

Walthamstow Memories -

WALTHAMSTOW HIGH STREET

We well remember Walthamstow High Street of the '50s. We took for granted all the sights, sounds, colours, smells and patter from the stallholders. What a wonderful kaleidoscope of experiences.

Starting from the Hoe Street end, the Black & White Milk bar - what about "Bible Johnny" - an elderly man wearing a three-piece suit with a buttoned-up waistcoat, always a buttonhole, and a bible under his arm? He frequented the milk bar and could be seen and heard preaching bits of Scripture. His face was terribly pockmarked and his ears so dirty. As my Mum said, "You could grow carrots in them!"

Rossi's Ice Cream Parlour for their delicious "Knickerbocker Glories", then an evening saunter past the cinemas whose names are long-forgotten, along with the queues for the 1/6d., 2/6d., or 2/9d.seats.

If it were live theatre you were after, the Palace Theatre put on top class performances before the days of telly. Dad liked the eccentric dancers such as Jo, Jac and Jonni, or Wilson, Keppel and Betty. Jane and her nude calendar tableaux were popular and permissible provided she did not move while on stage.

On Saturdays the street market came alive. In the mornings housewives would come for the greengroceries or household wares; in the afternoon it was the turn of the younger people: teenage girls with their hair in curlers under turbans and headscarves, getting ready for the Saturday night dance, looking for a new blouse or pair of nylons. The Teddy Boys trying on Edwardian suits from the Jewish tailors and menswear shops, being solicited by shop owners with tape measures around their necks and a handful of spare jacket behind the lad's back to show a perfect fit in the full-length mirror placed strategically to one side of the doorway.

The smell of the Sarsparilla Drink stall - hot in winter, cold in summer; the home-made sweet stall full of coconut ice and twisted cough candy, the price of which included half a pound of your sugar ration in lieu of sweet coupons. Mum always tried to get Dad's favourite boiled sweets - pear drops, which had a taste of nail varnish or acetate, about them.

In winter outside the pub was an old man with a brazier, cooking chestnuts on the open coals and selling them for 2d. a bag. I remember the "Cat Lady" pushing her pram with two or three cats inside, looking for homes for them, with a little draw-string "dolly-bag" hanging from her wrist to surreptitiously take cash donations for her cats, or payment for taking them off an owner's hands. We called him "No Legs Billy"- squatting on his trundle-board with castors underneath, pushing himself along with two half house-bricks, he would angrily demand right of passage through the forest of other people's legs.

Is Manze's Pie Shop still there? The stalls out the front full of live eels, galvanized trays awash in ice and water. Once you chose your eels, they were killed, cleaned and chopped into segments in a trice, wrapped in newspaper and dropped into your shopping bag. Inside the shop, the walls lined in Victorian brown, green and white tiles and narrow high-backed wooden benches and marble-topped tables. You ordered a meat pie tipped straight from the tin upside down onto a thick china plate, and a huge spoonful of mashed potato scraped off alongside the edge, then lovely thick green "liquor" poured over it. Only spoons and forks, no knives were needed or offered.

The Walthamstow Municipal Buildings housed the indoor Swimming Pool and the Slipper Baths. I never liked the chlorine fumes of the swimming pool, or the echo of the voices. In the same building was the Public Library, a dark wood-grained, high ceilinged deathly-quiet place where the librarian rubber-stamped your books. Old people went there to snooze in a corner and keep warm in winter. The Slipper Baths had individual cubicles housing full-size baths, the water operated from the outside by an attendant. They also hired out towels and soap and with your clean clothes under your arm, your ablutions were completed in luxury.

About half-way down on the right-hand side was the "Dolls' Hospital" which repaired broken dolls and mended the rolling eyes of the life-size baby dolls which opened and shut with a weight mechanism. Bateman's window always had a crowd of small boys around to look at the completed models of their aeroplane kits made from balsawood. Hanging from fine lines they swung and swayed against the backdrop of unopened boxes of model Spitfires and other planes that had kindled their interest from the war.

There was a very classy lingerie shop with a small window discreetly dressed with ladies' undergarments; inside a petite lady dressed in black would guide you into a curtained cubicle and measure you for a fitted bra or corset - such luxury compared to these days of standard 'off the peg' creations made in China.

Another discreet shop sold Herbal Remedies for every ailment, but my father always urged me 'don't look in there' whenever we passed. Mum, however, always went in to buy her peanut butter, which eked out the butter and margarine ration.

It was more than just a shopping trip - it was a slice of life to walk from the top of the High Street down to the bottom where it continued on into Coppermill Lane - can anyone shed any light on the site of the old workhouse opposite James Street? The shops gave way to urban streets, leaving the cockney street-cries to waft away on the wind until next Saturday.