

MERTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LOCAL HISTORY NOTES - 23

A Mitcham Childhood Remembered 1926-45

Pamela Starling

Born Pamela Hobbs 1926 – same year as Marilyn Monroe, Queen Elizabeth II and Winnie the Pooh – at Mitcham, Surrey, famous since Elizabethan times for its lavender fields, of Potter & Moore fame and fields of other herbs producing oil extracts including peppermint.

As a child, I remember well that many of the houses were the old black or white weatherboards – very picturesque but most would disappear after the second World War.

Mitcham was also famous since Elizabethan times for its Fair, which was said to be the largest in the country, held earlier on in the town centre and later on Mitcham Common, around which the whole of my childhood was spent.

I was born in a new house near the edge of it on the east side – opposite the railway that ran across that part of the common and under the bridge nearby, through which I could just see from my bedroom window when the Fair had appeared. It always came overnight and when I awoke – there it was – like a miracle! I loved it. It was the highlight of my year and I saved my pocket money for this purpose although no doubt supplemented by my parents.

Of course, in those days there was no television and very little radio. My father and many others managed to make their own radios. I remember that we had a large ‘baffle board’ fixed under the dining table, which apparently helped to magnify the sound. Most people were more likely to have

a wind-up gramophone, now considered an antique. I remember sitting in my grandmother's sitting room on a black leather horsehair sofa – now called a 'chaise longue' – which most people would have had, playing all the records. I particularly remember my favourite by Maurice Chevalier – 'Louise'.

My grandparents lived nearby, but in a road full of so-called workman's cottages. These were built especially for the working class and anybody who worked, however lowly paid, could afford one. They were at an affordable rent unlike today – where these same cottages still survive they are much in demand and surprisingly expensive. In the 20s and 30s they only had the two up two down rooms and no bathroom or inside toilet.

Everyone had to wash in a galvanized tin bath on the kitchen floor, usually in front of the fire that was called a kitchen range. It burned coal a bit like the old 'AGA' that has come back into fashion – heated the water, cooked the meals either on top or in the oven and dried clothes over the top hung on a wooden rack supported from the ceiling by pulleys. That was the kitchen and dining room combined. The scullery was a smaller room behind that with a stone floor and stone sink for washing and a large copper the size and shape of a dustbin where washing could be boiled – heated underneath by gas. The sitting room was kept for best and would often have a piano.

My parents had a house newly built in the next road, with an upstairs bathroom with a separate toilet, and a separate kitchen with gas stove, but still with the copper for boiling clothes, and a dining room just for eating in. The front room was always a bit special. We, like most people, had an upright piano and both my parents could play and sing. Everyone was expected to entertain in some form – playing instruments, reciting poetry or in my case as a child, dancing and singing while my mother played the piano. Of course there was no television and people were more creative. Both my parents painted, my mother made all her own clothes and mine and this in due course encouraged me to follow suit. My father repaired his own car – we always had a car, which was unusual then, although I recollect at one point we had a motorbike and sidecar in which my mother and I sat. This was a very popular vehicle in the 30s – probably more than a car.

Trams ran across Mitcham Common from Croydon to Wimbledon and Tooting and beyond I suppose. At the Fair Green terminus trams were reversed and, as the front and back of the tram were the same, I remember the conductor would walk up the aisle reversing the seats by pushing the backs the opposite way so they faced the front again. Ironically, having dug up all the lines in the 30s and replaced trams with trolley buses, they have now, in the 90s, reverted to trams again. The railway also traversed the Common and passed our house on the other side of the road.

In those days there were quite a lot of tramps about. One doesn't see them much any more out of London. The old ones used to call at houses – not like the present day 'con men', but they would ask for a drink of water, perhaps bread and cheese and, hopefully, a few pence. Children also often called and asked for water, unlike today's children who always seem to have a can of 'coke' in their hands.

