

My Childhood in Brockham Green. - War Year Memories

I was born in February 1934 at No 1 Cast Iron Cottages, Gadbrook Road part of what I believe, is now called Brook House. My father Gilbert Strudwick worked as a gardener at Brockham Park, Shellwood Manor and Little Abbots Farm where Sir Malcolm Campbell the holder of the British land and water speed records lived, or was it his son, Donald Campbell? In 1938 we moved down into the village to new houses, at 21, Oakdene Close, just before my sister Elaine was born in May 1939. My father had large greenhouses built where he grew, showed and sold tomatoes, salad stuff and chrysanthemums. We kept several breeds of exotic rabbits, 65 in all. My mother Flora worked as a part time housekeeper at the picturesque Cottage on the Green next to the Church and she also worked for the Titchners on Wheelhouse Road just in front of Gadbrook Farm. Lanham Titchner, a Producer with the BBC even had a TV set in 1939.

I would go up on the Greenline from Dorking to stay at their London flat We lived next door to Alf Meadows, a good village cricketer and his family at 19. Oakdene Close Alf's brother was the landlord of the Spotted Cow at Strood Green. Jackie Meadows was my best friend and his sister Shirley befriended my sister Elaine. Other school friends included Lawrence Cox and Roy Woodroffe from Oakdene Close, Donald Shoebridge and Vernon Harding from Wheelers Lane. Vernon's father kept ferrets and many a happy hour was spent 'rabbiting' along the banks and in the surrounding woods.

There was Pat Gunner who lived on the Green next door to the newspaper shop and Dennis Jones and Rosemary Overington lived in Providence Row the other side of the Green. Rosemary was my very first sweetheart and the cause of some trouble for me! On her eighth birthday I *'borrowed'* my mother's pearl necklace for her present, fortunately her mother realised their value and returned them. I think that very act probably ruined what might have been a beautiful romance, right there and then! I met Dennis Jones many years later when he became proprietor of the Royal Oak, and found he had changed his name to become an actor.

We were a happy bunch of children enjoying school and country life. Our headmaster was Mt Aldrich and our class teacher Miss Hobby, everyones image of an ideal teacher, a cheerful rotund lady, who travelled from Gomshall every day. We enjoyed school even more when the evacuee children from London were 'billeted' with us in the village because we 'locals' went to school in the mornings and the evacuees had our school after lunch. We thought we had the better of the deal because it seemed we always had the warm sunshine in the afternoons. But when it came to organising 'scrumping sorties' to the local apple orchards or raids into the builder's yard, the evacuees held the upper hand, they were so much more streetwise and cunning than we naive country kids! They even organised concert parties and plays. For our swimming lessons we walked along the Old Coach Road to the open air pool at the Watermill on the Reigate Road near Pixham Lane, 'that water was bone chilling cold!

School Lane was often flooded so we had to use the raised wooden gangplanks We would meet up and play round the Village Pump on the Green, on the felled hollow tree in the pond opposite the Butcher's shop or at the weir on the River Mole in the woods behind the village. We were never allowed to stray beyond Borough Bridge, thought by our parents to be out of sight and therefore getting up to no good!

My memories go back to having to walk up daily to collect the can of milk from Weir Mead Farm at the Junction of Wheelers Lane and Wheelhouse Road,(their geese were excellent security guards better than any Alsatian dog). Call in to pick up my father's prescription from Doctor Arthur's who lived in the house on the corner of Blind Lane and Wheelers Lane and to deliver the Sunday newspapers the length of Wheelers Lane. On winter days we would stop at the Village Forge for a 'warm up' before going in to school, dreading the ice on the top of the school milk at break time. I recall seeing Freddie Mills training for his next title fight behind the Barley Mow. Cutting the corn and threshing time was fun time, we were all armed with stout sticks with knobs on the end, positioned round the perimeter of the field so we could 'knobble' the rabbits and rats as they ran for cover.

Jackie Meadows and I often '*helped*' Mr Budd the Coal Merchant with his deliveries, he allowed us to sit in the cab of his lorry. One day, when we were parked outside the Royal Oak and Mr Budd was inside having a swift half to assuage his thirst and settle the coal dust, while we played with the steering wheel and released the brake, Panic! gradually the loaded lorry started to roll slowly backwards. Mr Budd must have been keeping an eye on us and dashed out to apply the brake just before the lorry reached the main road. Our temporary unpaid employment was terminated. With immediate effect!

