

Early Memories of Walthamstow

By Neil Watling

I was born in 1958 in Lewisham, in 1960 at the age of 2 moved to number 43, Sutton Road, Walthamstow, where I lived until 1973 aged 15.

The house I lived in was opposite what was commonly known as the "Reck" namely Higham Hill Recreation Ground/Park. There was a day nursery just in front of the park, I spent many happy hours playing in the park, it had a large grassed area in the main park, with a bowling green to the left, it had a high privet hedge all the way round (to keep nosey little boys like me out!) just beyond this was the Park Keepers hut and a small pretty little putting green again with a privet hedge all around but much lower about adults waist high! We used to hire the clubs and balls from the park keeper and would get a pencil and score card, one day I was playing with my brother who is one year older than me and during one of my fantastic strokes HIT him straight in the mouth and broke one of his front adult teeth in half, we ran to the park keeper for his help and obviously he could do nothing other than tell us to go home, my brother went to the dentist and eventually had his tooth "capped".

There was an alleyway to the right of the park leading to Norfolk Road, and another alleyway which divided the park from the swings and tennis courts, which also divided Worcester Road into the top section off of Higham Hill Road and the bottom section off of Blackhorse Lane.

About half way down the bottom section of Worcester road on the left was an opening which lead to an area used by "HITCHMANS DAIRIES". I can recall a man pulling along a cream coloured cart full with bottles of milk that he was delivering to the surrounding houses, pass Worcester road and on the corner of Norfolk road and Gloucester Road was a shop known as "Riddout's" the entrance into the shop was literally on the corner with steps leading up ,the shop had a bare wooden floor, inside the shop under the window were wooden crates on their sides filled with" R WHITES" soft drinks , Lemonade, Cream Soda and Tizer, it was small inside and had a refrigerated glass cabinet at one end, Mr Riddout would get cold saveloys and chopped ham and pork out of it for us to buy, we would also buy Mothers Pride cut bread, they sold mainly groceries but also some sweets and ice creams.

Facing "Riddouts" was a small church and we would climb up onto the surrounding wall and climb up into the fruit trees and eat the fruit, there was yummy cherries, apples and pears, I can remember one of the neighbours "Banging" on the window, to scare us off

Just opposite "Riddout's" there was an alleyway leading from Gloucester road through to Clarence Road and Lowther Road, just a short way along Lowther Road on the corner of Lancaster Road was another shop called "Jacks", this shop sold Sweets and Toys, here I remember buying "Lucky Jamboree Bags" and "Jubbly" ice. If you continued to the end of Lowther Road you would arrive at St Andrews Road, then if you turned right and crossed over you would arrive at my school "Higham Hill Infants and Juniors" the route we have just taken is the way I used to walk to and from school.

It was a lovely school, a typical tall red brick Victorian building of its time, with highly varnished and polished parquet flooring (which was sanded down and re-varnished during the summer holidays (I can still smell that fresh varnish which was eventually replaced by a lovely smell of polish) the roof was very high and had tall arched windows.

Sadly the School was pulled down (by this time I was at Secondary School) and was replaced by a factory. The School itself was replaced with a newly built one named "Edward Redhead" in Higham Hill Road, as far as I am aware that school has also since been rebuilt (they don't make them like the used to).

At the bottom of St Andrews Road on the right just before the junction was a typical Barbers shop, although it had a large window, the bottom half was coloured in, the top half had a curtain back drop and behind the glass were products and advertising boards for "Brylcreem" and such like, when you went in it was very dark and dingy, there was a glass counter as you entered and I can clearly remember seeing a sign saying "something for the weekend" at that time I had NO idea what it meant and there was obviously advertisements for "DUREX". When it came to my turn for the haircut it was "Short Back and Sides all round" this was done with electric clippers and finished off with scissors, then a "Cut Throat Razor" was sharpened on a strap and your neck and side burns were cleaned up, a brush was used to get rid of all the loose hair and then there was a quick "puff puff" round your neck from a little round ball thing with a teat at one end where powder came out.

