

1950's MEMORIES

Robert Hough

In 1950 I was 14 years old. I remember.....

EWELL COURT

The estate where I have lived most of my life has not altered much since 1950. Huge changes had occurred twenty years before, in Epsom and Ewell as elsewhere round London. Then suburbia, including our estate, had overtaken the countryside. Alan Johnson gives a marvellous account of this in his 'Semi-Detached London', with a case study of Stoneleigh. But by the 1950's our estate was well settled and, apart from double glazing and too many cars in the streets and front gardens today, it is still much as it was in my youth.

In the 1950's, however, we did have a thriving shopping centre, where the Kingston Road meets Stoneleigh Park Road and Bradford Drive. For us this was conveniently 'down the bottom' (of the hill from the Queen Adelaide). Here were all the everyday shops you needed – see the Appendix - plus a proper Post Office, a circulating library, ladies' and gents' hairdressers, a fish and chip shop, and even a dairy. I clearly remember the excited queue outside A.T. Palmers Joyland – toy and sweet shop – when sweet rationing ended in 1953 and I got my first (small) box of chocolates.

In Ewell Court itself the Kingston Road itself was single carriageway, unlike the stretches from Ruxley Lane and the Ewell bypass either side. It did not become dual carriageway until the 1970's, though there were very wide verges ready for it, where speedwell grew in profusion. Nor were there any traffic lights here. In fact there were none at all between Ewell Village and Tolworth.

Hard by was the Rembrandt cinema, our own local 'dream palace'. I went there regularly for the childrens' Saturday morning matinees with their endless, boring, B&W westerns. Later I graduated to the evening shows once a week with my mother. We never aspired to the posh tearoom above the foyer, though later my friend John attended Felicia's Ballroom Dancing academy which had replaced the tearoom. I learned that crucial 1950's/60's social skill with another friend at the Court School of Dancing over the billiard hall in Epsom High Street, near the now-departed Charter Inn.

Television was soon to topple the cinema (for a while anyway) and the familiar H-shaped aerials sprouted from many roofs. The aerials were susceptible at that time to interference from car engines; a neighbour once apologetically approached my father as he parked our car in the garage (that was what a garage was for in those days) and asked if we would fit the suppressor he tentatively offered. Our engine was spoiling his viewing.



'Dream palace' under the hammer, 1990's

Our own telly did not arrive until later in the 50's. But my grand Uncle Fred round the corner – a leading technofreak of his day – had a magnificent pre-war TV set in a huge wooden case with a tiny screen which you viewed in a mirror angled above the case. It did flicker into life after the war though not for long. More modern versions were displayed at the 1951 Festival of

Britain, alongside other technological marvels: on a visit with my parents I gasped in astonishment at a glimpse of myself onscreen, caught by a roving TV camera. (The equally new Festival Hall, alongside, was more to my taste, though – my first concert was in 1953, with a school friend.)

To view the coronation that year I had to go to friends in Epsom to crouch round their small grey screen with a crowd of neighbours. That was after returning from the Thames embankment where in a school party I had stood in the rain to see Sir Winston Churchill doff his plumed garter hat to the crowds, followed by the huge and magnificent Queen Salote of Tonga and finally and briefly by our young Queen herself. It seemed fitting that we saw news of the conquest of Everest by Hilary and Sherpa Tensing on the news-stands as we waited in the rain.

More parochially I remember the creation of the new King George VI playing field over the river in West Ewell: the noise of machinery ploughing up the ground disturbed my adolescent laying-in. Later, in student vacations, I joined a council gang cutting grass around the borough, including St. Mary Ewell and St. Martin Epsom churchyards and Ewell Court park itself. I became adept with the small hand-scythe but – very wisely – was never allowed to swing the big long-handled one. When working in Ewell Court I came under the stern supervision of Mr. Mitchener, the Head Park Keeper, who lived in the lodge. I have wondered since whether he belonged to the family of that rather unusual name associated with one of the local farms; did he maybe take to park keeping when the farm sold up to developers?

I was very familiar with Ewell Court House (ECH). Then it accommodated clinics checking your eyes and teeth (and even did some drilling of the latter). Here I was found to be colour blind and also in need of remedial work for overcrowded front teeth. For the latter I am forever grateful, as a nice lady dentist in a long-vanished surgery in Waterloo Road Epsom gently removed the protruding molars and saved me from a blighted life. The colour blindness I can live with!

Outside the House itself, the ornamental pond, now a flowerbed, still flowed with water. Further on, the grass opposite the little artificial waterfall where I used to play football was planted in the 50's with small trees, doubtless to stop us enjoying ourselves; some of these are now being removed, presumably for age or infirmity. A big improvement here has been to encase the unsightly sewage pipe over the stream down from the lake. It now forms a pleasant little bridge. As youngsters we used to walk across the wide, unbridged, pipe, fearing to fall into the water though no one ever did.

