

“In the Midst of Life...”

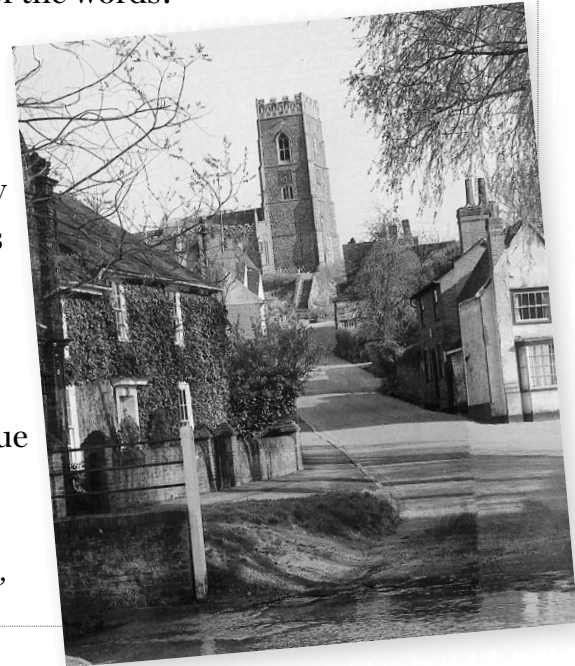
CHAPTER 8. MORTALITY

PEOPLE ARE IN LOVE WITH KERSEY. “ONCE SEEN, NEVER FORGOTTEN” is truly said of it, and in the most favourable sense of the words!

¶ Visitors to the village take away mental pictures of an idyll to be referred to in duller surroundings.

¶ New residents cannot believe their luck. ¶ Whole lives have been spent here in quiet appreciation of the continuity with which they have been blessed. ¶ But what is the secret of its magic? ¶ It is exceptionally pretty, but chocolate box prettiness alone is not enough to cast this spell on such a variety of folk. ¶ And, at the end of the twentieth century, there is apparently nothing more to capture the imagination than a lot of picturesque old buildings, a stream with ducks across the street, and a large church looking down on them.

“People are in love with Kersey”



Can it be that, because it is unusually small, the past joys and sorrows of this community are distilled into an essence which imbues the physical scene with something deeper and more compelling? Kersey has had perhaps more than its share of death, or at least of unexpected and dramatic death. A number of suicides have occurred within living memory of residents but most are at a loss to understand why, because they insist that life in Kersey was happy.

Certainly there was and still is plenty of life, and in this chapter I have tried to include some of the many good times to balance the undoubtedly sad ones. However, more than in any other chapter, memories are often searingly painful. I can only thank the contributors again for sharing these.

Reverend Ian Wilson has some thought provoking things to say in the final pages, and provides a comforting end to a rather difficult chapter.



Victor Biebeck: I've always lived in Barking and I loved it when I was evacuated here. I still do – I love Kersey. I often think about it. I remember the Simpsons living in the big house by the river when it was a proper farm. What was amazing was that all the ducks that went on the water over the road used to come out of the farm! We used to see them

