

MERTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

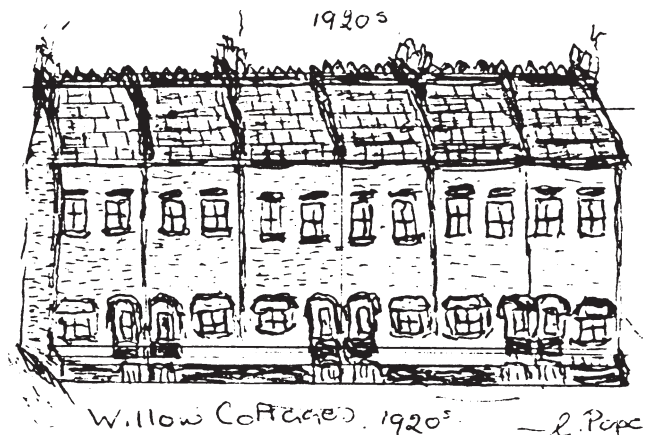
LOCAL HISTORY NOTES - 6

More Memories of Manor Road and Commonsides East in 1920s

By Constance Pope - 1991

My reminiscences of the 1920s in Manor Road seem to have caused quite an interest, so I will try a sort of biographical account of life as a child going to school, describing the surrounding buildings and the people who lived in them.

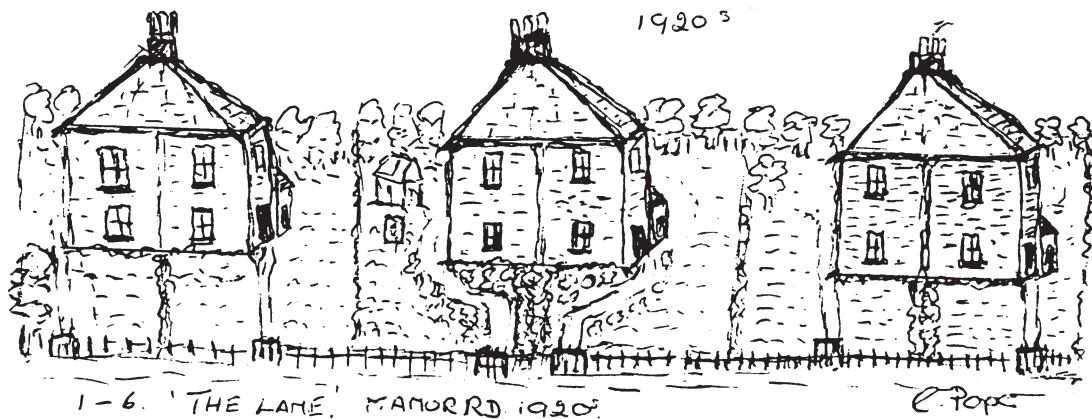
To start with, everybody had to have a job - no job, no money (no unemployment money, no income support, no child benefit, it was definitely no money!) So whatever job you could get you took. Never mind how menial it was or how little you got for it, it was money. I say all this because my mother went to work for as long as I could remember. She was a widow, and I also had two brothers, so there were four of us to keep, until my brothers went out to work and one got married.



My mother worked at the Horse and Groom for 12 years as a general assistant, doing all jobs and working all hours. Working as she did, she had to fit in cooking and washing and looking after us, which left me pretty much on my own looking after myself and, because of that, taking in everything that went on around me, making memories more impressionable.

Mother usually got up early to light a fire in the range to get the kettle boiling for a cup of tea (no teasmade or plugging in the electric kettle!). I cannot remember what we had for breakfast. It could have been porridge, bread and jam, or bread and dripping. Cereals were a luxury and there was not a lot of milk, and we mostly had tinned milk.

After that, at about 8.30am, we were off to school. Ones and twos of children would meet up as we went along. There were children from our six cottages, and some from the next six cottages, although we did not all go to the same school. But most went to Upper Mitcham School in St Marks Road.



We had to be at school by 9 o'clock, walking all the mile and a half - no buses or mums to take us to school in the car. We did that twice a day there and back, if we came home at dinner time (we had from 12 noon till 2 o'clock then) and that we did in all weathers.

We had two routes to school. The one along 'Tommy Lane' (Tamworth Lane) was so messy usually, with water and mud - just a dirt road or track used by horse and cart and an occasional lorry for the factory. And the factory! It was a chemical one, making substitute rubber, so we got plenty of smells that were not exactly aromatic.

