

A Child of the 50s Growing up in Walthamstow

By Stephen Paul Taylor [[email](#)], March 2015

I was born in 1951 at Thorpe Combe maternity hospital in Forest Road. I spent the first years of my life in a halfway house (known as a rest centre) at no.1 Prospect Hill (now flats) due to my parents being evicted from a service flat because of the business being sold and the new owner not requiring my father as the caretaker. The business being the original cork factory in Billet Road. The rest centre was a large detached property which stood in its own grounds with stables at the end of the garden. The next door property had a complete orchard in the rear garden with apples, pears and cherries growing in profusion. There was at least four other families sharing the "rest centre" with us and I can remember an outbreak of Diphtheria occurring which luckily missed me. I do remember catching Chicken pox, however.

We moved from the "Rest centre" to a pre-fab at 201 Shernhall Street, adjacent to a small open debris site that shortly would be the site of The Lord Raglan public house. I watched the pub being built but never, in my life, did I get to use it. The nearby forest, the Hollow Ponds and the Rising Sun pond, where I learnt to row small boats, all became my new playground. My love of trees and nature started at this time.

The pre-fab was an absolute luxury with a modern fitted kitchen including a refrigerator, wash boiler electric cooker and hot water with a modern sink unit. There was also a large bathroom and separate w.c. The main living room was fitted with a multi fuel burner that kept the place warm and also helped with the hot water by means of a back boiler. The pre-fab stood surrounded by a very large garden in which my father grew salad and vegetables for our own consumption and lots of flowers for my mother and the neighbours. My friends and I built many a den in the deeper undergrowth of the garden. My friends included *Mickey Morgan*, *Dave Dixie*, *Robert Salmon*, *Malcolm Housey* and my occasional next door friend, *Colin Offord*, when he came to visit his Grandmother. There was also *Desmond Aherne* and *Hazel Creasey*, who both lived at Salisbury Road E.17 just up the road from me.

I can remember the local shops just round the corner from us in Lea Bridge Road, my next door neighbour, Mr. George Miller, had a greengrocers shop near to Lambs Café (still there); there was Robinsons the bakers on the corner of Western Road where we

could buy yesterdays buns for only one old penny and occasionally my mum and I would walk down to the Bakers Arms to visit a traditional old Sainsburys. There was sawdust on the floor, sides of bacon hanging up and great slabs of cheese awaiting to be cut to your weight by large wire cutters. Butter was sold from large blocks which seemed to be shaped by large wooden paddles and wrapped in a grease proof type paper. Even today I can still remember the mixed smells of this shop. Just opposite the bakers was a shop called Pollys, which was a grocers shop. It was here that I discovered the original "Wagon Wheel", a chocolate biscuit that seemed to be huge. Later on I found that it had shrunk over the years (like most things)! There was a post office, a chemist shop, paper shop and a small electrical shop all between Eastern Road and Lambs cafe. Some of these shops are still there but not all. Basically, you did not have to travel far for your normal shopping in those days.

It was at this time I joined a young peoples club called the *Young Braves Association*. It was uniformed group with similar aims to the Scouts. It was started by a man called *George Stewart* about the same time as a similar club called *The Young Citizens Guild*. We were rivals when it came to the annual Walthamstow Carnival and we were always trying to outdo each other in other activities. We attended carnivals at South-End, Worthing and Billericay. There may have been others but I cannot remember.

I attended The Henry Maynard School (the old original), which consisted of a mixed infants school and two segregated junior schools for boys and girls. I cannot remember much about the infants school with the exception of the headmistress being *Miss Bird*. The junior school is more memorable in that I remember *Mr. Birmingham* being the headmaster. My favourite teacher being *Mr. Henderson*, who appeared as being very stern and old fashioned but with a fantastic sense of humour which I came to appreciate the older I grew. I remember other teachers such as *Mrs. McStocker*, *Mr. Frost*, *Mr. Carney* (the music teacher). I have on the whole only happy memories of the school. I remember the old tuck shop in Maynard Road which stood by the alleyway leading to our school where you could buy all manner of sweets for half-penny each and buy individual glasses of lemonade or tizer for two-pennies (old money). Really nice on a hot summer's day.

