

Lez, Clare and "The Gang" as seen through the War-time letters

Lez and Clare first started 'walking out' together in May 1940. Clare's letters tell us much about the courtship. She describes (27.4.43) her first visit to "your club", and how friendly they all were, "wonderful times". By the time that Lez was called up and joined the Navy, in July 1942, Clare knew the gang very well. It is clear from the letters that she also knew the parents and siblings of many of them. Not surprising really, they had grown up, or lived in the same area. . Hux and Tom began their training in the army at about the same time as Lez joined the navy.

During the war they wrote letters to each other, and met whenever possible at Jim and Vera's house, known to Clare as 'Cufley Towers'.

In a letter to Lez (7.8.42) Jim tells of the results of a local gala, including that he won the handicap race, and describes activities after the 'show':

"we had one or two little drinks with Charles....Vera decided she was hungry and we all went down to the café by the 'Guy'.....amazed at the variety of stuff he had.....and I for one frankly confess that I made a pig of myself. Who wouldn't when they can get steak chips & mushrooms. Went for a drink in the 'Guy' afterwards and then on to the 'Embassy'. Apart from the fact that it was terrifically hot we managed to find a place by an open exit door and have a damned good time. You ought to see Clare and I do a foxtrot, boy I get better and better. We got home at about 12.0 and played cards until Huxley as usual fell asleep. Tom and Hux are not going away until the 20th so it looks like another couple of weekends with beer. I suppose I shall have to make the most of them because I don't suppose I shall drink very much after they have gone. (except when somebody is on leave).

Vera is keeping very well.....The hospital people think she is doing very well and fortunately she hasn't to go again for about six weeks.... I'm hoping to have the dart room functioning by the time you get your leave so you had better get a little practice unless you don't mind losing some money to me."

Beer obviously played a significant role in their leisure time. In a letter to Lez (4.2.43) Clare mentions that Hux, at training camp has *"no friends and no beer"*

The next month a letter from Jim (12.9.42) includes some good news: *"You may now call me Fireman Cufley, as I have joined, and passed the medical exam etc. Curious thing, they have graded me B. ordinary which is similar to Grade 1 in the forces. I had to go to St. Nick's for the exam and it was a fairly good one.....The eyes turned out very well, read the card off at top speed until I reached the last line.....Anyway I start playing Water-Polo on Saturday at a Gala that is being held at Highgate Ponds. Apparently we all travel by way of a Fire Service Tender, but don't ask me how they wangle it."*

In the letter he passed on Huxley's latest address. The letters often contained addresses, and exhortations for people to write letters to cheer others up.

Jim and Vera did have a telephone, but Clare, staying in her mother's flat or in Joan's house did not have one. All telephone calls that are mentioned are to her office. This might be why she writes on 24th Feb.:

"I have had no further news of Vera so I think I will ring Jim in the morning and find out if everything is going well. I finished the baby frock on Monday evening & it really does look sweet."

At this time Clare and Lez wrote few letters because he was living in digs whilst training in Middlesex, so was able to come home most weekends and often phoned the office.

The first mention of Susan is in a letter of 11th March:

"Last evening I visited the Cufleys and cuddled little Susan Anne on my lap the whole evening. Gee she's a sweet little bundle. I can imagine how babies can tear at a mum or dad's heartstrings. When I arrived Jim and Vee were sitting on the table gazing into the cot where my lady was supposed to be sleeping. But she had a touch of wind & the comical expressions & grimaces she kept making had us in fits."

Clare had been asked to be her Godmother, and she and Lez must have discussed a present for her because the letter goes on:

"By the way, she already had one savings certificate so it was just as well we made sure before starting a second book for her. Eh?"

On 16th March Clare writes:

"Fraid I haven't had a spare evening to go over and cuddle Susan Anne this week so I expect they will be at Glenesk next time I visit them"

From this last comment I presume that Vera, Jim and baby Susan were staying with Vera's parents who lived, I think, in Merriman Road.