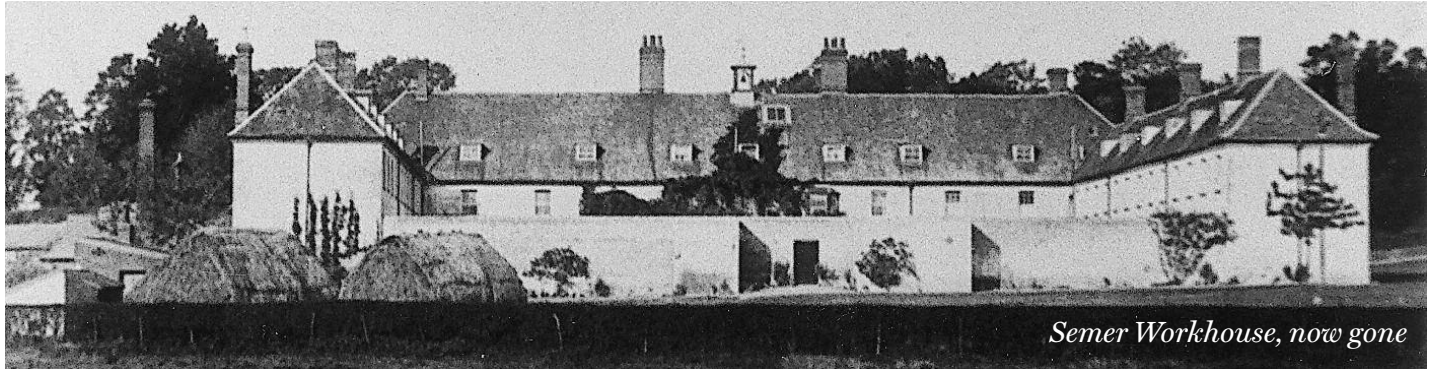
all coming down – little ones as well – and they'd go back at night. I do love this place, I really do. Probably my ambition, if I ever won the lottery, would be to buy a place out here.



Margaret Needham: I'd been to Kersey years and years ago when my children were small and my ex-husband's aunt had two little cottages near the splash. They had a donkey in the garden! I never thought I'd live here. But years later, when I was on my own and looking for a house, I came up to Wickerstreet Green and got totally lost because you wouldn't have known there was a cottage here, and I just fell in love with it. It had a lovely serene feeling and the garden, although very overgrown, was beautiful. I knew I had to live there when I walked into the back garden through the morning room.



Ada Wyatt: My family always lived in Kersey in different houses and I was born in Kersey but I can't remember which house. I've never been away, I've kept in Kersey all the time. My brother Leonard was born in "Pax" when it was two cottages – he was born in the one nearest "Leys House". Lance was born in this cottage but he and I have been here together since 1959. Before that we lived down by the river for twenty-two years. I cleaned in the school for over twenty



years from when my kids were small. My mother cleaned there for years too. And I helped clean in both pubs at different times.

Everything was different then. You'd get an old man come in the pub and make a pint of beer last a whole evening. Now they drink no end and come out with bent stockings! The men used to get in there and do the step dance and the broomstick dance and they'd be as pleased as fiddles. The White Horse is really the best little pub – that's more homely. There always used to be a few people coming through Kersey but not so much as they do today. They think it's wonderful.



Viney Bigg: As you go up Semer Hill, where the old workhouse was, at the back of that there's what we called The

Spinney and there's a graveyard there with tiny little crosses of children who died of smallpox. I should think they died in the workhouse and that's the burial ground.



The isolation hospital, now a dwelling, is still standing. The present owner told me that most years on Christmas Eve, he and his wife are visited by a male ghost whose face is severely pockmarked on one side. the graves in the spinney are haphazardly laid out and many have nice stones, often with the name of the donor mentioned. Some of the words are memorable, for example "The grass it withereth and the flowers they fade but the word of God shall stand forever." Presumably the ground is unhallowed, and there is a prevailing sense of sadness.

One hopes that the burial services were conducted by a vicar, although fear of infection may have prevented this.



Maisie Martin: My sisters were Chrissie and Daisy. Chris was mother to Cherry Chalmers, so I'm Cherry's aunty. And Mary Smith is Daisy's girl, so I'm aunt to Mary as well. Jean Jarvis is another niece to me, she's daughter to one of my brothers. She's just lost her husband hasn't she – Chubby Jarvis – that was Ivy Tricker's brother. We don't half miss him. He used to come over and talk to Ted, Tuesdays and Thursdays. He'd do anything for you, you only had to ask.



Ada Wyatt: A lot of the people are gone that I knew. We've just lost another – Ivy Tricker's brother, Chubby. He was a prisoner of war with my brother, Charlie Holden and Charlie died in 1994. So Mary Holden is my sister in law.



