

Selsdon as a Community 1940/50

We read a lot in today's newspapers about loneliness, there is now even a Government minister for loneliness. How sad that modern society has got like this. When I was growing up in Selsdon I knew by sight all of my neighbours in Abbey Rd and Greville Ave. Probably 90% by name and to speak to, and had been into the homes of about 50%. So what has changed?

A few things, but one major factor is the motor car. Where I now live everyone has a car, including the teenagers over 17 who drive to college in their own motors. I have lived at my current address for 50 years this year, but have never spoken to the majority of my neighbours. Why not? Because they leave their house, jump in the car, and drive off. If I am lucky I might get a wave, and a "Hi!" before they disappear up the road. So what was so different in my Selsdon of the 1940s and 50, and still much the same into the 60s when I moved away?

When I was still in a pram my Mum took me to Selsdon's shops on most weekdays. We met neighbours in the street and had a little chat. In the shops we queued, giving more time for chatting.

By the age of three, and certainly by four, I spent hours outside playing with other boys and girls in Selsdon Rec or out in the street. If it was raining I went to their houses, or they came to mine. By the age of 4 I was helping the local milkman and knocking on customer's doors to collect the payment for the week's milk bill. So my familiarity with Selsdoners expanded to cover more residents and more streets, those covered by Nobby Clark's milk round – Sundale Ave, Benhurst Gds, Elmpark Gdns, Ingham Rd and more.



Above are some of my neighbours from Abbey Rd and Greville Ave at our VJ Day party in the Rec in 1946 (Victory over Japan). Even now, after more than 70 years I can still name the majority of them and remember where they lived.

Note the absence of men, only 5 in the photo, mostly of very mature years, and one grown up teenager. This is because the men folk were still away in the armed forces.

Each person creates a trigger for my memory and tells a story.

The man on the far right, with the dog, was a widower who lived at the bottom of Abbey Rd. I never knew his name but we kids all knew his dog, Patch. Patch was his faithful companion and I am sure that our elderly neighbour, also greatly enjoyed the fun that we got from playing ball with Patch.

And at the end of the next row in front, in the white shirt, is not a man but a grown up youth. His family name was Gibbs and his dad had been in the RAF but sadly got killed very early on in the war.

I nearly forgot. Centre of front row, wearing a Selsdon School tie, is 6 year old me!

There were a lot more of our local neighbours, who for various reasons, were not at this party. For example, Mr Brown of Abbey Rd and his son Jimmy. Mr B was a policeman who cycled each day, to and from his police station on his police issue bicycle. He was on duty, as was Jimmy, another cyclist. However Jimmy's bike was painted red as he worked for the Post Office, delivering urgent telegrams. Not quite as quick as present day e-mails!

The Selsdon community of those times involved not just knowing people, but also helping people. I can give some examples of things that my Mum did, not because she was an exception but only because I knew of them first hand.

Mrs Blagden was our next door neighbour. When her three children were of school age, she returned to work as a Matron at a Croydon hospital. I cannot remember which one because then, there were two, Croydon General, and Mayday. When her three boys came home from school my Mum went in and made their tea and made sure everything was OK until Mr or Mrs Blagden got home from work.

Mr Blagden was very good at making things out wood and had an extensive set of woodworking tools. He in return would make things for us. A new, wooden sink draining board for example, when our original one began to rot. And for me a lovely wooden sword, when with my friends, we took up sword fighting. This was after seeing a film about swashbuckling pirates, starring Burt Lancaster!

There was a very elderly lady living around the corner, in Greville Ave. Eventually she became bed bound. My Mum used to go in, wash her, dress her, feed her and do a bit of dusting etc. After a couple of years the poor old lady died. My Mum laid her out and did all things necessary to make her look nice for when relatives and friends came to the house to say their farewells.

These are but a few examples of the community spirit that was the norm in those times. Of course the war brought people together, but cars, TV, I-pads and the mobile phone have a lot to answer for!

Finally, there may be some amongst you readers who might like to comment on the topics about which I am writing. Or you may also have your own memories of past times in Selsdon. If you do I would be very interested in hearing from you, so e-mail me at des.oldselsdon@gmail.com.