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Dear Moses and Pippa,

You will be able to read or get from the Internet much of the history of the Cooper family back a century or two. I want to tell you in this letter some of the family history to which I can testify (i.e from 1920 onwards) because "I was there", even if some of the events I can only recall because I heard my parents or friends talk about them.

I was born on the 1st day of May 1920, the son of Ernest Henry Cooper and Blanche Kathleen Cooper. As well as my mother and father, my mother's mother Catherine Sarah Riddy lived in the house. She had been born in 1852 and was a widow. She had many memories of her life which she passed on to us.

29 St Anne's Road, Wembley, Middlesex, was a small terraced house (two rooms upstairs, two downstairs, with an extension to the rear of the downstairs' back room for a scullery. The only toilet in the house was attached to the scullery with access only from the back yard. The garden was no more than a 15 x 25 feet rectangle of soil and concrete and the property backed onto the cemetery of St John's Church, Wembley. It had, brand new in 1919, cost my parents £150 to purchase outright.

Hanging on the fence in the back yard was our tin bath which was brought indoors when someone wanted a bath. I found bath night very enjoyable with the bath in front of the fire filled with hot water from the concrete and iron 'copper' (a device like a huge witches' cauldron with a fire burning below it) in the scullery. The copper was also in use every Monday so that my mother and grandma could wash the clothes. My father started the fire under the copper with wood before he went to work on Mondays. The ladies washed the clothes (by hand using a big wooden copper stick to stir the copper). When the clothes were washed the ladies would transfer them to a mangle which, when the handle was turned, squeezed the water out. Then the clothes were hung in the garden to dry (or in the house if the weather was bad).

The first thing I can truly remember in life was the occasion in 1924 when I went by taxi to the Middlesex Hospital in London to have my tonsils removed (a routine for most children in the 1920s). After the operation my throat was very sore and I returned home to a rare treat – ice cream. And an added treat from my parents was a farm set (animals, trees, sheds, etc.) some made of wood, some made of lead, which I could move about on the floor where it was usual to set it out together with a train set.

I can also remember my first day at school (Alperton Primary School) when I was five years old. At the end of that first day I complained to my parents that the teacher had misled me by telling me that the numbers after 10 were 11, 12 and 13 when I knew they were Jack, Queen and King (my father had clearly taught me my numbers).

I had a number of friends about my age who lived in or near my road. The road was a cul-de-sac with a corrugated iron fence at the end about 8 feet high. We always used to chalk goalposts or cricket stumps on the fence according to the season. I learned how to catch a

tennis ball (which we used for street cricket) in one hand while eating a sandwich with the other hand. Due to this I became quite an accomplished cricket fielder when I grew up.

There were very few cars in those days. When most people wanted to travel they did so by public transport – in buses or trams for short journeys and by train for long journeys. Only the very wealthy travelled abroad or had cars.

When I was five years old my little sister was born and I was encouraged to help my parents look after her and protect her. During my primary school days I was moved round different schools.

I must have been about 10 years old when we moved house – only into a house in the next street, 19 Lancelot Road, but bigger than the house in St Anne's Road. It had three bedrooms (I was given one of them) and there was a large fitted bath in the kitchen screened by a curtain. This was living it up!

When I was 10 years old I was allowed to join the Cub Scouts (called Wolf Cubs in those days). We met on Tuesday evenings in a hut given to us by the Church Lads' Brigade set in the grounds of St John's Church. It was a big wooden hut with lots of room to play games and do Scout work. We could do fire lighting and cooking in the field surrounding the hut.

At school (Park Lane School) I was doing well academically and passed my 11+ exams with quite high marks so I qualified to go to the grammar school (Wembley County School) where I started with great trepidation in September 1931. When I did so I thought nostalgically of my time at Park Lane School (I can still sing the Park Lane School song 77 years later) and recalled with pride such times as Empire Day each year when we were allowed to wear Cub uniform to school for the day and sang patriotic songs at Assembly.