The annual Fair was a huge attraction and drew very large crowds and because the crowds were so dense, particularly in the evenings, children would be carried shoulder high which I remember well. I would also go in the afternoons with my mother when it would not be so crowded. It was only on for three days. The music would waft over the Common; some of it was produced mechanically by a machine controlled by paper which unfolded itself like a concertina and had holes punched in it. It sounded a bit like an organ. There were all sorts of sideshows, stalls and booths for boxing where there was a resident boxer and anyone who fancied himself could get into the ring and win money if he could knock the incumbent down – if anyone ever did. All these shows had a platform outside where people would be performing, dancing or singing and perhaps animals and clowns or dwarfs. Then there were the freak shows, where you would have to go inside and usually there would be midgets, a man and woman sitting in a small room on very small furniture. There was also the 'Fat Lady' and various freaks preserved in glass cases, probably some sort of 'con' – such as a two-headed animal.

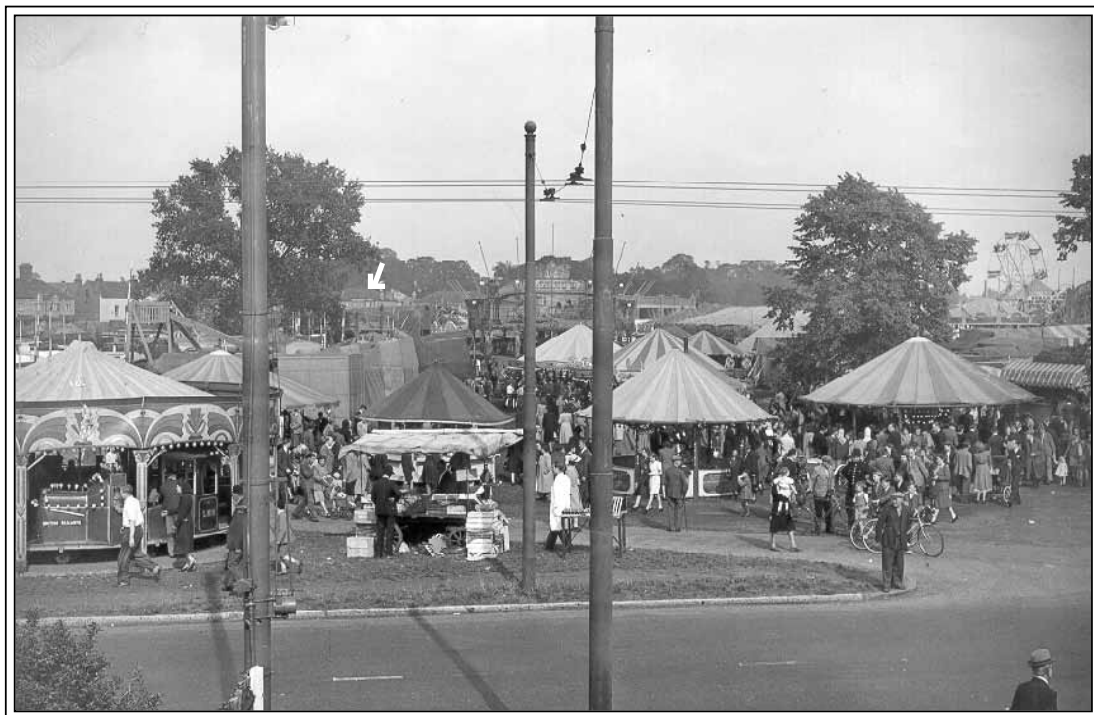
Then there were the 'Guy Fawkes' bonfires on the Common. Everyone would be out with fireworks – hand-held sparklers in my case – but all good fun without any of today's aggression.

Another memorable night was when the Crystal Palace burnt down in 1936. As it stood on the hills beyond Mitcham – everyone was out on the Common watching it as it could be clearly seen – a sight I have never forgotten. Another memorable sight I saw from my bedroom window going across a sunset sky one evening was one of the big airships, probably the R101 that crashed in France in October 1930.

I think Mitcham in the 30s was probably a very up and coming place and old people then did not like change anymore than now. My school was built about 1929 on the site of a farm and old tithe barn. At this time and into the 30s many new buildings went up – a new cottage hospital, a stadium, a fire station, swimming baths, where I learned to swim and in the winter it became a dance hall and general function hall. Then of course there was the Majestic Cinema – very grand but not nearly so grand as the now famous Granada at Tooting Broadway, which is now a listed building. This was only a short distance by tram and I loved it – all red velvet, red carpets and gold carving on everything – a huge palace of a place full of sweeping staircases and mirrors.

