

MY EARLY DAYS IN WOODFORD

by Peter Lawrence

I'm sure most people can recall some happening from their very early years. My earliest memory is the day we moved from Gloucester Road, Walthamstow to Stanley Road, South Woodford. My parents had married at the beginning of World War II at St Mary's Walthamstow and began their marriage living with my mother's parents. I came along in 1943 and in 1947 we moved to Woodford. The move must have made an impression on me because I can recall so vividly leaving Gloucester Road that morning sitting on my mother's lap in the cab of one of my Grandfather's coal lorries, with the furniture, such as there was, strapped on the back. As we moved off the neighbours were waving and shouting, I presume, words of good luck. My next memory is later that day sitting in the kitchen, on a simple wooden chair watching my mother getting organised. Our new next door neighbours were there to welcome and help. I presume I was in the way at that moment so the next thing I can remember is their 14 year old son, John Winslow (now living in Ongar) taking me by the hand and showing me the sights of George Lane and the railway. I saw a steam train go over the level crossing on its way towards Woodford station. The changeover to electric trains and the extension of the Central Line didn't happen until 1948.

My next early memory is my first day at Churchfields Infants School, when my mother had packed me a marmalade turnover to eat during the morning milk break and I was given some coloured laces to thread patterns through punched cards. Perhaps now is the time to recall Churchfields school at this time as it has been modernised. The school blazer badge bore the initials "C F S". To us children that stood for "Charlie's Fish Shop". The boys' toilets were all outside in the playground and everything used to freeze up in the winter. The playing fields at the back of the school were still wartime allotments so you imagine the joy we had when they were turned back into fields again.

Postwar Woodford was a happy time for a small boy, playing on the bomb site between Stanley Road and Malmesbury Road. Football and cricket in the street because nobody had cars, although neighbours could get rather irate when their front garden plants were broken. The nearby forest was also our playground and during the school holidays my mother used to encourage me to call for a friend with the words, "go and play in the forest, get some fresh air and I don't want to see you until teatime". They really were happy days.

Rationing continued for some years so my father built a chicken run in the garden which kept us in eggs and a roast dinner at Easter, Christmas and birthdays. Mother shopped locally in Grove Road. Shopping in George Lane only happened on Saturday and to go as far as Walthamstow High Street or Bearman's at Leytonstone by bus was an adventure. So much was delivered by street traders in those days, whether it was Charlie the milkman from Steel's Dairy in Carnarvon Road, The "clip-clop" of hooves on the road announced the arrival of the Co-op greengrocer's horse and cart. The horse used to mount the pavement three houses along from us and rattle the gate until the lady came out and gave it a carrot.

Rag and bone men on their carts, ringing their handbells and armed with goldfish that they gave to people in exchange for old clothes would be followed on Saturdays by the seafood salesman offering a pint of winkles for six pence.

We became friends with all our immediate neighbours, sometimes taking tea in one another's houses. I can remember being invited in to see a neighbour's first television set. Although my parents took me to the cinema, I hadn't seen a television before. There was a cowboy film on the one BBC channel. Well, it frightened the life out of me and I ran out of the house. My sister was born in 1950 so the spare room that had been occupied by lodgers had to be vacated. Having lodgers at that time not only helped to pay the mortgage but it was expected in those postwar days of housing shortages. The next point in time was the death of King George VI in 1952 and the subsequent Coronation the following year. I remember, a couple of years before, my mother taking me to the end of Stanley Road and Grove Road to watch the King and Queen drive past. My mother pointed out that the King was driving. Apparently he did drive himself from time to time. However the 1953 Coronation was a turning point for many families, as it was the event that brought televisions into people's houses and ours was no exception. I remember now being very excited to see the big wooden box with the small screen arrive, together with the single rod aerial that was fixed just above my bedroom window. Today (2010) that aerial is still affixed to the house in Stanley Road. 1953 also saw the chicken run replaced by a greenhouse. My parents were both keen gardeners and I learned a lot from their plant husbandry. They grew everything from seed. Then in the early summer they sold bedding plants from the front garden. We made enough money to go on holiday, normally to a great aunt's boarding houses at Shoreham-by-Sea. The Coronation year saw my father plant the front garden with red, white and blue petunias. It was one of the central attractions for the subsequent street party that year.

Sunday school was important to my mother so I went to the Grove Evangelical Church (demolished 1972) to begin with, then to St Mary's, where I subsequently joined the Cubs and the Scouts. The Scout troop was the 12th Epping Forest South, which after an altercation with the Rev. Wansey, became the 52nd Epping Forest South. Along with the 33rd Epping Forest South, the annual Scout Gang Show became part of my life. They were held at the Memorial Hall, then from 1956 the Sir James Hawkey Hall. They were always sellouts with a celebrity, such as Ralph Reader or Arthur Askey opening each season. There really was a sense of belonging during my early days in Woodford.