

BITTERNE WHEN I WAS YOUNG

Jill Abrahams

Winters, when I was younger were cold but there were special times. Christmas Eve when Father Christmas came along Taunton Drive on his sleigh, the Salvation Army band was playing and the night was magic.

The Christmas when it snowed, I was five and so excited. My dad and I were going to visit my auntie in Milbury Crescent. I had welly boots on and saw the virgin snow in our front garden, I just had to walk over the grassed area – I was small and snow is very cold when it goes inside your welly boots!

Every summer seemed hot and sunny and the ice cream van regularly came along Taunton Drive playing its musical notes. Mum used to buy a block of Neapolitan ice cream, wrapped in cardboard, which was then wrapped in newspaper to keep it colder. We all enjoyed this cut in slices and then put in wafers, even Mickey the cat, who liked the strawberry flavour.

The memories of when I was a child have stayed with me forever, but it wasn't always magic and sunshine. I remember crying with pain when I had chilblains on my toes and I had to walk to school. Only a short journey to Harefield School, but the pain was horrendous.

At bedtime I remember getting undressed in front of the open fire, then running upstairs to bed as quick as possible, jumping in, and avoiding the hot water bottle. The whole bed was never warm, even though mum had moved the bottle around to try and get it as warm as possible. There was ice on the inside of the windows in the morning and gosh wasn't it cold on your feet when you stepped out of bed onto the cold lino! Every morning I rushed down to get dressed again as Dad had got up early to make the fire before going to work.

Homes were definitely colder when I was growing up. I had won a goldfish one year at the fair on Southampton Common. It lived in a round goldfish bowl which had to be moved off the front room window sill every evening. One winter's day I forgot and went to bed. Next morning I woke up to find my fish had frozen in the bowl.

The magic was spoilt one Christmas for me when I had a gift of a wonderful pair of red slippers with no toes and backs one year. They were great and I thought I was so grown up, but when I was dancing in front of the fire (we made our own entertainment then), and kicked my leg, one slipper flew off and went into the fire. I was so upset and even though my dad went back to the shop where they had been bought there were none left, so I wore them with a burn mark on until I grew out of them.

Life seemed so simple when I was growing up. Not only did Father Christmas come, and the ice cream man, but a fish man came every Friday delivering fresh fish. A milkman came every day delivering milk in glass bottles, when these froze the silver foil top popped up due to the cream at the top freezing. A bread man also came regularly and brought his bread

round in a wicker basket, I wonder if this had been made by a relation of my dad, Jim Tongs, who sat in his garage on the corner of Hatley Road and Shales Road making baskets.



Jim Tongs basket weaver

When the grocer came mum sometimes bought a bottle of R. Whites lemonade as a special treat and this was put on the cold shelf in the larder. This was a white tiled shelf and somehow we managed to keep things chilled in the summer, but of course it was easier in the winters.

Everyone knew each other then and there were other children my age living nearby and we all played together, in each other's houses and gardens. I remember Susan Stone, Christine and Alison Bunster. Alison was older than us and told us where babies came from, when we were in the garden shed one day. Completely wrong of course, as later I found out the truth!!

Also, Susan Bedford, Wendy Ledley and Jill Doidge (who sadly died some years ago). Jill played the violin and I played the viola. Her parents were music teachers and mum baby sat for her and her brother and sister in exchange for some private lessons for me.

We played simple games, no computers, just skipping ropes, dibs, hopscotch and French skipping. This meant saving my pocket money until I could buy a packet of rubber bands, these were joined together and then two girls put them round their legs and another girl jumped on them. Simple but fun. We didn't spend our lives in front of the television like most of the children do today and I know our lives were richer because of the friendships we made and the simple things we enjoyed together.

Families lived closer together then and I had aunties, uncles and cousins all living locally, whom we visited regularly. Sunday evenings round auntie Beryl's meant dripping on toast for all. I absolutely hated this and was allowed to have Marmite on toast instead. A great treat for me as mum hated Marmite and wouldn't have it in the house! I still love it today.

Even walking to Bitterne shops was exciting. We had to go past the Redcote Convent and the Sisters, I called them Nuns, were always friendly and stopped for a chat. I remember one day going to Mr Payne's shop on the corner of Commercial Street. There were tins of paint and wallpaper books on the counter, but the best thing about going in this particular day

was to collect a kitten, as his cat had just had a litter, a small black and white one, whom we called Mickey.

The other shops in Bitterne I remember were Mr Ball's shop, next door to the post office; it was a wonderful shop with Mr Ball and his wife always dressed in pristine white overalls. There were tins of broken biscuits on the lower front counter, which you could see through the glass lids. It was exciting to choose the biscuits, then see them being weighed out on the shiny scales. Much better than buying a packet off the supermarket shelf as we do today.



It was also wonderful to see the large joints of ham, which were sliced onto paper then weighed out and wrapped. The smell of the shop was one that could never be smelt in a supermarket and sadly our children and grandchildren will never experience this.

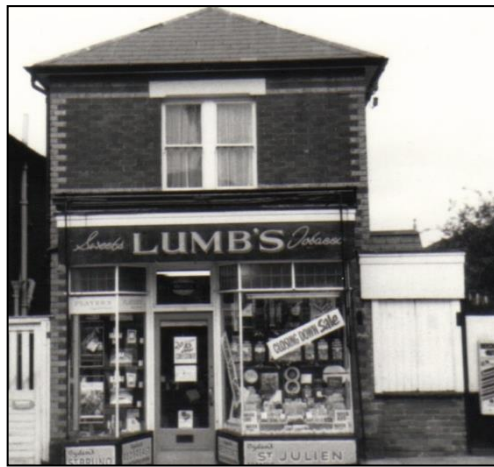
In Mr Milne's shoe repair shop you could watch him repairing the shoes. I remember the shelves where the finished repairs were put in brown paper bags and labelled. You could smell the leather and glue. I always remember in the seventies he sold paper knickers. I never knew why, as they obviously had nothing to do with shoes!

