



MERTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LOCAL HISTORY NOTES - 16

Growing up in Mitcham (1939-1963)

By Michael Reed

I was born above my grandparents' shop at 114 Christchurch Road on 7th July 1939, two months before the outbreak of war. (Almost all births in those days were home births). I moved to 174 Church Road about 1943 and after the War my parents started a newsagents shop, selling second-hand magazines recovered from the local incinerator before they were burnt.

During the war, when the bombing and doodlebugs were going on, my mother, brother and I used to crouch under the stairs amongst the coal, listening for the dreadful and frightening sounds of the doodlebugs (V1s) cutting out. (H.E. Bates, in a book on the V1s and V2s mentioned 49 doodlebugs landing on Mitcham, a prime target due to the many factories at that time in the area). At night we listened intently for bombers, being able to tell by the engine sounds if it was one of ours or a German plane. The loveliest sound was the 'all clear' siren. Sometimes we would escape the bombing by going down to Colliers Wood tube station to shelter for the night. There were a few bunk beds for those who arrived early, but you had to provide your own bedding. Most people ended up sleeping on the platforms. I remember a little café at the end of the platform where you could get a cup of tea and, maybe, a bun.

My father was once perched on a roof trying to dislodge an incendiary bomb between raids, when the sirens sounded for another raid. The fellow holding the ladder ran off, the ladder fell down and my Dad had to sit up there till the raid was over! When his 'helper' sheepishly came back, hot words were exchanged. Another time he was down a garden shelter with some men, women and children. The bombing must have got bad because one fellow began to cry. This made my Dad very angry, and he told him not to cry in front of the women and children or he would chuck him outside!



Colliers Wood Tube Station - May 1972

I was evacuated early on in the war but came back when the worst of the bombing was over, only to be evacuated again in 1944 when the V1s and V2s started in earnest. Being evacuated on my own to the countryside was the worst time of my life.

As kids, our playground was the streets, alleyways and any bombed out houses which, having 'Keep Out, Danger' signs, were a great adventure. We scavenged for souvenirs, dug tunnels and looked for any unexploded bombs. One of the games we played was 'Knock down Ginger', which was played with a tin can, with a stone inside. I remember a man walking the streets singing for money - perhaps he was a wounded ex-soldier. There was the 'muffin man', the milkman had a horse and cart, and people used to rush out to collect the manure for their gardens after the horse had passed.



*On right: Keene's Terrace,
100-142 Church Road,
Mitcham - May 1966*

As well as 'Penny for the Guy', we had, in the summer time, 'Penny for the Grotto'. The latter comprised lines of earth arranged in a semi-circle on the pavement, decorated with flower heads (pinched out of gardens) and a piece of mirror in the centre, representing water. We would vie with each other to produce the most beautiful layout, sit next to our art work, and cry out 'Penny for the Grotto', having no idea of the meaning of this tradition. My Mum was not too pleased with me, thinking it was near to begging, which it probably was.

The games we played in the streets were Cowboys and Indians or Germans vs. British. We all did imitations of Spitfires by running along with our arms outstretched firing thousands of rounds into the kid you were chasing, who was behaving similarly to you. Other playground games included British Bulldog, Ching-Chang-Cholla (now called paper, scissors and rock), English against the Irish, French He, and Up against the wall (possibly a public school game). Our legs used to freeze in winter as boys never had long trousers until they were about 14 years old.

On VE (Victory in Europe) Day people in our street, like many others, set up tables on the road and we had a big street party. Houses were decorated with flags, people got out their best clothes, and we stuffed ourselves with any delicacies held back for this day. Everyone was very happy and relieved that, finally, the war was over and that we would not be bombed any more.

A very rough area of Mitcham was called 'Rocky'. This consisted of the end of Phipps Bridge Road and included New Close, and Rock Terrace (where Rocky probably got its name from). Rocky was bordered by the River Wandle, the railway line, allotments, factories and the local refuse depot and incinerator. As it led nowhere, you only went into this place deliberately. The local rough pub was 'The Bath Tavern', known as 'The Blood Tub', where many local villains drank. Frequently, a game called 'Pitch and Toss' would be played by 20-odd men in a circle in the street. This was a gambling game which the police could only break up by a big raid (no police patrol was safe there). Young kids were paid to be look-outs to give warning, and when a police raid started there was many a chase down alleyways, and through people's houses. I remember watching a big crowd gather round two men stripped to the waist having a street fight, with the onlookers shouting support to one or the other. This was a well-established method of settling grievances.

