More Memories of Kings Heath

Compiled by Ivor Davies March 1994

Introduction

In 1989 Mary and Walter Reynolds gathered together a number of reminiscences of past and present Kings Heathens which were published as Memories of Kings Heath.

As their offering was well received, it was decided to produce a second work of similar type if enough fresh material became available. This paper marks the execution of that decision.

Whether there will be a third selection of this kind depends on the willingness of the public to share with us their recollections of the Kings heath they knew in the past. If you can help in this way, or point us to anyone who can, please contact the society.

In this paper appended notes give further information about some of the matters mentioned and a title marked * is given to any item which lacked one.

Finally. "Thank you" to all those who have provided pieces found herein.

The first two pieces deal mainly with aspects of Kings Heath life between the first two world wars.

The following is a letter written to Community Historian Dr Carl Chinn in June 1992, by a member of the Kings Heath Local History Society.

Growing up in Kings Heath in the 20's and 30's*

Following your recent talk to the Kings Heath Historical Society at Kings Heath Library, (now meets at Kings Heath Community Centre), I have decided to sit down and write a few of the memories that come to mind of my childhood and young adulthood that took place in the 1920's and 1930's in a working class street in the parish of Kings Heath. They may not all follow on from one another, but I will put them down as they come to mind, so bear with me.

I was born over 70 years ago in Middleton Road, a cul-de-sac which ran from Alcester Road to allotments on which now stands Wheelers Lane School.

My grandfather had migrated from the Catshill area and my grandmother from the West Heath area, they met and married and came to live in Middleton Road, their names in the family bible go back to the 1700's so even in those days they could read and write. They both came from big families and it seems when old enough the boys emigrated to Canada and Australia and the girls went into service with local families.

Sadly, when my grandfather died in 1935 all family ties were lost and also the same when my father passed away on Christmas day in 1939 and so to this day I still have no real knowledge of his younger days brought up on the north side of the city.

He served in the Machine Gun Corps in the First World War and met and married my mother when he discharged in 1919. My mother was an only child and still lived with

her parents after she got married. The wedding was held at Kings Heath parish church and the reception was held at the family home. It must have been a lovely day by the wedding photographs which were taken in the back garden and which I now keep in the family album.

Most children born in the 1920's were born at home and it was usually a fortnight before things got back to normal after a baby was born. I remember when my brothers and sisters arrived a midwife came every day and I believe her name was Mrs Yapp. My mother used to take me to the welfare up Polplar Road which I believe is still there and used as a welfare centre today.

Most families in the 1920's had big families for the death rate amongst infants was quite high for most of the diseases, which seem nothing today, took their toll. Chicken Pox, measles, whooping cough, scarlet fever and, of course, the killer-consumption. The other thing, of course, was the lack of contraception and the knowledge of it, of course, sex was a taboo subject and wasn't taught in schools. Most men any way could not afford to buy the rubber condoms which were available.

There were always plenty of children to play with in working class roads and most children, without the aid of T.V. or radio, managed to fill their days with play. Strange, but most of the childhood days seem to have been sunny days yet the winter days must have been real hard. Everything was delivered by horse and cart – bread, milk and coal and the rest from the corner shop.

Mossfield Road was a better class of working class street, although it had council houses as well as private houses but it had no corner shops. Our road, Middleton Road, had three and an outdoor beer licence, so had the next working class road, three shops and an outdoor. The beer was delivered to the outdoor by a steam wagon and, after he had unloaded, all the boys used to cling to the sides of the wagon for a ride to the bottom of the road. There was such a thing as a coal fired lorry and it certain delivered the beer in Middleton Road. Today, as far I know, only three people are still alive to remember the days we spent as youngster and were born in the road.

My grandfather worked for the council at the depot in Silver Street and on school holidays I would go with him to look after the horses there. Everything was done by horse and cart and the highlight of the year was May Day when the horses were trimmed up and entered into the local horse show. It was a sad day when he retired in 1934 and he only lived two more years, his chest being poor due to the type of employment he followed. He was buried at Brandwood End Cemetery, for there was little cremation in those days. The hearse and carriage were drawn by black Belgian horses with plumes on their heads and everyone in the road turned out to give their last respects.

My Gran had always gone out to work to supplement the income; she cleaned in the big houses in Moseley. For 2/6d per day she worked from 9.00 a.m. – 5.00 p.m. and on a good day came home with the left-overs of the day's or day before's dinner, the grateful thanks of a good employer, sometimes even a pudding. She would come home and take me down Kings Heath village to buy me a pair of trousers from Fosters for 1/6d and it is only now, when I look back, I realise what a sacrifice it must have been.

The shoes, or boots, were always bought from Freeman, Hardy and Willis, a firm still going strong today (They now longer have a shop in Kings Heath (1994) and are no longer trading as a company (2014.) The week's meat would be bought from the Bull's butchers on a Saturday evening just before closing time where they would auction the meat off from an open window. It was always, "who would give me two bob for this", and end up probably with a tanner piece and usually an ox tail which would go into the stew pot and boil overnight on the living room grate ready for Sunday dinner.

Nearly everyone had vegetables for they either had big gardens or allotments and most had fruit trees. We were lucky for we had pigs and fowl, so nothing was wasted, even the potato peelings were cut up and boiled, mixed with Sharp's mash and fed to the chickens.

The four young piglets were fetched by cart from Bunce's the coal merchant's who had a big yard at the corner of Yardley Wood Road and Brook Lane by Swanshurst Park. They were kept and fattened up and then sold to the pork butcher's, Barr's, who had a shop in Kings Heath. They were killed and usually a leg of pork kept back to celebrate. The rat man, with his terriers and ferrets used to come very three months on a Sunday morning and it was always exciting morning counting the kill. It was also an excuse for many journeys backwards and forwards to the outdoor and usually every journey meant a halfpenny earned which after four journeys meant 2d and a packet of 5 Woodbine cigarettes which would be smoked in secret.