Ruth Glead: I still can't believe that Mary Holden's gone, you know. I can't honestly. When I looked in that grave I said to our Minister, "She's not in there." And he said, "Well, no she's not really, is she?" Of course her son Robert used to go to her nearly every day for his meal, so he'll feel her loss dreadfully. I know when I went there on a Wednesday she



Old Isolation Hospital, now a dwelling

always had home made buns or sausage rolls or jam tarts or mince pies. We used to talk about old times.



Verena Manning: Stan and I had only been married three years when he went down with leukaemia and I lost him at Christmas 1952 when Brian was five and a half years old. I was twenty seven when Stan died and that was when I started to go grey. He'd only been ill eight months when the doctor told me there was no hope for the future and I just fainted after the doctor had gone. I never did tell Stan what

he had said but the sad thing was that he'd more or less been told in hospital and was keeping it from me. But mother was so good, and so were my neighbours – Brian used to say no one could mash potatoes like Mrs Rice!

Mum used to look after him a lot and take him down to feed the ducks. And when mum died I gave Brian and his wife Ann some money for a keepsake and they went and bought a ceramic pond with ducks in there, and he said, "That's in memory of when nana used to take me down to the ducks."

I suppose my saddest memory was losing Stan, and my dad – I was very close to dad. He always said that the war would last six years – two years longer than the great war – but he never lived to see the end of it. He was fifty when he died. But looking back at later memories, Frances' Cathy's death was such a sad thing. That was so, so sad.



Gladys Rice: As for sad times, well it was sad about Frances' daughter, poor little Cathy, weren't it? The whole village was shocked. We just could not believe it. You'd never believe how that hit people. She was a lovely girl, you know – ever so friendly. That was a terrible tragedy.



Eileen Gleed: She died just before Christmas. And all the young boys were in church, weren't they. She used to work

down The Bell so that's where the boys got to know her well, I suppose. I've been there sometimes, and she used to say to my oldest boy, "What are you going to have to drink, Sup?" They always called him Sup.



Cherry Chalmers: The saddest event that I remember in Kersey was when Frances' daughter died, Cathy. That was dreadful. She was a great friend of mine, though she was only eighteen, and she was a lovely girl, beautiful. That was a tragedy. As for the happiest event, well it was all happy really, weren't it? Everything was OK in them days, I thought so anyway.



Eileen Gleed: I met Luker at a cricket match! Really, I met him through my cousin, Margery Richardson who lives at Whatfield, because she married a Kersey man and she put me on to my husband! And I used to come right up from Hadleigh to watch him play cricket here. I used to sit outside his mother's door – I didn't dare go in! She lived at number 2, Church Hill and that seat at the bottom of the church steps is where I used to sit. But she was alright really.

I had my children in hospital. Well, I had my first one up mother's in Whatfield but I lost the baby – that was a girl. They took me to hospital, but it was too late. That weighted

ten pounds. For the other three I went in hospital – Kenny and Tim – and the last one was a girl and she died.

When I was going in hospital to have Tim I had to break it to Kenny that I had to leave him. I said, “I’ve got to go to hospital – I don’t know whether you’ll have a little sister or a brother.” He said, “I don’t want a sister! And if I have a brother, I’m going to call him Timmy.” So we called him Timothy John and that was Kenny what named him! Naomi Partridge had had a little boy called Timothy just before.

We hadn’t been in this bungalow all that long when Luker died. That’s like his two bachelor brothers – they didn’t last long here either. They lived at Sproughton and they bought this bungalow and Ron went first and Kenny didn’t live long after. They used to live down Church Hill in Kersey and when I married Luker and went to live there, their mother said “You’ll be alright now, I’ve got a daughter-in-law and she’ll look after you.” I thought, I married one, not the lot!



Gladys Rice: I first saw my husband, Evan, when he went by our house on a threshing machine belonging to his father. I was standing at the door and I saw him and he saw me! And we sort of smiled at one another and then, I believe the next night or the night after, I could hear somebody keep whistling outside in the road. I went out and that was him,



*The young Gladys Rice (left)
in her father’s trap*

come down on his bicycle from Postead to see me! And then, you know, it just went on from there. It was sort of like a magnet in a way because I’d never set eyes on him before!

