

A Childhood In Handsworth

By

Beryl McMullen

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It was a lovely September afternoon in Canada, the trees were showing hints of autumn, and the garden was aglow with warmth and colour. My sister Jean and I sat together in the golden sunlight and sipped tea: “Do you remember”, I said wistfully “the times when we were children we would hop the fence to granddad “D’s” and grandma’s house for Sunday tea?”

My name is Beryl McMullen {nee Darlaston} born on the 8th of January 1927 into a world without television, computers, the odd gaslight still around milk delivered to houses by horse and cart, children attended Sunday school., and most people went to church on Sundays, with the exception of the wireless sometimes blaring the latest hits of the day, the populous breathed a life of quiet simplicity.

Our house 192 Westminster Road, Handsworth, Birmingham, looked very much like any other on the street, it sported a freshly painted green door, a neatly squared off garden with a hedge of golden privet and it was here I recall my early years growing up:

The sun shone through the clouds, after the rain, and the delightful scent of lilac came through the open window. Birds were singing and blackbirds swooped into the garden in search of worms.

Jean pretty in her blue frock and me in my pink raced down the garden path, climbed over the low paling which separated the two gardens, and planted our little feet on the well worn patch of ground.

Savouring the prospect of a tasty treat we hesitated but for a moment before we took to our heels running eagerly through the long tickly grass where raspberry bushes dripping with fruit had run riot, so much so it was difficult to squeeze our two little persons into one small space, we stopped and listened and hearing only chirps of birds we broke into stifled fits of laughter. We laughed and chattered in the warm sunshine; thrusting tiny hands in among the leaves, popped raspberries into our small open mouths. For a while we were happy till we surveyed numerous yellow stalks covering the bushes!

Walking up the path above the potted geraniums on the windows-sill we could see Granddad’s balding head resting against the cream and red afghan. The deep sonorous notes of the old grandfather clock struck four as we patter through the kitchen’s open door of the into the small Victorian style living room. Grandma sat stiffly one side of the fire place granddad the other a cheery fire would be burning in the grate, Grandma wearing a large blue apron pockets stuffed with odds and ends mending socks. Granddad’s bright blue eyes peered over steel rimmed spectacles as he lay his pipe and book down purposefully within easy reach on the table rises to open a small cupboard stashed with paper for us to draw till it was time for grandma to bring out a steaming rice

pudding and set it down on the table. I think it was all Jean came for because after the rice pudding she bid goodnights went home!



Granddad would then light the gas and play me a couple of games of draughts. As nighttime drew in I watch shadows chase across the ceiling, the dying embers of fire still burning in the grate now all very peaceful Granddad leaned his head back against the chair, wrapping his hands through the leather straps of his concertina pressed gently on the ivory keys played favourite old hymns! I have many happy fond memories of my Granddad, but unfortunately not so many of my grandmas for she died when I was just 10 years old.

My memories of late summer days Jean and I played together in the backyard. There was a solid fence at the bottom of the garden where I would give a little jump heave myself up till my feet found a stave so my chin would come above the level of the top. There I would see a wild tangled strip of garden, a tall thin man leading his collie and bull mastiff to their kennels for the night. I must have looked like a head without a body because the dogs always barked at me so would quickly scabble down amuse myself making hollyhock ladies and eat raspberries off the bushes dividing our garden,. I made myself a little garden loved to dig in the soft earth for a disinterred worm fascinated me, watching them clinging to the earth with their heads and tails while they heaved their middle parts up into the air like a railway-arch. Jean scared of worms sometimes I would wrap them around a stick and chase her, to my mind she failed to realize how wonderful they were able to move along without legs or wings. And marvelous of God to have invented so many ways for the progression of His creatures! Unfortunately my little garden was right in line of grandma's dustbin and every so often grandma with a dust cap on her would empty ashes into it, sending clouds of gray dust into the air covering the leaves which I washed off.

In the 1930's my father worked for a company called Adie Brothers Silversmith and Goldsmiths as a silver spinner, England was then in a depression so he was on short time. However, he always did his best and as children my sister Jean and I never felt deprived.

