

## MERTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LOCAL HISTORY NOTES - 19

### A Thirties Childhood in Mitcham

Irene Bain

#### Beginnings

The sound of a Westminster chime clock striking the hour invokes this period of my life as it announced its message to the quiet world that was suburbia in the 1930s. The wooden-cased Napoleon hat shaped clock sat in the middle of our mantelpiece and was flanked by two long-necked brass vases which my uncle and aunt had brought back for us when they came home from working in Ceylon.



Below the mantelpiece was the open fire grate. This would be alive with hot glowing coals in Winter and the centre of our life. In Summer the cold grate would be screened by an embroidered firescreen depicting a lady in a crinoline gown. Quite often, instead of the screen, a vase of flowers from our garden would be placed there. A pleated piece of coloured paper would be laid across the empty grate itself.

In front of the fireplace lay a single small rug, for there were no carpets for ordinary people then. The floor was covered in well-polished linoleum. Two armchairs stood, one on each side of the fireplace - one for father, one for mother, each with an embroidered chairback. A table and four

chairs and a good oak sideboard completed the furnishings of this smallish room. There were two side windows and central French windows leading out into the garden. Nor must I forget the wireless standing in the corner on the three-cornered shelf Dad had built for it. The front room was not furnished for many years, as it could not be afforded.

Our family moved to New Barns Avenue, Mitcham, in 1934. My mother, Auntie Alice, my brother and I got off the tram which ran across the middle of the Common. We walked down Watneys Road, which was surrounded by enormous thistles as tall as me. I was four years old. We arrived at the house before Dad and the removal van. The empty house seemed strange after the flat in Balham. Our voices rang around the empty rooms and our feet clattered up and down the uncovered wooden stairs. Normally stairs had carpet runners affixed to rods.

The bathroom was painted a horrid shade of dark blue. Standing in the corner near the window and over the bath was a big brass geyser. In years to come this would give apprehension and fear, for to light it a match had to be held to a long jet of gas which was then turned into the bottom part of the geyser to ignite its main jets. There was always a long interval before these lit up, accompanied by a most violent explosion.

The rest of the house had been painted in various shades of brown - the fashionable colour then. In the back bedroom overlooking the garden, and which was to be my room, an empty mousetrap had been left on the windowledge.

Standing in the street sometime during that day I could see all the way up to Pollards Hill. I remember quite distinctly seeing in the distance a man sitting milking a cow. Later on Dahlia Gardens would be built and the other roads, also Chestnut Grove with its row of shops. I hopped and jumped over the marked out plots amongst the grass and golden ragwort in the sunshine, for children could wander then and we did, far and wide.

Soon I found myself attending Sherwood Park Infants School. At the preliminary medical there was another child (a boy) with his mother, also waiting to be seen. This lady and my mother began talking, found they lived quite near each other and became friends. This friendship lasted up to the time of my mother's death in 1981, 47 years later. Her daughter, Jean, became my special friend through the school years, too, although we lost touch later on. Many, many were the afternoon visits with Mrs Anderson. They would visit each other once a week alternately - one week our home, one week hers. When Mrs Anderson visited, an afternoon cloth would be laid on the table and the tea things set out nicely.



*This photograph of my mother standing at the gate in front of our house in the 1930s shows the quietness of the street then.*

They would each produce something special in the cake line, and very pleasant it all was. Mum was a good cook and won prizes at the Church Bazaars for her sponges.

