

### **3. Norah Hodgkinson, Schoolgirl Diarist**

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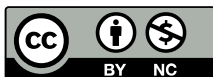
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Cover image: Norah Hodgkinson, 1941, W.W. Winter, Derby. A selection from Norah's archive, Alison Twells, 2025. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal.

### 3. Norah Hodgkinson, Schoolgirl Diarist

PERSONAL MEMORANDA.		TRAIN OR 'BUS SERVICE.	
Name	N.HODGKINSON	To School	From School
Watch No.		4.20	8.20
Season Ticket No.		8.16	10.0
School Telephone No.		10.0	11.5
Telephone No.		9.15	1.5
Bicycle No.		3.40	3.15
Locker No.	12.7	5.40	4.40
School No.		5.20	5.25
Holder's Reg. No. 1		5.40	5.40
N.S. Certificate 1		6.40	6.45
Car No.	ALM 157	9.30	9.30
Size in Shoes	7	10.15	10.15
Size in Gloves	8		
Size in Hats	6 1/2		
My Birthday	MARCH 9 <sup>th</sup>		
Weight	8 st 3 lb	Date	22.7.
Height	5 ft 4 1/2 in	Date	22.7.
Address	Hill Top, Castle Donington, N.R. Derby		
School Address	LOUGHBOROUGH GIRLS HIGH SCHOOL, LOUGHBOROUGH		

MEMORANDA

Derby County

Wright

Bell Howe

Nicholas Barker Keen

Cooks Dick, deighton, Napier, Dutton

Half Packer

Banks

Spencer

Fig. 5 1938 *Letts's School-girl's Diary*. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.  
Photo: A. Twells, 2025.

Perhaps it was on one of those oft-dull days between Christmas and New Year that Norah picked up her brand-new diary and pencilled in her surname and first initial (*N.Hodgkinson*, the space too small for *Norah Isabel*), her date of birth (9th March) and addresses at home (*Hill Top, Castle Donington*) and school (*Loughborough Girls' High School*). She later inked over all but her home address. Marsie and Pop had put in for one

of the new council houses that were being built across the village and Norah had every faith that they would be on the move in the coming year. Other details she left blank. Norah had no use for a Watch No., Season Ticket No., Telephone No. or even Bicycle No., although, rather fancifully, she filled in a car registration plate: *ALM 757*. She created two columns for bus times, to and from school. She inserted her sizes for shoes (7), gloves (8) and hat ( $6\frac{7}{8}$ ), adding her height (*5 feet 4½ ins*) and weight (*8st and 3oz*) a few months later, after she was weighed and measured at school. She doesn't elaborate in 1938, but the following year – 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1939, when she had shot up to 5 feet 5¾ but was still some way off her adult height of 5 feet 8 in her stockinged feet – she noted proudly that she was *3rd heaviest & 2nd tallest [...]* *The doctor said I have a 'wonderful physique'.*

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Norah's first diary sits neatly across my palm and fingers, the rusty-red cover crisp and crinkly to the touch. Inside an oval frame of gently embossed croquet mallets, tennis rackets and hockey sticks, the name 'Charles Letts' is emblazoned in a fancy, looped script, the words 'SCHOOL-GIRL'S DIARY' printed in a plainer font below. At three inches by five, the diary is just small enough to have fitted inside Norah's Christmas stocking, no doubt bulging with clementines and nuts, which hung at the foot of the bed that she shared with her elder sister, Helen. But I imagine it wrapped in thin paper – decorated with holly, perhaps – and lying under the small spruce in the front room.

The schoolgirl's and schoolboy's diaries had been part of a new venture by Charles Letts, grandson of John, the London stationer who had printed his first diary in 1812. They marked the launch of the new special interest range that from the 1870s saw a change in the fortunes of the firm. Letts was soon catering for all manner of hobbies and livelihoods, with diaries for motorists, gardeners, ramblers, wireless amateurs, boy-scouts, girl-guides, textile workers, poultry keepers, pigeon fanciers and more, totalling four hundred overall. A new interwar diary craze saw sales rise again from just under a quarter of a million in 1900 to three million in the mid-1930s. Encouraged by radio broadcasts and popular newspapers, newly published anthologies of

British diarists, biographies of John Evelyn and Samuel Pepys and the launch of the new Mass Observation project in 1937, these years saw an unprecedented interest in the 'ordinary life'.<sup>1</sup>

Norah's 1938 diary, *bound in cloth* and selling for one shilling, is the cheapest on offer. Marsie and Pop, on his postman's wage, were unable to stretch to the sturdier, more elegant, *fine quality leather* version (3/-) with a pencil, pockets, world maps and gilt edges. While their eldest son, Dennis, had moved away for a white-collar job, their four other children still lived at home. Helen and Birdy, elder daughter and middle son, were poorly paid in local factories. Frank and Norah were both at grammar school and seemingly in endless need of items of uniform, sports equipment, books and pens.

An opening page reveals the results of a competition whereby Letts had canvassed schoolgirls on ways in which the diary might be improved. Replies had come in from all over the globe, including Australia, South Africa and Iraq. The winner, Joan Wisdom of north London, was promised a leather-bound set of Rudyard Kipling's novels as her prize.

After that, fifty-seven printed pages are stuffed to the gills with facts and lists. Compiled by Jersey school-master and French language teacher Marc Ceppi, they open with Daily Wants, listing term dates, Bank Holidays, postage rates, sizes of sports grounds, the temperature at which water boils, the costs of various licenses (driving, dog). A lengthy section on Careers for Women details jobs in the Civil Service, nursing, teaching, domestic science, librarianship, as well as some less predictable suggestions: positions in horticulture, engineering, and as chemists. Examinations come next, including the Oxford School Certificate that Norah will pass in 1941, followed by sovereigns of England, British Prime Ministers from 1721, the lighting-up table, world time, Latin verbs (seven pages of them), French verbs (eight pages), German strong verbs, the metric system, tables of weights and measures. The list of Books to Read – on natural history, gardening and nature study, photography, crafts, travel and more – are billed as 'supplements to the classics which you will hear in school and mainly intended as helps to various hobbies and interests'. Five pages on recent sporting triumphs – the winners of the boat race, champions in skating, cricket, lawn tennis, rugby, athletics, golf and swimming – are rounded off by

two more printed lists: the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World and Some Wonders of the Modern World.

