

EARLY MEMORIES OF WOODFORD GREEN, MY VILLAGE HOME

By Pauline Robson

The Woodford Historical Society was formed in 1932 and held its inaugural meeting in the Wilfrid Lawson Temperance Hotel. I now live on that site in Churchill Lodge, a block of flats built on the site where the Hotel once stood.

Being born in 1937, I was completely oblivious to the unrest unfolding across Europe during the last three years of the decade.

My earliest memories of Woodford Green begin around 1940, at the age of three, when we were living in Chingford Lane. Chapman's farm was only two doors along and their chickens used to wander around everywhere. My Mum used to try and encourage them to roost under the hedge in our tiny front garden in the hope of getting some free eggs! The roads were very, very quiet of course – hardly any traffic at all– so we used to play cricket across the road, with the batsman on one pavement and the bowler on the opposite side. Such carefree times for a child still not yet aware that there was a war on!

My Dad was an ARP warden and he had an allotment over in Highams Park and we used to go with him on Sunday to tend all manner of fruits and vegetables. He even used to write our names on young marrows with a series of pin pricks and we would watch them grow and grow until it was time to "eat one of us".

I wasn't that much older when I started to become aware of all the different smells that were everywhere in the village. The lovely smell of oranges, wrapped individually in tissue paper and packed in wooden crates, from Knights Greengrocers on the corner of Elm Grove and Chingford Lane - it's a house today, opposite St Andrew's church. We used to smooth the tissues out to use as toilet paper, since you couldn't buy any in the shops. Mrs. Knight also let us have a couple of the wooden crates and my Mum dressed them with some bright coloured material to make a perfect bedside cabinet. You needed lots and lots of coupons to buy any kind of new furniture, even stuff with the Utility Mark.

I gradually became more and more fascinated by all the different aromas coming from the shops in the village. Walking up Mill Lane, the first smell to hit you was the strong polish from the boot and shoe repairers. Next to them was Swingler's the grocers and general store, where all dry goods seem to come together in one heady infusion.

Continuing up Mill Lane, next came some old cottages and in one of these lived a girl called Stella Brosnan who my sister Barbara and I were friendly with. I recall Stella's father was killed in Palestine and that we were all greatly upset by this. But I digress! Continuing my walk up Mill Lane, and crossing over to the other side, I came to the Golden Cross pub, where the smell of beer was everywhere, especially on delivery days when I used to watch the barrels being rolled down into the cellar. There was always a large gathering of us local kids watching these events as the dray horse was always the centre of much attention.

Half way up Mill Lane – that is half way between Chingford Lane and the High Road– there was a coffee shop in what is now a hairdresser. The aroma of coffee and freshly baked bread was a great favourite of mine and has remained so all my life.

Crossing The Square, and facing me as I walked, there was Mrs. Marks the grocer and general store. Immediately inside the front door, on both sides, were bins of chicken feed and loose grit that were sold by the pound. After the war, my Mum and Dad bought this shop but kept the Marks name. I remember the clouds of dust that permeated the whole shop when the delivery men emptied their sacks of chicken feed and loose grit into the bins. I can still recall that smell even now - what a wonderful sense smell is! Next door to Marks was, and still is, the Rose and Crown with the familiar smell of beer and opposite that was a gent's barber and Aldred's the fishmonger.

But it was the last part of the walk up Mill Lane to the High Road that was my favourite bit. Just beyond the Rose and Crown and up an alleyway was the blacksmith. He was a delightful man who would welcome us kids into the smithy to watch him at work. Strangely enough it was the smell of the often rain-soaked coats we were wearing as they steamed dry from the heat of the forge that comes flooding back to me. On the right hand side, opposite the blacksmith, was Chalkley's the bakers. They used to bake on the premises and the smells were so real you could almost taste everything from bread to doughnuts.

So turning left into the High Road from Mill Lane, the first shop you came to was Broomes the chemist. Next to that was a watchmaker - not many smells there - and then there was a tobacconist called Jackson's. All manner of pipes and tobacco and cigarettes were in the window and I remember pipe tobacco being weighed up on a beautiful polished brass scale out of large glass jars and waiting patiently outside until a customer opened the shop door and the intoxicating scent of the tobacco wafted out onto the street. Jackson's also owned the shop next door that sold toys and stationery and had a small library at the back of the shop. And once a year we used to buy the used tennis balls from Wimbledon - sold in boxes of six and they seemed to have an endless supply. I've often wondered since how a little shop in Woodford Green became the place to buy them.