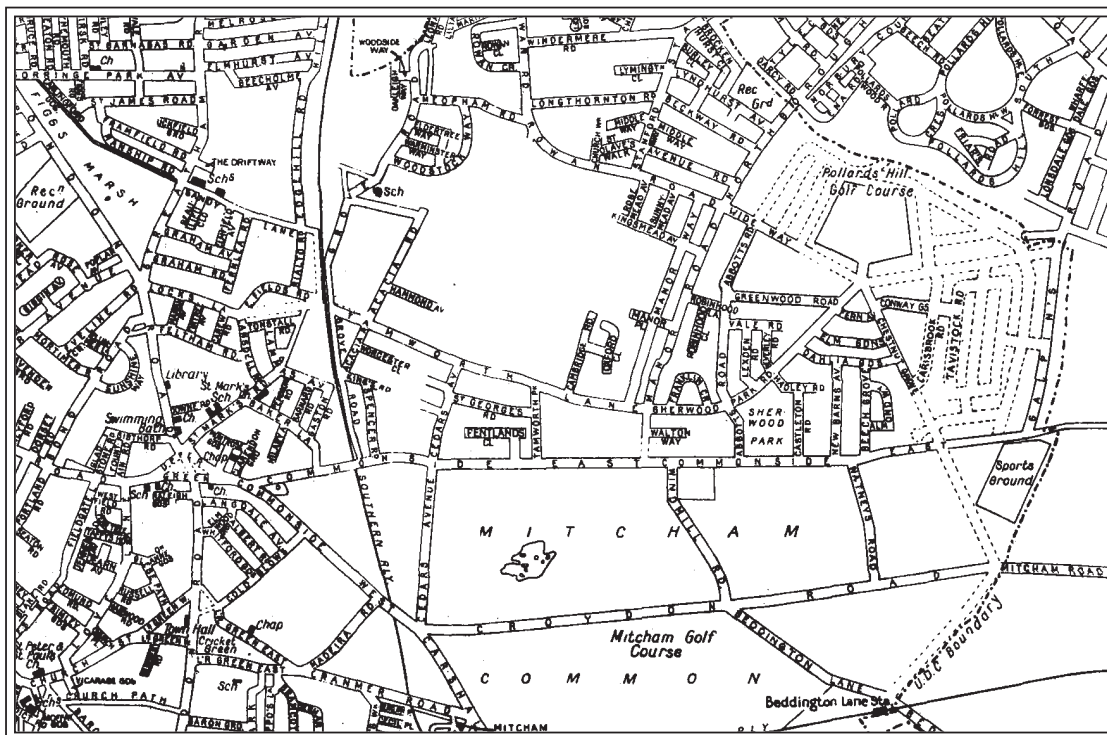
I can still remember my first day at school and the classroom with its tiny tables and chairs. There was Plasticine to play with and lots of brightly coloured wooden spills. At dinner time there was Mum come to fetch me. How pleased I was to see her. In the afternoons the little tables would be turned upside-down with their legs in the air and, resting on blankets, we all had to lie down in them for an afternoon rest. Every day we were led through the alphabet by the teacher holding up a card for each letter, which we all had to call out. Solid grounding, I believe.

The school was considered a modern building and the hall floor was of cork, so that when we did Music & Movement to the wireless broadcast (very advanced stuff then!) we could run around on bare feet without getting splinters, while we pretended to be fairies or giants.

My hair was in ringlets at that time, which mother produced by twisting thick strands of hair in strips of clean white rag and knotting the ends together. Known as 'putting your hair in rags', this was done every night before going to bed. In the morning the rags would be removed and the hair brushed, then combed easily into ringlets wound around the fingers. A ribbon tied around my hair with a bow on top completed the hairdressing.

There were lisle stockings and liberty bodices in Winter for the girls. Boys wore snake clasp belts to hold up their short trousers in Summer.

Going to school in Winter I was snug in a thick brown coat and a matching, brimmed, velour hat. In Summer I often wore a cream coloured Panama hat. It was lovely when Summer did come. We knew this when it was announced at morning assembly that instead of playing in the playground we could 'play on the field'. Then, like the released young animals we were, we raced around, savouring the smell of the newly mown grass. The boys would play at being aeroplanes, with their arms extended as wings and, making the appropriate noises, would zoom



Extract from 1930s street plan, from Mitcham Official Guide

around and around the field. When they got (pretend) injured in their games, a group of us girls were willing nurses to assist them!

