

# **A Childhood in India**



**Ellen Rogers Kirby**

Ellen Rogers Kirby (nee Binnie) was born on 10 October 1909 at Allbless Hospital, Bombay, India. She was baptised on 9 December 1909 at the St Anoreus Church, Bombay.

Ellen's church membership began on 15 February 1925 at St Paul's Parish Church, Greenock Scotland and now continues at Wylde Green United Reformed Church in Sutton Coldfield, England.

## A CHILDHOOD IN INDIA

**T**here's a quiet residential village in the Renfrewshire hills in Scotland called Kilmacolm. (I understand it means St Columba's cell). My paternal grandfather, a school inspector, lived at the top of the Hydro Hill, so called when the Hydropathic was there, with his wife and five children, one being my father. At the foot of the hill lived my other grandfather who ran the family grocer's shop in the village. He had seven children. The two families, both loyal members of the Church of Scotland, became close friends. So much so that my mother, a grocer's daughter, married the inspector's son. Also, a grocer's son married an inspector's daughter.

There was a spirit of adventure and empire building at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Three brothers and a sister in my mother's grocer's family travelled abroad. One, a sea going captain for a while, settled in London. Another settled in Chile and brought up two daughters. A third went to live in Cape Town and brought up a daughter whom I got to know well. We exchanged visits and kept in touch. They all died in Cape Town. My Aunt was a domestic Science teacher and went to Lovedale, a Church of Scotland School for African girls. She cared for me and kept in touch. There were holidays home to Scotland. She too died at the Cape and later I was able to visit her grave at Hermanus, a seaside town.

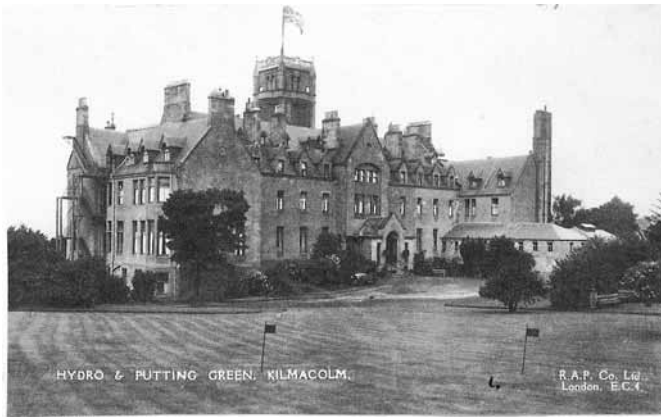
Then, of course, there was my father who, armed with a chief engineer's certificate, sailed round the world with

the P & O Line. He became engaged to my mother and they wanted to get married. A shore job was found in Bombay - chief engineer of the Bombay Port Trust Docks. The job came with the engineer's house and servants - a butler, cook, general servant, and, when needed, a nurse or ayah for any children.

So my mother, the lass from Kilmacolm was invited to be mistress of this establishment. Bags were packed and the maiden voyage taken to Bombay. There in the Church of Scotland my parents were married - friends acting as host and hostess.

I was born on the 10<sup>th</sup> October 1909 and I was christened in the same Church. I was to live most of the first ten years of my life in Bombay or Mumbai as it is now called. I have an album of many childhood photographs and interesting letters - all kept and treasured by my mother. They have helped me retain many clear memories of my childhood years. The engineer's house was an immense building with a flat crenulated roof where I used to play with my dolls, usually the butler or 'Boy' as we called him, in attendance. 'Boy' came from the Island of Goa and had a wife, with a daughter my own age, who was a playmate when they came on visits.

Ours was the top flat with servant quarters. The main entrance was through a conservatory, upstairs, past the middle flat occupied by my father's assistant. He was a parsee, a sect, to my knowledge, known only in Bombay. Like many of the kind caring people who surrounded me I remember the Parsee for his kindness and patience. He would often entertain me by reading a children's comic aloud to me and doing little sketches. The ground floor



The Hydro

BAPTISMS solemnized at *Roanley, in connection with the Church of Scotland* in the Year of our LORD 1917.

