

A 1950s CHILDHOOD IN WORCESTER PARK



Central Road, Worcester Park c1950

The 1950s was my first decade. I was one year old at the start of 1950 and my earliest memory of the times was of rationing coupons. I couldn't read them of course but my Mother was always checking she had them with her and I remember the little squares. One of the items she used to get was bottles of orange juice for me - they were flat shaped (like a small gin bottle) with a blue metal lid and blue writing on the label, and I loved that orange juice. It was kept in the larder (the place to keep food cool since few households had a fridge).



*Bottles of orange juice and cod-liver oil.
Image courtesy of Pat Cryer and her website
'Join me in the 1900s' at www.1900s.org.uk*

My Mother shopped in Worcester Park and we walked to the shops most days as Mums generally only bought a day or two's shopping at a time. Express Dairies was at the corner of St. Philips Avenue. It was a single shop and the entrance was across the corner of the building. It had a tiled floor of dark-coloured quarry tiles (interesting how a small child notices the different floor surfaces) and the lady there wore a white overall and a pleated, white headdress - imagine a tiara made of stiffened, pleated cotton. The Greengrocer was about halfway between St.

Philips Ave. and Brinkley Road and was run by two brothers called Barrett. One was very jokey and wore a trilby hat, and the other was quieter. They sold beetroots which had been cooked and were often still steaming. You had to have a shopping bag for vegetables because they were sold loose, there were no carrier bags, and spuds were muddy!

Then there was Freeman's, the Chemist, on the corner of Brinkley Road. He had those wonderful huge glass bottles on display, full of coloured liquid - red, green and purple. Not many items were pre-packaged then. If you had a cough or cold and consulted your pharmacist, he'd make up something for you himself. (The cherry linctus was OK but the 'tonic' was appalling!) Just next to the chemist was the fishmonger, with the amusing name of W. Hale. Their floor was black and white tiles, they had marble slabs on either side with all the fish laid out on them. My Mother used to buy plaice for my dinner (and tell me the story of the Fishy in the Dishy who, believe it or not, used to ask me to eat him).

Woolworths (about where Superdrug is now) had a wooden floor which I think they maintained with some kind of oil. They sold biscuits loose from cube-shaped tins. We also shopped in a grocer's called Caters which was a little higher up the hill from Woolworths. It was a single shop unit. It had a kind of stone floor which looked as if it had little chippings in it - they were coloured and I liked them. The floor extended out to the entrance between the windows and their name, Caters, was imprinted in the stone. On either side of the shop were long counters with wooden fronts and marble tops. You had to queue at each section and then ask the servers for what you wanted. My Mother used to buy New Zealand butter which was wrapped in paper, silver with a green pattern and writing on it, but the cheese was cut from a big piece with a wire, wrapped in greaseproof and put in a paper bag. Morleys, the bakers, was on the lower corner of Longfellow Road and they were a real bakers who baked the bread overnight.

As you can see, there was no one-stop shopping then. J. Sainsbury did exist, but it was at North Cheam and it was only like Caters (see above) anyway. We did sometimes walk to North Cheam because the laundry was there (for bedclothes etc. but not for our clothes as Mum hand washed those - no washing machine for most people). It was, I believe, the Sunlight Laundry and was about where the Post Office is now.

In 1950, the neighbours were nice people who mostly treated each other with consideration and respect. One lady was a retired schoolmistress with a beautiful speaking voice, who wore a fox-fur (with the head attached), two ladies were war widows who lived together, a few were families with children of various ages and two were elderly ladies who were addressed by me as 'Grandma' Stone and 'Grandma' Flynn. There was a 'Grandad' Stone too, but Grandad Flynn had "gone to heaven". Most grown ups were addressed as Mrs or Mr even if they were friendly with your parents although one or two very close friends might be addressed as 'Auntie', but *no* grown-ups by their Christian name.

When the Coronation was televised in 1953, we all gathered in the two local houses that had television. I had my colouring book and was expected to be quiet with that or watch (but not chatter). We had all decorated our houses - Dad put two crossed Union Jacks on the bay between the upstairs and downstairs windows, with a big cardboard gold crown in the middle. I remember my Dad telling me about Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tensing and what an achievement it was, and why. He used to talk to me a lot about 'the world about us'. He told me about the war, about the places he had seen whilst in the Army, (India, the Middle East, N.Africa, Sicily/Italy, then Europe from D-Day) and about animals and gardening and even DIY. I sat on the top of a toolbox in his shed and probably drove him mad asking what everything was for, but he patiently and amusingly answered all my questions (and then did the same all over again for

my children). I can also remember him telling me about the terrible flood on the East Coast and Sheppey, because I asked about a picture in the paper of policemen in a boat in a street. I felt terribly sorry for the people; it mattered to me.

