

November 2010.

On reading the excellent recollections of Len Jordan and Alex Street I realised how much in them I could relate to, albeit from a different view and with other details. It also occurred to me that I am not a true-born Brockhamian, as their memories are of life lived on or near the Green, while I started off 'up the Pits'. Len tells of his birth and how Dr Thorne then cycled up to the Pits cottages to deliver Ted Boatwright. Well, the good doctor had done the same for me a few months earlier. So even when we moved a bit nearer, on to the Reigate road, I felt a little apart until I went to school.

But those cottages were called Brockham Pits as the quarry above them was the Brockham pit and the one further to the east was Betchworth pit. Beyond the back gardens of those dwellings ran the railway line which we called the Incline; on it chalk and lime was transported to Betchworth station. On the other side of this track was shrub and waste land, and beyond that lay the lake known as the Clayhole.

This was a dark, shadowy, mysterious place and although – when I was older and ran on the hills with gangs from the Pits and from the village – I was never happy near this stretch of water. I once watched a snake swimming beside me at the edge of the lake. It's body looping beneath the surface, it's head held straight above the water, it glided into the weeds and kingcups which grew there. I felt it was watching me if I went near there.

At some time my dad told me that there were tools, shovels and digging machines, lying on the bottom of this deep pool. He said that men were in the pit digging out the clay when they hit a spring (probably one of the chalkhill streams) and water rushed in, flooding the hole. The men scrambled out leaving their equipment behind. He assured me that they all got out safely.

I remember seeing men carrying away a large alsation dog they'd pulled from the water.

I learned – when I was older – that as we moved out of our Pit company home, on the very same night, the mother of the new tenants 'walked in her sleep' over the incline and into the Clayhole, where she was found the next morning.

To get to the main road from the Pits one had to cross the Guildford to Redhill railway by a level crossing. The gatekeeper's cottage stood here, a dark, low, wooden little place. The gatekeeper, Mrs Banham (I don't remember a 'Mr') always wore a man's old cap.; she often came out to talk to passers-by. The small gate was always left unlocked, so walkers and cyclists could get across

Her son Alf was our local postman for many years. Len Jordan refers to his postman as Mr Le Cluse. Perhaps they shared the rounds.

Although there was a lot of rail traffic there was very little on the road ; in fact often the only one needing the big gate open was Dr Thorne when he used his horse and trap.

Which brings me back to Dr. Thorne. My sister (Joyce Wenman later Green) told me that one day as she walked from the Pits down Moles lane, the doctor, coming from behind stopped his horse and told her to jump up into the trap (he probably guessed where she was going) and gave her a lift right onto the Green. She was so proud to be sitting high up next to him. He was thought of with affection and respect by everyone. It was remembered in our family how he, called out to my mother during a time when Dad was out of work, deliberately 'forgot' to pick up his shilling fee from the dresser as he left; and he did dispense many of his little powders, for I remember him standing by my sickbed and, with a smile, producing a slim white paper package from his waistcoat pocket and giving to my parent for me.

In 1926 there was an earthquake shock in the area. I remember feeling that the room was swaying and my mother calling "Oh, look at Flo Mole!" Our large oil painting of a gypsy girl was hanging sideways. I don't know how this girl got her name; I wonder if there was a group of gypsies living nearby; why was Moles lane so called? Opposite it, across the main road, is a narrow track (a short cut past Mr Kempe's house onto Brockham lane) which was called Old lane or Gypsy lane.

The council house we moved into in 1926 must have been one of the first ones built locally after WW1. First known just as number Reigate Road,, they were eventually called Puddenhole cottages; named after the dwelling which lay opposite on a slope down to the river.

Our move certainly took us up the social scale for our house had a kitchen – which we called the scullery; a bathroom – containing a solitary bath with cold water tap; and – most amazing – a flushing toilet indoors! There was a big garden bounded at the back by the railway cutting and the A25 at the front

The families who first moved into the new houses were (from no.1) Wheeler, Saunders (later Streeter), Overington, Mitchell, Green , Homewood, Adams, Wenman, Grantham, Burberry, Arnold , Overton. Several of these came from 'tied' accommodation after leaving service in big houses in Betchworth; or from shop or Post office, farm cottage or chalkpit company. We soon jelled into a comfortable little community, the parents mostly middle-aged with teen- age family and (like us) with a younger, post-war afterthought. So we all had contemporaries and shared our joys and tragedies.

