

**Susan Martel (nee Ropner)**

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*Sue lived at Middleton Lodge with her parents [Jock and Jill Ropner](#) from 1946 until her marriage in 1957. [Her parents continued to live there until 1980.](#)*

***What is the main thing you remember about living at Middleton Lodge?***

'The abiding memory of my childhood years is the freedom I had. I could go off on my pony for hours, even for an entire day, usually with my friend [Judy Hunter who lived near Scotch Corner](#). We could ride almost anywhere from the village, including on what are now the A1 and the A66, which you certainly wouldn't want to do now. I remember one day we decided to go for the whole morning jumping from field to field as necessary without opening any gates. Two other girls on similar-coloured ponies were in a lot of trouble for that!'

'Another day we dressed our ponies up as a bride and groom and rode them through the village. It was just [great](#) fun.'

'[Juliet Johnstone, who lived at Foresters Hall, was another friend and later on she and her mother, Mrs Bigge, kept their horses in our stables, joined by another friend of mine. It was fun riding and hunting with the Zetland Hunt together. They had a groom but I looked after my own horse. This was quite hard work on hunting days as she had to look smart with her mane plaited. We also used to ride several miles to the meet whereas now most people go in a horsebox.](#)

'[On arriving home it took some time to get the horses fed and comfortable. Later in the evening I used to get someone \(usually our cook, Una, who was a good friend of mine\) to come with me to make sure my horse was all right as it was rather spooky in the dark with all the trees.](#)

'[Incidentally, it was only the Master and the Huntsman who went hunting to catch foxes. That was their job, to help the farmers. Most of us just enjoyed an exciting cross-country ride.](#)

'[The fox seemed to assume it would get away until the last moment and personally I was always rather pleased when it did.](#)

'[Alf Thirkell used to shoe all our horses and I still have a wrought-iron standard lamp he made us for a wedding present.](#)

As children we were regulars at John King's shop too, though in those days the shop was tiny and was really just the post office and a few jars of sweets – or what passed for sweets so soon after the war.'

***And life at home at Middleton Lodge?***

'When we arrived, Middleton Lodge hadn't been lived in by owners for a long time so there were no gardens as such, just rough grass and trees. My father was a very keen gardener and he created the herbaceous borders and planted the yew hedges. He brought the lawns back into order and created some topiary as well. He had the terrace built too and the balustrade round the terrace came from Halnaby Hall when it was demolished. Another of his projects was a large goldfish pond where my children always wanted to go and feed the fish but I gather that has disappeared now.'

'We only lived in part of the house. There were a lot of empty rooms at the far end and if there is an empty space, people just fill it! I remember rooms being stacked full of other people's furniture.'

'My father ran the walled kitchen garden more as a market garden, selling fruit, vegetables and flowers to help pay the gardeners' wages. Frank Squirell, the head gardener, had been with my father since about

1936 except for the war years. My job was usually to climb the apple trees to pick the fruit higher up as I was the lightest. My brothers and I were experts at tree climbing.

'My mother kept free-range chickens and geese and I had two pet ducks. Between the kitchen garden and the stables there was a sort of secret garden and I can remember my brother and I discovering an old door on the ground there. We were enthusiastically jumping up and down on it when we were found and hastily removed because the door was covering up a very deep well.'

Christmas was always a special time with stockings (including one for my dog). Church, family lunch and then presents under the tree. My father grew the trees and as after a few years they had grown quite large the stairs were always handy for decorating the highest branches. It was always in the hall. Two decorations that always went on first were a fairy, made out of one of my dolls, and a blue Father Christmas. Both of those still go on my own Christmas tree every year.

***Did you employ staff at The Lodge?***

'We had a cook and daily help with the cleaning. There was also Nanny, who looked after my two older brothers and me when we were younger. She stayed living with us as she was too old to take on any more small children. She helped with things like mending and ironing and looking after our parrot. Altogether she lived with us for twenty five years before she died. I did get teased sometimes about having a Nanny well into my teens by people who didn't understand that by then she was just part of the family.'

***You had a governess – so you were educated at home presumably?***

'My governess was Mrs Hodgson, 'Hodgie' to me. She came in daily and she loved Maths, History and Reading so we did a lot of that. She obviously instilled a life-long love of the subjects because I still love them all today. When I was old enough I went to the Convent in Richmond as a day-girl. I recall those as happy times on the whole. I liked the nuns but, as ever, we used to play up if we found a nun who couldn't really control the class.'

'When I was sixteen I went to school in Switzerland for year with a friend. We had to speak French the whole time and were fined if we lapsed into English and we did a lot of skiing – not a lot else that I remember. Apart from Pony Club certificates and typing exams I haven't a qualification to my name but I don't feel it's ever held me back.'

***And after that?***

'For a time I worked in a Barnardo's home in Barkingside where I had two proposals of marriage from boys who were much too young to be in serious contention!'

***When did you leave Middleton Lodge?***

'I left when I got married in 1957. We were married in the church in Middleton Tyas and we had the reception in a tent, 'marquee' it would be now, I suppose, on the lawn at Middleton Lodge. As I recall, the reception just included afternoon tea and champagne. It didn't go on into the night as they do now. We had to catch a train to London and I believe my parents had a party at Catterick Officers' Club for the bridesmaids and ushers and so on in the evening but we had gone by then.