Our library was always based at ECH. I joined as a child and am still a regular user. The children's library has in my time occupied two of the three ground floor rooms, though the adult section has remained in the former billiard room. I still have the last of the cardboard borrower tickets used before computerisation.

I well remember the deputy librarian of those days, Miss Griffiths – small of stature and high of heels. But not the famous librarian himself, John Dent, though I probably met him. I did, however, visit the remarkable excavations of Nonsuch Palace in 1959 for which he was the prime mover.

With crowds of others I peered, impressed if somewhat uncertain, into the numerous trenches. Subsequently I found enlightenment in Dent's authoritative and scholarly account of what is, probably, the most important historic building out of many in our borough.



Mum receives prize for best shop (see below)

STONELEIGH

Nearby was Stoneleigh Broadway with even more shops than Ewell Court, including a Woolworths and a Co-op. My mother worked for many years in Miller's (later Johnston-Carlton's) bread and cake shop (picture above). One especially tedious task every day was to check the weight of every single loaf on delivery to ensure that it reached the legal minimum – using manual scales. Every Saturday evening she faithfully brought me home a bundle of comics from the newsagent, along with vast amounts of shopping over the handlebars of her bicycle. She was very pleased when we finally reached the top of the interminable waiting list for cars and acquired a second-hand pre-war Morris 8. Now she could be met from work!

Dad worked 'in town' and like most men round here commuted from Stoneleigh station. He went early to catch the 'workmen's' train as it was cheaper. I became an apprentice commuter myself in 1959 for a temporary job in his office. I soon grew familiar with the bumpy uncomfortable trains with their long-vanished stout leather window straps and 'Ladies Only' compartments at the end of each coach. In 1950 Stoneleigh station had not long acquired its present access stairway and booking office, all under cover, replacing the original open stairway which I remember using early on (perhaps in the 1940's). The remnants of that can still just be seen.

Stoneleigh in those days considered itself superior. Ladies wore gloves for shopping in summer and there was consternation when it was rumoured that a fish and chip shop was to open on the Broadway (it didn't, until much later). Less elevated Ewell Court already had one – and there was no telling what might be happening in West Ewell. In fact there was an understood social hierarchy downwards through the three localities to match the downward slope of the terrain; and it was actually whispered that there were Communists in West Ewell. Whatever about that, the secondary mod. school (Danetree Road), where you went if you failed the 11+, was located there. Naturally the boys' and girls' grammar schools were found, respectively, in the more salubrious climes of Ewell Village and the better end of Epsom.

EWELL VILLAGE

Mercifully I scrambled through the 11+ to Hessle Grove, otherwise Epsom County Grammar School for Boys or today's Glyn, along with 5 others from West Ewell County Junior. (This was - and still is - not in West Ewell at all but across the river in Ewell Court). While at Glyn for the entrance exam. I had been awed by the tall angular figure of the Headmaster in a tasselled mortarboard and black gown stalking the corridor. That set the tone of the place as it tried to ape the ways of the public schools: which was probably easier then with a mere 400 boys than today with three times that number. But in fairness the 1950's school served me well and I am very grateful.

My journey to school was by the 406 bus, until the sixth form when I cycled. In the early days the 'bus' was sometimes a single-decker un-buslike coach, I think on hire. As today it followed the Kingston Road into the village and I daily watched the building of Grange Mansions, the block of maisonettes still with its ugly back to the road. On the river opposite was the original Upper Mill, before its 1960's reconstruction. My cracked soprano rendering of 'the White Cliffs of Dover' at a childrens' party there (maybe in the



Tennis 1950's Hessle Grove style. (The court has now been built on)



Hessle yobs 1951

Street – I think just along from the shop – despite his efforts to persuade her to move, he said.

The Ewell telephone exchange was in the village – the building remains, next to the Spring Hotel. But no it longer houses the cheery 'hello girls' who in the 1950's would routinely demand 'number please' and then connect you, sometimes with a peremptory 'hold the line'. Often while doing so you would hear the bells of nearby St.Mary's as the ringers practised. Best of all was the freedom to gossip as long as you liked as calls were not timed. But we had had to wait ages for the phone to be installed because of postwar shortages of materials. And when we got the prize we had to share our line with neighbours for a while, so that you could not make a call if the line was already in use – though you could overhear the neighbour's conversation.