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It is heavy-going, all this *matter*. Norah squeezes in her own term dates, adds *Oxford* to the boat race winners, and updates the list of Prime Ministers to include *Neville Chamberlain* (1937). On the line above, next to the name of Stanley Baldwin, the outgoing PM, we start to see her. She writes a single, unexpected, bracketed word: (*Fool*).

The inspiration for this minor piece of political commentary is surely Tom Hodgkinson, Norah's father. A ferocious socialist, his regular political altercations with local grandees were already becoming the stuff of family legend. Major Dalby, the Vicar of Diseworth and Gillies Shields, formerly agent to Lord Donington and now the owner of Donington Hall: all would wait for him on his postal round, eager to engage in political debate. Other family stories see him dashing down High Street at election time, ripping 'Vote Conservative' banners from the old oaks in Dalby's field; or, wild with anger when Labour formed the National Government in 1931, tearing the poster of Prime Minister 'Ramsay Mac' from their cottage wall. 'You turncoat! You blasted turncoat!' he roared, shoving a poker through MacDonald's eye, trampling the picture on the ground before screwing it up and throwing it on the fire.

Norah would have been six at the time. By that first-diary Christmas of 1937, she knew all about Stanley Baldwin (*Fool*).

We see more of Norah under the headings at the back of the diary, where she lists her Pocket Money (1½d, then 3d after her fourteenth birthday, from *Mam*), Timetable, Presents, Exam Results and Marks, Letters (Received and Sent) and Books Read, each with a short 'review'. Among her early reading in 1938 was a memoir of Lloyd George, most likely ordered by her father as part of his *Daily Herald* subscription. She failed to finish it, moving on to *Elinor in the V* by Winifred Darch (*very good*) and Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (*Very, very good*). For the best read of the year, it was a toss-up between *Goodbye Mr Chips* (*Excellent*) by James Hilton and J. B. Priestley's *They Walk in the City* (*Lovely*). The worst, by far, was Rudyard Kipling's historical fantasy, *Rewards and Fairies* (*No good*).

Under Films Seen, Norah records her thirteen trips to the village picture house and her sole outing to Derby's new Coliseum cinema. *Dodging the Dole* was *absolutely awful*, she wrote, while *Maytime* with Jeanette Macdonald and Nelson Eddie was *excellent*. Disney's romanticised adaptation of the Grimms' *Snow White* came tops: *absolutely the best ever*. At the end of her diary, after pages of Match Results – tennis, swimming, hockey (the words 'or lacrosse' struck through) and netball, where Norah played a capable Goal Defence – followed by Birthdays, Addresses and Engagements, Norah stuck a cut-out photograph of the French actress Simone Simon, whom she had seen when *Girls' Dormitory* (*Very G*) was showing in the village.

If the list of Prime Ministers provides a small and unexpected insight, and the end-matter shows us more of Norah, it is the diary's blank Memoranda pages that give her free reign. Here, she remedies Letts's neglect of her twin sporting loves, football and motor-racing. She prints the words *DERBY COUNTY* atop a faint pencil pyramid of footballers' names:

Wright

Bell   Howe

Nicholas   Barker   Keen

Crooks   Nix   Astley   Napier   Duncan

Overleaf, after a half-hearted column for Girls in our School who Left and a couple of Tongue-twisters ('The Leath police dismisseth us' and 'Are you copper-bottoming 'em?' 'No I'm aluminiuming 'em, mum!'), she pencils in Derby's results over the 1937 festive period, Stoke City's Christmas fixtures and devotes a full page to Races at Donington Park.

Next comes her list of 'crazes', the local lads and sporting heroes in whom she'd had a romantic interest that year. We'll come back to them.

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One of the pleasures of Norah's 1938 diary is the way in which her lists and insertions, her marginalia and crossings out, chafe cheekily against Letts' attempts to steer her interests. While we have access to vast amounts of material *about* children's lives in the past, historical sources that present a child's-eye view of the world are so much harder to find.<sup>2</sup> The information pages might be striking for their confidence about



what a teenage schoolgirl needed to know, but we have no idea whether Letts's readers read them or skipped them, or whether the Kipling box-set would have been Joan Wisdom's choice of prize. So to find a girl who lets us know that in her view Stanley Baldwin was a (*Fool*) is... unusual, to say the least.

More than that, Norah's commentary offers little glimpses into a life that isn't quite contained by Letts's template for grammar school girlhood. The *School-girl's Diary* was aimed at that very small number of girls – just 12.2% of Norah's age group, girls born between 1910 and 1929 – who stayed on at school beyond the age of fourteen.<sup>3</sup> These were mainly the daughters of the middle class, girls who had been weaned on *The Water Babies* and raised on the classics, who had the means to take up photography as a hobby and might one day visit a wonder of the world. Girls whose continued education was not reliant on the free pass that came with success in the scholarship exam and for whom biding their time at the local council school until their fourteenth birthday and the commencement of blue-collar work was never a consideration.

