Memories of Our Village

(Second Impression, revised and enlarged)

By Sir T. Cato Worsfold, Bart.

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My earliest recollection of old Mitcham is one that at the time was an alarming experience, for well I remember the thrill that ran down my infantile spine when on a fine summer day, with the blue sky and bright sunshine above, I saw four or five sheeted ghosts rising and bending in a field. To complete the unearthly illusion each spectre was armed with a flashing knife! I did not know then, and when I was told by my nurse, I did not believe, that these weird phantoms were men busily engaged in cutting squirting cucumbers, the raising of which at that time was one of the industries that had for centuries gained for Mitcham the title of "The Herb Garden of England," when almost everything in the vegetable kingdom that had a healing virtue in the medical world was produced in the village and its vicinity.

The squirting cucumber is so called because when severed from the stalk it ejects a spray of a most acrid nature, blistering the flesh on which it falls, and therefore of considerable danger should a drop enter the eye. For protection of their faces the men who cut them wore folds of white muslin swathed about their heads, and hence the spectral impression that was imparted to the mind of the infant Worsfold.

This healing virtue of plants extended, by tradition, at least, to the tree which still stands where the road from Cranmer Bridge to Mitcham Junction cuts that which passes from the latter to the Blue Houses. To walk round this tree three times three on a windy day was said to be a sure cure for children who had whooping cough, if, I presume, they survived the treatment.

It is curious that another experience of my early youth was allied to the uncanny, for I well remember the "creepy" feeling one had in the dusk or at night walking down the Morden Road by the side of Ravensbury Park, because it was known colloquially as "Dead Man's Lane."

Nobody in my young days knew whence it acquired this gruesome title, which was only explained many years later when the excavation made by the late Mr. Bidder, Q.C., in his field adjoining the Morden Road, and amplified later by Colonel Bidder, established the fact that "Dead Man's Lane" was a path through a Saxon cemetery.

In the late 'seventies Streatham Lane acquired an unenviable notoriety from the exploits of a miscreant known as "Spring-heeled Jack," whose favourite diversion was to terrify women and children at night by springing out on them from over one of the dense hedges that ran each side of the very narrow lane that led from Figg's Marsh to Streatham, a lane that was gloomy on a bright summer day, from the lofty elm trees which met overhead in a wonderful canopy.

According to the accepted report, the apparition was clad in a black cloak, which he would throw open showing a gleaming skull and cross bones on his breast, whilst he could easily leap six feet in the air and clear fourteen feet at one bound, because he had springs in his boots, whence he derived his name of "Spring-heeled Jack." He was also wont to approach a lonely person from behind and then to place icy cold coal black hands on his unfortunate victim's face. Further alarming details were added each time he appeared, and the result of all the embellishments was that no woman or child dared venture out when it was dark, especially after our local doctors had been called in to treat cases of shock induced by fright.

Determined efforts were made to trap him by some of the stout lads of our village, disguised as females, loitering about his favourite haunts, but unfortunately nothing transpired to earn him the thrashing he deserved, and I believe his activities, ultimately, were transferred to Roupell Park, Streatham Hill, then, like Mitcham, "real country."

The Mitcham fire engine was a very important, if ancient, appurtenance of our local government in by-gone days. It was worked by hand, and the fire brigade generally, if I remember rightly, was formed of school boys, under the superintendence of our village beadle, Mr Hill, who, in his blue coat with three capes decked with gilt buttons, staff of office and tall hat, directed proceedings in a stately, if somewhat leisured fashion. There certainly was no undignified haste when our fire engine went into action, chiefly due to its being worn out; and at last debility in its internal organs led to its inability to send out water alone for extinguishing fires. Blended with a sufficiency of mud, however, a stream could be sent some little distance on to a conflagration, and fortunately this proved very efficacious when the Heywood oil-cloth works caught fire. Water alone would have extended the flames of blazing oil, and so the peculiarity of our fire engine proved invaluable. With the end of a hose planted firmly in a ditch of particularly juicy

mud, streams of a rich consistency were poured on the burning floors of the factory and the flaming oil was subdued.

This, I believe, was the last important appearance in public of what was termed irreverently "The Village Squirt."