It was round about the age of 11 that I was taken by my father to see my first professional football and cricket matches. For football I was taken to Loftus Road to watch Queens Park Rangers play. My uncle Percy Harry Riddy had played for them and for Tottenham Hotspurs on occasions as an amateur in the early part of the 20th century. At Loftus Road the spectators (nearly all men) would lift me and other boys over the fence so that we could sit on the grass by the touchline to watch the game. For County cricket I was taken to the Oval where I can remember seeing Hobbs and Sandham open the Surrey innings. But I was always keener to play than to watch and was proud to play cricket and football for my school and to represent my House at athletics and swimming.

My father had been in the regular Royal Navy from 1907 until the Great War ended in 1918 and therefore after discharge he was on the Royal Naval Reserve and had to do one week's training at Portsmouth every year. He always had the following week as his holiday from work and consequently my mother, my sister and I would have two weeks every year at Portsmouth with him. He would join us every evening and all four of us would have walks and a drink in a local pub. We had to sit outside in the garden while Dad went in and bought us lemonade and packets of fruit and nuts. We did lots of paddling and playing in the sand. Holiday times were exciting – we would get little sleep the night before and the train journeys were always interesting and exciting, particularly when I was in my early teens and the destination was Sandown in the Isle of Wight. To get there we had to go by train to Portsmouth Harbour, then board a ferry boat to take us across the water, then train again from Ryde to Sandown. Sometimes friends would accompany us. Sandown with its hard sandy beaches was ideal for playing beach cricket with a tennis ball. We would encourage other

holiday makers to join in and would spend most of the daylight hours playing cricket or swimming.

On one holiday at Sandown we were having a walk as a family when my father spotted a policeman who, he thought, was his cousin Albert Turner who had been in the Grenadier Guards in the 1914–18 War and served in the horrific trench warfare in France and Belgium. After much hesitation my father approached him and said “Excuse me. Do you know a man called Bert Turner?” The policeman replied “I certainly do – and I know a man called Ernie Cooper”. It was a fortuitous reunion. We were invited to their house – Uncle Bert had a wife who quickly became Aunty Ivy. Their son Ken, a bit younger than myself, and I became casual friends. For years our family and theirs exchanged visits – and in 1986 Cousin Ken and his wife Ena were the first people to welcome Dorothy and me to Wiltshire when great-grannie and I came to Pewsey to live. They lived in Swindon where Ken was the Road Traffic Officer for Wiltshire.

I thoroughly enjoyed my days (1931–1937) at Wembley County School. I played football and cricket for the school and represented Delta House at athletics and swimming, went to Scouts, collected stamps and cigarette cards, enjoyed walking, cycling, Scout camping and had some success academically. My school was mixed sex so I frequently fell in love with the prettiest girls who caught my eye. I was much too shy to talk to them however so it was always “love at a distance”.

From a young age I was brought up to regard Sundays as special and holy. I went to Church and Sunday school every week and was not allowed to go out to play. I wore my best suit and went for a family walk if Church activities permitted. My father usually had a ball in his pocket. He was a much easier ‘touch’ than my mother. He and my sister and I sometimes played cricket in our microscopic garden. If the ball knocked a flower down my father would stand it up and attach a splint so that my mother would not notice. My mother had high standards; my father was the eternal boy. Even many years later in life, when we lived at Southend and John and Peter were boys, my father was trusted to take them over to the marshes to look for newts on condition that he did not let the boys fall in one of the many streams. Shortly after reaching the streams it was my father who fell in and the boys who brought him home to change his clothes.

In 1936 I took the General Schools Examination and gained Matriculation standard but although I should have liked to be a surgeon my family could not afford to finance me through University so I also took the Civil Service Clerical Exam and passed with high marks. Hence I was instructed to start work with the Board of Control of Lunacy and Mental Deficiency in the former Northumberland Hotel in London.