While this business of missing out and having to make do with what life doles out to you could be painful, success – getting into the Grammar – could come at a price too. So many working-class girls like Norah did not stay the course. It wasn't just that their families, however proud and hopeful, were unable to sustain the cost of the uniform, books and various extra-curriculars, or simply needed them to bring in a wage if there were younger mouths to feed. For many, their location at what Richard Hoggart has called 'the friction point of two cultures' was too bewildering; the personal transformation required at such a school too difficult, like being a saltwater fish plunged into a freshwater pool. In Pierre Bourdieu's evocative phrase, grammar school involved a *habitus clivé*, a rift within oneself. Valerie Avery, the schoolgirl author of an astonishing wartime autobiography, *London Morning*, later described her movement away from her working-class roots – both physically, due to bombings, and educationally, as a grammar school girl – as heralding 'a state of disintegration of me as a person'. Just as violently, historian Rob Colls felt he was 'being trained to purge himself of who he was and where he came from'. It was 'a form of Inquisition', writes Ken Worpole;

the working-class pupil 'could either recant and embrace a new faith – or be broken on the wheel'.<sup>4</sup>

The breezy tone of Norah's diaries, the lack of evidence of any culture clash at school, intrigues me, and I realise this is my obsession, not hers. Ever since I read David Storey's *Saville*, on the English Literature A-level syllabus in 1982, about a boy adrift from his Yorkshire mining family after getting into a grammar school and his wider sense of never fitting in, I've been intrigued by this double estrangement: from one's new classmates by virtue of background and, through education, from family and community at home.<sup>5</sup> (Not that Storey prepared me. At Sussex University in the '80s, I was utterly stunned, for the full three years. More than the specifics – the private schools, second homes and pony club pasts, the bonding over backpacking in Peru – it was the oblivious, effortless coming-from-money comfort. The blasé ease: kids totally at home on what for them were well-trodden paths, successful lives set out and ready to drop into, whenever they chose.)

But if the *Letts's School-girl's Diary* worked as a kind of shoehorn into an elite education – this is what is valued, it told its readers, this is what you will need to know to succeed – there is no suggestion that Norah felt anything other than at home there. Her grammar school brothers had paved her way, no doubt. Her parents' unshakable belief that no badge of inferiority should be attached to their social origins and that a good education was their children's natural right will surely have rubbed off. Perhaps the Letts's School-girl's Dairies of 1938 and 1939 helped ease Norah into her grammar school life, shaping her schoolgirl self, bringing her into being. With a foot in both worlds, she makes her confident little interjections, supplementing the long list of sporting triumphs, correcting the heading for Hockey ~~or Lacrosse~~, the latter not played at her school. She reads without discrimination, with no special reverence afforded to 'highbrow' culture or the classics. Charles Dickens is *very, very good*, of course he is, but her favoured authors of middle-brow fiction and social commentary novels deserved a mention too.

Norah and her siblings remained proud of their school attendance throughout their lives. I remember visits when my uncle Dennis made his annual pilgrimage from his Hertfordshire home. Dennis was like a centripetal force, a jovial giant of a man, warm and playful, who drew us

all in as he strode round his old school grounds with his impossibly long legs, reminiscing loudly about this teacher and that, this classroom and the other. 'Norah, Norah, do you remember...? Norah, Norah, whatever happened to...?' Norah would quietly admire the cloister windows and attractive red brick of the girls' school next door, marvelling at the new buildings, remembering where she had sat in the grassy central quad, talking and laughing with her friends.

We might see diaries as a kind of 'template for personal change', a technology for discipline and self-fashioning.<sup>6</sup> Norah was already well aware, in 1938, that she was 'on the up'. She wouldn't find herself in Gibson's factory making 'long-johns', like her sister. Nor would she spend her adult life in a poky, damp house overflowing with children, as her mother had done.<sup>7</sup> She would leave school to work in an office and – fingers crossed – find herself a handsome, affable, white-collar husband. They would enjoy holidays in neat, bright guest houses at Bournemouth and Torquay, day-trips out in the car – a Morris Eight, maybe – and most important of all, a new house with a nice kitchen and all mod cons.

For Norah, the future was looking grand.

Or would be, if that Hitler fella kept out of the way.

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Might we drop in on Norah in mid-December 1938, at the end of her first year of diary-keeping, when she is bed-ridden and enjoying a second week off school after her clumsy middle brother Birdy has tipped the scalding contents of a pan over her left foot? I imagine her snuggling down under her pea-green satin eiderdown scattered with newspapers as she resists parental pressure to exercise, her skin now scabby and stiff rather than blistery and red raw. She wishes they'd all clear off and leave her alone. She'll sort her foot, soon enough. But before then, she has sports reports to devour on the wonders of Stoke City's star striker, Frankie Soo. His passing skills are stupendous, the papers say. And with his gentle features and those dark eyes with a hint of the Orient, he really is a beauty.<sup>8</sup> *Crazy over him.*

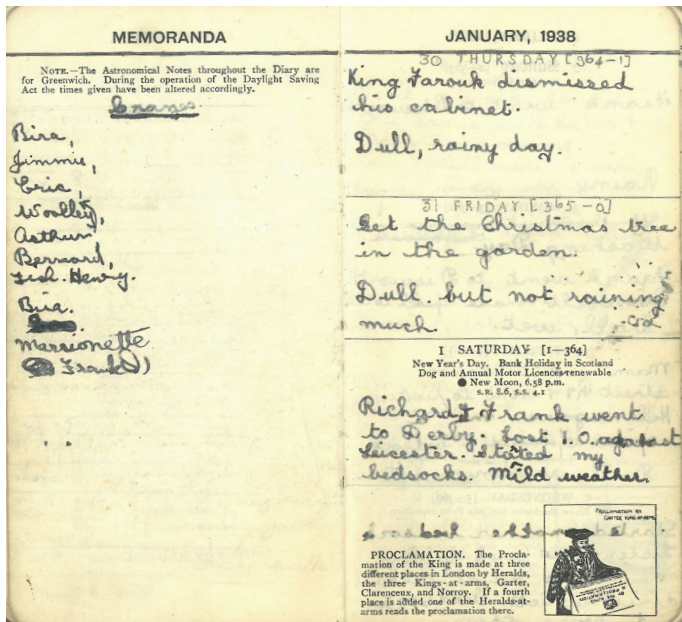


Fig. 6 Norah's 'crazes', 1938 Diary. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.  
Photo: A. Twells, 2025.

