

Hanford Memories

Growing up in Hanford in the 1940s by Bob Robinson



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Trentham Heritage Project

During the school holidays I sometimes had my midday meals with a couple of Hanford families, the Becketts and the Davises. Mr and Mrs Beckett lived on the corner of our street and Mr B sold newspapers to some of the locals. Their daughter Iris married the local Police Constable Gordon Cowan. The Davis family also lived on our street and I recall Mr & Mrs and two sons, Stan and Donny, who were both well older than me. The younger of the two sons, Donny, in his much later life tended the Hanford churchyard.

There were a number of children about my age in Hanford but my best friend was Peter Knapper whose parents kept a general grocery store in Wilson Road. We shared the same birthday month and year. He had grandparents who lived in Kidsgrove and Peter and I would often take the bus to see them on what seemed like epic journeys from the bus stop just outside their shop, through Stoke, Hanley, Burslem and Tunstall. If we were lucky we got front seats upstairs and had panoramic views of four of our six towns.

In the summer months when off school we tested the boundaries of what we were and were not supposed to do. Don't leave the village, don't go near water, don't go near the main road or the railway lines, don't light fires, don't play with electricity, be back before it goes dark. The list seemed endless but we always ended up mentally crossing things off and wondering what all the fuss had been about. Except on a couple of occasions!

One was with my best friend who had an epidiascope which we used in the garage/store shed behind the shop. We had to "plug" it into the light socket in the outside toilet. I was standing on the toilet seat to reach the light fixture and make the connection but our connector had no cover on it. With my hand wrapped around it, for some reason the power came on. I could in no way unclench my hand to let go of the connector but I could shout "switch it off...switch it off" which eventually happened. I had two deep burn points on my right palm, one just below my forefinger and one at the base of my thumb. At least I had not fallen off the toilet seat and into the water in the toilet bowl.

Another time following the "big" boys (we younger kids often trailed behind an older group and if they were in a good mood they didn't chase us away) we meandered up the village to Primrose Hill, down Cow Lane across the canal bridge and over the main railway lines to the spoil heaps/slag heaps resulting from the coal mining operations. We had been walking on the tops of the heaps and had just descended them all except Tony, who was a year or two younger than me,

when he broke through the crust to find that below the surface it was burning! His shrieks brought the older lads back to find that his feet and ankles were terribly burnt. They had to carry him home as there was no way he could put his feet on the ground. Re-crossing the canal they decided to quench his burns in the canal water. Tony had to have months and months of treatment and rehabilitation.

Another of the "big" boy interactions we were dragged into was collecting "gutter old flake" for them for their smoking pipes. We were sent scavenging in the gutters for discarded "dog ends" of cigarettes which they broke open and packed the tobacco into their pipe to smoke! We were sometimes allowed to have a quick suck on a pipe!! I suppose it must have also been one of the "big" boys who introduced us to "Pig Nuts". If we crossed the Hanford Bridge into Trent Vale and then went down the pathway at the side of St Teresa's Presbytery we came to the meadows and the Lyme Brook. In the low lying, dampish part of the meadows we were able to find the white flowers of a plant that produced, below the ground, some small whitish tubers that were edible and quite tasty. No preparation required, just brush off the soil and eat. I have not seen, or perhaps not been able to recognise, the plant since those days.

I got to an age where I was allowed to try a few other outside the house pursuits. Piano lessons with a teacher in Trentham. The Cubs, again in Trentham. The Hanford Church choir. The Hanford pageant as fancy dress contestants. None of these ventures lasted for long as there was always something new and different to take one's fancy.

Like so many families in this period, we did not have a car, so walking or the bus was our means of transport except on occasions when we booked a "Creamline" taxi, particularly if we were visiting my dad's sister Hannah, known as auntie Annie, her husband uncle Charlie Scrimshaw (the one who had played football for Stoke City) and their family at the pub they kept in Smallthorne. The pub was called the King's Head but everyone called it "Scrimmies".

We might also have had a "Creamline" to take us to Stoke railway station when it was holiday time and trips to the sea-side were in order. Often, if we were a little early we had to queue and long lines snaked from the platform entrance to the street outside and along the frontage of the station. I recall sitting on one of our cases as I waited, excited, to be off to Rhyl or Blackpool. Once we were let into the station proper, having shown our "allocation" tickets, we crossed under the

railway lines via the subway tunnel from platform number 1 to platform number 2 where the trains for the north and west departed.

I saw quite a lot of my Mum's family since they had weekly cards and dominoes nights. Some were held at my Grandmother's home and some at my Mum's brothers or sister's homes. Some were at our house. They were smoke filled noisy times with refreshments, (sandwiches, pork pies, pickled onions and the like) somewhere between 9 and 10 pm. If I stayed quiet the adults forgot that I was still up and it was great fun to hear the click and clack of the dominoes and their good natured banter and interaction with each other. Eventually I'd be spotted and it would be "Our Robert! It's time you were in bed" and even though it may have been a Friday night and no school the next day that would be that!

