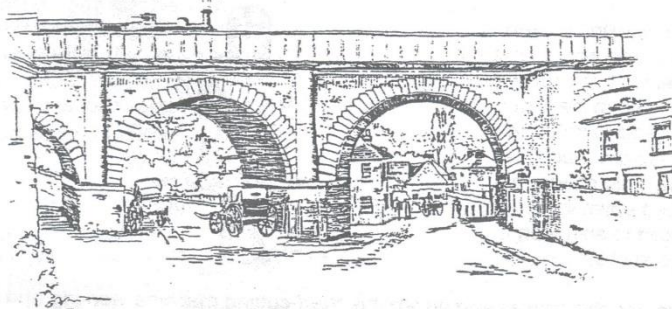

OXHEY VILLAGE ENVIRONMENT GROUP

March 1995

History Sheet No. 7

Underneath the Arches



A view of Oxhey by Mrs. Edie Rutherford

I was born Edith Frost, in 1907, in a house at the bottom of Chalk Hill, on the right-hand side, facing the Arches. It was the road-side end of three terraced houses. We had about six steps to the front door and so had a fine view - through the Arch, down the High Street - of various Watford landmarks. It was a rented house and Copyhold, so dated back to when a tithe had to be paid to The Lord of the Manor. It was noisy there, of course, but we were used to it. When an express train roared over the Arches the whole place shook and our crockery rattled. It was a good old house and sheltered us through two World Wars.

It was a very interesting place to live as there was always something going on outside. Bushey Arches then was the boundary for the Metropolitan Police and there was a Police Box there with a telephone. Every morning, at 6 o'clock, two policemen came down - one to report off-duty and the other one to start. This was repeated several times a day. They were always on foot.

The ambulance, which was rather like a long pram with two big wheels at the back and a small one in the front, was kept in a shed at the back of the Police Box. We always knew when there was an accident. The policeman would come down and take out the ambulance and *push* it to the scene. The injured person would be strapped on to it, lying with his/her back to the policeman and would be covered with a mackintosh sheet and a big hood, which was put over the person's head. The policeman would then push the ambulance with patient to the little Cottage Hospital in Vicarage Road. People were very helpful in those days and some sort of first-aid would have been given before the policeman arrived.

We also knew when there was a fire as well, because Benskins Brewery had horses and a horse-drawn fire engine with their own men as the firemen, and Sedgwicks Brewery, which was opposite Benskins, had the same. We could hear them coming usually before we would see them in the Lower High Street. It was a marvellous sight to see them galloping by with the firemen in their brass helmets - one would be ringing the bell. The horses also

had bells. Sedgwicks followed - they were generally the second to come. We would hear them return - but only the horses' bells would be ringing then.

Opposite us was the Railway Tavern Public House - which Mr. Lockett ran. He also hired out horses and carriages. The carriages were kept under the middle arch. Between our house and the arches was a private road leading to the Colne Valley Water Company. There were also meadows and two fields where Mr. Lockett had his stables. He also had a little pony cart with a pony named Minnie. We used to go and play in those fields. It was lovely there: all sorts of wild flowers and colourful butterflies - and we used to watch the trains go by on the top of the embankment. We used to wave to the engine drivers and, sometimes, guessed how many trucks there were with the train. We had a funny kind of game - when one of us saw a double-engine train coming, he or she would shout out "double engine, my first luck" and then spit on the ground and turn right around and not look again, not even at the smoke left behind. Otherwise the luck would go!

We also used to play with wooden tops, which we coloured with chalks - they looked so pretty when they were spinning; we also played with wooden hoops - the boys had iron ones; then there was the diabolo - this was rather like a big cotton reel which was narrowed down in the middle, and we used to spin it on string between two sticks.



We would often go into the stables and watch the chaff-cutting machine working and the horses being groomed. In the evenings little bats would dart over our heads, making their funny squeaking noises.

Everyone went for walks. A favourite walk of ours was through Attenborough's Fields. People had to keep to the footpath and not take anything on wheels. Attenborough's employed a man to keep watch every day. I took my tiny doll's pram one afternoon and he told my mother I must not take it there again.

