

MERTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LOCAL HISTORY NOTES - 18

THE MITCHAM THAT I REMEMBER

1927 - 1941

Mrs. Iris C. Marshall, née Overy

SAMUEL WARD, PAINT MANUFACTURER, VICTORIA WORKS, WINDMILL ROAD (Site often referred to as **The Creameries**.)

One of my hobbies is painting in oils/acrylic/water colour and I recently painted in oils, from memory, my recollections of the above site, which was my own and family's home from 1927 to 16th April 1941.

The factory faced the **Seven Islands Pond** on Mitcham Common, and incorporated the old **Woodite Villa** site. My father was general foreman of the paint factory and the old **Workhouse Master's Lodge**, pictured here in the foreground of the factory as a whole, was our home. It was a 'tied' cottage and therefore was part of my father's wage.

A large bell hung, surrounded by a protective cage, on the side of the Lodge, and, in its earlier life had been the main means of visitors announcing their arrival at the site. The site had been used for varying purposes during its lifetime. It was originally an infirmary for the poor of the parish; waterproof groundsheets were manufactured here for the soldiers in the Crimean War, and when tinderboxes were dispensed with, lucifers were manufactured here, allegedly for the first time. Mitcham lavender was processed here for a while and so we come to 1927 when Samuel Ward moved his factory from Blackfriars in London after that factory had unfortunately burned down. Fire was to follow this company throughout the remainder of its history, but more of that later.

Two rooms had to be added at the rear of the small Lodge in 1927, to accommodate our large family. I was the youngest at the age of 2½ years at the period of which I write. The original Lodge had two small bedrooms and one communal room below. A passage alongside the stairway led from the front door (which in fact was at the side of the Lodge, fronting the petrol pumps which were added in the Thirties) to a kitchen. Off the passage, just before reaching the scullery, was the back door and means of reaching an outside toilet placed immediately to the right. During very cold winters, when ice, frost and snow prevailed, dampness appeared on the inside of the oldest part of the Lodge, the damp course having long deteriorated, and droplets of frozen water resembled a myriad of fairy stars. The rooms were heated, when they worked, by gas fires. We had no chimney stack, and ventilation was provided by an ugly ‘elephant trunk’-shaped pipe that protruded out of the front of the Lodge and over a ditch that surrounded the whole of the site. This was grandly described as a moat at one stage of its life, and swept right round the site that included the **Creameries**, a separate factory at the rear of Samuel Ward. A row of tall trees grew along the outside of the Creameries and sheltered it somewhat from direct view when approaching from Croydon.



Pen and ink drawing of Samuel Ward paint factory, by Mrs Iris C Marshall, with the Overy family home on the left.

Three cottages and one larger house faced Commonside East. I attended the same schools as the children of families living in two of the cottages. We were infants and juniors at the wooden village-type Sherwood Park School in Abbots Road and ultimately, at the age of ten years, we had to move to the newly built Pollards Hill School, at the other end of Abbots Road. The latter is now named Alfred Mizen School and was built over that gentleman’s nursery grounds, along with a huge estate of houses to accommodate the continually growing population that moved here during this era. This latter school appears now to cater only for very young children. How times have changed! We were educated and expected to leave school ready for work at the tender age of 14 years. If you were fortunate enough to be able to enter for the local County Grammar School and be accepted, then the age for leaving was upped to 16 years. *[Mitcham County School for Girls, off Cranmer Road, is now Cranmer Middle School, and Mitcham County Boys' School, off Commonside East opposite Three Kings' Piece, is St Thomas of Canterbury R.C. School.]*

In Samuel Ward's grounds was the house known as the **Woodite Villa**. A family by the name of Skinner had lived there and when they vacated the premises, the property served as an office dealing with customers calling at three pumps that were erected in the foreground in the 1930s. My father and older members of the family had to 'man' the petrol pumps after the factory had closed for business during the weekdays and at weekends.

There was such freedom for myself, as a young child, to be able to run and play on the Common with my dog Gyp (short for Gypsy) as a faithful mongrel companion. He had been ill-treated as a puppy and was rescued by one of the van drivers working for the firm. The drivers would finish their various journeys and, if the factory was closed on their return, they would report to my father and sign off for the day. Such wonderful place names were used during these adult conversations - Nine Elms, The Great North Road, Archway. In my childish imagination the van drivers could have been travelling in another world - the mileage seemed so great!

A castellated brick wall, topped with broken glass, surrounded our kitchen garden and orchard. This did not prevent gypsies and children scrumping from our fruit trees and eventually a section of the wall was so damaged that intruders just used to clear the ditch and walk in on our produce!

One night in 1936 a peculiar glow appeared in the sky at the rear and to the left of our home. My father came to the conclusion that it was, in layman's language, The Northern Lights! I felt proud to receive this snippet of information and was rehearsing how grand I would sound when imparting this knowledge to my school chums! Communication via TV and radio was unheard of then - we had to rely on a few families who could afford a radio to be first with the news, or failing this the daily news when it was delivered to our home. My chagrin was great when the correct explanation was made public - it was the famous Crystal Palace, Sydenham Hill, ablaze.

Many times on hot summer evenings I would rest my head on an abandoned ant hill - now overgrown with grass. It provided a comfortable, natural pillow whilst watching a mere speck in the cloudless blue sky 'sign writing' an advertisement for "PERSIL WASHING POWDER". The speck of course was a biplane providing the necessary 'magic' material to write in the sky! I would watch in wonderment until the word "PERSIL" had spread out and become 'muzzy' before disappearing altogether! I never once gave any thought as to where the 'plane could have taken off or landed after its mission . It was most probably the old Croydon Airport near Purley Way. (I believe roads and estates now built over the old airport have been named after famous flyers through the ages.)

