

Selsdon's Winter Wonderland!

Last year we had the Beast from the East, but that was not a patch on the winter of 1947, reputed to be the worst on record. However I cannot remember much about it, other than there was a lot of snow!

My main recollection was that one of my friends, Norman Bray who lived a few doors down from me in Abbey Rd, had impetigo. Why I should remember that, I've no idea. Anyway impetigo is very contagious and so children should be kept away from school. Norman had been stuck at home for a couple of weeks or so, and for a treat and to relieve his boredom, his dad took him up to Selsdon Rec to see the snow.

It just so happened that I was already in the Rec building an igloo and tunnel thru the snow, to get into it. The snow was about 3 foot deep. As you might expect Norman wanted to help me, so he did, and we had a great time playing in the snow. Just in case you should ask, no I did not catch impetigo. No doubt the infectious part of his illness had by then passed.

I don't know if it is imagination or climate change, but we seemed to get more snow back in the 1940 and early 50s. Living on Abbey Rd, which is quite a long hill, it was the hill of choice for the local kids to go sledging on.



Looking up Abbey Rd



An indication of gradient

For much of this period petrol rationing was in force, and even when de-restricted, few people had cars. So a) it was safe to sledge on the road, and b) the roads were not then gritted. So the snow lasted much longer.

Everyone who had a sledge, had one made from scrap bits of timber, perhaps with a bit of old brass curtain rail for runners. I was the exception!

My very best friend was Antony Lennell who lived in Greville Ave at the top of Abbey Rd. Antony's eldest brother, Harry, worked as a bell boy at Selsdon Park Hotel. Guests there were the very wealthy. People who could afford to go on Swiss skiing holidays. One such guest gave Harry a beautiful sledge that had been brought back from Switzerland. Luckily for me, the Lennells were just about to emigrate, or to be a bit more accurate, return to their dad's homeland – Eire! The important bit was that Harry's/Antony's mum gave me the sledge. It was like a racing car against cart horses in our winter sports!

Whilst we kids loved the snow, it was not so much fun for the grownups. My Dad, like most local dads, worked in London. As I have already mentioned roads were not gritted in the 1940s. If it was a lightish snow fall, the weight of a bus full of passengers was enough to provide grip and the driver could ease the No. 64 bus all the way up Farley Rd to Selsdon. With heavy falls of snow, the bus would not be able to make it past Brent Rd where the steepest bit of Farley Rd begins.

You car drivers of today, will probably not be fully aware of these variations in gradient, but when I went to school on my bike I got to know (and still remember) every little change when the road went up, especially that last bit of Farley Rd!

Snow! So my Dad would leave at 6 in the morning to walk to wherever the bus might be able to reach, and get home about 8, having walked in deep snow for the last couple of miles.

And there was poor Emily. Emily was the aged cart horse who every day, sun, rain or snow, had to pull the heavily loaded Express Dairy milk float up Abbey Rd, Ingham Rd and several other hills in Selsdon. No wellie boots for hard working Emily, but she did have $\frac{3}{4}$ inch iron studs screwed into her horse shoes for added grip. I used to help the milkman, and on one occasion saw Emily stumble on thick ice and fall onto her front knees.



Poor, poor, Emily, in a later year she fell when going down the steep Ingham Rd, broke a leg and had to be put down. It was only today, via a chance contact who used to live in Ingham Rd , that I heard this sad bit of news. And just writing about it has brought tears to my eyes. Poor, poor, Emily.

Going into the 1950s, and more road traffic which caused the snow to melt much quicker, our Cresta Run moved from Abbey Rd to the very steep, last 150 yards of Ingham Rd. Too steep for cars to even attempt in icy conditions. And even better still was Littleheath Woods at the top of Ingham Rd. Dodging our way between the trees, this became for us older boys, our slalom course.

I still after 70 years, have a pronounced scar from a sledging incident in those woods. Slaloming in thick snow, between some chestnut coppicing, I nicked a bit sticking up from a coppiced stump. This took a lump out of my thigh.

Fortunately it was so cold that it had a numbing effect and it did not bleed very much. I was thus able to limp home and get it dressed without any real trauma.

Those days were real fun and didn't cost a penny, unlike the fortune of a skiing trip to the Alps!