Every day, horses and carts went to and fro between the Gas Works and the coal wharf at Bushey Station. In the summer, when the sun was very hot, the horses would wear straw hats trimmed with artificial flowers, with two holes for their ears to poke through. Horses and carts would go by each morning, loaded with bags of soot being taken to the farms for fertiliser; in the evening they returned with high loads of hay or straw. In the middle of the road opposite us was a concrete horse trough with water for the horses - underneath the horse trough was a shallow trough for dogs. People could have a drink also - by pressing a button at the side and using an iron cup on a chain.

On Sundays in the summer, we would hear brakes (a big open cart with a canopy on top) go by - full of people sitting on benches facing one another as they set off for an outing somewhere in the country. They would all be singing. Sometimes, on their way back, they would stop at the public house opposite to have a drink and rest the horses. They would sometimes sing and dance outside and go back all happy - with bunches of flowers hanging above their heads. Occasionally we would see a Pearly King and Queen with them. Later on, Charabancs took the place of the picturesque brakes. Also on Sundays, a lot of boys would come by to gather bluebells and we would see them coming back at night with the bluebells on the back of their bikes. On Sunday afternoons in the winter, the Muffin Man would come. He carried the muffins on his head on a board covered with a piece of green baize material and would ring a big bell. We would go out and buy some and toast them by the fire - lovely!

We had plenty of tramps knocking on the door, usually asking for something to eat or some tea, sugar, milk or boiling water. They would never ask for money. An elderly couple who came regularly, and who had all their belongings on a pram, also asked for yesterday's paper as they liked to keep up with the news.

There were some nice shops opposite us at the bottom of Chalk Hill: Mr. Barker at the Butcher's Shop, and Mr. Wort the Baker's shop next door. We were very friendly with Mrs. Wort and used to go over there often. Every time we were in their sitting room we could hear the cricket chirping in the bakehouse. Next door was Mr. Foakes, the Greengrocer, then there was Miss Bee, the Grocer and Mr. Hawkes, a Boot and Shoe Repairer. He used to wear a long leather apron from his chin to his feet and he would be at the back of the counter with his mouth full of nails. We used to call him "The Snob". One day he came over and said he had lost his coat and would I tell him if I saw it. I said "Oh, yes, Mr. Snob, I will". My father did laugh and said "That's not his name!" Many of the shops are still there, but, of course, they have changed hands many times.

I had two brothers, both older than myself. One had a diseased heart and died in his teens, the other died in France in the First World War. My father was a Signwriter and he died in 1917 - when I was 10. It was very sad and hard for my Mother. We had no income so she had to find a job - which was not easy for women in those days. She did obtain one, serving in a Corn Merchant's Shop in the Lower High Street. My father's mother was living with us for many years so I always had someone in the house when my mother was out at work. We also let two furnished rooms at various times and that is how we managed. I can remember on several occasions we had two soldiers for bed and breakfast. They were being trained in Watford to go to France. Their food rations were brought in an open wagon drawn by two black mules. Mules were used a lot in that war.

I attended Oxhey School, at the corner of Aldenham Road, which was on the site where the Fairfield Flats are now. We had the usual lessons of the time. I remember Empire Day especially, because the Union Jack was put in the centre of the playground and we all had to march in single file and salute it. The older girls gave a dancing display and we sat on the hard playground and listened to some prosperous-looking men making speeches which we could not understand. I think the teachers were a bit bored too! We had the afternoon off as a holiday. When I was between 11 and 12, I sat for the Scholarship Examination which I passed, and I went to what was then called the Higher Elementary School in Derby Road Watford. While I was there the name was changed to The Central School. The building is still there. I was there four years. In the fourth year we had a Shorthand and Typewriting lesson each week. I started work in 1923, when I was 16.

I lived with my mother on Chalk Hill until she died there in 1956. In 1957, I married and moved to Lower Paddock Road, where my husband had a cottage and in 1963 we moved to Haydon Road - so I have lived in Oxhey all my life. My old home at Chalk Hill, and the public house opposite, were demolished in the early 1970s, and the spaces are now car parks. All the beautiful steam trains that we loved no longer go over the Arches.