Referring to aircraft at that time, my mother and I were very agitated one late afternoon when on hearing a low-flying biplane zooming over our home, we saw and heard the frantic pilot hanging over the side of his aircraft, resplendent in a leather flying helmet with earflaps, goggles hiding the upper part of his features, banging loudly on the cockpit door and shouting a warning with a foreign accent to "GET BACK!" "GET BACK!" He had overshot Croydon Airport and followed the old Workhouse Path that led from our home to and from the **Seven Islands Pond** using it as a makeshift runway! The amazing conclusion of this drama ended somewhat weakly! The area was not thickly populated at the best of times, unlike to-day, and apart from those of us on the factory site, not one person bothered to investigate fully or in close-up! The 'plane had eventually come to rest near to the Seven Islands Pond. By the next morning the 'plane had disappeared! We had no idea how it was transported or who did it!

Going back to unique advertising on the Common; my mother came to check my temperature one afternoon, when, home from school recuperating from a childish illness, I saw this wonderful elephant complete with a cover over his/her back (it could have been a 'cow' elephant) emblazoned with the words "HUDSONS SOAP POWDER". A man sat on the elephant at the back of its

head dressed as an Indian mahout. I believe the elephant was in fact an African elephant, but no matter; the ultimate effect was truly superb. My mother thought to look out of the window to verify my sighting after checking my condition - she thought I was running a high temperature and was delirious! I can see her amazed and delighted look at the episode that, even today, seemed to be staged just for us two.

On the 16th April 1941 the factory site was lit up by German Luftwaffe aircraft and we knew with terrible dread that we were going to be a target for possible destruction! My mother collected her insurance policies and valuables in a suitcase; I made sure our dog (the second to be called Gyp by now after the death from old age of the first dog) had his collar and lead secure, in order that perhaps in the expected holocaust to come we would escape as orderly as possible - God willing we would survive that which was to come. After what seemed an interminable period of time the final act of wickedness was enacted and one of the two landmines dropped on the site scored a direct hit on the chimney stack shown in the painting. Fifteen Home Guard members, amongst them some of our personal friends, perished as they tried heroically to put out the huge fire, along with smaller fires that erupted, to say nothing of the effects of the actual explosion of the landmines on impact. I understand a plaque was placed on a wall of the factory that has since been built on the old site, and rightly so, to commemorate the fallen. *[The plaque now hangs in the Royal British Legion, St Mark's Road, Mitcham.]* My parents managed to find a new home for us all off Rowan Road. Property lay empty at this time, the occupants having evacuated themselves and dependants wherever possible.



'The Creameries' site from 'Workhouse Path', c.1966. The old Workhouse Master's Lodge is centre foreground.

MILL HOUSE, WINDMILL ROAD AND JUNCTION WITH BEDDINGTON LANE

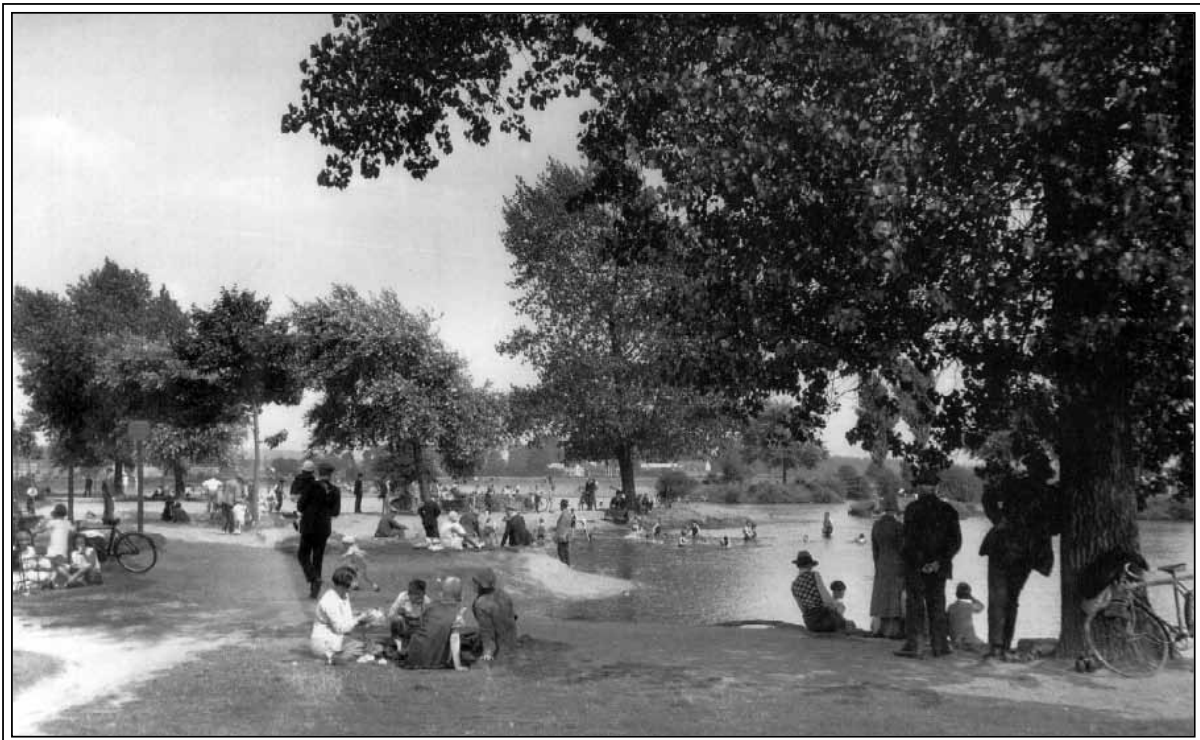
On the corner of Windmill Road/Croydon Road, stood Mill House. *[It is now part of the Windmill pub and restaurant.]* The family living there in my time were very wealthy and unapproachable! A nanny would wheel the youngest member of the family, a small boy, in a pushchair for an airing. It appeared to be an unwritten law that we would not attempt to acknowledge them or get to know them. They were considered a 'cut above' and 'different'. I understand the foundations of the original old Mill are still in the grounds of this property.

Beddington Lane was renowned for its watercress beds but, alas, as with Mitcham lavender, they are no more. What a tragedy that the only reference to lavender in Mitcham nowadays is Lavender Avenue near Western Road. It is alleged that in their time and prime, the lavender fields of Mitcham sometimes surpassed those of France.