I duly reported and one of my work colleagues was a young woman called Dorothy Cobb whom I found it easy to talk to. Six years later she was to be my wife and share 64 years of happy experiences, adventures, family pride, success, watching the successes of our children and grandchildren, and sharing all the family ups and downs.

In 1938 I joined the Territorial Army with five of my friends, but the years 1939 to 1946 are a separate story which I have recorded elsewhere.

Likewise I have recorded elsewhere my Civil Service career, my Scouting career, my Natural History story, my venture into oil painting, my coordination of the Neighbourhood Watch at Scotchel Green, Pewsey, and events from Stanton Lodge, where I was one of the earliest residents and the first Chairman of the Residents’ Association.

Your great-grannie (Dorothy) and I met on the 1st of July 1937, the day that I started work at the Board of Control of Lunacy and Mental Deficiency in London. She had been working there for a few months. We were always good friends and we attended one or two functions together. It was not until 1941 when World War II had been raging (or dozing) for two years that we fell in love (or to put it in its true perspective, Dorothy decided she was going to marry me) – and once she made her mind up little changed her.

We spent two exciting years discussing many things about our future together but it was a time when first thoughts were of survival. In 1943 we were married and could plan (hazily) for more than survival. My thoughts and intentions were to give Dorothy as good a life as I could – to show her and her family (hopefully) that I could give her more than she had got from them (and that was quite a lot as her family was better off than mine and wealth counted, more perhaps in those days than now when grants, bursaries, allowances, etc. seem to be more widely available). We did agree that we should like a family despite Dorothy having been warned that it might not be possible or wise because she had been born with a heart murmur and had not been allowed to do exercises at school. At birth her father had insured her life for £15. When she died aged 87 we received £16.01.

Within a few months of our marriage I was sent to India and Burma while Dorothy was given a job in London, which turned out to be hazardous when the Nazis started bombing London. We did, before I left for India, decide that we ought to have a son who would replace me if I was killed in the war. So when I left Britain in November 1943 Dorothy was pregnant. Planning for the future was put on hold until I returned in 1946 with the war over, with Dorothy and John fit and well, and myself unscathed and bemused by the little boy whom I found sharing my wife with me. From that moment we could plan and have expectations for the future. All of a sudden we were back at square one – where to live, how to earn money, how to fit our little family into the intermingled areas of our life, Dorothy's parents, relations and friends, my parents, relations and friends, adjustment to life as it had been. The pattern gradually evolved.

Dorothy and John lived in a fourth-floor flat, No. 10 Leigh Heath Court, when I came home from war. The flat was small – one bedroom, one sitting room, one bathroom, one kitchen and a balcony. From our flat we could see the Thames estuary. We were a happy trio. I commuted from Leigh on Sea to Fenchurch Street, to work at Rutland Gate (near Harrods store and the South Kensington museums). People worked in those days on Saturday mornings. I had been accepted into a football team (Homestead FC) and a cricket club (Marine CC) and on Saturdays would lug my kit up to London and back to wherever I was playing in the Southend area. Lunch for me every day except Sunday was packed sandwiches. At work I tried hard and gained promotion to Executive Officer, then Private Secretary to Sir Percy Barter, the Chairman of the Board of Control. This meant more salary and more prestige because I became well known in the Department and had many contacts outside the office.

Dorothy and John made friends with a number of people near home. It was during these four years that John started school at West Leigh School. Dorothy would take him to school and collect him after school. She stayed friends with some of the mothers who took their children as she did – and one of them writes to me even now at Christmas recalling those days. She has been a widow for many years and at 91 is still very active.

On the route to the school one passed a smallholding where chickens and rabbits ran free and we always had to stop there and look (John was already showing a leaning towards animal

interests). I recall his sitting under the table at Nanna Cobb's house and catching the crumbs that fell from anyone's plate unless Benny (Nanna's dog) caught them first.