And there were tragedies. During my schooldays there were several that affected me in some way: Some of the infants of the school died of measles or whooping cough; the fathers of two of my fellow pupils suffered fatal accidents at work and my own mother died when I was eight. Before that , next door at no.9, a Grantham child died and soon after , next door at no.7 the Adams toddler did not recover from diphtheria. Later , the husband of Dolly Burberry crashed on a motor cycle and was fatally injured, as was Sonny Streeter, another neighbour's child. He fell under the wheels of the baker delivery van, out side our house. He was laid on our sofa – something I deeply remember.

During all these times Drs Thorne and Arthur attended the patients and supported relatives. I mention these things here as I wonder was a series of such events common in other groups in the village during that time.?

With several other men from the village, my father worked for the contractor building the new A25 road. I remember his words: "It was b..... hard work with pick and shovel."

Later, when that came to an end he (Ernest Wenman) worked for Mr Farley, a contractor or developer who built all the bungalows down Brockham Lane. My dad said he had dug most of the drains all down the Straight (as we called it), by hand.

There was a butcher's shop at the junction with the main road owned by Mr Hodgson. I recall his wife giving an outgrown frock of his daughter to my sister. This was probably in the 1930 depression.

It may have been about this time that the willow trees opposite the bungalows were planted. They stood in a straight line between the pavement and the field. Even then I think this was called the Big Field.

In winter north-east winds and blizzards blew across it, catching us on our way to and from school; but the trees later became a good screen.

At the bottom of the Straight the manor estate began; we called it Mr Poland's garden; it provided last minute items for our school nature notes as we hurried past, noting which flowers were out, trees in bud and plants of the river.

The generosity of this benevolent gentleman and his wife is well known. One such I remember: I went on the appointed day to what seemed a door in the wall of the estate on Kiln lane; inside was a courtyard or outhouses where, to a line of school children were being handed out pairs of new shoes. What a sensible gift! I know mine were gratefully received. I think this too, must have been financially a bad time. I don't know if this shoe distribution was a regular occurrence.

Another of Mr Poland's gifts was a children's play area in his grounds beside the river, with a pool and space for games and trees for shelter. As Len remarked, this was a great place to go on Saturdays and holidays.

I know there is a photograph of swimmers, supposedly of the opening of the pool, but I query the date suggested; for in 1930 my sister would have been fourteen years old, and she and her contemporaries there do not look that age. Perhaps there is a record.

But I know it was a boating pool. A man was in attendance; perhaps one of the estate gardeners or other staff. He would time each boat then point to it and shout "Time's up", and out we would row, without sulk or argument.

My main memory though, is of the toilet facilities. Two huts made of – I think – metal sheets, with a bucket seat inside. Towards the end of the day the smell was grim and flies and other insects from the river congregated. Only dire necessity sent me there!

Another item in Len's story which interested me was his sighting of an airship.

I too, watched this from our front garden on Reigate road. It moved slowly from west to east – an awesome sight; it must have been the R101 on test flight, for I saw it in daylight and I believe its last fatal journey took off late in the evening.

Summer was a busy time on the Green, from Mayday with may queen and we school children performing Maypole dance.

Then came cricket; the team mostly of fathers and older brothers of my school friends, until they were old (and good enough) to play themselves. I did not often watch matches, although my brother-in-law (Fred Green) was in the team, and in later years told me of clocking up his thousandth run and of his shot that took tiles off the Royal Oak roof. Pulling my leg, I guess; although there may be records still.

To me, the pictures in Syd's gallery of the 1935 Surrey county match is a great reminder. I was there! The name Jack Hobbs was mentioned that day, although I don't think he was there. I did though, (probably making a nuisance of myself running around with pencil and book) get the autographs of Barlow and Owen among others.

Then came the Flower Show. The interest and competition began as soon as the schedules were out; most families entered something. We all – apart from my teenage brothers – were keen competitors.

My dad chose and washed every kind of vegetable from our garden ; my mother baked cakes and boiled matching potatoes; my sister stitched embroidery.

For the children's classes, I spent days before, making my 'minature garden on a plate'. Then on the day of the show I was off up the hill to pick my 'best bunch of wild flowers'.

