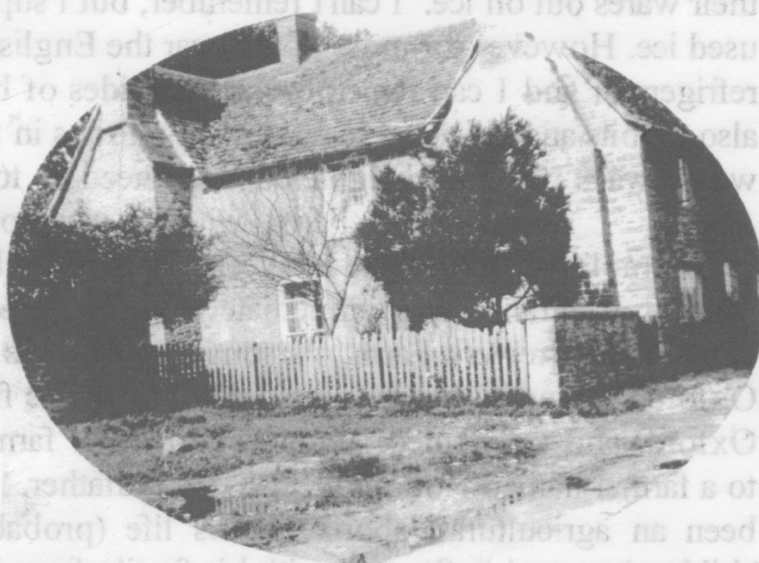




MY EARLY CHILDHOOD

I was born at 11.30 P.M. on March 23, 1926 at the home of my mother's parents, Parsonage Farm, Stratton St Margaret. This was then a small village just outside the railway town of Swindon in Wiltshire. For many years I believed my birthday fell on a Monday, but recently using my hand held computer, I pushed the calendar back to 1926 and discovered that it was a Tuesday. It was a difficult and painful birth. My mother told me that it was a breech birth and that the umbilical cord was wrapped around one of my legs, which appeared blue-black after birth. Fortunately, it soon recovered. Mother also said that at the last moment the doctor moved everyone out of the room and handled the turning and the birth all by himself. The doctor's name was Dr. Darling. He had been an Army Doctor in World War I and lived and had his surgery (office) about a hundred yards from where my parents lived. This office stayed a group medical practice right up to 1995 when the group moved to a new building in the Highworth Rd. and the office was taken over by a chiropractor.



Parsonage Farm House

Dr. Darling's wife was, apparently related to the Warfield family who were connected by marriage, during the twenties, to Mrs. Simpson who later married King Edward VIII and became the Duchess of Windsor. I am told that at that time the Darlings had an active social life in the set surrounding Mrs. Simpson. They employed a chauffeur, Jack Wilson who was the son of my godmother, who lived next door to my parents when I was born. Dr. Darling was still in practice when we left Stratton in September 1938. He died in March 1940 and was buried in Stratton churchyard. The church was full and overflowing at his funeral. I remember frequently seeing Jack Wilson in his uniform in my childhood years. Dr. Darling continued to treat all the family during those years. At the

time I was born my father was working for my grandfather, William Cook, who at that time lived at Brewery Farm. My parents who were married on November 4, 1922, were living in a small farm cottage which belonged to my grandfather (it was later bought from him by my father) and which is now No. 55 Swindon Road. Since those days there has been considerable renovation. My godparents, the Wilsons, lived at No. 57 along with their son Jack. Mr. Wilson worked for Mr. Keene the butcher who had a shop in Ermin St., next to W.A. Spark's grocers shop which was located at the corner of Ermin St. and Swindon Rd. I believe that my Aunt Hilda worked in Spark's shop as an assistant. When I was born Mr. Wilson traveled around Stratton in a horse drawn van, selling Mr. Keene's fresh meat from door to door. Mr. Keene stayed tending the store, cutting meat and making pies and sausages and serving housewives who wanted a bigger selection than was carried on the van, or who could not wait for the meat van to come around. In those days in the English countryside, there was no refrigeration. Fish shops laid their wares out on ice. I can't remember, but I suppose that butcher shops also used ice. However for most of the year the English climate can be as cool as a refrigerator and I can remember seeing sides of beef and pork and lamb and also rabbits and chickens hanging from hooks in the butcher's shop. The meat was always freshly slaughtered and needed to hang for a day or two.

