



MERTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LOCAL HISTORY NOTES - 15

ONCE UPON A TIME

Recollections of an Edwardian Childhood in Colliers Wood

by James B. Bass of Millers Mead

(born 1897)

(Written between 1966 and 1970)

Editor's note:

James commented in one of his many rough drafts, which have been brought together in these Recollections, "It is impossible to record the past in chronological order so these notes must be written at random as they are recalled." Whereas some rearrangement was necessary, and a little editing required mainly to avoid repetition, James's reminiscences have a vitality of their own, and for this reason I have endeavoured to leave them very much as he jotted them down. As I read them now I can still recall the enthusiasm with which, over a quarter of a century ago, he recalled a world soon to pass beyond living memory. His wish was to share these memories with future generations, so that his Colliers Wood would not be forgotten. This, I hope, we have achieved.

E. N. Montague

It was the lot of my generation to experience the last vestiges of a semi-village life and see the commencement of a new era in the story of Colliers Wood which, in my youth, was thought of as the poor relation of Mitcham. The old folk identified themselves for several reasons with what they saw as an extension of Merton. For one reason, all the roads were listed in the local directory as in Merton except Lyveden Road, Robinson Road, Waterfall Road and Briscoe Road, which were in Tooting-Graveney. The High Street was "Colliers Wood, Merton." Mitcham was a distance away, and people spoke of "going over" to Mitcham. Colliers Wood was a compact community bounded on two sides by railways, by the river on another and open fields on the fourth. Another reason for the desire to be associated with Merton was the adoration, especially by my grandparents' generation, of the local hero Horatio Nelson. I absorbed this veneration which had a great influence on my young life. The knowledge of the historical past of Merton Priory and the area known as Merton Abbey further influenced the inhabitants to identify themselves with Merton. Although before the boundary was altered, we lived in Wimbledon, our allegiance was to Merton.

Looking back from 1966, the first thing I remember with any certainty is sitting at the kitchen window at Millers Mead in a high chair looking through the open fence at the skaters on the Mill Pond - the "reservoir" as folk called it - with its wide belt of bulrushes and the swans which came there every year to nest. At one end was a tumbling bay of tarred wood. London had not yet overrun Merton and life was far different in those days. There was warmth in the home, and to leave the neighbourhood even for a day was an adventure. Curtains from ceiling to floor; oil lamps, open kitchen stoves with hobs and iron or copper kettles. There was a similar stove in the scullery, where on Sunday morning the meat hung on the meat jack which turned first one way and then the other. Beneath was a huge tin tray with a sump in the centre to catch the dripping fat. Currants were washed and stalked and laid in front of the fire on a cloth to dry. Grapes when ripe were picked from the garden, pressed through a sieve and put into a large earthenware jar with water. On the top floated a piece of toast with some baker's yeast. In time it was bottled and became grape wine. There were many elder trees in the district, and the berries were gathered to make elderberry and apple pies and also wine. My grandfather would bury bottles of this in the garden to keep it cool. Children ate the berries and leaves of the hawthorn, which they called "bread and cheese".

When I was young, the side windows of Millers Mead were glazed with small panes of Old English glass with a bulge in the centre. The downstairs room was used as a store. A large hook in one of the beams had hams suspended from it. On a shelf was a gallon jar of peppermint essence from Mitcham. Another glass jar contained lily leaves in brandy, a magic cure for cuts and bruises, as well I know. Another remedy - for weak eyes - as recommended by Jack Miller the Blacksmith, was water from the tank where he plunged the hot iron. In our storeroom was also a coffee mill which we used for grinding our coffee beans.

Washing day had none of the benefits of modern equipment. Water came from the culvert. Clothes were boiled in the copper or the cast iron 8-gallon pans set in brick in the wash-house. Much water spilled onto the flagstone floors. I have seen pattens worn to prevent wet feet - two wooden soles with two pieces of wood fixed edgeways underneath and a leather strap, which kept the feet two inches above floor level.