Hux has written (21.3.43) to Clare. Says he has heard from Jim and Colin Lawson and has written to Tom (Lawson). He hopes to see Westy (Lez) before he is posted.

Throughout the war the threads of a strong friendship group were maintained. Whenever someone was on leave he would turn up at Jim and Vera's and enjoy an evening with whoever was around. Jim, Hux and Lez were good correspondents, so news was passed on. Tom wrote to his mother regularly, and it was the absence of letters that led Hux to guess that he had been posted abroad. Len (Wellard) was less good at keeping in touch, but news of them all got to the hub of the group by some means or other. The war did, however, mean that men were not around for important events, like christenings and weddings.

Sunday 4th April, 1943 was Susan's christening. Clare writes:

"..I went over to Cufley Towers last evening (Saturday) to see the baby and Vera & Jim. They were sorry to learn that you were away and could not be at the christening ceremony. The baby is lovely chubby and happy. We even managed to get an occasional gurgle or chuckle out of her, and I nursed her and cooed at her for a lovely long time."

Clare visited Vera and her God child Susan as often as possible. She describes visiting one Wednesday evening (14.5.43) to see Vera and Susan.

"Vera is often on her own in the evenings these days."

Dansom Pool played an important role in the lives of the gang. Mum remembers as a teenager watching with admiration as these tanned young men strolled to the pool with swimming trunks over their shoulders.

One Sunday in June (21.6.43) Clare writes:

"Well I have spent a very enjoyable and lazy afternoon in company with Jim and Vera & Susan Anne. They are all three blooming with health as usual – fat & chubby. Susan chuckles when Jim holds her over the pool & he fully intends to take her in the Small Pool next summer. She's going to learn to walk & swim together!"

In this letter she also gives news of others:

"Tom is in North Africa now – according to Jim's code which they worked out and memorised before Tom went – he's in Algiers. I have taken a note of his address..."

Bill (Cufley) has received one of your letters & has written to you.

Jack Cotter representing British Movietone went with the first landing party to Lampedusa – when it surrendered. So any pictures of this island that we see in the papers will presumably be his.

Penny is still in the Pay Corps, stationed at Knightsbridge – and liking it."

In July Vera with Susan went to Christchurch. Clare's letter (22.7.43) says that Jim rang to tell her that Vera will be staying in Christchurch for another week. By 26th July she is writing: *"I'm looking forward to seeing Vera again and Susan who I hear is getting as brown as a berry."*

Life went on in Eltham and Plumstead, men coming home on leave and catching up at the Cufley's house.

Tom, in N Africa became a bombardier; Len was due to be awarded a commission when he blotted his copybook by taking an illicit night off to see his girlfriend and was reduced to the ranks! Later, in December Hux brought news that Len is now engaged and is in the Glider Pilot Regiment; Penny has been transferred overseas.

Then on 21st January 1944 Clare wrote this letter to Lez:

"What a life eh? Great Guns!!

We've had a bit of excitement ourselves this evening. I went over to Cufley Towers straight from work prepared for a quiet chat by the fire. And all went well until the warning went at about 9.0 o'clock.

Susan was sleeping upstairs & for a while they thought it best to leave her there, but the gunfire got to a terrific pitch, & we were just deciding to

bring baby down when there was the most tremendous crash & splintering & some of the ceiling over the bureau started to come down!

Vera gave one yell for baby, & Jim dashed upstairs to get Sue who was crying at full pitch of her lungs.

After a few seconds of wondering what to do, and waiting for the next shock I realized that we ought to get into our coats and keep warm & maybe go down to the shelter.

However Mr Bruce looked in & piloted us into his house while he and Jim & about 6 wardens shoved their way into the front room.

