

Halcyon Days, 1950-60



*A postcard view of Chesterfield Road (date not known)
Image courtesy of Bourne Hall Museum*

Home

I was born in 1940. My parents had bought a bungalow in Chesterfield Road, West Ewell, before the War. A nice little house, which my mother kept immaculate and full of the flowers my father loved to grow in the garden. During the War he had had to grow vegetables, but when peace came he vowed never to grow vegetables again. There were four apple trees: a Cox, a Blenheim Orange and two Granny Smiths, until my father took one down to put up a glasshouse. I loved the Blenheim Orange apple, and have finally managed to plant one in our garden here in New Zealand - its fruit didn't disappoint, even after sixty years! I think the apple trees used to be part of the garden of the older house a couple of doors away.

There were two bedrooms, and my sister and I shared the small one, until my father converted the attic for me to study and sleep in. Up there I could look out over the other gardens and watch the stars - but it was cold up there in the winter.

It was a pleasant road to live on, because there was a variety of attractive houses, not rows of semis. Some of the houses had probably been built at the turn of the century, because they were larger, and the trees in their big gardens were tall and mature. Lining the street were planes, which were regularly lopped to keep them from growing too big. As the summer progressed they would let loose their helicopters of seeds round our heads.

Primary School

So in 1950 I was ten years old, and a pupil at Ruxley Lane Primary School, Junior section. Mr Piper was the headmaster, and my teacher in 1951 was Mr Jasper. He was very keen on prehistory, which is why he named our class teams by prehistoric animals



*Teacher and pupils at Ruxley Lane School in the 1950s
Image courtesy of Bourne Hall Museum*

(I was in the Sabre Tooth Tigers). We listened every week to "The BBC Service from the Past", when a radio 'reporter' would go back millions of years and describe his surroundings. Usually he took off at the end when he was chased by something nasty! Mr Jasper even took us to the Natural History Museum, where I met, and have never forgotten, the gigantic diplodocus. He also liked tennis, and took us to Wimbledon. The best sort of teacher - he aroused a liking for history and a curiosity for information in me that has never waned. (The tennis interest stayed for a few years, but faded when my children arrived - no time!) Mr Piper had a part to play too - every day he would come in and give us a mental arithmetic test. I was never a genius at maths, but my resultant quick calculation skills have stood me in good stead.

Going to School

I used to walk to school from Chesterfield Road. Not a very long walk, (though Poole Road was a mud-hazard in the wet weather), and I would often return home for lunch. I had a couple of routes to and fro, the best being beside the Hogsmill River, accessed from the bottom of Crosslands Road. It was quiet, green, leafy, with the sound of the river softly running nearby. I would stop and watch for water voles plopping into the water, and if I was lucky, and stood very still for a long time, I might see a kingfisher dart out from its hole in the bank.

Ewell Court Park

The river ran through the outskirts of Ewell Court Park, which was a favourite haunt. There was no fence along the path in those days, and we would wander among the trees and play around the river by the old powder mill. In the park itself we would throw sticks to dislodge conkers from the great chestnut trees, and play around the stream

which led from the lake, catching tiddlers and newts - one day I saw a heron standing in the small lake, totally immobile as it watched for fish. We must have often returned home wet, muddy and dischevelled, but mum never complained. It was wonderful that we had so much freedom to play, explore, and learn how to take risks. I suppose I would have been called a 'tomboy' in those days!



*The Pack Horse Bridge in Ewell Court c.1960s
Image courtesy of Bourne Hall Museum*

A group of us belonged to the News Chronicle I-Spy Club. We had our own 'Red-Indian' tribe - because I wore glasses I was Chief Hawkeye. Monica had a dog we called Thundering Paws. We took our I-Spy books everywhere - I still have some of them - and we would diligently enter everything we spotted. The Pack Horse bridge in the park was a special trophy. One day we went to Chessington Zoo to meet Big Chief I-Spy - he turned out to be a nice man with grey hair, a walking stick and a limp. I think his Club was a brilliant idea - why can't young people have something like that now?