In the front garden were flower beds, paths and lovely roses. In one corner stood a pump. Many of the small creatures I remember have now vanished. Gone altogether are the red squirrels which hopped along the top of our garden fence to a box we kept full of food for them. There were also peacocks in Wandle Park. With the disappearance of so many willow trees we no longer see musk beetles here. One of them alighting on a child's clothing would terrify, as they would cling so tenaciously, and could only be removed with difficulty, and gave off a strong smell of musk. Another beetle which has vanished is the one familiarly called "the devil's coach horse". A slender very black creature which, when disturbed, raised the rear portion of its anatomy after the fashion of the scorpion about to sting. There are no more toads to be found in the front garden. Efts (newts) were common, and in winter these cold blooded little creatures could be found sleeping under stones. Occasionally a hedgehog secreted itself in the garden to have its litter and disappear again. The owls no longer disturb the night. Stag beetles were very common in Wandle Park and boys collected them in boxes. When small I remember carrying a female in my waistcoat pocket until one day a family of minute young had arrived and they were promptly evicted.

Nights were peaceful. Carts bearing farm produce to Covent Garden rumbled by, the drivers sleeping, for the horses knew the way. If the wind was in the right direction, the bell of the Vestry Hall clock at Mitcham Green could be heard. Sounds travelled far in those days, and we could often hear plainly the handbell which was rung at Wimbledon on the arrival of a train, and the porter's call "Wimbledon-don-don". Local cockerels greeted the dawn and later Miller, the Blacksmith, tinkled at his anvil and Harris's cows helped to announce the beginning of another day.

These were the days when the horse was supreme and old customs were still observed. I believe one had to go up to Tooting Bec to get the horse tram. The horse buses ran between Raynes Park and Clapham Junction via Tooting Corner and the Wheatsheaf. There was a stop at the King's Head, Merton. On May Day the drivers wore grey toppers. There were no motor cars! One could cross the road, which was little more than half the width of today, at any time, except the big race days, without attention to personal safety. I have heard it said that two of the Baptist girls, one each side of the road, holding a rope between them, would run from here to the Red Lion. This would be during the evening - no traffic!

The roads at this time were of granite, and were very gritty and dusty. Hence the water cart to sprinkle, and the roller broom, which had the broom set at an angle to sweep the dust and horse droppings into the gutter. Sunday was particularly quiet. Perhaps a cycling club passing by, making for the "Baytree" in Kingston Road for tea. In fine weather the occasional trap, with sometimes a Dalmatian tied to the axle beneath; probably a status symbol of the times. On Sunday evening people from London walking from the horse tram terminus leaned on the railing admiring the flowers and often asking for a bunch for 6d.

I once went to the Crystal Palace to see a Cup Final; climbing a hoarding for a better view. That was with my father, as I was too young to go by myself. When Uncle Sid kept the public house at Gipsy Hill we often went to the "Palace", using free tickets no doubt. There were also exhibitions, cycle racing, bands and the Great Organ. Sometimes we walked there, across Tooting and Streatham Commons. Legs were used for walking. Relatives were always visiting at weekends. Nelson was spoken of with reverence. One would never believe he had been dead for 100 years. He was still a local hero. I remember the centenary of his death at "The Grove" in 1905. I was so upset, as he had become my great hero, I was unable to eat my dinner.

