

Memories of 55 Gatley Avenue, West Ewell



*Brian Piket with his dog Rusty and (l to r) his mother,
Gran and Auntie Beat outside 55 Gatley Road*

When World War 2 finally ended all were keen to resume their interrupted lives, although for many a return to their former homes in London was not possible and 'temporary' accommodation in the form of prefabricated houses in the Epsom and Ewell area was a cost-effective solution. I had been living with my mother and relatives in Reigate Road, East Ewell awaiting the return of my father from the War and the prospect of a completely new home was very exciting for us all. I can remember my first visit, aged five or six, to the flat-roofed single storey prefab in Gatley Avenue where we would live for about ten years - construction work still in progress in the road, a look of newness to everything and the smell of fresh paint. The interiors were well appointed, the kitchen having a gas cooker, copper and refrigerator, the sitting room an enclosed fire and built-in cupboards with drawers underneath, and there was an entrance hallway leading to two bedrooms and a bathroom and toilet. Outside there was a sizeable garden and a metal shed. As you entered the road there were a number of brick houses which suggested that their residents were from a wealthier class, setting them apart from the occupants of the prefabs. The road began to fill with tenants from varied backgrounds but sharing a common purpose to restore life to its pre-War normality, and this made the process of settling in and getting to know each other much easier. Neighbours would often be seen at the garden fence chatting to each other and there was a trust which enabled doors to be left open for visitors to 'pop in'. For the children there was the fun of making new acquaintances, and for me the opportunity to have friends for the first time. First contacts were, naturally, in the adjoining prefabs and Alan Martin in number 49 and I were soon good friends although as others moved in my circle expanded to seven or eight boys and girls who remained close until the road began to empty out in the mid to late fifties.

My father was able to find a job in Chessington at Siebe Gorman, a firm producing diving equipment, which had recently re-located from London. Because of my age my mother found work in the kitchens at Ruxley Lane Primary School so that she could be at home during school holidays etc, but even with two incomes there was no surplus for luxuries. The prefab was initially furnished with just the basic requirements for day to day living although a later sign of improving finances was the arrival of a large cabinet housing a radio-gram, which was a radio together with a record player for 78rpm records. There were no television broadcasts at this time so evening meals and Sunday dinner, always prepared for around 2pm, were spent as a family with the radio as background. Favourite shows were Billy Cotton's Band Show, Dick Barton, Journey Into Space and Riders Of The Range and some of the plots from the latter two were used for outdoor games with my friends. It could be very cold inside the prefab during the winter but the enclosed fire gave the sitting room at least a comfortable temperature and the cooker in the kitchen could also be used to create warmth. The sitting room fire could also have its door left open so that bread could be toasted or chestnuts roasted.



*Brian (centre) with George Williams, Susan Reid
& Susan's relative Peter*

I can only recall one or two residents in Gatley Avenue having cars in these early years, reliance having to be placed instead on cycles or on the local bus services for travel to and from work or for social or domestic reasons. Play was therefore

possible not only in one's garden but also in the road with little interruption from traffic. Favourites were tennis, using table tennis bats that someone had acquired, and cricket which often found the dads joining in. Respect for the adults was always maintained, even during such leisure activities, because any reports of bad behaviour would surely find their way back to one's own parents. We also had a cart, made from a plank of wood and two axles with wheels from discarded prams, which gave endless pleasure rides around our territory. As we grew older we began to acquire bicycles and trips to the shops at the beginning of the road were often made to purchase items forgotten by our parents but most of our socialising still took place within the confines of the road. In any case many of us were not allowed to take our cycles outside Gatley Avenue into Ruxley Lane where the road was considered too busy. Shopping trips to Epsom on Saturdays and Sunday visits to my relatives in East Ewell were something of an adventure on a London Transport green Country Area bus, although on many return journeys my parents chose not to use public transport but to walk home instead.