During these early infant school years I had a teacher called Mrs Assiter and she was very harsh. Hopeless at Arithmetic, she did not help the situation at all and I became so upset I used to have nightmares. My parents, although concerned, did nothing about this, as complaining or 'going up the school', as the saying was, was not in their natures. So I suffered, and Maths in most forms has remained a closed book to me, though I was above average in other lessons.

Sometime before Christmas a great many Christmas puddings were made and the school caretaker put them into the boiler to cook. At Christmastime, when the puddings had matured, the whole school, sitting in the hall on the cork floor, would be given a slice of cold pudding. For those who had good attendance or were not late, a second piece was awarded and once I was thrilled to be one of those.

On Empire Day I went to school wearing a white dress with a red, white and blue sash. I walked down the road and along the edge of the Common on my own, as was usual then. In the hall, many of the children had been dressed up to represent the various nationalities of our Empire. It was startling to see the blacked up faces, some surmounted by turbans, and the bright outlandish clothes they had on. They paraded in a large circle to show us what the people were like who inhabited the places coloured pink on our Geography maps of the world.

One year the play *Sleeping Beauty* was produced, and I was one of the courtiers. For this I wore a long, pale blue, real silk dress. Mum had made this out of a length my aunt had brought her from Ceylon and which she unselfishly gave to me. I am sure she would really have liked it for herself, but this act was typical of her.

The main players were excellent, but the girl who played the witch, whose name was Jean Sullivan, gave a marvellous performance, proving the talent latent in some children. Here is a photograph of us all.



## About Our Home

Meals were a family affair with the four of us seated at the dining room table. A cloth was always laid and afterwards it would be shaken out in the garden for the birds to have the crumbs. At breakfast there was the Force cereal packet in place, with its picture of Sunny Jim. When very small I had a toy Sunny Jim, but somehow was never comfortable with his image.

At teatime there was always a plate of bread and butter, the bread having been sliced thinly on the bread board.

Chef baked beans had a picture of a chef holding a tin of beans, which also had a picture of a chef holding a tin of beans, with a picture of a chef holding a tin of beans, with a picture of a chef holding a tin of beans, and on and on and on ...

Sometimes we would have the wireless on at mealtimes and had great pleasure in listening to Children's Hour at teatime. At night we listened to plays and exciting serials. On Saturday mornings there was the Ovaltinies programme for children.

When meals were finished we children were expected to say grace. If we were anxious to go out to play, I am afraid this would be very hurried and come out something like: "Thank-God-for-my-good-tea-(dinner),- may-I-leave-the-table?-Amen!"

Food was brought home in baskets or brown carrier bags with string handles. Shopping was mostly done at the local shops in Sherwood Park Road, where there was a large shop on the corner, with butcher, dairy and grocery sections, all separate. There was a sweet and paper shop, a hardware shop with a post office right at the back, a chemists and a greengrocers. Both a ladies' and a men's hairdressers were just around the corner at the side. We would walk into Mitcham often, and now and again visit Croydon, which was a fascinating place with very old buildings near its colourful fruit and vegetable market. Neither must I forget Wilson's coffee and cake shop. This was a very old building with lots of nooks and corners to sit in. Of course, we didn't go in for tea until I was older, but it was lovely to smell the roasting coffee beans as we walked past it along the High Street.

Drapers shops had an overhead wire system to pay for goods. The assistant would put the customer's money and the bill into a small screw-top capsule. On pulling a cord, the money was sent by pulley via overhead wires to a lady in a tiny glass enclosed space high in the shop. The change would be worked out and sent winging back to the counter from whence it came. The assistant would then unscrew the capsule and give you your change and receipt. It was always fascinating to see this working.

You could buy 1d bars of chocolate from slot machines on the station, if you had a penny!

Dad smoked Woodbines and you could buy five in a packet if you wanted to.

In Woolworths in Mitcham (the 3d and 6d stores) you could buy your mother a box of Cadbury's Milk Tray at Christmas for 6d - all in a lovely purple coloured box - if you had saved enough money. Another present was a 6d bottle of California Poppy scent - and it smelt lovely, too.