1938 had been quite the year for crazes. Bira was first. He had been Norah's best hearthrob since 1935, the year he shot to fame driving a Riley Imp at Brooklands and raced his first Grand Prix at Donington Park. Beautiful Bira, slender and broad-shouldered, with glossy black hair and golden skin. He cut a dashing figure in the pitstop and the paddock, his silk overalls dyed the same pale blue and yellow of his cars. (Norah wouldn't know that he was inspired in this choice by the evening dress of a young female acquaintance, or that these would soon become the national racing colours of his native Siam.) 'Bira blue': Norah had wanted it for a cotton frock Marsie made that summer but had to content herself with duck-egg, the closest they could find on Derby market. Still nice, though.

Does Norah thumb through her diary to find her entries about Bira's visit that glorious spring? If she does, she will see that she had sunned herself in Webb's orchard, browsing copies of *Picturegoer* and sketching

her favourite film stars. That's when she had buried Dum-Dum (her cat?) in the garden, garlanding his grave with forget-me-nots. She and Audrey had gone bluebelling over the fields, usually coming home laden with common-or-garden ladysmocks, mayblobs and cowslips instead. Some nights they skipped until dark.

Bira had won the Crystal Palace Trophy Race at the start of April and just days later, here he was, at Donington Park. *Cars practising on the track all day*, Norah wrote. She loved the whirring backdrop of the distant engines, the noise building as the cars took the Melbourne hairpin, swarming round the bend towards Coppice Corner before shooting down Starkey's Straight. She could still hear it here, in the new house, but nothing like at Hill Top, the little hamlet on the south-westerly edge of the village where their cottage adjoining the Nag's Head pub had been just a short walk from the main racetrack gates.

They all loved the races. The opening of the Park had brought some life to the village. Before the middle of the nineteenth century, Castle Donington had been a thriving market town, making the most of its position on the southern escarpment of the Trent, near to the confluence with the Soar and the Derwent, and on two major roads: Derby to Leicester and Nottingham to Birmingham, the latter of which ran straight past the Hodgkinsons' gable end. But by the time Tom and Milly had moved to Hill Top in 1911, the collapse of the lace trade and reorganisation of hosiery into factories in nearby towns had seen Donington reduced to no more than a village.<sup>9</sup> The racetrack felt like it was part of a new beginning, a resurgent entry into the modern world.

Norah's sister Helen was thrilled by it. She was always over there. This time, for the British Empire Trophy handicap race in April 1938, she had walked Norah up to the high sloping pastures at Isley Walton to get a better vantage of the cars whizzing round the track as they practiced for the race the following day. Norah thought that might be it, the sum total of her Park adventures that year, but then Marsie had miraculously relented and promised to let her go with her older sister in pursuit of a famous 'gap ticket' to watch the big race itself. *Went to bed early. Felt excited*, Norah wrote.

Crossing the fields towards Donington Hall, she and Helen kept the walled edge of the track close by to their left until they were safely out of sight. Seeking toe-holes in the red brick, scrambling carefully so as not to scuff their shoes or snag their frocks, they pushed themselves up like gymnasts on a beam. Hearts thudding, catching their breath and scanning the scene, they swung their legs over the top before dropping cleanly into the grounds like burglars in the night, brushing their skirts and making for the crowd. On this occasion they were almost thwarted by a vigilant official, but Helen gave him some chat and they slipped otherwise unnoticed into the event. *9th April: Went to Park with Helen. Man stopped us. Saw Bira and got his autograph. Saw his wife. Dodson won, Bira second. Close, dullish.*

Afterwards, when Bira had finished as runner-up and they were pushing and shoving in the crush, Norah held out her brand new autograph book, a present from Helen. 'B. Bira', he signed himself, on the first page:

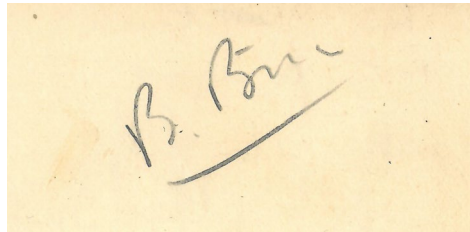


Fig. 7 Bira's autograph. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson. Photo: A.Twells, 2025.

It was here that Norah's lifelong love of motor-racing was born. My mum and I found newspaper cuttings about Formula One champions inside her kitchen cupboards in the days after she died.

The following day, after a late start due to Daylight Saving, Norah *saw Bira and his wife going home*. How utterly perfect to be Ceril Heycock, the young Englishwoman whom Bira had met at Art School in London. Just an ordinary girl and now Princess Ceril, Mrs Birabongse Bhanudej Bhanubandh of Siam. (After a late-in-the-day spot of Googling, I discover that the number plate at the front of Norah's diary – ALM

757 – belonged to a Park Ward Rolls Royce owned by Bira's cousin and sponsor, Prince Chula. Might this be the car that took him and his princess-wife past Norah's house and home from Donington Park?).<sup>10</sup>

Bira first. And next? Jimmie, surely. She'd been sweet on him all year. Still was, if truth be told. They had played cricket together that summer with a crowd of neighbourhood lads, inspired by the arrival in Derbyshire of the Australians, here to defend the Ashes. Mr Robinson, one of the dads, who made cricket bats for Gunn and Moore in Nottingham, would often come out and umpire. *Lovely but Jimmie can't play*, Norah wrote on 20<sup>th</sup> May. He was hopeless! She was a much better batswoman. It didn't put her off him though. A few weeks later, he had come with Marsie to see her gym display at school. They weren't very good and the audience had laughed, the rude beggars. But Jimmie had been so sweet. *Jimmie sat with us and made me want to kiss him. Love him. Rainy, cold.*

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'She played with us lads all the time', John Glenn recalls as we sit in his front room one sultry August afternoon. 'Cricket mainly. She was a lovely girl, nice natured, even tempered, gamey'. John adds 'played cricket' to the map he is drawing of Hill Top, the outline of the field directly opposite the opening to Diseworth Road, in his and Norah's day a pretty rural lane that ran round the southerly edge of the village. On the corner, two red-brick cottages adjoined the Nag's Head. The Hodgkinsons' was the first of these, flush with the main road, the Glenns next door sharing an entry with the pub. Beyond the yard and drying area out the back was the orchard, allotments ('the garden'), farmyard and slaughterhouse where the kids spent so much time. ('That's where we used to congregate', John says. 'It does seem a bit odd, looking back'. He enjoys my rendition of a family story that the abbatoir is where my gran and grandad did their courting. 'Where's Helen?' someone would ask, to be answered by Marsie: 'She'll be up at that slaughter house, hanging around Joe Twells.')

