

LIFE IN THE 1950s



Ewell Court Shops, Kingston Road, Decorated for the 1953 Coronation

We bought our bungalow in Firswood Avenue in 1953 when we were married. It cost the princely sum of £2,950. My father generously gave us £1,000 and guaranteed to the building society that our mortgage would be paid monthly. In those days, the wife's earnings were not counted and, as my husband was only earning just over £5 a week, we could not have got a mortgage without my father's backing. I worked for four years and saved my salary; in that way we managed to pay off the mortgage just before my first baby was born.

My husband worked five full days and half a day on Saturdays. He was allowed a week off in Summer without pay. He was a plumber. Unless we had a cold winter with lots of frozen pipes to be mended in the evenings, we had no money for holidays.

We never borrowed money or owed any. We never bought anything unless we could pay for it. We saved for three weeks to buy a back doormat, which cost 3 shillings and 11 pence. When we finally got it, we were so proud of it. Every week we put ten shillings in an envelope for the rates; ten shillings in another envelope for gas and electricity. Our weekly food bill rarely came to much over £1. In addition, I bought a joint at the Ewell Court butcher's each weekend. This was roasted on Sunday, cold on Monday and made into shepherd's pie on Tuesday. It rarely cost much over ten shillings. I cooked every day and we always had a pudding. The meal was always ready to be put on his plate when my husband came home from work. For years, we had an allotment near the Organ Inn and this kept us in vegetables most of the year. The milkman came everyday whatever the weather and the baker called twice a week.

I spent Coronation day with my head literally inside the gas oven. We had inherited this from the previous owner and it needed a good clean-up. We had no refrigerator for years. No one in our road that I knew had one. Our kitchens face north so the larders were cold and I can never remember milk going sour. Every morning you could see a procession of ladies going down to the Ewell Court shops to buy their daily necessities. There were plenty of shops there to supply our needs: two fish shops, two chemists; two greengrocers; three grocers. We did not have a car and supermarkets had not been heard of. Going to the local shops was something we looked forward to each day.

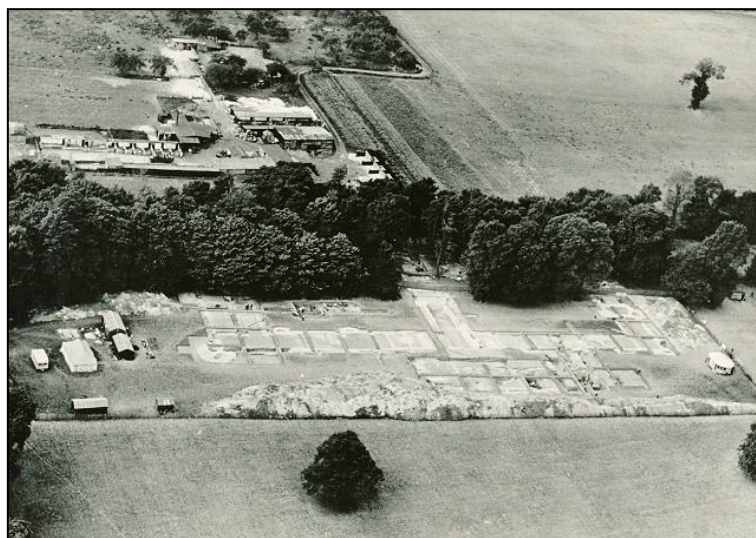
Our house was very basic. We accepted this as normal. We had one messy boiler in the kitchen that worked on solid fuel. It had to be raked out every morning and the ashes

removed. If it did go out, it was a horrid task to relight it, which filled the kitchen with smoke. In the evening we huddled round an electric fire. In winter, the house was literally freezing. There was no double-glazing of course for many years.

I did all the washing by hand, (still do, actually!). We did not have a washing machine, even a basic one, until my second baby was born. The washing was hung on the line outside dripping wet. Often, in winter, it hung there for days, sometimes frozen solidly to the washing line. When my first baby was born, I had to boil all the nappies in a bucket on a gas ring. There were no such things as disposable nappies.



When we were first married, once a week the great treat was to go to the Rembrandt cinema. This cost one shilling and nine pence, about twenty pence (nowadays). Other evenings we listened to the radio; we always made sure we were sitting ready for the nightly instalment of 'Dick Barton'. We did not have television for many years.



Aerial view of the 1959 Excavations of Nonsuch Palace

On Sunday afternoons, we usually went for a local walk. Ewell Court Park was our favourite stamping ground. In the 1950s the course of the Hogsmill had not been altered and there were even still traces of the old gunpowder mills. When my first baby was born, I regularly attended the clinic in Ewell Court Park to get baby weighed, as instructed by the health visitor of whom I was terrified. In those days, the babies were breast fed every four hours, not a minute before or after. They were taken for a walk every afternoon, rain or clear. In the mornings they were put out in the garden in their prams. If they were ill the cure was

always five days in bed. I used to long for the five days to be over so that I could walk round Ewell Court Park again.

Occasionally, we walked to Nonsuch Park to see the peacocks in the gardens of what people called Nonsuch Palace. I remember in 1959 going to see the excavations of the genuine palace. What a pity it was all covered over as soon as the 'dig' was finished. It would have been a big money earner for the borough these days, if it had been properly preserved.



In Ewell village there were many more old houses than there are now, including an old pub which sold cider according to its advertisements. Bourne Hall School was functioning when we first came to Stoneleigh. I remember seeing a notice board proclaiming it was for 'the daughters of gentlemen'! Soon it closed down and gradually began to decay. We saw the children's cloakrooms open to the weather, a sorry sight. Later, of course, it was replaced by the present library and museum. There was a lot of opposition to this scheme and we thought the new building represented a flying saucer!



The main Kingston road was like a country road, with wide grass verges each side. There was very little traffic and it was a pleasure to walk along it. Our road, Firwood Avenue, was kept looking immaculate by an old man with a wheelbarrow, who removed each weed that dared to grow before it had scarcely appeared.



Stoneleigh Methodist Church

It was a good life in the 1950s. Our possessions were very few but we were contented and happy with what we had. Our main outing on Sunday was to walk to the local Methodist church morning and evening. You had to start out early in the evening because the church would be so full you could not get a seat unless you did.

Things are a bit different in Firswood Avenue now!!

Hilda Bristow © 2011