

TREVOR BEER'S BOYHOOD MEMORIES OF PILTON

In 2013, the writer and wildlife artist Trevor Beer wrote his memories of life in Pilton where he was born in January 1937. He died in June 2017.

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I lived at 66 The Rock and went to Pilton School from the age of 3½ years. My teacher was Miss Milward and the Headmaster was Mr. Stacey. Other teachers in the school who I recall were Miss Turner, Miss Norman, Miss Hill, Miss Carter, Mr. Hurst (or Hirst).

War ended when I was 8 and in Mr. Hurst's class which was in Pilton Parish Rooms – in the big hall with a stage. He said "the War is over, all bang your desk lids". After the War Mr. C. Dix came on board as a teacher and later, the Head. We received food parcels occasionally, including tinned food and cocoa, from the Americans. American forces were billeted at Bellaire House - the troops gave us chewing gum. At Bellaire House there was a large fireplace in a downstairs room with a push button on one side. When pushed it would swivel the fireplace and one could see into the next room! Is it still there? I remember this well as my mother occasionally helped at the house with the cleaning.

There was a Mrs. Hughes in charge and when no-one was about they used to startle women working in the next room by opening the secret 'wall'.

During the War a few memories stand out. On one summer's day tanks came up Pilton Street and trundled by our home leaving deep indentations in the tarmac on a hot, sunny day. They were not repaired for some time. On another day a platoon of men marched by heading towards Littabourne and the farmland beyond. They had soldiers with them and later we learned they were Italian prisoners of war helping on farms. On one day whilst at school we were out to play when a huge 'airship' floated high overhead. A teacher said it was probably a barrage balloon which had broken loose from its cables.

On another day all the iron railings outside each of our homes were removed "to help make weapons and tanks" we were told. The railings preventing people from falling off The Rock on either side of the road were left and are there to this day, as are the school railings and the churchyard ones. Our home, No. 66, was the last in our row of cottages to have electricity installed. Prior to that we had gas lighting, an oil lamp, candles and Tilly Lamps. Cooking was all done on a Bodley range which also provided the heating. Washing was done in a 'boiler' shared by 3 properties as was the yard, all at the rear - with outside WCs. We had a mangle to 'dry' the washing - my job was cleaning the Bodley Range using 'ZEBO' to blacken and polish it regularly.

I was no good at sport and used to go off to the fields and woods of the Bradiford Valley and Tutshill Woods, via Shearford Lane (which some called Venn's Lane). The former is correct and is such on all the old maps. There I explored and watched wildlife as I do to this day.

The otter hounds were kennelled at No. 3 River View and we used to see them go out on Saturday mornings. At age 8 & 9 I used to take Mr. May's cattle across what is now the main North Road to the fields by what is now Pilton Lawn and the Fire Station. There was hardly any traffic in those days.

There was a Fish & Chip shop in Pilton Street (Furse) and 2 food and general items shops, Gist's at the bottom, and Robin's opposite the Fish & Chip shop. There was also a grocers in Priory Road run by Mrs. Barrow and a Dairy (Jeffrey's) opposite the entrance to Priory Road and Gardens. Billy Lee's Stables were also in Littabourne and I would occasionally help "muck out" and be allowed a ride on one of the horses. Billy Lee lived at the bottom of Pilton Street.

George Huxtable, who lived in Pilton Street, ran a dairy farm in fields along Northfield Lane. He also kept pigs and I used to help him make pig-swill. On Saturday mornings I sometimes rode on his horse and cart delivering milk from door to door. I would dish it out from metal churns using pint and quart size "dippers". Milk back then tasted delicious and made wonderful cream. One of my dens was in his hay barn. Former Barnstaple Mayor, Charles Dart, owned our home and others along the Rock. He would call and collect the rent, riding a bicycle, each week. Our neighbours were Mr. & Mrs. Richards, Mr. & Mrs. Stribling and Mr. & Mrs. Wellington, with Mr. & Mrs. Furse at the far end of the row.

The Army often used Raleigh Park, where North Devon Hospital now stands, as a firing range. It was a huge field with many red ant hills and Large Blue and other butterflies. The Army set up great sheets of steel hanging on a framework with chains then fired at these with Howitzer type guns and machine guns and rifles. We used to watch from the North Road. Raleigh is pronounced "Rawlee" to be correct.

An aircraft crashed one day, flying in low over the fields at Roborough then hitting railings and crashing into Westaway Farm stone wall. People took buckets of sand and soil to put out the fire but the pilot was dead in the cockpit. People took the toughened glass from the smashed cockpit and made rings from it! You can still see the different stonework in the Westaway stone wall where it was repaired. On another day a meteorite crashed beside the road not far from the waterworks near Maer Top. We were taken to see the crater before it was filled in and I remember the site of the hole to this day. Perhaps the meteorite is still there? Or is it held at the North Devon Museum or somewhere else? From outer space, to planet Earth, to Pilton! Wonderful!

One afternoon when I was at Bellaire House whilst my mother was working with Mrs. (or Miss?) Hughes inside, I went to explore the grounds. At a shrubby and treed area a man appeared clad in a leopard skin and holding a club. He said I was to go away as there were dangerous tunnels one could fall into. Was he a ghost, an eccentric resident or an American soldier doing a Tarzan act? Does anyone else recall him? We were always told tunnels led from the Bull Hill area to the Castle Mound in Barnstaple. That means they would have had to go under the River Yeo. This would be quite an engineering feat, or is it just a myth? The Americans asked Miss Dennis of Bradiford House where they could obtain rabbits and squirrels as food. They had a preference for the meat fried, with syrup poured on.