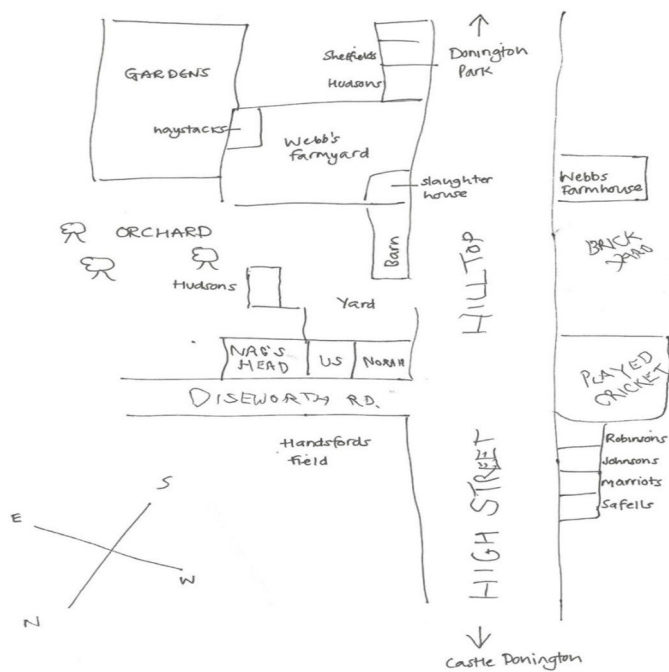


Fig. 8 Map of Hill Top, John Glenn and Alison Twells, 2014.



Fig. 9 The Nag's Head, Hill Top, Castle Donington. The Hodgkinsons' cottage stood to the right of the pub. Photo: A. Twells, 2025.



Surprisingly, no photograph seems to exist of the pre-war Nag's Head, now a revamped gastro-pub, white-washed and bedecked with hanging baskets throughout the summer. The cottages, which once adjoined the pub, are long demolished, their footprint and shared backyard now arranged with wooden benches and umbrellas. A few faded snaps in Norah's collection show children playing as geese peck at the ground and washing blows in the breeze. On one, Pop can be seen through the window, concentrating hard as he peels spuds or washes pots. Another shows a clutch of Hill Top kids clustering in and around a car.

'That's Mr Mitson's sports car!' John says, delighted. The well-to-do son-in-law of the publican ('his daughter married up'), he used to visit from somewhere near Coventry and take the local kids for a spin. I focus on Norah, bob-haired and smiling broadly, looking younger than her twelve years, sitting in the back behind a young driver.

'That's me!' John exclaims, pointing to a tall, slender lad standing beside the driver's door. Thirteen years old, he is well kitted-out in his boots, knee-length socks, shorts, jacket, waistcoat and cap. The sun picks out his cheekbones and his gentle dark eyes smile straight at the camera. In the background is his little dog, name forgotten but much loved and last stroked over seventy years ago.



Fig. 10 Norah, John and friends, Hill Top, c. 1937. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.

The remaining Hill Top photos in Norah's collection were taken on Webb's farm during the Hodgkinson family's last days there in July 1938. On one snap, Frank, Marsie, Norah, Helen, Pop and Birdy line up in front of a farmyard gate; only eldest son Dennis is missing. Another sees Helen, my gran, standing slightly behind Norah, who straddles a piece of farm equipment. ('The old Bamford mower', John says fondly.) Looking straight at the camera, Norah is smiling, playful, confident. I note her long, strong, suntanned legs, the calves that give them all – my mum, gran, Norah and now, it seems, my ten-year-old daughter Ruby – that extra inch of height over me.

'I think Webbie took these', I say. 'They were his gift to the family, after 27 years of neighbourliness. And rent'.

John laughs. 'They were damp, flea-ridden holes, those cottages', he says. 'But I do remember it as a very happy time'.

'Do you think you're romanticising?' I ask. I'm interested because Norah and her siblings had similar reflections on their 'idyllic' childhood.

'Yes', he concedes, 'I may be. We were dirt poor. My grandmother couldn't afford to kit me out for the grammar school. She didn't have two ha'pennies for a penny and was always worrying about how to make ends meet'.

'And the narrow morality', I add. He's already told me about his unmarried mother.

'Yes, that as well. But there was something in the innocence, the neighbourliness, the simplicity. It was a healthy outdoorsy life. It was good'.<sup>11</sup>

And it's all here, in Norah's 1938 diary. Norah fetching eggs from the farm, her early morning mushrooming and blackberrying in the late afternoon. Norah knitting bed socks, a blue jumper and a vest for Marsie. And then the cricket, the sledging, the lounging in the orchard reading her books and magazines. And Jimmie.

One Christmas Day, not so very long ago, sometime between the pudding and the game of 'Sorry' with my young daughters in the front room, Norah told me about Webb's orchard, the garden up the lane and the interior of the Hill Top cottage: the front sitting room and back kitchen, the rag rugs, the position of the dresser and the piano. The sitting room wallpaper was cream, patterned with delicate grey-black diamonds.



Fig. 11 The Hodgkinson family, Webb's farm, Hill Top, 1938. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.



Fig. 12 Helen and Norah, Webb's farm, Hill Top, 1938. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.

The floor was uneven, the memory of it prompted by her recollection of a china tea set, received with pride and pleasure for her fifth Christmas, and which, placed on a tray balanced on a wooden chair, smashed to smithereens when one leg wobbled a devastating half-inch above the floor.

It pains me now that I didn't ask for more detail: the flashes of colour, the extent of Marsie's untidiness, whether there was much drama from the pub, the position of the poster of Lord Kitchener, concealing the damp patch on Norah and Helen's bedroom wall and the precariousness of the loose window frame, permanently tied to the frame of their shared bed, to stop it falling out into the street below.

