

ARTHUR GATCUM'S FAMILY AND THEIR ASSOCIATION WITH WOODFORD GREEN (DATING BACK TO 1853)
by Arthur Gatum

Introduction

In July 1852 George and Sarah Searle arrived in Woodford with their baby son, George, who was my great grandfather. He married Ruth Alcock who was housemaid to Mr. Edward Ryder Cook at Woodford House (now called Hurst House and situated near the Churchill Statue).

Their marriage took place on 11 January 1876 and was the first marriage at All Saints Church. Afterwards the members of the bridal party were conveyed in two carriages, drawn by pairs of grey horses, to a wedding reception kindly provided by Mr Ryder Cook at Woodford House. Mrs. Edward Buxton provided the wedding cake as the bride had previously worked for her. The couple were so well respected in the area that they received over 60 wedding presents.

After the wedding George became Head Gardener at Woodford House. He walked there from his home at 13 Snakes Lane and back three times a day for 46 years. His walk took him along Woodford Green between the poplar trees. George and Ruth had ten children.

My grandfather, Arthur Searle, and his wife continued to live in the cottage on Snakes Lane. He worked at Stratford LNER workshops. My uncle Fred was a boot and shoe repairer and worked for a Mr. Borkett in Snakes Lane until setting up his own business at the bottom of our garden on Snakes Lane.

The Ponds of Woodford Green

There are three ponds on Woodford Green High Road; the Firs Pond, the Potato Pond and Kendon's Pond. The Firs Pond was originally part of the Firs Estate. The Potato Pond opposite the Working Mens' Club was so named as farmers would stop their horse drawn carts to use the pond for washing the dirt off their potatoes to obtain a better price at market. As children we used the Potato Pond to fish for tiddlers and frog spawn. At the junction of the High Road and Johnston Road is Kendon's Pond, named after the original owners of the land. After school we would dare each other to walk along the narrow concrete ledge at the foot of the pond's wall. Fortunately the pond was not very deep if you fell in, but explaining to parents how you got wet on a sunny day was another story.

The Shops of Woodford

Opposite Kendon's Pond was Wheelers the butchers. I remember the butchers wearing red and white striped aprons and straw boaters. The shop had hanging baskets of flowers along its front. Also opposite the pond in Johnston Road was the Post Office which was opened in 1905.

On Woodford Broadway was Puddicombe's Drapery Store. This was next to the bank and was the size of three large shops. Next to Puddicombe's was Sainsbury's grocery shop. This was nothing like the supermarkets of today. There was no self-service. The counters were of marble and the floor had black and white marble tiles. You would be served by shop assistants from behind the counter who all wore clean white coats.

Sainsbury's had two counters; the left hand one sold items such as tea, sugar, dried fruit, flour, coffee and biscuits etc. The opposite counter sold butter, milk, cheese, eggs and other dairy products. Butter was cut from a large block and then with two wooden bats was formed into the size that the customer required. This was then weighed, wrapped in greaseproof paper, placed

in a paper bag and passed to the customer. As a young lad I was fascinated watching them use the wooden bats to 'bat or pat the butter' into shape. Goods were paid for at a cashier's desk to the rear of the shop. My mother always had a shopping basket as only small paper bags were provided by shops. Without your own basket or shopping bag you could not carry your purchases home.

On the other side of the Broadway was a bank, a wine merchant, which I think was called Findlaters, the post office /newsagents. Then was Chrystall's the chemist and a little further on was the Broadway Music Salon where I purchased many records for my old wind-up gramophone. The Gas Light and Coke Company office and show room, where you paid your gas bills and ordered gas appliances was at the end of the block.

The Jubilee Hospital

At the far end of Broomhill Road was the Jubilee Hospital. This was built in 1897 then demolished and rebuilt as retirement flats in 1997. It served the residents of Woodford for nearly 100 years. Dr Percy Warner, my grandfather's doctor, was the first doctor appointed by the Jubilee Hospital to be on call for emergencies. A later partner of Doctor Warner was Doctor Eddowes who attended my mother at my birth and remained my doctor until he handed over to Doctor Millar on his retirement.