Films were hugely popular as we still had no television and every film would attract long queues to get in and if the films were changed, as they often were several times a week, people would often go three times a week, so they must have been quite affordable. I don't know if my mother liked the films she took me to, or whether she thought they were just suitable films. I know my father never seemed to come because we saw every Shirley Temple film – the child star who was my idol along with most young girls. I remember having a large near lifesize cut-out cardboard Shirley Temple doll with paper dresses that you could clip on and change the clothes every day – the forerunner of the Barbie Doll. We also used to see all the Laurel and Hardy films that I loved – they have stood the test of time, which Shirley Temple has not. I think she was a year younger than me.

Shortly after this we moved to the other (west) side of the Common to a slightly bigger house with a much larger garden and with the trams, then trolley buses, running past the door. My parents never owned a house, as most people rented, and there was always plenty of choice at an affordable rate to suit income. On this side of the Common we actually had the Fair on our doorstep – even better and the music was even louder – which suited me but probably not my mother.



This view of Mitcham Fair in the early 1950s was taken from our house on Commons side West after it had been rebuilt following the bombing. Note the trolley bus posts and wires in the foreground and the 'bobby' – an unusual sight these days. The white arrow marks the house where I was born in Grove Road just over the Beehive bridge.

We had electricity laid on by now, a few years earlier I expect – it must have seemed like ‘magic’ at the touch of a switch. We still had no television, refrigerator or washing machine.

Mitcham Common covered quite a large area beyond the part where I lived and stretched towards Croydon, which is where my mother and I often went shopping by tram. There were several large stores, a cinema, a street market and many smaller shops in the main high street. One of the large stores, called Kennards, had several floors and a large restaurant which served ‘afternoon tea’ and where there was always an orchestra playing. This was a great treat for me and very popular. I remember there was a competition in one of the newspapers for amateur songwriters to compose a popular song to celebrate ‘summer’. The winner was a song called ‘Sailing Down the River’, won by two sisters who subsequently were engaged to play the piano in Kennards and they were a great attraction.

My mother was an excellent dressmaker, so we always visited the fabric departments, which sold a wide range, because of course dressmaking was a popular skill and most people would have a Singer sewing machine and if not, there were plenty of people who would do it for you at a reasonable charge.

These departments were quite fascinating for me – there would be long counters with brass ruled edges for measuring the bales of fabric stacked alongside. The thing I found most intriguing was a chain of overhead cables, which carried small bullet shaped cylinders that would be connected to every counter. The assistant would reach above her and take it down, unscrew the two halves, put the payment in – in cash of course – screw it up, pull a chain and all these cylinders would be ‘whizzing’ all over the place, ending up in the glass fronted office of the cashier who then returned any change and receipt. Now gone forever but efficient in its way.

I went to a small private Catholic kindergarten school run by nuns until I was 10 – not because we were Catholics but it was considered better than the state school. I think the school was excellent and strict but probably put me off religion for life. Of course then most schools other than ‘state’ were ‘single sex’ and the women teachers were never married which is why they were dedicated to a career in teaching and usually very good.

When I was 10 there was an Entrance Exam for the County School for Girls, which had been built in 1929. There was the equivalent school for Boys on the opposite side of the Common so the two never mixed. When the War came a few years later, we were evacuated to Weston-super-Mare, and the two schools were merged. One can imagine in retrospect what an upheaval this must have caused – mixed classes with teachers and of course what happened? The younger Art teacher, being very attractive, got friendly with, I think, the Geography teacher from the ‘Boys’ and they did in fact get married before the end of the evacuation.

In 1939 War was declared, I was then nearly 13. Everyone panicked and expected immediate bombing so my cousin and I were despatched to relatives in Scotland where we went to school for a short time. The schooling was more advanced than here and extremely strict. I think we must have been treated rather carefully, because if anyone else misbehaved in any way, even giving the wrong answers to questions, they would get a slap on an open hand with a wide leather belt, which was called a ‘strap’. This I suppose is where the expression ‘getting a belting’ came from. This was a mixed state school and all the teachers seemed to be male.