Another remarkable article of public service was a venerable locomotive employed to draw the early morning train to Wimbledon. This was used by a considerable number of regular passengers who, after a time, were much annoyed by the failure of the engine to draw the train into Wimbledon Station, which meant getting out and walking along the line. It was the last hundred yards that proved too much for the poor old thing, worn out by years of faithful service. At length, on the representation of the aggrieved passengers, it was taken off, a substitute being supplied for what we called "The Old Tea Kettle," and there was much rejoicing one day when a beautiful locomotive, gorgeous in green and yellow paint, and bearing the name of "Maud" in golden letters on its side, appeared at Mitcham Station to take us to Wimbledon. For a few days we caught our train for Waterloo punctually, and without mishap, and then one morning the old catastrophe recurred. The train had hardly left Morden Station when its speed decreased and finally, after much puffing and wheezing, it stopped. After an interval we were asked to descend and walk. When we came to the engine there were the usual signs of distress, steam and warm water descending from the locomotive in fitful showers, and on close examination, it was unanimously declared that "Maud," after all, was only "The Old Tea Kettle," rejuvenated with a little solder and two coats of paint ! ! ! The indignation aroused resulted in her final disappearance.

Just outside The Canons, where the obelisk stands, there stood for many years a very large dog kennel, as it seemed, of brick and stone. This, somebody told me as a child, was the spot where on special occasions bear baiting with dogs used to take place, the kennel to which it was chained being the place of refuge for the unfortunate bear when too hardly pressed by its enemies.

Now let me recall some of the celebrities of Mitcham as I knew them in the olden days.

One of my earliest friends was, I think, John Bowyer, who died in 1880 in his ninetieth year. His chief claim to respect in my early years was that he had seen and spoken to the great Lord Nelson. John was never tired of telling me how well he remembered the great Admiral coming over from Merton with beautiful Lady Hamilton to see the lads play cricket on the green on summer evenings, and then giving them a shilling each to drink confusion to the French.

"The great Admiral," he told me was a "rare little gentleman, very quick and firm in talking" whilst still more interesting was his

description of Emma Hamilton as " a real wonderful lady who talked all over you with her eyes."!

On a certain occasion John Bowyer was one of the team of professionals who surnames began with " B " matched against the Rest of England, and he was very careful to tell me that they knew how to dress in those days. This, I think, was true. On the historic occasion of this match, John and the other members of the team were arrayed in top hats, blue swallow-tailed coats with brass buttons, and nankeen smalls, finishing with white silk stockings and pumps.

There are some among us yet with a memory of Mr. Fred Gale, who, under the nom-de-plume of " The Old Buffer," used to contribute most delightful sketches of country life and sport to "Bailey's Magazine" and other sporting journals. His particular hobby was cricket, of which he never ceased to write and speak during the many years I knew him. When John Bowyer passed over, he showed me an extremely neat sketch for the latter's tombstone, the chief features of which were the wicket with the middle stump down and the bails flying, with the epitaph underneath. " Here lies John Bowyer, bowled at last—by death." As, however, our worthy vicar did not see eye to eye with " The Old Buffer," as to the suitability of this marble memorial and the inscription, it never materialised, much to Mr. Gale's regret.

Another celebrity in my eyes was one Billy Rumsey. He was decidedly a big man, and always attended the Sunday morning service at the Church in tail coat and top hat. During the week, I believe, his occupation was that of a jobbing gardener, and I think it was said of him that when he was asked how much he charged an hour, he showed you his two spades, one large and broad, and the other a small one, explaining that if he used the large one he expected a higher reward, whilst when using the small spade he asked for less remuneration. " Billy," however, was at his best on a hot Sunday morning, when, to my great delight, he used to come to Church wearing his well brushed, but somewhat ancient top hat, and walking in his shirt sleeves with his black coat over his arm.

Amongst my recollections of Mitcham Fair, extending over many years, there comes to my mind that I once had the privilege of attending a genuine old-fashioned full-blooded " Richardson's Show," this in former days being a term applied to special travelling representations of melodrama.

I met it in all its glory on the Old Fair Green when, as a boy, I beheld a tent erected with an entrance over which appeared in large gilt letters the arresting statement that it was " The Original and Only Richardson's Temple of Art and Drama where will be performed

nightly the impressive and harrowing drama entitled " Agnes, or the Bleeding Nun," to be followed by a diverting Harlequinade." The announcement was enhanced by thrilling paintings on canvas of a man in armour being pursued by a spectre outside a gloomy castle.