I first started school at Westminster Road School. My earliest recollection of that school is when the teacher plunked on my desk a lump of smelly plastercine expecting me to enjoy making little models all twisted mixed colours other kids had used just didn't turn me on! Dad would ask each day what I'd learned at school which wasn't much so it wasn't too long before dad pulled me out and sent to Saint Mary's C of E school

At 9 years of age I remember being in (William the Conk's) Mr. George's class had moments of daydreaming staring out the window see a bird touched by the sun winging its way across the sky. The floor would turn from dull to golden and the ceiling rosy

jerking me back to life to what was a mental arithmetic session - not being sure of the answer made a habit of putting up my hand take a stab at it just to let him know I was worth bothering about! Mr. George would say: "Beautiful dreamer come unto me" Standing there in front of the class he would reach to the top cupboard brought out the cane, Darlaston, if only you could do your arithmetic as well as you could swim?"

At four thirty like a choir of angels came the ringing of the school bell time to go home - I could only think of tea time and mom's hot buttered toast - toasted with a long fork over an open fire real comfort food to me!.

Of course it wasn't all free and easy lazy days, in those days we had much teaching. Mr. George was one of those teachers who seemed to be ageless, from the beginning of school even when I got the cane for dreaming I still had enormous respect for the bespectacled man for he made lessons interesting and colourful that we wanted to learn, and visited him twice at the school after the war.

HANDSWORTH BATHS

Handsworth Baths was located on the corner of Grove Lane and Hinstock Road. Today, although still standing, it is converted now into residential accommodation.



My memories only date back to when it was a Public Swimming Baths, my mother taking me there to learn to swim (doctors suggested to strengthen my hips) which I eventually accomplished and in so doing became the mascot of the "Handsworth Ladies Swimming club" Sometimes my mom informed me that it was her weekly outing so unbeknown to my Dad my mom would take me to the Odeon picture house instead...

I recall the time when I was about 7 years the swimming club held there gig gala night; First they had a fancy dress contest; I went as "Ovaltine Cold" wore a yellow bathing suit and black cap. Climbed to up to the top diving stood poised as if I was going to dive in and promptly turned around and went back down. God what a ham I was! Needless to say I won - don't know whether it was for my nerve or for my costume - I received first prize- a pink crinoline lady for my dresser, wonder what happened to it?. After came the one length free style competition. Swimming the breast stroke I came in last .two thirds of the way to go only one left in the water my - god what a great hand everyone seem to give me!. These were a couple of highlights in my life. I became the mascot of the club

had my picture taken on the diving board sitting on someone's lap picture was published in the Birmingham mail

From 8 years onwards, my swim suit wrapped in a towel tucked underneath my arm I would trek through the park along with my class mates from St Mary's school to Grove Lane swimming baths for our weekly swim. I did so well at swimming that I managed to win a certificate for 900 Yards of breast-stroke from school. My friend Betty Prime and I were the only ones to receive one. Other times Dad would take me to swim Saturday afternoons when it was mixed bathing;

As you can see by the two entrance doors, men and women queued on separate steps, I remember on my school trips, that boys and girls followed this same tradition the attendant standing there in her starched white uniform looking much like a prison guard that a supervisor strict and in control.

Below used to be a private school, but in the 1930's it became "Handsworth Home for Girls". The girls would walk down Churchill road each day to attend St Mary's School where I attended. I became good friends with one of the girls whose name was Daisy; she was tall with blond curly hair. Sometimes I would walk back with her to the "Home" in the hope she could come out and spend some time with me, but once inside the door was slapped shut. The "Home" was situated on the corner of Churchill and Charles Roads, where the long garden with a high brick wall was imbedded with large pieces of glass. You would think these poor girls were a bunch of criminals instead through fate orphaned girls. Here a large crab apple tree hung its branches low over the sides of the wall - I'd gather up the fallen apples pitch them over the top in hopes of attracting Daisy, but it never worked. What seemed worse the girls besides losing their parents didn't seem to have much fun in life!