I remember Colonel ("Buffalo Bill") Cody's circus on the field at the corner of Byegrove Road (Biggary Mead?), with Red Indians chasing a stagecoach. Pennies were given to the Indian children. I also recall visits to the cottage sweet shop reached by a wooden bridge across the brook in Phipps Bridge Road. There were small bridges like this to houses in High Street Colliers Wood, where the Graveney ran openly, and from where Sunshine Hall is now, to Cavendish Road was a field. Juster's, the Undertaker's workshop, had elm boards displayed round a big tree. Here were gates into the fields. Scout concerts were held in the winter, and I remember some of their songs - "Jimmy Law lend me your saw"; "The Village Pump"; "I can't reach that top note" and "Play ze Game and playzit fair, Zats ze motto over zere". We also enjoyed two penn'orth of meaty melodrama in a marquee in Nelson Grove Road. Audience participation was with gusto. Boos and hisses for the villain, warnings to the heroine when in dire peril, and loud cheers for the hero, just returned from sea or Australia with enough money to put everything right. Sanger's Circus was a name on everyone's lips, when the annual visit to the Common took place; there were inevitable arguments as to which was best, that of Lord George or that of Lord John Sanger. In any case, it was always judged 'better than last year'.

Imagine a Sunday afternoon in Winter. A handbell is ringing. Presently the cry of "Muffins and Crumpets!" as the Muffin Man goes by with his tray of muffins on his head. The milkman yodelled his way round in his chariot, filling the pewter cans from the churn aboard, and I got a free ride part-way to school. From an old milk float, cats-meat on skewers was sold - no fancy tins containing marrowbone jelly or Thiamin - just plain horseflesh. We would go into the sweet shop opposite on a cold day for a hot drink, made while you wait with hot water from the kettle. Saturday pennies were pooled. A basin of pickled cabbage 1d, a piece of cheese 1d, some broken biscuits from Hamlins (corner of Christchurch Road), some "stale" buns from Brandons the Baker - all made a feast in the back garden. Fish fried, ½d, and chipos ½d, from the Marlborough Fish Bar. You could also help the icecream Jack push his barrow up the railway bridge and claim a lump of hokey-pokey.

Our local fire engine, the pride and joy of the younger generation, was named the "Bonsor"- after the local M.P., I fancy. It was kept at Mitcham Parish Council's Fire Station No. 2, which was at the corner of "the lane" now occupied by Colliers Wood Underground Station. When there was a fire, as there often was at one of the varnish works in Mitcham, the bell in the fire station turret would be rung and there would be an immediate congregation of children. Someone would fetch the horses already harnessed from the "Far Famed Cake Co." up near the Tooting Railway Bridge, while another would light the fire under the boiler at the back. Capt. Holland would come from the bootshop opposite Haydons Road. "Sonny" Saker (Dyer & Cleaner from opposite us) would hurry along doing up his tunic and his helmet slung on his arm. Fireman Verral (wheelwright) from a few doors from the station, Fireman Potter lived next door to it. Fireman Drane (Swineherd) worked at Harris's farm, and there was one who went round with the Winkle Barrow on Sunday. I remember being in Byegrove Road one morning when the bell went and he put on his helmet and tunic which he must have carried with him, and leaping on his barrow, he booted his donkey into action.

If we discovered where the fire was, and could get a good start, it was a race to get there before the engine, collecting recruits *en route*. It was usually not difficult to reach halfway along Church Road before the engine caught up with the enthusiasts. The fires were generally in that direction, and we came to know what we called "The Cock Chimney Factory" (a paint and varnish works off Batsworth Road) very well. If we were slow off the mark, it was still a sight to see the horses at full stretch charging up the Christchurch Road railway bridge, eager firemen hanging on like grim death, the bell clanging furiously and smoke and sparks belching from the chimney flue. The first turn-out of the newly acquired motor engine was less noble. In an effort to impress, the engine failed to turn and went bang into a shop front opposite. Oh, calamity!

I have seen polo played in the field of Wandle Park House. This was when Mr. Menzies lived there and I could see from the window when I was sitting up in bed probably recovering from measles. Every minute of life was lived with no time for boredom. The annual visit to the Theatre (at Clapham Junction?) for the pantomime. I saw Dan Leno (as a pantomime Dame?) and Little Tich stand on tiptoe in his long boots. The ride home was on the horse bus. Getting to the front on top, next to the driver, and looking down on the bobbing horses below was a great thrill. It doesn't seem possible I rode on a horse-drawn tramcar, up the front, looking through the door at the two horses joggling along the cobbles,