All of the street gaslamps had their glass tops mangled, and car tyres were thrown over the horizontal bar. Kids ran loose with nothing on their feet, and 'Diddycoys' (Romanies) horses were led in the front door of a house and out the back to their gardens. Redskin Alley was a path which led over the railway lines to 'Hatfeild's Park' (Morden Hall Park), where rival gangs from Tooting and Wimbledon used to fight. I believe one captured lad was tied to the railway lines.

*The old Bath Tavern on
the new Phipps Bridge
Housing Estate, Mitcham
- May 1966*



After the war, temporary housing was put up on waste land alongside the Council Depot called 'The Dust'. There were two parallel roads, one with square huts, (prefabricated asbestos bungalows), and the other with ex-army 'Nissen' huts, called the round huts. These made snug and warm homes in spite of the asbestos linings. I felt safe going over to Rocky because I was a local and known as Reedy's son, who delivered their papers. Unfortunately, a school friend of mine was not so lucky when he cycled over there to see this place, for he was grabbed by the local gang, a rope was put round his neck and he had to run behind while they rode his bike, pulling him along.

More gypsies, diddycoys (slang name), lived opposite Gladstone Road in a big yard, containing about half a dozen traditional Romany caravans.

*Swing's Yard, Western Road, Mitcham (near the junction with Love Lane)
Used by gypsies - June 1966*



As the upstairs of our house was requisitioned during the war, my parents struggled to bring up three children in a two bedroomed house. As my brother, sister and I were sharing the same bed, my Mum, after trying to get help from the Council, wrote to the then Housing Minister, Harold Macmillan, and we quickly gained repossession of the upstairs part of our house. Unfortunately, this was infested with fleas and all floor boards had to be lifted and sprayed.

At the junction of Western Road and Church Road, was a garage from where it got its name - 'Poole's Corner'. On a piece of derelict land opposite 114 Christchurch Road (my grandparents' shop) there was a caravan which sold teas and rolls, called the 'Liberty Café' and it serviced all the surrounding factories. To the left, and just below the bridge which went over the railway line, Old Man Friday (Jack Stopher) had a variety of sheds which were all illegal, in which he kept chickens and 'doctored' people's cats. In fact the land was ancient parish waste, or common, and Jack was a squatter. When Jack was old he stayed with us as he was our relation. As he never washed, my sister, who was only a teenager, gave him a compulsory strip wash, which must have surprised him! He had always mistreated his own small dogs, and tried to do the same with our Alsatian, when he was a puppy. Our dog did not forget, and when he grew to full size, showed his hatred by being ferocious towards Old Man Friday who quickly became terrified of him.

November 5th was a major event in our calendar. Every street collected its rubbish and wood for weeks beforehand, and assembled their bonfire the night or so before 'Bonfire night'. Ours was set up in the middle of the road, about 6 to 10ft. high, and cars had to drive around it. Rival gangs would try to pinch your material for their bonfire, and many fights took place. A big bonfire was always set up on the Mount Road Recreation Field, away from all cars and easily guarded. All sorts of dangerous fireworks were used, including 'Shooting Stars', Roman candles, crackers and bangers. Rockets were fired horizontally out of bottles and bangers stuck through letterboxes for amusement.



Cars parked outside 'Liberty Café' - on the former 18th-century Jacobs Green. The Pickle Ditch is behind the white railings - May 1974

A ditch (the Pickle ditch) with a small stream in it used to run down the side of Phipps Bridge Road to Poole's Corner where it was joined by a surface water sewer from Western Road and thereafter disappeared underground. Kids used to play quite happily in the ditch, looking for any creature that moved. As it was polluted by the paint works at Phipps Bridge, some official had it piped and covered over, so another avenue to the countryside was lost to children to play in!