I failed the eleven plus exam and happily made my way to Warwick Secondary Modern School for boys at Barrett Road E.17. *Mr. Maxwell* was the headmaster with a *Mr. Briggs* as his deputy. I distinctly remember a very young *Mr. Eagle* taking over my class straight from teachers training college (poor man). We led him a

merry dance, but I think in the end we all held him in high regard. My favourite teacher was a *Mr. Jeffries*, who taught us English and me a love of books which I still have today. He was, probably, the most influential teacher I ever had at school. It was at this school that I received two sets of canings across my palms for firstly fighting in the playground and secondly playing truant for a day to escape a P.E. lesson. After the second caning I vowed never to be a bad boy again and I never was! I actually believe in such punishment and certainly have no complaints about my treatment. I deserved it!

My friends and I had now reached teenage and we were very lucky in that there were numerous youth clubs where we could meet and discover girls! There were youth dances at the Assembly Hall in Forest Road E.17 and also at The Old Leyton Swimming Pool (during the winter they would drain the pool and cover it over with a hard surface suitable for dancing on). I personally joined a Boys Brigade Company the 25th South Essex based at Higham Hill Baptist Church, as well as joining my friends at other youth clubs such as St. Peters-in-the-Forest church club. I learnt to play the bugle in the brigade and remember vividly acting as the camp bugler at Summer camp at Stonewood camp at St. Helens on the Isle of Wight. My favourite calls being "Retreat" as we lowered the flag and "last post" just before "lights out".

By this time we had been forced to move from our beautiful pre-fab to a small terraced house at Luton Road E17. The council, in its wisdom, had decided to build a tower block on our site. They moved us out only to find that a part of the Fillebrook river ran underground at our location. The subsoil was therefore not suitable for a tower block. The answer was to compulsorily purchase all remaining properties in the area and to erect a small "village" of low level terraced housing which survives to this day on the site.

Our "new" house was a great disappointment to us after the luxury of the pre-fab in that there was only cold water, no heating apart from open fireplaces and finally an outside W.C. I had to take to using the slipper baths at the new swimming pool in Chingford Road to have regular baths. In very cold weather we had to utilise a paraffin fired greenhouse heater to stop the W.C. system and pipes from freezing! I lived at this house until I married and moved out after a small delay at the age of 23. I vowed that I would never suffer an outside W.C. again!!!

While still at Luton Road, I took on a job as a paperboy at Shepherds Newsagents at the Palmerston Road junction with Forest Road. The job involved unpacking the papers, writing out the

rounds and finally delivering the papers. This involved getting up about 5a.m. seven days a week in all weather. The governor at my shop was *Vick Shepherd*. His brother ran the paper shop opposite, but they never spoke to each other in all the time that I knew them. The job paid good money at the time and I had a chance to save up for essential luxuries necessary for a young teenager i.e. records, magazines, admission to the pictures and the occasional cigarette.

I left school at 15 and became an apprentice Motor Fitter with the Eastern Gas Board at Woodall House, Wood Green N.22. It was there that I discovered the greatest love of my life: motor cycles. I first worked on B.S.A. bantams which were part of the Gas Board fleet, but were gradually being run down. I purchased the last remaining bike when it too became finally redundant. My lifelong affair had begun. I was 16 and I was free and mobile. A gallon of petrol was about 3 shillings and 6 pence (old pre-decimal money), which equates to less than 40 pence today! My bike needed in addition a squirt of two stroke oil which cost 6 pence (2+pence today)-

The mention of money triggers a memory that once upon a time I could go out on a Saturday evening, buy a pack of cigarettes (3 shillings and 6pence old money), 4 pints of mild & bitter (at 1shilling and 10 pence a pint) and on the way home buy some fish and chips for 1 shilling and 6 pence for supper and still have change out of a one pound note. My local pub at the time was the Woodman, around the back of Oatland Rise, Higham Hill. The landlords being *Jack & Cherry*.

