

A TRIP DOWN MEMORY LANE.

The home of my childhood was in a little close on the borders of Cricklewood and Goldersgreen in North London. Our house was a small rented semi with, what seemed to me at the time, a vast back garden.

Our next door neighbour's garden backed on to the Handley Page Airplane Factory and every day we would hear the strident sound of the factory hooter summoning the workers. Until the late 1920s the factory site was extensive. I have found out through researching this piece that our road and the adjacent roads were actually built on the site of the original factory. The nearby streets, which were my route to school, were once the site of a huge aerodrome.

Like all children growing up in the 50s we played in the street, often not returning home till dusk. In the middle of the close was what we children called, "the bushes". A tangle of undergrowth and unkempt shrubs where we would play hide and seek, fairies and witches, cowboys and Indians. We would also dig for 'treasure' coming home with shards of pottery – that's probably where I first became interested in collecting blue and white china!

At the start of the close was a red phone box where, when we had nothing better to do, we would make random phone calls to strangers telling them to expect us for tea – and then put down the phone. Near the entrance to the close was where the teddy boys gathered on their two wheelers, spinning the bike chains in their hands. To my 9 year old gaze they appeared very scary and threatening. That's where I first heard the F word. When I asked its meaning I was simply told it was 'the king of all the swear words' and they diplomatically left it at that.

We knew all our neighbours. Mr and Mrs Evans in the house attached to ours had a budgie and cat that sent each other Christmas cards. Every bedtime I would hear Mr Evans calling their cat, "Joey" and I did not settle down to sleep until I knew that it was safely indoors for the night.

On the other side of our house, separated by a shared driveway, lived the Taylors. Most of the tradesmen – the milkman, coal man and rag and bone man – still used horse drawn vehicles. After their visits, Mrs Taylor would shovel up the horse manure for her flower beds. I liked to peer over the fence and admire their garden. In the middle of their lawn sat a bird bath, something I always coveted – and a bird bath was one of the first things I purchased for our garden once we had our own home.

Every November 5th the street would have its own firework party. For days beforehand the men would pile up the wood in preparation for the huge fire they lit on bonfire night. At the top sat a lifelike guy which had been put together by the older kids. My parents would not allow me to be at the bonfire so I ended up watching the fireworks from our front room window.

In the summer the girls would meet on one another's front porches. Our favourite game was 'schools' where we would take it in turns to play the role of teacher and pupils. At the side of our house was a derelict garden shed and this is where anyone pretending to be naughty would be sent to stand in the corner. One such day when everyone had gone home for the night and I was about to go indoors, a little voice called, "can I come out now?" I had completely forgotten one of the girls and she had been quietly waiting all this time! I felt terrible. Even more so when she died some months later. I always felt that somehow I had something to do with her death and the guilt stayed with me for a long time.

About 25 years ago I was passing through my old neighbourhood and couldn't resist driving into the close.

The bushes in the middle were still there but not as I remembered them. They were neatly manicured and spaced well apart. Nowhere for hide and seek, I thought sadly.

I bravely knocked at the front door of our old house and the owners kindly let me in round the side to look at the back garden. To my disappointment it was nothing like as big as I remembered.

Sometimes it's best to stick to your memories.

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