The wooden floor and the way the Home and Colonial Stores were laid out was also a wonder for me. The piles of tins stood high and I was always afraid of knocking them over. I remember the haberdashery store, E W Cross, where a yard of elastic was measured out by a lady from the tip of her nose to the tip of her finger. I was fascinated by this, but when I tried to copy her at home, measuring the same piece of elastic, I found the distance from the tip of my finger to my nose was a lot shorter! The haberdashery items, including hankies, girdles, knickers, vests and other items were on show in a glass display cabinet, which was fascinating to see.

The butcher's was another fascinating place to visit. There was sawdust on the floor and the great big wooden butcher's block, where the joints were cut with a large cleaver and a very sharp knife. The meat was also wrapped in paper and then we paid the lady who sat in a small wooden box.

I loved the smell of the fish shop where all the fish were laid on ice. The smell permeated out of the door and you could always smell it even when passing. I loved it.

The sweet shop owned by Mr and Mrs Lumb was a favourite of all the children in Bitterne. The jars of sweets were all around the walls and there was a counter for chocolate bars. My favourite was Fry's Chocolate Sandwich, which consisted of milk and dark chocolate with white chocolate sandwiched in the middle. Mum's favourite was Fry's Turkish Delight, my grandmother always bought her a box of miniature ones every Christmas and my dad loved Peanut Brittle. Mr Lumb would let you buy an ounce of anything you wanted and it was placed in a small white paper bag. In the summer Mr Lumb sold ice cream from a small addition on the side of the shop. The ice cream was pure white and not creamy, probably made with more ice than anything, but tasted absolutely wonderful on a hot day, when I had just walked home from Sholing Girls School. I have never, to this day, ever tasted ice cream like Mr Lumb's.



Mr Guster's ironmongery was another exciting shop to visit. There were all sorts of items in the shop ranging from screws to china. This shop was the talk of Bitterne when they had a fire in the 1970s. The fire was quite extensive and many items were damaged so they had a sale and there were lots of bargains. I remember spending ages looking to see if I could buy some Christmas presents at cheap prices.

Bitterne didn't only have small village shops. We had Woolworths and Fine Fare. Woolworths was a shop where you could wander round looking at all the different items on display, then take your goods to the till. Quite a different style of shopping from some of the other smaller shops, where you knew the shopkeeper who served you. Fine Fare was Bitterne's first real supermarket. It's strange what sticks in your mind from when you were young. I remember the pillars outside the shop and the opticians next door.

Sainsbury's was quite a revelation when it opened in Bitterne. How it has increased over the years and now has such a monopoly.

When I was three I started going to Bitterne Congregational Church on the corner of Dean Road, one of many buildings demolished to make way for the bypass. Mrs Dawson was my Sunday School Teacher and all the children loved her. We put our pennies for the collection in a box which had a bird on the front and we had to lift up the beak so we could put money in it. While each child did this we would be singing – 'dropping, dropping, dropping, dropping, Hear them as they fall. Everyone for Jesus, He shall have them all'. We had a

stamp which we put in a book every time we went and then received a story book of Jesus when our stamp book was full, for good attendance.

Can you remember the ship halfpenny pieces? We used to collect them and put them in a special package and then the money would be sent to Missionaries, who sailed round the world in ships to help people in the poorer countries.

When we went into church there were long pews from one side to the other, but the small children sat on the front pew, probably to enable the teachers to get to us easily if we misbehaved, we didn't very often as I don't ever remember getting told off at Sunday School.



From left to right

Jill (Abrahams) with friends

Jill Doidge and Christine Bunster.
Harvest Festival at the Bitterne

Congregational Church (late 60s)

I attended church regularly as a child, joining the Junior Choir and practising every Saturday morning. We did shows and concerts and a favourite of mine was the Nativity Play we did every Christmas. One year I was chosen to be Mary. I rushed home to tell mum and dad but dad was being taken off to hospital. I never did get the chance to tell him as he died that day. I found it very hard to be in the Nativity Play that year, but was sure he would have been proud of me as I was very shy.

Mum and I then moved to a brand-new maisonette in Dean Road. Birch Court was named after the Foreman, Mr Birch, who worked on the new buildings.

We had a Youth Club at church - the Seekers. I couldn't wait to join as soon as I was old enough. We enjoyed meeting every Wednesday, but I had to do my homework before I could go. I used to rush home from school and do it straight away, have my tea and run down the road to be there on time. We met in the hall at the back of the church and played games like darts, table tennis and listened to music. There were a group of us who used to walk home together. On the way we would buy chips from the chip shop near the church and do a set route so that the girls could be seen home safely, after this the boys went home on their own. The highlights of the Seekers group would be the trips out and the discos we would have for special occasions - Valentine's Day, Christmas, Easter, and Summer. As you can see if there was any occasion we would have a disco!! We knew they were discos, but were not allowed to call them discos. The church referred to them as social evenings!



Life was simple and I enjoyed growing up in the sixties and early seventies in Bitterne. I had wonderful parents who even though they were older, mum was thirty-nine when they had me, gave me a great childhood, instilling in me a love of life and treasured memories. Although Bitterne was a suburb of Southampton it felt like a village and still had a friendly way of life. I still enjoy living in Bitterne today.