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DAILY DELIVERIES

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*Advertisement from Souvenir Programme and Guide for  
Mitcham Carnival 1938*

Big slabs of yellow soap were cut up for the weekly wash. The clothes were soaked, soaped and rubbed vigorously on the rubbing board before being boiled in a tin bath on the gas stove. They were prodded and poked with the boiling stick and then lifted out to be rinsed in the sink - a hazardous operation for mother. They were rinsed and wrung and rinsed again, the last rinse having a bluebag dabbled through the water. The use of the bluebag was supposed to make the whites appear whiter. The bluebag was kept by the kitchen sink in most homes and was also used to soothe any wasp stings. Some of the clothes were then starched.

Two soap powders I remember were Rinso and Persil. An aeroplane once wrote 'Persil' in large letters in the sky above our houses. I stood in the back garden and watched it. The clothes were hung on the clothesline to dry. In Winter if it was frosty, it was amusing to see the shirts and towels being carried in from the garden upright and stiff before the warmth of the house flopped them down to normal. The clothes were ironed on the table using a heavy metal iron heated on a gas ring of the kitchen stove. They were then placed neatly folded on the clotheshorse to air around the fire.

Salt was often bought in big slabs, too, and it was fun when I was allowed to crush some with the rolling pin ready for use. With no fridge, Summer was a worrying time for keeping food fresh. The butter could turn to oil and the milk go sour in no time and have to be thrown away. Milk was often scalded as soon as delivered to stop it turning. Another method of keeping it was to stand the milk bottles in a pail of cold water with a wet cloth draped over them and place it in the coldest part of the house, which was the cupboard under the stairs. Meats could not be kept long. Cucumber was halved and put to stand upside-down in a glass of water to keep it fresh. Cheese was kept covered in cheese dishes.

I would often be asked to stay to tea with my friend down the road. There would be bread, butter, lettuce and radishes from the garden and often a caraway seed cake, which I didn't really like.

There was never any strong drink in the house except for a bottle of ginger wine at Christmas and some cider to go with the Christmas dinner for the adults. Once I was allowed to taste the cider and thought it absolutely marvellous with its appley bubbles.

### **The Life of The Streets**

The streets were empty of cars. Babies were bathed, fed and put out in their prams in front gardens to sleep in the fresh air while the mothers did the housework. If you went shopping, the baby would be left in the pram outside the shop.

Postmen wore smart uniforms and peaked caps. Telegraph boys also wore smart uniforms and round hats and delivered telegrams by bike.

If you wanted heavy items sent by rail, particularly holiday luggage, you just put a card with the initials CP in large letters in your front room window and the Carter Paterson van would call to collect and deliver it.

The milkman came daily with his horse and cart. I was terrified of that horse because it would come right up onto the pavement, hoping for someone to give it something to eat. A horse is enormous to a small child. Milk was left on the doorsteps, remaining untouched, except sometimes by birds, who got to know they could get to the milk through the cardboard milktops.

The baker dragged a small two-wheeled cart around the streets, having to play the part of the horse himself by pulling the shafts. He came to the door carrying a large basket showing a selection of bread and cakes. If you were out, the bread would be left in a paper bag on the ledge of the little window beside the front door.

We had a travelling greengrocer who used to come on Saturday nights. In Winter the naphtha lamp on his cart gave a lovely glow. We also had a travelling grocer who came in a van a couple of days a week. He lived round the corner not far away from us and if Mum wanted anything out of hours we could run round and get it. We could also go there on a Sunday (when trading was forbidden!) and buy groceries. One of my memories is being sent there to buy half a quartern of self-raising flour. Another quite separate memory is of buying a farthingsworth of sweets in the sweetshop in Sherwood Park Road. Sometimes we had a ha'penny to spend after school. We didn't have much in the way of pocket money, but I never felt deprived.

The shrimp man went the rounds of the streets on Sundays.

The rag and bone man toured the streets with his horse and cart. Ringing his handbell he would call out, "Rag and bone, rag and bone, any old rags, any old rags". He would pay a couple of coppers for old clothes you wanted to be rid of.

