

Moving to St Albans from Pakistan – one family's story

This is the story of one family's move from Pakistan to England and settling in St Albans. Mumtaz Begum told her family's story to Romayne Hutchison at her home in Fleetville on 13 January 2020.

Early life in Pakistan

I had a very enjoyable life in childhood, very happy, playing with children outside, playing with my friends; there were lots of ladies I used to meet. We were living in Baffa, a small town in the North West Frontier province of Pakistan. I was born there; it's a small town in a beautiful valley. We lived as a community and we cared about each other – not like now, the current day, where you don't know your neighbours.

My father married four times. From his first marriage there were two children, from the second marriage there were no children. I am the child from his third marriage, born in 1929. From his fourth marriage I had a younger brother and a sister. I am the only one from that generation – from all my brothers and sisters – who is still alive.

My mother died when I was born and I was taken in by my grandmother in another village and was really happy. Then when my grandmother died when I was five I went to one of my uncles (my mother's brother). He had one daughter, but he loved me just as his daughter. But because they had only the one daughter, having me in the house had a really big impact on the husband and wife's relationship; the husband wanted me to live with them, but my aunt wasn't very pleased – it was really difficult. Up to the age of eleven I stayed with them, but although my uncle absolutely loved me and tried to make me equal with his daughter, my aunt was never happy and that caused a lot of conflict between them. So then I was passed over to another uncle, who had two daughters and a son. I have such a fond memory of living in that household.

I didn't go to school at all. There was only one school in the whole of the small town at that time. They lived very near to the school, but although the uncle was really nice, he didn't let the three girls (my two cousins and me) go to school. So it was only the boy – my cousin – who was allowed to go to school.

I got married very young. I have such fond memories of my husband. His name was Ghulam Sarwar Khan. My father's house and my father-in-law's house were joined together. They were closely related as well. One day I went to visit my father's house and then went next door and that was the first time I saw the man who would be my husband. He was doing housework and when I came back home we were all laughing and giggling that I had seen a young man doing housework. That was unheard of for men to do housework and we saw him doing housework! His family really liked me when they saw me for the first time. His mother brought a proposal for an arranged marriage to my uncle's house and my family accepted it. We got married very young – I was thirteen or fourteen then. I can't remember the exact date. We were still in Baffa then. When we were married I came to live in a great big house and I was the oldest daughter-in-law. My mother-in-law liked everything very organised and because this was a very big house there were so many things I didn't know how to do and my mother-in-law would get very cross if I didn't get things right. She was very strict.

It was ten years before we had any children, and in that time my husband went to live in America. He went for work; he was working as a labourer on a farm in California. He lived in San Francisco as well. He got deported from America one day before he was due to get his Green Card. You had to live there for five years before you could get one, so he was deported. Then he returned to Pakistan and later he came to England.

Moving to England

My husband came to England before me. It was for economic reasons. It was only intended to be for a short time, though everybody in my village said that if he went away he would never come back. When he got here he had to find a job. First of all he went to Birmingham and he stayed there for about two years. Then he came to St Albans in about 1965 and lived in Alma Road; from there he moved to Blandford Road and stayed there for quite a long time.

My husband worked first at the rubber factory in Camp Road and later at a factory in Hatfield Macmillan Bloedel Corrugated (just behind British Aerospace) for a good twenty years.

I followed my husband to St Albans in June 1970 with my oldest three children, two boys (born in 1956 and 1958) and a girl (born in 1960). It was absolutely so quiet and nobody would talk, whereas in Pakistan everybody was outside and there was lots of hustle and bustle in the street and people were so friendly. I missed the friends I had in Pakistan. The quietness was **so** bad. We lived in Sandfield Road then, renting two rooms from an Indian family who owned the house themselves. We had two bedrooms and a cooking space upstairs; it was really cramped conditions. My husband and I slept in one room and our three children in the other room. We didn't have dishwashing facilities upstairs, so we had to take everything downstairs to wash and then bring it up again. I was so upset at living in such a small space, and with no friends. I said to my husband 'get me a place I can call my own, because I can't live here'.

