

A Roundhay Childhood

© By Gwyneth Spurr (nee Evans)

Although I was born in Roundhay and have never moved away from the area, I have no real family roots here. My father was born in Bangor, North Wales and, after being orphaned at the age of fourteen, was apprenticed to a nurseryman in Hale, Cheshire. After war service he moved to the seed merchants, Conway's of Halifax where he met my mother who was a florist there. In the early 1920's he came to Leeds to start up a tree and shrub nursery for the Leeds Parks Department on land on Park View Crescent which had previously been used for allotments. After their marriage in 1927 my parents lived in the cottage at the bottom end of what was then the Park Cafe, now The Roundhay Fox. The Park Director's driver lived in the cottage at the other end. The Deputy Director lived in White House in the Canal Gardens and the Director lived at Ramwood on Mansion Lane.

By the time I was born my parents had moved into West Lodge, the oddly-shaped house near the tennis courts which has recently been extended and refurbished (see the picture on the book front cover). We used to call it the threepenny-bit house. One of my earliest memories is of lying in bed on summer evenings listening to the pat-pat of tennis balls on the courts outside my window and later, to the military bands and the gun-fire of mock battles when the Tattoos were held on the arena in the park. I believe that in 1939 a contract had been signed for the Tattoo to be held there for the next ten years but the outbreak of war put a stop to that.

Roundhay Park is, for me, a rich source of happy memories. I imagine that there are not many people brought up in Roundhay who did not share, at some time or other, in the ritual of feeding the ducks in the Canal Gardens and then took their own children - and their grandchildren. Those ducks were so well-fed that the water was covered with floating bread which they loftily ignored. In winter it was a different story and they flocked round anyone likely to have a bag of crusts. I remember some of them having to be released from the ice. Sadly, nearly all the ducks and geese are down on the small lake these days.

There used to be an aviary/zoo in the corner of the Canal Gardens behind the high wall and the bricked-up entrance can still be seen behind the planting. The zoo was very small and was looked after by one of the park rangers, Mr Beattie, who lived in the police cottage on Wetherby Road and I can only remember a monkey and a parrot said to be over a hundred years old. Once there was a vast bank of rhododendron bushes, which can be seen on old postcards, between the water and the wood at the back. The gnarled roots made ideal 'dens' to play in and the wood offered, unofficially, trees to climb, a stream to dam and raspberries to pick. I used to collect baby frogs from the stream to show to my mother but she didn't appreciate my efforts. The wood has been cleared and opened to the public for many years now - all very attractive but not nearly so much fun!

On summer evenings and at weekends the walk between Old Park Road and Prince's Avenue was a popular meeting place and youngsters, mostly on bicycles, would lean on the railings and the wall overlooking the courts causing great inconvenience to passers-by. I did it myself when I was older.

There were very few shops on Street Lane when I was young and my mother had to push me in my pram to shop at the Co-op in Oakwood which was in the same building as the present-day Co-operative Supermarket. I remember being fascinated by the fancy overhead contraption for carrying change backwards and forwards. I also remember my mother taking the old wireless batteries to be recharged at Malin's on Street Lane and the fuss made at the prospect of a fish and chip shop, of all things, on the parade! People were glad of it during the war.

I was told that when King George Vth and Queen Mary came to Leeds to open the new Civic Hall in 1933 we stood at Oakwood and waved flags as they passed by. My mother made the bouquet which was presented to the Queen on that occasion.

The children who lived in the cottages on the park side of Prince's Avenue went to St. John's on Wetherby Road but I started at Roundhay Talbot Road School which was a temporary building put up in 1918 and was known as the Tin School because of its corrugated iron roof. It had a cinder playground and outside toilets.