There were so many to choose from on that part of the Downs so close to our home. I think this must have been a popular class in the show; I remember many vases with (sadly, quite soon wilting) flowers lined up on the bench. Did we contribute to their decline in numbers?

The judging was usually over by midday, so the afternoon was the exciting bit. The Green teemed with people, most making for the marquee to see who had won awards. I don't recall any coming our way, but the sight, smell and feeling of being part of it remains.

Bonfire night. How we looked forward to it! As soon as the big box in Mr Stent's shop was opened every penny we were given or earned was spent on fireworks and although our collection was only a few penny bangers, a Catherine wheel and a rocket, we joined with neighbours (there was always one dad with an ongoing garden bonfire) and enjoyed our celebration.

Then on the Saturday, the fun began for us children with the fancy dress competition. On the Green the fire for the roasting of the pig was alight and the flares for the evening parade were ready. These were made of a long, stout stick with some cloth or flock tied firmly round the top; this was then doused in paraffin or some such oil.

As the waiting lines of marchers moved off and we joined up we were given a lighted flare. Holding them high we stepped along. This was a lovely sight; a moving column in the darkness. I recall the smoke billowing from the flares and the strong smell of burning oil.

I think the younger walkers were encouraged to return to the Green early on; it was a long route, with some stops for refreshment for the adults. I – probably with my sister and older girls – waited for the parade to arrive back, when the flares were thrown to light the bonfire.

There has been a keen interest in the village in Scouting and Guiding, for many years. My sister was a Guide in 1928 and probably a Brownie before that. Her Guider leader was a Miss Du Boisson from Betchworth who was spoken of with affection. My own Guide leader, in about 1935 was Miss Emily Balchin assisted by Hermia Parsons. They were the last for a while as the company was closed until 1939, when I gathered together some enthusiasts and restarted it. They were mostly from old local families: Chitty, Boxall, Swan, Jordan. An evacuee joined, as did the daughter of the village policeman, Mr Bleach.

He was well liked; the police house stood at the end of Oakdene road.

Although I was christened in the church, apart from going to services with school, I rarely went inside.

On these occasions all the pupils and staff would walk to the church, perhaps for Easter or carols; although the service I do recall was on ascension day, as I think this was the occasion when we were out from school for the rest of the day.

Although there must have been a children's service or Sunday school there I, and my siblings and friends, all went to the Baptist chapel across the Green.. I suspect this was partly because we thought church was too 'high' for us (in dogma and social status) but mostly, I guess it was the chapel's annual tea party and seaside visit that enticed us

I didn't, in my youth, know that the Sunday school superintendant Mr Beasley was a working man with a workshop near the school; I thought of him as God's spokesman. I knew his house at the top of Brockham lane and sometimes saw his two elder children. The younger ones, Molly and David, we knew from Sunday school. Molly (I don't think we called her 'Miss') was our teacher.

I remember listening to her gentle voice telling bible stories as I sleepily watched millions of dust motes dancing in the summer sunlight coming through the high circular window of the upstairs room we used.

In winter the room often smelled of wet coats and socks, mingling with the fumes of – I think – an oil heater.

I remember those Sunday mornings as happy times. Mr Beasley was cheerful and patient and was liked by us. But also, he was very strict in the religious and moral code he taught us. He said we must never work or play on a Sunday. He said God would punish us for this, and for lying, stealing and all the others. He told us about his family's Sunday routine: The stove was banked up on Saturday so no need to carry coal or wood; there were sandwiches for lunch, so no cooking; no games or story books allowed – only the Bible, and three visits to chapel.

We enjoyed the hymn singing; mostly for the anticipation of Mr Beasley's blast on his tuning whistle. He would pull it from his pocket, give a long blow, sing the note then la la la up the scale until he found the note to start us on. By this time we were almost bursting with suppressed giggles, but nevertheless we sang lustily "A curse is on its greenness, a curse of blood and death" I quote.

So, to the two 'treats'. During the summer came the Outing. All the times that I went, this was to Littlehampton which was, while to us exciting, a dreary sort of 'just-sea-and-sand place.

All the chapel pupils from various parts of the village made their way to the green to pile into the coach; earlier, when my sister went, the transport was a charabanc – spoke wheels, open top; ours was better, with hard bench seats. On the way home the little ones fell asleep as the rest of us sang 'Ten green bottles' and 'Green grow the rushes'.

