

## **Memories of a Childhood in Slade Green 1969-1979**

### **The move**

Moving to Kent in 1969 must have been as bad as taking the £10 passage to Oz because my mum and gran were so upset at Kirkcaldy train station that I thought I was never going to see my gran again!! Mind you if I had been my mum, I too would have been distraught at the state of the house we moved into on our arrival at Oak Road, Slade Green. My dad had lived for a year already lodging in the Nursery and in Plantation Road to earn the three-bedroom parlour house that he and my mum were to live in until he died in 2017. I think many single women took in the railwaymen as lodgers until the railway allocated them a house so their families could join them. There was rivalry over the two bed non-parlour houses in Cedar and Elm Road and the bigger three bed parlour houses of Oak Road. We were lucky – despite only having two children, we got a three. As many of the Scottish families were Catholics, it was quite common to have six children sharing two bedrooms.

Dad focussed on decorating a room at a time whilst my mum scrubbed it from top to bottom and my brother and I ran up and down the long garden path amongst the three foot weeds shouting every time a train passed (every five minutes or so as we backed onto the busy Dartford/Greenwich line). We were never on a train in Fife despite my Dad having been a driver at Thornton since he joined the railway as a fireman at the age of fifteen.

Our garden still had a concrete coal bunker, which was a great position for peering over the road to see who was walking over to the station and shops. My pal Christine and I spent a lot of our time standing on top of this until one day, whilst dancing on top of it, she fell through the lid, which was not made of concrete but of a much thinner slate. The coal bunker was broken up after that.

My mum was very homesick for Fife for many years. My dad's wages were £17 a week with an extra £3 for the week he worked Sunday. The rent for the house was £5 a week, twice what they paid in Glenrothes. My mum's family thought this was extortionate! They

used to visit for their holidays. Later the railway houses were offered to the tenants to buy at fifty percent less than market price, £17,000. Those that couldn't do this now have to pay rent to a private landlord and those that did purchase them can ask over £300,000 for them.

## **Friends**

I recall being “knocked for” by Isobel from a few doors down very soon after arriving in Oak Road, she introduced me to Christine, who also lived in the road, and was also six years old (the gang had been waiting on my arrival) and that was it, we were lifelong best pals for the next fifty years. Christine was Catholic and one of six children aged 4-14 so I welcomed the large chaotic family life, as it was so different to mine. Christine came on holiday with us to Bournemouth and Scotland and I went with her family to Marizian, where we stayed in a disused train carriage on the beach! The only time we were apart was when we reached 11 and had to go to secondary school. She had to go to St Catherine's Catholic School and I to Slade Green Secondary School, which was later renamed a rather grand Howbury Grange.

I knew every family in Oak Road and if the resident was elderly they knew us by name as we spent the vast majority of our time playing in the road – paldies, hopscotch, French skipping, two balls, kirbie, British bulldog, forty forty. If we became too big a group, one of the older kids was made responsible for walking us over the railway bridge to the recreation park in Whitehall Lane. Here every summer one child would have an accident by falling off the chute (which did seem particularly high) but we did insist on seeing how many could descend at the same time – consequently come September someone returned to school with a stookie [plaster cast] on their arm. One year Christine's sister had two!

## **Slade Green**

The Railway Hotel – I was never in either of the two bars but it had an off licence and Christine's brother's girlfriend worked there. Christine and I collected bottles to get money back to spend on sweets.

The Railway Club – Probably too much time spent in here on a Thursday night by the railway men (wages were paid to drivers in the station on Thursdays). We went on a yearly trip to the coast with the Club and there was always a fireworks display, a kids' Christmas party and a trip to a pantomime.

The Station Master's House – This appeared very grand to me. Trees surrounded the big garden so we could not see into the back of the house but I remember when the front door was open seeing the Station Master's wife on the floor polishing a beautiful parquet floor.

The Community Centre – I assume this was quite a new building in 1969 and only remember my parents going to the yearly Christmas Dance there so I don't think it was used very much by the community.

St Augustine's Church – Seeing that all my pals went to the Wooden Chapel at the top of Bridge Road on a Sunday, I insisted I attend Sunday School with a friend from a rare English family in Oak Road. I only had one dress and when I realised my "Sunday best" would be the same every week, I soon decided I didn't want to go to Sunday School.

School – The old school was still in situ when I started in 1969 but I remember only going into it on odd occasion, our classroom was behind it in a newer building. I had already been going to school for two years in Scotland, I presume I was ahead in reading and writing and I just could not understand why we were told to "play" so much. I did not go to school to "play". I remember I started with one other Scottish boy who never spoke to me again after walking through the classroom door despite our parents being friends until now. If I'm honest I never felt I belonged in school. I was only happy when I was walking home with my pal.

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