Barr's pork butcher's shop.

While the time between the old pigs going, and the new pigs coming in, we usually has a dozen or so Aylesbury white ducks. One night there was a skirmish with the ducks and Granddad got up and then got us all up in the middle of night to see a sight I have never witnessed before. The gooseberry bushes were alive with fireflies, a mass of small golden lights, hundreds of them, and the next morning the bushes were washed with soapy water for the fruit was more important than any thought of conservation.

On warm summer nights you could sleep outside and the gate leading to the garden was never to my knowledge ever locked yet it seemed everyone trusted one another. Maybe it was because we were all poor together.

The men folk always seemed versatile because they repaired taps, shoes, chairs, bikes, anything that broke, pots, pans, kettles, they repaired it. The girls' shoes had 'segs' put in them, the boys had steel tips put in the heel and toe and no such thing as plastic, all leather, so they were repairable and the only problem was you outgrew them and then they were handed down, so were the girls' clothes.

The children's ailments were nearly always treated with home-made remedies or the old-fashioned ones from the local shop. Sloan's liniment was a must for all aches and pains and it stank to high heaven, winter green ointment was another, and if a child had whooping cough, a steam kettle with a long spout was filled with boiling water for the vapour was supposed to ease the congestion on the chest. Should there be any road works going on in the area, the child would be wheeled round as the smell of the tar was supposed to be good for the lungs. If you had a chesty cough, a large sheet of brown paper was had with a hole in the middle to just go over your head and it was smeared with goose oil. Many of your pals turned their noses up at you.

My mother paid 3/6d per three months to a doctors' club, which gave us medical treatment should we need it. We had two good old-fashioned doctors who lived on the corner of Vicarage Road and Alcester Road, Dr Fennessey and Dr Kennedy. They lived in a big old-fashioned house and were very firm – you didn't abuse the privilege of seeing a doctor. The family's teeth didn't get any attention except for the school children who had regular inspections at school and if any attention was needed a note was given to Warstock Lane clinic which I still there to this day.

Monday morning was always a day for the washing and father was always up early to light the copper, and fill the copper with cold water. There was no such thing as a hot tap so the water when once used was kept warm for the family bath in front of the fire. The last remaining suds were used to kill greenfly and aphids on the vegetables as no chemical was available and anyway it cost money. In later years in the thirties, the elder generation made a trip once a week, usually on a Saturday morning, to the local baths. The baths were situated in Institute Road and the attendant filled the bath and you soaked in luxury and were given a towel and piece of soap for 2d.

The brew house had to be shared by four other cottages and luckily there was a well in the yard where we could draw water from. We shared with another family the toilet which had a wooden seat with a bucket underneath and you made sure you went before you went to bed as it was impossible in the dark. Later it became a flush toilet.

Everyone had a shed in which were kept the essentials, the last for repairing shoes, the garden tools, the pig food, the chicken corn, the stored vegetables and I remember the row of rabbit skins which were stretched out on boards to dry. These, I believe were sold to some shops in the village. Strange how, in those days, chicken was a luxury and rabbit the poor man's meat but not a bit of it was wasted.

My grandfather had a large rhubarb bed and every year it was transported to the house where he had a very large cask. The top came off and the day was spent smashing the juice out of the rhubarb sticks to make rhubarb wine. Yeast and sugar

were added and the lot left to ferment, a large scum appeared on the top which was skimmed off and eventually and after much tasting, the brew was ready to drink. A number of neighbours came round and on a Saturday evening and it usually ended in a sing song. I still cannot understand why they had to dip a hot poke into the brew before they drank it.

Most men drank a lot and on Friday night and a Saturday dinner time you would see them come staggering home from work and pub. It was money ill-spent really for Monday morning the wives would gather up what valuables they had and go off to get a few shillings to keep the home going. Most men got paid on Friday afternoon so the stuff was taken out of 'Uncle's' so the husband could wear his best suit for the weekend. 'Uncle's' was, of course, a pawn-broker's.

The reason the small shopkeepers kept going was because of the 'strap', the goods were put on the slate until Friday. The youngest child was usually sent to the shop with the message, can I have a packet of tea and sugar, and Mom will pay you on Friday. Can you imagine this happening today in the age of the supermarket? Yet there are no corner shops left in Middleton Road or Albert Road as everyone has money for groceries.

I started school at five years of age at Colmore Infants and walked in the morning, back at dinner time, back after dinner and home at 4.00 p.m. No nursery school to lead us in, but it opened up a whole new world, and then on to junior school. You still wore short trousers and it was only on going into the seniors that you finally wore long trousers.

As an aside, when I left to go in the Air Force in the Second World War, I was called Freddie by the neighbours, but when I returned in 1946 I knew I had reached adulthood for they called me 'Mr Hill'.

The time came to leave Colmore Road and move on to the senior boys' school situated on the corner of Institute Road and the High Street. A wonderful school Which, in the early 1930s, had a large laboratory and a huge woodwork shop and many a lad made his mother a stool or clothes horse.

King's Heath Board School (with tower)

Each class had 48 pupils and on leaving at the age of 14, I don't think there was anyone who could not read, write or add up. My father instilled into me the fear that when I left school and started work, the employers would cheat you if you could not read and write, or add up. I moved from 3A to 2A and into the top class, 1A, presided over by Mr Swift, a man who kept discipline and a cuff round the back of the ear was

a sharp reminder to listen carefully in future. No use going home to tell Mom, because the teachers knew best and you were there to learn.

The names of the other teachers are still familiar after almost sixty years, Mr Stanton 3A, known behind his back as 'Joey', and Mr Puddlephat who took 2A and a most remarkable man who had time for all his pupils and yet helped the sports and football teams. We won a number of trophies. In 3A it was hard for the smell of the baking from the local bakery filled the classroom and by dinner time you were starving, hard to concentrate when the tummy is rumbling.

