

NEWSLETTER

SUPPLEMENT SEPTEMBER 1999

CHILDHOOD RECOLLECTIONS OF THE ORIGINAL FRENCH HORN LANE

Written by H.J. (John) Gray, Early 1998.

No one seems to know why the original French Horn Lane, Hatfield, was so called. It's musical connotation gives rise to a theory that a French Horn belonging to a bandsman of the Herts Militia, which was stationed in Batterdale and the original Salisbury Square in the old town in the last century, lost his instrument which was eventually recovered in the nearby lane which was thereafter given its title. It is a romantic enough story. It will do for me!

Much less romantic is the fact that when I traversed the lane as a child on my way to and from the original Newtown, Hatfield, to Countess Anne's Infant School, almost everyone referred to it as Gas House Lane! This was because Hatfield then had a gas works, begun in 1860 by Lord Salisbury and others, which was located in French Horn Lane alongside the western bank of the railway - where St. Etheldreda's Drive is now to be found. It belched acrimonious, sulphurous fumes over the residents of Glebeland and Batterdale who frequently complained. A Saturday morning chore for older boys was to take their home made

trucks to buy coke, cheaply, from the gas works with which to stoke their parent's grates and open fires. In the evenings men would emerge with their long lamp lighters with which to ignite the mantles in the town's gas lit street lamps.

In the 1920s the road, which connected the original Newtown with the old town, really did resemble a country lane with high hedges on either side and a ditch on its south side. Over the hedges for much of the way, there were garden allotments. In such an environment countryside flora and fauna abounded and moths and butterflies, the like of which we never see today, flew or settled on the wild flowers.

The modern houses in Old French Horn Lane, the new French Horn Lane itself and its adjoining properties, as well as the telephone exchange - all built in the 1960s - cover two of those allotment sites and the row of shops which include Martin's, Abbey National Bank through to Boot's the chemist, are built over a third one. Hatfield folk dug for survival in those days. In the 1940s they dug for victory!

As I passed through the lane as a 5 year old in 1923 I saw "Langley" being built. Little did I realise that 40 years later I would buy the house from Eric, only son of James Tomlin who had it built on a plot bought from the Gascoyne-Cecil family. For a decade "Langley" was a landmark - a bright, new, pebble-dashed house, in East Goldings when Cranborne Road was not even contemplated, much less started.

In the 1920s commuters from west of the railway used to pass through a 5-bar gate beside "Langley" and follow an asphalt path through the middle of an allotment on the northern side of the lane to Endymion Road, thence over the footbridge to the railway station. The same route as now, save that the asphalt path and allotment are now covered by Cranborne Road which was built, little by little, in the 1930s.

At the Newtown end of the lane E. T. Tingey & Sons' new furniture shop and removals garage was the first building on the north side when I began school. The building is now occupied by Pizza Hut and

Upstairs Downstairs (Antiques) Ltd., businesses. Next to the shop was a house, which still stands, occupied then by Harry Ewington and his family. The two properties were known as the Corner Houses - being on the corner of the lane and St. Albans Road. Then a cross roads with Wellfield Road and no roundabout. Harry Ewington was E.T. "Tom" Tingey's shop manager.

Alongside the house was a double fronted one named "Crantock" in which Tom Tingey and his family dwelt and next to it came a row of eight Swiss style dwellings named "West Goldings" for the simple reason that they stood west of and next to Frederick J. Hollier's dairy which occupied "Goldings".

"Goldings" was Hatfield's second police station in the 1880s before it became the dairy of the Humphrey family who sold to Hollier in the early 1920s. In 1886 a Miss Elizabeth Humphreys was a cow keeper at "Goldings". This would seem to date the time when it began as a dairy and the period when the police left French Horn Lane for their third home in St. Albans Road East where they shared with the H.Q. Herts Constabulary which came from Hertford to Hatfield c. 1883. At that time and well into the 1960s cows grazed the meadow behind "Goldings" to provide milk for the dairy - though much more was bought in from Home Farm, Hatfield Park and elsewhere. The site of the old Police HQ is now covered by Endymion Mews built in 1997.

It follows that on the other side of "Goldings" the properties were known as "East

Goldings". Its dwellings comprised the two semi-detached, red brick cottages owned by Gascoyne-Cecil Estates which are now Nos. 5 and 7 Old French Horn Lane, and my house "Langley" which had "East Goldings" for its postal address when in 1963 I first occupied it.

The houses "Sunnyside" and "Meadow View" which still remain were there in the 1920s - "Sunnyside" occupied by John Gregory J.P. who was a grocer in Park Street in a shop adjoining the "Horse and Groom" public house and "Meadow View" by Frank Pinder, manager of the gas works.

Next to "Meadow View", standing high on a bank, was the original row of four houses named "Malting Mead", a name now transferred to a block of flats in Endymion Road. The "Malting" part of the name derives from the fact that the houses were built adjacent to the site of the former Manfield and Berner family maltings, but "Mead" comes more likely from the poetic version, meaning a piece of grassland kept for hay, rather than from the drink of that name made by flavouring fermented honey and water.