My father bought me a Rovex (later Hornby) electric train set for my seventh or eighth birthday and many winter days were spent in numbers 49 and 55 playing with the trains. I was allowed to leave the set part-assembled on our sitting room table or on the radiogram in winter but in summer it usually resided in the drawers under the room's cupboard. We also spent a lot of time constructing model aircraft from balsa wood kits, and this interest in transport extended itself to the airspace over our homes which at that time was always interesting. Croydon Airport was still active and traffic at London Airport - as it was then - was beginning to increase. Above, these commercial aircraft could be seen working their way back to Europe from North America or tracking west for the Atlantic crossing, and higher still there was a fair amount of military jet activity. It was natural, therefore, that we would wish to know more and the discovery that George Williams at number 65 had a naval telescopic gunsight which gave good magnification led to a group of us spending summer days lazing on our backs in the garden identifying the different types of aircraft passing over - Dakotas, Constellations, Tiger Moths, United States Air Force B-36s and many others - using the Observers Book of Aircraft as our reference. Being much more interested in aircraft than George I eventually purchased the gunsight and made very good use of it until my late teens.

By the early nineteen fifties the road had a comfortable, established feel to it although few made any great effort to improve their gardens which were left mainly to grass. My father had levelled the surface around our prefab and sunk eight or nine flower pots into the grass to create a putting green. Two of his walking sticks - he was injured in the War - and a tennis ball provided hours of entertainment for children and adults alike. There were still very few cars in the road but my father, who now worked in Kingston as a fishmonger and poulterer, was allowed to bring home the firm's van if he was making an early delivery to a client the next morning. This was parked over-night outside number 47 on a stub of Gatley Avenue which ran up to the boundary of Ayers and Card nursery.

Television sets began to appear, ours having just a nine inch screen but nevertheless having to be housed in a large cabinet due to the size of the rear tube and the number of valves. Only the BBC was making transmissions at this time, for a

period of four hours or so in the evening and, of course, only in black and white but it was compelling viewing.



Brian with Alan Martin in Gatley Avenue

For my group of friends this was a time of major change. Growing up together with almost daily contact had made us close but the eleven plus exams were about to send us off in many different directions, and reduce the amount of time available for 'chilling out' together. Retrospectively it seems that we did pretty well in the exams - all my male friends made it to Grammar Schools in Epsom or Surbiton while I progressed to Kingston Grammar. Travel was still primarily by bus and my mother took a job in a grocer's in Kingston so that the whole family was there during the weekdays. The demands of this next phase of our education meant that contact during the week was much reduced, homework taking priority over socialising, but week-ends and school holidays would still find our group out in the road chatting companionably about matters of interest until quite late in the day when our parents would call us in. The car owned by Mr Lawrence at number 57 was often the focal point for our gatherings as his daughter, Jacqueline, was one of 'us'. Restrictions on where we could go on our cycles were also relaxed and my parents bought me my first drop-handlebar bike, a Phillips Kingfisher, enabling visits to Ewell Court, Nonsuch Park, Tolworth, Epsom and sometimes even further. Costing just over ten pounds this magnificent machine was almost a week's pay for my father. I was also allowed considerable freedom to use public transport to pursue my interests in transport and would often disappear for seven or eight hours on a Saturday, ending

up at such remote places as Golders Green, Windsor, Uxbridge and Victoria. Bear in mind that I was only twelve and mobile phones had not even been thought of, nor were there any concerns for my personal safety. These excursions would eventually take me past London Airport and help me determine my later choice of career.

As time advanced into the mid-fifties it became obvious that the life-expectancy of the prefabs was becoming limited. We had originally been told that they were intended to survive for only seven years or so, but subsequent extensions to this meant that there had as yet been no major exodus of residents. One or two of our group had moved out, Berene Johnson from, I think, number 39 and Marie Davies from 45, but the main nucleus was still there. Friday night became established as our night at the cinema, winding down after a hard week at school, and three or four of us would go to either the Odeon in Epsom or the Rembrandt in Stoneleigh, depending on the film showing. A new estate was taking shape on the Nurseries and the stub of road outside numbers 45 and 47 was now extended across to join up with the roads on the Chessington side, allowing new friendships to be established in that direction. In our final year at number 55 my father was at last able to purchase his first car, a Ford Anglia, and I began to cycle to my school in Kingston with a friend from Derek Avenue who was in my class there. A second television channel, ITV, began transmissions in competition with the BBC but my family would not be able to afford this major advance in viewing choice for a couple of years yet.

It was impossible to envisage Gatley Avenue or, indeed, the other similar roads locally (Curtis Road and Gadesden Road) without their prefabs as they had been such an integral part of my growing up, and the dispersal of their residents to many estates around the area would cause the severance of relationships formed over many years. But progress is inevitable and in 1956 or 1957 we moved out, on a miserable, cold, wet day which contrasted so markedly with the hot, sunny day when we first arrived in Gatley Avenue.

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