When he was so ill, Evan was in Anglesey Road hospital, which was a special cancer place, and he got so he wanted to come home. They had us up there several times saying he wouldn’t last many days but then he rallied round. And one day he said to them, “I’m

going home and nobody on this earth is going to stop me.”

So he came home, and Dr Fisher came and said, “Well, we’re keeping his bed for a fortnight because I don’t think you can possibly look after him and he’ll be back in two or three days.” But he didn’t go back – the Marie Curie nurses used to come in two nights a week and that built me up, so I could manage to survive the other nights. I nursed him for

six months and he died at home in 1988.

You ought to have known poor old Paddy Wyatt what lived down our lane. He was Lance Wyatt's brother and he was the salt of the earth, he was wonderful – he knew all about the birds and wild animals. He used to come up to ours a lot – most evenings – and talk to my husband. They'd sit out in the conservatory and I'd make them a cup of drinking chocolate.

He was ever such a tender hearted man and when my husband was ill, he couldn't bear to see him. In the end he said to me, "I don't like coming up to see him because I can't get to sleep at night." And he kept saying "I'm not going to live long after your husband – when Evan goes, I'm going to go soon afterwards." "Don't talk so silly Paddy," I said. But, do you know, he only lived three months after; he died from a heart attack.



Ivy Tricker: My husband's been dead seven years now, it doesn't seem possible. He just walked down the garden and died. I don't think I've ever got over the shock. My grandson had the car. He's a lovely boy, he decorated this room for me. I've got my daughter and two grandchildren and three great grandchildren and I think I'm lucky.



Cherry Chalmers: There used to be a man lived in "Market

House" with his wife. And one day I saw the old boy going to the outside loo, and the next thing I heard he'd cut his throat. There've been a lot of suicides in Kersey you know. In "Park Place" there was two old boys and they were nice men but one of them shot hisself. And someone else shot hisself with a sten gun. It's dreadful really, but you think of it when you're looking back, don't you. Otherwise it don't cross your mind.



Jill Harbinson: Yes, there have been a number of suicides in Kersey. One man had had a stroke and was in a wheelchair and he did away with himself. The publican at The Bell had got into financial trouble and he hanged himself. It was rather nice afterwards when they were having a bit of a wake, Jack Stiff said, "I think we ought to take that hook down. We don't want people coming in asking was that where he hanged himself." And he got that hook down right away.

Then there was the young boy who started as an assistant chef at The Bell and was doing very well, when he went out, bought a rope and hanged himself in a garage at Felixstowe. And there was a gentleman who'd been to school at Eton. He was a dealer in antiques and had a licence to take them abroad. But he'd been taking brasses out from various churches and the police went round to see him at "Old Drift House", so he put a pistol to his head. They found all these brasses afterwards in the boot of his car.



Ruth Gleed: My mother passed away on 26th March 1939 when I was twenty one years old. She died of leukaemia and, you may not believe this, but her funeral cost just nine pounds. They cost hundreds today, don't they?

Then tragically, I lost my brother – he took his own life. He had TB – consumption they used to call it in those days. And he knew he wasn't going to get any better. He was only thirty four. It's a good thing my mother wasn't alive then. I think that's the most tragic thing in my life – it's something you never get over, really. I was in a terrible state but the police were very good, very kind.

That's really why we moved down to number 5, The Street, next to Gladys Warren. The police said, "You mustn't stop here, you must go", and so we went to the little cottage

**"IF YOUR
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Sue Griffiths

and Mr Stiff let us have that for four shillings a week. It was a terrible wrench to go from Noakes Farm to another little cottage, although of course we got a lovely garden.