Parsonage Farm, where I was born, no longer exists since it was demolished in the late nineteen fifties to build the Deloro Stellite works. The farm entrance was immediately in front and across the street from the entrance to Brewery Farm. Parsonage Farm was owned by Merton College, Oxford University (which incidentally was the first college to be founded at Oxford) and was rented, along with another farm at Penhill, Upper Stratton, to a farmer named Hoddinott. My grandfather, Henry Wiltshire who had been an agricultural laborer all his life (probably because he had sixteen children) moved to Stratton with his family from East Challow in 1908, when my mother was four years old. He moved into the big house at the Lower Stratton farm as the Bailiff or Manager of the second farm. Mr. Hoddinott lived at the first farm and visited his second every two or three days.

Brewery Farm during the latter half of the nineteenth century, had been the site of the Star Brewery. When I was a boy the vats and furnace of the brewery were still there. There was a loft above them which could only be reached by a ladder. I remember that when we lived there, this loft had many old files relating to the brewery business - invoices and sales records. This area was called the Brew House. We used to keep the coal there along with sacks of potatoes and other vegetables which needed storing in the winter time. The Brew House was finally demolished in 1973 when we remodeled the farmhouse, installed central heating and a new kitchen and, on the Brew

House site, added a three bedroom town house which at the time of writing I use as a pied a terre on my trips to Europe. My brother Rex has a bottle which was used by the Star Brewery and has its name on it. My father, who served in India for most of World War I, arrived home in 1919 to find strangers in his old home at 2 Winifred Street (Swindon Old Town). He discovered that they had moved to Brewery Farm, where he walked in on them with no notice. He went to work for my grandfather helping on the farm (this was really a small holding of 20 or 30 acres) and running the milk round which delivered fresh milk and eggs every morning, by horse and trap, to a number of houses in Lower Stratton and Gorse Hill (Swindon). His round took him down Swindon Road, Gypsy Lane and into Chapel Street and the surrounding streets.

My paternal grandfather moved to Brewery Farm in 1917 - renting the farm from the Arkell family which had been for decades acquiring all the small breweries in the area which they promptly closed down. It is interesting that in an 1831 voter's list John Arkell was shown as



Parsonage Farm & Brewery Farm

living in Parsonage Farm while Thomas Arkell was farming at Penhill. These were the two farms rented from Merton College, Oxford by Hoddinott, for whom my grandfather Henry Wiltshire, worked. John and Thomas Arkell were cousins who had emigrated to Canada in 1830. They did not stay and returned to England. John Arkell started his brewery in 1843 in Swindon Road, probably at Brewery Farm across from his residence. He later moved his business to Kingsdown, but in 1854 it is recorded that the Star Brewery was being operated by a Richard White. The brewery continued under various owners until 1892 when it was acquired by the Arkell family which promptly closed the Brewing business which was competition for their Kingsdown Brewery.

After 1919, my father was living with his father and mother at Brewery Farm. My mother lived just across the street at Parsonage Farm and that is how they met. There are old photos (taken by my father's brother Frank) showing my parents along with cows at Brewery Farm in the early nineteen twenties. My Uncle Frank, who also lived with his parents at that

time, had a Kodak box camera and took numerous photos in the nineteen twenties and early thirties. He did his own developing and printing. Some of his photos are still extant today- seventy years later. The originals are with the family of his son John Cook, but I have copied most of the pertinent ones. There are photos of my father and grandfather on the steam engine (used for threshing) as well as my father in the milk trap which he used for his milk round. Later on in the late nineteen twenties and early thirties there are photos of me with my cousin Pansy (Marguerite - Aunt Florence's daughter) and of my sister Eileen with Frank's daughter Vera have little memory of my first four years. Again some photos exist - taken by Uncle Frank. I am told that in my first year I won first prize in the baby show at the church fete. In those days the baby show was a standard event in all local fetes in England. Babies



Edgar & Dorothy with cows entering Brewery Farm



Edgar on Steam Engine with father William, standing



Edgar preparing for his Milk Round



Dorothy and Ernest



Dorothy & Edgar with Ernest



Ernest in First Year



Annie Wiltshire with Grandchildren

were judged by prominent local older women and were selected basically by which looked the "bonniest". I don't know what I won - probably in those days a cake, or some other home cooked item. Apparently I started school at the age of three and as a result throughout my whole



Ernest with cousin Margarite Neale

school life I was always a year ahead of others of my age.