Ewell Village

I think it was in 1950 that my uncle generously gave my sister and me bikes, heavy Rudge Whitworths with four gears. I would spend hours riding around the Ewell - Epsom district, as well as further afield to Oxshott and Shere, and I would sometimes use it to get to school - frozen fingers in the winter! I enjoyed riding around Ewell Village; I liked its historical character - the overhanging upper floors over the shops, and the narrow side roads, with their lovely trees, and Bourne Hall with the ancient Spring. I liked the idea of the ancient folk coming from Epsom Downs to fetch their water. My father worked for a small engineering firm in Ewell; it was tucked unobtrusively in a back

street. During the War they had made parts for the fighter planes, so it was essential that it wasn't spotted by enemy bombers.

Grammar School

1951 was the year I started at Rosebery Grammar School in Epsom, which was a longer trip on the bike, and uphill most of the way. The best part was that if I pushed off from school at the end of the day I could travel all the way down the hill through Epsom (if the lights were with me) and under the railway bridge before I had to pedal! Just past the bridge was a shop where I could buy a tupenny orange-flavoured triangular ice block (against the rules in school uniform, but who was to see me?)



*Rosebery Grammar School date unknown
Image courtesy of Bourne Hall Museum*

My years at Rosebery (1951-59) are still treasured. One of my out-of-school activities was amateur dramatics, so I always jumped at the chance to be in the school plays. 'The Shoemakers' Holiday', 'Little Women', 'Riders to the Sea' - even one in French. I made friends there that I still write to at Christmas, but now that we live in New Zealand, I've never managed to get back to a reunion - I don't imagine there would be many there from my years now anyway. My husband and I did return there once when we paid a visit to family in England - it was nice to go to the old classrooms and see my name up on the Prefects' Board. But it seems that a lot of the playing fields we used to enjoy have since been used for buildings. We used to lie out on the grass for English lessons, reading Shakespeare aloud. The teachers were all very likeable, although I was scared of a couple of them, who shall be nameless! Then there was Miss Gibbard, Miss Gatley, Mrs Hall-Yarr, Miss Leopold, Mr Stokes.....The Principal, Miss Lack, was wonderful - she even gave us lessons in Philosophy. Her most important advice: "Define your terms"!

Growing Up

Out of school the 'fifties were the days of shirtwaister dresses and full stiff petticoats - and white socks. The petticoat fabric was called 'paper nylon' and it could be somehow stiffened with sugarwater - pretty sticky in the hot weather. They were the days of blundering through the emotions, embarrassments and surprises of growing up. Of the first boyfriend. Of experiments with makeup - the Yardley Club would send samples of

their lipsticks in pretty youthful pinks. Days of pondering the meaning of life and writing poetry up in my 'attic'. Of kicking away the chair legs of religion and standing alone among my own responsibilities.

Bound's Shop



*Ewell House Parade in November 1970
Photographed by LR James. Image courtesy Surrey Libraries*

Between leaving school in the March of 1959 and going to Nottingham University in the September, I worked in a shop in Ewell to make some money for clothes to take with me. Mr Bound's shop was in some ways the hub of the village. We had regulars who came in for their newspapers, tobacco and sweets. After school we would be invaded by children for more sweets and ice creams. Again Mr Piper's arithmetic tests were useful - adding up shillings, pence, halfpence and farthings in my head. The shop was opposite the 'Green Man', on the corner by the tree-lined lane that went down to my father's engineering works; now I believe Bound's is a shoe shop. On Google maps it looks much smaller than I remember.....

Living at one of the 'round Earth's imagined corners', we don't often get back to England, and it's twenty years since I last saw Ewell or West Ewell. I've only got to look on Google maps to see how much (and sometimes how little) it has changed over the last fifty years. But your website shows that Ewell Court is still attractive, though the wilder, secret corners of its woods have gone; and it's good to see that the green stretch of the Hogsmill River is still preserved. I wonder if the kingfishers and the voles are still there too?

Mary Boekman, née Doerr © 2011