At school in 1949 when John started he came home reporting there was a Lion in the class. Dorothy went to investigate the story to find it was a boy called Lionel whose name had him confused. John complained that Lionel called him "Old fat-face". When I saw the boy I thought I had never seen a boy with a fatter face than Lionel's. Occasionally our milkman who had a horse and cart to transport his milk would give John a lift to school in his cart. Oh Paradise!

In 1948 Peter was born. Dorothy went into Rochford Hospital a week beforehand because of her heart murmur. As soon as he was born I went to the hospital to see him. The Ward Sister told me to go and see him in the ward crèche (it was a time when all the babies were put frequently in a crèche and the mothers given a quiet rest). She told me that I would see half a dozen tiny babies and one huge one. My new son was the huge one. He was too – 10 pound 12 ounces. My recollection was that in his early days he did only three things – eat, sleep and yell. He gained fame in his first year by causing an uproar when put in a playpen with his cousin Julia, stealing the rusk she was eating and eating it himself. A few days before Peter was born I played football and took John with me. I sat him on a groundsheet behind the goal where the ball was unlikely to hit him – and he was as good as gold collecting every creature brave enough to venture near him. Further signs of his destiny.

In 1950, John being 6 and Peter 2, we moved house to 33 Rutland Avenue, Thorpe Bay – a brand new house (£2,000) with a small garden all our own. It had three bedrooms, a bathroom, kitchen, sitting room, dining room and (to us) so much space. The day we moved in was cool and rainy. The boys both had tricycles. These were the last things into the removal van from the flat and therefore first into the new house. The mud from the tyres took hours to remove from the floor. The stains on the carpet took several days. But what a lavish place we had. And the seafront and beach were only a quarter of a mile away, and Southchurch Park just down the road. Our old friends soon realised they could have a day by the sea by calling on us. We entertained frequently for nine years.

In the year of the great East Coast floods we saw high adventure. I woke early one Sunday morning, knowing the weather had been terrible all night and came downstairs to make everyone a cup of tea and found the gas and electricity supplies had been cut off. But as a former Boy Scout I was unabashed knowing we had plenty of wood and some coal. I woke Dorothy and the boys and invited them down to share the cooking of breakfast and to decide what we would eat. It was all very exciting and we looked out of our front-door. The sea had come over the promenade, flooded the low lying Southchurch Park, and had reached a spot about 50 yards from our house. At about 11 am while we were making plans to survive, a heavily loaded car came through the shallows and stopped outside our house. Our friends from Canvey Island had come to us seeking help. We invited them to come and stay. They came, Reg my friend and fellow member of the cricket club, Edna his wife and Dorothy's friend (these ladies had stomached many cricket matches with stoicism and their knitting), their two young daughters, their cat, their dog, all the clothes they would need, and all Reg's physiotherapy equipment. He was a professional physiotherapist. They stayed three weeks and some members of our cricket team turned up with gifts of bedding and various necessities. We got along without a hitch and the Local Authority even gave us a grant. Reg is long since dead but Edna still survives and writes every Christmas with memories of our happy three weeks surviving together.

John, Peter and I joined the 5th Southchurch Scout Group while we lived there. Dorothy joined the WI (or was it the TWG) and enjoyed their activities particularly singing with their choir. I was ASM (later ASL) and a man called Alfred Minshaw was SM (SL). We had some jolly times. Alf was a frightening man. He was marvellous with the Scouts but terrifying to the local layabouts who would hang round the fence taking the mickey out of the Scouts. He would walk around holding a massive felling axe. When he got near our gate the boys outside melted away. The Troop had numerous successes and some good camps.

