

## Hum Hole Revisited: some memories

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I've often heard it said that we who were born just after the war lived in a time of austerity, and maybe by the standards of today, we did. However, if you have never known anything different, then there is nothing to compare your life and times with and I, for one, never had any sense of deprivation. With loving parents and plenty to eat, I certainly would not complain - well, not much anyway, and life just got better and better!

One of the wonderful aspects of life as a child growing up in the late forties and fifties was the freedom to roam that seems so sadly lacking for children today. In the school holidays we could leave the house straight after breakfast, only returning for lunch, tea and bed. There was no fear that we would be abducted by paedophiles or, if there was, I certainly wasn't aware of it, although the sex offender is certainly not a new phenomenon.

The nearest place of fascination for me as a child was Brownlow House, right next door to my home at 234 Peartree Avenue, Bitterne. Often as a young child I would stand on our coal shed roof and watch a garden fete held in those grounds, and I have vivid memories of Mrs Bucknill as she swept along the gravel drive in her invalid carriage, past the lodge with its exotic chimney pots and out into Peartree Avenue, surrounded by her collection of cavorting, yelping dogs. These were of various varieties, sizes and colours but I particularly remember a very handsome Red Setter among them.

As boys we were certainly not averse to a little trespassing but wouldn't have dared to trespass in the grounds of Brownlow House. This was because Brownlow Lodge was occupied by Mr and Mrs Burns. Mr Burns was a local policeman. I can't remember now whether he was a constable or a sergeant and would hate to either promote or demote him. He always seemed a rather stern character to me. Although he did tell my father on one occasion that I could climb over the railings in Peartree Avenue early one morning in order to collect conkers from his garden. His wife was always very kind to me. I would often call at the lodge in the summer holidays and she would show me her greenhouse, which was filled with the scent of tomatoes and which also housed her collection of cacti. I was very keen on cacti at the time and had a tiny plastic greenhouse of my own which I kept on the windowsill at home. Mrs Burns gave me little cuttings to pot up. She also took me to visit her beehives on the other side of the drive close to Brownlow Avenue.

When I was a very young boy, Brownlow Avenue was still unadopted and there was a patch of spare land on the corner of Brownlow and Peartree Avenues where I would sometimes play. This was situated just about opposite the premises now occupied by the Bitterne Historical Society. I'm not sure whether this was a bomb site or not but I remember the house that now occupies the site being built in the early fifties.

Freemantle Common was a very popular playground, of course, and it is good that it remains much as it was, although some of the trees appear a little smaller to me now! I spent a lot of time there as a child and the only problem I recall was the quantity of dog mess to be encountered there at that time. There seemed to be many more unaccompanied

dogs around in those days, sometimes roaming in packs. These could occasionally be aggressive and their mess was a constant problem. There were however, other areas where small boys could find adventure in the fifties and which were perhaps more exciting at the time. One such was the patch of land which was later developed as Fine Fare. Once again, was it a bomb site or just spare land? Another was the land on the West End Road, upon which Apollo Place and adjoining houses were later built. Then of course there was Cutbush Lane and the surrounding woods and fields further up West End Road, but the most exciting of all was undoubtedly Hum Hole.

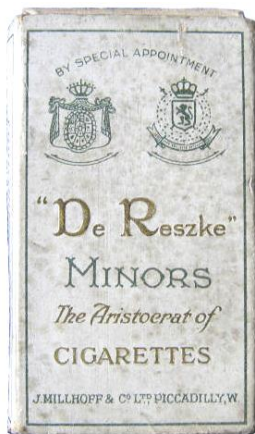
When I returned home after playing at Hum Hole it was invariably with shoes caked in mud or full of water - usually both. I remember so many times crossing the road by Stonier's (later Kendrick's) at the top of Lances Hill to the billboards with their Guinness advert, and making my way down the gravelly, sandy track past tall bracken and blackberry bushes before bearing right, close by the exit to Glenfield Crescent, towards the broken pond. The pond was concrete sided but great slabs had been smashed and lay at angles at the point where a stream exited. The pond was practically empty, with what water that remained, covered in duckweed, beneath which lay deep oozing mud. In the Spring my great school friend Ken Rickards and I caught tadpoles and frogs and in those days there were always plenty of newts of different varieties to be found. One night, just recently, I was thinking of this pond and just for a moment I experienced once more the steamy, buzzing vegetable heat generated by the moisture held within those concrete walls and I was back there in the moment all those years ago. It was merely half a glimpse into the past and, as is the nature of these things, lost the moment I gave this vision my full attention.