As there were no air raids to start with we were brought back to Mitcham; however after a while, perhaps another year, we did start getting air raids and Mitcham in particular was very badly hit. Where we lived on Commonsides West I think fared worse than most because on part of the Common near us (by Mitcham Junction Station) there were anti-aircraft guns and searchlights, which obviously must have been a target, apart from the constant rain of shrapnel.

At the height of these raids, which went on every night for some months, you would get the sirens when a raid was imminent and one would take some form of cover. My mother and I would get into the cupboard under the stairs or under the dining room table which was where we all were when we had an almost direct hit. My father, who was in the Home Guard, had just come in, parked the car outside

the door and a bomb fell demolishing the car and house completely. It is of course an experience one is never likely to forget. My mother was injured being hit on the head and was taken to the local hospital nearby. I was taken to the house of a school friend by her father, who was a friend of my father's in the Home Guard. We had to walk alongside the Common to their house, fairly nearby and I remember having to wear a tin hat because of the falling shrapnel. The bomb killed all my pet rabbits in their hutch in the garden and our canary.



My father in Home Guard uniform standing by our bombed Ford 8 in which he had just returned home.

Mitcham was also famous for its celebrated Cricket Green and still is, surrounded by impressive listed buildings, although some did not escape the bombs. There was a variety of bombs dropped and this period also produced 'land mines' which of course nobody had heard of. The first night they were used, I remember watching them come down slowly across the Common – they looked like parachutes presumably with men – instead they had bombs attached so when they landed, they exploded on impact; with no deep crater they caused a much wider area of damage. The following morning after this experience we all walked down to the town centre and had never seen anything so terrible – no tiles left on any of the roofs or glass in the windows including of course our own. My mother seemed to think it was the end of the world or at least the War – nevertheless this scenario happened many more times. Nobody in Mitcham escaped this fairly superficial damage and its constant repairs. These parachutes would often get caught up in trees or buildings and not explode, then an expert would have to get up to defuse them.

Shortly after we were bombed, my school was evacuated to Weston-super-Mare, although we were not told where we were going, for security reasons, until we got there. I and two other girls ended up in probably the most desirable billet in the area – a farm on the outskirts of the town. The farmhouse and surrounding land actually bordered the beach, although this was covered with coils of barbed wire to prevent enemy landing craft. It was the most gorgeous situation and gave us a wonderful insight into farm life. The farmer and his wife had two young daughters – one was in the ATS and had a regular boyfriend in the Army; the other was in the WAAF and had a succession of boyfriends all flying personnel in the RAF who one by one failed to return. She became very depressed, feeling that she was some sort of jinx and even as evacuees we could not help but feel concerned. I have often wondered what happened to her.

The other 'traumatic' thing on the farm was when they got 'Foot & Mouth disease'. In retrospect, this probably wasn't so unusual then. The usual procedure was gone through – all the cattle killed, buried on the farm, everything disinfected and movements restricted – but there were no sheep involved. We three were sent to alternative billets in town but it was all over in about six weeks and we were allowed to go back to the farm.

There was a huge farmhouse kitchen that overlooked the beach and once when there was a storm and an extra high tide, the sea came right up to the kitchen window. There was a huge scrubbed wooden table and as quite a number of farm hands were employed, lunchtime was the big meal of the day for everyone. A cook was employed to do these meals but as we were soon to find out, one problem was the washing up and someone had to do it! That became our job – I can see it now – stacks and stacks of plates etc.

After my mother came out of hospital, she came and stayed on the farm for a while – meanwhile my grandmother had died. We didn't escape the bombing there either – I do not know what the aim was but incendiary bombs were used a lot throughout the war; they were dropped in strings over an area with the sole purpose of setting targets alight.

We returned home at some point after this but had to find somewhere to live, which turned out to be a bungalow in nearby Morden. This was getting on towards the end of the war but not before the end of the bombing. Some people had Anderson shelters at the end of their gardens, supplied by the government; these were made of corrugated iron and buried underground. We never had one before but in the bungalow we had a Morrison shelter which was also supplied by the government and looked like a huge table made of iron, with a metal grid all round and the whole family could get inside. As they took up so much space, I had one in my bedroom – my bed on top of it that meant climbing up and down.