When Mitcham was given a Charter in 1934 and made a Borough, we, as schoolchildren, had no idea what it meant. We were walked in 'crocodile' fashion from our respective schools to congregate on the Cricket Green one summer morning. The Mayor of Mitcham stood dutifully on the Green with his back to the red brick Town Hall. We could not hear his voice as we were seated on the grass at the rear of the audience. We saw his mouth moving and he took off his tricorne hat to resounding cheers from the assembly. Like sheep we cheered too and learned later that at that point he had declared Mitcham had received its Charter and was now a Borough. We were each presented with a lavender coloured mug to mark the occasion; a raised sprig of lavender was embodied in the china on the mug.

The only other times I joined crowds on the Cricket Green after that occasion was to see a **Holidays at Home Concert Party** show. These shows were arranged whenever possible to help keep up the spirits of those of us who had no choice but to live and work throughout the war in London and the suburbs. The last occasion was to view morbidly a captured Heinkel bomber that was displayed on the Green. Those of us living close to this considered it not very sensible because it would seem that, viewed from the air, it could look like our own activities to combat air-raids were being conducted from this region. Consequently we appeared to have even more daylight raids directed into the area surrounding the Fair Green and Cricket Green.

SEVEN ISLANDS POND



Seven Islands Pond c.1930

The above pond was a paradise for us local children. Long, hot summer holidays particularly spring to my mind. The whole area was a scene of merriment as children, some with their mums in attendance, spent many happy hours fishing, swimming and 'having goes' on the brightly coloured paddle boats that were moored to a natural landing stage. Ropes from moored boats awaiting excited passengers were tied to huge tree roots that protruded from the base of the centuries'-old willow trees lining one edge of the pond. Slime that had formed and dried out in the hot sun hung like dirty curtains from the lower roots into the pond water. The upper roots were often used as elevated ledges to rest picnic lunches brought by the children who intended to have a 'long play'.

Daring passengers on the boats would know a trick to keep out of sight of the exasperated boatman-in-charge when he repeatedly called "COME IN No.11", "No. 9" etc., or whichever boat had exhausted its time. Their favourite ploy was to moor for minutes on end out of sight behind an island by means of holding on to overhanging grass until their hands ached and they had to let go.

In the deepest part of the pond a stout piece of wood measuring approximately 6" x 6" and with about 5 feet protruding up from the bottom of the pond, had a rubber car tyre draped over the top. This acted as a point to dive from and 'show-off' boys would perch precariously on the top bending their toes over to get a grip and making their joints turn white in the process until, by shouting and attracting enough attention from an appreciative group of children they would dive dramatically to a chorus of "OOHS" and "AGGHs". Sometimes too, for added measure and to frighten onlookers needlessly, they would stay under the water for what was considered too long by the more sensible children, before bobbing up gasping for air and pretending usually that they hadn't seen anyone taking undue notice of their antics! Their faces were inevitably caked with sludge and they proceeded to sluice this off their faces and body with supposedly cleaner water!

At the shallower end, children who, like those swimming, were usually attired in over-large hand-me-downs of various swim garments, their mothers' reasoning being "anything will do for the pond", sat or stood patiently with a fishing net hoping to catch the unfortunate tiddlers who somehow managed to survive in this turmoil and environment. When caught the tiddlers were shaken hastily into pre-arranged jam jars that were filled with clear water and had a makeshift string handle round the rim for carrying. It is no wonder the local fever hospital had its work cut out in summer months with patients suffering from diphtheria and scarlet fever.

BROWN'S FARM, MANOR ROAD

The above farm was situated in Manor Road and my mother would buy fresh eggs from there. A petrol station now stands on the site, opposite the **Horse & Groom** public house. [*Alas, now also gone*]. Across on the opposite corner from the Horse & Groom and where Tamworth Lane meets Manor Road, the old red brick 'Manor House' stood back a few yards from the main highway. I can remember Manor Road and the surrounding district being built, gradually swallowing up Mizen's fields and pastureland. Beautiful elm trees were felled to give way to 'progress'. My parents took me to tea at one of the cottages opposite the entrance to Robin Hood Lane one Sunday afternoon; I believe this little row of original cottages still stands.

MRS. ROBINSON'S SWEET SHOP

The above shop stood semi-detached in the second row of cottages facing Commonside East and going towards Beehive Bridge. Mrs Robinson was a frail and bent elderly lady and I suppose, looking back over the years, was eccentric. She would emerge from her 'living quarters', hidden by lace curtains, at the sound of a bell that hung just inside the shop door. The bell would sound for quite a few seconds because it bounced up and down suspended from a large spring-like base. One hand was cupped over an ear in order to try and hear a little easier what the customer wanted; in the end she had to resort to a very large hearing aid that resembled a miniature old-fashioned 'bed-warmer'. She had virtually no patience with small children, although most of her trade revolved round their needs for cachou sweets, OH-BOY chocolate bars and the like. The aroma left our noses twitching with ecstasy!

If I had to go to her shop on Sunday afternoons, I would peep through the net curtains to see who was visiting her. Her middle-aged and reclusive son would inevitably be sitting on her chaise longue sipping presumably tea from delicate china. If one had reason to mention her in conversation it was usually prefixed with "Poor old Mrs Robinson, she ...". As children we