The first sign of Spring was the sound of a cornet from the direction of Tooting and the arrival of the first brake full of singing humanity on their first "beano" of the year and the Epsom Spring Meeting. Good Friday meant hot buns for breakfast. During school holidays a party of us boys took our packets of sandwiches and bottles of water, walked up to Wimbledon Common via Milkmaid Walk, played in the woods all day and walked home in the evening. The buses and trams hadn't yet appeared on the scene and, as I have already said, legs were for walking. The Wimbledon schools held their annual sports on King's College Ground at the Ridgway. With the usual packets of sandwiches and bottles of drink we would walk to Worple Road, along it and up Edge Hill and along the Ridgway. After running and seeing the programme through there was the long trail home, but it was never a trial. Another great day in our calendar was the Annual Sunday School Excursion (9d).

One must definitely agree that the day of the year was Derby Day. Those who never saw it could never imagine what it was like. From tea time the day before until late at night on the day it went on. All through the evening and the night before came the foot sloggers and we always looked for the man who walked from London to Epsom carrying a large earthenware jar on his head. All night the exodus. In the morning those fortunate enough to have gardens on the route brought out their seats for a day of colour and spectacle. The cavalcade of horses drawing every kind of vehicle; the music and singing; everyone in holiday mood. All that could, crowded the "Six Bells" yard where "Thorleys Food" was advertised and besmocked agents for the Firm served out free samples for the horses. One could earn welcome coppers by holding a horse's head while the owner was refreshing inside. The "Six Bells", or the "Royal Six Bells", sported the Prince of Wales' feathers by appointment, and H.R.H. would break journey here until, it was said, some idiot threw a bag of flour at his carriage. Whether it was on target I couldn't say but it seems, that was that, and H.R.H. and his family were never again seen this way on Derby Day. I have seen a

photograph of the road from Tooting Bec Road to Tooting Broadway so tightly packed with this horse traffic on the day that it was proceeding at a walking pace. Of course the roads were narrower. Outside Millers Mead it was little more than half the width it is today. Up to 1 o'clock or so the horses trotted by. Some "cockneys" loved to adorn the nag's forelegs with a pair of ladies' "bloomers" and place a large straw hat on its head with holes for the ears. I suppose about 4.30 p.m. the cavalcade would commence again in reverse and, whatever their fortune, good or bad, there was no sign of dampened spirits (why is it today people no longer sing like they did in those days?). As the brakes came along the more enterprising boys turned cartwheels, often dangerously near to the wheels of the vehicles. When the continual cries of "Throw out your mouldies" (coppers) won a shower of pennies a struggling heap of young humanity would snatch, claw and kick for a share of the plunder. This is what amused the throwers; the scramble. The crowd lining the road at South Wimbledon was tremendous and noisy. People from Wimbledon and Merton Park would gather there.

It has all gone. Today what is there to indicate it is Derby Day? The traffic is no different from a normal day. People are walking the street about their business. How extraordinary! Not one cornet or concertina. Never a song. Not a hand wave. The people in the cars might be going to a funeral. The "Six Bells" yard will be silent. Not one person will stand on the pavement to watch the laughing, singing, cheering procession.

In earlier days, just before my time, the stream ran beneath the road and ran through the front garden of Millers Mead. This stream is written in the old deeds as the Old River (Wandle), and the present river at Wandle Bank as the New River. Here there was a waterfall and fountain. I have no idea how the people hereabouts obtained water. In 1856 my great-grandfather had an artesian well bored, to the depth of 190 ft. which threw 60 gallons of water per minute. The neighbours then came here for their water which cost them one farthing a pail. An entry in a book I have shows that in 1880 the Singlegate Working Men's Institute opposite, paid five shillings for a year's supply of water. Later, a tank was erected on the length of pipe above ground which was connected to the taps indoors and also flushed the toilets. In 1895 the Water Company began pumping at Streatham, and the artesian water ceased to flow in November 1896. The same year the Company laid on water. There were several artesian wells in the Robinson Road area which I visited with Mr. Lucas who measured the depth of the water at regular intervals. Mr. Lucas was always searching the gravel paths for small stones of the shapes he needed for his hobby. In his studio in Defoe Road he created "pictures" from small stones which he glued to wood. Some of them were very large and quite extraordinary.