In my younger days, as an apprentice, money was still tight and the only way that my friends and I could afford to maintain our bikes was to use secondhand parts and generic spares from shops like Jack Paddock at Gosport Road E17 and All Star Spares at Capworth Street, Leyton E10. *Max Dolties*, *Jack Nice* and *Vic Camp* were other motorcycle shops/people that I can remember using at some time.

In addition to riding bikes I also had a little convertible Bond three-wheeler car that was powered by a small Villiers motorcycle engine. This was used in bad weather, like in ice or snow type conditions. There was a small shop in boundary Road E,17 that specialised in these engines, by the name of Snells. Even now the shop has gone I believe that *Mr. Snell* was still offering a specialised service for such engines up to a few years ago. Perhaps he still is?

I would add at this time that I still have a love of motorcycles and still ride a large capacity machine, a Harley-Davidson (it keeps me young!).

I qualified as a motor fitter in 1971 but was made redundant during 1972. I had gained a Heavy Goods Driving license while working for the Gas Board and I joined the local authority, Waltham Forest, as a transport driver in 1973. After various jobs such as highways, dustbins, school meals I was given a permanent driving post carrying out maintenance on all Council trees. I worked with the tree gangs for two years, which I feel were the happiest working years of my life. Some of our works I am still proud of today. The Plane trees which line Chingford Mount E4 were planted by my gangs and I. These were planted circa 1974, if my memory is correct?

My interest in trees had grown due to my job and I had taken to study trees or as it was called, Arboriculture. There was a chance of becoming an assistant to the Borough Arboricultural Officer which I applied for and was lucky to be offered. My lifetime career had begun, finally.

I spent some 32 years as an Arboricultural officer with the London Borough of Waltham Forest trying to maintain and conserve the tree stock in the borough against all odds. Whatever I did was wrong in the eyes of the public in that 50% of people liked trees and 50% hated them (or so it seemed) In addition, sometimes, the councils wishes were contrary to my training and so I had to carry out works which I did not agree with but at the end of the day they paid the wages. The greatest challenge of my career came with the Great Storm of 15th/16th.October 1987. There was so much damage and destruction to both properties and the boroughs trees. We were still clearing storm damage six months later. We did manage, finally, to clear all the fallen trees and most were replaced within the next few years. However it takes a long time for saplings to replace large mature trees. Hopefully some of the trees that I had planted will still be growing when I finally depart this mortal coil!

I was made redundant in 2007 in preparation for privatisation of the service which I believe is ongoing at present. I wish whoever takes over the service the very best of luck and I hope that the conservation of trees in the borough will continue to endorse the name of Waltham Forest.

I have now taken a semi retirement and have moved out to a quieter life in Suffolk. I still miss Walthamstow but have many

memories of my life there such as The high Street and Rossi's ice cream parlour, Allan's sarsaparilla off the stall, the hot Chestnut man by the Cock Tavern. The original swimming pool where I learnt to swim with the help of a *Mr. Smith* (I think he was paid by the schools to teach us). The fish and chjp shop opposite the old pool where we would get a portion of chips wrapped in newspaper for 6pence(old money)after a swimming session, The Whipps Cross Lido (now buried under the forest) where we would spend happy sunny days swimming and lazing in the sun with a penny arrowroot biscuit and a cup of tea to last us all day and chat the girls up for our next party. We seemed to have a party every week-end!

I could go on and on but I will end by saying that I am proud to have been born and bred in Walthamstow. I still keep in touch with friends and regularly read the local Guardian and Walthamstow Memories with the aid of the trusty PC.

I hope that I have not bored you with my ramblings,

Good luck to you all and keep the good work up.

Stephen Paul Taylor
(Paul to friends)
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