Getting past the gravel pits opposite the factory, and coming up to the cottages, you could look across to a wide green space of trees and hedges that led to Tamworth Park and St Georges Road, and that went on up to Cedars Ave. It must have been more or less the same on the cottages side of the lane. Carrying on after Cedars Ave was a bungalow on the corner surrounded by a wall which made it a place of mystery for us, wanting to see what was on the other side of the wall.

Next came 'The Gables', the big house where Mrs Wilson lived. My mother worked for her for a while. She used to have blackberry jelly made and then, after straining off the pips, told her maid to add more sugar to the pulp to make more jam and then "give it to the poor". That was the story my mother told me, and I have never forgotten it. It wasn't very nice to be 'poor' in those days.

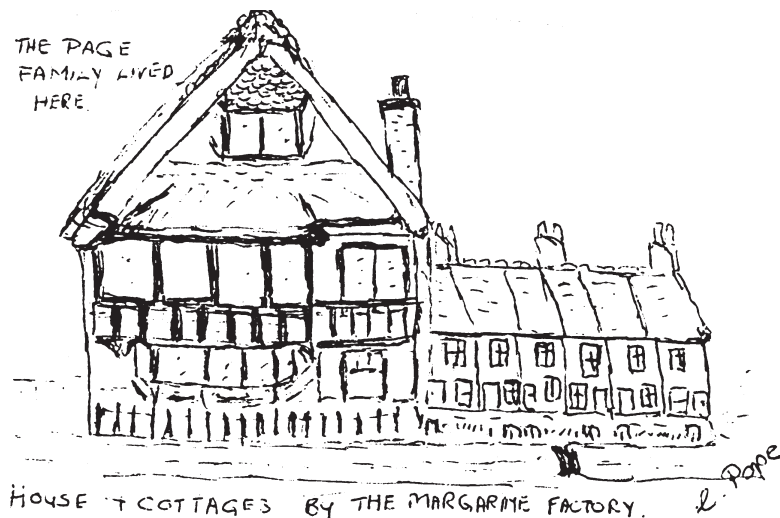
Anyway, back to the school route. Next to the house was an allotment. I remember because there was an old shed there that belonged to my grandfather. From then on, on both sides, was a landfill and it seemed to be hot ashes of refuse that had been burnt and that had a smell of its own somewhat! That went on up to Acacia Road and from there we would go up to the steps in Grove Road over the railway, through to Baker Lane and we were in St Marks Road. But we didn't do that too often.

The Commons side East way was really favourite, so, starting from the Horse and Groom, we would come to the big house, where the Dawson family lived. It was called Tamworth House with a cottage on the side, where Mrs Whitwell lived. I remember Midge Dawson, who went to school when we did, her sister Ethel and brothers Bill and Jack, along of course with their parents, Mr and Mrs Tom Dawson.



As I mentioned in my other paper, Mr and Mrs Jackson were the pub proprietors. My brother tells me they kept geese as guards, but I only remember the dogs. I am told by someone who remembers as I do, that the ducks and geese from Harvey's Farm next to the pub used to walk from the yard across to the ponds on the Common in front of the margarine factory. (Imagine that now!)

While I am in the vicinity, the house that is used as offices by the factory had private people living in it and next to it were some cottages where you had to cross a small bridge, over the stream that ran along Commons side East, to get to the front garden and door. I remember it because I was taken to a party there.



Carrying on to school from Dawson's we would turn the corner into Commons side East, and I will try and remember the names of the folk who lived there. The Stevens' family lived in the first cottage, and where the detached house is now was all of their garden. Mr Stevens was a taxi-driver and he had a very strong shed come garage made of railway sleepers. It stood for years and was tarred to keep the weather out. In summer it was covered in creeper that turned lovely colours in Autumn. Not so long ago my older brother said to me "Is Stevens' shed still there?" We took it for granted then, but look upon it as a 'masterpiece' now.

I knew most of the people in the cottages. In the third one lived a Mrs Mary Elmer and her sons Tom and Harry. You could always see her standing in her doorway, arms folded, with her apron tucked in her arm. When she did her washing, she dried it on a line that was on the green in front of her house. Lovely white washing it was, blowing and flapping in the wind. It wouldn't do to put out one's washing now, things have a habit of disappearing.

Jim Durregan and family lived in the end cottage and I think he had something to do with the golf course. With all the courses that were around us, some of the people were involved. I had a cousin who was a greenkeeper, and some would go caddying for a few shillings.

Next came Mrs Robinson's shop, our only one, but she sold nearly everything. I can remember being asked, "Will you go round to Robinson's for me? I'll give you a halfpenny." We usually went, for we did alright for a halfpenny. (No stocking up at the Supermarket then.)



