

Boyhood Memories of Attenborough Fields in the 1940s

History Sheet No.38

By Douglas Chowns

Attenborough Fields were our escape.

Only a short distance through the bridle path passageway at the top of our Avenue (Wilcot) and then past the waterman's house and allotments the stile was our gateway to a world of lush grass and freedom.

A vast expanse to us, the Victorian cast iron field railings encircled almost all the fields and stretched from our stile down the hill beyond the split willow fence and another stile where we saw a doodle-bug, to the pond weir and round the always muddy path to the kissing gate in Merry Hill Road.

Then up the lane under the hedge to the London Road and back down to Crook Log passing the junior Masonic down into the vale towards Chalk Hill before the back gardens of workingmen's houses in Cross Road and Haydon Road.

Finally to complete the circuit back to the clay brick kiln pits in Lower Paddock where tiny run down mean looking cottages faced the very pits that provided the bricks they were built from.

Cheap but separate housing for navvies and their families when the railway came, and in the war time forties still not much different.

The clay pit dumps, bushes and holes made a rough up and down switchback playground for us on our bikes and a dump for rubbish.

Sitting on our stile facing Bushey Church, all the fields over the iron railing fence to the right of the Bushey path were forbidden territory and had a ferocious bull ready always watching to charge us small boys. Consequently we hardly ever crossed that fence line and then only with fear.

We played and fished for sticklebacks through the slats in the foot bridge above the broken weir on hot summer wartime afternoons, wishing the water level was higher and wondering how it must have looked when it was full; always hot sunny days with an occasional dogfight above for interlude.

A strange triangular brown pillar left by Arthurian Knights denied our attempts to push our swords into it.

The always muddy path to the kissing gate had high iron railings which separated us from the tangle wood of the mysterious Attenborough House pond. Painted with sticky sun cracked tar, oily in summer when we squeezed through, which marked our school clothes and skinned our cheeks and knees - ears sometimes also, as we all had short back and sides and looked like taxis with the doors open. I can still smell that tar. The kissing gate squeaked - what a sappy idea and we certainly didn't want to kiss anyone, least of all girls.

Crossing the twisty lane at Haydon Dell the ongoing path ran beside a triangular and pretty paddock, the path railed only on one side, holly bushes that fell away through dark soft soil to the stream bed of the Hartsbourne where camps could be built under the hollies and the mighty rivers dammed.

We often hung around the bridge at the end in the woods below the graveyard where the path from Merry Hill crossed to climb up through the graves to St James churchyard to Bushey High Street. Wide-eyed one afternoon we discovered adult only items in the stream, we figured grown ups also met on the bridge at night. At first we thought it had fallen out of a German bomber.

We followed these paths daily to friends' homes, the village or to catch a bus to Catsey Lane and the swimming pool, and the other way to Oxhey Golf Club and Blackwell's farm.

We made camps, fought battles or dared graveyard ghosts or the monster in the Swallow hole swamp, rolled and hid in the grasses and in winter tobogganed and slid on the ice in the pond, even played hooky when we were supposed to be at Crusaders Sunday School.

However, over all the open fields an unseen gaze watched our every move from the big house dark windows who sent an angry leather-gaitered and aged farm manager to shout and wave his arms in the air at us.

St Margaret's School - its tower among the trees on the skyline - was the end of our world and in another land, but we walked a field path from Merry Hill to Oxhey Lane past the Gypsy holding where Robin Hood cottages poked their quaint roofs and winked their dark diamond lead light windows at us in the hill bottom opposite forbidden Absalom's woods with its bull mastiffs snarling in their cages in a courtyard of the big house.

Before the Scout Hut and Watford Heath on the hill top, a hidden pond in a garden where I once saw a beautiful maiden younger than myself dressed in white with flowers in her hair watching me intently as I passed by.

A pair of cart horses were lead daily from the railway via Bucks Avenue and Sherwoods Road to the Gypsy field,



