

KEITH LUSCOMBE

Like most kids who lived in the vicinity of Lloyd Park it was, next to the street, the main playground of my childhood. **It was a place** of fun, mischief and adventure. Despite the fun mischief and adventure, or perhaps because of it, there was also a constant state of hostilities. On one side of this never ending war were the custodians of the park, the park keepers (parkys), while on the other were kids in general and, so it seemed to my mates and me, "us" in particular. There were two parkys in particular who seemed to pursue a personal vendetta against us. One was short and wore a large ginger moustache of the type that was fashionable during the 1914 - 18 war, and of course we nick-named him "Ginger Whiskers". The other was tall and bore an uncanny resemblance to the Blakey character of "On the buses" fame. I've never been able to watch that T.V. show without an odd feeling of apprehension, and an almost uncontrollable desire to run.

Those two were the bane of our young lives, our very own Nimrod and Nemesis in tandem. Their purpose in life seemed to be stopping us from enjoying ourselves, although of course they must have had other jobs on their schedule. But we were positive that their main object was catching us at some innocent recreation such as, fishing for newts in the duck pond, knocking conkers out of conker trees, climbing trees, bird nesting, firing our catapults, riding our bikes or skating along paths where both these actions were positively prohibited (at least bike riding was because there were signs telling us so, although I never ever remember a sign actually outlawing skates), playing cricket with a hard ball, our wicket drawn in chalk on a handy tree (the hard ball was usually one we had "found" in the nets), being in places in the park out of bounds to the public, i.e., disused air raid shelters, potting sheds etc., picking the heads off of the flowers in the flower beds to decorate our grottoes with when grotto season came around (it was handy that the flowers bloomed at just the right time for the grotto season or was it the other way round?), making swings swing too high, and roundabouts go round too fast. Worst of all though in their eyes, was the greasing of the slide with candle wax which was taboo, a "crime too far". When caught in any of these harmless pursuits (but especially the slide waxing) the chase was on literally.

There was an unwritten law, more an unstated understanding I suppose, that all chases ended at the park gates, normally, but not always, those at the end of Winns Ave. Once across these E.17 Rio Grandes the chase was over. We were safe until the next time. The end of a chase was usually signified by fist waving and threats from Ginger Whiskers and Co., and a lot of cheeky banter from a bunch of breathless kids. Until one day , having stopped, and feeling ourselves safe and beyond retribution, we were horrified to see that Ginger Whiskers had broken the rules, had not observed the unwritten code, and what's more, was still after us and rapidly closing the distance in between. Panic and fear caused the adrenaline to flow, and tired leg muscles found a new strength. We scattered down and along well trodden escape routes, Badlis Rd., Carr Rd., Winns Ave., hiding in front gardens and in unknown residents porches. We all escaped . But only just. Our experience that day taught us something about life and authority, and altered , I'm sure, all of our young lives. The rules had been changed, and things were never the same again.

I must have been about fourteen when I made what, up until that time, was my only legitimate visit to Lloyd Park Pavilion. This was as a member of the William McGuffie schools Shakespearean class in the Miss Morris production of " A Midsummer Night's Dream". I was one of the rustic yokels but I've forgotten the name of my character. Mickey Colby (his real name was Brian), sometimes also known as " The Walt Disney of Walthamstow " and owner of a pet monkey named Jacko, played Puck. Brian Barwick (Barby) was Bottom the Weaver I think, and Pat Hopkins, arguably the best looking girl in the class, possibly the school (I was madly in love with her), was a very beautiful Queen Titania. For the life of me now I can't remember who was cast as Oberon. The press were present to record our thespian endeavours and we had our pictures in the Guardian. My mum was quite proud of me. We had never had an actor in our family up until then, and for a while I think she harboured secret thoughts that she had a budding Ronald Coleman for a son. I disappointed her, not for the first or, sadly, the last time and, instead, became a merchant seaman. In which job oddly enough, I did manage to get to Hollywood (well Los Angeles actually, but it was close. A whole lot closer than I ever came to being another Ronald Coleman anyway).

It was about the time of my acting debut that I also started to earn some money of my own, as coming from a large working class family, pocket money was something you only heard rumours of or dreamt about. I became a bakers boy, working all day Saturday with a Co - Op baker for five bob, half a crown of which I gave to my mum. Our round took us through the park, delivering bread, rolls, and the occasional cake to the families who lived in the prefabs that had been built there after the war. The prefabs started just inside the Aveling Park Rd. entrance, and ran the length of the park par-

allel to Aveling Park Rd. where they then made a right angled turn left and ended just before the Brettenham Rd. entrance.

The area of the park the prefabs bordered was where we played football. Our games mostly followed recognisable F.A. rules though the size of the teams were decided largely by how many of us there were, and who wanted to play. Sometimes it was barely five a side. Other times a melee of well in excess of the statutory twenty two. Most goals had to be scored along the ground, because with only coats for goal posts, anything above head height was invariably hotly disputed as to whether the ball was over the bar or not. As well as being our football pitch, it was also the site for the fair when it visited the park.

The fair was a magic place to us kids, a wonderland of excitement, noise, coloured lights, and that oddly unique smell that fairgrounds have, a sort of electrical smell that probably comes from all those generators collected together in one place. Mum and dad usually took me and my sisters over the fair each time it was in the park. Money was always tight though, and even with rides at tuppence or thruppence (proper money) a go, a night at the fair was a strain on the family budget. In those long ago days before burgers, pizzas and other modern day fast foods, the "cherry on the cake" of the visit for us kids was a candy floss. We would all stand in front of the spinning machine, mouths watering in anticipation, as the proprietor twisted a mass of pink sugary filaments onto a stick. Lovely.

There were huge trenches dug across this playing field during the war, tank traps I was told, but I don't know if that was the true purpose of them or not. It could have been as there were certainly huge concrete blocks for that purpose close to the water fountain end of the swings. I don't think I ever managed to jump from the top of one of these concrete blocks to another. As I remember, this had something to do with not being able to get a good enough run at it, the tops of each block of concrete being too short to get up the speed necessary to clear the gap. They were probably designed with that in mind, to stop German parachutists jumping from one to the other. While they existed they were, of course, great places to play. By the time I'd become a bakers boy they had all gone, trenches and tank traps, although I have no recollection of them being filled in or knocked down. They just sort of . . . well, vanished.

Although almost all of my park memories are of the years while I was in senior school, at the time of my very earliest memory of Lloyd Park I could not have been going to school for very long. This earliest memory is of my mother lying on top of me and two of my sisters at the rear of William Morris Gallery (or House as I believe it was then called), fairly close I think to the old bowling green and, from this odd position, seeing "sparks" bounce off the reddish coloured asphalt of a path. The "sparks" were actually machine gun bullets fired from an unseen (by me) aeroplane. I like to think that those bullets came from an aircraft painted with the black and white crosses of the Luftwaffe as it's difficult to believe that at the tender age of five or six, I had already upset some of Ginger Whiskers predecessors enough for them to persuade the R. A. F. to "get me".

What must be my last "memory" of Lloyd Park I suppose, is of a time when, as a young man home on leave from the merchant navy, I waded out through the murky waters of the duck pond to rescue a distressed cat who had somehow or other managed to get itself marooned on one of the islands. To the scattered applause and praises of a small crowd of onlookers, I returned the cat to the safety of a wider park. There was no parkys there that day, yelling at me, telling me to, " HOP IT ! ". If old Ginger Whiskers had been around I'm sure that, on this one occasion, he would have turned a blind eye. May even have looked kindly on some of my past transgressions. Who am I kidding.

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