Ahhh The Pantry - the next place from which an enticing aroma of cakes, coffee and lovely sweet things that caused this child to stop and dream. It was the place where the ladies of Woodford Green - the posh ones from the Monkams side of the High Road - met to take coffee and cakes. Walking quickly on past Clapp's the estate agents (no smells there either) you come to the most important shop in the whole village for us kids - Findlay's the SWEET SHOP!! With all manner of sweets in vast great glass jars, Mr. Findlay kept an ever-watchful eye on what his young customers were up to - and we were all very well aware of that too, and behaved impeccably! Strange to relate, I also have a rather sad memory of Findlay's, when sweet rationing ended for the first time and all that he had to offer were row upon row of empty glass jars. I could not understand where all the goodies had gone, and why so quickly? Then rationing was re-introduced and gradually the glass jars started to fill up again.

My Mum had two very good friends called Kit Harris and Flo Reason. Kit was married to Fred Harris, the butcher whose shop was next door to Findlay's. They were both delightful people, but when Fred died and the rest of the family didn't want to carry on the business, Kit laid out the shop as if it was still trading and kept it that way until she moved a few years ago. For many years, everyone who knew the history used to refer to it, with great affection and respect, as The Museum. Flo Reason used to manage Glovers, the cleaners on the opposite side of the High Road, and this shop also sold small gift items and fancy goods.

The next smell to hit the senses was the smell of printing ink emanating from the little office of our very own local paper, the Woodford Times, which fronted the High Road. The printing presses themselves and the large tins of printers ink were housed in a small factory area behind the shop.

A few doors along was Stevens the ironmongers, with the entrance to the shop at the end of small passageway down the middle with display windows on either side filled with the most gorgeous china and glassware. The door had a loud bell on a spring that automatically rang as you opened the door and you were faced by Mr. Stevens striding rapidly towards you, doubtless worried that we kids might break some of his obviously expensive stuff. The ironmongery was at the back of the shop.

There was a grocer, a haberdasher called Alice Neills, and a very expensive and exclusive ladies clothes shop called Ann Paget (another posh ladies place). This shop had windows on three sides which displayed very up-market ensembles, often finished off with a highly decorative hat. I used to wonder if I would ever wear such lovely clothes and hats, as they seemed to be from a different world from the one I lived in at the time.

Next, you came to Green's Stores, Coleman's the fruiterer and another butcher. One of my favourite places was Crosland the confectioner, who used to sell books and boxed cakes as well as sweets, so the smells were particularly inviting. After the war, he used to sell Lyons Maid ice cream, little rounds of ice cream wrapped in paper which fitted into specially shaped cornets - delicious! Mr. Crosland was a very dour man so, when I won a prize at my primary school for a history scrap book I'd made, I had to go to Crosland's to choose a book. I had always wanted Arthur Ransom's "Swallows and Amazons" and Mr. Crosland ordered it for me. From then on, we were good friends.

The last shop on this side of the High Road was one I knew simply as "The Dairy". We used to get our eggs there - sometimes the ration was only one a week so they were very precious. There were no egg boxes like you have today; they were simply wrapped in a brown paper bag. As I was more likely to break them than my sister, I was glad to let her shop for them!

For me as a child, the extreme of the village when you turned right out of Mill Lane into the High Road was Evans Garage, next to The Castle and where Westside Motors is today, and then Thompson's the newsagents, who had a smaller shop to the side that stocked sports equipment. I bought my first hockey stick there, and paid 3d (old money!!) a week out of my pocket money.

Walking back towards Mill Lane, you passed a large drapery store and another Hayward's fruiterers and greengrocers as well as dressmakers. Chapman's the butcher was next (still there today). Chapman's Farm being our neighbours in Chingford Lane, we always got our meat there. I remember them selling horsemeat during the war. Our newsagent was next door to Chapman's and Mavers the barbers next to that. There was another fishmonger next to the barbers, and I remember quickening my step past them to get near to Chalkley's the bakers again.

I realise this is only one side of the High Road but it was the area I was most familiar with in my childhood. Anyhow, on the opposite side of the High Road was Johnson's Pond and the bus stop. Shops didn't start again until you got to the other side of Johnson Road. There were no traffic lights along the High Road then, either, just a crossing outside Chalkley's.