Sue Griffiths: Everybody has problems within their families and, if your house goes back as far as

1320, a lot of things are bound to have happened. As to ghosts or whatever, I think it's very much what you feel because Nora Anderson, who used to be Ralph's (Hammond Innes) secretary, always used to talk to me on my doorstep and once she apologised and said, "Don't think I'm being unfriendly but I can't come into this house because of all the vibes." But I've never noticed anything. I don't know whether some people imagine it or whether we can't feel it – I honestly don't know.



David Griffiths: There's a lot more light in this kitchen since we had the glass door put in – it used to be rather a gloomy room before. But you realise when you live in an old place like this, that there have been lots of people living here before you and lots of situations. Tragic things have happened here because Teddy (Martin) was telling us that at one time there was a family here and one of the boys, who'd been all through the first world war in the trenches, came home and there was a nasty shooting accident.

He was squabbling with his father over a gun and the father was killed, and the boy never got over it. He just went to pieces. I've never felt anything here, and I didn't when I slept at "Ayres End" rather than leave it empty with all Ralph's stuff in it after he died. But I know Dorothy Innes thought one of their rooms was haunted, and Nora Anderson felt that as well.



Sue: There have been a lot of suicides in Kersey, but don't you think people felt they couldn't get away from their troubles then. There wasn't the mobility that there is now, and nothing much to divert them.



David: Yes, and when people get on your nerves a bit you need to get away from them. If you're able to go on holiday or even out for a drive things get back into proportion. Perhaps they were just too on top of each other in such a small place, and also of course most people did a lot of hard physical work for very little money.



Owen Gillingwater: My dad used to work as a commercial clerk in London before he moved to Kersey. I think there must have been a period of time when I lived in one of the brick cottages going up the hill near the church. It could have been when my mother was ill. She died in a London hospital of pernicious anaemia when I was four years old.

Today my dad would be called the company secretary to the Stiff's empire, and it was an empire, so he had a lot of responsibility. Then, being a clerk and quite well educated, he was captain of the Home Guard here. And during the war



Owen Gillingwater as a child, with his father

photographs and love letters he'd written to my mother before they were married. He was due to go up to London to see a psychiatrist with a view to helping him overcome his problems but he didn't make it. The day before my birthday,

he was the man people called upon for advice when their husbands were away, a sort of "listening post" really.

Anybody in trouble would turn to him and he was quite happy to help. But latterly, he'd been worried about his domestic affairs and it was getting on top of him. The opinion at the time was that he should have upped sticks and gone away with his second wife but she wouldn't leave her mother.

My memories from 1951 are very sad. Dad had a hut on his allotment and he kept all sorts of things there, including some old

he went into his hut on the allotments and shot himself.

I never lived in Kersey again, but I think I was very lucky to be born and have my childhood here and I still come back. Kersey is still my home, you see.



Cherry Chalmers: There was two girls lived up Wickerstreet Green and I used to go and see them. I reckon I'd be about fourteen, something very young. They had this old father and he was an ugly old man really and when he died their mum said, "Would you like to look at him." It was my first experience of anybody dying and I said yes, I would. Well there he was in the front room, laid in his coffin, but he looked so much better dead than alive! Honestly. There was a lamp beside him. Frightened the life out of me really. I never have forgot it, course I haven't.

I can barely remember but mum used to tell me that men used to carry the coffins on a bier up the grass hill, as we called it, to church. That bier used to stand in the church and I've often wondered what happened to it. It's not there now is it? And horses and carts used to go up that grass hill, but I can't remember that.

REMEMBRANCE OF HAPPY THINGS PAST

Jack Stiff: I was born in Carlton House and lived there until I was nineteen and the window at the side there overlooked

Kedges Lane. It was a sliding window so it was always open, you didn't have to worry about it banging in the wind, you know. There was only about six or seven cars in the village then, and you could lay in bed at night and know who was coming home because they all had different sounds.



Jill Stiff: Well, when I came to Kersey as your wife it wasn't a quiet place. You would hear everybody walking up the road and know their footsteps.



Jack: We used to get a weather forecast off the blokes going to the allotments at about six before they started work on the farms at seven. They'd say it's going to rain before breakfast or it's going to rain after lunch. They could tell you it all!