Apparently an A.A. shell had come straight down through the roof, & darts room, and exploded in the front room. Poor Jim & Vee, their lovely piano is ripped apart & the room is a shambles, in fact the whole house is shaken. It was miraculous that we should all have been in the back & escaped without a scratch. I was sitting by the bureau with my back to the middle wall & it felt as though the explosion was right behind me, as indeed it was, except that there was a wall in between!.....

Poor kids I went back indoors with them & talked while they got rid of the wardens, there's a rotten mess to clear away & I said I wd go over tomorrow & help."

Although most of what happened during the war was not mentioned after the war, this incident was retold by Clare to Jill and Mark. Stories told one when young can become distorted in the memory, did I really remember Mum saying that she was saved by a piano? This letter confirms and enlarges the story!

The next news of the Cufley family comes in a letter from Clare (12.1.45):
"Jimmie phoned me today. Wanted to know how, and where, you were. Seems to think you may get several leaves before you finally move. Only hope he's right! Vera is in town again, and is expecting the new baby in a week or two. I promised to go over to see her one day next week before she goes to hospital."

Then, on 31st January Clare write:

"Well I thought you'd like to hear right away the news that an exceedingly proud father has just conveyed to me.

It's a BOY – weighing 8¼lbs – some nipper according to Jim, though he hasn't seen it yet. He had the news by phone this morning – just the bare

details. Vera it seems did not have nearly so long in the theatre this time. Jim was talking to her last evening on the phone & baby arrived around midnight.

I've written a letter to Vee, congratulating them both on doing the job properly, and you have her address in case you can do likewise.

I bet she can hardly wait now to get back her strength & gather all her family around her once more!

I told her that you were hoping for 7 days in the near future & trusted she'd be home so's you can dangle Roger upon your knee. Remember how young Sue christened your best suit?"

Clare has been making clothes for her baby and hopes to post them to Vera this week (24.1.45). On the 30th Jan she writes that there has been another 6" of snow. There is no news yet of Vera. She encloses Vera's nursing home address: Moatlands, Paddock Woods, Tonbridge Wells. On 26th February Clare writes that Jim is going down to Christchurch this weekend to bring Susan home.

In March Lez was posted abroad and sailed out of Liverpool on the Mauritania for Bombay. Clare now wrote much more frequently and included more news of family, friends and gatherings.

On Easter Monday (3.4.45) Clare writes:

"Yesterday I spent the afternoon and evening with Vera and Jim. They are feeling very pleased because their damage claim has been settled at £280! At least the amount of the claim has been settled – the cash will no doubt arrive after the war. I passed on your address, & I expect they will be writing. The latest news from Bill (Cufley) indicates that he hopes to be on his way home towards the end of April. Won't he be fed up at just missing you!

At the beginning of May, with news of imminent surrender in the air, Clare writes:

"I phoned Vera t'other day.....Vera's 'brood' as she calls it are going on fine apart from a few mishaps. Jim badly cut his finger on a lawn mower & also playing polo with the Rest of London (what an honour!) he received a kick in the ear which resulted in a perforated ear-drum. Bad luck that, just when he was playing for a really fine team.

Vera is also fed up because Sue has to go into hospital for 3 weeks for an op: on her navel. Such a shame, poor kiddy.

However, as a tell Vera, once it is put right she won't have to worry over it again,"

After VE Day life for Londoners was very different. Gone was the threat of bombing, the streetlights were put on again and rationing for petrol ceased. All around them were bomb sites and the houses which could be repaired were being converted into flats

Later in May (25.5.45) Clare writes:

"I rang Vera yesterday & had a good pie-jaw. Bill is home now & enjoying 30 days leave. I hope to meet him on Saturday when I am going to spend the evening at Cufley Towers.

I interrupted Vera in the middle of a make-do-and-mend session, so I couldn't resist telling her about your button-sewing cameo.

Roger, it seems at 4 months is growing into quite a little monster, & quite definitely takes after the Cufleys. Susan always says 'allo auntie' down the phone & then jabbbers unintelligibly to me. I get Vera to interpret afterwards."