On the back of the notice to quit served up on the previous occupier of Millers Mead, when my great-grandfather bought the property in 1831, is a curious note by a John Killey who delivered the notice which ends "Mr. Hutsen we not wery weal". This peculiar pronunciation of Hudson reminds me that at one time the old folk referred to Wimbledon as "Wimpleteon." (Mr. Hudson was a wood engraver)

Mr. Marks of Wandle Bank tells me he remembers sheep grazing on the railway side of Robinson Road, and like myself he remembers the Graveney flowing by the side of the High Street. There was a one-rail fence between the footpath and the gardens of the few houses at that time. Boys used to fish here, and an eyewitness once told me he saw a pike caught by Marlborough Road. The Methodist Church was familiarly called "The Tin Chapel". Where the "Iron Road" crossed the High Street and where the Tollhouse once stood between Juster's, the Undertaker's workshop, and Verral's, the Wheelwrights, was a gate into the fields where two local football teams played; Waterfall and Merton Abbey. Father and his cousin Jack took the cash at the entrance to one field, which meant free admittance to the Bass boys. When my father played football they used the Rugby type of ball.

Mr. Marks also recalls Dr. Sampson the vet going on his rounds on horseback wearing a top hat. Sometimes he toured the neighbourhood in a dogcart driven by his assistant. This could well be the gentleman I saw riding in a horse sleigh when the weather demanded it. The river and mill pond here often overflowed, flooding nearby cottages, and a punt served to transport pedestrians between Terriers Bridge and "The Victory". On these occasions my father would carry me part-way to school wearing leather thigh boots. We boys considered it rare fun canoeing in a galvanised bath.

On Boat Race days the lads would stand on the bridge watching the flagstaff on top of the flour mill where the result was signalled by hoisting the winning colour. Mr. Robinson of the mill would shepherd his herd of goats down Wandle Bank, along the High Street and into the Meadow beside the mill pond. Mr. Marks also remembers what he called the Water Carnival which Mr. Robinson organised, which consisted of illuminated and decorated punts on the Wandle.

Near the bridge, opposite the "Six Bells", Mrs. Harris had a dairy where one took a jug and was served with milk fresh from the cows from a large china bowl. At the far end of Byegrove Road was a stile and footpath leading to "Cutthroat Lane" or Blackshaw Road, and many were the gruesome stories told by the old folk of Spring-heeled Jacks and footpads. Between the railway and Blackshaw Road was an open field and boys went there to fly kites. Where the old wooden cottages stood next to the "Red Lion" a lady served from the front window hot pies, pease pudding and faggots. Mr. Marks further recollects that on Derby Day, besides the man who walked to Epsom balancing a large earthenware jar on his head, another trundled a cart wheel. The Royal Mail drawn by four horses dashed through here at 10.10 p.m. on its way to Guildford and on Derby Day a mounted policeman rode in front to clear the way. Police were also stationed about 50 yards apart along the main road to keep the road clear of obstruction. Some of the down-and-outs were to be seen crouching on the axles of the four-wheeled cabs.

What a day it was when we first went to the sea with the Sunday School. This was a new delight; no more in Harris's field or at Riddlesdown. We were busy for weeks beforehand; accumulating funds; pennies and halfpennies came one way or another, and were carefully hoarded; coloured papers cut into small pieces for confetti, cherry stones washed, dried and bagged; all to shower on railway workmen and station staff *en route*. On the morning we would march on Merton Abbey Station in white shorts and plimsolls to await the train from Tooting Junction, already half-filled with children from St. Barnabas, Mitcham. The noise was tremendous, and small groups clung together, determined that their friends should not be excluded from the compartment of their choice.