I remember Mr and Mrs Harry White and Eric and Ronnie who lived next door to the shop, and I believe a son of one of the boys lives along there now. It was considered 'posh' to live round the 'front' as we called it. I also remember Kathleen Pretty whose family lived in those houses, and I once went into the little cottage that is attached to the houses at the end of the terrace when Bloomfields lived there.

From there on, there was just a footpath alongside a fence that bordered Tamworth Lodge. It was a large house with a drive in front, and a family lived there, but then it became the offices for Typke and King, the chemical factory. ('Donne Place' is there now).

The next terrace of houses was there then, up to Tamworth Park. They also were considered 'posh'. On the other side of the park road were even bigger houses (and where the so-called 'Suntrap houses' are). There was a fence at the bottom of the garden of one of these bigger houses. There were fruit trees and soft fruits and what is called a 'carrot leaf blackberry' trailing over the fence. I reckon that's where those you find growing on the Common came from originally. My brother reckons they used to go scrumping there.

Further along, where Pentland Close starts, right on the edge of where the then path was, was an iron gate that one could look through, and what a joy it was, a beautiful garden with all kinds of old-fashioned flowers, tall and short ones, and very colourful. The path went from the gate down to the house that was called 'Pentlands', in which a Mr Owen lived. I believe he had something to do with the houses that were built around here later.

From there on was a fence sometimes broken that you could get through. It was rough ground with trees and bushes and I remember lots of evening primroses grew there. It was known as Cronks gravel pits. There was a row of tall horse chestnut trees growing by the fence and I believe there is just one left in one of the front gardens along there now.



There was a reasonable tarmac road along the Common from Mitcham as far as Manor Road, but it was only meant for light lorries, horse and cart traffic and bikes. The fence brought us to a drive into Cronks where the lorries went, and then to the two semi-detached large houses that are still there. A Captain Hawkins lived with his family in the first one, and the Dalton family lived in the adjoining one. Mr Dalton was a County Councillor and JP and was respected by most.

On the land up to Cedars Ave was a cottage on a smallholding. A Mr Pinnock lived there, and on the Common opposite was a pond called Pinnocks Pond, with a great poplar tree beside it.

Crossing over Cedars Ave and continuing along, we came to two houses and the very old 'Rose Cottage', the wooden one. These were all pulled down and replaced by flatlets. They all had families living in them then. I remember being blamed for picking flowers from the front garden of one of the two houses. Just because I had a grey coat and passed the house, I was condemned as the culprit. It wasn't me, my brother had given me a ride to school on his bike that day, but I still got the blame.

Next to 'Rose Cottage' was 'Woodlands', a bungalow with trees and shrubs which made it look like woodlands, with a small wooden gate. Alongside this was a paddock that belonged to Miss Farewell-Jones from Brenley House, and at the gate we used to feed the horses that came over to us. After this, coming up to Spencer Road, was a large house with a half circle drive in front, which could have been used for horse and carriage.

The land opposite was part of the Common (its just a space for dumping now), and up to a few years back there were four or five lovely horse chestnut trees that grew on the edge of the Common, with a stream running alongside, finishing in the Three Kings Pond. It was very clean and clear and on hot days we would dip our hands in and put the water to our faces, but never drink it. The trees have gone now, and no doubt the water is piped underground.

This road was the original road to Mitcham, up and over the old bridge. The bridge we have now was built when it was decided to run buses into Mitcham and of course the old bridge was not wide enough. On the way down were steps (as there are now) that led to a narrow dirt path that ran along in front of the Beehive Pub, and some cottages, Smiths Buildings (back to back houses) and Brown's Stores. At Brown's Stores you could get all kinds of sweets for a halfpenny or even a farthing, and a quarter pound of custard cream biscuits.

Sparrowhawks rag and bone business was there, but a much smaller edition, and they lived in one of the corrugated roofed buildings in the yard, the one with the chimney. There was also a greengrocer woman (a Mrs Housden?), who lived somewhere along there. She used to come round with a horse and cart on Saturdays.

Then, of course, there was Tylers, the well-known greengrocers. They had a yard next to the shop which was guarded by geese that used to come cackling out. Everyone knew the Tyler family - Mr Tyler and his wife, who used to serve in the shop, their son Fred and two daughters, Helen and Mary. I believe the two daughters still live in the cottages along there.

The cottages and pavement were more or less the same as they are now, up to the school and past to the Three Kings Pub. The only difference with the school was that it was a Secondary School for Boys. There are two cottages before the pub, and the one with the drive was the coalman for most of us, Mr Dick Townsend and Sons. You could go up there with an old pram or pushchair and get a bag of coal for 6d (2.5p). He also came round delivering and selling coal with his horse and cart. My mother was the one who got him to come right down the common, and then down the lane to the cottages.