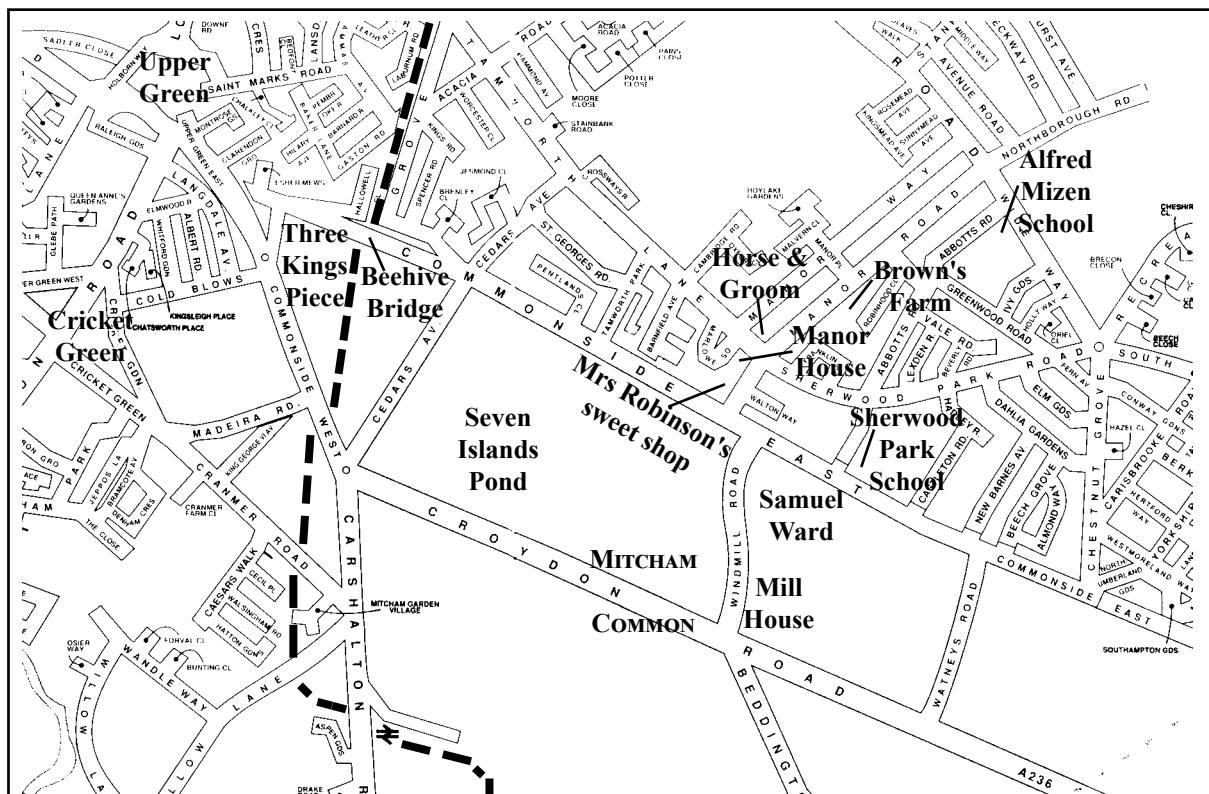
weren't certain why she was pitied, but we in turn pitied her also. She must have been irritated at the amazing looks of pity she received from all of us!

BONFIRE NIGHT

A few yards from Brown's farm a huge bonfire was erected annually. Preparations seemed to begin very soon after our return to school from summer holidays. A young lad from the same row of cottages as Mrs Robinson (I will call him 'Nick' to protect his identity because members of his family are still living in the area and I do not want to encroach on their privacy) used to direct operations when it came to collecting and placing the material acquired in readiness for November 5th. It was accepted by all of us children that 'Nick' was the boss and it was an unwritten law that nobody would light the bonfire on the allotted day and time but him.

During the preparation of one such bonfire I strayed close to it on my way home from school for lunch. Bed springs from an old mattress that had split open lay strewn about. The springs in those days were made of very heavy and thick steel and tightly coiled. I decided to fix a spring on each foot and jump as though wearing 'seven league boots', surprising my unsuspecting family as they sat down to their mid-day meal! They were going to be mightily surprised and thrilled at the length and height I would be able to bound in one leap, there was no doubt in my mind about that! My dreams vanished when, having fixed the springs in place over each shoe, one promptly twisted painfully off and the other would not uncoil again once I had put my weight down! I completed the walk to my home with one foot on its side to avoid damaging the leather on my shoe. My ever-patient father sat me on the bottom stair and prised the spring off my shoe. He showed no interest in why or where I had decided such a stunt. It was, to him, apparently an everyday occurrence that I should arrive home in this way. I was disappointed at the lack of response and wondered yet again at the immense patience my parents always showed me.

After the fireworks were exhausted, adults would bake potatoes in the hot embers and have a sing-along. It was fun making one's own amusements.



Detail from a modern street map, courtesy of Merton Design Unit (London Borough of Merton)

MITCHAM FAIR

This fair was held at the commencement of August annually. We celebrated Bank Holiday at the beginning of August and not, as now, at the end. The fair was erected between the railway line running under Beehive Bridge and the **Three Kings** public house. A pond was, and still is, outside this public house. There was a slope into the pond from Commonside West and carters would drive their teams of horses down into the pond for a refreshing drink and to cool their hooves after long hauls. The chink of their harnesses and gleam from highly polished badges that adorned them was a wonderful sight.

When the **Big Lizzie** contraption was erected in the fairground we would listen for the mournful screech that emanated from the long cage - fashioned like a carriage - that swung up and down above the heads of shrieking onlookers, accompanied at the same time by shrieks from passengers riding this sensation-seeking piece of machinery.

I paid a large old penny piece once to go into a side show in order to view the allegedly "smallest man in the world". This unfortunate human being was being exploited by wearing a miniature evening dress complete with a top hat. He also wore a beard and had a gold ring on the third finger of his left hand. He sat on the rim of yet another top hat with his feet down inside the crown of same. I should have felt ashamed at this exhibition at the cost of another human being's plight but I was a child with much still to learn about life and how to conduct oneself.

Another booth had a huge hook fixed to one side. Standing a few feet away a man fashioned a sugary mixture of soft toffee in his hands until it was the size of a football, then, with one almighty heave he would hurl it at the hook pulling it back and stretching it to the desired length and width that he required. The hardening rock would then be placed on the top of a not too clean table and he then proceeded to bring down a chopper at various lengths dividing the sweet into pieces. The end product was rock. He would sell as much or as little as one wanted. I cannot remember him wrapping his produce as would be the procedure today but I do remember that the rock tasted better than any I have tasted since.

SCHOOL BADGES

Sherwood Park School in the 1920s/1930s had its badge fashioned on the lines of a wonderful old elm tree that stood for centuries at the junction of Watneys Road/Commonside East. When I have passed by in recent times there is just a hollow where the magnificent roots once were.

Pollards Hill Central School (now Alfred Mizen School) Large
oak trees overhung the playground of the above until the estates were built. Pollards Hill School badge was an oak leaf with acorns.