How we gazed in curiosity at the labourers in the Sussex fields in their strange garb; long white smocks; wide-brimmed straw hats and gaiters. Finally, that Other World - the seaside - oh, the wonder at seeing the sea for the first time, and all for 9d!

Election days were another source of fun. Rival parties of boys paraded the streets; barrows were adorned with posters of favoured candidates. The continual chant of "VOTE! VOTE! VOTE! for Mr. ---, kick old --- out the door. For --- is our man and we'll have him if we can, And we won't vote for --- any more."

At one time boys were seen everywhere on stilts. In our earlier days we took our hoops to school. The boys using a "skimmer" to propel their iron ones and the girls a stick for their wooden ones. Young boys went to school in blouses, while the older ones sported "Norfolk Suits" - belted jackets with breeches buttoned or buckled below the knee. Wide collars, some of celluloid worn outside the jacket collar. All wore boots; the girls and young boys wore buttoned boots. Everyone wore black stockings. A button hook and shoehorn were household necessities. Girls also wore pinafores to school. One qualified for long trousers on leaving school.

After school, in the marble season, there was a stampede to stake pitches on nearby pavements which were soon teeming with youngsters frantically pitching or "knuckling" their "stonies" at the target, a "prit" placed between the outstretched legs of the sitting owner, who collected the marbles until someone claimed a hit, when he handed it over, replaced it with another, and the game continued midst much shouting and disputing. Several different games were played with Cigarette Cards, which were flicked forward from between the first and second fingers. Enterprising lads charged one or two cards to view their peepshow made from a cardboard box. A hole at one end to eye through at some scene or tableau made from cuttings from picture books, at the opposite end, and to make it discernible, an aperture cut above in the lid.

On Hospital Sunday, the Carnival procession, led by Nos 1 and 2 fire engines, threaded the streets. There was still a "Jack o'the Green" and the Oddfellows carried their huge banner. The tradesmen's carts bedecked with bunting; the horses wearing rosettes and the harness brasses gleaming. One cart I remember had a patient in bed being abundantly cared for, by several nurses. The collectors on the flanks jingled their bags on poles, which grew weightier as they gathered coins from the upstairs windows.

Once a year handbills were distributed at the school gates announcing a magnificent Lantern Show. It was very primitive; "Poole's Panorama" was one such show. A sign of progress was when moving pictures were shown in the Baths Arcade in Worple Road. Very elementary, but the shape of things to come. Indeed, it was not long before we were visiting Attlee's Brewery, where in the old buildings there were shown short comic films, and we were soon to become familiar with Tontolini, Max Linder and Hawkeye the Detective. This later became the Electroscope, and at present, the Bijou Bingo Hall. A further improvement was the marquee erected on a vacant plot (the site now occupied by No. 126 High Street, Tooting). Here was a stage and grand piano. Prosperity moved this to the King's Hall (now the premises of F. W. Stern Ltd.). Another pioneer effort was the opening of the Nelson Hall in Merton High Street, and the words "Cinematograph" and "Pathé Frères" and "Bioscope" began to infiltrate into our vocabulary.

This was still the age of the horse. The "Horseless Carriage" was not yet to invade Colliers Wood. A Saturday trip in the Grosvenor Laundry van up and around "West" was sought after. Occasionally, on Sunday, the horse was promoted to the Wagonette, in which a party, with refreshments on board, set off to enjoy, with no concern for the time or speed, a trip to Windsor or Box Hill. Every moment of the journey in the yet unspoiled countryside was to be enjoyed. Some boys seized the opportunity of a free ride, which meant running after the van, unobserved by the driver, jumping up and hanging on to the tailboard. This was known as "Cutting behind", and often cut short by some passer-by calling to the driver to "Cut the whip", upon which the lads dropped off quickly to avoid the whiplash.

