

Graffiti

I was born in 1960 on a sofa in the house at 30 Carey Place (which is no longer there).

Us four children played in the car park of the art college (which is no longer there) it was demolished to build Sainsburys (which is no longer there).

The bulldozers moved in, and we moved on. Not too far, just to 128 Queens Road where our mother opened The Pram Exchange; a shop selling second hand prams, cots and anything else baby equipment related.

We were an unusual family for those days. Single mother, four children with various colours of skin. We were very proud of our diversity but learnt a lot about racism. We attracted more than our fair share of curiosity, and were given tips on how to deal with it. The most memorable advice was “Nosey cow. If she asks any more questions tell her to come and ask **me! I will tell her**”

Our mother was a confident and attractive woman, who was never afraid of being different, in fact she relished in it, and sometimes appeared to deliberately behave or dress in a controversial manner to attract attention.

Her days were spent looking after us children and cleaning and repairing prams. She made us clothes on her Singer treadle sewing machine and cooked for us every evening. Her moment of freedom each day was when she closed the shop at 4pm, and ‘nipped up the road’ to buy an Evening Echo and say hello to my dad Stan Freeman (who was the owner of Queens Road Music Shop, at number 79/81).

There are so many tales I could tell about the comings and goings in Queens Road. The shops in those days were mainly selling second hand goods, and what a choice there was.

Wardrobes, books, guitars, clothes, prams. The list is endless. And each shop had its own unique smell as well! Mothballs, cigar smoke and WD40 are some that immediately spring to mind.

Although I could tell a hundred and one different tales, I want to stick with the theme of racism. Not the anti-nazi league rallies, not the national front marching through town, not my older brother aged 12 coming home having been beaten up by local national front skin-heads. I want to tell you about the racist slogans which had appeared overnight across town, and particularly the one painted on the wall of the railway tunnel in Radlett Road (known as The Death Trap to us locals).

My dad who was horrified by the offensive vandalism had a word with his good friend PC Don McBride, our local bobby.

“Don, that graffiti has to go, but I don’t want to get caught”

“Don’t you worry Stan, go there at midnight. I am on shift so will make sure that I avoid the area for an hour. We can turn a blind eye.”

My dad loaded up the boot of his mini with a very large can of Nitromors paint stripper (normally used to strip varnish off pianos before he French polished them) an all-in-one overall, and a stiff scrubbing brush. At the appointed hour, he drove the short distance to Queens Place. He parked up, put on the overall and pulled a hat over his head to try to cover his very recognisable face. He walked calmly down the steps towards the death trap and began scrubbing.

The next morning at 10am, the shop phone rang. ‘42067’.

I heard McBride’s voice commanding “Stan, I’m in Radlett Road, you’d better get down here **now**. I watched as the colour drained from my dad’s cheeks. He replied “OK Mac I’m on my way”

My dad nervously took the three-minute walk to Radlett Road where a crowd of people were gathered, including a man with a large tub of whitewash, the local press and photographer, the Mayor of Watford and of course PC McBride who walked towards my father with a stern look upon his face. My dad whispered “Am I in trouble?”

“Morning Stanley” boomed McBride. “I thought you might like to see this. The Watford Observer have come down to write a story on how the council are fighting racism. They have brought a photographer to take a picture of the mayor cleaning up the racist graffiti, but some silly sod has cleaned it off overnight!”

He winked at my Dad, and together they watched the council workers repaint the offensive words onto the wall, to enable the photographer to capture the snap of the mayor doing his bit for society by cleaning up the graffiti.

Sadly Queens Road Music Shop is no longer there, but the memories of those days stay with me, and whatever the changes that have taken place over the years, Watford is still a great town, I am proud to be a Watfordian.

Louise Welland.