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Norah thought back to that summer's day in June 1938, when she and her family had left Hill Top forever; that had been a day of heartbreak. She remembered then another brief crush: Arthur, the driver of the van that took their worldly goods all the way across the village on that blustery Saturday morning to a brand-new council house on Moira Dale. *25th June: Left our old house in Co-op [van]. I like Arthur the Remover. Called me 'sweetheart'. Mrs Robinson and Mrs Bostock gave us flowers. Emma cried. Didn't want to leave them & Jimmie. Sunny, rainy, windy.* ('They had a van?' my mum says, incredulous. 'When we moved to Garden Crescent in 1951, we went by coal lorry, all our possessions piled high for the world to see'.)

Did Norah feel her heart grow heavy as she read her diary entries for the next few days and weeks? She missed Jimmie, terribly.

*1st July: Revised French. Practised the Gym. Felt terribly lonely. Had a return for science but didn't sign it. Rainy cold.*

*2nd: Got up rather late. Worked a lot. Should have gone to the tennis tournament but didn't. Emma came to see us. Made me feel homesick. Bought some nasturtiums. New people went in our house. Sunny.*

*3rd: Got up late. Helen had her bath at dinner-time. Went to Diseworth through D. Lane. Made me feel terribly homesick. Wanted Jimmie. Sunny.*

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But the new house was just grand. 18 Moira Dale: such a posh address! It's hard to believe it now, but in 1938 to live in a council house was a respectable aspiration. Although rents were high and many tenants could scarcely afford the payments, it was a step up in the world for a working-class family. The interiors of the three- or four-bedroomed houses varied, but included a front room, a good-sized kitchen with a pantry and a brick copper in the corner, a bathroom and a toilet. A privet hedge was set at the front and an apple tree planted in the generous garden at the back.<sup>12</sup>

Norah noted in her diary that when the architect came to look round the houses in early 1939, he was impressed. I'll bet he was. The Hodgkinsons were model tenants. Houses on these new 'garden estates' represented a movement not only to clear slums, but to uplift the poor. The tenancy agreement came with strict rules about housework, maintenance, children's behaviour and the keeping of pets. I haven't been able to find an example for Moira Dale, but a letter from the Corporation of Bristol Housing Estates on 15th June 1936, sent to a prospective new tenant making an offer of a new house on Bristol's Knowle West Estate – where, coincidentally, Marsie's younger brother Frank and his new wife Mary were soon to move – reveals the reforming intentions:

The Housing Committee realise that you have been living under very undesirable conditions, and that in worn out houses it is very difficult to get rid of vermin. But there will be no excuse in your new house. Do not buy secondhand furniture, bedding or pictures unless you are quite sure that the articles are free from vermin. Insects do not like soap and hot water, and they also dislike dusters and polish. So if in the new house you keep your windows open, and keep your bodies and clothing, floors and stairs, furniture and bedding clean; use the duster frequently on all skirting and ledges, you are not likely to be troubled again with vermin. This sounds a lot, but life isn't going to be all work for the housewife. The new house will be easy to keep clean and it will be well worth looking after.<sup>13</sup>

Maybe it is the word 'corporation', or maybe it is just the tone, but I imagine this conveyed over the wireless as the new residents cross the threshold, in the Queen's English of the pre-war BBC.

What will the architect have seen? My mum tells me that it was a proper cottage garden at the front of number 18. The boys – Richard, Frank and Helen's husband-to-be, Joe Twells – had ripped out the privet and replaced it with lilac trees, Marsie's favourite. There was a snowball bush by the gate and flowerbeds set with honesty, stocks, yellow daisies,

bought as gifts by Hill Top friends, running either side of the slabbed path up past the lawn to the front door.

‘You went in the front door...’

My mum is set on walking me through the house, but I stop her, keen to know the colour of the front door. We laugh. Council house front doors interest us more than they should. For the first fourteen years of my life, we lived with my grandparents in a post-war Nye Bevan beauty of a house on a big corner plot round the corner on Garden Crescent. When the men from the council arrived every few years to re-paint the front door, giving the tenant a choice from one shade each of blue, red, yellow or green, my gran would choose red (for Labour!) and then, in her own small protest at this excess of local authority uniformity, would get her paint-brush out the following week.

‘Did she ever just ask them not to paint it?’ I ask.

‘Oh yes, but they had to. They knew what she’d do. Nobody batted an eyelid when she got that olive green tin out’.

It turns out that the front door at Moira Dale was plain brown wood. On entering, you were greeted by the aspidistra at the foot of the stairs on the right. Above the door to the living room on the left were some stag’s antlers that Pop had picked up in Donington Park on his postal round and which the owners had mounted for him:



Fig. 13 Pop’s antlers, courtesy of Castle Donington Museum. Photo: A. Twells, 2025.

The front room was a living room and not a parlour. The kitchen wasn't big enough to be a 'living kitchen', but even if it had been, Marsie would not have had a perfectly good room with a big window that got the morning sun and not enjoyed it daily.<sup>14</sup> As you walked in, the gramophone, and later the telly, stood against the front wall. Then, beneath the window, covered with a crocheted throw, was a dark horsehair sofa, replaced in the 1950s by a pink moquette. At the far end, in an alcove, there was a built-in cupboard where Marsie kept the darning wool, the needle box and Sunday evening games: Sorry, draughts and a pack of cards. On the shelves above was her wedding-present Crown Derby and china tea set with the delicate green pattern. On the other side, beyond the black range, a second alcove housed a tall bookcase holding encyclopaedias, book prizes from school and Sunday school and Marsie's Bible. In front of the range were two chairs, the wooden one Pop's, inherited by Birdy when his father died in 1945, and Marsie's, upholstered and without arms (more comfortable for darning and breast-feeding).

'It does sound a bit cluttered', I say, remembering that in my great-grandmother's scheme of things, untidiness, *stuff* and even a bit of dust were not at odds with homeliness.