Wife's Baptism						Baptism of Child			Parents' Names		Place of Parents	Quality, Trade or Profession of Father	Name of Pastor or Minister by whom the Sacrament was performed
Year	Month	Day	Year	Month	Day	Child's Christian Name	Sex	Christian	Non-Christian				
1917	December	9	1917	October	15	Ellen Rogers	Female	Miss Piller and Ellen Porter Savers	Binnie	Roanley	Engineer Roanley, Port Trust	J. Cameron Chaplain	

The above is a correct Extract from the Register Book of Baptisms kept in *S. Andrew's Church, Roanley*

*John Cameron*  
Chaplain of *St. Andrew's Church, Roanley*

Baptism Certificate



Communion Certificate



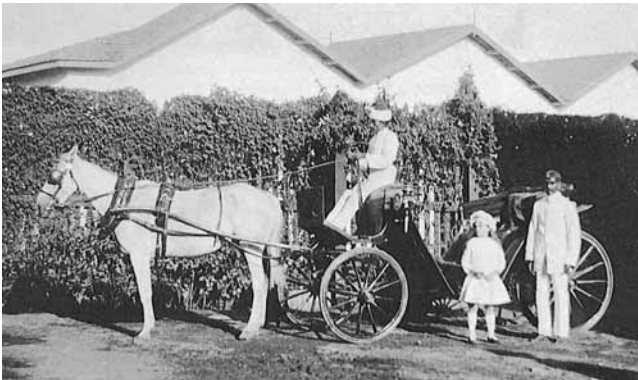
Port Trust Dock's Engineer's House  
– Carnac Bunder

*Dressed for school*

*The Scot's Baby with Ayah, Cook and Butler (Boy)*



*The school run*



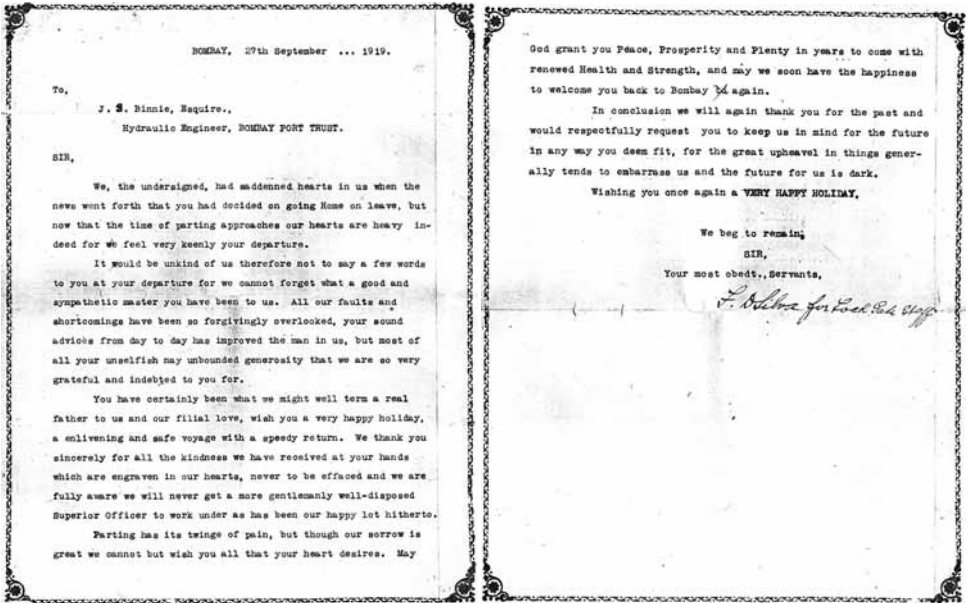


*The Chief Engineer, his  
wife and daughter*



*At play*





*Letter from the Lock Gate Staff of the Bombay Post Trust*



*Kilmacolm 1984*

*The gravestone of my mother, baby brother and father*



was called the 'Engine House', but I was never introduced!