Jill: And of course Lemons the vets was there, and they had animals and pigs, didn't they?



Paul Ryde: In 1947 when I came to live in Kersey as a vet I was in lodgings at what was called "Denbigh House" with the horse's tail on the roof corner. (Now Kedges End). Kersey was much different then because we always used to

wake at six.

But we never had an alarm clock, we didn't need on: Arthey had a lot of carthorses then and they used to go down the meadows at the bottom of Kedges Lane as it's called now where the allotments are. And at six o'clock in the morning Reg Farthing senior used to come and get the horses. We used to hear him go down the lane and then you'd hear these horses clip-clopping up the street, six of them, and of course they all had four feet and they were all shod so they made quite a lot of noise!

Again, about quarter past or half past six Mr Stiff, my father-in-law's, shop used to be starting all their old lorries and away they used to come, and they never started very easily so they used to be run down The Street and they used to get them in gear and then the clutch let out, and if they didn't start you'd hear some very, very good vocabulary!

So The Street was alive at that time of the morning because it was actually the start of their working day. Mr Stiff had three house cows, and they were milked up in the barn at the top of The Street opposite the White Horse. But they used to graze in the meadow behind the village hall and so, about the same time, you would have Harold Seggar's father, Ike, who used to be the stock man, going through The Street driving these three cows up to milk.

At "River House" Mr Simpson used to keep a lot of pigs and you'd hear the noise from those pigs because they knew

it was feeding time about half past six to seven. The whole day awoke with a tremendous row. That was village normality in those days.

CATHERINE AMANDA WHYMARK DIED,
AGED EIGHTEEN, IN 1989 "...INTERTWINED
WITH KERSEY FOREVER."

Frances Whymark: Everybody used to come and confide in Cathy – she was like a mother figure to everybody – even me! When I had Tom I had a bit of post natal depression, which I didn't realize at the time, but I used to cry a lot.

Cathy would spend the whole of Saturday morning doing the paper round and collecting the money, because she used to take the little children with her and the animals, and buy them some sweets from Stiffs! And then when she came back she'd say, "Oh, Mum, you go shopping, leave Tom with me." And she'd be tidying her bedroom up – which never ever got tidied – and she'd have this "Bat out of Hell" music blaring away, and I used to come home and there was little Tom fast asleep on her bed in the middle of all this muddle with all this noise going on!

I'd love to be able to help Cathy's friend Claire who always sends me letters, although she's out in Australia at the moment. She's thoroughly confused and mixed up. She says, "I can't make friends with anybody because I'm afraid I'm going to lose them."

Dan Jarvis was an admirer of Cathy's and she wasn't quite so keen because she was very keen on one of the Pryke lads at the time but he was more interested in football than! Dan bought her eighteen red roses for her eighteenth birthday and she said to me "I feel so guilty, Mum – he's bought me eighteen red roses and I don't love him."

She worked for a month at Manningtree as nanny to a little boy and girl, both at school. She wanted to be a nurse really but she didn't have enough qualifications, and she didn't know whether she wanted to stay there or not, plus she loved working in the Kersey pubs. She used to come home at weekends and work in The Bell and The White Horse, cleaning in one and serving in the other.

She used to love Kersey. She was born here and Bill Stiff said she was "the real Kersey girl." Christina Mellor in the Mill House wrote and said that "Cathy would be intertwined with Kersey forever."

It was uncanny the things we found that she'd left behind – little prayers and things – they popped up everywhere. She did have lovely thoughts, we know that from these things we found that she'd written. Especially in the little book that they found at the house at Manningtree. She'd put all her feelings down in there, all these deep, deep feelings about everything. And yes, she was angry with some people but she'd forgiven them and she'd written she'd forgiven them. She even put at the end, "There's good and bad in all of us."

She was in church with me the week before and I did the Intercessions that week and she said, "They were lovely prayers, Mummy."