When I passed "Malting Mead" on my way to school, Tim Naden, a local small builder, occupied the old wooden malting buildings. They were the last structures on the north side of the lane before one passed beneath the original railway bridge which was only feet to the north of the present one and on line with the existing pedestrian underpass.

Emerging on the eastern side of the bridge, one took the right hand fork to London Road (Great North Road) in the old town - the left hand fork took one into Pond Hill, Batterdale where J. J. Burgess and Sons had their original wood and bark dealing building and undertakers business.

Triangle House, then the surgery of Dr. Percy Morgan Brittain, created the fork. Leaving it on one's left, there was a mixed bag of old Herts Militia buildings which were vacated in the 1870s. They were occupied variously by private residents and Messrs. Waters, the garage proprietors, workshops, before one came upon the last house on the north side of the lane. It was the former home of James Gray (1860-1913) who bought a coach building works in the old town and developed it into the motor car business which came to be known as "Grays of Hatfield" and which is now Rover Diamond.

Making an about turn to return up the lane on its southern side one left the C of E School for girls on one's left. The school had previously housed children of all ages but the senior boys left in 1905 to occupy the Endymion Road building, then named Hatfield Boys' School. The juniors left in 1913 to occupy the former Countess Anne's Charity School building (now St. Etheldreda's Church Hall). The older girls joined the senior boys in Endymion Road in 1924 when the school was renamed St. Audrey's Senior Mixed School. It stood on the site of the present Countess Anne's Primary School. The Girls' School buildings were used for teaching woodwork, science and violin

playing to pupils from Endymion Road school - all three subjects taught by Geoff. Whitby, son of Walter Whitby, a former headmaster of the school whose memorial plaque is in St. Etheldreda's Church.

There followed two or three private houses, one of which was "Edgemere", home of the widow of James Gray, before one reached the Wesleyan Chapel opened in 1889. The Wesleyan, or Methodist worshippers had previously met in wooden outhouses which adjoined cow biers next to the Two Brewers public house off Church Street, causing their meeting place to be dubbed "The Moo Cow Chapel". All this changed when the pub and outhouses were demolished so that Lord Salisbury could build on the site a Rectory for his second son, Lord William Cecil and his wife, Lady Florence, when Lord "Bill" became rector of the parish in 1888 until 1916.

To the west of the Wesleyan Chapel there were further private dwellings named "Spring Villas" before one passed under the railway bridge on the return journey to come upon the smelly old gasworks. Beyond the gas works the existing cottages of Glebeland, which face the present French Horn Lane, were met.

Beyond Glebe Cottages there was a large allotment over which Glebe Court and Brain Close are built - the latter an apt choice of name for it commemorates the brilliant French horn player, Dennis Brain, who was killed in 1957 near the Birchwood roundabout

when his car left the A1 road in the early hours of a Sunday morning when he was returning from the Edinburgh festival where he had been playing. He was only 36 years old.

After the allotment one came upon Old Rectory Lodge, the lane entrance to the Old Rectory in which the Rev. Francis Faithfull, Rector of Hatfield from 1818 until 1854 used to live and which was occupied in the 1920s by the Ven. & Hon. Kenneth F. Gibbs, Arch-deacon of St. Albans. Ernest J. Savage, a leather gaitered, jodpur clad character was the keeper of the lodge which stood literally opposite the drive to my garage when I first moved into "Langley". Only it obscured the view from my front window apart from the high hedge which concealed the largest of all the allotments which stretched to the vicinity of the present telephone exchange. By then the Old Rectory had become Howe Dell School, which was run, disastrously, on self expression beliefs. No. 10 Old French Horn Lane now stands on the site of the old lodge.

At the western end of the allotment the County Council Highways Department had a yard in which it kept road making materials such as tarmac, which gave off a much more pleasant smell than the gas works. Beside it the entrance to the Herts County Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club could be found. When the County Club removed to Harpenden in the early 1920s its premises became those of the Hatfield Lawn Tennis and

Bowls Club which is now located in College Lane.

The drive and garden of "Kennelwood House" was next to the Bowls Club entrance. The house was occupied by a family named Royds, relatives of Johnny Lloyd who farmed Astwick Manor farm. On the western side of the garden an asphalt path connected French Horn Lane with the original Dog Kennel Lane where Miss Olive Lusty had her sweets and tobacconist's wooden shop when I was a schoolboy, buying from her whipped cream walnuts!

The last piece of ground was an allotment on which the Hatfield Labour Party planned to build a clubhouse, but E. T. Tingey beat them to it and built his second Corner House - which is presently split into small units, the charity concern "Help The Aged" occupying one and Mather Marshall, Estate Agents another. (As I write the rest are empty!) The Labour Party soon afterwards built a spacious wooden building for its clubhouse in Union Lane (now Wellfield Road) on the exact site of the present Conservative Club and offices. In it, in the 1930s, I learned to handle a cue for the purpose of playing billiards and snooker. My eligibility for admission arose from my being the son of my father who was a member and so able to introduce me as a guest!

How the face of Hatfield has changed in the past 50 years. All that is left of the original French Horn Lane is the cul-de-sac now known as Old French Horn Lane.