The next few years have a few memories - but not many. In those days most of my mother and father's families lived in Stratton. Uncle Frank, who married Laura Knapp lived at Number 51 Swindon Road. In fact he lived there all of his married life and his widow was still living there at the time of her death in 1992. My father's parents who retired, built a house at Number 69 Swindon Road and my Aunt Flo built a house at Number 71. At Number 79 my mother's sister Ethel, who was married to Charles Perkins, who after a career in the Royal Navy ended up as a Chief Petty

Officer, built a detached house. Later, when he retired and purchased a grocery business, the house was sold to my mother's cousin Vera Tuck and her husband. At the time of writing (2002) Vera's son is living there. In the

Quadrangle, now known as Wildern Square, my mother's sister Elsie lived with her husband Bill Giles and numerous children! Further down the Swindon Road, just past the entrance to Marshfield Way, my mother's brother Fred lived with his wife and four children. I remember my cousin Arthur Wiltshire who was several years older



Eileen with cousin Vera Cook

than I and his younger brother Norman who was about two years older than me. In 1997 I met again Cousin Norman after almost sixty years. He had

been a railway engine driver all his life. He had no children although he had



Annie Wiltshire with Bert Henly (future son in law) standing outside the West End Road house.

married a widow with two small children and had adopted them. His brother Arthur died in the nineteen fifties after many years of suffering with tuberculosis, most of which were spent in a sanatorium. One of his sisters was still alive and living (I believe) in Yorkshire. His father, Fred, died of tuberculosis when he (Norman) was only a few years old. Uncle Fred is the gentleman to the right in my parents' wedding photo. He gave my mother away since at that moment my mother's father was milking. Also at this time, my mother's parents (long retired) lived at a house on West End Road (further down the Swindon Road before reaching the Green (railway) Bridge, which was owned by my paternal grandfather. Later they moved to a bungalow at 4 Park Street, owned by the Council which was cheaper. My mother's youngest brother Tom lived with

them and met his wife there - she lived next door with her parents. A wedding photo showing them with both sets of parents, still exists. My father's sister Louisa (Aunt Louie) lived in Newport, Monmouthshire. Her husband Wilfred, was involved in merchant shipping and was frequently away. They owned a four story house on a hilly street called Park Place or Park Street. They lived in the basement and one upper floor and they took lodgers. I went there several times for holidays (when we lived at Stratton) and my father and I frequently traveled there when the Swindon Town soccer team played at Newport County or Cardiff City. I remember that there was a small store in Newport which sold the best steak and kidney pies I have ever tasted. Everyone at Stratton loved them and every time Aunt Louie came for a visit she would bring a basket full of these pies. I believe the vendor's name was Thomas. I also remember going to the cinema several times a week when I was there. My aunt had a piano which she played. I started to attempt to play

on this piano. Newport also had a music hall or theatre. Several times my aunt took me there.

We saw several English music hall (vaudeville) acts which were quite famous at the time.

One in particular, I remember, Albert Whelan. I am told that I started school at the age of three - although I can't remember



Thomas & Lillian Wiltshire Wedding [Albert Wiltshire, Henry James Wiltshire, Bridesmaid, Annie Wiltshire, Thomas and Lillian, Bride's Parents]

anything of my Kindergarten days. How my mother managed to get me in at that age, I do not know. Maybe the class that year was small or maybe my mother had friends at the school. At the time of writing the Infant School is still there and is still in use. My mother also went to this school soon after she came to Stratton. Also all of Eileen's children went there. Probably one or two of her grandchildren also went there. My mother also went to the same Junior School as I did. (Junior School took the last three years of elementary education - the first two years along with Kindergarten. was handled in the Infant School). Around 1912 she was awarded the "Herring Trust Prize" which was presented at that time to an outstanding Junior student. I remember seeing it around when I was a boy, but I haven't seen it for at least fifty years. I believe it was a book, suitably inscribed. Maybe one day, I shall research this in the Swindon Library or the Stratton church records. When I was six I went on to the Junior school. This has long since been demolished, but some old photos have been published in nostalgic photograph books. I can only remember three of the teachers - Mrs. Love who lived with her family in the attached schoolmaster's house, - Miss Ida Sealy who was a renowned figure in Stratton for many years (I believe she taught my mother as well as me) and Percy Bridgewater, the headmaster. Mr. Bridgewater was a tall angular man who wore rimless glasses. He was a stickler for discipline and every boy (me included) received a caning (on the hand) for some infraction or other. He lived in South Marston and cycled to and from school every day - a distance of two to three miles.

