

Biggin Hill



Biggin Hill parish

In the 1920s Biggin Hill was made up of lots of little wooden bungalows, usually with about an acre of land. They'd been built as holiday bungalows for people from London who would come and live in them at weekends. After the second world war this changed, and most became permanent residences. My father had a bungalow with a plot of land down in the Biggin Hill valley that he originally rented out, but because it had been empty for some time he sold it just after the war for £150. We had the job of going down and sweeping it out before it was sold.

There were terrible London fogs before the war when you literally could not see more than a yard or two. I remember one day visiting my maternal grandmother who lived in Catford and we came home at five miles an hour for a long way. This fog was very dangerous

for anyone with a chest complaint, and was caused partly by industry and partly by most people burning coal on their fires.

In 1936 Crystal Palace burnt down. Although we were 17 miles by road from London and deep in the country I could see this quite clearly from my bedroom. When this incredible building was erected there was a lot of criticism regarding whether or not it would hold up because of the new methods of construction, but no one expected it to burn down, being mostly glass, although in fact it was the second time this had happened.

We had a real old-fashioned policeman called Kitney, who knew all the rogues and where to find them. We knew him quite well because he always had to see the sheep being dipped, which was the law at the time. The sheep were dipped by pushing their heads underwater with a forked stick. We used a mixture containing arsenic, which must have been safer than the organophosphorus used today. One day our dog ate a concentrated mixture but didn't suffer any ill effects.

This policeman had a bottle of beer left out for him on the wall of the Black Horse pub. One day someone added pepper to the drink. This resulted in a heated-up copper!

About 1937 the vicar was asked what he thought of Biggin Hill. He said it was 50% crooks and 50% crocks. Several people took offence at this and he had to move to another parish. In fact, what he said was in the main-part true. Many people went to Biggin Hill for their health because it was 700 feet above sea level. Also there were undesirable types that settled there from the East End of London and Croydon.

One of the market gardeners at Biggin Hill was losing runner beans to thieves. He stretched trip wire across the road, attached to a 12-bore containing a blank cartridge. He had just finished fixing this when someone he wanted to see came by on the road. He ran to catch them, tripped over the wire and frightened himself so much that he dismantled the whole thing.

We had to always put one hanger upside down on the gates so they could not be taken and used as firewood. Once when putting on grass seed with a shandy barrow we left a small bucket in the field. When we returned after a dinner break it had disappeared. On another occasion someone took two balls of binder twine when we were away for an hour. If I had to leave the tractor out I always took the tools out of the toolbox and hid them. Of course not all the people living there were bad, just a small percentage. The Biggin Hill valley at that time mostly consisted of small bungalows in 2-acre plots. Now of course it is built on and has become part of outer London.

Some of the farm labourers were not to be trusted. One chap would cycle round the barns and then walk through the cowshed if he was late, making out he had been there earlier. One of the workers was stealing eggs. Father found these in his coat pocket when the coat was hanging in the shed. He broke the eggs while they were still in the pocket. On another occasion he took the eggs and, with a hypodermic needle, extracted some yolk, replaced it with mustard and put it back in the pocket.

One day during break time all the farm workers were having a farting competition in the shed they used for relaxation. One fellow somewhat overdid it and made such a stench we all had to leave.

One of the men from Biggin Hill who worked for us was a trade unionist. He'd always look at his watch at three minutes to the hour and say "I'm off" because the three minutes would give him time to get his bike out to get home. There might have been half a dozen mangolds to stick in the sack, but he'd just leave it for someone else to do. Although this was annoying, my father kept him on because he was so punctual in the mornings!

This worker was a funny chap. He had one of the first televisions, so all the other workers would go over and watch it, and yet he couldn't afford to have water put on in his house. He had a standpipe in the garden.

This same chap had to have a day off because his wife unexpectedly had a baby. They had been married for about twenty



A typical Biggin Hill house

years. She was lying on the carpet by the fire eating nuts, as it was Christmas, when she felt a pain in her stomach. Within a short time she'd had a baby. This caused a lot of ribbing from the other men like "Didn't you know what caused it, Tom?"

