

Account of Purley on Thames

Memories of Purley School 1942-1945

by Ian Nash

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I was born in August 1937 at “Sinnington”, Glebe Road, the home of my maternal grandparents George and Rose Reed. My paternal grandparents, Arthur and Agnes Nash lived at Scraces Farm cottages in Westbury Lane. Later, my parents moved into one of the new council houses at number 14, Glebe Road, where my brother John was born in January 1939.

My first memory of Purley village was when my mother took me, at the age of five, to start at Purley School in September 1942. The headmistress was dear old Mrs. Tidbury who lived at “Upper Hyde” on the main road. Her husband Herbert had an electrical and photography business in Pangbourne. There was a fish pond in the front garden and she kept Guinea Fowl (gleanies) for eggs. The infants’ teacher was Mrs. Page, a younger lady, who lived in Park Lane, Tilehurst and came by bus via Norcot Junction. When she left she was replaced by Mrs. Butler who lived in Westbury Lane.

So I was carrying a line of father, uncles, aunts and cousins, both Reeds and Nash’s who had attended the school. According to the punishment book my father and brother Fred were always in trouble from when they started in late 1915 until finishing at 14 in the early 1920s.

Looking at the school from the street, there was no gate in the flint wall. The first thing to catch your eye was the massive walnut tree in the front playground. Here we would sit at playtime and collect nuts in the autumn.

The girls’ cloakroom was to the left, the boys’ to the right. The front, smaller classroom was the infants’ under Mrs. Page. The main classroom under Mrs. Tidbury catered for the 6 to 7 year olds before leaving for Pangbourne School at 8 years. The back playground was officially for the girls but at that time we mixed. The red brick toilet block was divided in two and straddled the two playgrounds. They were very basic, as was our new council house, with two wooden seats and buckets. Nearby a yew tree stood with a branch that could be sat on and “ridden”, I suppose you would call it. The main room, accessed from either of the cloakrooms, had a large coke-fired stove enclosed by a guard to heat the large radiators, and rows of long desks with folding seats.

Also in the room was a large mushroom, which I think was to do with the brownies, sitting on a tall cupboard. On the wall was a large print of a famous Civil War painting of a young boy being asked “When did you last see your father?” The infants’ room where I spent my first year always seemed brighter, although it faced north. Here we had small tables and chairs and, I think, a gas fire. Again there was a large coloured print of a farm labourer’s family saying grace before their meal, with an open door looking out onto a sunny landscape.

As well as children from Glebe Road, Purley Rise and Long Lane, there were also those from the “camp”. These were families who had come to live in their holiday bungalows to escape the bombing in London. There were also evacuees who lived in “KennelGate” formerly “Belle Isle” and later to become “Trenthams” head office.

It wasn’t long after starting school that my mother went into Peppard Sanatorium with T.B. and I never saw her again, although she did write me letters with drawings on the bottom of the page. My younger brother John went to live with Gran and Granddad Nash who had now retired and moved to Kentwood estate. I went back with Gran and Granddad Reed.

In the infants we only used slates and chalk and I can remember Mrs. Page reading Enid Blyton's Sunny Stories in the afternoon. The only thing to worry me in those early days was the visit by Nurse Haslam, the district nurse, checking for head lice. I don't remember anyone being sent home. We were given a third of a pint bottle of milk at morning break but had to go home for lunch as there were no facilities for meals.

From Glebe Road we normally walked over high bridge, down the dump, past the tin sheds (barns) and into the village without grown-ups. There weren't many cars around and most of the farm work was horse power, although some Fordson tractors were used. On one occasion, one of Mr. Bucknell's horses came galloping past the school with just the cart dragging along, heading back to his stable. It appears that the wagon, broken away from the shafts, frightened him.

During the build-up to the Normandy landings we had Canadian army signallers running telephone cables through the village. Another time we had American soldiers posted around the village. It was a freezing cold morning and Mrs. Tidbury invited a young soldier in for a warm. He told us he was hoping to be a teacher after the war. I often think of him and whether he made it back home.

In the autumn, a loud clanking could be heard in School Hill and a steam traction engine would appear pulling a threshing kit, water wagon and living van. On the way home we would watch the men throwing the sheaths into the thresher driven by a long belt connected to the traction engine. The corn being bagged into sacks hung on the side of the thresher whilst the chaff and straw came out the bottom. The straw being "ricked" again. The older boys would stand around with sticks waiting to kill the rats.

Being a church school, we had to attend church on certain days and also do a scripture test in order to win the "Bishops Prize", a bible suitably inscribed and presented by the bishop himself. The runners up were given a new testament by Mrs Tidbury. I still have mine. We also went out one day to pick bluebells in Purley Park woods where we went through a tunnel under the main road, coming back with bundles of flowers to take home. Not allowed these days and quite rightly so. Another time we were told to bring a spoon and, to our surprise, Mrs. Tidbury brought home-made ice cream, the first I had ever tasted.

During the harsh winter of 1944 the school was very cold and every so often we would stamp around the room for five minutes or so to get warm. In the end we had a few days off when the coke stock ran out. One morning during that winter I arrived early and stood outside crying with the cold when Mrs. Luker from Jasmine cottage took me in, sat me by the fire and made me a cup of cocoa. Our school milk was also frozen solid that winter and we would scoop it out with a spoon.

One lunch time I was coming home with brother John and some other children (Dad had married again in January 1945 so we were a family again), when we passed one of the Italian prisoners of war going back to the farm to fill his water bottle. He had left his brown battledress jacket on the railway fence where he was working and I hid it under hay cut by railwaymen on the bank. A little while later an agitated Italian was seen coming down the road. Seeing me he asks me where his jacket is. I, now being frightened, says I haven't seen it. My mother now comes out to join in and also the neighbours, in the end I own up and we all go back to retrieve his jacket. I came home via the main road that evening but we were soon friends again as the Italians liked talking to us kids.

One of the last things we did before leaving Purley school was to draw a set pastel landscape and frame it in glass to take home. The glass was old glass negatives supplied by Mr Tidbury, that were soaked and the emulsion scraped off. I wonder what gems we destroyed.

I left Purley School in July 1945 and joined the older children on the coach run by Smiths of Reading to a rude awakening at Pangbourne County Primary School.