EPSOM

The town then was rather more dowdy than today. The focus was at the East Street end of the High Street where the main shops were stationed. These included the original Waitrose (whose 1950's arrival the summer-gloved ladies deplored), along with Boots and Woolworths - but no M&S until much later. True, the splendid Kings Head hotel at the clock tower end had not yet succumbed to progress but it soon did; and the Ashley Centre was a 1980's mirage. The Gaumont and Odeon cinemas flourished for now, one at each end of the town. I preferred the latter for its grand red velvet seats and its sweeping staircase down into the wide foyer.

In my senior days at school I sat on a young people's road safety committee, which met at the Town Hall (lemonade and cakes provided). A kindly policeman and council official listened benignly to our youthful outpourings though I don't think much official notice was ever taken. Most embarrassingly on my way home from one such meeting I was stopped in the High Street and reprimanded by the police for having no lights on my bicycle.

My life of crime continued soon after when I was caught riding the same bike up the then pedestrian-only alleyway into Manor Drive. Two policemen in a police car parked opposite, presumably just having a quiet smoke (I didn't ask), did their duty when this malefactor flew out of the alleyway and I was sternly reprimanded once more.



Teachers off duty: Messrs. Powell Swithinbank & Saalfeld at a 1950's Hessle Grove sports day

1940's) was long remembered.

The 406 route continued into the village where, had I but known, I might have seen that fine Ewell historian, Cloudsley Willis, in the family shop – he only died in 1950. But I did pass Carpenter's the bakers in one of the village's lovely old buildings which, like so many since, was shamefully demolished – on this occasion 'accidentally', by a reversing lorry. (It was replaced by the former post office building currently about to be re-used). I slightly knew Bill Carpenter of that family, later to be Mayor, whose mother continued to live in one of the old houses in the High



But I didn't really pilot it....

I managed to conceal this record of crime when attending first the Baptist and then the Methodist churches in Epsom. Indeed on one occasion whilst in the RAF on National Service I was invited to address the Methodist childrens' church wearing my grand Senior Aircraftsman's uniform – so that they could then sing the chorus about everyone needing to find a Pilot. I also told them an instructive story, though not of the barrack room kind.

My main contribution to church life however was in performance: I belonged to a small group of troubadours led by John. We offered loyal and long-suffering church members divers entertainments – with a retiring collection for a good cause (not us). I variously played piano pieces, badly, (to the horror of my music teacher who kindly attended, unaware, I think, of my intention to play), recited poems, and acted in dramas, some of which he had written. Our repertoire and boldness expanded in tandem and we rose to the heights of Shaw and Chekov. We even took the latter's 'The Marriage Proposal' on tour - to the then Richmond Methodist Training

College (for one matinee performance in a tent during an Open Day). But that was the apogee of our theatrical careers, alas!

The 1950's for me were a good time. I saw school, National Service, university and work, all in the one decade. I was away for 5 of the 10 years but always returned whenever I could. I would not be elsewhere.

John, my lifelong, but now sadly departed, schoolfriend, fellow thespian and much else, felt likewise. He lived in Epsom in the 50's (though in exile later) and I in Ewell so we 'divided' the borough between us. But for both it was always one place: its two parts united - in my fancy, but also on the borough arms - by water flowing from the Downs and the old town pond into our own small river which long powered so many mills (including one in Ewell even in the 1950's) on its way to the Thames and ultimately to the sea. Why go anywhere else?

APPENDIX

EWELL COURT SHOPPING CENTRE

(Clockwise Tour from Bradford Drive)

ORIGINAL AND EARLY SHOPS

From Bradford Drive to Kingston Road

Ledsham's chemists
Ewell Court Electrical
?Shoe shop (*in prefab on bomb site*); *much later*: video hire
2 cafe's
Blunt's fishmongers
Robert's bakers
A.T.Palmer's Joyland (*sweets and toys*) = *last 2 shops*

From Kingston Road to Stoneleigh Park Road

Manning's fish (*and chip*) shop and restaurant
Chance's hardware
Nuttings grocer's
House of Ray ladies' and gentlemen's hairdressers
Montgomery's chemists
Job's Dairy
(*drive to shops' rear access*)
Turner's bakers
Kingston's butchers
Richardson's fruit and veg. (?later a hardware shop or
?that separate)
Sunny's sweet shop (*on corner*)
Mme. Aida's ladies and children's garments
Cobbler's
Dixon's hardware

From Stoneleigh Park Road to Kingston Road

Circulating library
Cutt's fishmongers
Barclay's(?) bank

From Kingston Road back to Bradford Drive

Post office
Newsagents
Ewell Court Fruiterer's aka. Marny's
Grocer's ? Nutting's moved across or a.n.other
Appleby's ladies and children's garments