There was often sweet smells in the air and I would wonder where it came from? Just around the corner was a factory called "BUSH BOAKE ALLEN LTD" where they produced fragrances and flavourings. Then just along the road was "Britains" toy factory where as a teenager I use to do "outwork" where I would get boxes of animals etc to paint, there would be a painted example for each toy and you would have to apply the paint in stages in order to copy and match the example. Once all of the toys had been painted they were taken back and you received payment and your next batch of work, it was not easy money!

During the winter months I remember walking to School wearing a knitted balaclava, knitted gloves and scarf, it was often very cold and VERY FOGGY a "PEA SOUPER" as we called it! This was before smokeless fuel (Coal) was introduced; visibility was so poor it was impossible to see your hand at arms length!

One of my most vivid memories was that often we would have a Number 58 "Routemaster" bus parked outside our house, I would look out of my bedroom window and be level with the top deck, all of the little "Golf Ball" light bulbs would be glowing, and it looked magical with no passengers on board! The reason the buses would wait there is because they would "run light" with only a few passengers on board, having boarded at "The Crooked Billet" or along the way, the passengers would then be put onto another bus following right behind.

I am sure it was also due to the fact that a long time previous to this the "TROLLEY" buses had a terminus there between Sutton and Sinnott Roads where they would unhook the overhead wires and hook them up again, onto the wires going in the other direction.

At the junction of Sinnott Road and where Billet Road became Blackhorse Lane was an old disused Prefab site where we used to play in and amongst the old ruins which were all made of ASBESTOS unbelievably! (There is no way this would be allowed today) The site was eventually cleared and an

old people's home was built there called "Essex Hall", it is now "Higham Hill Sure Start Children's Centre".

As children we used to make "JIGGERS" these were a type of homemade Go-Kart, made from a short length of old scaffold board with a large set of wheels on an axle mounted at the back, these were from a disused pram, the axles were secured to the board with no more than a long row of nails hammered in, one bent one way and the next one bent the other and so on along the length of the axle shaft (how ingenious). The front axle consisted of a smaller set of wheels from a pram and secured to a small board in the same way! (I cannot think how many nails we must have used and how many times we banged our fingers with the hammer?), the small board was secured to the underside of the large board by drilling through both of them in the centre, this formed the pivot for the steering, using a coach bolt, washers and a nut, then two more holes were drilled one at each end of the small board and a piece of rope was put through the holes and knotted this was the steering! If you wanted to be "POSH" you would then get some old carpet and nail this to the board, not only did it give you the "UPMARKET LOOK" but also gave you a softer surface to sit on!

On one occasion my two brothers and I decided to go DOWN a steep concrete "stony" roadway (which lead down towards the River Lea) off of Sinnott road, it was gated and there was no normal access for cars, we set off at the TOP and the idea was that my older brother was going to maintain a sensible speed by keeping his shoes in contact with the road using this as a brake! I think his feet soon started to warm up! With this he picked them up and on to the board, this is when the "LAWS OF PHYSICS" took over! We quickly made break neck speed!! But we still had our good old steering and we intended to follow the sharp left turn at the bottom of the hill, but at speed of what seemed like 50 mph, skinny solid rubber tyres on the front and a severe lack of TRACTION! We pulled on that good old rope to go left! But we continued in a straight ahead direction and INTO the concrete railing posts that run the length of the road! OMG did it hurt we were all cut and bruised (I still have a scar on my knee from it). We picked ourselves up and dragged the bent up jigger and went crying home to my Mum, who was in the middle of doing the weekly wash! She attended to me first as I was the youngest.

The Weekly wash was done in the tiny kitchenette, we had a Hotpoint Twin Tub, once this was pulled out into the middle there was no room for anything else, there was washing all over the floor. The washing was done by more or less using one lot of water in the wash section, first was the whites and then the bright colours then lastly the dark items, after each stage of the wash cycle came the rinsing and spinning, the washing had to be lifted out of the wash tub using wooden tongs and transferred into the spinner, then it was spun out, the water came out through a hose which was pointed into the sink, then water was put into the spinner using a hose connected to the tap, it was then spun again, this would be repeated until clear of soap, in the final spin you would add the fabric softener.