Realising that the entrance fee, 4d. for a stall, could not be held exhorbitant, my father and I paid up and passed in. As far as I can remember the plot, it was of a wicket Baron who was continually pressing his unwanted suit on the beautiful Heroine, only to be thwarted as often by the virtuous Hero, supported by an Apparition. At last, exasperated at continual failure, exclaiming " Curse you, rash youth, for this you die " the revengeful Baron with sword in hand, rushed upon him. At this exciting moment the sound of melancholy music arose from a harmonium " off," whilst a substantial lady appeared at the back of the stage, her head partly covered by a black hood and wearing a voluminous white night dress, on the left side of which appeared a bright red stain of blood. Exclaiming " Hubert, remember and pause, oh evil man, ere it is too late! " she raised her hand, groaned and then pointed a menacing finger at him. To this the wicked Baron, greatly agitated, replied " Again thou hauntest me, Alas! I must forbear " and cast his sword at the feet of the Hero, who promptly picked it up and drove it through the Baron, who thereupon died in the foreground, whilst the Bleeding Nun amidst a little red fire united the young people's hands and the curtain descended, with thrills of excitement on our side of it.

As there was an interval of ten minutes before the Harlequinade and it was a stifling hot August night, we sought fresh air through what seemed the nearest exit. But it led us only into a small adjoining tent and, oh wondrous happening! almost into the arms of the wicked Baron, who, still in armour, was, like ourselves, seeking fresh air that sultry evening. A few friendly words followed but my father, asking the wicked Baron what he fancied as a beverage, was rather astonished to hear it was *stout* which, on a night like that, scarcely suggested a cooling draught. However, stout it was to be, and on our readily acquiescing in the Baron's suggestion that the Bleeding Nun should join us, this sustaining liquid was consumed by all four. Thus in my early youth I was first brought in touch with " The Legitimate Drama "!

They were good honest hard-working folk, and as they quaffed they told us the incidents of their calling and family life. The Bleeding Nun was the Wicked Baron's wife; their daughter " Agnes " the persecuted Heroine, whilst the latter's husband was the faithful lover who ultimately slew the Baron, all four later being the principals in the Harlequinade. The three " supers " who had helped in front, assisted Agnes to collect the entrance money, guided the audience to their places, appeared as the Baron's retainers, formed the orchestra and the

occasional crowd in the Harlequinade, also helped the Baron and the Hero to pack up the tents and move on when the Show was over and the high road once more lay before the "The Temple of Art and Drama."

On another occasion Mitcham was awakened by a visit from Wombwell's celebrated menagerie, and was especially interested in an incident that happened in the domestic life of the staff.

Two Michamites happening one morning to be in the vicinity of the large show tent containing the dens, were startled to hear footsteps of one person pursuing another in the tent, whilst uttering threats of a particularly fierce and personal nature.

Suddenly there was a clang of an iron gate opened and shut with rapidity, followed by a series of deep growls, and a female voice angrily exclaiming "Come out of that, you miserable coward, or I'll give you a hiding you'll remember."

The listeners, looking through a slit in the canvas, saw that the lion tamer had locked himself in his animals' cage in his efforts to escape from his angry wife, who, equipped with a broom stick, had driven him to take shelter in this fashion.

It is interesting to know that very many years after, this event was illustrated (I believe by Phil May) in one of the London papers.

In front of Preshaw Crescent there existed a large and somewhat deep pond, in my young days, known as Hill's Pond, so called because of its proximity to the Beadle's house, and here I spent many a happy hour in my infancy catching "tiddlers," being more than once retrieved by my nurse from what might have been a watery grave.

On one occasion a certain convivial Mitchamite apparently had looked on the wine when it was red, for he was discovered in the small hours of the morning, standing well up to his middle in Hill's Pond. A belated villager, hearing cries for help, came up to the brink of the pond and asked who it was. On being given the name, he said, "But where are you?" and then from the middle of the pond came the answer, "I think I must be in Holland, there is so much water about."

Further up there still stands a mile stone by which I stood to see the Prince of Wales, afterwards King Edward VII., posting to the Derby, and I remember my father telling me how he in the past had been told to take his hat off and bend his knee as the Prince Regent, afterwards King George IV., came past, in his carriage and four, escorted by a troop of Horse Guards in full uniform, on his way to Brighton.

In olden days the only place for a political meeting, that I ever remember, was the yard of the White Hart Hotel, and I well recall the then Members, Sir Henry Peek and Sir Trevor Lawrence, addressing

the electorate from the top of the stone steps that led, I presume, into the hay loft, with three or four "gas flares," as they were called in those days, to illuminate the scene.

On one occasion the opposition had been making abusive remarks, reflecting grossly on the character of the Army, with the result that at the next meeting somebody equipped a number of small boys with substantial cones composed chiefly of sulphur and gunpowder, with instructions to kindle them if any more offensive remarks were uttered against the soldiers of the Queen. *We* (I must confess it) carried out these instructions faithfully. But the result, perhaps, went further than the inventor intended, for dense sulphur fumes not only emptied the yard of our opponents, but also our friends, the whole of the audience being compelled to clear out, and the meeting finished on the Cricket Green. Other time, other manners, fortunately prevail nowadays.