'And I'm far from finished yet', my mum says. On the wall that ran from the alcove to the kitchen door stood Marsie's piano, above which hung a wall clock and two or three prints of Derbyshire countryside scenes. And then there was the oak sideboard with glass knobs. The wireless sat on the top of it, and arranged underneath, from the late 1940s and 1950s, Norah's multi-coloured collection of high-heeled shoes, a big attraction for her young niece. 'And there was a dining table and chairs in the middle of the room! We all used to sit there to watch the telly'. She pauses. 'I honestly don't know how we fitted in. It was certainly cosy'.

Upstairs, all four bedrooms were in use. Marsie and Pop took the big back room while the boys shared a double bed in the front and the girls had a small room each. Helen, biding her time until her marriage, overlooked the back garden. Norah's box room, bright and sun-drenched all morning, the small-paned window looking out onto the front garden, is the only one I can describe: the single bed covered

with the satin eiderdown; the small oak dressing table, with a wooden jewellery box and little pot pourri dish, a clothes brush, hair brush and comb; and an over-the-stairs cupboard that held her clothes and where, I guess, she stashed Jim's and Danny's letters throughout the war.

Into the kitchen, there was a Belfast sink, a long pantry with a meat-safe at the end, a crowd of coats on the wall near to the stair-hole door, a brick copper in the corner and next to it, the door to the much-prized bathroom. A small passage led out past the lavatory and the coal house, into the back garden. My mum remembers the rambler rose, Frank's peach tree, and beyond a small scrappy lawn, vegetable beds and raspberry canes, blackcurrant and gooseberry bushes, plum trees, another lilac, the hen house and a compost heap to the left of the bottom gate. No more tripping up the lane to the allotment for some veg or flowers or hanging out washing in a dusty shared yard, the garden was Marsie's pride and joy.

Norah's next-door neighbour, Irene Marsh, seven years old when her family moved into number 16 that same summer, remembers admiring Marsie's washing from her bedroom window. 'She used to hang it up in order of size', she tells me as we sit in the living room of her Derby bungalow. 'I used to watch her from our upstairs, putting things back in the basket, picking out the right one'. She pegged the shirts with the collars bent taut over the line to hold their shape, towels to create two even loops. 'My mum just used to sling ours over the line, all higgledy-piggledy', she tells me. 'But Mrs Hodgkinson's: it was like a work of art'.

Some summer evenings, the families in the terraced row – the Robeys at number 14, the Peggs, the Hodgkinsons and then more Peggs at number 20 – would sit out on wooden kitchen chairs and planks lined up along the back path that linked the houses. The grown-ups in their pinnies and shirtsleeves dished out boiled new potatoes tossed in butter with fresh peas and mint sauce. Chatting and laughing, they looked out over the gardens until the sun set over Bucknall's orchard beyond.<sup>15</sup>





Fig. 14 (left) Tom and Milly in the front garden at Moira Dale, and Fig. 15 (right) Norah in the back garden, both c. 1940. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.

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A beautiful brand-new council house: they had really gone up in the world. And lovely Arthur had brought them here. Norah would add his name to her list. But before him: she had nearly forgotten Cousin Eric who visited in early May, Uncle Will driving them all – Marsie and Pop, Norah and Eric – to Southwell Minster and Newstead Abbey, Lord Byron's former home. *Adore Eric*. And then there was Woolley, a friend of her brother Frank. His smiles from the school bus had added some spice to her days. *Waved to Woolley all week*.

And next? Bernard Limb from Belton, of course! She hardly gave him a second thought any more but had been so giddy about him in the summer. *Sat with that lovely Grammar boy & like him*, Norah wrote in mid-July. That was the first time they'd talked. *Sat with Bernard*, she wrote each day that week. *I absolutely adore him. Talked to B all the way home*. Did Norah smile at the memory of how her daydreams annoyed her teachers

(*Shellie got on to me about looking ponderous*) and remember how lonely her weekends felt at that time? *Thought about Bernard all day long*, she wrote one Sunday in late July. *Absolutely terribly love-sick for him*.

Even more of a flash in the pan had been *Fishboy*, aka Henry, whom she had eyed up on trips to the village shopping street. It is highly likely that she wouldn't have remembered him at all without flicking through those months. This diary-keeping malarkey: it was grand. Was this the point at which Norah committed to writing a diary forever? A diary could 'anchor the past' as it disappeared behind her. It was 'a message in a bottle', to the future self whom she did not yet know.<sup>16</sup>

Norah was reminded of seeing the Northern Lights in the late January sky and a few weeks later, tasting her first Cadbury's Milky Way. The false news that Hitler had been assassinated, then Eden's resignation and the government crisis that followed. Her minor domestic triumphs: making lemon curd and baking pasties that *even Birdy liked*, skinning a rabbit in record time (*10 minutes*), going to the Park in April, moving house in late June, starting her periods that summer and travelling all alone up to Bamford in Derbyshire – two train rides – to stay with her sixteen-year-old cousin. That was another grand week, her days spent roaming the moors with Jeff the dog before meeting Peggy from work in a Sheffield department store. Two nights running, they went early doors to the pictures, seeing Jane Withers in *Checkers* and Constance Bennet in *Merrily We Live*. She'd shared Peggy's bed and listened to her talking about her own crazes as they drifted off at night.

Other highlights included being chosen for the school hockey and netball teams, as the artist for Burton House, and for the part of Sir Andrew in *Twelfth Night*. There were some disasters too. She maybe smiled as she read her blasé account of the marble cakes she and Kathleen *burnt to pieces*. *Bad luck*. Her crowd of friends had the usual fallings out. *I'm back on Agnes*, she wrote. *Kathleen and Enid snubbed me all day*. But they were giddy, often helplessly so – *couldn't stop laughing all afternoon*. Telling her off for her *rather perverted sense of humour*, a teacher had made her *write out Anaerobic Respiration five times at 4pm*.