The early months of the 'Phoney War' passed, Brockham mustered it's Home Guard, so vividly reminiscent of TV's Dads Army, drilling in front of the Village Hall with their pickaxe and scythe handles as 'make believe' rifles.

At the end of May 1940, I remember going up to the railway bridge the other side of the Reigate road to wave to the soldiers of the British Expeditionary Force on the trains coming home, after the fall of France and their evacuation from the Dunkirk. On the '*day war broke out*' 3rd September 1939, the memory that still brings a smile was Jackie Meadows standing on the bonnet of his red pedal car imploring the neighbours to 'Dig their shelters deep!, deep!, deep!'

The Anderson and Morrison shelters were installed, at first it was quite novel to eat dinner from the top of your indoor shelter and sleep under it at night We got used food rationing, coupons, powdered milk, powdered eggs, spam and snoek.

Friday night was bath night, taken in the regulation two and a half inches of water followed by a spoonful of Boots, Cod Liver Oil & Malt Extract to make us grow, and another of California Syrup of Figs to keep us regular!

We surrendered our aluminium pots and pans, cast iron gates and railings for the war effort and bought National Savings Stamps, that we stuck on shells and bomb cases with appropriate inflammatory messages for Herr Hitler.

The Ack-Ack guns were positioned along Box Hill as part of London's defence, the odd German bomber was shot down and provided us boys with a new hobby,- collecting bits of shrapnel, spent bullets and scraps of aircraft. You had a prize possession if you had a piece with part of the swastika or iron cross insignia on it.

The French Canadian soldiers arrived in droves to be stationed in woods round the villages giving us yet another collectors item, the back of their 'Sweet Caporal' cigarette packets showed recognition profile and detail of both Allied and Axis aircraft. During one air raid, we were all in the play ground, Mr Aldrich pointed to one German, parachuting down and saying 'He was coming down without his boots on' What he meant was, he had lost his legs by gunfire after bailing out.

Warnings went out to avoid the anti-personnel Butterfly bombs dropped by German bombers en route to London on their bombing raids. Of course we boys found one in the ditch opposite the Girls Home on Wheelers Lane, left one of our number although we did get a mention at 'Assembly' at school, the following morning.

Being 'boys will be boys' if you got caught, you would most likely get a clip round the ear from the 'village bobby' he'd tell your Dad he'd done it, and then you would get another clip round the other ear from your Dad when he came in from work.

We all attended Sunday School and looked forward to the annual Sunday School trip to Chessington Zoo on open top double-decker buses! Much more fun than the service buses 429 and 439 that ran to Newdigate and Strood Green respectively.

At Christmas, it was customary to go to the Manor across the Borough Bridge to sing carols to the residents, and every year we were each given a sixpenny piece, a glass of orange juice and a mince pie. Of course, the high light of the year was Bonfire Night, local farmers for weeks before hand, but well after the cricket season and well away from the 'hallowed square' would bring hedge clippings and felled trees and begin to construct the biggest bonfire ever seen. When the job was done, Dorking Fire Brigade would come out with their big turntable ladder and put the 'Guy Fawkes' on the top. We would all dress up and parade before gorging on fizzy lemonade and meat from the spit of the pig or ox roast.

Watching the spectacular dog fights and contrails in the sky of the Battle of Britain in August 1940 give a young boy indelible memories of those difficult times.

One summers day my Father was strafed by a trigger happy German pilot in a Messerschmidt 109 whilst cycling home along Wheelers Lane, he had to leap into the ditch to save his life, a close shave!

He was a senior member of the British Red Cross and went up to London with his ambulance from Dorking every evening during the 'Blitz' to take care of the injured. He, himself was asthmatic and each morning he would come home at around dawn shivering and soaked to the skin with the spray from the fire hoses and after some weeks this nightly experience, it affected his health, finally taking its toll and he died on the 12th May 1942 aged 34, and is buried in Dorking Cemetery.

After witnessing the enormity of the build up of forces and the launching of the D-Day Invasion in early June 1944, we left the village at the end of 1944, and I went to live in Puttenham, under the Hogs Back near Guildford, the home of my paternal grandparents, missing out on the VE and VJ celebration parties in the Village Hall
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