Gypsies would knock on the door selling pegs and bunches of heather. A chair mender would travel from door to door and would sit out on the pavement mending the cane seats of chairs. About once a year a man would call around and ask if you wanted any knives sharpening and this would also be done outside on the pavement.

The coalman came with his huge horse and cart. His hands, face and clothes were smeared with the black coaldust. He wore a leather cap with a long flap at the back to protect his head and shoulders. The front and back doors would be held open for him to come right through the house to the back yard. Turning his back to the cart, he would reach backwards to lift the brimming one-hundredweight sack onto his back and, bent over, he would carefully plod through the house, where newspapers had been spread over the floor. At the coalbunker he would tilt the sack forward over one shoulder, allowing the coal to tumble in. The coal made a lovely rumbling noise as it fell into the bin, which soon became full to the top. The sacks would be counted in. It was reassuring to know that we had plenty of coal for the Winter.

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*Advertisement from Souvenir  
Programme and Guide for  
Mitcham Carnival 1938*

Naturally, every lump of coal had to be physically carried indoors. It was shovelled through a small trapdoor at the bottom of the bunker into a bucket. This may be all right when the weather was dry, but when it was cold or raining it was a different matter. Sorties had to be made for refills and out into the pouring rain my parents would dash. Mother often had to put a towel over her head while she hastily shovelled some coal into the bucket and then dashed back indoors.

Laying and lighting the fire was a ritual I liked to see. In the morning the cold grate had to be emptied of its ash. If the ashes had any heat in them you could be in danger of a fire, as they had to be shovelled out onto several thicknesses of newspaper, wrapped up and removed. Clouds of ash rose in the air. The grate was brushed, the small firefront blackleaded and the tiles wiped clean with a damp cloth. Sheets of newspaper were then folded into long, quite wide, strips and made into a knot. Several of these were placed in the fire basket. Then sticks were placed across the paper at one angle and another layer crossways. After this the knobs of coal were put on top of the sticks, smaller pieces first, then two or three larger ones. All was now ready. Taking a box of matches and striking one, the lighted match was held to the protruding ends of the paper knots. Soon all the paper was alight and by the time the sticks were crackling away, the coal had caught fire and smoke arose. Not very long after this the coal began to glow red and you had a lovely fire, giving not only warmth and comfort but something to sit and stare at and dream over on dark evenings.

We also made toast over the fire, holding the bread to the coals on a toasting fork which hung on a hook by the fire and every family possessed one. Crumpets were also toasted in this way.

If, for some reason, the fire would not light, perhaps due to damp or poor quality coal, a rather dangerous thing was practised; this involved covering the entire firefront with a large sheet of newspaper. The newspaper would be held in place to block out the air and make the fire draw up through the vent in the firefront. Soon a roaring sound could be heard as the fire got going. If a small brown scorch patch appeared in the middle of the paper you had to be very quick to remove it before it spread and the whole thing went up in flames, which it did, many times. When it did the paper was bundled up quickly, allowed to burn and float up the chimney out of harm's way. This procedure was carried out by adults only.

The chimney sweep's visit was the most exciting of all and this was always done in the months when the grate was not being used. The room would have to be stripped of as many items as possible and the remaining furniture covered with old sheets. My brother and I would watch the sweep as he pushed the big black brush up the chimney and fitted a rod onto it - and another - and another, until all his rods were up. Our job would then be to run outside to see if the brush was sticking out of the chimney pot and then dash back to tell him.

Soot poured down from the chimney onto the hearth, making a terrible mess and covering everything with sooty dust. The soot was swept up and put into a sack to be spread on the garden later. By this time the sweep himself would be covered in soot on hands, face and clothes, but he didn't mind and we thought it marvellous. He rode away with his rods and brush as he had come, on his bike. The clearing up for the housewife would be something else!