From the Three Kings on were quite a few big houses. I say big because they were bigger than the cottages as we knew them, and they all had families living in them. There was certainly a very nice lady living in 'Prospect House'. Then there was Jenner's Corner, an engineering firm where the workers used to sit out on the pavement during break time. Crisp's the shoemenders was next, and then Clarendon Grove. On the other corner of Clarendon are still the same two houses, although they are now one and belong to Drewett's the Undertakers. I went to piano lessons in one of the houses for a while, but piano lessons have to be paid for and it was a bit of a struggle, so I still cannot play the piano.

Further on was Davis's greengrocer shop, although we always called it Blowers. On Sunday morning you could get shrimps and winkles, a Sunday teatime treat in those days. Turner's the baker's house, shop, bakery and stables were a little further on. I remember the younger children of Turners in those days. Of course, the bread was delivered by horse and cart. There were some small shops between Turner's and Gutteridge's - I think one was a linen drapers- but Gutteridge's was a real country shop, selling chicken and animal feed of all sorts, seeds, pulses, dog biscuits, and gardening and horticulture requirements. Whatever you asked for they always seemed to have. It was an old firm and it was sad to see it go.

There was always a row of shops from the corner which is now a Chinese along to Lloyd's Bank. Preedy's, the card shop, was Craig's tobacconists and leather goods and bridles and horse gear. Then came the Post Office, of which the only thing left is the pillar box on the pavement. I cannot remember what the other shops were, but I do remember a sweet and tobacco shop with the name Salman and Glucksteen over it, and also the shoemender's shop with the cobbler, Tom Ruff I believe, sitting in the window repairing the shoes.

Next to the shops, on the corner of what used to be St Marks Road, was a big, old house that laid back in what was a not-too-well-kept garden. It became the site for the Majestic Cinema in later years, and then a Bingo Hall. It was rebuilt for Sainsbury's and is now Quik-Save (what next?).

St Marks Road, in my memory, seemed a bright and sunny place. It had no tall buildings, which might have been the reason for the sun. It had six shops, including an undertakers, chemists,

sweetshop and barbers. In those days the houses were not run down and dirty. People hadn't much money, but they were clean.

Upper Mitcham School had an Infants and Big Girls, as they called it, 5-14 years. I quite enjoyed it there, that is the junior part. On Empire Day, May 24th, we went to school dressed in white starched dresses, white canvas shoes that were cleaned with chalk, long white socks and red, white and blue ribbon threaded through the insertion round the waist of the dress. I cannot remember if the boys wore anything special, like white shirts and plimsolls. But it was a colourful and enjoyable day and we danced around the Maypole, plaiting the coloured ribbons, and then reversing to unwind them.

I remember the teachers' names too. When I first started school at five, we had a nice motherly lady called Miss Cotton, and all we did was play with a collection of toys that seemed wonderful to us. We didn't seem to stay there long before going into Miss Harewood's class, where we learned our ABC and to begin to read and spell. There were a couple more classes after that, but my memory is strong for the top class in the infants called Standard 1. We had a very nice teacher called Miss Carpenter. By this time I was about nine, and could read, write, do sums, knit and sew. I even came top of the class with another girl. We had a lovely headmistress called Miss Hunt. She had white hair, I remember, and the other teachers were mostly grey-haired, and they all had their hair done in the style with a bun. Compared with the teachers of today seen with crocodiles of children going on the Common, it's difficult to tell the teachers from the children.