There was a season for old-fashioned games played to and from school usually. In the springtime we played marbles, hopscotch and ran alongside a large hoop. Tops were spun and all this usually took place in the main roads. We had no fear of traffic, there was hardly any. The regular motorised transport consisted of one wonderful lorry with a canvas and tarpaulin cover at the back. The whole was held together by varying lengths and thicknesses of old ropes. Hand-painted signs on the sides read "THE OLD COVERED WAGON" and the man who owned it made his living by travelling round the estate. It was a godsend to housewives until shops were built closer to their new homes. We used to watch with bated breath as the driver swung round corners, expecting the back to fall off. He would often swing into the filling station for petrol and my father got to know him. I think we were a bit disappointed that his produce didn't eventually fall out of the back of the lorry; it should have done by rights because the canopy covering his fruit and vegetables was so flimsy.

Another tradition that always happened in the spring was when a travelling tinker stopped outside our school gates with stocks of goldfish in bowls, exercise books, pencils, rubbers, storybooks. The carrot held in front of our noses by the vendor was that the child who could bring him the very best type of old rags would get the best from his wares. I had to travel the longest distance to and from home to try and get in on these bargains; I never was successful! He had usually cleared his cart by the time I arrived back at his spot by the gates. On at least two occasions he appeared to sniff derisively at my offer of “good-type rags”. On learning his reaction on one occasion my mother retorted, “Perhaps he knows that we have to wear all our old rags anyway”. It was a measure of comfort to hear her words and know that she was on my side in this. I had to make a conscious effort to clear my mind of the goldfish that I was sure would be mine when he saw what I had brought him! I had some satisfaction to learn that some of the poor goldfish never survived for long. Such is the ‘cruelty of children’ at times.

THE WILSON COTTAGE HOSPITAL

The Wilson Cottage Hospital was opened by the then Princess Royal, (daughter of King George V and Queen Mary). The exact date escapes me at present, but it was around 1928.

My mother’s health prevented her from taking me to see the event but one of my sisters was good enough to take me over to the opening ceremony. My recollection is somewhat hazy; the crowd of curious onlookers was sparse, compared with dense crowds that often gather at Royal events today. We were lined in single file along the roadway opposite the hospital gates and on the grass verge. I could have only just begun to appreciate fairy stories being read and told to me but was fully expecting the princess to be dressed in wondrous flowing garments, complete with tiara!

The princess duly arrived and departed and I was none the wiser. A faint cheer was offered up by those patriotic enough to attempt same! All eyes appeared to follow the route of a most uninteresting black chauffeur-driven car; the princess seated in the rear dressed very ordinarily! It was all too much for such a small child to comprehend and I got fed up and lost interest! What did catch my interest was the sight of two burly policemen busily ‘frog-marching’ a perpetrator! I never did discover why he was treated thus. The whole episode appeared to be taking place in slow motion. The policemen huffed and puffed as they lugged their unfortunate quarry along the grass verge. The prisoner was dumped down roughly whilst his captors regained their breath and strength. Curiously, I wasn’t frightened by this commotion. The policemen continued their journey to the local police station, disappearing into the distance amidst a sudden flurry of excited onlookers. I don’t suppose I shall ever witness the like again!

For many years, the fact that the only street lamp in Windmill Road was placed on the wrong side of the road at the corner of Samuel Ward’s factory, caused untold accidents to occur, mainly to motor-cyclists and their passengers either riding pillion or in a sidecar. The vehicles would plunge down and overturn in a ditch opposite the light. The road bent round the corner of the factory but the light shone across to the commencement of a footpath worn by pedestrians, giving the overall impression, as vehicles approached from the direction of Beddington Lane, that the road was straight across to Manor Road. My parents and older members of the family were often involved in arranging for an ambulance and police officers to attend to the injured and have them transported to “The Wilson” as we affectionately called the hospital.

In present days it must prove a great loss to the local public that the hospital has been closed. We, in our time, felt it was a safe haven in times of need.

It was fortunate for all concerned that a telephone link had been installed at the end of our downstairs passage. It was a marvellous contraption; the earpiece resembled a large cotton reel which rested on a hook at the side of the mouthpiece, secured to the wall when not in use. The telephone was an extension from the factory office. We had to answer the telephone when the factory was closed at night and at weekends. Every call, whether local or long distance, had to be dialled via the telephone exchange operator. I still remember the telephone number of Samuel Ward's commencing MIT (for MITCHAM) but I will not quote the number in case it is a number used by a subscriber in this present day.

I DECIDE TO LEAVE HOME!

I was fed up through being teased overmuch by the family one winter's evening. The time had come to teach them all a lesson! I knew that on a journey of any length one carried a suitcase; certainly when leaving home! I struggled to bring a suitcase downstairs that was used for storing clean linen.

I didn't question the door being opened and closed for me by an adult because I could not reach the door latch. I stood on the doorstep minus a coat and outdoor shoes. The moon and stars shone brightly and I became scared! The branches of the bare trees appeared to stand out starkly against the moonlit sky and were surely reaching towards me to gather me up! I had left home long enough. I called out to be let back indoors and never chanced such a move again!

SHOPPING FOR MOTHER AT THE 'HOME & COLONIAL STORES'

My next sister up from me (I was the youngest of the family) and I would take the bottom cardboard bed out of our dolls' prams and walk up to the commencement of Northborough Road to the 'Home & Colonial Stores' on Saturday mornings. It was tantamount to having a basket on wheels. It was a boon for my mother of course and we were glad to do this for her as she was going through a tough time with her health. My sister, being the eldest, was trusted with carrying the money and received any change from the shopkeepers. On more than one occasion she managed to lose a sixpence. It was genuine for she was an honest girl and very upset. My mother understood immediately and never once doubted that it was anything else but an accident. On occasions when she was joking around with us she would refer to my sister as "Miss Woolworths" because of course at that time Woolworths Stores advertised their products as "NOTHING OVER SIXPENCE".