It was very difficult at that time; I had no friends and it was so quiet that I could hear my footsteps. It was very hard, even the dress code. I was used to wearing a headscarf; I used to put my trousers on, then my coat, and I wanted to keep my scarf on. Now we accept the scarf, but then, in the 1970s, it wasn't so accepted. I'd go out and I'd feel I wasn't wearing enough clothes – for cultural reasons, not because of the cold. I'd come from a small village to a totally different environment, and I found it so hard that I couldn't talk to people due to the language barrier. Now there are lots of people from Ethnic Minorities living in St Albans, but at that time there were only five Pakistani families in the whole of St Albans. Families used to meet about once a month for social events; we used to get together on Sundays in a local hall for tea and the children could play together.

I was very scared to go outside. When we went out shopping I had to follow my husband because I didn't know which way to go. The way he instructed me was 'just watch my head, which way I turn'. In the 1970s we had to go to Luton once a week, or once a month, to get Halal meat. And back then people didn't have big freezers, just fridges with ice boxes, so that was all the meat you could get. And to get Halal chicken you'd have to go to the farm and you would have to slaughter your own chicken and bring it back. And tins didn't have pictures of food on them, just writing, and because I couldn't read or write English, when my husband brought home food like tins of tomatoes or baked beans, I'd have to guess what was in it.

It was also really difficult to buy clothes, especially our ethnic clothes. I had to learn how to stitch clothes myself. My husband bought me a hand sewing machine and I learned how to use that.

We didn't really experience any racism as a family; our generation is quite resilient and respects other people.

The family settling in their own home

I was desperate to live somewhere I could call my own. My husband used to do night shifts at the Macmillan Bidel factory in Hatfield. He would sleep during the day and in the evening he would go off to work. So it was just me and the three children in the evening, with no outside communication. And they were at school during the day.

When we purchased the house where I still live now at the end of 1970 we didn't have enough money to buy anything to cover the floor. For the first three months we just had floorboards. We had no curtains, a little cooker and no fridge for at least three months. But I was very happy because it was mine. My fourth child – a daughter – was born very soon after we moved here.

When we bought the house there was no bathroom and the toilet was outside. The first thing we did was put in a bathroom where there had previously been two larder cupboards at the end of the kitchen. And outside there was a place to store coal because everybody had coal fires then. It was so cold then; everyone used to come and warm their hands in front of the fire when they came in. Downstairs used to be two separate rooms but it was made into one room later.

There was a lovely lady living next door when we first moved in; she was wonderful to me. She was a teacher at Camp School and had one daughter who was always very kind and respectful. The couple who lived on the other side later had a shop on Hatfield Road. They kept themselves to

themselves. He was very nice to my children, but she was prejudiced and used to freeze us out. My children didn't go in the garden when they knew she was outside. In those days we had quite low fences, so we could see into each other's gardens. One neighbour who lived in my row of four houses when we moved in is still the same, but the other two houses have changed hands.

Reflections on fifty years in St Albans

Everything has changed in the fifty years I have lived here. What I have noticed is that everybody used to know each other and now there is nobody. Neighbours used to give each other food and they would bring something round to you, but that doesn't happen now.

There used to be English classes at Camp School in 1976. And my third son – my fifth child – was born then.

My husband died in 1995. I have such fond memories of him and this house. He was part of the founding members of the Islamic Centre on Hatfield Road. All my children grew up here. I never went to school, but all my children have graduated and all are living locally. My grandchildren and great grandchildren are here too. So I have lots of happy family memories. My proudest moment was when my son-in-law became the Mayor of St Albans City and District. The fondest memory I have is of my whole family together. It was so difficult for me early on; all day I would wait for my husband to come home and when he came that would put a smile on my face and I would have somebody to talk to; otherwise I didn't have anyone to talk to. Everywhere he went out he would take me with him; I was so afraid of losing him in a crowd and he would always tell me 'just follow my head'. I've had a difficult life, but I have some very fond memories. St Albans is my home and I have fond memories of living here - this has been my home for the last 50 years.