Daisy like me was in the same "Fuchsia patrol" in St Mary's Girl Guides but being a few years older moved up to the rangers soon after I joined. I was small for my age and she was very kind and very protective me. On some of the long .camping trips she would give me piggy backs when I got tired. So you can imagine how upset I was when she told me she had to leave the "Home" and go into service. I knew I would never see her again! I wonder what happened to her I hope she met somebody nice and had a happy married life!

At St Mary's School we were given a cup of hot cocoa each morning in the winter, and a small bottle of milk in the summer, this sustenance being provided by the education department for tuppence ha'penny a week. Those who couldn't afford it didn't have to pay including the girls from the "Home". At Easter time we would bring shell eggs to

the school and at Harvest a pound of some staple, which would be later donated to the "Home."

The education department also provided the underprivileged children with boots, socks, and at Christmas time, a few potatoes and a cut of meat. Their clothes were hand me downs or otherwise bought cheaply from jumble sales. It's hard to imagine that in those days, if any one was in debt, they were taken to the workhouse.

Most of the houses around us were rented, for 15 shillings per week, and were built in the year of Queen Victoria's golden jubilee in 1887.

May 12 1937 was the Coronation of King George VI. The Union Jack hung out of every window, parties were held on all the streets in the cities. All children received a coronation mug filled with chocolate, bearing a photograph of the king and queen and a coronation medal, from school.

How I remember Bishop Linton (once Bishop of Persia) standing in gaiters at the school gate (small somewhat like the late Malcolm Muggeridge) The Bishop was very charismatic - the minute he entered the gate most of the children would drop what they were doing go rushing over gather around while he proceeded to pull a piece of string from his pocket showing us all kinds of tricks!

I remember the Bishop telling the story about the little boy who didn't have any money - when the collection plate was passed around he asked if the plate could please be lowered so he could offer himself!

My mom always gave me a penny for collection, dad tuppence but it didn't matter who gave it to me I always spent half of it at the sweet shop - Jean tried to discourage me but still at the same time couldn't resist eating some of the sweets. I always justified it in my head that they were lucky to get even half when the little boy in the story didn't give any money. I was always too ashamed to tell parents when I knew dad was on short time then.



There were the times I visited Aunt Ada and Uncle Will at 148 Hutton Road: Uncle Will {dad's cousin} grew prize dahlias, my Aunt his mother didn't like me in black stockings, would buy me knee socks from a little shop in Church Vale. I remember their two tabby cats Liz and Boy were so independent they completely ignored me!

I recall Adcock's Garage in the Vale petrol 1 shilling a gallon, the small shops in Hutton Road. After guides queuing up for penny fish suppers at Reid's fish and chip shop. Devey's fruitier where Peter and Mary Tooze lived.

There was Mission Hall where Sunday School Christmas parties were held and the Paragon laundry remember the odour which came from it when you passed. Occasionally on Saturday afternoon we went to the matinees at the Birchfield picture house to see Mickey Mouse or Hop a long Cassidy or something or other, the Odeon was the only other picture house and of course there was the Aston Hippodrome for lively entertainment.

Back tracking Mary Tooze was a little friend I called for on the way to school – together we made our own cut out dolls that we kept in shoe boxes. Then came the time when I would call for her and she was too sick to go to school. One day when I was about to pass the fruitier I saw a small sad silent crowd of people gathered - in a funeral procession a little white coffin was carried out across Hutton Rd to wend its way up Stamford... Out of respect didn't want to cut through the crowd and it didn't much matter that I was late couldn't concentrate on anything - nothing could take my mind away from it for Mary was just 9 years old the same age as me and she had died of meningitis

(Years later I dated Mary's Brother Peter for a while!)

In the winter I would see boys enjoying themselves on sleds sliding down Crompton Road hill (liked to have joined them but didn't) There were the Christmas parties and pantomimes - with the patients of Broad Street Children's Cripples Hospital as it was called then!