### **About The Children**

The children led an active, carefree life on the street outside our houses. As there were only two car owners in the whole road we had free range. A group would gather outside after tea when the evenings got light. "Please can I go out to play?" I would beg my mother. The girls would often play at skipping. A long rope would be held out stretching from one side of the road to the other. This would be swung in a wide arc. Queuing and taking it in turns, we would jump into the middle to see how long we could skip, with everyone counting. One way of changing the skipper was to chant, "Mother's in the kitchen doing a bit of knitting, in comes (naming whoever it was) and out goes she." The new skipper would jump in and join the first. After a couple more turns of the rope, when both had skipped in unison, the first would then exit. The changeover would be made without the beat of the rope altering. Of course, turns would be taken at the swinging of the rope.

Sometimes a lone car made an appearance to interrupt our games and the cry would go up, "Car coming!" and the road would be evacuated for it to pass, but this was rare. When it began to get dark and the street lights came on, we would go back indoors, saturated with fresh air and toned up with the exercise.

We played marbles along the gutters and our treasures were kept in small home-made drawstring bags. The most precious marble was the blood alley, which had red markings running through the glass, just like blood. This marble was worth more than any other and to win one from your opponent in the game was a thrill.

We collected spent matchsticks from the gutter and made spiders by sticking them into a large potato. We played hopscotch marked out in chalk on the pavement slabs, using a small stone as a marker. We played fivestones or dabs as it was sometimes called. This was a very ancient game, but we did not know that then. We played 'He' or 'Touch' and leap frog.



The boys made carts out of old pram wheels and wooden boxes, with help from their fathers, and rode them up and down the road. The girls played with their dolls and dolls' prams, wheeling them up and down the pavements.

There were Mabel Lucy Atwell books with pictures of chubby children on the covers.

We children really thought there might be a man in the moon, as we were told.

The seasons came and went in a pattern I never discerned. In the hot summers the tar on the road would heat up and form bubbles and it was great fun to pop these. In Winter I tobogganed down snow-covered Pollards Hill, all countrified then.

At one time on Saturday mornings we went to the 'pictures' at the Church. This event was held in the so-named Upper Room. It cost tuppence to go and the films were projected onto the screen by the vicar himself, and a treat it was, too!

### **Out and About**

At the end of May the Common at the end of our road underwent the most wonderful change of appearance, because all the hawthorn trees blossomed. As there were so many of them, both of the white and pink varieties, it was a breathtaking sight and the smell was wonderful. We girls would go onto the common and dress up and pretend to be the May Queen, decorating ourselves with the blossoms of the may trees and organising our ladies in waiting.

Summer was a time for picking buttercups, which grew in profusion on the edge of the Common. "Let's see if you like butter", we would say to each other, holding a buttercup beneath chins, where the golden glow always assured an answer of, "Yes!" We made daisy chains. We climbed trees and played around the Old Oako pond, which was on the opposite side of Watneys Road, the name handed down from generation to generation by children.

We would have picnics on the Common with our sandwiches wrapped in greaseproof paper and popped into a paper bag. Mother might have a thermos flask of tea. Our drinks were of lemonade made with lemonade powder bought by the ounce from the sweetshop. Mostly we went to the Seven Islands Pond which, indeed, had seven islands. The water was deeper in those days and there were boats to hire and a jetty for boarding them. There was a real holiday atmosphere as families picnicked on the grass around the pond and the children paddled in the water or waded out to the most accessible islands.

My brother and I would often set off for the day taking the usual sandwiches and an old medicine bottle filled with water mixed with lemonade powder. Here, again, we would roam far and wide, often as far away as Beddington Park, which we approached from the direction of Beddington village, passing the watercress beds.

The golf club along the Common from us, where the Pollards Hill estate is now, used to have a sort of fair laid on for its members' children in the Summer. It was held in one of the many small fields edged with oak trees that used to be there. A small roundabout was one of the attractions and the rides were free to the members' children. It didn't take long for us locals to realise that we could also get a free ride. Word soon got around that the man running it wouldn't know whose children we were. Of course, eventually, he did realise what was happening and we were sent packing, but we had had our rides!