During the early nineteen thirties I have a few vivid memories. As I mentioned, my paternal grandparents lived just two doors away. They were stalwarts of the Methodist Church - as a result I had to attend Sunday School

every Sunday afternoon and at Easter, which was the anniversary of the founding of the church, I was co-opted into the choir which sang an anthem (about 20 minutes long) at both the morning and evening services. I enjoyed this because it meant that for about four weeks we spent our Sunday afternoons practicing and learning the anthem, and did not have to go through the boring bible reading and hymn singing. After these Sunday afternoon sessions there was always a special Sunday tea at home where we feasted on jelly (Jell-O), blancmange or some times a trifle or canned pears or peaches with cream. There would be a cake - sometimes a fruit cake or a sponge cake with jam in the middle. These cakes were always homemade by my mother. She made them from scratch since there were no ready mixed cake mixes in those days. In the summer there might be lettuce, tomato, spring onions and radishes (all grown in the garden) or sometimes celery or watercress - eaten with bread and butter. Except for a couple of years when we were not living on a farm, the butter was home made. It was often my job to churn by hand the cream which after about 20 minutes would turn into butter. I believe that my brother Rex still has the old butter churn around, somewhere. Of course, at noon on Sunday there was always the customary English Sunday dinner - a roast (usually beef but pork or lamb was also sometimes served) with roast potatoes, vegetables in season and Yorkshire pudding (called colloquially "a batter"). In those days there were almost no imported vegetables - a few potatoes or tomatoes arriving by boat from places like the Channel Islands and Spain a few weeks early. Everyone ate only vegetables of the season. Salad vegetables were available in June, July and August, perhaps into September depending on the frosts. Beans and Peas came in at the same time. Brussels Sprouts, Broccoli, Cauliflower and Cabbage were available all winter as long as they lasted. Root vegetables could be stored in straw in earthen pits and were also available all winter. My paternal grandmother ran, for many years, the "jumble sale" at the annual Methodist Church fete. Although the grand finale was a large stall at the fete itself which was usually held on a Saturday in July or August, all year round her front room was full of old clothes donated by people, and there was a constant stream of buyers at the front door. These were depression times and good used clothing was very much in demand. The thing I remember most about all this is the all pervading smell of moth balls in the front room, which to some extent permeated the whole house for most of the year. On Boxing Day, the day after Christmas, my father's family gathered at my grandmother's house. As I remember it, we gathered for Christmas Tea. We would have a Christmas fruit cake with the usual hard icing with the marzipan layer underneath, which English Christmas and Birthday cakes have. Of course, there were the usual jellies, blancmanges and mincemeat pies. After tea there

were whiskeys, brandies and port wine with nuts and biscuits for those who wanted them. And the adults would talk about past times remembered. Then we would play games. My grandmother liked whist or snap. One game in which all could join in - even the children - was Hunt the Ring. We all sat in a circle and grandmother would put her wedding ring on a long piece of string. The ends were tied together and we would each hold the string with both hands. Then we would all sing some song or hymn while quickly moving the hands backwards and forwards along the string in time to the music while stealthily passing the ring from person to person. Someone would stand in the middle and try to guess where the ring was. If the guesser guessed right he or she took the place of the person in possession of the ring and that person had to go into the middle. In those days there was no television. Radio was in its infancy and in the early nineteen thirties few people had radios with loud speakers. Most listened through headphones. No one in our family had a gramophone. During the depression gramophones and records were luxuries that few people could afford. Christmas dinner was always eaten in our own home. We usually had a roast beef dinner, although once I remember we had roast goose. We always had a Christmas pudding for dessert. The making of the Christmas pudding was a ceremony which started at the beginning of December. Everyone had to help stir the mixture since this was considered to be lucky. All stirring was done by hand since there were no electrical mixers in those days. The puddings were cooked and saved until they were needed when they were reheated. My mother always kept one to be eaten on her birthday (January 13). My paternal grandmother's sisters would sometimes pay her visits. Her sister, Aunt Rose and her husband Uncle Arthur, who lived at Eastleigh in Hampshire came several times. Her sister, Aunt Polly spent the last days of her life at my grandmother's home. She died in the upstairs bedroom at the back of the house. She was the first dead person I had seen. I do not remember the date. I don't even remember her married name (she was a widow). I presume she is buried in Stratton churchyard, but that is not certain. One day when I have the opportunity, I need to research this.