One of the other distractions was when the cattle got away from the drovers driving them up the High Street to Pearsall's butchers ready for slaughter. The chasing and the squeals still remain to this day and Woolworth's now stands where the abattoir stood. (Woolworths no longer exists as a company and the store has been replaced by Poundland – 2014).

Woolworth's store in 1934 with Pearsall's butchers nearby

At the age of 14 it was time to leave school. It was school on Friday and work 7.00 a.m. Monday morning. Had been offered a job at a garage at Alcester lane's end for 7/-per week but I turned it down because I wanted to be a carpenter and it paid 7/6d. My father was working for Dave's the builder who was building the new estate called Fox Hollies, Hall Green, and he had a word with the carpentry foreman and at 7.00 a.m. on the Monday morning after leaving school I started work as a carpenter's improver. When people tell me how hard they have to work, I tell them the story of how on my first few weeks of work my mom had to ease my weary arms with embrocation before I could lift up my knife and fork to eat my tea.

My working week started at 7.00 a.m. Monday morning, half an hour for breakfast (without pay) 8.30 – 9.00 a.m., then on till 1.00 – 1.30 p.m. for dinner and then on in summer time to 5.30 p.m. and 4.30 p.m. in winter time. Saturday was work until 12.30 p.m. Any time it rained or snowed and you stopped work you lost the pay, so men worked on, soaked to the skin, not wanting to knock off. But the chief members of the firm, the owners, would roll up in their cars and stop the men working in case

the rain made the men less efficient. The Trade Union officials would sneak round the job without the foreman knowing and collect the men's dues. For me it was 3d per week and if I didn't attend the branch meeting held every month I was fined 3d. I am sure it was the harsh working conditions that were imposed on the labour force that made the men, who returned from the Second World War, rebel and say never again should working people put up with such hard conditions of employment.

Even when the hours were cut from 54 to 52 to 50, and 48 to 46 to 44 to 42 to 40 and, lastly, to 38, a two hour reduction in pay was taken each time.

But in 1948 a revolution took place in which people got free health care and at last working people came into their own right. Unfortunately, it was so good a lot of people abused it and things have slowly started to drift back to the old ways.

The people who lived in our road who had the best jobs were the postman, the dustman, the milkman, the coalman, for they had regular wages, not a lot in the 1930s – it wasn't much more than around £2.00 per week. The coalman had a hard job for he had to carry 1 cwt bags of coal into the house, for the coal was kept under the stairs.

As the years went by things slowly improved for we got gas lighting instead of oil lamps and a candle to go to bed with. Then in the late 1930's the electric arrived and people were really scared of it, a flick of the switch and a light came on, it was marvellous. The radio worked by two batteries and an accumulator and every fortnight a visit was paid to Mr Vizard's garage to have the accumulator charged up. One battery and a high tension and a low tension battery plus the accumulator to hear the Saturday night variety show, also 'In Town Tonight'. It was marvellous to hear people speak from a box. I think the set was made by Alba, a firm in London.

The social conditions improved too. For the fleas, which were always a pest, a powder came out to control them, also the big black beetles which came out at night from around the fireplace. The silver fish are still around today and, although harmless, still mange to survive as a species. The black grates began to be removed from most cottages, no longer was a fire needed to boil a kettle on and cooking in the oven each side of the range, for the new black gas stoves did all that at a turn of a key.

It was still a job in hot weather to keep the kitchen food free of blow flies and most houses had a wooden meat safe with metal gauge round it. It allowed the air in and kept the flies and mice out.

The hot weather was a time for going places and having a bike it was easy to explore all the areas around. Once a year Sir Alan Cobham came to the Austin with his flying circus and it was always seemed to be fine. We boys couldn't afford to go in so we would sit on the high bank overlooking the airfield and enjoyed every minute. One special stunt was the lady or man standing on the wing of a biplane aircraft as it flew by and waved to us.

My Gran would gather half a dozen of us youngster together for a day out at the Lickey Hills. We would all take bottles of cold tea and sandwiches and eat on the hills. The tram ride to Rednal up the Bristol road was a never to be forgotten ride, upstairs on the outside seats. The tram rattled and rolled and was a more rewarding ride than all the paid fun fair rides.

During the summer months a number of train trips used to take place to the seaside. They would stop at most local stations and we would go on these cheap excursions to Rhyl, Weston-Super-Mare and New Brighton. The trains were usually that long that when we arrived at Kings Heath station the train had to pull up twice to the platform to let all the passengers off and sometimes ended up at Moseley Station.

I earned my own money to go on these trips for at the age of 12 years, I became a butcher's boy delivering meat to the better class houses of the neighbourhood. Every Saturday morning at 8.00 a.m., I would arrive at Cunnington's the butchers and get out the delivery bike with a massive wicker basket on the front, loaded with lumps of meat, and off round the area I would pedal. Some of the ladies seemed a bit sharp, and not many Saturdays went by without getting a dog bite. I could never understand why the ladies couldn't carry their own meat home once they had bought it but it gave me a job at the end of the day and I collected half a crown and a good slab of meat for my Mom.

I joined the Scout movement, which was held in the church at the top of Poplar Road, but it didn't last long. The boys seemed too good for us, came from better class homes and wore uniforms which we really couldn't afford.

A lot of the boys and girls attended Sunday school and everybody seemed friendly there. Once a year there was an anniversary and all the girls sported frocks and looked lovely and for most there was a day out at the seaside, the only trip to the sea most of them ever had.

My Gran used to love a trip round the Outer Circle bus route, twenty four miles long, and you got off where you got on at least two and a half hours later. After dinner on a Sunday we would toddle off to Kings Heath Church, board a bus and get back off at the same spot ready for tea. Although sixty years have gone by the bus still follows the same route and you can see the change in the various districts as you go through them, posh and working class.

For most young people work was easy to come by but became harder when you reached eighteen, the employer sacked you and got another fourteen year old in. Most of the school leaving girls tried to get into Cadbury's for they had a good reputation. The girls who were picked became known as 'Cadbury's angels' and no doubt they were the pick of the bunch.

