

## The Austerity of Post War Years & The Coronation

I was 15 years old in 1950 and lived in West Norwood SE27 and later, after I was married, in Streatham. During the war we moved away from the bombing, staying with relatives and renting accommodation so, by the time I had left school, I had attended 7 schools. In 1950 I was at Streatham County Grammar, belonged to Girl Guides and went camping each year.



*Wendy, Jennifer and me (Gill)  
In the Stocks at Battle Abbey 1953*

It was a bitterly cold day on the 6<sup>th</sup> February 1952 when King George VI died. I was playing netball at school and saw the union flag being put at half-mast across the road at Furzedown Training College.

In 1952 I was at school at the Accession of the Queen. I wrote off for a job with Shell Petroleum Co., and received letters later that summer offering an interview and then an offer of a position as a clerk at £200 a year - 10 pence an hour going rate. The letter was written on quarto tissue paper as there was still a shortage of paper then.

The following July I left school and started working for Shell in Bishopsgate. The day I started was very sombre, that morning Ruth Ellis was hanged for murder at 9am.

The city of London was in a dreadful state after the war with so much bomb damage; plus the thick fog due to the burning of coal to heat the offices, made working there in the 1950's rather grim. Due to the fog, our throats were sore and our eyes stung. Our eyes ran with tears and made white trickles down our sooty faces. Our white petticoats were grey almost up to our waists. Washing and cleaning was not so sophisticated as now, so we looked grubby especially the men, who wore dark woollen suits which went without cleaning for most of the suit's life.

I went often with friends to the pictures in West Norwood, it was called the Palace but we called it the 'Flee Pit'. I never told Mum, as she would stop me going. It was a grubby place and we were sprayed with disinfection when we entered. Most times the films were Charlie Chang, the Chinese inspector and son who solved many crimes. In 1952 I joined the Sea Rangers and rowed and sailed.



*Off to the start.  
Sea Rangers at the Chelsea Regatta 1953*

Times were austere and rationing did not finish until July 1954. A weekly ration of 2 oz sugar, 2 oz butter, margarine and lard, 4 oz tea, 2 rashers of bacon, 4 oz meat and 2 oz cheese kept us all very slim. Even the Royals had ration books and clothing coupons and they were very strict to show an example to us all, including only 4 inches of bath water per person: for one bath a week. We had very little fuel and I always felt the cold.

1953 - instead of things getting better after the war, things seemed to get worse. The year started with Derek Bentley being hanged for a murder he did not commit. [Editors

note:19 year-old Derek William Bentley (30 June 1933 – 28 January 1953) was hanged for the murder of a police officer. On 30 July 1998, the Court of Appeal overthrew Derek's original conviction]. We had terrible flooding on the east coast, the Thames estuary as well as in Holland. 1,000 drowned in Holland and 400 in England. That winter we had one of the worst smog's. Masks were given on prescription to those prone to respiratory troubles.

Not all was gloom. We did have plenty of fun with Bill Haley and the Comets and Bakelite records to play music on our Dansette record players. Levi jeans were born, as well as stiletto heels and paper slips to go under our Dirndl skirts. The best thing of all in 1953 was giving all us young people vaccinations against polio. Stalin died in the February and Queen Mary, the Queen's grandmother died in the March. The Coronation could not have come at a better time to cheer us up.

A relative asked me why it took so long between the Accession & Coronation. It took all that time to arrange things; coaches had to be refurbished, horses trained to cope with noise of the crowds. Crown jewels cleaned, dresses made, and mothballs shaken out of the Lord's Ermine. The City had also to be cleared of bomb rubble and dust, including refurbishing Westminster Abbey.

What was I doing on Coronation Day? My parents had bought a T.V. three months before, ready to view on the day. The set cost 52 guineas, money they could ill afford. I wanted to go up to London with my friends so, on Monday the 2<sup>nd</sup>, I went to our Sea Ranger weekly meeting and a group of us decided to all go up to the Coronation. So, armed with our jam sandwiches and bottles of water, we set off for the Mall.

Night temperature was 7°C; all night long it rained and we crouched under cycle capes. At nine in the morning we got into our positions. The Queen's guard with their Busby's lined the route. Because we stood in the Mall, the Queen's procession past us once going to Westminster Abbey and once more returning to Buckingham Palace. At 4 o'clock we set off for Chelsea and met by our Skipper who supplied us with sandwiches & tea. We then prepared our gigs [boats] at Cadogan Pier and 12 of us rowed down to Lambeth to watch the Royal fireworks.

After the display the police launches kindly towed us back to Chelsea or tried to. Sadly our painter in 'Frobisher' snapped between Vauxhall & Chelsea. So back to the oars and against the tide, we rowed back to Albert Bridge to our moorings. Trains ran most of the night so my friend Wendy and her sister Julie set off for home to West Norwood.

I got to bed about 4am and had to be up at 7 o'clock in the morning for work. As you can imagine I fell asleep over my desk - **WHAT A TWO DAY EXPERIENCE !**

Each week Dad and I went skating to the Streatham Ice Rink, often my cousins Doreen & Peggy came too, then back to Mum for tea. My paternal grandfather Edwin Moss came each year to stay for 3 weeks. Again I was lucky to go to the cinema; this time allowed to go to the Regal for the first performance at 1.10pm, in the 1/9's, and watch the films (main film plus second feature and Gourmont British News) twice over as you could then. We emerged from the cinema at 5.30pm. Granddad died in 1951 age 85. I was not allowed to go to Saturday morning pictures

except if a friend invited me on their birthday as they could take a friend and we both went free. The films always seemed to be “Tarzan”, “Sabu” and ‘Cowboys and Indians’ – not ‘politically correct’. We all hissed and booed the Indians and cheered the cowboys who had the advantage of guns when the poor Indians only had bows and arrows! Lots of noise took place while the poor theatre organ was played. It rose up from the orchestra pit. The poor man playing the tunes must have been relieved when he and the organ went down in the depths. Why they continued this practice, when all the children wanted was to see the films, I did not know.

Mum’s mother also came to stay each year; she lived with Aunt Lily when Granddad died, but spent a month each week with us and with Aunty Hilda and Uncle Bert. Grandma spent most of the time putting worn sheets sides to middle. Also making pillowcases out of old sheets Mum gave her. She also loved reading ‘Mills and Boon’. Things were still very short after the war and we had food rationing right up till 1954.

I went to the last trip of our tram in West Norwood and took this photo.



The Last Tram, West Norwood. 1954

In 1954 while at the Shell ‘Typing Pool’, I went swimming once a week at the Stepney Borough Baths with some of the girls. Food and clothing rationing was stopped at last after 14 years. The ‘Clean Air Act’ was introduced, stopping us from

using black coal, and we could only burn coke. The black fogs began to be a thing of the past. Things seem to be improving. We stopped in Petticoat Lane passing the Jewish Butchers with their chickens hanging up over the gutters. The butcher cut the throats and let the chickens bleed into the gutters – Kosher style. The smell of warm blood was ghastly.



*Setting off to France, sailing on Terminist 1954*

In 1959 I got married. We bought a semi-detached house in Streatham for £2800. It was in a terrible condition. We spent nearly a year bringing it up to date. Our two dads helped decorating.

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