On occasions too I was sent by an older sister to return library books at a small private library almost next door to the 'Home & Colonial Stores'. The lady librarian was a serious looking person who never had cause to smile in all the time I knew her. She was average in height and had beautiful deep auburn coloured hair. It fascinated me to see her open the front cover of the books, stamp the page with real authority and place on one side in rhythmic fashion. I decided that I would like a job like that when I left school. The sound of the rubber stamp loudly banging down surely meant that one was in charge of the situation!

MUSIC LESSONS WITH MISS GREATORIX

My parents kindly arranged for me and my sister with whom I shared shopping duties, to learn to play the pianoforte with the help and teaching of Miss Greatorix. This lady lived in a neat Victorian-style house along Commonsides East. She was a dainty person who dressed in a very feminine fashion and used 'PHULNANA' perfume. This description could be said of my first day-school teacher too. There was not the confusing names of various cosmetics to choose from in those days for the ordinary folk, as we have today when so many brand names are offered for sale. Woolworths was the favourite store who sold 'PHULNANA' perfume, 'KNIGHT'S CASTILE SOAP' and 'AMAMI' wave set! These various perfumes were always acceptable as gifts and womenfolk felt their toiletry and grooming complete after using them.

My piano lessons ceased when it was eventually realised that although to this day I enjoy music, I was not going to be a budding 'WAGNER'. I was too much of a tomboy and was allowed to follow my own wishes in this regard.

TUNING THE FAMILY PIANO

The young man who tuned our piano periodically was unique and made a great and lasting impression on my young mind. He had a serene face and businesslike manner; quiet in temperament and an ability to play the piano with great confidence. The back of the piano would be placed on end and he would strike various chords and notes, strumming tunelessly for often long periods, all the while turning and twisting the pegs inside the piano attached to the individual notes. When the piano played to his satisfaction he would close the top down and treat us all to beautiful snippets of classical pieces. I would listen for ages and wished that he could have stayed on for longer each time he visited us.

Another reason why I respected him so much was the fact that he could tell the difference between the competitive 'buses, known as 'Pirate Buses' before London Transport gained the monopoly at the time of which I write. They were nicknamed 'Pirate' because they would race alongside each other, overtaking and picking up members of the public who indicated that they wished to board. There were incidentally no measured 'bus stops as we know them to day. You may wonder why I thought he was so marvellous. The fact was that he was totally blind! I understood the wonderful dignity that surrounded his whole being. Knowing him made me feel very humble and at the same instance grateful for all faculties.

ORGANISED AND DISORGANISED GAMES PLAYED ON THE COMMON

A little way from the Seven Islands Pond there was a clear patch of ground, about the size of at least two football pitches. This area was ideal for owners of toy aeroplanes to congregate on Sunday afternoons. The groups would fix up their own 'wind sleeves' and take very seriously the activity of flying their aircraft. Usually the aircraft moved gracefully through the air at varying heights propelled with the aid of a previously very tightly wound piece of thick elastic that fitted the length of the body of the aircraft. Great excitement occurred when a 'plane stayed up far longer than any other and travelled higher and faster. I am not aware that there were competitions held. It would not be surprising if there were, for the owners of these models were very interested in their hobby and would stay for a couple of hours.

Cricket was played on this site too. Sometimes by a group of 'Borstal' boys who were lodged in St George's Road for a time. They disappeared; probably evacuated when the war commenced.

Swamp trees and bushes near the main road linking Croydon with Fair Green provided excellent sites for our Headquarters. One large tree in particular was singled out for our 'gang' and woe betide any rival gangs who tried to muscle in on our find! The outside leafage of this large puff-ball shaped tree had in its centre low and strong branches. When we entered from either side the leafage would close behind us and thus gave us complete privacy from the outside world. We would sit on the branches in pecking order. The 'leader' would be allowed to sit down first of all and we would then arrange ourselves along the remainder of the branches. If we heard voices we would overreact and sit with hands over our mouths not daring to announce our presence. Stirring times indeed!

Just once we caused a situation which could have been really serious! We had found an abandoned shell from an old Valor Oil Heater thrown down in some gorse bushes. We had been playing 'shops' using stones for potatoes, various grasses for cabbages, lettuce, etc. Inevitably one of the group had matches! We set about arranging old dried grasses under the heater in place of where the fuel

tank would have been situated. In the complete ignorance of youth, we set fire to the grass. We naively considered beforehand that the heater's bodywork would contain the fire and consequent heat, but to our dismay the flames took hold outside the planned area, catching gorse bushes alight too! Fortunately my father and a brother saw what was happening by reason of the great cloud of white smoke that billowed, even though it was a warm, still and sunny day. We were in terror that the 'Common Keeper', who rode a horse, would come galloping across from wherever he happened to be to investigate. The common was flat in those days and not the unsightly place caused by the huge mound of dumping that has been allowed to occur, obliterating one's ability to see across towards St Helier's, etc. My relatives came armed with damp sacks and proceeded to beat the flames out. An added worry was the fact that perhaps a spark would catch the petrol pumps alight. The pumps were not the sophisticated pieces of machinery that one sees today. My father was sensible enough not to question any of us. It made us all feel even more guilty and ashamed than if he had got angry with us. I am certain he knew that we had learned a lesson and would not do such a stupid thing again! Also, perhaps more sensibly still, the least he knew the better all round in case questions were asked by authorities. By the next season, fresh green shoots sprang out of the burnt grass and we had an even more beautiful display of gorse bushes than had previously been at that particular spot. Perhaps we had done Nature a favour too!

For a short period of time from the summer Saturdays until early September 1939, Sea Cadets appeared on the cricket pitch and encouraged a crowd of onlookers to watch them go through their paces with a fair sized gun mounted on two large wheels. The wheels were pulled by strong ropes as the lads whirled round and round in circles. I never quite got the hang of what they were trying to achieve. A sense of gloom seemed to descend over the entire area, perhaps mainly because of the disturbing news that World War II was inevitable since Chamberlain's first dramatic statement approximately a year beforehand, when he had been assured that there would be peace in our time and this statement had proved to be untrue. To my knowledge, from then on, nobody visited the games area again. It was, as I see it now, the end of yet another era in what had been such a lively bustling area.