When I was about four, I went to a dancing school at North Cheam, in the parade facing Church Hill Road. The owner was Miss Garnet and she was very exacting, so I wasn't keen on her, but the little ones were usually taught by Miss Lesley and I adored her. She was younger and quite pretty and less tough on us. We used to do 'displays' (shows) at Sutton Town Hall, which I think was near All Bar One but is gone now.



*Central Road, Worcester Park c1950
The Odeon Cinema is the building on the left with the Dutch barn roof*

Every few weeks, Mum had a treat and went to the cinema. The Odeon was on the corner of Windsor Road where Pizza Express is now. Dad made sure he was home early to mind me. Oh, that was my treat too. He was terrific fun but always teaching you something at the same time. Our extravagant pastime was making the models from the back of the Cornflakes packets! They were just printed on the packet and when the box was empty, you cut them out, and then assembled them. He taught me how to work accurately but would also tell silly jokes like the story of the fly who was running across the packet as fast as he could and when another fly asked him why, he said, "It says there, tear along the dotted line". We also used to listen to a serial called Journey Into Space and I think I was fascinated by space ever afterwards. That was why, on a dark winter night, up in his arms in the garden, Dad would point out the main constellations and the North Star. Even now, when I look at Orion I think of my Dad.

I went to Primary School at St. Cecilia's North Cheam and I was always very happy there. There were instances of bullying occasionally, but it was a more robust era and bullying was dealt with by older friends or by yourself, because the Mums all used to say, "If another child smacks you, smack them back harder, then they won't do it again". It seemed to work - there was very little bullying later on. However, in one memorably extreme case, a sadistic little ten-year-old got hold of as many of the infant class as he could and told us a man was coming with a gun to shoot us all. (It may seem a ridiculous claim, but we were only just five, in a far more innocent age, with the war not ten years past.) Quite a few of the class were crying. However, our wonderful Headmaster, Mr. Flynn, had found out and came in to our class to assure us that no

one was going to hurt us and the very naughty boy who told us such a mean lie had been given the cane. Yes, a more robust era.

When I was six, my little sister came along, so in the latter 50s I had someone to look after. I was quite sensible - being sensible was expected from young children far more in the 50s than now - and my sister was allowed out in my charge without undue worry on my Mother's part. There was a stern warning of, "If you want to go with Gillian, you hold her hand and do as you're told, or you won't go again," and that, I assure you, was that. Almost every Mum was to be obeyed immediately in the 1950s. My sister and I used to go round to Mrs. Rae in the sweet shop a few shops down from Brinkley Road - *to buy my Mum's cigarettes!* I was about eight or nine, my sister was about three and we bought ten De Reszke with no trouble at all.



Around 1958, the first 'supermarket' arrived in Worcester Park. It was called Youngs and was a couple of doors up from Washington Road. It was one shop-front in size, but it was self-service. There were shelves along both side walls and a large shelved island in the centre of the shop. We were sent for the bread - Lyons Thin Sliced. It was wrapped in waxed paper and I had to check the paper wasn't torn and give it a little squeeze, to see that it was fresh. There were no sell-by dates on anything. It was your business to know if anything had gone off, but since shopping was still done every day, generally food wasn't around long enough to go off - except the milk in summertime.



Central Road, Worcester Park looking towards the railway station. 1951

On summer evenings, we were allowed down to Worcester Park station to meet Dad off the train. By then, he always came home on the same train at six o'clock. We sometimes waited on the bench on the green between the station and Green Lane - the little shops weren't there then - but sometimes if we had time, we used to go up the steps and on to the platform so my sister could see the railway and watch the train on the other side. There was a very nice porter, I believe his name was Henry but we would never have called him that. He used to chat to us when he came over to collect the tickets in the few minutes before Dad's train arrived. He was very kindly. Imagine his surprise if he'd known we would remember him so many years later.

In summer, there was a parade which came up Central Road on one Sunday afternoon. I believe they started at Parker's just beyond Worcester Park rail bridge - where the much-loved poplar trees grew until just recently. We would hear the drums and bugles of the Boys Brigade - or sometimes a grown-ups' band - and we were allowed to go up to the top of Central Road hill to see them all go by.

In spite of the six year age gap, we mostly played together very happily - often pretend games. My sister's favourite game was 'schools' with me as the teacher. To us it was just fun to teach her reading, writing and sums, but when she went to school at the end of 1959, the reception teacher said I'd left her nothing to do.



Nonsuch Palace, Excavations, visitors on last day. 1959

In 1959, when Nonsuch Palace was excavated, our Headmaster decided we could not miss such an opportunity, so my class were told to bring a packed lunch, were formed up in a 'crocodile' and walked from St. Cecilia's to Nonsuch Park to see the excavation. I can't recall who explained it all to us, but I found it fascinating. Whenever we went anywhere, the staff would always sit amongst us with their packed lunch and talk to us about all sorts of things. My recollection is that they were all such a wonderful influence.

The following year, I left primary school, the decade turned over and it was all aboard for the Swinging Sixties - but not at my convent school, that's for sure!

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