They went to day continuation until they were eighteen, and their hair and finger nails were checked for cleanliness. Even today the older men around usually say when they meet a smart elderly lady, "I bet she was a Cadbury Angel." To pick up these girls, the lads from Kings Heath used to go down to Stirchley village and go up and down the main street, known as the Monkey Run. It nearly always ended up in the Salvation Army Citadel having a cup of tea, then home.

There were quite a few picture houses about. Kings Heath had two, Stirchley had two, then there was the Savoy, the Kings Norton and one in Yardley Wood. Sadly all have gone and the memories of the romances that started in these places. Nowadays young men have cars to do their courting in, but they do not know the thrill we had as lads holding hands in the back seats of the cinema.

After the first few days at work I began to lay floorboards in the 'Dave's Distinctive Houses', which sold for £375. I graduated after the first week of fetching bottles of

beer from the Three Magpies pub by the back road and I knew I had become one of the workers for I no longer had to have a strip of gummed paper placed over the cork by the publican to show no one under age had drunk any of the contents.

You were expected to lay the complete flooring downstairs in a day and the next day the upstairs floors. Cut your boards to size, fetch them from the stack of timber and cramp them up tight, then nail them down with two nails per joint per board, and woe betide you if you put any hammer marks on the face of the boards.

You brought all your own tools and no one stole anyone else's tools, and unwritten law, for they always said you were stealing another man's bread and butter. Yet, in this affluent society, stealing tools is rife.

By sixteen years' of age I was expected to help put the roofing timbers on, hanging doors, skirting, architrave, in fact do a man's job, the wages rising to about 16/-a week. But no bonus, you just had to work as hard as you could otherwise someone else took your job. When the time came, the foreman would come round the job on a Friday afternoon to sack the one's he didn't want. The word would go round the site that 'the broom was out' and it meant, if it was you, a spell on the dole, 10/- per week after a lot of pleading. Two hours notice meant you just had time to get your knives sharpened, collect your cards and money from the site office. The men spent hours on their bikes riding around from job to job for being out of work they couldn't afford the bus or tram fares. Can you imagine riding ten miles, doing a day's work, then riding ten miles home, then for relaxation go to work in your garden or allotment.?

These men were the ones who had saved us in the First World War and now burnt themselves out getting a living. They had been promised all sorts of things which they never had, so you can guess why there was such reaction after the Second World War.

My father was still working for Dave's when his pal came on the site and dad told him I was working on site. Even in those days it was who you knew rather than what you know and I was offered a job with Harris and Sheldon, the top shop fitter outfit in the Midlands. It meant travelling into the city but I jumped at it. It was hard work, no talking to the man on the next bench, and the foreman looked down on you from an office above and banged the window if he saw you slacken or look round.

The war came along and gave a lot of lads the chance to escape the rigours of work, for a lot of them had joined the TA. The barracks were in Mossfield Road and a lot of chaps joined because it was almost like joining the exclusive club with a fortnight camping away from home and a small gratuity as well. Unfortunately a lot of these lads were sent to France with the BEF and, those that did return came home via Dunkirk.

For most of us it gave us the chance to tour the world, see people and places we had only read and heard about at school. To start with it was almost like a new found freedom until later the reality set in.

In the 1930's only two people in a road of over 100 houses had cars and I was lucky enough to be given rides in them both. The owner of the 'outdoor' pub used to like fishing and he would take his son and daughter and me fishing for the day at Cleve Prior. We played for hours on the weir and in the river trying to catch the fish with nets, but we always returned home happy, tired, dirty and with no tiddlers.

The other lady and gentleman had no family so went for a run in the car with a couple of the boys and girls out of the road as guests. We nearly always ended up in the Clent Hills. Petrol was 1/6d per gallon and there was only one main garage in King's Heath, that was Arnolds and Genders, on a site where Sainsbury's now stands (Arold, Genders and Co. Ltd. Motor Engineers were at 38 – 46 Alcester Road South). They even sold new cars and repaired old ones in the garage at the back of the forecourt.

Arnold Gender's

The only stable building left now, as stood in the 30's , is the Parish Church, and a well known landmark for it was the terminus and turn around for the tram into town. The other tram service ran on to Alcester Lane's End which was the terminus. It was always called the 'Nob' and nobody really seems to understand why. This was the home of the greyhound stadium and once a year the home of the Kings Heath Horse Show. In the late 1920's I remember the Cossacks coming to stay on the greyhound track and racing their horses up and down the Alcester Road, doing all sorts of horses riding skills for the on lookers. Even in those days it was a favourite pass time to stand at the bottom of the road and watch the traffic go by. It was mainly horses and carts and the enterprising lads always got a galvanised bucket and shovel to collect the horse manure. You could sell it to the gardeners for a couple of coppers for it was supposed to be excellent fro growing crops.

The landlord used to call to collect his rent in a horse and float, come rain or shine, on a Monday morning, same time every week. The book was handed over with the money and then marked, you didn't owe rent for you lost your home if you did. I think it was 3/6d, then 5/- and I often thought how people treated money as a god. Here we had some of the wealthiest landowners in the district who were really hard towards their tenants. They had farms in Woodthorpe Road, Cocksmoor, Yardley Wood, Maypole, yet any improvement was frowned upon. But they died rich and I suppose that was the satisfaction they got. In later years these houses were demolished and, having long gardens, a number of new homes were erected on the same site. The terraces disappeared and old peoples' bungalows took their place. Once only two cars on the street now it's a job to find a place to park in the same street.

The houses have improved beyond recognition, with bathrooms and other improvements to come up to modern standards. But the feeling has gone out of the road, no shops, and no outdoor, no real neighbours, so was it all for the better?

When I came home from the war and married a girl out of the street, people rallied around. Everything was on the ration coupons but my wife had a white wedding dress, bridesmaids, a reception with friends, relatives and food. Would people give up their ration coupons today for a neighbour? In some roads probably still.

