

A Free-range Childhood in Partridge Green

My first memories of Partridge Green are of arriving in Burdfields' lorry after a very bumpy ride. We had moved all the way from Hurstpierpoint where I was born four years earlier. It was 1943 and there was a war going on. Our new house was to be Hatterell Cottage, which was at least a mile from the nearest road, which you would call 'out in the sticks'. The cottage was one of a pair, originally a farmhouse built in the seventeenth century and called Hatterells Farm, just over the river from Hatterells sluice where there was originally an iron swing bridge to allow barges to come up river.

I often wondered how my mother coped with three small children and my father away with the Royal Engineers. Like so many children we saw very little of him but we were at least lucky he came back.

We had no electricity so that meant oil lamps and candle lights, no running water, just a pump, at least this was indoors over the sink. There was an old black range to cook on which had to be fired with coal. We collected the coal by horse and cart down the track in Hatterells Wood.

Bathing us was quite a task for our mother, and the copper had to be lit up to get hot water. The copper burned wood which we used to carry home from the wood. The hot water was lifted out by bucket into the tin bath in front of the range, very cosy. The toilet was a little wooden hut down the garden with a bucket the contents of which had to be buried in the garden. Nice job for mother. We have some photos of some very large carrots she grew!

When it came to shopping, we had to go down and over the river, across the field, through the wood, three more fields, over the railway line, another field and then out by the school and we still had the walk to the village! All this with a pram, my sister and I walking. It was a lovely place for my sister and me with fields all round and old farm buildings to play in, very free-range!

I started school whilst living at Hatterells, no school bus but another long walk in wellies. There was very inefficient central heating and high ceilings. I remember it being very cold and when the boiler had a hiccup we would wear our coats in class. The toilets left a lot to be desired, a trough for the boys and a bucket in a brick building at the bottom of the playground. The buckets for big jobs were taken away by Burdfield Bros; they were the local builders, lorry hire, taxi and undertaker.

The war never bothered us much at Hatterells, when there was an air raid we would go under the table. There was an air raid shelter at school but I don't remember going down there for real, only for a drill. I remember one day on the way to collect milk from Clothalls Farm how a Doodlebug came over and mother shoved us into the ditch, and later in June 1944 when staying with friends at Lloydcroft Cottages, my mother was having my second sister, so she had to be looked after and be a bit nearer civilisation for the Midwife with her little black bag (I think we had to stay with our friends because they had some very large gooseberry bushes in their garden!). There was such a big bang, the house shook and the doors flew open and tiles rattled, then silence, just kiddies screaming. The Doodlebug had fallen in the field opposite the Church, nobody was hurt.

As children we thought war was quite a normal way of life. We were unaware of the suffering and great loss of life that was taking place all over the world.

We were only at Hatterells for about two years, just long enough to get a good feeling of the countryside. We then moved nearer to civilisation but that's another story.

Roy Gasson