Then there was Mitcham Fair time. I can remember being put to sit on the kitchen table to be washed ready to go to the fair. Walking down Commonsides East along the Common towards the Three Kings Piece, you could hear the music and the strange whizzes and bangs, and the

shouts of the fair people, long before you got there. When you got to the top of Beehive Bridge, there was the fair set out in all its wonder, with roundabouts, helter skelter, big lizzy, coconut shies, toffee apple and humbug stalls. The gypsy women who ran these stalls threw swathes of humbug mixture over a big hook hung on the side of the stall and pulled and twisted it into shapes before cutting it up with large scissors into saleable chunks.

There was Mitcham stadium, which seemed a huge place to me. School sports days would be held there and other local events. At one event, I remember, there was to be an ox roasted whole, and I hated the idea of that.

We went to the pictures at the Majestic cinema in Mitcham. There would often be long queues outside waiting to go in. The commissionaire in grand uniform would come out and usher you in, so many at a time. I remember seeing Shirley Temple films there, such as *Poor Little Rich Girl* and *Heidi*. Upstairs there was even a small dance hall as well.

The wonderful Granada cinema in Tooting was really out of this world - a true picture palace of wide carpeted stairs and all decorated in the Gothic style. It had a restaurant in a balcony upstairs overlooking the main foyer. In this foyer on the cinema's birthday there was a huge birthday cake - very tall. Chefs would be standing by it all dressed in their white uniforms and high hats. Everyone going into the show would be given a piece of birthday cake. Outside the cinema, buskers would entertain the queues by singing or paper tearing. In the interval there would be an organ recital and once I remember seeing a full stage show at half time and Billy Cotton's band playing, too.

### **A Walk Around The Cornfields**

On fine Sunday afternoons we were taken out by Mum and Dad for a walk, returning home to the traditional full Sunday tea. These walks could extend as far as The Grange at Beddington, which really was a long way away.

One Sunday we crossed the two Commons (two to us because the main road to Croydon bisected the Common), making our way past the One Island Pond towards the railway crossing at Beddington Halt. The train did indeed halt there and a token was given to the driver so that it was safe for him to proceed.

A little way down Beddington Lane (a country lane then) a few people had gathered to the left. Of course, we stopped to see what was the matter. There was a policeman standing there holding his bike and by him was a woman. I can picture her standing there now. She was soaking wet, with a very red face and short dark, wet hair. Something black and shiny had been put around her shoulders and it must have been the policeman's cape. She had attempted to drown herself in a quarry on that side of the road and suicide was against the law. Poor dear, I have often thought of her over the years and sincerely hope life turned out better for her.

Nearly opposite the crowd was a farm and the farmer and his wife were looking over the big gate of their yard to see what was going on. Mum and Dad stopped to talk to them about it all. They were very pleasant people and the wife cut Mum a lovely bunch of flowers from their garden to take home. In retrospect and after all these years as I write this, it occurs to me that the flowers should have been given to the poor lady. We went on with our walk.

Another favourite Sunday walk was around the cornfields. Approximately halfway down Beddington Lane we would turn left into fields and follow paths that led over stiles. We called them the cornfields, because the memory stuck of walking through fields of ripe corn there. We would eventually walk through until we came out onto the main Croydon to Mitcham road just

before the Redhouse, now the Jolly Gardeners. This area is Therapia Lane on the tram stop. When I see Beddington Farm Road (off Purley Way) as I pass by, it reminds me of the farmland that was once there. It is now a sad industrial site.

### **Matters Medical**

At one time my mother got pleurisy and ever after had a weak chest. I remember her being ill in bed and the doctor being called. Five shillings had to be found from somewhere to pay him and this was not easy. The vicar also called to visit her, so it was all quite serious.

When I was about seven I had to go into the Wilson Hospital to have my tonsils and adenoids out. This cottage hospital was donated to the people of Mitcham. It has since been swallowed up by the Health Service and doesn't function as it was intended to, which does seem a great pity.