I remember on one occasion when Uncle Arthur and Aunt Rose were visiting that a seance was held in the Brewery Farm sitting room. Brewery Farm had for some years been haunted (in fact today - 60 years later - strange phenomena are still occasionally observed). In my grandfather's time he had be awakened during the night by voices calling his name "William". My mother also several years later also heard her name "Dorothy" being called during the night. My father and a live-in teenager (whose name I no longer remember but in his inimitable manner my father always called him "Dung" - presumably because his job was to clean out the stables and cow shed and he was probably usually covered with the evidence of his job) heard loud noises

coming from the southwest corner of the sitting room, late at night. On this occasion the old dog, "Bob" who was fearless and I vividly remember the participant of many fights with neighboring dogs, was said to have woken startled, growling at the corner, with his wire hair standing on end. These noises were heard on more than one occasion and at one point my father had the floor taken up to see if there was anything underneath (there was not). These same noises have been heard recently. I and my brother Rex, experienced them in 1972 and during the nineteen nineties Rex has heard them. In the nineteen thirties I certainly felt that I saw an apparition in the upstairs bedroom. Of course at the time I was an impressionable young boy who had been exposed to seances and much talk of the supernatural.

Uncle Arthur and Aunt Rose were reputed to be mediums. Aunt Rose who, like her sister, my grandmother, had also lost a son in World War I, had conducted many seances in which her son came back to her and discussed life in general. She had published a book detailing her experiences. For years we had a copy of it around the house but I have not seen it since I left home fifty years ago. I remember that every chapter started with the words "Love to all, Dear Mother". So, on one evening when Aunt Rose and Uncle Arthur were visiting, my grandmother organized a seance in the Brewery Farm sitting room. She and my grandfather, Aunt Rose and Uncle Arthur and my mother and father all sat around a card table. I was seven or eight years old and watched from a nearby chair. I no longer remember much of the details of what occurred. I do remember the



Ernest with dog "Bob"



Uncle Arthur & Aunt Rose in front of Brewery Farm House

card table with only Uncle Arthur's fingers on it, rocking around the room, untouched by anyone else. In 1926 Arkell's offered for sale by auction Brewery Farm, various fields and other properties. The auction took place the day before I was born. (This would have been on a Monday - further evidence that I was born on a Tuesday) My father bought the farm and sundry other fields. He paid 750 pounds for it. In today's money that would be about \$200,000. Most of the payment was financed by a loan from my grandfather who was still living in the farmhouse. Documents relating to this purchase still exist (Exhibit I). My father quickly paid off the debt by selling building plots to my grandfather (for himself and my Aunt Flo) and for all the houses on that side of Swindon Road between Brewery Farm and Clays Farm (Clays Farm has long been demolished but one of its stockyards were where two bungalows have recently been built). Part of his purchase was a field along side of the railway line along Gypsy Lane (now opposite the Rover factory). This was also sold off for building plots. Within a couple of years my grandfather had built his retirement house and moved into it and my parents and I moved to the farmhouse.

Soon after this the Depression or "Slump" as it was called in England, began. Basically there were many unemployed and both wages and prices fell. In order to keep his head above water financially, my father decided to work at a second job. After he left school at the age of eleven he had been apprenticed to a shoe maker/repairer and saddler. This seven year apprenticeship came to an abrupt end in 1914 with the outbreak of World War I (or the Great War as it was called then in England. Like most of the young men at the time, he volunteered and joined the Army. His skills meant that he was assigned to the Royal Artillery as a saddler. In those days teams of horses hauled heavy artillery around and there were a constant demand for harness repairs and even the making of new harness. This probably had a great effect on his chances for survival during the war. As a saddler he would never have been assigned to the front line. Furthermore by 1915, when he was sent to India, the front line in France and Belgium had become bogged down and there was a much greater need for saddlers in India where the British Army was highly mobile and had little access to the new fangled motorized transportation. Consequently, in the early nineteen thirties he opened up a boot and shoe repair shop in a building in front of the Brewery Farm house. In the early nineteen twenties this building had been the Stratton Volunteer Fire Station. A photograph still exists of the volunteer firemen taken in 1922 in front of the Brewery Farm house. This building today still exists but has had the upper part (which was a kind of loft) removed. The original building is shown above in an old photo. This photo was taken while the building was still in use as my father's shop. The photo shows bill boards on the outside on