That weekend Clare did visit Vera (30.6.45):

"I went to Cufley Towers, a very busy and full household this always these days.

Susan on the floor, with 2 playmates, surrounded by toys and playing 'at homes' with tea service & lots of water. How kids adore getting wet!

Young Roger is getting a whopper. – weighs over a stone, and is getting quite lovely to look at. Vera thinks he is a real Cufley, but he has very long legs, arms & fingers & will undoubtedly outstrip his father one day."

The following week, with Bill still on leave, Jim, Vera, Bill and Clare went to the theatre together. Then on the Sunday (6.6.45):

"After lunch found me heading for Cufley Towers. I love that ride over Shooters Hill.....the guns have disappeared from the site.

Jim & Vera were busy polishing & sweeping when I arrived, and the babes bless 'em were fast asleep upstairs..... Pat & Hux turned up and we girls soon had tea prepared & the usual gang-meal ensued, with everyone jawing about the boys, when they'd be demobbed & home, and Jim persuading Hux to finish up the bread & butter. Just like old times."

The next day (7.6.45) Clare continues her description of her Sunday afternoon at the Cufleys:

"Little Susan is getting more used to her Auntie Clare these days & honoured me by bringing along her nursery rhyme book after tea, announced 'me up' and proceeded to take possession of my lap. After which we spent an absorbed half hour with 'Jack & Jill', 'Jack Horner' & the rest.....bedtime came along & Sue was led off to bed-quite contentedly as she was almost asleep"

During June 1945 Jim bought a second hand car, a black and cream Ford 10. To celebrate the fact he took Tom, Bill and Jeanette (Kidd) down to Shorncliffe to visit Pat & Hux, who had married at the beginning of the year. The next night they all went dancing to the Embassy. Tom was off to Germany at the end of the week.

At the beginning of July (2.7.45) Clare went over to visit to Cufley Towers.

"I was sorry that I couldn't revise a few more nursery rhymes with Susan, but she was sleeping peacefully when I arrived, and I was just able to see the top of her golden curls.

Roger on the contrary woke up with a roar, pain in his tummy & a hoarse voice – and I walked the room in an effort to pacify him. He's getting a real whopper. – taking after father.

I didn't stay too late at CT because they all looked a bit tired.....They have been poring over maps ever since they bought the car, and today they are taking a trip into Surrey somewhere.

Jim brought me home by car, and gee it was quick compared with the usual wait for the bus. She runs very smoothly and Jim is quite proud of her. By-the-by I am told that she is 'black & ivory'.

One evening later in July (24.7.45) Clare gives Lez the news:

"Jeanette was over at V & Jim's on Saturday & between us we girls did quite a bit of ironing – getting ready for the holiday. The Cufleys have rented a bungalow at Herne Bay for a fortnight starting next Saturday. Freddie Kidd incidentally has been doing lots of swimming in Italy and has been chosen for the Eighth Army team! Some honour eh? Seems he swims a pretty nifty 100metres and Jim thinks he's not far off the Kent

County Champion. I reckon that between you your gang could make a pretty formidable water polo team."

VJ Day was 15th August. On Thursday 16th Jim drove Clare, Len and the Cufleys down to Yalding, where they stopped by the river (18.8.43):

"Len & Jim donned bathing costumes & did a bit of swimming & took Sue in after a while. That child simply loves the water, & looks like being a champ someday."

Clare describes visiting Cufley Towers one Friday in September (10.9.45):

"....Jim was out for a swim and the children were both up when I arrived. Young Roger is a picture – gonna be a monster when he grows up..... Vera was just about to bath 'em so Auntie Clare rolled up her sleeves & gave a hand..... Roger comes out first so that Sue can indulge in some swimming & splashing on her own. Gee how those kiddies love the water!"