All kids used to collect cigarette cards and played a game at school called 'flickers' or 'fackards' (fag cards) in which you could win cards from other children. These cards came in sets of 48 or 50 and depicted film stars and sportsmen. Cigarette cards were discontinued very soon after the outbreak of the War. Trade cards (in tea packets, etc) continued, but were not so popular. We used to swap comics, American ones being worth twice as much as English ones, and we played marbles and conkers (which it was against the rules to soak in vinegar and bake). After the war some kids would collect car number plates in a book, but this craze died out when the car boom ruined the hobby.

The radio was our main evening listening with "The Man in Black" starring Valentine Dyall, frightening the hell out of everyone. "Riders of the Range" by Charles Chiltern, "Journey Into Space" (science fiction) with Jet Morgan, and a spy thriller called "Dick Barton Special Agent", featuring Dick, Jock and Snowy. People listened intently using their imaginations to fill out and enhance the programmes.



Junction of Church Road / Western Road SW19 - 'Poole's Corner', the old Singlegate School in background - November 1987

The event of the week was always Saturday morning pictures with a choice of four cinemas, all along Wimbledon Broadway. One at the bottom of Wimbledon Hill, two opposite each other, the ABC and Gaumont, and Kings Cinema, called by the kids 'The Flea Pit', which I always tried to go to. They were always packed and everyone was concerned that they might not get in, squabbles always broke out against queue jumpers and, when the doors were opened, it was a rush to enter. Hundreds of children, uninhibited by the absence of any adults, would be quite wild with pushing, shoving, fights and kids running up and down the aisles impatient for it all to start. The manager would usually come in and, in order to quieten us down, would get us in a sing-song followed by a Prize Draw, before retreating and letting the mayhem take place.

The films were a mixture of any of the following - Superman, Flash Gordon goes to Mars, Dick Barton Special Agent; cowboys such as Roy Rogers, Lash-Larue, Gene Autrey; Zorro; comedies were Laurel and Hardy, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and Charlie Chaplin. Cartoons were Donald Duck, and Mickey Mouse.

Shouts, cheers, boos and crying would echo around the cinema with some children hiding behind seats peeking out, while others would stand on their seats shouting out defiantly against the baddies. Of course, many serials would finish with the hero within seconds of certain death so you simply must come back next week!

All this excitement lasted about 2 - 3 hours, and cost 6d or 9d. I had to drag my kid sister along with me or I couldn't go.

Different factories I remember, were Fry Diecasting Ltd. at the Tandem Works in Christchurch Road, Metal Box Co., Hadfields (Merton) Ltd., - paint and varnish manufacturers at Phipps Bridge, and Barrow Hepburn and Gale Ltd., - manufacturers of conveyor and transmission belting.

During and after the war rationing was very strict until it finished around 1952. My parents, who owned a shop, had quotas allotted them of sweets, papers and cigarettes. The cigarettes were kept under the counter and sold to regular customers only, so even if you had the money (and in the case of sweets, the coupons required), it was still difficult to find a shop who would sell you any. Many arguments came of this practice by customers who never believed you when you said "sorry mate, sold out". Some cigarettes were sold in fives to help those short of money, I think they were called Wills Woodbine and Black Cats. I used to collect cigarette ends up off the streets and strip out the tiny bits of tobacco so that my father could roll his own, which was not my favourite chore (and as a result I have never been tempted to smoke).

*The Tandem Works,
Christchurch Road, SW19 -
May 1974*



The rationing after the War was worse than during the War, for example the milk allowance was reduced to 2½ pints a week, newspapers had four pages and bread was rationed. Holidays overseas were banned!

The winter of 1946/7 was very bad, the snowfall was heavy and hung around for about six weeks, the temperature dropped at night to -9°C (16°F), and because of coal shortages we had power cuts. Paper deliveries around the streets were very difficult, yet some people complained if their paper was a little late!

Children used to follow behind the tar lorry being told the smell was good for their health.

A popular local sport of the time was bicycle racing, which was well organised and took place near the pickle factory (Robertson's Pickle and Sauce Works Ltd.) whose "Zalmo Works" was off Lewis Road near Glebe Avenue. There was a field here with a circular track where youngsters would race four laps and large crowds would gather and cheer on their team. This was speedway without the noise, and it was free.

