

PEMBURY IN THE 1960'S : A VILLAGE IN A TIME OF CHANGE.

I came to live in Woodsgate Way, aged 5, in the summer of 1961 and started at Pembury School in September that year. In retrospect it was a pivotal time in the development of the village from a largely rural community to today's dormitory town. Although I ceased to be a permanent Pembury resident in 1974, I continued to visit until the death of my mother in 2003, by which time the village had changed almost beyond recognition.

In 1961 the recently completed developments at Woodsgate Way, Woodhill Park and The Forstal were virtually the only post war housing in the village, and these were inhabited largely by young families whose father (but in that era, not yet their mother) commuted daily to employment in London. It is only at this distance in time that I can appreciate that we represented the *thin end of the wedge* as far as the change in the nature of the village was concerned. Looking back I think it was the development of the housing between the school and the recreation ground that tipped the balance for me; It was at this point that I ceased to recognise by sight almost everybody I encountered.

In the very early 1960's newcomers had a sense of being witness to a way of life which was on the very cusp of vanishing and which in some respects had already turned the corner out of sight just before our arrival on the scene. In this latter category was the hotel cum tea rooms cum county club at Woodsgate Corner and the Dower House (which was later to become the council offices and then the Mecure Hotel) . There were intriguing clues to this earlier life.

In the case of The Woodsgate there was left behind the open air swimming pool, marooned between two modern housing estates , but still functioning. This pool was the delight of my life from about the age of 8 until its closure in my early teens. At this period the pool itself, the chutes, diving boards and fountain were all painted an exotic shade of deep turquoise and set against the white of the entrance building (where even the turnstiles were turquoise) and the rear archway (what **was** the original purpose of this gate onto the footpath at the rear?) it was like having a holiday resort on our doorstep. It presented many interesting rites of passage; jumping from the top diving board, going down first the small chute and then the large one and then each head first, –to this day I have slightly impaired hearing in my left ear sustained during an over-ambitious descent. The pool complex was evidence of changing tastes, poolside there was an aura of faded 1930's elegance, while the adjoining café, with its formica tables, juke box and pinball machines seemed to have fallen prey to 1950's American youth culture. Neither much changed their decor during their remaining existence, the café undergoing a late renaissance as a transport café by day and a night club after dark.

The clues to what life might have been like in and around the Dower House were more difficult to uncover and interpret. The house itself always seemed somewhat forbidding, by the time I knew it was unoccupied and falling into disrepair. The grounds however hinted at an exciting past, there was a pond, a large stand of rhododendrons, a small woodland under planted with daffodils and bluebells and ,most interesting of all, the remains of what appeared to have been the track of a miniature railway.

In other ways we arrived just in time to witness the "old" village. Acotts' Bakery was still in business in the High Street and their delivery man-Mr Taylor -still did his rounds, as did Mr Waghorn with his fresh fish. Miss Walker still had the drapers shop, where you went to buy Pembury School uniforms, and which smelt of rubber from the plimsolls and wellingtons hung above the above the counters (ladies wear to the left , gentlemen's to the right) on lengths of string and whose window display was protected from sunlight by a kind of orange cellophane. The modern block, comprising the Off Licence, Mr Maynard's Spar shop, and between the two what was briefly –and unsuccessfully- the High Street's third confectioners, had yet to be developed. There was what appeared to have been a grocer's shop on the footprint of the Off Licence, but this had already ceased trading and the faded green

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window blinds were always down. The Newsagents and Sweet Shop near the corner of Lower Green Road and High Street was known as Giles' but I don't know whether this was the name of the elderly couple who owned it at this period or of a previous owner. There was also a lovely lady, universally known as Joan, behind the counter.

On the other side of the High Street, approaching from Woodsgate the first commercial premises you came to, just as the road bends round, was The Square Deal. In 1961 this was already a transport café, but it appeared to have had a previous life as a more genteel establishment, as there were roses and green and cream metal chairs and tables in the garden, from the style of the building it appeared to have once been a private house. There was one house between the Square Deal and the Village Hall (yet to be modernised and freezing cold in the winter) and then a row of terraced cottages, from one of which operated Chapman's transport business. I think lorries were kept in the yard behind the cottages. The owner, Rod Chapman, was considered a rather glamorous figure as he was also a Rally Cross driver. Beyond the cottages was Eldridge's (the other Newsagent), another house, and then a run of shops and businesses. Amongst these were Rideout's Greengrocers, a branch of the National and Provincial Bank (later to become the Nat in NatWest) and Bruce's Butchers Shop. Mr Bruce was helped in his sawdust floored shop by his assistant, Jim, and Mrs Bruce delivered Sunday joints on a Saturday morning, if you left your backdoor unlocked she would even put it in your fridge while you indulged in a weekend lie-in. In the parade which is on the corner of Camden Avenue the last shop was the chemist, and there was another bank and a hairdressers called Marlene's. At a later period either Rideout's or the National and Provincial (I can't recall which) became another hairdressers called Judith's.

Many of the institutions of the village-the Free Church, the Brownies, the WI, the Bowls Club-were peopled more by the families who had been in the village prior to the 1960's than by the newcomers, -due I think to diffidence on the part of the latter rather than to exclusivity on the part of the former. This also changed during the course of the 60's and 70's as the number of new houses grew. I joined the Brownies in about 1962 and the pack then met in the hall beneath the Methodist Church on Hastings Road and was therefore largely made up of girls from this part of the village. It subsequently moved its meetings to the Village Hall and as a consequence attracted more girls from Woodhill Park. In the 60's there was no footpath between the Paddock and the High Street and unless you were prepared to climb through a gap in the fence and traverse rough, unlit ground you had to walk all the way round Woodhill Park.

I was a member of the Free Church Sunday School from about 1962. The minister was initially a Welsh man called Reverend Howells and he was succeeded in the mid 60's by Reverend Moon. There was an annual Sunday school outing (complete with marquee) to either Bexhill or Eastbourne and, in addition to the usual festivals, we celebrated Primrose Sunday, when the Sunday School adjourned *en masse* to pick primroses in the hedgerows of Cornford Lane or the Old Coach Road.

Looking slightly further afield, there was no link from the A21 to the North Farm Industrial Estate and the short dual carriage way outside the hospital was not built until 1967. Buses from Tunbridge Wells -which was referred to by longstanding Pembury residents as simply The Wells-stopped at the end of Pembury Road and only the Tonbridge buses stopped on the A21. On summer weekends there was a line of stationary traffic all along the A21 both morning and evening as motorists from nearer London made their way to and from Hastings and Bexhill.

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