In the summer there were the Sunday school picnics, motor-boat rides on Handsworth Park Pool., and the great times playing on the swings and large iron roundabouts. "Wellies" time black gum boots we could kick leaves along the gutters with no worries of getting into trouble with mom for getting my socks wet - playing boys marbles on the way home from school, whip and top, collecting cigarette cards, such as silk flags all nations, kings and queens, playing jacks, and conkers -shiny brown horse chestnuts, threaded with pieces of string a "sixer" meant six hits without the chestnut breaking your opportunity to 'conker"

I remember my first bicycle was green which my Granddad constantly had to fix because it only seemed to free wheel down the street. Years later I bought my own black BSA bike which I rode to work. I was adventures kind of child. Once I bought a fish net in Perry Barr and went to the park fished for newts and tiddlers. When mom caught sight of the jar filled with little black wiggly things, she told me to take them back to where I got them from they were not happy in a jar! The only other time I went fishing was on holiday in Devon when I went out to sea with some fishermen. With the roll of the boat and the smell of the fish jumping about in some tin container in the centre of the boat I was feeling sick , and I didn't get a bite, even if I had I don't think I would have been able to take the hook out of it . When we came ashore one of the fishermen was kind enough to give me two of his mackerel which we took back to the boarding house and had for breakfast.



How I looked forward to my Grandma Parish visits on Wednesdays, the little presents and cakes she brought from Wimbush's or Bains's in Perry Barr. How I would make her laugh with my silly little acts and poetry.

Granddad and grandma Parish owned their own coal business at 35 Cliveland Street. At the back of the wharf ran a canal so being an adventures child I would stand on the tow path watch Clydesdale horses plod along pulling barges of water gypsies loaded with wares, sometimes they would wave an I'd wave back and to the factory workers tossing coins over the canal for me to pick up! .It's no wonder mom and grandma were nervous!.

On a hot day our neighbour Mrs.Thorn would treat us all to ice cream cones I would buy from Woods, then knowing no one would be any the wiser take licks from all of them on the way home About once a week I ran errands for old lady McCartney, she looked like something out of a Dickens's novel, shuffling to the door in her long black dress to send me to the Swiss cottage for a jug of draught ale! I never drank any of it because I didn't like the taste. She always paid me with religious medals once with a missile which judiciously I set on my bedroom shelf along with books mostly fairy tales.



Often on Sundays evenings I attended services arriving early at St Mary's C of E church, enough to climb the steep winding steps to the tower to talk to the bell-ringers. After church I walked up Hampstead Road to meet dad, mom, and Jean in the gardens at the Endwood pub, seated there with its hanging baskets of flowers on a warm summer evening sipping a grapefruit drink and eating a bag of crisps nice end to a lovely day!

At times Gypsies who lived in the Black Patch Park near Soho Rd. would travel around the houses during the day, selling lucky charms, pegs and would even tell your fortune if you were generous and bought from them. .As a kid I remembered the old nursery rhyme "never play with gypsies in the wood". Often the women would carry their babies on their backs .and thinking the babies might be stolen - was scared of them. Looking back at it now shouldn't have been, they didn't cause too much trouble except if you were unlucky enough to have your milk stolen off the window sill or the washing of the line! I recall the time when dad was on leave - a gypsy man came to the door - looked fit enough to be in the armed forces - dad said something to him and the gypsy put a curse on dad so dad chased him off down the street. I stood there and watched just hoping the neighbours weren't looking? Eventually the gypsies did leave, as far as I know Pre Fabs were built on the land.

My friend Winnie Marlow lived near the shops at the top of our street At Truman's I would buy dolly mixtures or a surprise penny dip which often turned out to be a waste of money.



There was Smallwoods fruit and vegetable come butchers, where rabbits for sale hung on hooks outside the shop, the shoe makers, the iron mongers, Neil's where we bought our cottage loaves, Harris's green grocers and Edwina who I coaxed into taking piano lessons from my piano teacher Miss Perrot. There was Erott's mini market, that my mom still called it "Shuffs" because the previous owner's name had been

"Shufflebottom". Just round the corner on Wellington Road was a wool shop where I went with Winnie to buy rainbow wool to knit clothes for our dolls. Across the busy Wellington Street dad sent me "Smiths" the little tobacconist to get the Birmingham Post., near

Lane turn of the century cottages, is the Calthorpe pub where dad and granddad would go for a drink!