Those hard years taught us many things, the first being how to look after your coppers, that drink was a luxury you could do without, and a respect for other people, especially the older generation.

I follow the children home from the local school. Their language is foul yet they should be far better educated than me. They strew litter and pop cans as though it does not matter as the silly old 'so and sos' will pick it up. Yet they look so well fed and well clothed, it must be for the better.

No one dies of consumption any more and the living and welfare conditions are so improved and no more sleeping head to toe in a bed, yet they still seem to be bored with their lives. I go to the local library and very few children seem to use it, yet, when you get old, many happy hours can be spent with a book. I realise that the games that we played as children cannot be played now for they really needed the run of the road. Whip and top, release, where you chased one another, tig another chasing game, and tip cat, marbles and of course, picture cards. Every packet of cigarettes had a picture card in it and you collected a set of fifty. Then you played skimming them against a wall to see if you could knock them over that were leant up against the wall. Marbles were also a favourite and many a duel has been carried out in the gutter coming home from school. A lot of pocket money was spent on buying marbles.

The girls' two favourite games seem to have been hopscotch and skipping and boys were rarely allowed to join in. I remember the girls singing allowed as they skipped, "Rosie apple, lemon tart tell me the name of your sweetheart." Groups of these girls all had their own peculiar types of skipping rhymes. Everyone seemed to be in by 9.00 p.m. at night but when the ladies or girls did go out on their own I never heard of anyone being stopped or molested. It seems that this offence is one of the modern day ills, for even during the war, with all the foreign troops here, the girls still say they walked the streets safely.

The motor car was really the reason why family life fell apart in the modern society. The average boy met and married the girl from his own locality and the girl's parents usually approved because they new of his family background. They usually set up home, to start with, with the in-laws and then looked around the locality for a house. Today, they commute and on odd occasions come home to see mom and dad. This was really how the old fashioned streets lost that neighbourhood feeling.

New estates grew up, built with a different type of layout to the old style of terrace building. Open plan became the rage. The High Street of the village has changed face. No longer needed are the cycle shops and the blacksmiths. But the three pubs remain the same. Now it's travel agents and building societies and only a few of the quality shops remain.

Now the clothing and shoe shops sell goods which are not made for repair but to dispose of and replace. The Municipal Bank where we saved our threepences and sixpences is now TSB. (It is now no longer a bank and the building is used to sell electrical appliances.)

Municipal Bank opening on 2nd June 1928

DIY shops have now sprung up and the small property repair people now find that people do it themselves. The fire station has gone from Silver Street and so has the council work yard, now car parks. On the site of the old electricity generating station now stands a warehouse – International stock. The two cinemas have gone and so have the large green grocers and it's now smaller units.

Yet the baker's shop seems better, more chemists, more card and paper shops, but I think that the supermarkets have been the main cause of the change of the face of the village High Street. The railway station has gone, no longer do the trains stop there, no longer railway sidings filled with coal trucks, and there must have been ten different coal companies who supplied the local community with fuel in the years between the wars. Now we are a smokeless zone.

The side roads of the village are now filled with shops which once housed residents. The old-fashioned grocers' shops have gone, Moyle and Adams, Wrenson, Mason, Co-op where bacon was cut while you waited and the staff always seemed polite.

Two more memories of childhood in the early thirties come to mind. The Co-op sports day. Held in a field past Lane's end and bordered onto Sunderton Road, Broad lane. What a Saturday every year that turned out to be. Bags of buns, sweets, running races, fancy dress and prizes for nearly everyone from babies to adults. Not prizes of great value but the thrill of winning something. The horses and carts were scrubbed and trimmed up for rides for everyone. Most people seemed to be Co-op shoppers in those days. On everything they bought they got a 'dividend', usually a shilling in the pound.

The other memory of school days was the sports day of Kings Heath Boys School, held once a year before the break up of the summer holidays. Held by kind permission of Major Cartland, the local squire. He loaned the field bordering Vicarage Road and Cartland Road. All types of races were run and a great competitive spirit was the order of the day. You were held in good esteem if you could win races.

No trace is now left of where we lived as children. The trees my grandfather planted over a hundred years ago were bulldozed down to make away for a community centre. Although the times were hard, it seems they were happy years and it is heartbreaking to think what used to be.

My father had a saying which was often repeated:

"England is a free country,
Free without a doubt.
If you've got no Christmas pudding,
You're free to go without."

My last memory is of the two organ grinders who came round the streets on a Saturday morning begging for money while the organ played. One with a leg off, one with an arm off, proudly displaying their First World War medals (and having to beg!) – that's what I call hardship. So I am grateful today for all those good things that have come out of suffering and count my blessings every day.

F. Hill.

Delivering the Milk in Kings Heath

Born during the first world war, Joan Precious (nee Cooke) spent nearly 25 years delivering milk to the people of Kings Heath/Moseley, first as a young child from the age of seven or eight years helping her father at weekends and holidays, then on leaving school as a full time assistant to the family dairy business and then taking over the deliveries herself when dad took full time employment in the difficult thirties.

The history begins when Harry Cooke, born 1887 in Aston but subsequently living in Silver Street, having been left some money, was forced by his future wife, Emma, to purposefully use this money before she agreed to marry him in 1912; and this he did by purchasing a Kings Heath dairy round. After a year at Hollywood (Wythall) they based themselves in premises in Albert Road near the junction of Howard and Alcester Roads where as a small dairy preparation and cleaning area, a jetty for milk churns, a stable with hay loft and a shed for the delivery cart and other vehicles. The milk was delivered in two 17.5 gallon churns by lorry from Fernihoughs, the wholesale milk merchants, of Hubert Road, Selly Oak. This delivery would be between 5.00 a.m. and 6.00 a.m. The milk float (a 2 wheeler in the style of a chariot) was prepared with the bulk churns, delivery churns, (5 Gallon), eggs and butter for a start at 7 – 7.30 a.m. The morning round was undertaken in the Cambridge/Greenhill/Ashfield Road area of the parish, and the afternoon round in the Pineapple area.