When playing in our garden we had a red tricycle which we shared, it had a little trunk on the back with a little T shaped handle which we would use to lock and unlock it. We had a greenhouse full of various types of cacti, on one occasion when I was about 5, I was inside the greenhouse trying to get out, my two brothers were holding onto the door handle to keep me inside, then all of a sudden they let go! With this I fell backwards and into lots of cacti, hundreds of tiny little "needles" were

stuck in my bottom!! Then after being stripped naked my Mum pulled each needle out one by one with a pair of tweezers!

During the summer months you would hear the "TONIBELL" ice cream van ringing its music, we would run around the corner as it used to stop outside the parsonage, the "Vicars Residence", the vicar was Mr Parker of St Andrews Church.

I can remember digging up various parts of old CLAY PIPES in our garden which were made of "white clay", I later saw some of these in the Vestry Road Museum.

We used to go swimming at the so called "NEW BATHS" in Chingford Road (now called Waltham Forest Pool and Track) and opposite this was the Walthamstow Bus Garage.

I also liked to go fishing with my friends down on the River Lea; we used to buy our bait from a little fishing tackle shop at the top of Gloucester Road just before Higham Hill Road.

The Higham Hill Tavern in Higham Hill Road was a place where sometimes I was asked to go, and get some "Double Diamond" beer in bottles, this was from the "Off Licence" part of the pub, this was accessed via a door at the front of the pub, as you entered there was just enough room to stand inside, there was a counter where you were served and if there was any change I was allowed to buy a "PENNY"(arrowroot) biscuit, from a large glass jar on the counter(such a TREAT).

Opposite the tavern was the Co op and at this time there were 3 separate shops, working from left to right, the first was the food store, next to that was the Butcher and on the end was the Greengrocer. (At about 4 years of age I can remember being in a pushchair and the Greengrocer giving me a little pack of peanuts).

When I needed to visit the Doctors we had to go to St Marys Road, the Doctor was Dr Callaghan and his surgery was inside his house, the house was at the top end on the left, just before the alleyway through to Vestry Road, I can remember it had a gravel drive and a porch which had an ominous red light. The Doctor eventually moved into a multi practice in Corbett Road.

At the age of 5, I started wearing glasses; these were really "fashionable"! With round lenses and wire frames, they were prescribed for me by the ophthalmic department at Whipps Cross Hospital, my mum used to take me there by bus (I used to get time off of School, Hooray!), one of the tests I remember doing is looking into a piece of equipment and what appeared to be inside was a Policeman and a Police Box, you had to move the controls until he was inside the box (what fun).

Talking about Policemen, there was a BLUE police phone box (like the one used in Dr Who) near to the corner of Billet Road and Higham Hill Road, I remember looking inside, it was all painted cream and had a black phone on a shelf, I picked up the handset said "HELLO", I did not wait for any reply just quickly put it down and ran away! (I think I would have of got a "CLIP" round the ear if a Policeman had caught me!).

One day to attend hospital after cutting my finger wide open, because I fell over on the steps into my house and went crashing into some milk bottles, I was taken to Connaught Hospital in Orford Road, where it was stitched up, I attended the same Hospital a few years later when I cut my left

ankle open, being a little older I was more aware of what was going on and nearly passed out! (what a baby I was).

At the age of 11, I started working in Walthamstow High Street, I worked for a Jewish man called Allen he had a stall right outside Rossi's Ice Cream Parlour (next door to The Chequers Pub), he sold rolls of material such as polyester cottons and a velvety material called Crimplene, I worked there all day on Saturdays and during School Holidays when I would work on a Thursday, and in all weathers for 50p (if he had a so called "bad day" he would give me 20p – OH THANKS!)

To the Left of our stall was "Maude The Beetroot Lady" she lived just round the corner in Truro Road and had an old washing boiler in her back yard, where she boiled the raw beetroots, and then walked them round to her stall, still steaming she would often give me a warm beetroot to eat I would hold it in a tissue and break the skin off and eat it, it was so sweet and yummy! Next to her was a man called Ken and he used to sell leather purses.