We would use the beach for Scout tracking exercises and altogether it was a most formative time for John and Peter. John and I found that we could travel by train to Tilbury, cross into Kent by ferry and visit the house of the well-known butterfly expert L Hugh Newman who was a member of the Nature Parliament on the radio. We did this one day and met the great man and saw his wonderful collection of butterflies and moths in all stages of life all alive in his garden and home. We heard that there was an Amateur Entomologists' Society which had publications and whose members met annually in a London school at Westminster. We attended of course and John met the most interesting people he had ever known. In fact we attended every year and it was at one of these meetings that we met Major Maxwell Knight, a fellow member with L Hugh Newman on the Nature Parliament. This was the start of a long friendship between Maxwell Knight and John which blossomed when we moved to Crowthorne in 1959 and found that Maxwell Knight lived at nearby Camberley. Maxwell Knight and his wife Susie became family friends and visited Dorothy and me and our children. He helped us to set up the Crowthorne Natural History Group in 1968 and is the reason for our Max's name when he was born in the course of time.

Life at Crowthorne was busy for us all. We moved there in 1959 when I successfully applied for a post at Broadmoor. The post was a Department of Health one called in its archaic way the Confidential Clerk to the Medical Superintendent. I was like a private secretary but with responsibility for ensuring that the clinical work of this far-seeing forensic psychiatrist was acceptable in law and to the public. I enjoyed the work and got on well with the Medical Superintendent Dr Patrick McGrath. He and I had both been Army officers in war and served in Burma. Two years later I was promoted to Senior Executive Officer and appointed Steward and Clerk of Accounts at Broadmoor Hospital, and my close bond with Dr McGrath continued for the next 13 years, as did the friendship of our families.

It was during our Broadmoor days that several worldwide events of great importance occurred. The most dramatic was undoubtedly man walking on the moon – and this was a marvel to my father who had seen horse-drawn transport and now witnessed (on TV) space travel; and Diana suffered a big disappointment. The moon landing came in our night time and while Grandad was able to get up and witness it on TV Diana was considered too young to be got up for a mere giant step for mankind.

Another great event was the conquest of Everest, the highest mountain in the world, by the climbers Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tensing Norgay (news of which came on the day of Queen Elizabeth II's coronation – “the icing on the cake” as the BBC so appropriately put it). I remember going with John to hear a public lecture by some of the climbers and a few years later I met Lord Hunt (formerly Colonel John Hunt who was the leader of that successful Everest expedition).

We started in Crowthorne in 1959 in a five-bedroom house at Broadmoor, (We moved to a four-bedroom house in New Wokingham Road in 1961. It had a long back garden with large trees growing in it.) John was 15, Peter 11 and Diana 2 when we first came to No. 2

Broadmoor, and it was Dorothy's and my family home for two years; then we moved to Quantocks, New Wokingham Road, where we stayed until 1986. In those 25 Crowthorne years the children grew up; John went to and through Bristol University, Peter went to and through Southampton University; Diana finished her secondary schooling at the Abbey School, Reading, and got a hands-on job as a nurse, rising steadily up the ranks until now she is a Health Visitor and a senior member of the Nursing Service. They must each tell their own stories. Whatever they have done in life we have been a proud of them. We have been particularly proud that they each found a spouse who has been a companion, a comfort and a credit to them and a kind friend to Dorothy and me.

Life moved on and we had many exciting family parties at Quantocks. On one occasion Dorothy and I booked a bedroom at the Waterloo Hotel for each couple, Margaret and John, Moira and Peter, Diana and Rob, while we had the four grandchildren that we had at the time. Vanessa, Max, Holly and Laurie all slept in one room and did not stop chattering until they fell asleep from exhaustion at about 4 am. (Our first experience of a "sleep over" which as every parent knows is a misnomer because it means a "chat over".)

In the years since then the family has scattered far and wide over the world. We have followed every move of every member of the family with interest and pride, we have shared the pleasures and achievements of our grandchildren, their marriages, their careers, their successes in life. Before Dorothy died we were able to celebrate having two great-grandchildren, Moses and Pippa, for whom the prospects look good and to whom I offer every good wish for the future.