

# GLIMPSES OF THE PAST

*Some snippets of Dover History*

## BEFORE THE WAR by Dick Whittamore

I was born in Streatham, London, on January 6th 1925, an unwanted baby who was given a home by a very kind lady who brought me up. She took me to live on Chatham Hill which was on the main route to London in those days. As an infant I was always fascinated by watches and clocks and when I started school remember building a roman-figured clockface with matchsticks on the classroom floor.

From Chatham we moved to various places in Kent. In Ospringe I can recall witnessing a little girl being run over on the main road and I also walked into the side of a speeding car at the same spot - only bruised, thank goodness. At West Farleigh, living in the wilds, we had to share a communal pump with six other cottages to get our drinking water.

In 1937, at the age of twelve, we moved to East Langdon. The local school was mixed and catered for all ages. Mrs James, the headteacher, taught the seniors, Mrs Bottle the mid-ages and Mrs Robinson the infants. In those days a third-of-a-pint of school milk cost a halfpenny a day. Old fashioned stoves in the classrooms afforded the heat. I was given the task of recording the temperature each day from a thermometer which hung from the ceiling. My earlier interest in timepieces came to light again here. When the classroom was empty I got up on a chair and pushed the big-hand of the huge clock forward by five minutes so we could go home earlier - it worked!

I was a good pupil and, on several occasions, was top of the school. My rival, Ella Dixon, beat me sometimes. Poor Ella

was killed by a shell in Dover's Market Square in March 1942; she was only seventeen.

In those schooldays people were very poor. Only the well-off had cars. There was no television and wireless sets were pretty crude, needing a big battery, a smaller grid bias and an accumulator which had to be charged each week - 6d a time at a local store. Only businesses and the rich had telephones and, in the country, we still had lavatories at the bottom of the garden, the contents having to be buried periodically. I often earned a little money by working on the local farm by picking peas and gathering up potatoes. In those days big farm horses did the work of today's tractors.

During my early days I can still remember the last Dover trams, the skating rink on the seafront and the aerial ropeway crossing the Deal and Guston roads carrying coal from Tilmanstone to the Docks. I visited Dover each Saturday to attend the Plaza matinees - 4d to get in and 1d for a tube of wine gums. I recall the King's Hall being burnt down in 1937 and on my visit to Dover I went round the back and saw just the four walls standing. It was rebuilt and today is the Gala Bingo. I can also remember a fatal plane crash over East Langdon. Two RAF planes were manoeuvring overhead when their wings clipped. One landed safely but the other narrowly missed houses as it crashed in a field. The pilot baled out but the young observer stayed in the plane and was killed. The pilot later was driven away to fly again before he lost his nerve.

At school each year we performed a Xmas pantomime at the Village Hall. One I can

recall was Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, the juniors having to black their faces. Mrs James rehearsed the pupils whilst Mrs Robinson painted the scenery on stitched together bacon sacks supplied by Mr James who worked for the Danish Bacon Company. I didn't like the stage in those days so I was put in charge of ticket and programme sales. Admission 7d and 1/-. One year we made enough profit, with the help of a grant, to buy a portable radio which we used for schools educational programmes. Sometimes Mrs James let us hear the Grand National or Derby as a treat.

I was confirmed at St Margaret's Church, at the age of thirteen, by the Bishop of Dover.

I left school at fourteen and my first job was at Vye and Son, the Kentish Grocers. The shop was where Dixon's is today in Biggin Street. They had other branches all over Kent. 7/6d per week was the wage and we had to provide our own white jackets and aprons. I wasn't very happy there and left after only seven weeks. In those days, in early 1939, there were many national grocers: International, Pearks, David Greig, Maypole, Liptons and more. The Co-Op was Dover's main shop with several branches. It sold grocery and provisions and had a dairy and bake house amongst its many outlets. The annual dividend for

members brought about long queues on pay-out days. Before the war shops stayed open late in the evening, but there was an official early closing day and they were closed on Sundays.

On Monday, 14th August, 1939, living in Snargate Street, I started work as a page boy at the Royal Hippodrome at 5/- a week. I can remember the first show I saw. It was the OVALTINEY'S touring show. A disc from a tin of Ovaltine gained admittance. I can still recall the Ovaltiney's theme song.

On September 3rd war was declared and I can remember helping with blackouts and sticking gummed tape on windows to prevent splinters and sorting out my gasmask which had been issued earlier during a previous scare. What a nuisance it was carrying it with you in its cardboard box. As time went on people forgot to carry them - thank goodness we never needed them! Members of H.M. Forces always had to carry their gas masks, also a tin hat and often the soldiers carried a rifle too.

At the outbreak of war places of entertainment closed but they soon reopened - the Hippodrome did on Tuesday, 12th September.

That's my pre-war adolescent story. What followed was six years of war which was much more dangerous and exciting - but that's another story.



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8 Cherry Tree Avenue, Dover CT16 2NL  
Tel: 213668