Joan Cooke comes into the story in the years 1923 – 24 onwards when attending Colmore Road School she insisted on accompanying Harry, her father, on the round. He made for her a special 1.5 gallon delivery churn with which she could go to customers to attend to their orders. This she enjoyed because she was frequently rewarded with sweets and lemonade by the customers.

One of the pleasures of being in the milk business was that the horse could be used for social occasions and days out when a four wheel carriage was substituted for the milk float and the family (father, mother, two daughters Joan and Beatrice) could ride in style to the Lickies or Cannon Hill park or to friends. Another pleasurable event at

this time was the annual May Day parade of horses, floats and carts through Kings Heath High Street. Hours were spent grooming the horses, plaiting manes and tails with ribbons, polishing the horse brasses, spit and polishing the tack and cleaning the floats – a great occasion for the best horse and float.

After she left school in 1930, the family moved into premises which not only included the dairy and stables but also a shop. This was in Waterloo Road. But the same milk rounds were kept although there was certainly competition from other roundsmen – Maces, Hodgetts and Maidens. But Harry Cooke, now had a full time assistant in Joan. Naturally the shoeing of the horses about every six weeks was undertaken by one of the local smiths usually Arthur Lyons of Heathfield Road. The repairs to the carts especially the iron tyres to the wheels were done by Roberts of Wythall. They also executed the delicate painting which adorned these lovely vehicles. Milk was still delivered in bulk to the business from the wholesaler and re-sold at 3d (1.25 p) per pint or 6d (2.5p) per quart. The deliveries still started at 7.00 a.m. Over the years the horses Tommy, Kitty, Ruby Queen knew the roads so well that driving was almost unnecessary, they almost took themselves around.

The shop folded after about two years so that the thriving milk round was forced to go into rented premises in Coldbath Road near the Billesley Pub. Harry Cooke having had to take full time employment with Fernihoughs, Joan was left to run the milk round mainly on her own, no small task for a sixteen year old. A new departure was the use of bottles for an early morning delivery round by bicycle for those customers who needed an early morning pinta. These were prepared by the business including washing, filling and inserting the cardboard cap with the roundsman's name these early morning deliveries were supplemented during the day by the normal round of loose milk ladled out into the customers' jugs or basins with a half pint or pint metal ladle or stoop. The empty bottles were collected, eggs and butter sold, if required, the transaction sometimes recorded in the customers' milk book hanging by the back door but certainly in the roundsman's main book.

Joan Cooke was married in 1935 at the age of 19 to Horace Precious but she continued the milk round in between the births of her children. The war came in 1939 the situation became difficult and the business was sold to a Tom Pratt although she continued to work for the new owner.

The horse that is remembered by Joan with great affection was Ruby Queen and ex-trotter from the trotting car races; this mare lifting her fetlocks daintily and carefully over the tramlines and could make swift time form one end of Kings Heath to the other. An accident on the slope of Ashfield road brought Ruby's working life to an early end; she slipped pulling a fairly heavily laden float which damaged her knees which did not mend. The shafts on the float broke it was a sad day.

The heavy snow and frost of the winter of 1947 saw milk rounds being severely tested. The milk was either left at the ends of un-cleared road or transported by hand pulled sledges. On frosty days Joan got under or behind the horse to put frost nails into the shoes so that the horse had a better grip.

Certainly over the years the Cooke milk round had called upon all kinds of residencies large and small in cottages, on shops, on small businesses and work premises, but it is with pleasure that Joan the milk lady looks back on those horse drawn days.

Compiled by Ron Watt from information supplied by Joan Precious

The following items deal with an older Kings Heath , chiefly 19th Century.

The Robinson Family

Mr George Robinson 39, Waterloo Road, Kings Heath on his Golden Wedding says:

"My grandfather, Mr Joseph Robinson, lived at the corner of Broad Lane. He was a farm labourer, and his wages were ten shillings a week in the winter, and 11/- in the summer, the farmer them keeping him as long as he wanted him. As the time went on Billesley Common was cut up and the roads made. It was gorse at that time. Then he left farm labouring because they were offering 14/- a week road-making on the common. Then he started saving money and went into a money club which was held at the Cross Guns, kept by James and Isaac Bate, where people could go in for £5, £10, and £20 shares, and after saving money bought a bit of ground in a field, which is now Silver Street. He built the first house in Silver Street. There was no road; it was absolutely a field. The price of the land was 6d a yard freehold, and could be paid for by instalments. It is supposed that Silver Street took its name because my grandfather paid for it in silver. My grandmother augmented the living by working in the fields in the summer picking stones in the ploughed fields in the winter. They picked these stones and put them in heaps in the ploughed fields; then they were carted on to the side of the road and broken up. This was the only means of repairing the roads then, and the cost of the repair was paid from the toll gates. There were three in Kings Heath and two in Moseley. There was one at the end of Adam's Lane (now Poplar Road) another at the end of what is now Station Road and the other at Queensbridge.

This was to catch all the traffic because they used to go down Valentine Road to get into town. The toll gates were for the maintenance of the road and it was so much per head for sheep, so much per head for cattle and so much for a horse and wagon or cart. If people in charge of the toll gates should happen to go to bed they blocked the gate across the main road and people had to knock them up to get through.

My mother was born in a little cottage where the Cross Guns lounge is at the present time and her father was Mr Molesworth a boot maker. At the time they were cutting the railway through (The Birmingham and Gloucester Railway opened from a temporary terminus at Camp Hill Birmingham in 1840), he did very well. He made

water tight boots for the navvies and the job lasted for years that gave him a chance to put his sons through apprenticeships. They fared better than my fathers' family.