Dr Millar was a bearded ex-Navy doctor who was not keen on using a stethoscope. To test your breathing after the 'flu he would get you to breathe out into his ear and just as you wanted to breathe in he would squeeze you tightly. After evening surgery Doctor Millar would visit his patients in the Jubilee Hospital and on many occasions would take along his small children in their night clothes to say goodnight to the patients. Both Doctor Eddowes and Doctor Millar had their surgery in a large house in Monkams Avenue, now Hutton Close.

The Cinemas

Our main family entertainment in the 1930s and 1940s was the cinema which we would visit once or twice each week. There were two cinemas in South Woodford. The Plaza stood on the site of the M&S Simply Food store. The Majestic, now the Odeon, still stands on the High Road. The Majestic held a Saturday Club for children. I can remember the doors opening and about thirty of us rushing to the front to get the seat in the middle of the front row. The Majestic had one screen with stalls and circle. On the top floor of the building was a ballroom where dances and wedding receptions were held. The cinema was often full and ice creams and drinks were sold in the auditorium during the interval. The main feature film was preceded by a 'B' film. This was usually in black and white and often better than the main feature. You often had to view the film through a haze of cigarette smoke.



The Majestic Cinema, South Woodford in the 1950s

The Railway

Woodford Station opened on 22 August 1856 as part of the Eastern County Railway. The steam train ran to Liverpool Street. The Fairlop loop line opened in 1903 and in 1923 the line came under the control of the London & North Eastern Railway (LNER).

The train always had two men on the footplate, the engineer who drove the train and the fireman who stoked the boiler fire. A guard in the rear van made up the train's crew. Before the train left the station the guard and at least one porter would walk the length of the train to ensure all the doors were shut. The guard would check his watch to ensure the train left on time, blow a whistle and wave a green flag to signal the engineer that the train was ready to leave. After dark the guard would signal the engineer with a green light from an oil lamp.

Between St Barnabas Road School and Horn Lane there was a footbridge over the railway with a wooden floor with gaps between the boards. As teenagers we would stand here as a train was passing underneath so we were covered in smoke from the engine's funnel.

London Transport extended the Central Line to Woodford Station on 14th December 1947 but passengers travelling on to Epping had to change at Woodford and continue their journey by steam train. On 21 November 1948 the last steam train left Woodford for Epping as the Central Line was then extended to Epping.

Trams, Trolleybuses and Buses

The trams ran from Woodford to Embankment and from Woodford to Walthamstow. All trams terminated at the Napier Arms. My nan lived in nearby Fullers Road and every other Sunday, during the summer we would board the tram and set off for the Embankment where we would watch the ships on the River Thames. I loved the screeching of the wheels and the rocking of the trams, stopping and underground tram stops and going under the Kingsway. The trams were replaced with trolley buses. Their turning point can still be seen opposite the Napier Arms today. Two bus routes ran along

Woodford High Road - the 10A which ran from Loughton to Victoria and the 145 which I believe came from Becontree and terminated at the Royal Forest Hotel. The buses reversed onto the forecourt. In the 1930s the buses had open stairs at the rear of the bus. A silver handrail and a metal side to the stairs prevented you falling off the back of the bus. The entry platform had no cover for the ticket collector and, in heavy rain, if you sat just inside you would get wet.

Second World War Bombs and Rockets

At approximately 6.45 am on Monday 26 June 1944 my mother, brother and I were sleeping on the floor of our Anderson Shelter at the bottom of our garden and my father was asleep on the bunk above us. We were awakened by a loud roaring noise and the ground shaking. There was a very loud explosion and smell of burning. A flying bomb had passed 30 feet above our shelter, without cutting its engine and hit the Congregational Church in Broomhill Road.

On 4 February 1945 I was awoken by a large explosion and broken glass from my bedroom window landed on my bed. A V2 rocket had landed in the grounds of Harts Sanatorium.