

My memories of Ock Street.

I moved to 11 Ock Street at the age of two, in 1940.

One of my earliest memories is the smell of fresh baked bread from Trotman's wafting in through my bedroom window in the early morning. I lived across the road from the bakery and my widow looked out on to Ock Street. Trotman's did all their baking on the premises. The bread and buns would be baked daily and ready for sale before the rest of the town woke. Twice every day, except Sunday, the baker's horse-drawn van would leave the lane opposite to make a delivery round. (This baker made the best Lardy Cake I have ever tasted).

There were other scents to Ock St. When Moreland's Brewery was starting a new brew smell of hops and barley a-cooking would pervade the air. Very fitting for a street with so many pubs.

I lived above Allee's butcher shop. The shop was actually two properties that had been converted into one. This could be seen clearly by the frontage, each shop had a separate window but behind that it was one establishment.

As well as fresh meat, the shop made and sold many kinds of meat products; black puddings, faggots, sausages, smoked ham and bacon, salt beef and pork and offal (tripe, liver, kidneys, sweetbreads and lights). In the back-shop was the refrigerator, the coldroom (where beef was hung to age), the ovens (for cooking faggots), the smokehole (for curing bacon and ham), the boilers (for cleaning tripe and cooking black puddings). In addition, there was the usual sausage, mincing and mixing machines.

All this equipment and storage filled the entire ground level of the property back to within 5 or 6 feet of the rear wall which backed onto the Abingdon School playing field. Thus, it was an unhealthy environment for a young child as it left no yard or garden for me to get fresh air or play. Ock St. was out of the question as it was a main highway. So to ease this situation, most days, my mother or my grandmother would walk me to The Abbey Grounds or to Albert Park for an airing.

Now this routine was noticed by the Miss's Westbury who live across Ock St. and one day I was invited to take afternoon tea with them. This was my first solo social engagement and I was very nervous and shy. However, I was delivered to the Westbury's and after tea they took me into their garden. I thought I had entered paradise. It was a beautiful walled garden, with a lush lawn, flowers, herbs and overhanging trees. From then, until I went to school at age 5, I was invited to the Westbury's for tea and recreation quite often. The two Westbury ladies were older than my grandmother, they were unmarried and lived with their bachelor brother who did the gardening. He taught me about the various plants and herbs in the garden. To this day I am grateful to the Westbury's for being so kind, thoughtful and instilling in me a love of gardens.

Also on the south side of Ock St., just west of the lane, was another place that left its mark on my child's brain. This was Darby's cafe, firstly because it sold ice cream and secondly because this was where I first observed human mating rituals. Darby's had a large plate glass window, when the cafe was not open a blind was drawn down. This meant that anyone standing in front of the window would see their reflection. It was fascinating to watch young couples meet there. Whoever arrived first would check their appearance in the window's reflection with much hair adjustment and tie straightening. Then, if they met with a kiss, the girl would invariably lift one leg backwards from the knee during the embrace. I asked my grandmother why girls did that? Her embarrassed reply was that they had "copied it from the films they saw at The Regal".

Most of my time living in Ock St. was during WWII and the road was always busy but was not congested as in later times. Petrol was rationed and most people did not drive cars for personal use but rode bicycles. Many local businesses used horsepower. Moreland's used horse-drawn drays to deliver the barrels and crates of beer and coal was also delivered by dray. The majority of motorized traffic was commercial or military. If a convoy of "Yanks" went up the road the children would run beside it yelling "got any gum, chum" and the Americans would oblige by throwing packets of chewing gum. As sweets were rationed, this was indeed a windfall.

I can't quite recall but I don't think that the bells of St. Helen's or St. Nic's rang or that Ock St. Fair was held during most of the war years but I certainly remember the Victory parade up the street. The bells rang, soldiers, sailors and airmen marched by. There were lorries, gun carriages and tanks. There was a squad of Gurkas playing bagpipes, a troop of Cossacks riding horses and military bands. The RAF and Fleet Air Arm did a fly pass and the whole town was there. I had a front seat view from our flat over the shop.

The first Ock Street Fair that I recall must have been in 1945 or 46. (I place it in these years because the tune being played by the big merry-go-round was "It's a Grand Night for Singing". This song was from the film "State Fair" and that was released in 1945). It was most appropriate for the weather was mild and the air of general celebration was all around. I was enthralled by the fair at night when the lights went on. I had never seen such a display before in my lifetime.

At the end of the war my family moved from Ock St. to Caldecott Farmhouse but most of the local children of my age attended Abingdon County Council School which was at Bostock Rd and Conduit Rd. Our route to school was along Drayton Rd., over Ock Bridge and down Ock St. On the way home we had time to stop at Ruddocks Fish Shop to buy a pennyworths of scrunchings. Scrunchings were the bits of fried batter that were strained from the fryer after fish had been fried. Food was still on ration but scrunchings required no food coupons and they tasted good so this was even more rewarding than scrumping sour apples.

I left Abingdon in 1947 when my family returned to London but I kept ties with the old town. My aunt married there and lives there to this day. I have revisited Abingdon many times and witnessed it's enormous growth and changing appearance but my memories of the old town are my fondest.

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