



Map detailing the locations Audrey would have known well



Audrey with her dolls in the garden of Orchard Villa
Hepburn Family Collection

1. Folk memory can often reveal fascinating and unexpected stories. In the lovely East Kent village of Elham, one of the most delightful of these community stories tells of the little Dutch girl who spent the formative years of her childhood in the village. In the late 1930s when she lived in Elham her name was Audrey Ruston. Twenty years later she was known worldwide as Audrey Hepburn.

Biographies of the film star tend to gloss over her early childhood, speaking vaguely of how she attended boarding school in England. In fact, between the ages of seven and ten she was a pupil at small inexpensive private schools in Elham: the first run by the redoubtable Rigden sisters in a house which bears their name in The Square; and the second - which Audrey attended briefly - at a house called 'West Bank' in The Row.

2. Audrey was born in Brussels in 1929, the daughter of an expatriate Englishman Joseph Ruston and his wife Ella Van Heemstra, a Dutch baroness. Both her parents had been married before - they had met in the Dutch East Indies and by 1936, when her mother brought her to England, this marriage too had failed. Audrey's father was a restless spendthrift, and had worked his way through much of his wife's inheritance. He was also raising funds for the British Union of Fascists. In the early 1930s he and his wife shared extreme right-wing views and in 1935 both were present at a lunch in Munich where Adolf Hitler entertained a British delegation. The Baroness was later to change her mind about Hitler when the Germans invaded her country.

3. In 1936 she and her daughter found lodging with Mrs Butcher of Duck Street, Elham, at a house which was then called 'Orchard Villa' and is now 'Five Bells'. It is not clear why they settled in Elham - it is not even clear why they came to England, although it seems that the Baroness felt that her daughter should continue to be near her father, who was demanding right of access to his daughter as part of a divorce settlement. It may be that the village provided an inexpensive but genteel way of life near the fashionable seaside resort of Folkestone and the Channel ports. The Baroness made frequent visits to her family in Holland, where there was considerable economic and political unrest.

A Film Star's Childhood in Elham



Audrey (centre) in the driveway of Ottinge Court
Sampson Family Collection



Audrey sitting on the railings of the
Elham Valley Railway bridge at Ottinge.
Hepburn Family Collection



Audrey (back row centre) at a friend's 8th birthday party
at Paddock Cottage, Ottinge in 1939.
Sampson Family Collection

4. Perhaps too she felt that an English country village provided a safe and stable environment for her little girl. In interviews in later life, the film star Audrey Hepburn recalled how distressed the child Audrey Ruston was at the break-up of her parents' marriage: 'Other kids had a father but I didn't. I couldn't bear the idea that I wouldn't see him again. My mother had great love but she was not always able to show it...' Audrey was to see her father just four times between 1936 and 1939, and only met him again briefly much later in life. As is often the case, the child of estranged parents compensated by extravagant displays of affection, even to strangers: 'It always boils down to the same thing in my life - not only receiving love but desperately wanting to give it...'

5. And that is almost certainly why the Elham folk memory of 'little Audrey' is of a pretty child, smiling, polite, affectionate, eager to please. That is how she features in the photographs of her Elham childhood, a number of which are reproduced in this commemorative leaflet. That is how she was remembered by her contemporaries at the Rigdens and West Bank schools. And in due course, as the celebrity of Audrey Hepburn the film star grew, the village folk memory quite understandably took pride in her achievement and even laid claim to have contributed to it in a small way. Here in Elham, it was pointed out with modest pride, she first attended dance lessons in the Fellowship Hall as the old Church Hall was known. Here the Misses Rigden gave her the elocution lessons which refined the English accent for which she later became famous. Here she took part in what may have been her very first public performance in the Elham Brownie Pack's performance of 'Humpty Dumpty'.

6. By the time war broke out in 1939, Baroness Van Heemstra had returned to her father's estate at Arnhem in Holland, where her daughter joined her later that year. The Baroness's former husband was interned on the Isle of Man. When the Germans invaded Holland in May 1940, the Baroness's earlier sympathy for Hitler may have been replaced by feelings of patriotism, and members of the family may even have developed links with the Dutch Resistance. Her daughter Audrey, who was known during the war as 'Edda' to conceal her English origins from the Germans, attended the Arnhem Conservatory where she refined her talent for dance. She may also have carried messages for the Resistance, and is said to have helped conceal British pilots who had been shot down. In 1947 she returned to London to begin her outstanding stage and film career, taking the surname 'Hepburn' from one of her father's maternal forebears.

This leaflet has been produced by Elham Historical Society to mark the 90th anniversary of Audrey Hepburn's birth.