which every week, was pasted the programs for the Empire and Palace cinemas in Swindon. For this service my father was given two free tickets every week to each cinema. I probably used these tickets more than anyone else did. My father's shop opened at a good time for the shoe repair business. During the depression most people could not afford new shoes and since there were few cars, did a lot of walking. So for years they would repair and re-repair them. His business was so good that in his busiest times he would send out some repairs to a part time associate. It was often my job at the weekends to cycle with a load of shoes a mile and a half, to this associate, drop them off and bring back the repaired shoes from the last batch. The associate lived in Chapel Street in Gorse Hill. He only had one leg and walked with a crutch. He had his own shoe repairing equipment in his front room! He may have lost his leg in the war. I don't remember. I cannot remember his name - my father always called him "Snobeth" ("Snob" was a colloquial term for a cobbler - I do not know it's origin). My father always had strange names for everyone. My mother was "Liz", Eileen was "Fanny", his mother and father were "Missus" and "Massah". I have already mentioned the young man he called "Dung". My Aunt Flo was "Tottie". There were others.

I can remember the day my brother Rex was born. I was an eight year old schoolboy. He was born in the same room that he has slept in for the last forty plus years. My father surprised everyone and named the baby Rex. His mother was outraged. She said that this was a 'dog's name and to the end of her days she always called him by his second name, David. I can also remember the afternoon my sister, Eileen, ran across the road outside and was hit by a bicycle and broke her leg. Many years later (in the nineteen seventies) when I was looking at the church with my niece Debbie, and I believe that my daughter Julie was along, we were talking to the Verger and he told us that he was the cyclist who had broken Eileen's leg.

In 1936 my father decided that he no longer wanted to work in two jobs. He was forty years old and he wanted to work at something in which he could reasonably expect to spend the rest of his life. If he waited he would be "too old". So he rented the farm out to an older couple named Stevens. They had a granddaughter who lived with them and whose name was Mavis and who was two years younger than I. He bought the house next door from my Aunt Flo, who proceeded to move further up the Swindon Road to a semi-detached house opposite the Junior School. He kept on his shoe repairing business while he looked for something else. He applied for work at the Swindon Railway Works, where his brother Frank and his brother in law Herbert (Aunt Flo's husband) worked. In fact half the men living on Swindon Road probably worked there. Alas, he was too late. At the age of

30 he might have stood a chance - at 40, no way. So he started to look around for larger farms to rent.

As an ex-serviceman (veteran) he was eligible to participate in a scheme which had been set up by the Wiltshire County Council some years earlier, to provide work for entrepreneurial agricultural ex-servicemen. They had purchased a number of smaller farms and rented them out at economical rents to ex-servicemen. I remember that Mother and I traveled around with him in his small car, an Austin 7, looking at several of these farms which were available at the time. We eventually settled on a farm at Pewsey - halfway between Pewsey and the village of Wilcot. It is ironic that although no-one knew at the time, and to his dying day my father never knew, this was the area from which many of my father's ancestors came. His father's mother was an ORAM whose family had lived at Pewsey for generations and his mother's grandfather was a PEARCE who, it seems, was born at Wilcot and whose ancestors [the ROMAINES and NOYES] had lived in nearby Urchfont since the early sixteenth century.

So, in 1938 the die was cast and he entered into an agreement to rent the 50 acre Pennings Farm, Pewsey, starting from September 29th (Michaelmas Day) - which was the standard day for the start of all farm leases since it came after the harvest but before autumn sowing for next year's crops.

kept it going by buying chemicals as I needed them from local pharmacies.

In September 1944 my father took a much larger farm - Church Farm at Stratton St. Margaret. His landlord was the same - the Wiltshire County Council- so he was just upgrading. By that time I was at Cambridge but I did get to assist part of this move in the first half of September. This was the month my Grandfather [William Cook] died. I did get to see him before they put him in his coffin and was able to attend his funeral. That month also my cousin Noel arrived from Australia. He was a rear gunner in the Royal Australian Air Force. He was two weeks too late to meet his grandfather. He travelled to England from Australia on board the ship "Queen Elizabeth" A few years later I crossed the Atlantic twice on board this vessel - but under very different conditions from the wartime troopship conversion.