I remember venturing over that side of the High Road when I became interested in all kinds of needlework because, at the top of Johnson Road, there was a shop called The Workbasket. That sold all kinds of patterns, silks, wools and needles. A veritable Aladdin's Cave for a young girl beginning to get interested in such things. It was owned by two ladies and they were both very helpful - they let you put aside enough knitting wool to finish what you were making but buy it a bit at a time. That was a much needed concession when you were trying desperately to stretch out your pocket money.

On my visits to The Workbasket I used to take the opportunity to walk down Johnson Road. I used to love looking in Lillian Howard's, the dress shop that was next door to The Coffee Bean. I would stand for ages gazing at the lovely clothes and inhaling the wonderful smell of coffee. To get to those shops I had to pass Wheelers the butchers, now Prezzo, and a gentlemen's' outfitter who also sold shoes.

At the top of Johnson's Road, opposite the pond, there was The Health Stores. They stocked a vast array of ingredients for all types of diets, which also helped to make the rationed items go further! Turning left into the High Road, the first shop was Crystals the chemists, who still have a branch on Woodford Broadway. A very sad woman used to stand in the doorway for hours on end wearing only a long pink satin dress, even in the depths of winter. The powder on her face looked like flour and she always carried a handbag. The grown-ups told us she was waiting for her son to come home, although he had been killed in the First World War over 25 years before. I can't remember any of us children, or anyone else, ever making fun of her - we just felt so sad for her.

Next to Crystals was Ralph Kent the grocer. Kent's was a big shop, with counters running the length of the shop on both sides and a cash desk at the back. Along a low shelf in front of the counter down one side were large biscuit tins with glass tops so you could inspect the contents. There was no way we could buy any of these, as you needed points coupons from your ration book, so biscuits were not high up on our list of priorities!

The next shop was another one that was of great interest to all of us, especially after the war and especially on Mondays. That was the day when Peter's the confectioners got their once-a-week delivery of Walls Ice Cream in the form of small briquettes wrapped in paper. They cost 3d each (old money) and you also got two wafers with them. The queue of children on Monday afternoon when the schools came out had to be seen to be believed.

Glover's the cleaners and fancy goods shop, where my 'auntie' Flo Reason worked, was next to Peter's. There were two more shops next; one was a bicycle shop called Berrecloth's that was not half as enticing to young appetites as the wonderful smell of home cooking that came from the Woodford Dining Rooms. I remember the black cast iron tables with mottled grey marble tops which were laid out close together inside.

Some years later, when they closed down, the fixtures and fittings were sold and, by a strange coincidence, I recently met a lady, quite by chance, who was visiting her father. He still lives in Woodford Green and he bought one of the marble topped tables to use as a garden table. He still has it and it was still in use until quite recently! The lady was Maureen Hadfield (nee Richardson) whose father Stan Richardson was a stalwart of the Woodford Cricket Club for many years.

There was also a little sweet shop in this row called Jarman's. The customary bell on a little spring was fitted to the door and, when it rang, the loveliest grey haired little old lady appeared. Barclays Bank occupied the whole of the rest of the block leading up to the alleyway - today, it's Churchill's Fish and Chips. Where the PMS property letting company is today used to be another sweet shop called Alderton's that was run by two very jolly brothers, and Lamberts the funeral directors used to be a jeweller. The Midland Bank was on the corner where the Indian restaurant called Razza is now. This building always looked so enormous to me as a child and more than a little foreboding.

When I reflect on the village as it is now I can appreciate what a completely self contained place it was in those days. Everything you could possibly need could be bought just along the road. All the shopkeepers knew you and your family and you always felt safe. Even the local, midwife, Nurse Straw, lived in Elm Terrace, just behind the High Road, and would always have a kind word and a smile for you as she cycled around the village.

Woodford Green will always be special to me and, I'm pleased to say, has not lost its 'villagey' feel. People are friendly and the businesses, although very different from what they were, are still really focussed on good and pleasant service. The one business that, in particular, I hope you will continue to treasure and support is The Village Bookshop. How marvellous that Woodford Green still has a shop of that calibre - truly a reflection of all that's good about living here and an example of how the really good things about the last 80 years still set the mood for the Woodford Green of today. Long may it continue.