I didn't have many young friends, but if a school friend *did* come for tea the cook would make us chowpatties to eat. The school I attended was the Cathedral Girls School and I travelled there in a horse drawn carriage with 'Boy' in attendance. At lunch time it was Boy who provided my lunch by bringing a thermos flask of food, and fruit. I don't remember much about school except being praised for drawing and colouring. But I do remember, on occasions, being allowed to go on midnight picnics on a yacht with grown ups. We went on holidays 'up the hills' and there were playmates there sometimes. I remember the name *Mattaran* and something of the surroundings - one being to look out for snakes! I was taken once in Bombay to an exhibition of live snakes in glass cases. That memory is still very vivid.

Our flat had a long verandah with a view of the main road. I used to play there and run about while mother and father sat talking or reading. We could see the Indian processions when they passed - decorated elephants with their mahouts (drivers), on their way for the throwing of garlands of flowers into the sea. I became quite good at speaking Hindustani and still remember a few words which translated mean *Hurry up and do your work for the night is coming!*

When I was three I went to Kilmacolm with my parents, for mother to have her second child - a little brother for me. When he was 6 months he became seriously ill and died of meningitis. He was buried in the family grave on

the peaceful hillside in Kilmacolm Cemetery. We then returned to India. But at the age of 10, in October 1919, life as I had lived it in Bombay was over for good. My father was no longer able to do his job. The diagnosis was a stone in the kidney. He was advised to leave the Bombay climate and have treatment in his homeland. There would be no going back. The Dock Staff and also Boy were all heartbroken. Letters which my mother kept along with the photographs in an album are touching testimonials to my father. They were probably typed by the scribes I can remember seeing sitting crossed legged outside the Post office with a typewriter on their knees. The Dock Staff said many appreciative things .e.g.

*That Dad had been like a father to them and life now was dark indeed.*

Boy was especially heartbroken - hoping we would return soon. *How were my dolls he asked in letters, and he would tell me that my pussy cat was missing me.*

The day in October came when we sailed away on the liner 'City of Cairo'. A cake was made to celebrate my birthday on the 10<sup>th</sup>. I found a pal my own age on board. One evening, after we had had our early meal, we stuffed some nuts and raisins in our pockets and got ourselves up onto a gallery with a view of the grown ups dining below. We thought it would be FUN to aim at them with the ammunition we had stored in our pockets. In Bombay I had not been used to being bored- or indeed scolded. There had been Boy - my guardian angel. I was in for a shock!

Time passed quickly and soon it seemed we were back in Kilmacolm, welcomed warmly at my mother's family

home. Her younger brother had taken over the grocer's shop when Grandpa died. He married the dear little lady who was his cashier and book keeper. They were among my relatives who were very good to me. Back home I had many relatives - a cousin, four half cousins and many uncles and aunts, but sadly no little brother. In Kilmacolm there were play times and parties and outings. One, I remember was in the horse and cart delivering groceries round the countryside.

On Sundays the family pews were always occupied in what was called the Auld Kirk. This was one of a number of churches in the village, being the Free Church, a small Church of England and the Plymouth Brethren.

A rich uncle kindly helped us to buy our own home. It was a small terraced house near the foot of the Lyle Hill Greenock with a view of Gourock's Caldwell Bay, the Tail of the Bank and the hills beyond - a setting for spectacular sunsets which I tried to capture in water colour. The Tail of the Bank was where the big liners were anchored after being built and then launched in the Clyde Shipyards. Sadly not today. (I saw the Queen Mary there.) Dad had his operation in Greenock Infirmary and had quite a big kidney stone to show off. Mother looked after him well through convalescence. He lived to be 82!