This was when the later type of bombs appeared which was very un-nerving because they were not manned but were aimed and set at a certain distance which when reached, the mechanism cut out and they dropped like a stone and fell more or less at random. These were called Doodle Bugs. I remember many times hearing one coming over and when the engine cut out you would count perhaps ten seconds and wait for the explosion which might be very near you or perhaps further away.

These attacks often took place during the day and were very disrupting. One would have to take cover wherever one could as there wasn't much warning, if any. Once I was caught in a raid and ended up with several others in a ditch on the Common. About this stage in the War, we would often watch our bombers flying overhead at dusk in close formation, actually darkening the sky, on their way to bomb Germany – an incredible sight that went on night after night.

After I left the County School, I went to Wimbledon Art School, as that was what I had hoped to do from a very young age, about eight I think; being an only child I was quite capable of entertaining myself and I had my own room in which I spent hours painting and drawing. I once did an advertisement for Ovaltine and my mother sent it off for me – what a joke! But nevertheless I got a nice reply from Ovaltine and a tin of Ovaltine sweets.

After I left Art school, I did in fact become a Commercial Artist and worked all my life in advertising and publishing then after retirement running an art gallery, so I have always remembered that early effort.

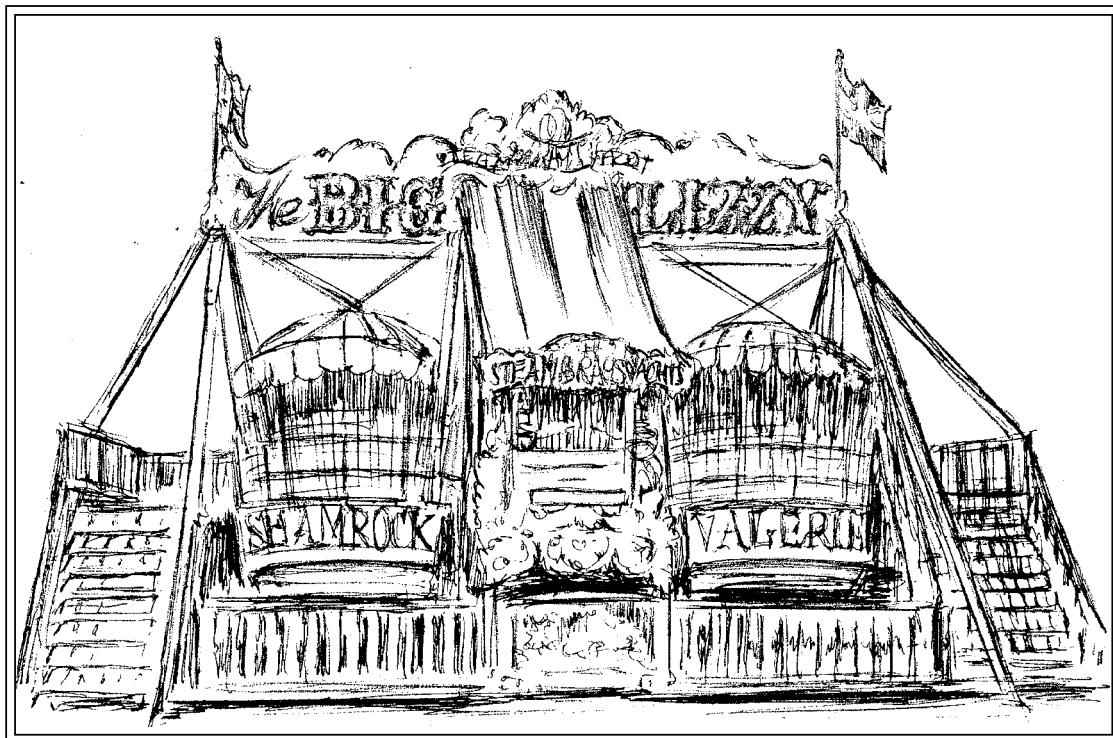
During the war years, Mitcham Fair was discontinued but was restored afterwards. Our house was rebuilt on the same site on Commonsides West and to the same design. We had been next door to an old weatherboard antique shop before the war but that was lost with the bombing and a block of police flats replaced it. We continued to live in the same house until my Mother died in 1956. I still visited the Fair which had become more modernized since the war. Particularly noticeable to me was the music – now playing the most popular 'pop' records and the sound was even louder, becoming very tedious when you heard the same tunes repeated endlessly.