In due time my grandfather built a house in Silver Street and left Millpool Hill. My father was born at the Broad lane House. He was the youngest of the family and while his father had a good job it allowed him to be apprenticed in bricklaying at John's in Moseley. He was Thomas Robinson. He worked on the Five Lands whilst serving his apprenticeship. There were no schools in Kings Heath only the church schools and those had to be closed through the want of pupils. There was then only Moseley

National school, which was only about one third of its current size. Then compulsory education came along and the Board school (The Kings Heath Board schools were opened on Monday 12th August 1878) was built in Kings Heath on the site of an old brick yard belonging to Isaac Clulee of Kings Norton who built Kings Heath church. I went to the national school at Moseley. All Greenhill was farm land farmed by Mr Cope, whose farm stood on this side of Prospect Road, up on a bank.

The uncles and aunts of the Robinsons were all in the Money Club and when they drew a chance out they had a few bricks thrown on to the land they had bought. This side of Silver Street for a long time belonged to uncles and aunts. My father put two or three houses up. My father was foreman bricklayer all his life, and worked for James Moffat and Son, Sparkbrook. I was apprenticed there.

All the lamps in Kings Heath were oil lamps, one at each public house, the Hare and Hounds and the Cross Guns, and the third at the Huckster's shop kept by John Knowles, where Mr Bluck recently lived.

Bluck's butchers shop in 1895

The rest of the lights were candles in every little shop. There was one constable and one superintendent for Kings Heath and Moseley. Mr Humphries was the superintendent and Mr Tandy the constable, and they lived in Balaclava Road. If they were fortunate enough to capture a prisoner they would shut him in the wash-house for the night. This wash house is still there. The court was held at the Kings

Arms. That was before the police station was built. Then the way to town would be straight down the Moseley Road to Bradford Street. That was one way. The other way would across some fields which started at Queensbridge, which it is now. You followed the foot road until you came to Edgbaston Lane. You crossed the road and followed the footpath into Jakemans' walk and out into Balsall Heath Road. That was the other way into town. It was considered a very 'unkid' road from Kings Heath to Moseley. A high bank lined with big trees on the right hand side. Along the road on the side was a very big sand bank with trees, which made it look dark and 'unkid.'

The embankment of the railway at Lifford took years and the engineers were stationary there. They used to cater for them at the Cross Guns and made a bit of money through tem. My mother went to school with the Bates who made a start at brewing their own beer. My old grandmother, living in the old cottage where the lounge is now, used to go in and cook for the engineers. She had a very good job and it helped them along. I worked for 25 years for Moffat and Son, and 30 years as a master man in the business of builder now carried on by my son, Tom Robinson. I built a lot of houses on the Grange Estate. My family were great supporters of the old original Baptist chapel, which was a branch from Lombard Street (The first meeting house on the site opened in 1815. It was replaced by a second in 1872, which was superseded, in turn, by the present building in 1898).

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Old Kings Heath - A Peep into the Past

A "News" man had a chat the other day with Mr .J. Moore of Poplar Road, Kings Heath. Born 72 years ago in Kings Heath, and living there all his life, he is able to speak with authority of the history of the village, especially in view of his really wonderful memory for men and events of the olden days. The result was that he imparted much interesting information and corrected many false stories one had gathered during a not short residence in the district. Mr Moore recalls the time when Kings Heath possessed but two shops; one a huckster's kept by Phoebe Davis on a site on which once stood Kings Heath brewery offices and where now are shops: and the other was a huckster's and a butchers combined kept by a Mr Knowles at the premises now occupied by Mr W. Bruck, butcher (This was William Bluck, not Bruck, 103 – 105 High Street), whose house is said to be the oldest in the village, probably dating back three hundred years or more. Mr Moore observed that there was no pot office in Kings Heath in his young days. If you wanted a letter you had to fetch it from Moseley. If the postman (his names was Jim Stanton) brought it up he charged 2d, and it was his wont to wait till he had enough to make a round charge of one shilling. Mr Moore also possesses a rare knowledge of the old houses of the neighbourhood and their occupiers.

The conversation drifted to Heathfield Cottage, that typical old English home cosily embowered in greenery, and one might say embattled in the quaintest of trim cut hedges. The Silver Hollies over the entrance wicket are trimmed and cut as a lych gate. Mr Moss Todd was the owner, as he also was of the Kings arms, Alcester Lane's end (Moss Todd bought the Kings arms 5th September 1823. He died 18th May 1848), and no doubt the road cut near the cottage, Mossfield Road was named after him.

Heathfield Cottage

A brother Grove Todd, was the owner of the Fighting Cocks and the Manor House, Moseley, the latter now long demolished to make room for shops opposite the Victoria Parade. When Moss Todd died at the Kings arms, his daughter married John Salt, who continued business at the Kings Arms, and her mother, Mrs Moss Todd and her son Edward left the public house and went to live at the cottage, where they were afterwards joined by Mrs Salt. On Edward's death, Mrs Todd removed to Mary street, Balsall Heath, and some years later went to live at Grove Cottage, Polar road, afterwards to Springfield Drive, just off the high street, where she died aged 89 (Mrs Diana Todd died 13th December 1873). The occupant following Mrs Todd at the cottage was Mr Thos. McDonald, a son of Mr William McDonald of the "Poplars", Sparkbrook. It was during Mr McDonald's residence at the cottage that his gardener, Isaac Shipton (a brother of William Shipton, who kept the Fighting Cocks), trimmed the hedge in its picturesque shape and laid out the garden, as it remains today. (The cottage was demolished in 1965 and Safeway built – now L.A. Fitness centre)

Joseph Todd, Mrs Todd's eldest son, appears to be the next occupant. He had lived for a time at the Fighting Cocks, then at the Manor House, Moseley, and Carlton House, Alcester Road, Kings Heath, which he left for the cottage. His daughter Annie subsequently lived there for three years after her father's death in June 1877, but she took a dislike to it on account of the place being burgled one Sunday night while the occupants were at church, and she sought another home.