I was 12 years old when I climbed out of bed Friday September 1 1939, when German troops made their way across the border into Poland! September 3 1939 Britain declared on Germany and the horror of listening to the news that Germany had torpedoed the 13,500 ton passenger liner : "Athenia" on route from Glasgow to Quebec, Montreal. 1,130 passengers aboard, 118 lost their lives many of them children. This caused such a furor

that Hitler ordered there would be no more attacks on passenger ships, no matter what the nationality!



That summer had been a hot one mom took us on a picnic to Stratford where Shakespeare was born and in August a holiday to Seaton a coastal seaside place in Devon, well known for its cider and clotted cream. Dad was away with the Air force, but being in the reserve was called up before things started to happen. I was relatively a happy child, but life for everyone slowly began to change: Air raids started and the Germans began dropping their bombs, everyone was issued with gas masks, and smaller children like my little brother Martyn a Mickey Mouse gas mask and in every other garden an Anderson

air-raid shelter were assembled. Within a few weeks the evacuations of thousands of children from London Birmingham and other big cities began. It was an operation that would have a profound effect on many of us later on in life. We were uprooted from our homes and dispatched to live with strangers some of us for a few years!

There was abuse not all children were welcome in families that took us in and I certainly had my share of rough treatment from some! However, it must be said, the independence forced on us at such an early age gave us an education - an appreciation of life's incongruities no school could have provided.

Children with name tags pinned to coats, carrying gas masks, suit cases or shopping bags containing their belongings, teachers carried placards with the name of their school, came from all over snaking their way to bus stops and railway stations Tearful parents saying good bye to their kids wondering where they would be sleeping that night. As I boarded the train biting my lip I waved good bye with my handkerchief like the rest of the children till our parents standing on the platform were out of sight!

Jean and I arrived in Worcester at a place called Puddleford Farm The owner Mother Morris, we called was short, stout and rather domineering. We were shown to our room at the back of the big farmhouse. En route we had been given a bar of chocolate, Jean had eaten hers, but I put mine in the drawer to save for later. <unfortunately a mouse got to mine before I did. There were other children at the arm, from different schools, and didn't have so far to go to school as we did to the C of E.

We all had jobs to do and we made them as much fun as possible. I didn't much like going into the hen house to collect eggs, but I did it, feel under each hen for eggs hand them to Jean standing at the door to put in her basket or apron. When she dropped them and the hens gobbled them up we never told anybody!

A boy named Huey 14 liked to smoke had the bedroom in front of us. Huey and I would bring the cows each night up from the field so the could be milked early next morning. We laugh all the way because we couldn't get them to walk straight they were all over the place walking in ditches. Another time Huey helped me onto a cart horse I rode bar backed to a blacksmith to get shoes. Didn't wear jeans in those days and had a terrible rash on my legs. Sometimes Huey gave me cigarettes thought it fun to smoke, till he gave me one in bed, Mother Morris caught me trying to it out on the windowsill and burnt a hole in the pillowcase!. We would steel apples from the orchard to take to school for lunch, and much to Jean's dismay stop Gypsy carts to give us rides to school we were forever late! Actually we didn't stay at the farm for more than six weeks before mom came to take us home! Besides living so far away from the school; we had to take our baths in a cold tin shed, never had clean clothes to wear, when mom came to pick us up we were washing the dairy floor in our underwear!

During the winter of 1940 we spent endless nights down the air raid shelters, cold damp cramped for space, listening to German bombers overhead! Unfortunately one night

when the air raid siren sounded I was up at my friend Winnie's house and coming out I ran into a brick wall - fainted found my self in the air raid shelter was taken to the hospital swathed in bandages with a broken cheek bone.