Another amusing recollection from this period, as well as the Fair, was the travelling circus. They would arrive with all their animals in large trailers, everything self contained – caravans and the Big Top which we would watch them assemble – extremely interesting as it would be laid out on the ground first. The most memorable thing was the smell of the animals and as we were only over the road, it wafted across all the time. They had, of course, lions, tigers, horses, monkeys and elephants. On the part of the Common opposite our house was a pond, not all that big, called the Three Kings Pond after the pub nearby. It seemed to be for watering the horses and carts as they could drive in and out of it. However, when the circus was there we noticed a tall vehicle like an extra large horsebox pulled up beside the pond and inside was an elephant standing up and led out by an Indian type of person. The pond proved to be very popular with the animal and at the end of the day it would return to its box and still standing presumably went to sleep but with its keeper curled up between its legs and were both still there in the morning; they would then go out and wash in the pond. There must have been an underground stream, as with all this use it never got stagnant or smelly.

My father was a commercial photographer. He started this way through the ‘Slump’ at the time of the ‘Wall Street Crash’ in the late 20s when he lost his job at Vickers in Kingston upon Thames where he lived so he started up on his own which was very enterprising at such a time. It turned into a successful and interesting career, which he continued for the rest of his life.

My grandfather was a cooper (barrel maker) by trade as was my uncle, so it was obviously a skill much in demand at the time. They were on my mother’s side of the family who had moved to Mitcham from Battersea after the first World War. Mitcham was then considered very desirable, being the start of open country, now it comes into the category of South London.

My father’s parents lived in Kingston upon Thames near the river and through doing so, we became related to a well-known old river family, the Turks. My father’s sister married a Turk from the Kingston branch who became the King’s Swan-Master during the reigns of George V and George VI,. The title was handed down to my cousin who became the present Queen’s Swan-Master but is now retired. The Swan-Masters always lived at Cookham in Berkshire where they had a large boathouse and boat-building business first started in 1912, which was the heyday of the river Thames. It was terribly



I recently drew this picture of the BIG LIZZY, from an old photograph I discovered in a book on fairs. A pair of giant swing boats, driven by a steam engine, it was my favourite and a popular feature of Mitcham Fair.

popular with all classes from grand expensive boats and houseboats, boat parties to day-trippers down from London on the very popular train service as there was very little in the way of cars for ordinary people. This suddenly came to an end with the first World War in 1914 and was never to recover to the same degree after it.

A last few words about my Mitcham Common; I so loved it and knew it very intimately almost every path and bush – there seemed to be no fear for children being in open spaces then, as there is today. I spent a lot of time walking on the Common with my mother or walking to school across it. There was a large pond called the ‘Seven Islands’, which to me was like a beach with a sandy shore, and it always had lots of swans – we spent a lot of time there. Many years later I had thought I would scatter my mother’s ashes there and decided to pay a nostalgic visit. To my horror much of the Common had been turned into an ‘infill site’ by the Council. Such degradation – I have never been back since. Many buildings I knew were also destroyed in the 60s, including the cinema and swimming baths I so loved. Although many older buildings were preserved through being ‘listed’, and some of the character of part of the area has been kept, unfortunately a great deal hasn’t and for me has been lost forever.

My school days turned to teens. These were still days before TV took over – apart from the cinema, the dance halls reigned supreme. Most towns and villages had regular dances in large or small halls. They were tremendously popular particularly with young people. A favourite venue for me was the Wimbledon Town Hall; I would go every Saturday night, there and back on the bus, always reliable and late enough to serve the turnout of the dances or cinemas.

I went to Wimbledon Art School during this period for three years, which I loved and when I left, I went on to a new phase of life, finally leaving Mitcham forever except to visit my parents.



Some of my mother’s photographs of the Seven Islands pond in its heyday, a favourite spot for both of us.

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