The railings by the Weir at the bottom of Attenborough Fields

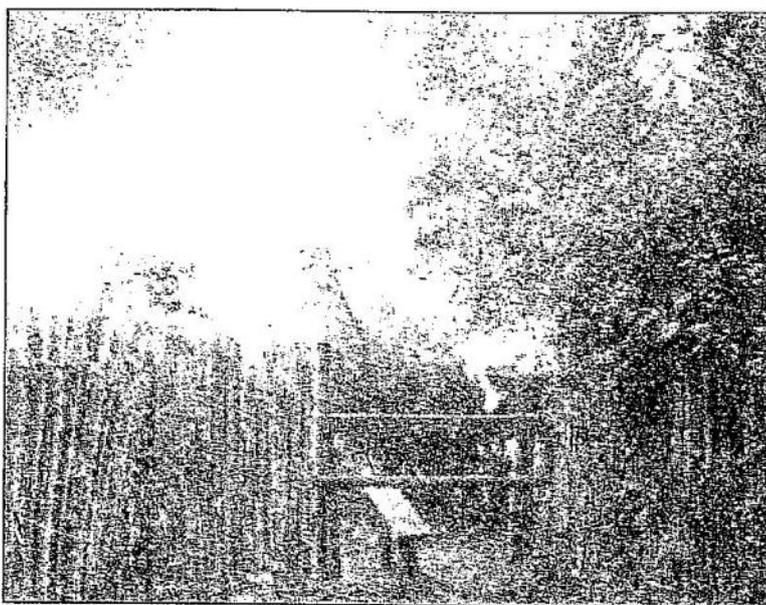
the driver walking between them as they clopped along.

The bend in the River Colne, moor and water meadows naturally divided the district, the footpaths in all directions had always been the quickest way to get from one village or farm to another for centuries and were well used daily by farm labourers who sought work at farms miles away by road. We boys also buzzed along them during war time as great places, ages apart by road on a bicycle or car and totally impossible by public transport, could be quickly reached in minutes even on foot. We were all good jogging along between Bushey village and Oxhey Golf Club, crossing the LMS railway line and the troughs where we collected train numbers or had cheap thrills getting steam up our short pants as a slow engine puffed up the grade, the steam shooting between gaps in the railway sleeper bridge and up our legs while we hooted with brass tangy glee.

In war time with most dads in the Forces, few private cars existed what with rationing and petrol rationing so we kids used the paths and our bikes to get everywhere. Stiles and bikes didn't go together and many a graze or squashed finger resulted which I can still feel.

It was forbidden according to the town clerk who had painted a notice himself on a post in the passage leading to the allotments and fields, that horsemen, maybe Highwaymen even, were not allowed on the Bridal Path and smooth iron post with a shiny knob on top that tasted of rusty iron stopped us riding fast down the passage but sent us fast enough into the garden shiplap fences to skin our knees. Handlebars had to be angled past the pole for a second like a spitfire, just a touch of rudder - but it could be done.

Opposite the Waterman's house the path to the fields passed a high and long mound. Sadly not an ancient Neolithic barrow on the top of the hill. An indoor reservoir, it had two massive black pipes towering hundreds and hundreds of feet high that water was pumped up on one side with a big vent on top to give a head for a good tap pressure before flowing down the other side black pipe all the way to Watford. The two vertical pipes joined in a U at the top with its hat dominating the ridge of Wilcot as a landmark to be easily seen from Watford High Street, but German bombers could see it also and would know where they were - so it came down about the same time that they painted over the name on Bushey Station platform I think. My Dad, then a Fire Warden, always worried that if a German bomb hit the reservoir a wall of water might wash us and our home right away. I had a clear picture in my head of water rushing down the road with Colin's house just debris passing our front gate.



The stile at the top of Attenborough Fields

Several craters were in fields, the Caley school hall had a direct hit from a parachute air mine and some poor chap was blown to pieces sheltering in the lych-gate of the Church in Bushey High Street. Bombs were a real issue and we frequently walked in the fields picking up shrapnel. One boy found a hand still in a glove.

Like the Magnificent Four, Swallows and Amazons or better 'Just William', Colin, Geordie, Denzil and myself were always in the grass often in our toffee-nosed school caps and blazers. We had no special play clothes other than corduroy shorts, football gear or blue linen PT shorts and plimsolls. Mostly we wore wellington boots.

Not allowed to play with the common kids who often had snotty noses, impetigo, ring worm and often purple blue painted heads, a rivalry existed and they almost always wanted to fight. My prep school, Kingsfield, wore bright yellow caps and sock tops and they called us appropriately "Canaries".

We boys had few girls who played with us and the sisters or those who lived locally went to girls-only schools while we went to boys-only schools. Only when very small did we all play together until our curiosity got the better of us and parents told us girls were sissy no doubt.

However, our endeavours were all heroic and valiant often based on King Arthur (less a Guinevere) or the war, the RAF Brylcream boys and the dog-fights that occupied our every day and our nights sleeping in garden shelters. We ate heaps of carrots because Sqdn. Ldr. Cunningham did and could see in the dark on Mosquito Pathfinder raids.

Earlier, I vividly remember sitting at night with my parents watching London burning on fire, the sky angry red seen from the stile over the fields towards St Margaret's School tower. The hawthorn hedges sharp and tangled black against the convulsing orange and red glowing cloudy night sky....

....and so on.

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Illustrations supplied by Bryan Hutt based on photographs (Stile - Ian Mackay, and Railings - source unknown)