Later in September (20.9.45):

"On Friday last Jim & Vera called in the car.... & wouldn't hear of me refusing to go to the pictures with 'em.... so I quit arguing & donned hat & coat & joined 'em..... I also went over to Cufley Towers during the weekend..... Jim had a bit of a blow.... he was informed that the London office of Marley Tiles was closing down & that he was out of a job. I don't suppose, with the labour market as it is, that he will have any trouble getting fixed up – he may even do better, but at the same time I think the news was a bit of a let down. He rather counted on getting a traveller's job with the firm after the war, I believe."

A week later he was still out of work but had had encouraging interview and second interview (1.10.45):

....."He thinks that lack of the necessary technical qualificatons probably lost him the job.

I bathed Sue and put her to bed as usual – even remembered to do her ears and dry her toes. Getting quite expert at that sort of thing now, but I must say it's a work of art and psychological ingenuity to manage to wash a child all over when it is much more interested in sailing its boats and demonstrating the crawl. How Sue loves swimming!"

On 15th October Clare had a phone call from Hux, who had a 36hr pass. She arranged to go and see everyone that evening after work.

(22.10.45):

"Freddie and Jeanette were there, looking very happy. Fred does not appear to have changed a scrap since he's been away". Freddie was on his first home leave in 2½ years. "we all retired to the Rising Sun for a couple of drinks and some laughs over old times. I heard how you and Freddie struggled home after Jim's bachelor night and thought you were climbing a steep hill when you came to Plumstead Bridge."

A few days later Clare had been held up on her way to Cufley Tower for tea. (22.10.45):

"I knew how I should be greeted by Vera, and true to form she met me with, 'Where the hell have you been?' same old V. Still she had saved me a cuppa in the pot & a sandwich & piece of cake. Len Wellard was there, trying to amuse the kiddies before we bathed them & put them to bed...Gee, how they grow! I put my finger in Roger's mouth, & he nearly snapped the end off – he'd cut five teeth during the week, and nobody thought to warn me. Cool!.....we all adjourned to the Fox where we were to meet the gang.....the crowd consisted of Freddie & Jeanette, Hux & Pat, Jim & Vee, Bill Cufley & his girl friend Grace, Len W and myself.....we took up quite a bit of space & certainly kicked up plenty of noise!"

On a Saturday evening a week later Clare joined the rest of the gand at the Bull in Woolwich (6.11.45):

"It was very crowded in the BullThe numbers in the gang have dwindled somewhat, & I guess that next weekend we shall be back to normal again. Freddie goes back to Italy sometime this week – poor Jeanette, after the joys of having him home for a month! Tom goes back to Germany on Thursday & Bill & Hux finish their leave also on Thursday. But as we said, the next time the gang gets together ole Westy will be there & most of you boys will be back in Civvie St. Yippee!"

Her next letter (9.11.45) describes the last meeting with the augmented gang:

"We all repaired to the Fox as usual, and the girls looked on as the lads played bar Billiards. Then we thought we'd show 'em how and Pat & I challenged Vera and Jeanette. The second time I had played and I enjoyed myself hugely.....After billiards we took up our positions at the dart board. There were 5 pairs of us & we set about an elimination game.

The winners of each heat challenging the next couples until the champs were declared. I hadn't touched a dart for years – but I had beginners luck & started off with a double on my second dart! You can imagine the howls that went up from the lads. 'We'll write to Westy' – 'Practising in the Local' – 'Always lunches at a pub' etc etc.....But that wasn't the end, - I actually threw the double to end the game. More cracks. Anyway Tom & I wiped the floor with the rest of them.....Altogether the evening was quite fun – except for the fact that all the lads were back to their army billets next day. Still as we remarked, they will be back in Civvie Street next time we all meet, and you, my pet, will be along too."

This is the last letter we have containing news of the gang. Lez boarded HMS Rajah on 16th December 1945, finally arriving back on English soil on Saturday 12th January 1946.