There are a few more reminiscences of the 1940s that I can recall. The house I had been born in had a lounge, an eat-in kitchen, a downstairs bathroom and a flush toilet that was off the rear porch, the other side of the kitchen door. Upstairs were two and a half bedrooms. We had a small front garden and a fairly long rear one. I recall renewing my relationship with Nurse Barlow when she gave me an enema apparently to make sure I didn't get worms! It was done in our lounge with me lying on our drop arm sofa. I recall the sofa well since I had my afternoon naps on it in order to build up my strength after the bout of scarlet fever. Similar afternoon naps continued when I first went to Oakhill infants' school as we had supplied pillows and, of an afternoon, having placed them on the desk we were encouraged to close our eyes for half an hour or so. My pillow had a yellow wheelbarrow patch sewn on to it which matched the picture above the peg on which I hung my coat. There was a sand pit in the school yard, circular as I recall, in which we were able to play if the weather was kind enough.

Sometime near the end of the war in Europe, whether just before or after I don't recall, my mum and I visited my mum's sister, my auntie Beattie who lived in the Birmingham area near to Longbridge where my uncle Charlie worked. We went in my Uncle Harry's Fordson van, me sitting on cushions in the back. I could see through the windscreen between the two front seats and I remember being amazed as we approached my auntie's house, at the seemingly hundreds of barrage balloons like huge grey elephants floating in the sky but tethered to the ground by thick cables.

It was also probably around this time that I became aware that the war was still going on in the Far East against the Japanese and that eventually we would

celebrate a thing called VJ day. On the 8th of June 1945, which was declared as "Victory Celebration Day", all school children received a printed message from King George which started:-

"Today, as we celebrate victory, I send this personal message to you and all other boys and girls at school... " I still have my copy.

By then I was in the juniors at Oakhill and at some stage was able to go to and from school on my own on the bus, with a penny for each of the journeys. Well sometimes, of an afternoon, the tuck shop and its penny treats beckoned which then meant a walk home. One day, after having such a treat, I arrived at Hanford bridge to find the river Trent had overflowed and effectively cut off the Trent Vale/Oakhill side from the Hanford side. I had to wade through and ended up with soaked shoes and socks. I expected my mum to be up in arms but I think she was just pleased that I was safe.

During the war and for a good few years after it had ended many everyday items were rationed. Every family member had a ration book made up of pages of coupons and the requisite numbers of coupons were clipped out in line with the quantity of goods purchased. One of my everlasting memories was that my mum would divide out our individual weekly butter rations which were then kept on the stillage in the pantry so that we could use it as required. My favourite way was to have dry bread all week long so that at the weekend I would spread all my ration in one go to really get that buttery taste. Even now I have to have enough butter on my toast to clearly see my teeth marks in it after each bite! I remember still using my sweet coupons well after I was at Longton High School as sweets were rationed right in to the early 1950s (February 1953).

Another memory I have is if we lacked real toothpaste, (it used to come in little tins, a bit like we have shoe polish today, and was often pink in colour [was it called Gibbs dentifrice?]) we had to brush with a homemade mixture of soot and salt which my mum put out on an old saucer.

My mum's shopping was a bit varied. Before moving to Hanford and well before my birth my parents lived in Spode Street, just off Campbell Road, within a quarter of a mile or so of their respective parents. There was a general food shop on the next corner, Corporation Street/Campbell Road run by a Mr. Titterton and I guess that is where they shopped at that time. I recall that at Hanford Mr. Titterton would sometimes make deliveries of goods to our house as he drove to his home in Bankhouse Road, Trentham. But my mum also used the Co-op in

Hanford which was situated in High Street (later called Mayne Street) opposite a complex of allotments. If I shopped with her I was always fascinated by the overhead "Dart Cash Carrier" system, little circular metal pots hung on overhead wires that whisked the money away to a cashier somewhere and then returned with the change, if any, and a receipt. My mum had a Co-op dividend number but I can't recall it now! I do recall a Mr Mason who sold vegetables all around the village from the back of a cart pulled by a horse. My dad was a keen gardener and if the horse left a deposit near our gate I was despatched out with a bucket and shovel to claim the steaming manure. Another delivery man was Mr Reeves the coal man who humped one hundred weight (about 50 kilograms) sacks on his back to everyone's coal house. He was always black with coal dust

Back at Oakhill Juniors things continued. I recall making a "papier-mâché" model of a squirrel which looked quite good and which I painted a brown/red colour. I suppose today's children would colour them grey! I remember a trip to Dudley Zoo, a 78 rpm record made of us singing songs we had learned, the "Derby Ram", "Barbara Allen", "Out in the Garden" and "Kelvin Grove". I remember the tunes and some of the words to the first three but "Kelvin Grove" escapes me. We also had dancing lessons. I don't recall the type of dancing but I recall three of the girls' names who were in my class, Kathleen Archer, Gail Bates and Gillian Tomlinson. I somehow don't recall any of the boys' names. What does that say about how my memory currently works?