After working in farming for a while he left us for a different job, where he could do his trade union work.

Some of the farm workers were a bit backwards. The cowmen were skilled, but the others were less so. Half of what they did in the winter was hedge-laying. We had one lad, a very strong lad, who was fourteen. He came from school but he hadn't learnt to read or write. My father asked "Well what did you do at school?" So he told him he just drew things, and they never bothered him, just left him to it. Later he went into the army, and the sergeant annoyed him, so he hit him. As punishment he got put in the glasshouse¹, so he got someone to write to my father and said

¹ Military prison

‘Can you help get me out, because all I did was hit a sergeant.’ My father couldn’t help him! In retrospect being in the glasshouse rather than on the frontline may have been a preferable option.

We had a worker called Upton, who was wiry, strong and incredibly hardworking. He used to do bush cutting and woodland management. He never used a watch. When he was hedge-laying he kept an alarm clock in his bag and when this went off he left work. He was a remarkable man who could outwork anyone at such jobs as cabbage planting. This was done with a dibber, the plants having been raised in a seedbed to about 9 inches or a foot high. One day we were working overtime and it got to about 7 o’clock, and he said “Right, I’ve done 700 plants so I’m off” leaving us to finish the planting. But we couldn’t complain as he had already done far more work than the rest of us!

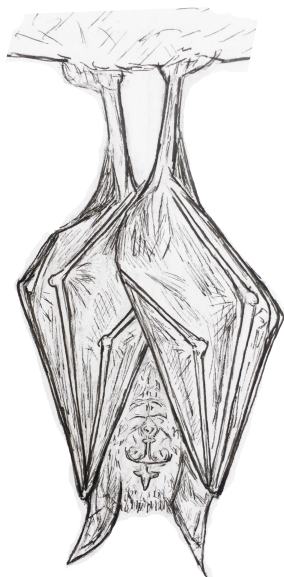
Upton taught me how to thatch and hedge-lay. When I had chickens I thatched a house for them and it never leaked.

One winter’s evening when Father had gone out and I was at home with Rene, there was a knock on the door. A man and a woman were there. The roads were covered with snow. The couple had gone partly up the lane from the house, got stuck and needed a pull. He left the woman with Rene while I went to get the tractor (the Cletrac) to pull him out. This took some time as the water had been drained from the radiator, not much antifreeze being used in those days. I pulled him out, only half destroying his numberplate. I can't remember what we charged him, but it was probably not enough. The woman smelt of too much make-up and was dressed like a tart. Rene and I split the money. She probably had the worst of the bargain, having to put up with the over-processed female. They must have known the road wouldn't get them anywhere except for some shelter for nookie.

About 1937 the Croydon gliding club asked if they could make use of one of the fields for gliding. They erected a large wooden hut at the bottom of Rough Field, by the beech wood, and kept the glider in there with the wings removed. To launch it, an old Sunbeam car was used. This was jacked up and a pulley replaced one back wheel. This would pull up the glider when the car was put into gear.

The cable was attached to the front of the glider by a hook which the pilot could disengage. Although it pulled the glider along it was difficult to get it off the ground. After several days trying (they only came at the weekends) the glider got airborne, but unfortunately it crashed into an oak tree, injuring the pilot. War was declared soon after so these chaps joined the airforce and their equipment was abandoned. They never returned after the war; perhaps they didn't survive it.

Later on during the war, when clocks and watches were difficult to obtain, we had an old alarm clock with a broken balance wheel. I fixed up a pendulum instead and it worked quite well. To give it clearance it was put on an old tin, and the pendulum hung down and cleared the chest of drawers.



There were many bats in our neighbourhood. Once, when motorcycling up Titsey Hill, I felt something touch my shirt. When I got back to the farm I went to wash. I took off my shirt and a bat flew out.

On another occasion we had been away for a few days and an upstairs window must have been left open. We discovered there were five bats flying round the bedroom shared by Rene and Marjorie. We knocked them down with tennis rackets and threw them out of the window. They all recovered okay.