THE WOODCRAFTERS

The Co-operative Society ran a youth movement in the 1930s, (perhaps they still do, I have no recent knowledge of such activity). The movement was called THE WOODCRAFTERS. The idea was for young people to learn to work and play together in harmony. When a youngster joined, they had to make sure that they were known within the WOODCRAFTERS by an adopted woodland name. I joined our local group that met on the common and was organised by a brother and sister. They were pleasant enough and friendly. I was told that even though my proper name is Iris and I smugly thought this ruling would not be made in my case, I was instructed to be known as "DAFFODIL". I hated this but complied because I was interested in broadening my circle of friends and interests. We played Rounders, cricket, hide-and-seek and sat in a circle and sang various "WOODCRAFTER" songs. Came the Saturday when a section of the Army were going to give various displays from Roman times at the famous Crystal Palace ground, my parents gave me permission to go and act as one of the many programme sellers, taking it for granted that as youngsters we would automatically be chaperoned by responsible elders. This proved not to be the case and on reaching the Crystal Palace in a group, we were handed programmes and instructed to charge 3d. each for same. The group split up and I was left to accompany a more 'seasoned' child in these matters. We were handed some snack food by a very kind lady who called from a large tent, "Have you children eaten?" We replied, "No" and promptly received a bag each containing a bar of chocolate, an apple and an orange. This was proving to be a very good day out for us so far!

We did not possess a watch between us and had no idea of the time as we progressed with our programme selling. A soldier dressed in a Roman Centurion uniform asked us if we were enjoying ourselves. We said we were and he directed us to a good position whereby we would see 'him and his mates' parading in a Roman scene.

We roamed also through the magnificent Hall of the Crystal Palace, feeling amazed that we could hardly see the organist who was perched up amidst the huge pipes of the organ that he was playing at one side. There were various small theatres off the main hall, the approach to each covered by a velvet curtain. Shows were not going on at the time and we decided to peep round the curtains. Inside one cubicle we found hidden from public view a very tall staircase - typically Victorian in design. We daringly ascended same and when we reached the top we found theatrical costumes strewn around the small attic room in disorder and an effigy in cardboard more than life-size of Charlie Chaplin. We felt very important that we had stumbled across all this in such a famous place.

We were given yet another 'takeaway' snack by another lady later in the afternoon. My young friend dishonestly answered "No" again when we were asked if we had eaten. I felt awful but ate the goodies just the same. A large marquee was set out for a large number of Boy Scouts. One of their leaders did not force us into dishonesty this time, he just grandly announced that we could come on in and join them in their feast. And what a feast it turned out to be. Orange and lemon juice, fizzy drinks, iced cakes. We munched until we could not munch any further!

Dusk fell and still we were walking about trying to sell programmes! I began to get worried that we would not be able to get home. My brave friend scoffed at this notion but I still felt very uneasy. I had never travelled to the Crystal Palace on my own before, in fact had never been there at all even with family. When I realise how simple it is to get to and from Sydenham Hill nowadays, especially by car, I realise how innocent children can be. I sold exactly three programmes! I can't remember who I turned the money over to, probably to the leaders of our group when I next saw them.

My poor parents were in agony of mind when I eventually returned home. Kindly conductors guided me on to the various 'buses that brought me to the terminus of that day at the end of Manor Road, facing the common. I could see in the dim light ahead of me my father's white shirt as he hovered outside the lodge not knowing where to start to look for me. Poor man!

I knew too that my days as a Woodcrafter had now come to an end. My parents told the leaders in no uncertain fashion how irresponsible they thought they were, etc. The leaders looked genuinely dismayed and were truly sorry that I was no longer allowed to belong to their outfit.

TALES TOLD TO FRIGHTEN!

The one remaining brother who was still a schoolboy at home, used to delight at times in telling us younger girls all kinds of horrific tales. He usually managed to scare me, that's for sure! One of his stories frightened me so much that I dreaded going out at all for a while. I had to, of course, but my heart would inexplicably pound in case I saw one of our neighbourhood 'bobbies' on his beat. My brother insisted that if I walked on the same side of the road as a policeman I would be arrested! I asked him why this should be but he managed to avoid answering leaving this terrible fear in my mind!

Inevitably I was to spot the local policeman coming towards me one day as I walked up Manor Road. His steps were, as always seems to be the case when one sees a police officer on foot, deliberate and measured. This made him look all the more menacing. Thank goodness traffic, apart from the occasional 'bus along that stretch of roadway was few and far between, because I held my breath and hurried to the other side of the road. The panic I felt was great and I remember closing my eyes as I stumbled along in the hope that the policeman would take no notice, perhaps not even notice me,

which would have been impossible on reflection, as we were the only two people walking along at that time. My heart continued to thump and I eventually turned to look cautiously backwards. The policeman was walking further away in the same direction as he had been and must have been a very kind person - not given to arresting schoolgirls at all!

Another time when my brother succeeded in making me believe his bogus yarns, was that I should be very careful not to swallow chewing gum; if I did my lungs would stick together! I stopped chewing gum for a long period! What horrors some brothers can be at times!

NICKNAMESANDINTRIGUINGSIGHTSATTACHEDTOSAMUELWARD'SFACTORY

Some of the men who worked in Samuel Ward's factory were called by names that for ages I thought their proper names. For instance the man who built the barrels was referred to as "COOPER". It was explained to me later that his profession of course was a form of carpentry known as cooperage. The man who reigned supreme in a tiny room at the top of a winding iron Victorian staircase alongside the boilerhouse was dubbed "PEDLAR PALMER". His job was to travel as a salesman selling various types of brushes to stores. He owned and drove a royal blue car. It was a neat car - two-seater with a couple of seats that became available when he opened up the back. It resembled a boot, but we did not have 'boots' in cars as one knows them today. He was a very kind man and would often give my brother and a sister a lift to their respective schools in Fair Green vicinity. I was disappointed and somewhat jealous of them when Sherwood Park School and later Pollards Hill School (now Alfred Mizen School) were designated as the places of learning for myself. It meant that I would not get a chance to ride majestically in that lovely little car! Another man known as BILL GARDNER was in fact Bill Gardner, but in my innocence I reckoned that he was a **gardener**.