The other treat was called The Annual Meeting. It must have been in the autumn for I remember the main hall being lighted by gas or oil lamps, and the warm cosiness of people – parents and chapel members.

High in a corner there was a wooden pulpit from which we would be addressed by 'a special' person; but first we had tea – fish paste sandwiches and currant buns.

In the evening came the entertainment; for this the pupils sang hymns and some were chosen to recite. This was called 'saying a piece'. We started learning them weeks before – passages from the Bible and innocent little poems. I did this in the years when I was four and five; I enjoyed the applause!

After the visitor had spoken (one year it was Mr Haddow, a founder of the chapel – a very round-looking man, I recall) it was time to line up for our 'going home' gift; always, as far as is remembered, it was the same. An orange and a bun.

So to school days and Jack Tickner; he was very much a part of our days there, as caretaker. Others have mentioned his activities in the village; he was liked and appreciated in the school. I don't think he was ever really cross with us – apart from growling at boys who slid along his clean corridor.

He was a comic though, telling silly jokes as he went along with a crowd of us behind him. One I recall: he walked along with an exaggerated limp, repeating with every step "ninety nine blonk", then stopped suddenly to ask "What am I?" Answer: A centipede with a wooden leg"!

But first into the infants class where Mrs Boxall was teacher. She seemed to me to be very old; I think she had grey hair in a bun and was slim. The first thing she taught us was a rhyme: 'Happy school to make us good and clever. Will we stay away? Oh, never never.' and I don't think any of us would willingly have done so, for we knew about Mr Rowe.

He was the attendance officer. I have a memory (is it truthful, I wonder) of a tall man in a dark suit, riding around the district on a sit-up-and-beg bike. We, the children, all believed that if he caught sight of us out of school, unless we were ill, that he could take our mothers to prison! I know I, on the occasions on which I had to stay home, always kept well away from the front windows in case he cycled past.

Another visitor who checked on us was the schools nurse, Miss Comper – known to us as 'the nit nurse'.

She too, I believe, cycled from school to school, with her nurses bag strapped to the carrier. She came regularly and began the ritual of taking us one by one into a corner of the room and worked with her small-toothed comb and tweezers. Very often she

would look carefully at what she'd found and write a note for the unfortunate child to take home.

We all hated this happening to us as all parents forbade us to get near anyone with a note; this meant we should be left to play and walk home alone until we returned, smelling of whatever (usually paraffin and carbolic soap) had been used on us. Nurse Comper was a reassuring person, often asked for advice away from school by mothers. She also looked for – and often detected - early signs of ring worm, chicken pox and the dreaded measles and scarlet fever rashes.

A dentist also came to the school at infrequent intervals. I cannot remember where he held his examinations; did a sort of van come or did he get a vacated room?

I don't think attendance was compulsory and I believe parents could accompany us, for I remember my mother being with me and agreeing to take me to a dental clinic in Redhill for treatment. I guess this had to be carefully considered as it involved bus fares and I think there was a small charge.

During my time in the infants class – 1928/9 – Mrs Boxall left – at least I didn't see her again; a new teacher came, but I never knew her name as I was on my way to Big School and class 4.

Miss Sanders, who lived in Betchworth, was teacher of this class and I adored her. I have memory of her dark, short-cut hair, kindly face and an impression of her dressed in neutral coloured skirts and soft twin sets.

She was always patient and had interesting things to tell us. The high window sills in her room were filled with floral offerings and she displayed our treasured 'nature' finds; leaves , snails and fossils.

It was Miss Sanders who made hot drinks at lunch times in winter for those too far to get home. In snow or rain we'd take our mixture of cocoa and sugar in Oxo tins , to her room, where a large black kettle would be heating on the round stove. She handed out the drinks; I think we must have been seated at the desks – no canteen in those days!

Years later I learned that it was her duty to cane any girl due for that punishment. I guess this will have been recorded in the punishment book. I think she would have hated that task.

Next class 3 and its teacher Mrs Heal. Curiously I cannot recall much about my time there. I think Mrs Heal was of 'homely' build and that she lived in Dorking and cycled to school.

It was in this class that I got to know and play with the Home Girls. This group from Way House were quite integrated with us. We all knew the poignant story of the Goddard twins being taken into Brockham Home (as it was then) and we older girls liked to 'mother' them.

