

Account of Purley on Thames

Memories of the Old Days in Purley

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Over the years many interesting interviews have been held with people talking about the Purley of bygone days. These were recorded on tape, and subsequently many have been transcribed by members. We have heard some extracts from various tapes at different times. Here are some of the memories of the late Mr Andrew Findlay which were recorded on 20th January 1988.

Mr Findlay first rented No. 5 Menpes Cottages, Long Lane, in 1940 for 10s per week including rates. He later bought the property and remained there until well into the 1990's. Here in this extract he talks briefly about the bus service, before talking about Long Lane.

“It was called Thames Valley in those days, then it was amalgamated with Alder District and they called them Alder Valley. The bus stop was at the bottom of Long Lane, and in the days I'm talking about it was known as the Forge. It was where the forge was and there was brickwork, an old brick and timber building above the surface. If you walked down that side in the dark you were quite likely to come a cropper, because there was no street lighting or anything like that. Long Lane was a lane. I've always had a vehicle myself - company cars, minibuses, one thing and another. If you met anything in the lane it was always somebody who knew the lane as well as I did. We used to put up our hands, and one of us would have to go back to the nearest gateway to pass.

There were no houses you see, there was none of this estate here and no Highfield estate. The entrance to Orchard Close was simply a cart track that led into the nurseries -Menpes nurseries at first, then it became O.A.K. nurseries when they took over. The house on the corner on the left hand side as you go into Orchard Close was known as 1 Menpes Cottages because it was there as an extra house, and on the other side is that bungalow. That was the estate office. From there until you got to our cottages there was nothing but hedges. There was one gate leading in there because that was where our eight cottages had allotments.

I come to the other side of the lane now. There was nothing from the forge until you come to where the school is now, and that was where the South Berks Hunt had their kennels. Now then, to give you an idea what Long Lane was like, twice a day a man by the name of Clark (he was chief whip of the S. Berks), he used to bring the pack of hounds up for exercise. He would be on horseback. Imagine what would happen today! When we came, we got to know Clark, he was a likeable man. My wife said to him one day “Your hounds were howling last night. What was the matter with them?” He said “You come from the country don't you?” “Yes, we come from the wilds of Dorset.” “Well” he said “surely you know the difference between hounds howling and them singing. They were singing last night”. “I didn't recognise the tune” she said.

Further along there were just fields. My daughter, she would be about nine or ten years old then, and my next door neighbour in the cottage there, she had a daughter about the same age give or take a year or two, Mr and Mrs Cannon. They had two daughters and it was always a great treat for those four girls to get together at six o'clock on a Sunday morning in summer, and go across those fields picking mushrooms. They used to come back with basketfuls. And then they put up Denefield School, that's only in the last ten years or so - quite a good school I understand.

Now we are nearly up to the end of Long Lane, except that it was very narrow in places with very high hedges. The thing I most miss about Long Lane, because I'm a great nature lover, is that we

could go out into our garden of a summer's evening in May or the first week in June, and we could hear nightingales singing in the hedge at the back. It's a thick hedge and you would hear four, five or six of them. You would see the larks in the daytime. They had their nests out there and they would sing as they went up. There were goldfinches, and partridges running up and down the lane, and pheasants. All that until this modern method of pest control. But they are all gone.

And in the gravel pit we menfolk got together and made a little cricket pitch, and we mums and dads and kids would have some lovely evenings out there. It was a family. There was no television you see.

We used to get rabbits, and on more than one occasion I have shot one in the garden, when I had a gun. There were young children in the cottages then. Because when our cottages were built they built up the first pair, and ours, which were the second pair, were left out. The first and third pairs were put up pre-1914. Our block was put up in 1921, and the reason our block was left out was because there is a lovely sandpit at the bottom of our garden that they used to draw all the sand from to build the houses. When they had built them they dumped all the topsoil down there. I've got all the topsoil in my garden. I can't go far down when I dig my garden, and I can never grow parsnips or carrots because they grow that long, never any thicker than my finger.

This is only a brief extract from the conversation with Mr Findlay, but feel it conveys to us the tranquil days of old in Long Lane.