

A Free-range Childhood in Partridge Green— The hazards of the Railway

It was 1945 and the war was drawing to a close but to me, then nearly seven years old the most exciting thing was that our father was coming home from the army and going to be our Dad again instead of a soldier. The next exciting thing that happened to us was that we were to move house from Hatterells, which was about six fields from anywhere, to 1 Lloytscroft Cottages, one of a pair originally belonging to Lloyts Croft. The move was carried out by horse and cart.

We were still on the wrong side of the railway line, so we still had to cross it to reach the village, not that this ever bothered us at all; we used to enjoy watching the old steam trains puffing by. We always took great care crossing the line and we knew what time the trains would be due. There were kissing gates for pedestrians and large gates for lorries and tractors who would come over to the brick-field, or during the war, a tank. A hard road had been made across the line and into the field past Copyhold House and out into Lock Lane to bypass the railway bridge. We always knew this as the tank road as tanks were too heavy to go over the bridge, which was also vulnerable to enemy action. I remember hearing that one tank missed the road and went into the next field without opening the gate! It was said that they were Canadian troops stationed at West Grinstead Park.

The big gates on the railway crossing had to be kept locked, so we had to have a key so that Mother could get the pram through. Father had to pay five shillings per year to rent the key, which he rather begrudged — after all, this was quite a few pints of beer in those days. Later, old enough to ride a bicycle, we used to avoid having to open the gates by lifting the bike above our heads to manoeuvre through the kissing gates, carrying it aloft across the line to repeat the process through the second gate. I look back in horror now at the danger of crossing the railway line and yet we young children would cross the line unsupervised.

The gates were also used by a local lady farmer, Miss Gates, who lived in the first bungalow up Church Road. She had to use the railway crossing as she rented land over the line for her Jersey cows, which crossed the railway line 4 times a day in the summer. The cows got away with it and "lived to graze another day." I never remember Miss Gates having a watch and if we met her waiting at the gates she would ask, "has the down train gone?" The down train was the one to watch out for as it came round the corner very fast and was at the crossing in no time at all, and with 20 or so cows to get over the line, it was all very fraught with danger.

To us having moved from a very ancient old house, Lloyts Croft Cottage was a very different sort of house and yet when we moved in, it had no mod cons such as mains water, electricity or sewerage, even though it was a short distance from the village.

I remember that for a couple of winters we did have a little help with our fuel supply. My father had a cousin who was an engine driver on the steam trains, he was quite often on our line and used to toss off a few nice lumps of coal just past our crossing. This was of course pre arranged, but being young and naive I thought it was a very careless engine driver that dropped coal from his train. My parents were very sorry when George moved on!

Roy Gasson November 2008