Money was scarce and Dad had to find a job. I suppose he was fortunate to find work at the torpedo factory which was still at the Gourock end of the Greenock esplanade and not too far away. Something of a comedown! He said he used to be sent on the launch going to the testing range up Loch Long, but I am not sure what else he did. Although I do know he had to sit a

practical test to be accepted.

I was sent to the Greenock Academy to be educated until I was 18. Art was always my best subject. There was a train service from Fort Matilda Station to Greenock.

The Church of Scotland was within walking distance and my parents became members. When I was 15, I too became a member and was presented with a certificate at a special Service. It was the start of a pilgrimage which has lasted all my life. Shortly after that we had the sorrow of my mother's death - with kidney failure - the Indian climate had taken its toll. She was buried in the family grave with my little brother. My father much later joined them there in peaceful Kilmacolm.

Childhood was over, but I had a caring father and many loving aunts and uncles - Many blessings to count.

It was in Glasgow during the 1940s that my life was again changed completely. I became a S.R.N. after training in the Victoria Infirmary and, proud of my new badge, was nursing in the private wing of the Cancer Hospital There I met the man who was very soon to become my husband. He had gained a Ph.D for cancer research, and was working in the labs, situated on the top floor. We met several times and he visited me when on holiday in Helensburgh.

It was Sept 1942 when we got married in Glasgow Cathedral where my fiancé was a Chorister. Our honeymoon was to the Island of Mull, after short stays at Oban and Iona.

In 1943 our first son was born and in November 1944 our lovely daughter came, making two in the pram which had

to be negotiated down and up some stairs. In 1948 we welcomed our second son.

New surroundings came when the position of research chemist at the Horticultural Research Station at East Mailing, Kent was offered and accepted. The Garden of England! We took the big step as a family to live in nearby Maidstone. A three bedroomed semi-detached house was found to rent, which we later owned. A remarkable fulfilling 25 years went by, watching the young generation grow up. A few of our more serious troubles included an infection of tuberculosis which healed, scarlet fever in an isolation hospital, pneumonia and a back injury which also healed.

Education for the three children brought out the best in them all. Two made it to university and one to college. My husband's elderly mother, who had stayed with us in Glasgow, came with us to Kent and was cared for nearby to make visiting easy and so she could join us in a family meal. Later on my father found lodgings in the same road as us. After he suffered a severe stroke we made room at home to care for him for the last days of his life. He was 82 when he died - the School Inspector's son and one time Chief Engineer of the Bombay Port Trust Docks. We also said goodbye to my husband's mother. Our daughter was married in the Congregational Church (later to become the United Reformed Church) to which we belonged - sadly now a shopping centre.

The Maidstone years left many happy memories and lasting friendships before we all went our separate ways. My husband and I retired to Malvern, but not for long, as illness brought my husband down in health, just as we

were happily settled. I was able to care for him and nurse him at home during the final weeks of throat cancer. My family was a great comfort to me and it was a help to find a small flat near my daughter, husband and her family of three children. We all keep in close contact today. Count your blessings and you'll be surprised.



## **Post Script**

Memories of the Bombay Engineer's House were recalled recently when a young man from my Church, Wylde Green United Reformed Church Sutton Coldfield, then training for the ministry, went out to Bombay. He gained permission to look over the old house. It was unoccupied and in a state of decay, with two guardsmen in charge. He was able to take some photographs and these made me realise that my childhood in India had not been a dream, but a very real part of my early life. Through that young man and his wife I feel my link with Bombay has come round full circle. They have introduced me to Jacob's Well - an organisation to help needy women in Mumbai. Through that interest I am still closely linked to the vibrant, colourful city in which I was born, and where the climate was either very hot and dusty or in the monsoon season extremely wet, but where I started to grow up.

*Ellen Rogers Kirby (nee Binnie)*

*With thanks to:*

Revd Valerie Dinning and Melanie Frew