During hot summer days, men would be armed with shovels from the factory and they would systematically push over certain barrels that stored various chemicals used in their work. The reason for this army of hunters was that they had a means of knowing where rats had their nests. I was never allowed to go near but could view this procedure from a safe distance. The men would creep along very quietly, catching the rats by surprise and would then aim blows at the creatures. What would the men have given to have access to pesticides and the like as we are able today.

One large machine that intrigued me very much was the one that was used for making putty. It consisted of a large trough that was covered in white powder from constant usage. A huge wheel would rotate round this trough when switched on and a mixture and smell of linseed oil would permeate around the stand. There was a very inadequate 'guard' on the wheel and I was prudent enough to stand well back whilst watching the manufacture of the putty. It came off the production line in wonderful smooth pieces of putty. I was allowed to pick as much as I could hold and take home. I was given a board on which to play with this gooey mess.

I was not allowed into the factory during the daytime, the only times I ventured inside was when a few employees were working overtime and could supervise me if I strayed into danger. They were all my friends and I felt rich in that respect. They showed great patience and had a way of sending me off for my own good without upsetting me.

Another place I used to like to stand at the doorway and look into was the boilerhouse. It smelled of steam and coal and the boiler looked like a demon when the operator opened up the small doorway to throw more fuel on the already fierce fire burning inside. The operator always appeared to show up in silhouette against the glow. He would appear to have a rhythm with his actions - he would open the door, throw a couple of piles of fuel inside, close the door and stand back somewhat jubilantly. I decided that he felt good at beating the fire into luring him inside each time! Monstrous thoughts for a child really.

THE DITCH

The ditch, which at one time had been part of a moat, still remained outside the front of the factory complex and therefore fronted our lodge. My mother would sit machining at one of the windows, watching for one or other of us to return home and also see something of life as it went by during the course of the day. She was rather lonely in the lodge, because she had always enjoyed communal life with neighbours. She struck up a conversation once with a gypsy who would drop down into the ditch and pick various herbs from the banks. He informed my mother that if she did but know it she was looking at a 'gold mine'. She was not impressed really and thought he was rather idiotic clambering about after weeds! The only things any of us could recognise in the ditch were the blackberry bushes that bore large berries. My parents would never allow us to pick or eat them. I can understand why now because they could not have been too clean to consider eating even after thorough washing.

I came home one afternoon to witness the remainder of what had proved to be a drama. My mother had been at her sewing machine that afternoon when, to quote her, "There was this awful bang and crunch!" She was lucky not to have been injured in any way, because a large saloon car had left the roadway and plunged on to its side into the ditch. A lone policeman was found and, as events unfolded, with help from men at the factory, he managed to extricate the driver and his passenger. The man and his lady companion had been drinking heavily and consequently were the worse for drink. The woman was very difficult to restrain; would not give her name and address to the policeman and kept sliding down on to the floor. The policeman forced her to her feet and she promptly struck him across the face with her hand! Drama indeed and I had missed the 'best' parts! It transpired that the driver was not her husband and she was very worried at this knowledge being broadcast to the wrong quarters. The car remained in the ditch for a couple of days and then an appropriate vehicle was brought along to lift and haul the car away.

TREATS ON SUNDAY AFTERNOONS

After lunch on Sundays, my mother would wrap pieces of meat taken from our large Sunday joint and give some to my father, along with milk. I used to thoroughly enjoy going with him to care for the factory cats over the weekend, making sure they were fed and kept safe. Playing with numerous kittens that were born was a bonus for me.

When the weather permitted, my parents would sit on chairs in front of the petrol pumps and under the shade of a large tree in very hot weather. Often visitors to our home would join them in this well earned respite.

People traversed back and forth also enjoying the open expanse of common land and folk felt all was well with the world.

The adults would usually wait for one of us children to point out that the ice cream man had arrived at the then No.118 'bus terminus. On being told this, they would inevitably tease by pretending they hadn't heard his tricycle bell ringing in the distance. People would quickly gather round his tricycle with the box in front emblazoned with the words "STOP ME AND BUY ONE" for all to see. The box usually looked too small to store all the ices that were in demand and I would become anxious, waiting to be given the necessary cash to buy up to half a dozen ices in one trip. The ice cream man never failed us but I suppose I felt there could always be a first time that he would run out of stock and all because of the game the adults seemed to delight in.

MY UNCLE - THE TAXICAB DRIVER

An uncle of mine was apparently one of the first black-cab drivers to commence a fleet in the Clapham Common area. He would pay my parents a visit if he was in the vicinity and not likely to lose custom by doing so.

He had a large stomach and would have to sit forward for comfort on the edge of the settee. His taxi rank number disc was fixed into his waistcoat pocket on a chain and would therefore rest partly on his stomach. He laughed often when bringing my parents up-to-date with news and, because of this habit, the disc would swing back and forth, hardly settling before it was set swinging again. It fascinated me to watch this procedure. I decided that taxi drivers were a breed apart! I didn't understand how he operated his business or what he meant when he spoke of 'picking up fares'! It was a wonderful experience to be taken for a short spin in his taxi. He used to enjoy entertaining me by using the hooter situated alongside his driving wheel overmuch. There was not much traffic along the quiet roads of those days and so he did not need to warn other road users half as much as he found it necessary to use the hooter. He would announce his arrival as he swung into the factory yard and we would hear a sharp 'toot' on the hooter that sounded like "BLAP". The hooter consisted of a metal horn fronted on to a rubber balloon-shaped ball. My uncle had the knack of squeezing the rubber at the right place to produce this peculiar warning note. He offered to let me do it but my hand was not strong enough.

Once again I could regale my friends with stories told with pride of my 'taxi cab' uncle and feel superior to a degree that **they** didn't have an uncle with a taxi cab! Incidentally, whenever the sound of his cab hooter was heard one or other of the adults would announce that it must be Uncle Arthur Dent. Why his full name was almost always used puzzled me but added to the assumption on my part that - yes - he was definitely different from the rest of mankind!

I have exhausted my memory lane but hope that some of my recollections may bring enjoyment and perhaps a few smiles from any folk who lived in Mitcham at the same time as all of the above.

Iris C. Marshall - October 1991

ISBN 1 903899 38 9

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