In the same ward as me a few beds down and surrounded at first by screens, was a boy called Peter, who had fallen into a tub of scalding water on washday. We weren't allowed to see much of him to begin with, but had occasional glimpses of his bandaged figure. He was very brave and cheerful and used to talk to me through the screens and I think quite liked me. He had been badly hurt. When it was time at last for me to go home, I was so relieved to be leaving hospital I left the ward without saying a proper goodbye to him and have always regretted that and been sad about it ever since. Travelling home from the hospital we boarded the tram running across the Common towards Watneys Road. As he was getting on Dad accidentally fell against the conductor, knocking the ticket holder out of his hand. The tickets went flying everywhere, even into the road. The conductor was not pleased!

One day our next door neighbour had cause to call the doctor in. Now she did what no sensible housewife should ever do - she polished the lino under the mats. The doctor knocked at the door, which she opened and held wide for him to come in. He stepped onto the hall runner and in a split second was at the other end of the hallway in a heap. Not a good beginning for a home visit!



*The Wilson Hospital, built in 1928.*

## Special Occasions

Outings, other than going shopping in Mitcham or Croydon, were few and far between. This did not bother us a whit, as we did not expect them and, anyway, had plenty to amuse us locally.

For our Sunday school outings we were taken to Farthing Downs with its lovely views. Here we played organised games and could also run freely up and down the slopes. We were given tea and buns in a long dark tearoom there. Afterwards we could have free rides on the swing boats which stood in a row outside - a rare treat.

I joined the Brownies, whose meetings were held in the Ascension Church in Sherwood Park Road. We had a lovely lady as our Brown Owl and her small sister was also a Brownie. The church was in a hall then and the church proper was not built until many many years later. The enrolment ceremony was delightful and had a touch of magic about it. Children then were not so worldly-wise as they are now. A grass mat like a greengrocer uses was spread on the floor and a mirror placed in the centre, making a pool, which was surrounded by flowers. Nearby, our ceremonial (toy) wise owl was put to sit upon the red-spotted toadstool, as he always was at meetings.

All the Brownies gathered around in a circle for the ceremony and I was led to the pool, in uniform but without the badge on my yellow tie. Brown Owl turned me around three times as we said the words, "Twist me and turn me and show me the elf - I looked in the water and there saw - Myself!" (Of course, for who else would do the good deeds and lend a helping hand? The elf was me! What a lesson!) Then the badge was pinned to my tie and I became a fully-fledged Brownie, having just learnt a most important lesson in life.

Around the time of the Boat Race day we children would divide our loyalties between Oxford and Cambridge. We would wear small favours in our lapels which often took the form of tiny dolls made out of cut wool in the relevant light and dark blues. They could be bought from a card in the local sweetshop. I was always Oxford, in sympathy with the losers, because Cambridge mostly won. The school gates would be picketed by a group of boys who were Cambridge supporters. "Are you Oxford or Cambridge?" would be asked, and only for those replying "Cambridge" would the gate be opened. We Oxfords soon got wise to this, and having stated "Cambridge" to gain entry, would go a little way inside and shout, "Oxford, ha ha", and run for it!

On the night of 30<sup>th</sup> November 1936 the Crystal Palace burned down. Mum and Dad went up to the top of Pollards Hill to see this sight, which was visible for miles. In the playground at school the next morning all the children were talking about this great event.

We had the occasional birthday party to attend, where we would be given fishpaste sandwiches, followed by jelly and blancmange. Then there would be the birthday cake ceremony with the singing of the Happy Birthday song and the blowing out of the candles. Afterwards we played party games, such as blind man's buff, hunt the thimble, oranges and lemons and postman's knock. We also played musical chairs and pass the parcel, the music being provided by the wind-up gramophone. All the games were supervised by an adult. If we were lucky we would be given a slice of cake wrapped in a paper serviette to take home. Of course, we always remembered to say, "Thank you for having me", to our friend's mother as she stood graciously by the door to see us out.

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