

DIANE FROM SOUTH LONDON REMEMBERS THE 1950's

As a school girl in the 1950's I can remember waking up on a cold winter's morning and finding intricate lacy patterns of ice on the inside of my bedroom window. I would make a hasty dash to a freezing cold bathroom for a quick wash, having to be mindful of other members of the family having to use the very limited supply of hot water heated in a boiler from a coal fire. We considered ourselves to be quite fortunate because several houses still did not have the luxury of a bathroom. My mother would get up early to make up the fire – a messy dirty job having to rake out the ash and clear the grate before laying newspaper and chopped wood. The balance had to be just right in order that once set alight the coals could be placed in such a way that they would burn evenly. It would take some time before the living room became comfortably warm and this was usually the only warm area in the whole house. One physically shivered in other rooms.

From a very early age I walked to school on my own. There was not much traffic about because the normal family did not own a car. The era of the large clanging trams was nearly over and the new modern electric trolley buses with poles running to overhead cables was the new form of transport but they were not very successful and it was not long before they were taken off the roads. The red double-decker buses had conductors who helped elderly people, young mothers with children and people with luggage. Fares would be collected as the vehicles proceeded along the road. Sometimes in winter fogs were so thick one could not see anything and people would have to walk in front of vehicles to guide the drivers - very dangerous. These fogs were known as 'smog' due to the burning of coal fires and the smoke from the chimneys becoming trapped in the fog thereby making it very dirty. People with respiratory problems had difficulty in breathing and in 1952 the fatalities reached over four thousand.



Diane (back row 3rd from right of photograph) with her school friends

Children in London did not have many possessions because they were just not available. Quite often toys were made by parents because they were so expensive to buy, but in spite of this children seemed to enjoy themselves because they had more freedom to play. We were allowed to go over to Tooting Bec Common which had two boating lakes, tennis courts and a refreshment hut where one could buy the most delicious buns for 1d. (1d. was one-twelfth of a shilling (5p)) The only warning we had from our parents as we set out to play on the Common was "Don't talk to any strange men". Situated on the Common was the Tooting Bec Lido – a large open-air swimming pool. In summer my father sometimes took me swimming as soon as he came home from work. The pool is still open to-day.



*Diane playing with the cooker made by her father
(an exact replica of her mother's electric cooker)*

Although people in London were surrounded by rubble, derelict buildings and bomb craters the hardships of the war were gradually receding and there was a general feeling of progressing forward into a brighter future. However many had to strive hard to obtain a better standard of living but everyone took tremendous pride in their homes and businesses. People would clean and sweep the fronts of their houses and shops so litter was never a problem. Gardens were well maintained and the soft "whir" of hand-pushed grass mowers and the "clip-clip" of hand-held hedge shears could be heard on many summer evenings. The sounds were almost soporific - so unlike the noisy power tools of to-day.



The view from the top of St. Paul's Cathedral (Tower Bridge in the background) overlooking the bomb damage

Great changes started taking place in homes. For my family these commenced with my father purchasing a twelve inch black and white television which was installed in time for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II on 2nd June 1953. Neighbours and friends were asked to watch the ceremony and I can remember the excitement and wonder of everyone present at being able to see the Coronation as it was literally taking place instead of waiting for the ceremony to be filmed and shown at the cinema. It was not long before all members of the family wanted comfortable armchairs to sit in whilst watching the television so the "living room" became the "lounge". The dining table and chairs were transferred to another room which meant we then had a "dining room". As coal fires took a long time to heat rooms, electric fires were installed to give instant warmth whenever needed. With these changes came fitted carpets to replace lino and rugs. To keep the new carpets clean my mother realised she needed an upright vacuum cleaner.

Kitchens were also being modernised. Pots and pans on open shelves were stored in cupboards. Brooms and brushes hanging on nails on the wall were placed in the "cleaning cupboard" which used to be the coal cellar. A washing machine replaced the old wash-boiler and room had to be found for a refrigerator which was a great asset in the summer. My mother used to shop every day for meat, fish and vegetables but as these could now be kept fresh in the refrigerator she no longer had to shop so regularly. However bread and milk were delivered each morning. The roundsmen had always used horse-drawn carts but these were being replaced by electric floats – much to the consternation of my grandfather because he no longer had a fresh supply of manure for his roses!

In the mid-1950's I became a teenager and the Rock and Roll era had arrived. Juke boxes, dance halls and coffee bars positively throbbed with the new music craze. Girls wore tight jumpers over full circular skirts that swung out from the waist when they jived. The boys wore long jackets over drain-pipe trousers and they always seemed to be combing their "Brilliantine" quiffs. Up until 1960 boys of eighteen had to spend two years doing National Service. This disrupted many romances but fortunately for me I met my future husband after he had done his National Service. Wages were low and the magical figure of £1,000 per year seemed a long way off, but we seemed to have tremendous fun ice-skating, roller skating, swimming and jiving. There is no doubt that entrance fees were more reasonable than to-day. If funds were really low my friends and I would make a cup of coffee last a long time whilst listening to the rock and roll music on the juke box in one of the many coffee bars. One could go to the cinema for 2s.6d (twelve and a half pence) and see two films, the news and perhaps even a cartoon. People could enter the cinema whenever they wished because there was a continuous programme. Everyone was shown to their seats by usherettes, with torches, and during the interval they would serve ice-cream and drinks in the auditorium.

Living together in those days was unheard of so my boyfriend and I were engaged for two years whilst saving for a deposit for a house. A three-bedroom semi-detached house in suburbia was about £5,000 and a car was in the region of £500. Early in the 1960's our Church Wedding and a Reception in a private function room of a public house with large buffet for one hundred people cost my father £500. During the first few years of our marriage my weekly grocery bill was approximately 19s.6d. (less than £1.00) and a large joint of meat cost 7s.6d. (less than 50p). It was the era of mini-skirts, bum-freezer jackets and the Beatles. Young couples struggled hard to obtain the modern appliances that were no longer classed as luxurious commodities but were the accepted normal necessities. At long last we were able to afford our dream home - a semi-detached chalet bungalow in Stoneleigh but the cost had risen to £8,500. I could look back with many fond memories but one of the greatest comforts for me was to have a centrally heated home with a constant supply of hot water and I certainly did not miss the ice on the inside of my bedroom window!

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