Following her at the cottage was Mr Evans, a wholesale draper, and Mr Jukes from Hockley, who was ordered into the country for the benefit of his health. The virile nature of the local air was such that Mr Jukes apparently speedily recovered and applied himself with zest to amateur gardening. He appears to have come into conflict with the clause of the lease which demanded very strict care of the hedge.

The cottage is now the property and home of Mr George W. Hardy, (George W. Hardy owned the Waterloo Bar in New Street. He died 7th October 1921), who succeeded Mr Jukes, and his old English taste harmonises well the place and its surroundings. The cottage is of some antiquity. It stood where it does 120 years ago when Mr Moore's grandfather came to Kings Heath. Mr More himself has personally known it nearly 70 years. At that date it was occupied by Mr Tom Kennison, of

Birmingham. Mr Hardy has resided at the cottage some 25 years, with the exception of two short intervals necessitated by changes at the Waterloo Bar during which periods it was let to the late Mr Tunncliffe and the late Mr Walter Heaton. At Miss Todd's death some ten years ago the cottage and land came under the hammer. It realised £3,150, Mr Hardy subsequently buying the cottage and orchard through Messrs. Wilmot and Fowler. This property was valued for probate in 1877 at £1,600. Woodthorpe Road was in those days Tom Gough's Lane, Taylor Road was Jack Guest's lane , Featherstone Road, Featherbed Lane, at the corner of which was Seymore Greaves Public House. Vicarage Road was Black Lane and Poplar Road was Adam's Lane. Asked as to the number of inhabitants at that date Mr Moore gave from memory the names of the residents upon both sides of the Alcester Road from Alcester Lane's End to Queensbridge. Mr Moore also gave the names of children of the residents, who with their parents, all told 427. There were no large families; three to five appears to have been the average except in the case of Mr Hadley who had eight, all of whom had nicknames and were always spoken of in a term almost defunct as "our so and so" to whit Matthew "our Mick", Charles "our Nigger", Henry "our Badger", Thomas "our Split", George,"our Duke", William "our Fitzman", Francis "our Shanks", Ann " our Nance".

Poplar Road, Silver Street and the Main Road comprised the then Kings Heath with a total population of 700 at the outside. Now it numbers 16,000 or 17,000. The police station adjoined the Hare and Hounds.

The old Police Station on the corner of York Road with the Hare and Hounds next door.

Graham was superintendent, assisted by one constable named Tandy. The stocks and whipping post were opposite the police station, and York Road goes through the old police station yard. A portion of the present Hare and hounds is built on the site of the old police station (The present Hare and Hounds was built in 1907). Brum Lawrence had the honour of being the last man to occupy the stocks and the late George Bladon was the last occupier as a private residence of the old police station. Two daughters of the late Mr Wm. Shipton married and live in Alcester Road, and the widowed daughter of the late David Todd resides in Ashfield Avenue.
Mr Moore's memory is remarkable. When we were discussing the population question Mr Moore kept referring to a sheet of paper. Thinking it was a list of the then residents and finished with, the "News" reporter asked him to give it to him. To his surprise the paper contained nothing but figures from which Mr Moore refreshed his memory for all the particulars he gave.

Reprinted from the Birmingham News July 26th 1919.

Finally, in an obituary the editor of the Moseley and Kings Heath Journal reminisces about Old Kings Heath.

Death of Mr W. Baker

We regret to announce the death of Mr William Baker, the clerk of All Saint's, kings Heath, which occurred at 2.15 p.m. on Thursday afternoon, at his residence in Woodville Road. The deceased had been associated with the village for nearly 50 years, and was much respected. He was 82 years of age, but despite illness, he until quite recently able to get out each day to visit the coal wharf, where he carried on business as a coal merchant. It was on May Day 1866, that Mr Baker became clerk of All Saint's. It was only five years previously that the church had been consecrated, and at the time there was no vicar in residence, but in July 1866, following Mr baker by a few months, The Rev. J. Webster was instituted the first incumbent. The population of the place was then not a tenth of what is now. The church choir consisted of three men and four boys, and there were no week night services. The church wardens at that time were Messrs. T.H. Dixon and Tandy, the former afterwards becoming partner with the deceased in the coal business, and the latter was a tax collector.

William Baker at his coal dealership premises at King's Heath Station.

Kings Heath was a rural village when Mr Baker commenced his work as parish clerk. It is true that the Midland railway had started to run through it, but only four trains stopped each day – two up and two down. Vicarage Road was then known as Blake Lane, and ran through green meadows, while other roads running from the main Alcester Road were also buried in rusticity. Messrs. James and Isaac Bate kept the Cross Guns Inn (Cross Guns Inn was demolished in 1897 – the present building was the erected on the site). They brewed their own beer. There was no Institute (The Kings Heath and Moseley Institute opened 1st October 1879. In its later years it faced financial difficulties and 14th June 1933 a special meeting of members decided to sell the land and buildings to Noreast Lands Ltd. FW Woolworth and Co Ltd then had a store on the corner of Institute Road and High Street), the spot where the Institute stood was a brickyard.

 King’s Heath Institute 1882

The police force consisted of superintendent Humphries and a constable named Tandy, neither of whom possessed uniforms. The late John Cartland lived at the Priory (the Priory off Vicarage Road was demolished after the second world war to make way for new buildings for King Edward’s Camp Hill Schools), and Mr Tarleton, an old Birmingham Solicitor, resided at Kings Heath House (This building now houses the school of Horticulture in Kings Heath Park). Mr Baker had for some time past been unable to personally attend to his work at the church, but such was the esteem in which he was held by the vicar and the church authorities that he was requested to continue to hold office, the actual work of which was undertaken by Mr Joseph Baker and other members of his family. It will be remembered that Mrs Baker senior died about 18 months ago and from that time the deceased, who felt his loss most keenly appeared to be failing.

Moseley and Kings Heath Journal 1907.