

Memories of Mill Hill from Ron Sargeant

Over a period of time in 2015 Ron sent the Society a series of emails with his recollections of Mill Hill. We thought these might be of interest so we have put them into this article for publication on our web site. ED

My name is Ron Sargeant, now 76, and living in Marbella, Spain. In 1939 my family moved from Woodford, to live at 52 Worcester Crescent, Mill Hill. This was a big move for my parents, as they both came from Essex. If my memory serves me well I think my father paid £350 for the house when it was new, and because it had no garage. Times have changed a bit I think! I spent most of the war years at 'number 52' until September 1964 when I married Barbara Snelling at St Paul's Church on the Ridgeway and moved to Harrow. I married the girl next door; well, across the road at number 51. Barbara's Dad was a policeman in Golders Green and won the George Medal for bravery during the Second World War.

My first school was a nursery in Croft Close, off Marsh Lane, and this was during the war because I was close to 7 years old when the war ended. My first junior school was a bit of horror story. This was St Georges, which was situated close to St Michael's Church in the Broadway. The problem was that I am left-handed and the head mistress, who I thought was a 'Nazi', did not believe that anyone could be left handed. I was forced to use my right hand alone for everything including trying to fasten my shoes when I arrived at the school in the mornings. I got so nervous that I refused to eat and had blood coming from the fingernails of my right hand trying to do up these shoes. My mother was called to the school, took one look at me, and really went for the head mistress. Needless to say I was taken away from that school and then went to Highwood School which was situated opposite the gates to the allotments in Lawrence Street. There, at the age of 8 or 9, I had to learn algebra, geometry, French, Latin, and attend boxing lessons on a Saturday morning.

Needless to say I failed the 11-plus and finished up at Edgware Secondary Modern, which was then situated down an alley way next door to the goods yard in Station Road Edgware. As you will see from my reminiscences, despite parental pressure, I did not have too much time for homework. However, I did manage to escape from Edgware 'Sec Mod' by passing the Technical exam at the age of 13 and getting a place at Kilburn Polytechnic Commercial School, another one which doesn't exist anymore. This meant leaving at 7.30 am and not arriving home until gone 5.30 in the evening. This did hinder my nocturnal adventures somewhat mainly due to fatigue.

One of my first memories is that Worcester Crescent stopped - although the road bases had been laid past number 72. This became the most wonderful playground a child could wish for right over to Moat Mount Park. The pond shown on your footpath map was well within the boundaries of the park itself and in fact was the focal point for all. The houses in Worcester Crescent were built by John Laing and Co, and John Laing had one of the big houses in Marsh Lane and he owned the field immediately behind number 52. The cows were secure in this field and I remember feeding them at the bottom of the garden through the wire fence. It was regularly patrolled by a gamekeeper who did not appreciate little boys like me in his field and made this very clear on several occasions when I had to go over 'his' fence to retrieve my ball and got caught with one leg over the 7 feet high wire.

However, the field adjacent the unfinished Worcester Crescent was not so secure. These cows were kept from straying by a series of temporary removable barricades - except when I accidentally moved one allowing the cows to escape and Dad's dahlias in the front garden took a hammering. Dad never found out that it was my fault that his dahlias got eaten otherwise I might have finished up at boarding school if he ever had.

Where Mill Hill County High School now stands was a large fir tree, the meeting point for all our gang, and the footpath followed down the hill to the fence of the park where there was a stile. There were three woods – ‘first wood’ in the field nearest to Ramillies Road [Beeches Wood], ‘second wood’ at the bottom running parallel with Hankins Lane, and ‘third wood’, best of all, adjoining the entrance to Moat Mount park [Nut Wood]. With snow on the ground the slopes above the pond [Leg of Mutton Pond] became a tobogganing paradise with the wall round part of it preventing any major accidents. I remember seeing the bullet holes in the park keepers hut after he was shot by a downed German airman. I also remember there being a concrete air raid shelter in our road outside number 48 and watching the flying bombs V1’s going over from our front room window. Before the houses in Ramillies Road were built the base for the road already existed, and almost at the bottom of the hill to the left was a large bomb crater that became a pond, where I well remember picnicking with my parents during the war. After the war there was a street party held in the field where I played for much of my younger days. The exact location can still be seen to this day I believe. South of the new school was what we called the ‘first wood’, roughly egg shaped and close to the back gardens in Ramillies Road. Just to the lower left of the wood stood two huge oak trees and the party took place around and between the trees. This was mostly fancy dress for us kids. My parents had covered my three wheeler bike with camouflage, a sawn off broomstick for a gun and so my bike became a tank. This was after the war but before building re-commenced.