In September, Bira was back, racing in the T.T. and Norah was *crazy over him again*. Did her heart skip a beat as she was reminded of her fears when, a few days later, she heard that he had been involved in a crash

in Northumberland in which a motorcyclist was killed? She was keen to know that it wasn't his fault (it was) and that it wouldn't stop him from racing (it didn't).

*Grave week in politics*, Norah had written in late September, as Hitler invaded the Sudetenland and Chamberlain went to Munich. The German racers, Auto Union and Daimler-Benz, set for victory at Donington Park, were back and forth that week. Though she wouldn't know it, they were ordered by the German Embassy to leave for Harwich and instructed to fire the cars if they were stopped on the road.<sup>17</sup>

At school, the Grammar boys came to dig a trench in the grounds. *Dozens! Lovely. We joined in*, Norah wrote delightedly on 28<sup>th</sup>.

*29th September: Awful talk of war. Germans back at the Park.  
Dug trenches in Gym and in English in the afternoon too.  
Lovely among the boys! Awfully warm. Frank & Den went to  
pictures. Sunny, warm. Chamberlain went to Munich.*

*30th: Chamberlain came back. Saved us from war. 3 cheers.  
Took a spade. No need now though. Chamberlain was given  
a terrific welcome. Everyone went crazy over him. Rained.  
German Racers Gone. Bad.*

As war loomed and was then averted, Norah enjoyed fratting with the boys. Although the crisis was over, ever hopeful, she had still taken her spade to school.

A few weeks after Chamberlain turned his back on the Czechs, a touring troupe of Germans performed a show at her school. One of them, referred to in her diary as the *Marionette*, was a lovely handsome young man. *We're all crazy over him.*

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'End it here, with the visiting German!', insists a creative writing tutor and poet. Coinciding as he does with Chamberlain's triumphant return from Munich and his countrymen racing at Donington Park, closing with the marionette has a certain Germanic neatness to it, a focused poetic appeal. But as a historian, I can't leave out a perfectly true part of the story in the interests of literary aesthetics; the final 'craze' which shows us more of Norah. A story needs a shape, I see that, but real life is never that trim.

*14th December: Water was turned off about all day. I can walk quite alright now, except for the limp. Listened to Bandwaggon. Saw a picture of Frank Soo. He's a beauty. Crazy over him.*

*15th: I'm still crazy after Soo. He's a Chinaman & plays for Stoke City.<sup>18</sup> Can walk on my foot now. Wall's house in Eastway set fire. Absolutely burnt to the ground. Made mincemeat.*

*16th: Made the Christmas puddings. Spent the afternoon looking at his photos (FS). He's grand. Frank taught me how to play Patience. Knitted a lot. Tommy fought Lou Nova (lost). Rained.*

*17th: Read about Soo in bed. He's stupendous. Derby's playing Everton in the cup & Leicester's playing Stoke City. Hope SC wins. Had the electric fire. Lovely. Uncle Frank (Bris) came. Stoke lost to Arsenal. Derby lost 4.1 to Middlesborough. Leicester lost 6.1 to Grimsby.<sup>19</sup>*

And of course if this was a novel, I wouldn't have three men all called Frank in as many diary entries. I'd give them different names, like Bill and Maurice maybe. But Norah had an Uncle Frank, a train driver visiting from Bristol, and a brother, named for him, who taught her card games that week. And now there's Frank Soo, the beauty at Stoke.

There's another thing, again about trimming. Deleting Frank Soo and the superfluous domestic detail loses the everyday texture: the inconvenience of the turned-off water, the warmth of the new electric fire, the fruity aromas of Christmas cooking. And there's the unintended humour. It can't have been much fun for the Wall family, losing their home to a fire, but there's something in Norah's reportage (*absolutely burnt to the ground. Made mincemeat*) that makes me smile.

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'What was she like?' my mother exclaims again. 'It's 1938 and she's thirteen years old, from a good Christian home! It's only two months since she was describing *Snow White* as the best thing ever'. My mum lapses into dialect, what we call 'broad Donington': 'O wor a bit of a gel, that o wor'. And then, in a more judgmental tone: 'Maybe this is where

it all started. You remember what she was like, even in her seventies'. She is again viewing Norah the schoolgirl through the lens of later life.

Norah always picked up male admirers on her SAGA holidays.

'It took me three months to shake him off', she once told me in an exasperated tone about some retired banker from the plushiest road in the poshest part of west Sheffield. Another well-to-do old fella who in his younger days had clearly been used to reeling in the women, he had pursued her since a fateful beverage at Heathrow's Terminal One after a fortnight cruising on the Doura. 'I knew what was coming, as soon as he asked me for a coffee. I thought, "Oh Lor', here we go again."' She was in her early eighties at the time.



Fig. 16 'Gentleman seeks lady' ad. Private papers of Norah Hodgkinson.  
Photo: A.Twells, 2025.

Playing with a box of odds and sods on Norah's coffee table during one of our visits, my younger daughter unearthed a small ad for a local gent seeking a lady friend. Norah was unperturbed by this exposure. 'I don't want another husband' she protested, by way of an explanation. 'But a chap who lives about six miles away, who can take me out on daytrips and come round to knock the odd nail in, that'd be nice'.

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Once you've spotted this liking for boys and men, they crop up everywhere. I flick back to Norah's first ever entry, made just after Christmas 1937. While the diary proper begins with the printed rectangular window for 1st January 1938, twelve-year-old Norah, keen to get started, created pencil-drawn boxes for the last two days of the

outgoing year. *30th December 1937*, she wrote. *King Farouk dismissed his cabinet. Dull, rainy day.*

If we didn't know any better, we might consider this a curious entry for a young girl's diary. But far from parroting *Daily Herald* headlines, or writing what she assumed diaries should contain, we can be confident that Norah will have been inflecting this news item with her own schoolgirl interest in the handsome young Egyptian king.

So it should come as no surprise that when the lady from the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) visits her school in 1940 to recruit sock knitters for the troops, Norah Hodgkinson jumps at the chance. Or that once the heavy seaboot socks are finished and ready to be sent off to the Royal Navy Comforts Fund, she cheekily slips her name and address inside the package.