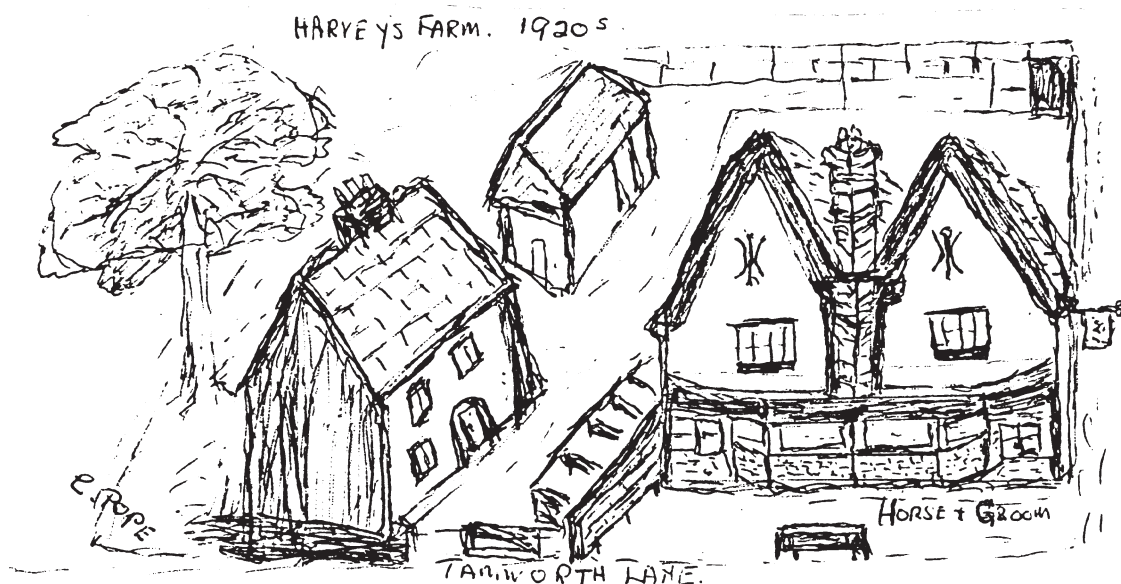
I did not like going up into the big girls. I suppose it was like going out into the real world, one never seemed to do anything right. If you opened your mouth to whisper and got caught, you got a hard slap across the wrist, and in needlework class, doing minute stitches on white pillowcases, if you made the work grubby because your hands were hot, more trouble! Our teacher for needlework was a Miss Crow. She was a small person, rather made up cosmetically, with peroxidized hair, and, my goodness, did we have names for her! The headmistress was a Miss Broomhead, and very handy with the cane, which she would dole out in front of the assembled school, so you can guess we also had names for her. If you were away from school for any reason, you would have the schoolboard man come to your house to see why you were not at school. There are other teachers' names I can remember, a Miss Ames, Miss Love, Miss Pickard and Miss Sturt. I left the school when I was in Miss Sturt's class, Standard 4. I was eleven years old, and as my mother had got a job in Croydon, I went to school there, where I stayed till I was 14 years. They were different there, and I did well. I left to go out to work, to get all of 8 shillings a week.

There were quite a lot of children from the Holborn Schools at St Marks Road School. The Holborn Schools was a large building situated near the Swan (opposite the library now), a home for children whose parents could not look after them. Some, I think, were orphans as well. They came to school in crocodiles of boys and girls mixed, some brothers and sisters, but mostly on their own. There was always someone in charge of them while they were going back and forwards to school, but once there they were the same as the rest of us. The girls all wore navy skirts, with either grey or navy jerseys, with black stockings and boots. The boys had navy trousers, the same navy or grey jerseys, black socks and boots. I think they had a strict routine at the Schools, they were well-scrubbed and always looked clean, and didn't seem to be underfed. I often wonder what happened to those we got to know well. The babies and children up to five years lived in Eagle House, which is still there. Sometimes a mother or relative would turn up and hope to see them on their way home from school. She would appear to give them something, sweets I suppose, but they were not allowed to stop and talk. It gave us kids something to think about, going home to our own folks instead of being shut away from them.

But for all these things, we were quite happy with our lot, finding things of interest to see and do. I feel we had a better childhood than the children of today, who get everything they want whether parents can afford it or not, and having got what they want are soon bored. I am glad to have been born then although times were lean. It was a safer place to live in than it is today. We enjoyed the summer, especially coming home from school. Whichever route we chose, there was no traffic, even on Commonsides East (imagine that!). We could even run along the road popping the tar bubbles made by the sun. We might on rare occasions meet a Walls ice cream man on his tricycle, and be able to buy a penny Snofruit (everyone had a lick all round). But that was rare and only in the summer.

Also on Derby Day we could stand on the railway fence in Grove Road and wave at the royal train with King George and Queen Mary aboard, on their way to the Derby. With luck we might catch the charabancs going to the same venue, and shout "Throw out yer mouldy", at which the occupants would throw out a few coppers. All this no doubt would be very boring to the children of today, but it was part of life.

Mind you, we did not always have good weather. There were always the 'pea-souper' fogs, where you could hardly see your hand in front of your face, and the flooding, when the rains filled up the ditches, and the one alongside our house used to swell up and make lakes everywhere. My brother, on his way to work, would have to tie the laces of his boots together, his socks in his pocket, and wade from our house along the front of the cottages and into the field with his boots round his neck, the water was so deep. He had to cross the field and the golf courses to get to Norbury Station, as he worked at Norwood. But as it happened nearly every year we took it all as a matter of course. I still feel, with all the modern wonders, it was a nicer place than it is today.



ISBN 1 903899 30 3

Published by Merton Historical Society - September 1991

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