My area of Mitcham was very insular. In the 1940s and 1950s there were no blacks, coloured people of any sort, or Arabs. If you were to leave London you felt as if you were entering a vast emptiness. A foreigner would be someone from Wales or Scotland. The only Jew I knew of was 'Jack the Barber' where we all went for haircuts. Muslims and Hindus just did not exist for us. The only place we knew black people lived was in Brixton (this is not racism but history).

My parents were among the first in the street to have a black and white TV and they fitted a tinted plastic sheet over the front to give an impression of colour. When the Cup Final was on, the room was cleared, planks put on beer crates, and neighbours and friends invited in. Maybe up to 20 people would be boozing and cheering on the teams; everyone having little, we would share with neighbours. The war made people stick together, but with prosperity, home comforts, tourists, TVs and cars, Britain has lost much of this spirit.

Some of my Mum's relations called Stopher had a small slaughterhouse down a little lane opposite us where they killed pigs (the site is now a school playground). I never remember any smell, probably because of the rubber factories nearby, which added their own aroma.

'Bunces Meadow' was a nice quiet field off of Phipps Bridge Road and led over to Hatfeild's Park. I used to take my canoe there when I was about 17 and paddled up and down its quiet, clean river.

A book was written about a police dog called Rex who became famous, catching a criminal at night in the railway yards at Christchurch Bridge.

Our paper shop, at 174 Church Road, was certainly the biggest in Mitcham and probably the biggest in South London. Frequently, I had a paper round before school and another when I got home. Saturday morning was collecting money from the houses I delivered to during the week, mid-afternoon was spent at Tooting and Mitcham football ground, selling the half-time football results, and full results in papers in the evening. Sunday, all morning, was my last round of the week. My father, brother and I went out to separate areas on carrier bikes on Saturday night selling 'The Star', 'The News' and 'The Standard' all around the streets, shouting out at the top of our voices "Classified!! Full Football Results!" I used to sell 13 quire (338 papers) at 2d each to customers rushing out of the houses, all wanting the football results. My Dad was very keen on football and organised a local amateur football team. He 'acquired' some genuine England shirts, took off the emblem, and called the team 'Merton Athletics', which went on in the 1950s to win a regional cup tie 3 - 1.

Quite a bit of ‘knocked-off’ stuff used to come my Dad’s way from local ‘contacts’. On my 15th birthday some watches were shown to me in the shop, “Pick one quick” my Dad said to me. I chose one and was told to ‘keep mum’ where it came from. This was the first watch I ever owned.

My Dad was always looking for ways to make a few bob and would take bets in the shop, always surreptitiously (from those in the know). Off-course betting was illegal in those days and my Dad got ‘pinched’ more than once by the ‘cops’. My Mum, who was as ‘straight as a die’ was always sick with worry and would have nothing to do with it. “Stick a bet on for us, Les” was an everyday call from some customers.

My Dad was a bit of a fibber, always telling ‘cock and bull’ stories and convinced me in my innocence as a child that my great-great-great-grandfather was the Prince of Wales. When I recounted this as ‘gospel truth’ at school you can imagine the ridicule and shame I went through. The teacher just smiled at my gullibility.

A popular outing would be organised by the local streets who would hire two or three “charabangs” (which we know now as coaches), and people would pile on carrying crate after crate of beer for a day out to Brighton, with stops on the way for a little drink at various pubs arriving at a very pebbly Brighton beach. We would spend the afternoon there and then back on the “charabangs” for home. Here there was a problem for there were scores of “charas” parked along the seafront and, as a young child, I got confused, unable to recognise my bus, and ended up crying my eyes out and telling a policeman I was lost! An hour or so later, I was picked up at the police station by my Dad. The people on my bus weren’t that pleased as they were missing out on the drinks, and the rude sing-songs which always followed on the way back!

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Photographs by Eric Montague



The junction of Liberty Avenue (formerly Phipps Bridge Road) and Christchurch Road. The former Jacobs Green on the left. Lyon House (Apex Tower) in the distance - February 1992

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Further information on Merton Historical Society can be obtained from the Society’s website at www.mertonhistoricalsociety.org.uk or from Merton Library & Heritage Service, Merton Civic Centre, London Road, Morden, Surrey. SM4 5DX