Some acrimony, from what I gleaned at the time, used to prevail at the meetings of the members of the Vestry, to whom the welfare of the district was then entrusted, and challenges "to fight it out" when the meeting was over, were not only offered,but if report was to be believed, were accepted, and carried rigorously to a finish after other business had been concluded.

As one rides along Kennington Park by the "Horns," in tram, motor-bus, or, perchance, a car, to-day, it is difficult to realise that at the end of the 18th century it was the haunt of highwaymen, one, Jerry Abershaw, making himself particularly notorious until the neighbourhood became so hot for him that he transferred the sphere of his activities to Wimbledon Common, where ultimately he was caught. He was hanged, I believe, in the vicinity of Kennington Common, now Kennington Park, and his body placed in a gibbet just where Wimbledon Common ends and Putney Heath begins.

On one occasion he and a friend played a grievous prank on my grandfather, who at the age of seventeen, conceived a tender passion for a London damsel about the same age. Thinking to propitiate her with the gift of a pet lamb which he had taught to follow him like a dog, he packed it one day in a saddle bag, mounted his horse, and set off from Mitcham to present it to his lady-love, who lived within the sound of Bow Bells. Unfortunately, the opulent appearance of the saddle bag led to the sudden appearance of Jerry Abershaw and a companion wearing their masks, at the Plough, Clapham, with a peremptory command to my grandfather that he should "Stand and deliver," whereupon, probably scared out of his life, he urged his horse to a gallop and went for all he was worth down Clapham Road until he came to Kennington Common, where the highwaymen overtook him. When, however, they discovered that the expansive appearance of the saddle

bag was only due to a live lamb and not a fat store of cash, their wrath was so great, that they cut the reins of his horse and spurred it so smartly behind with their swords, that the animal bolted with my luckless forbear clinging on to the mane until sheer fatigue brought the frightened animal to a standstill. What became of the unfortunate lamb at the end of this strenuous experience I do not know.

Here let me close with one or two of my more personal recollections.

My early home, the original Hall Place, was a delightful old house as I just remember it. Though the secret chamber at the back of the fireplace, in one of the rooms, is only to-day a very faint recollection, the low ceilings, oak beams, and mullioned windows are still in my memory.

Concerning the old Chapel, of which the entrance still exists, I think there is no doubt it was the one for permission to erect which the then owner of the house—Henry Strete—had to apply three times in 1348 to the authorities, the difficulty in the way being, I suppose, that the church was quite close, and therefore this chapel or oratory was not very necessary. However, leave at last was granted on the condition that the owner always kept in repair what is known now as the Major's or the de Boudrey Chapel on the North side. From this liability for repair, I suppose we may attribute the fact that in time the ownership of the chapel became vested in the freeholder of The Hall Place. In 1813, however, my grandfather was called upon to repair the chapel, and it was sold by him, with all outstanding liabilities, to Major Moore, from whom it passed to his daughter, Mrs. de Boudrey, whence it derives its present title.

In 1745 Mitcham was greatly alarmed by the report that the Pretender's troops, having defeated those of King George at Derby, were marching on to attack London, and that our village was marked for ravage en route by the wild Highlanders. How Mitcham would be in the way of the Pretender's victorious troops passing from Derby to London is by no means clear, but if the geography was weak, the alarm was very genuine, and an old-time Worsfold assembled his fellow villagers on the front lawn at The Hall Place, armed with flails, scythes and bill hooks, gave them a patriotic address, and called on them to rise and fight for King and Country. Whether fear or the lack of oratory was the cause, I know not, but when my ancestor had finished his speech, not a single man responded to the call to action until he had supplied them with three barrels of his best October brew. Then only, when the last drop obtainable had been consumed, did their valour assert itself, and they demanded to be led out against the savage Scots. This was the tale told to me some fifty years ago, by an old lady who was then in her 90th year. Her family had been our tenants for well over a century, and as she had heard the tale from her mother, who had witnessed it as a young girl, so she repeated it to me. I listened to it many a time, always with the same attention, and always thrilled at the incident which apparently impressed itself most on the young girl, which was the very vigorous language my thrifty forbear used when he found he had to stand so much ale to induce a proper patriotism.

1745—1932, 187 years ago, and only one life connecting me with what happened in those far-off days! Thus my little memories of Mitcham in the past come to an end. Small beer, I am sure, to " superior persons," but for those who knew the village in olden days and love it now, I have tried to draw from the well of remembrance a pleasant if modest draught.

Eheu ! fugaces labuntur anni !

THE HALL PLACE,
MITCHAM.

December, 1932.