And she loved her Uncle Leslie and was so worried about him. She used to say, "I wish I could do something to help him," because he used to get so depressed. And her friend Claire has always been a bit like that and she used to come and pour her heart out to Cathy. Everybody felt guilty, but this lady where she'd worked in Manningtree said nobody could have helped her, and they couldn't because she was always helping other people. Sir David Scott-Barrett lived at "Hall House" at that time – my mum had her cat put down because of him – it used to keep pooing on his drive and he complained about it! He was a funny old boy really, but he wrote me a lovely letter and said Cathy obviously took herself to God.

But afterwards, there were little things you remember her saying, like "I'll never have children and I'll never learn to drive the car." Those L-plates are still on that Morris Minor and we can't take them off! You must never treat people lightly when they're unhappy. The morning of her funeral, I woke up about three with this great big lump in my tummy and the words came to me, "She died that we might be forgiven." No, God didn't do it, but I know that she was meant to be up there, not with us. She's there for everybody else that's following.

It hasn't reflected in a nasty way – the house is still peaceful when I'm in it. It's just like a dream – it's not a horror to me. And I used to be cross with Leslie some of the time because I felt he could have done more with his life – got married and had a family. But, really, I think he and Cathy are better off where they are – they haven't got any troubles now have they?

AND AFTERWARDS?

Reverend Ian Wilson: My belief in an after-life comes from making sense of my own faith and the sort of things we read about in the bible and, in particular, looking at what Jesus said and the experiences he had. And the experiences that Christians have had since, which actually speak of something eternal and ongoing and the promise that is for us as well.

But it is also being with people who are close to death and seeing the transformation in them. The most dramatic thing is watching somebody die and then seeing what is left behind – that there is a change. Something is gone, and I believe that what is gone is the essential element of that person, their life force or being, which is given to us by God and goes back to God. So when that is gone – the soul, to put a tag on it – then life ceases to exist physically but that life which actually motivated and energised and enlivened us carries on with God.

I think that seeing this change is quite a powerful

experience and one which many people encounter but then don't make the connection that it has to do with God and therefore engages with how we live our own lives. But actually, if you really do see that and do believe in God, then it must impinge on how you lead your own life subsequently.

There's been a lot of writing about near-death experiences as well, which is quite strong, despite any of the arguments which say that this is a natural biological experience of a human being who's dying. They have tried to repeat the experience by getting somebody to become unconscious through centrifugal force, reducing the blood pressure so that blood is removed from the brain, causing some of the classic near-death experiences. But actually what we describe as a near-death experience is quite different from what is described by those who go through these experiments. For example, the sense of being out of the body and seeing what is happening around it has never been repeated through experiment.

There have been no bad experiences for me here but one of the hardest things is when people die that you've got to know really well. Because then you have to minister to their death and to the family and then do the funeral but, underlying all of that, is your own sense of loss because you have got to know them and care for them. Sometimes that is quite a struggle – and I suspect some clergy get worn down by it which may be why you get the feeling that some of them

are very distant. I can understand that. I hope it will never happen to me but I can see how that happens – it's self defence, really. I came close to breaking down when I was leading the funeral of a young mother whose children were the same age as mine and I knew the family well. That was an excruciating experience. The church was completely packed, and seeing the children . . .

It's a bit like standing on the edge of a precipice then – a momentary glance at the children crying and you're gone. Though I don't actually think it's a bad thing on those occasions to see that the vicar is finding it difficult. One of the problems for a Christian family who are grieving is that they assume that perhaps they shouldn't, because they believe that the person has gone to heaven and is with God and that we will join them again. But, inside, there is this huge hole and they really feel the loss – so to see the vicar upset might make them feel it's OK for them to be upset after all!

Of course, the christenings and the weddings are



wonderful – they keep things on an even keel. And I just think that Kersey is such a beautiful place and we are so lucky. To go into the church as I did this morning and think, “This is just wonderful!” I think Kersey is unique because besides being a popular tourist village it's a real village with real people who live here. It's not a commuter village either – it's a living place. We are very lucky to be here.