Once Ramillies Road had been completed I gained a lot of new friends, all boys of course. (I did not find out about girls until much later. I thought they were just boys who could not run very fast and were not much good at cricket or football). We had a mud football pitch at the lower end of the big field and it got so competitive that even some of the dads joined in on Sunday mornings. We actually formed a team called Moat Mount Youth and joined the Hendon Youth League. The highlight was reaching the cup final played at Claremont Road but losing 4-1 to Mill Hill Youth Club who we thought had cheated by fielding a team far too old for U17 youth team football. Moustaches and army uniforms were the giveaway! The other highlight was beating another team in the league 22-1. They scored first and I got 7 lucky goals. But my main love was cricket, which I got from my Dad. As a Schoolboy I played for Willesden district, North West London, Middlesex Schools in 1954, and in 1955 London Schools. My association with the Mill Hill Village Cricket Club was to last from 1946, when I became third XI scorer, until 1968 when I moved from Harrow to Tonbridge. I had some great times as opening bowler for the first XI for nearly 10 years, and being the vice-captain under John Hardie. When I got married in 1964 the event was duly reported on the sports pages of the Hendon and Finchley Times.

Dad was in the home guard before the call-up started for the over 40s being stationed down by the library, just off the Broadway. He was called up in 1943. Dad worked all of his life for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution beginning at their depot at Stirling Corner, but for most part of his working life he was based at their Head Office in Grosvenor Square. My father joined Mill Hill Village Cricket Club in 1946, the first season after the war. He became fairly well known locally due to his long attachment as a player and official of the Club. Dad was Treasurer at the time when the old wooden club house burned down on a Monday as a result of a cigarette left burning after a match on Sunday. Dad and I rushed up there when he got home from work on the Monday evening to be faced with just a large heap of still smouldering embers. This was in about 1950 if I remember rightly. It was a lovely old construction with a players’ balcony upstairs and a white picket fence around the front. It was in exactly the same position as today’s club house but with two cricket squares in front with overlapping boundaries. The tragedy brought out the best of all members.

Mum used to do her shopping mainly at Apex Corner during and just after the war and she used to walk there and back. That's quite a good hike from the top end of Worcester Crescent. From Uphill Road she used to turn right into Green Lane, which was then not a made up road but a footpath through blackberry bushes to the bus stop to the left of the air raid siren and the police box. Sometimes Mum would even walk to The Broadway and back. More often than not she would get the 113 bus from Apex Corner, penny-halfpenny for her and a halfpenny for me, for the two stops on an STD Class double-decker bus. Apex Corner has not changed much in all the years, just the names above the shops. I can see many of the shops in my mind's eye but I can't remember all the names. However three stand out for me, Sainsbury's right on the corner, and the Blinking Owl Café next door to Uncle Arthur's Barbers shop. Even the buses are much the same, the 240, 240A, and 251 being still around covering much the same routes.

Scratch Wood was also a favourite hunting ground for us kids right over to the railway tunnel. I am talking about something approaching 16 boys and sometimes a few girls of various ages who used to meet nearly every evening after school. We had two regular team captains who chose the sides, the game was a version of a WIDE game. The home team (decided by toss of coin) defended a tree and the away team had to hide and try to reclaim the tree without capture. Only one home team member guarded the tree, the rest hunting down the other side. We played this game in all weathers night after night all over Moat Mount Park and Scratch Wood. Many times when I was only about 10 or 11 my mother had to hunt me down to tell me it was time to come home to bed by which time it was pitch black outside.

However the building of the M1 alongside the railway did spoil a hobby of mine. I was an avid train spotter. My two favourite watching points were on the footbridge connecting Glendor Gardens and Hale Grove Gardens, and on the embankment by the bridge on the Watford Way. I would have loved to have used Mill Hill station for this hobby in the days of steam but there was a very, very, large Irish station porter nicknamed Paddy who chased spotters away. I used to travel all over the country with this hobby and paid for it by caddying at Mill Hill Golf Club. There used to be a wooden hut, part of an old barn which served as the caddy shack. The most famous, and generous person I actually caddied for was Len Harvey*, a 1930's boxing champion at more than one weight. I actually got a whole ten bob for the round, double the usual rate. I suppose I was about 12 or 13 at the time. I also earned pocket money by watering tomato plants inside green houses at Basil Colman's nursery, which is still next door to the Village cricket ground.

I will end my Mill Hill Journal with a little story. When the cows were in the field, just after Ramillies Road was finished, us boys decided that it would be good to try to ride a cow by climbing a tree and waiting for one to pass underneath. After about three hours up the tree it was decided that it was my turn to try. The cow duly obliged and I let myself down on to its back. The cow, of course, took off like a rocket across the field and I was ejected violently from its back landing in A PLACE WHERE COWS HAD BEEN. I was absolutely covered from head to foot and extremely smelly. My mother was horrified and proceeded to use the garden hose on me but the smell was still in my clothes. Needless to say I was told never to try that again on pain of losing any pocket money that might be due to me. MHPS

** Wikipedia: Len Harvey was British champion at three weights, middleweight, light-heavy and heavyweight. He also held the British Empire championship at light-heavy and heavyweight as well as being recognised as world light-heavyweight champion in Britain from 1939–1942.*