

A free-range childhood in Partridge Green (Part 2)

In 1945, we moved from Hatterells to our new house - number 1 Lloytscroft Cottage, one of a pair built about 1912 for the groom and gardener of Lloyts Croft. The rent was about 7 shillings and 6 pence a week (that in new money would be about 37 pence), peanuts one might think, but this would have been quite a slice out of my father's wages in those days. I think that even as a tradesman, just after the war, he would have only been earning about three pounds a week at the most.

We were now only one field away from the village instead of about seven. Even so we were still up to our knees in mud in the winter. We still needed our wellies for many months of the year - we would carry our shoes and change into them at the bottom of the field and leave the wellies in an old tin box ready to change again when we came back.

The cottages were quite modern after what we had been used to at Hatterells - not a beam in sight, higher ceilings and quite airy, yet when we moved in it had no mod-cons. There was still no electricity, and I often wonder how we didn't bum the house down. Looking back now I realise that young children candles and oil lamps do not mix very well.

We still had no main water but at least we had the convenience of a pump indoors, and it was very nice water, I'm sure much nicer than the water that comes out of our taps these days - no chemicals for us, just the odd worm occasionally, quite harmless I'm sure. Occasionally the old rotary pump would have slight hic-cups and need to be primed, this meant that a jug of water had to be kept on standby for this purpose. We were very lucky with our well - it was only about twelve feet deep, two cottages using it but it never ran dry. Of course we never used the amount of water that families do today, no washing machines, bathrooms or showers for us and of course no two gallon flushes down the toilet.

The toilet was still outdoors but at least it was part of the house and not down the bottom of the garden path as so many were. We only had to go out the back door and round the corner. It was of course still a bucket job. I can still recall the smell that these types of privies had, the contents of the bucket had to be buried in the garden - so good for the garden - and the bucket always seemed to be full. I remember helping to dig the hole, then when I grew up and was strong enough I did occasionally do the job myself and, putting it mildly, what a very unpleasant job this was. I do remember my Father tipping the bucket along the trench and digging it in when he was doing winter digging - quite disgusting but it was of course pre-hygiene days and quite acceptable in the countryside, in fact quite normal practice.

There was a black range for cooking in the living room and like most of these old ranges it was very much subject to the wind, as to how it would burn. We also had a primus stove which was very fast to boil a kettle before the range got going in the morning. There was also a large smelly oil stove. We did also have an open fire in the sitting room which burnt logs or coal but this was only lit on special occasions and maybe on Sundays which were still a special day then. No heating up stairs of course, so it was hot water bottles and thick blankets for us.

We still had a copper to heat the water for doing the washing and bathing. It was in the scullery with the pump and the old sink, which was the type of shallow sink that is now sought after by gardeners to grow their alpine plants in.

Washing day was a once a week event in those days and, of course, always on a Monday. For us having a bath was the tin bath-tub. It was quite a performance, lighting up the

copper and then stoking it with faggot wood. It seemed to be burning for hours to get enough water boiling to do a good wash. Can you imagine the atmosphere in our scullery when the copper was alight - just a very short chimney, very temperamental with a mind of its own according to the direction of the wind – and what with all the steam and smoke sometimes we were nearly kippered. At times we had to open the back door to let the smoke out, not very nice in the winter. The bath water was of course shared by all five of us children, just topped up between with a bit more hot water. Looking back this must have been quite disgusting and would have been viewed with horror nowadays, and yet what other choice was there, it would have been quite impossible to heat enough water for each one of us to have fresh water. I am sure that hygiene had not been invented then, yet in spite of this I think we were kept clean. I don't remember people avoiding me.

When the bath-time ritual was finally over the bath water, now looking like soup, had to be bailed with a bucket and tipped down the sink. It would then find its way into the ditch as did all the waste water - that was the sum total of our drainage, a very nice smelly ditch. Until 1957, when the house was modernized, we still had the job of collecting wood for the copper and we were bought up to always bring home some wood whenever we went across the fields, in fact we would go on wood gathering trips.

How hard Mothers in the country had to work to keep their children and clothes clean and yet it was an accepted way of life that had been going on for hundreds of years. I never remember my Mother complaining about having to work so hard.

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