I was nearly 13 years of age and attending Canterbury Rd School. A bomb had dropped in the school play ground and another hit the water mains and officials were concerned about the contamination of our water supply. Forced to take lessons in someone's house was not a satisfactory solution so arrangements for a second evacuation was made this time to Leicestershire:

We were all crowded into "Ravenstone Institute" near Coalville where locals came in to choose what kids they wanted to live with them. Jean and I was among the last to be picked, I was beginning to wonder what was wrong with us, and it wasn't that we were unattractive??? It was plainly sheer ignorance on their part! A lady named Mrs. Holmes eventually took us in! It seems we were thought to be Jewish as many children from London were; certain prejudices still remained dating back to the times of Simon de Montfort in the thirteenth century who happened to be no friend of the Jews!

In my pocket I carried a letter from my mom to give to whomever would take us in - thanking them at the same time asking if there was any possibility they could take in my 3 1/2 year old brother, pay them privately, as he was not school age to be under the government scheme. At the time this was unfortunate for me, because when my brother came it proved to be too much for the Holmes's so I was found home which was only just three doors away at the Mitchells!.. However I seldom saw my siblings. After school I was given many tasks: feeding the chickens, collecting eggs, weeding in the garden, filling sacks of grass to the feed rabbits and guinea pigs, which seemed to me to be all work and no play! It seemed to me I was free labour for when the government check was picked up I didn't get any pocket money or any bus fare given to me

It wasn't that I didn't appreciate the beauty of countryside when the warm sun gave of its free warmth producing rays that can even make the worst tempered of people friendlier I have wonderful memories of the surrounding fields and hedgerows when they are heavy with their aromatic woodsy smells, and on the odd warm afternoon found time to go exploring every nook and cranny of the surrounding fields - no hunger pangs with the many apples orchards blackberry and elderberry bushes laden with fruit!

The bluebell woods was a magical place to be I would wander around at the top of a little hill the sun gathering up the scent of the bluebells which ran down its sides like little rivulets into a deep azure pool it made me heady seem to loose touch with time and space - to fall with open arms into the blue haze - just to feel by body pressed close to the soft earth with its pungent scent - the sun warm on my back I forgot my problems I was happy!

One day a lady up the street Mrs. Poxon offered to take me in. I thought life would be better; didn't know it at the time; I jumped from the frying pan into the fire. The Poxon's were an elderly couple who had a 42 year old son - Horace who constantly chased after

me! When I found out the arrangement they had made for me to live there it was not a very comforting thought to go to bed at night -when in the bedroom was only a curtain that stood between us!

I received my school diploma 3 months prior to my 16th birthday and had started work at the in the employment office of the British Timken. The girls in the office were all excited about going to the Christmas dance and I really wanted to go, but the Poxons being strict Baptists at first said “no” however, Horace intervened and backed me up and helped me win them over for me - with strict instructions to be home at 11’oclock - with this curfew it meant me leaving earlier than my friends and a long walk home.

Walking along in the dark a car drew up beside me and the driver asked if the little girl would like a lift - taking a quick glance to see the man’s wife seated next to him I gratefully climbed into the back seat. However, the man dropped his wife off at their house so I was left in the car with this stranger. As we came to the top of a hill a felt the car grinding down to a halt, instinct told me to get out which I did scared to death ran managed to hide in some undergrowth at the side of the road. From my hiding place I could see the car driving slowly up and down looking for me, for what seemed like ages before I was convinced that he had finally left I crawled safely out!

However, from then on Horace now thought that I owed him when he had backed me up to go to the dance - he made my life utterly miserable things started to get really ugly it was becoming a cat and mouse game - he even killed my pet rabbit and served it to me for dinner!

The two girls in the office Olive and Kathy knew I was desperate to get away from the Poxons, so Kathy’s parents gave me the chance to go and live with them. It was the first home in which I had really felt happy! I went dancing every Saturday night with Kathy and her sister Joyce. The father was MC every week at the local dance hall and we were always chaperoned home - I was just beginning to enjoy life! It wasn’t long after that I was allowed to go home for good!

Though the last house I lived in was great I must say I have had many unhappy experiences being evacuated far too numerous to tell I was very glad to be home!