The matron of the home Miss Couchman, and her assistant Miss Taylor, made Way House a real home with kindness and common sense. I have heard that discipline was strict, but the girls – and all the village - respected both ladies with affection.

At about this time an unusual pupil came briefly to school. She was a small gypsy girl. She seemed to appear in the playground from nowhere; we heard that her name

was Charity Cooper. I regret to say that we girls (obeying our mothers' instructions to always keep well away from possible sources of infection) ignored her at one end of the playground.

The next afternoon a fierce gypsy woman arrived; she harangued us for "Treating my little gal like dirt" and shouted (probably to a teacher who arrived) "You should know what the Good Book says. Faith, hope and charity and the greatest is charity". She shoved the girl out of the gate, and as far as I know neither were seen again.

Class 2, the penultimate one before we left school, was taught by Miss Sherlock. She was, I suppose, a typical spinster for that era; she lived with her brother next to the shop he kept. We pupils thought she was a bit 'prim and proper'; a thin faced lady who seemed too 'governessy' to smile. I remember how her lips drew in to a pucker and twitched as she almost allowed herself to smile at some amusing incident

It was into her class that another unusual pupil came. I recall being fascinated by this boy's complexion; his skin was so fair it seemed almost transparent; his hair so cropped and fair that he looked bald.

Miss Sherlock informed us his name was Artis Freemanis and his home was in Riga – which, she reminded us was the capital of Latvia. The boys made much fuss of him and we all had fun trying to teach him English words, then, after a couple of weeks he was gone.

Now to class 1, the headmaster's domain. I think here should have been inserted my profile of him, published in the Dorking Advertiser in 1994. It could be shown elsewhere. As always, wondering how accurate memories are, I was pleased to meet his son Dudley at the mentioned reunion; he thanked me for such a true picture of his father.

I believe now that all the subjects Gaffer made so interesting and the way he taught them was my real education.

As well as the academic subjects, the activities were great and enjoyable exercise. Our performance at the Mayday celebration was prepared and rehearsed meticulously. There were boxes of Victorian style dresses for the girls which were brought out year on year; they fitted all shapes; the garters with bells on came out ,too. So did the master's gramophone and it's vinyl record of music for each dance.

There were trips out; I remember going to a chocolate factory – Fry's I think – and in 1936 by train to Southampton to see the Queen Mary leave on her maiden voyage.

A highlight of every year was our school choir's entry into the Leith Hill musical festival. The process began months ahead with the auditioning of pupils; this must have been of the older ones.

We were all gathered in Miss Sherlock's class, a gap was opened in the wood and glass partition between the rooms, and on his side sat Gaffer – unseen but listening. One by one we were called by name to stand facing the gap and sing the first verse of the National anthem. After hearing all the good, bad and excruciating efforts he decided who could, at least, sing in tune and we chosen ones were soon practising the set pieces, after school, at dinner breaks and any time available.

He'd told us about Dr Ralph Vaughan Williams the famous musician and composer who would judge our singing and afterwards, conduct us; so we were full of awe and determined to do our best for Mr Pinnock.

I remember the excitement of being in that great hall full of pupils from many schools, and the loud applause when the grey-haired, broad-shouldered Vaughan Williams appeared. I don't know if we won any awards.

It was the custom in the headmaster's class, for a pupil in their last year, to be selected as a sort of 'teacher's assistant'. Known as the Prefect, he or she would be in charge of the class any time the master had to be out of the room. I was chosen for this (as was my sister 7 years before) and I must say I enjoyed this break from routine. I sat at the teacher's desk while the pupils worked silently on essays or reading. So, apart from answering any queries on their work, my main task was to keep order; not difficult, for everyone knew that I must report any misbehaviour.

I was also authorised to award the punishment known as 'taking a black mark'. Every pupil had a named squared card; any misdemeanour, talking or other disruptive thing and one square of the card would be filled with a black cross. Three filled and it was loss of break time; six meant detention and writing lines and nine brought the cane.

I left school in 1937 and four years later joined the WAAF and left the village, but visiting frequently while family members lived.

Now there are many new faces, and so few of the old ones I remember; and yet, strolling round the Green on my visit in 2010, I still felt comfortably 'at home'.

Nora Mortimer (Wenman).