

CHRISTMAS FIRST

By Ian Welland

My first Christmas memory is being pushed on a swing in Churchfields, Hanwell, West London. It was 1966. Responsible for my wellbeing that snowy afternoon was my Grandmother, Rose; or as I remember her fondly as “Nanny Upstairs.’ She lived at 55 Station Road upstairs, whilst “Nanny Downstairs” my Edwardian Great-Grandmother lived, yes, you’ve guessed, downstairs!

Churchfields at Christmas meant holly growing wilder and the berries for the birds to feast. Squirrels foraging and stoats popping up on the heathland overlooking Brunel’s Wharncliffe Viaduct to say hello.

St Mary’s Church, adjacent, was a church held in great regard by our family. During Georgian and Victorian years, it was our family’s church. Our family owned the estate to its north and west border, now known as Brent Lodge Park. An ancestor allegedly lost the lot on the turn of a card! The church itself had seen many a family wedding, the last one being that of my Grandparents in 1937.

Christmas was always a “family” affair in those days and one to be savoured. However, it was also one of discipline headed by my Grandfather, George, who had been a “red-cap” or military policeman in the Second World War. Such discipline really came into its own when in 1974 I found myself living with my Grandparents along with my brother and sister. Some Christmas Days were spent visiting cousins in Bedford; but, those spent at Station Road Hanwell were the most memorable. Here were the “orders” ...

Morning: Everyone rises, washes, dresses and comes downstairs to breakfast. No pyjamas to be worn downstairs!

Mid-morning: We help our Grandparents prepare the dining room for Christmas dinner and await the arrival of our cousins.

1pm: Christmas Meal.

2.30pm: Christmas Pudding to be lit. Grandfather hiding a 50p piece in each of our bowls. (Dentist on standby!)

2.55pm: TV to be switched on. BBC1.

3pm: HM The Queen.

3.10pm: TV to be switched off.

3:15pm: Handing out presents.

5pm: Christmas Tea preparation.

6pm: Christmas Tea Time – with sandwiches (probably tinned salmon), cakes (including my Grandmother’s “rub-up” fruitcake), peaches and evaporated milk for pudding.

8pm: TV to be switched on. BBC1. Morecambe and Wise Christmas Show.

9.30pm: All children to go to bed.

Of course, in between the precise timings, my Grandparents would allow us children plenty of room to play with our toys or read books or listen to music as long as the playing was quiet (and that included the music!).

It is said that Christmas is not what it used to be. I wholly agree. Times have changed. But for all his disciplinarian traits, my Grandfather was a wonderful example of that pipe-smoking head-of-the-family that was born out of the First World War years and helped rebuild Britain during the post-Second World War years.

As I expect to listen to Christmas Carols, help prepare the Christmas table, and encourage my family to open pressies after dinner, I raise a glass to my Grandparents – fondly remembered and thanked for happy Christmases.