

Schooldays in the 50s

I was seven when the decade started and attending a state primary school in Coulsdon (now in the borough of Croydon). I lived one and a half miles from the school and walked each way every day on my own once my brother moved on to the grammar school when I was nine. I clearly remember being told that the king had died, and the following year having the day off for the coronation of the queen. Our family all went to a relative who had a television (tiny screen with a magnifying glass in front) to watch the ceremony. All children received a coronation mug (which I still have), and locally we celebrated by having a party and sports day on Farthing Downs, on to which our garden backed.

The school also had an annual sports day which was held in the recreation ground in Marlpit Lane. In my final year I was captain of the 'Blues', one of four houses into which the school was divided, and we were successful in winning the cup for the best team. Although not very gifted in athletics, I did take part.

I took the 11-plus exam in 1954 and passed to go the local grammar school. The class photo of my last year at primary school shows a class of some fifty children! Discipline was strict, but accepted as normal by the vast majority of children. There was no corporal punishment, but the shame of having to stand 'under the clock' outside the headmaster's office was sufficient deterrent for most.

As we had relatives in Australia we used to receive food parcels from them; presumably sent by sea and taking some six weeks to get here. They were wrapped in brown paper and string and contained such delights as tinned pineapple (very common nowadays). Even though the contents were non perishable, I can still remember the wonderful evocative smell when we opened the parcels.

I know that things were still on ration in the early 1950's, but I was not aware of any deprivation. My father grew fruit and vegetables and my mother bought meat at the Co-op. I can still remember her dividend number, which I was allowed to tell the cashier! I do remember sweets coming off ration when I was ten/eleven, but it was not a big deal...what you have never had you never miss!

The rest of the decade was spent at a girl's grammar school where discipline was even stricter, but which ultimately did us no harm. Away from school I was out of doors as much as possible playing in the fields and woods which surrounded our house. We had endless freedom and only went home when we were hungry. Our imaginations could run riot as we had very few material possessions and shared what we did have ... a bicycle for example.

I took eight GCE O-levels and passed all eight (we did not have grades then), spent a year in the sixth form and then decided enough was enough and got myself a job in the Civil Service in London. That was in 1960 and so ended my formal education, but since I retired I have gone back to studying with WEA classes and distance learning via the Internet.