Anyone who had an ice cream from Rossi's will tell you there was nothing like it! It was churned in big stainless steel drums at the front of the shop, using a big spoon the ice cream was placed on to a fresh cone, into a tub or as a wafer, this was done by placing a wafer inside the stainless steel oblong mould then filled with ice cream and levelled off, another wafer was then placed on top, it was then "Clicked" in some way and "Hey Presto" a wafer filled with ice cream would appear, another thing that Rossi's sold was the "Rocket" Lolly it was a Rich Raspberry flavour that lasted right to the end, it was a Pyramid shape and wrapped in a thin cardboard sleeve.

When shopping in the market during the winter months my mum would take me into Rossi's and buy us some Horlicks, they would heat it up using steam! It would make a loud roaring sound, the taste was wonderful.

Just past the Palmerston Road junction of the High Street, down towards the bottom end of the market was a "Hot Dog" van, we would often buy one with fried onions (the smell of them cooking would make your mouth water).

Near the "Top End" of the market (towards Hoe Street) was a very early Tesco store (where I purchased my first pair of blue jeans), outside this shop was a stall known as the "Sarsaparilla Man", here we would buy cups of Sarsaparilla, made with a concentrate and mixed with water, it had a strange but nice sort of liquorish flavour as I remember.

During the 1970s I can recall walking down the market toward St James Street when everything was plunged into darkness as the power was cut off! Many of the stall holders had little gas camping lights that they would be hurrying to light and put up, so as to avoid anyone stealing their goods! As I got to the very bottom I went into Woolworths, which was on the corner, to my amazement although somewhat dim, it was actually lit up; they had the original gas lamps alight all in perfect working order! They must have been the only shop in the High Street that had lighting.

Eventually (age of 14) I decided to give up my "Well Paid Job" in the market and started selling newspapers from a stand just outside the Palmerston Pub, I was making 1p for every paper sold (the Evening News and the Standard), I worked every night after school and also on Saturday afternoon.

(During these times as a child, things did not come easy, if you wanted something you had to earn money to buy it, I used to cut peoples hedges and wash cars for a few “coppers”)

I also had a job working on Sunday’s collecting football pools money, it was a charity organisation called “The Blind League”, my round took me in to the “Warner’s Estate” around “Stoneydown” .

It covered all of the roads off of Blackhorse Road, on one side from Haywarden Road through to Coppermill Lane and Leucha Road, on the other side from Stoneydown through to Mission grove and including Pretoria Avenue and Warner Road.

With the money I was earning I went to “Sedgwick’s” in Palmerston Road and bought myself a Brand New metallic green racing bike, which I paid for on a weekly account, I was so proud of that bike because it’s the only NEW one that I had ever had, all of my previous bikes had been made up from old parts put together.

After paying for my bike I saved enough money to go and buy my first pair of “Private Glasses”, (aged 15) they had gold coloured metal frames with tinted lenses (NO Calvin Klein or such like in those days!). These were purchased from the opticians in St James Street. Opposite the opticians was a small jeweller where I had my left ear pierced, and just under the station bridge was my dentist an Australian, Mr Leach.

For entertainment I used to go to “The Avenue” which was Walthamstow Avenue Football Club which was just off of Higham Hill Road and backed onto Priory Court. Saturday mornings were spent at the Granada Cinema in Hoe Street, it was great fun and as well as the films they had games organised by a man we knew as Ernie, he must have had the patience of a saint to keep all of those screaming kids in order!

When I was about 13 I loved to go to “The Stow” Walthamstow Stadium, when they had Hot Rod, Super Stock, and Banger Racing it was run by an organisation called “SPEDEWORTH” and it was fantastic to see cars racing around such a short circuit, the smell and noise was awesome, I used to get into the pits and look at all of the cars, there were men hitting the bent up metal with sledge hammers to reshape it so that the cars could go back out in the next heat, mechanics were working on engines revving them up and lots of people rushing around, the atmosphere was electric! My favourite Hot Rod was 351 driven by Barry Lee.

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