I was only dimly aware at the time, of Beechwood Junior School being built, although I know that a number of Bitterne C of E school pupils were transferred there when it opened in January 1953. I do however remember walking with my father the wooded path along the high wire netting fence that marked the boundary of the school around the time of its opening. There were of course several easy ways around the drier perimeter of Hum Hole, but for my friends and me, crossing the centre was the challenge and it required a good sense of balance, for the ground was a swamp where odd spindly saplings grew amongst tufts of reedy grass. The trick was to step determinedly from tuft to tuft without hesitating, for to hesitate resulted in yet another shoe filled with muddy water. Seldom did we make it across unscathed.

Back on firmer ground, on the far side of the swamp, through denser trees, one came upon the dump. It was obviously common practice at that time for some to discard their rubbish down the steep side of Hum Hole; this was situated at the rear of the parade of shops in West End Road, behind what later became Best's Fish and Chip shop. It wasn't just garden waste that was dumped but just about anything. As young boys we were always on the lookout for useful things like wheels of any sort or bike frames but I can't recall finding anything worth retrieving. There was a rumour about the remains of a German aircraft lying there but whether there was any truth in this I don't know, although we did once come across what appeared to our inexperienced eyes to be part of an aluminium engine cowling.

This part of Hum Hole, true to its name, stank in Summer and I remember standing on the lip at one time watching large rats scurrying about amid the rubbish below.

Around the age of ten, Ken and I developed a shared obsession with matches. We would make dens and light candles or small fires in the way that certain boys do. One evening after school we lit a small fire at the dump, which unfortunately swiftly grew beyond our power to extinguish and we were forced to retreat, emerging from Hum Hole at a point further up West End Road. This was at a time shortly before the bungalows were built at Mersham Gardens and we were able to stroll with assumed innocence down West End Road, past the gorse bushes to watch with an equal measure of shame and relief as the Fire Brigade hosed down our handiwork. We didn't do it again!



Instead, we found a new use for our matches in smoking and so started a hobby which in my case lasted for forty years. Little was known of the dangers of cigarettes in the nineteen fifties, or if it was, it was little publicised. Our favourite brand was De Reszke — I don't know why, perhaps we just liked the sound of the name. We would buy a packet of ten De Reszke Minors ("Are they for your father, son?". "Yes".) from one of the numerous tobacconists in Bitterne. and smoke five each, one after the other at Hum Hole. If funds didn't run to ten cigarettes, we would buy four Dominoes in a domino shaped paper packet for sixpence. Each packet had a different domino piece printed on the reverse, which one could collect to make a set. I can't say I really enjoyed smoking at the time. It made me queasy and my fingers smelt horrible afterwards, but it was something that had to be done! I remember an incident one morning in the Christmas holidays around New Year 1957. Ken and I must have become careless about where we lit up. We were standing amid the blackened skeletons of the gorse bushes (recently burned - but not by us) bordering Hum Hole in West End Road, when we were caught unaware by a large policeman who gave us a very stern lecture on the illegality of our actions. This lecture seemed to last forever. He took a note of our names and addresses and made us tear up our remaining cigarettes, which seemed at the time to be a tragic waste, as we'd only smoked one each. Sad to say we remained unreformed, although certainly more careful about where we practised our habit in the months that followed.

I referred earlier to the bungalows built around 1956 at Mersham Gardens, off West End Road. This must have necessitated the felling of a considerable number of mature trees, which presumably were then bulldozed over the edge of Hum Hole, for I well recall coming upon this huge tangle of timber one day and being thrilled by the discovery. It was like one massive climbing frame and offered endless play opportunities. Looking back sixty years I can appreciate how dangerous this play might have been, given the weight of wood and the precarious way in which some of it was balanced.

But time was moving on for Hum Hole, as of course it does for us all. A car park, gravel at first but later tarmac covered, was established in West End Road on the land where previously gorse bushes flourished, but by that time Ken and I had long been separated by the Eleven Plus Examination, and with new friends and interests had inevitably, in our

different ways, ourselves moved on. Yet I had the notion that Hum Hole would remain as it was, as indeed it did, for quite a while. It all changed of course with the building of the bypass which affected so many aspects of Bitterne life. The parkland area which now bears the name is nice enough, in its way but lacks the wildness that made it so exciting to me in those now far-off days. Of course we can all feel nostalgia for the lost places of our youth – I most certainly do. But perhaps it is not so much the loss of place that we mourn, but more the loss of youth itself.