A walk in the centre of the road such as to Epsom and back on a Sunday morning was no problem. Even as late as 1919 I walked from Purley to Brighton in midweek, on a summer's day in the middle of the traffic-free road, hardly seeing anyone except in towns.

"Torchy" was a figure of our boyhood. An Italian organ-grinder, assisted by a monkey on a chain, and dressed in a fancy costume. The antics of the monkey caused the children to tease it until it became menacing, and the poor man angry. I wonder why the telegraph boy leaving the post office at the corner of Wandle Bank on his red bicycle, in his pillbox hat and belt and pouch, was greeted with shouts of "Pic-pic-piccaninny"? Why was he singled out for this treatment? It was fun, when in the evenings boys and girls from the neighbouring cottages and shops gathered in the "Victory Field" (the piece of land adjoining the "Victory" and the open space now occupied by Oslo Court). All played together the numerous games of the time.

A Street Directory I have of 1903, contains the population of Wimbledon, Merton, Morden, Mitcham, Sutton, Carshalton, Beddington, South Beddington, Wallington and Cheam. Thirty years later a larger volume covered only Wimbledon and Merton. Evidence indeed of the rapid growth taking place. In 1903, Singlegate possessed among other things, a Fire Station (Mitcham No. 2), a horse-drawn engine, a wooden fire-bell turret, a blacksmith, wheelwright, undertaker's workshop, a farm, cork factory (where tiles were previously made), forage contractor, National Telephone Co. public call office, signwriter, a coffee house, harness maker, whipmaker, brush maker, lath renderer, and a gentleman by the name of Hermaine, who evidently merited the grand title of "Professor of LEGERDEMAIN". The Directory also listed Stone Cottage, once the residence of the gatekeeper for the Surrey Iron Road and, at the corner of Waterfall Road, the cottage where Miss Brigden had her "Fancy Bazaar".

The hawkers and pedlars had their cries. "Clos' Prop" called the gypsy, carrying his bundles of forked branches. The women offered their bundles singing that old street cry which begins "Won't you buy my sweet blooming lavender?" On certain days old "Gobbler" came along selling fish from the rear of his trap crying "'Ake or Mackerel!" The flypaper man chanted "Tormenting flies - catch 'em alive". The travelling tinker came trundling his curious apparatus, which resembled a wheelbarrow wheeled by the legs, complete with treadle, grindstone, a small can which dripped water on the stone and a small charcoal fire for heating copper bits. "Knives to grind?", "Kettles to mend?" he cried. At intervals another traveller passed this way with his "Chairs to mend?" He carried a bundle of slivers of cane, and would sit outside your front door and mend the cane seat of your chair. We must not forget the lamplighter who went on his round lighting each gas lamp with his long rod.

The Colliers Wood Post Office was at 55 High Street. Walter Lonnon was the Sub-postmaster, and letters were dispatched at 8.20, 9.20 and 10.10 a.m.; 12.25, 2.35, 4.10, 7.00, 8.00, 8.45 and 11.40 p.m. - Sunday 11.35 p.m.

Looking from my bedroom window at Millers Mead, as my grandfather certainly did, 140 years earlier, it is not difficult to conjure up the scene from it as I saw it in my childhood. The Mill Pond with its broad fringe of tall bulrushes; the moorhens darting in and out of them; the swans and ducks; Mr. Robinson's herd of goats munching away at the nettles; the old William pear tree near where the siren is now. Further to the right (before the Grosvenor Laundry was built) Mr. Menzies' polo ponies being put through their paces; some red squirrels running along our fence to the nut box.

Both my grandfathers lived in Colliers Wood. One, James Bass, builder, ended his life at "Bloomfield" in Morden Road and had the luxury of a carriage.

James Barton Bass
3 Millers Mead, Colliers Wood.

1st. December 1970.



Millers Mead, photographed c. 1975 when demolition was being considered. The pair of white cottages dated to the late 18th century. They were considered incapable of renovation, but, following clearance, replicas were erected in the 1980s as part of the redevelopment of the site.

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