Growing up we had nice neighbours who helped to colour my life. Mrs. Weetman at 194 let me into her sewing room to pick out pretty pieces of fabric to make clothes for my doll, old Mr.Hart who sit in his garden and would throw a bucket of water over any cat that dared to cross his lovely garden, including ours!. Elsie Hart who came to read tea leaves, smoke Abdullah cigarettes with my mother they would be sitting beside a low fire while Jean and I rolled up the

rug and dance to the strains of the late night music of Victor Silvester.

It always seemed be a low fire we had in those days but at least we had one. Coal was about the only fuel used to keep the houses warm then and chimney sweeps had a fulltime job cleaning the soot out of the chimneys. Sometimes I would stand outside and let the sweep know when the brush came out of the chimney... To make the fire last slack was dampened and packed at the back of the grate. Like everything else during the war it was rationed.

There were some children still away in the countryside when the war had ended. Now a big problem was immerging because the bombing had taken a major toll on cities children now 4 to 6 years older came flooding back – more housing was needed and as a result resettlement wasn't completed till 1946.

Some children enjoyed the countryside others hated it. Mine was mixed. Religious beliefs were tempered, so was attitudes towards authority, because as evacuees we suffered the humiliation of being picked out treated like cattle and taken away by strangers!

Parents who listened to calls of help from their children brought them home again I wish it been me! Dad serving in the Middles East and mom in the British Red Cross attached to the army at Whitten Barracks. I didn't come home till two years before the war ended. For better or worse evacuation had the effect of splitting up families that may never again were reunited, some children returning home, were not always welcome and for them it was traumatic- unable to cope with life they ran away back to the homes were they had been shown affection. Others sent to Australia for safety it was even worse, thinking their parents were killed in the bombing were placed in orphanages only to find years later they had been lied to - just terrible! There's one thing for sure no matter what I would never send my children away!

In the summer of 1947 was the first time I went to Handsworth park to attend a flower show! It was quite an amazing event the park was completely transformed by huge marquees and a fair ground with all kinds of rides for the kids. As I remember it, it was a time when lots of people were into growing all kinds' vegetables and flowers including my Aunt Ada and Uncle Will, who had entered their dahlias in the flower show they were displayed in the flower exhibit but the competition was so very tough - they tried hard but didn't win!

The flower exhibit tent was just a gorgeous sight Chrysanths and dahlias were in a multitude of colours some extraordinarily large, roses and other lovely flowers beautifully displayed attracting many visitors to come and buy their flowers or seeds.

All the flowers and vegetables that had been grown to put on the show were as perfect as could be. The runner beans were the longest greenest you could ever see, cauliflowers had the whitest centre's, potatoes scrubbed till they shone, pea pods filled with big round peas made me want to eat them – reminded of mom chastising me for eating the peas when I was supposed to help shell them - she made me “whistle”!

You could see all these displays had been given extra tender loving care by the exhibitors all hoping for a prize of some sort!

There was also a marquee where many breeds of dog's were getting the luxury of being petted and fussed over - strutting like peacocks - loving every minute of the applause from the crowd - with their handlers all hoping to win first prize.



Later on in the afternoon we listened to Ted Heath and his band and set up a picnic with sandwiches pop bought ice cream cones that dripped all over the place. Then in the evening the lights sparkled all around the pool. In the fair grounds you could hear kids screaming with excitement on the rides. The big moment came with fireworks displays as an end to a perfect day!

A few years ago I went back for a visit to Handsworth. The people may have changed front gardens may have disappeared - like 192 Westminster Rd - now used for a car park. And thought St Mary's School had lost some its character what was once a warm brick colour is now covered with stucco, the iron gates no longer there or the iron fence dividing the girls and boys play grounds, as if we were over sexed at that age we needed it? However, Handsworth is still a relatively quiet place in which to live, no heavy industry, no high-rise apartments and no gigantic thoroughfares dividing up communities, lots of open spaces, tree lined roads, fields and of course we can't forget the park where long ago I spent many happy hours in the those golden days of summer!

Britain was still very depressed during the years after the war. So in December 1947, with the hope of a better life my family decided to immigrate to Canada. Now in my late 70's happily married for 58 years with seven grandchildren, years have gone speeding by, but old memories still linger!

Beryl McMullen