The school badge had the initials R.T.R. and children often referred to it as Rotten Tinned Radishes. Each classroom had a large coke stove in the corner surrounded by a fireguard which was sometimes draped with damp clothing and it was near this stove that the tin bath containing our morning bottles of milk was put to 'air' in the winter. It was the custom for us to have an afternoon rest lying on the top of our desks and I remember that very clearly as on one occasion I rolled off and damaged my finger. I have the scar to this day to prove it! (Health & Safety?). During my time at the school the new buildings were put up, the first of which was the infant school on East Moor Road into which we all moved while the junior school was built. They were finished just prior to the war. I remember writing compositions about it but they were not about cranes and diggers but about the busy horse and cart. That horse was very popular and very well-fed on the apples children brought him. Once I was playing near the site, where I shouldn't have been, and fell into a large puddle of typical Roundhay clay and went home coated in yellow clay from head to foot.

On the right hand side of Victory Walk, on the path sloping down the arena, there are trees which were planted by schoolchildren for the coronation of King George VI and I remember going with a group to 'help' with the planting. At the bottom of the small ravine, now mostly filled in to make a new rose garden/ Victorian garden, is a stream which comes under Prince's Avenue in a huge pipe. Some of my friends and I dared to look inside but the bravest, mainly boys I think, went right into it.

There was always something going on in the park. Every summer there was a concert party known as the Pierrots on the bandstand which used to be below the Mansion. I was fascinated by it and used to sneak into the park to listen to them. I knew all the songs off by heart and particularly remember 'Oh Johnny, Oh Johnny, how you can love' performed by a diminutive singer called Tiny Ford. On August Bank Holidays there was the Leeds Hospital Gala which was a very big event in those days extending over both Monday and Tuesday with all kinds of entertainment including athletics. I remember Derek Ibbotson, who was a big name then,

running there and a one-legged man called Peg-Leg Pete who dived from a high board into an incredibly small tub. There was always a big firework display set off on the far side of the little lake. There were the donkeys too, looked after by William Stafford, known to all as Donkey Bill. Feeding the donkeys with acorns in the field near the old Lakeside Cafe where they were stabled was another childhood treat.

Before the war the Roundhay Flower Show was regularly held below the big bandstand which, for the duration of the show, served as the headquarters for the committee. My father was heavily involved in the organisation and running of the show and in 1938 was chosen to present a bouquet to the Lady Mayoress at the opening ceremony which was quite a formal occasion then. I wore a white satin dress with pink rosebuds, (7s 6d from Mathias Robinson's), white kid bar shoes, lace gloves and a straw hat and the bouquet, which my mother had made, was nearly as big as I was. The following year, at what turned out to be the last show before the war, the little girl who had been chosen went down with mumps at the last moment and I was asked to do it again. I squeezed into the same dress and my mother took the shoes to be stretched.



A young Gwyneth presents the Lady Mayoress with flowers at the Roundhay Flower Show in 1938.

When war was declared in 1939 it all seemed rather exciting to me, being far too young to understand the implications. For one thing, the schools were closed for several weeks while, we were told, the teachers were helping to prepare ration books. I was very disappointed when my father arranged for me and a friend to have private lessons from a retired headmaster. My father, who was too old to enlist and not fit enough to be in the Home Guard, had to settle for being a Fire Warden. There were some air-raids early in the war and from West Lodge we could hear the commander at the Ack-Ack emplacement at Wellington Hill shouting 'Fire' . I remember standing one evening with my father under the rustic porch wearing a tin hat and listening to the shrapnel raining down through the trees. My mother was horrified! I also remember going off into the park to collect acorns to feed pigs and rose hips for syrup.

After Dunkirk there were lorry loads of exhausted soldiers being driven through the streets looking for billets. The CO's were knocking on doors, but, as we had only two bedrooms, my mother said that she could not take anyone. Later in the day my father came across a group sitting at the side of the road and asked for a couple of men and arrived home with them. What my mother thought I don't know but they were nice young men from Ipswich, only 20 or 21, and they stayed for several weeks. One of them taught me to swim. The very first night the sirens went but, while we trudged across the garden to the old stone hen house which was our shelter, nothing was going to make them leave their comfortable beds! Some of the large houses were requisitioned for billets and convalescent homes. I remember being sent with a basket of vegetables to a home in Old Park Road. Sometime during this period an army wagon was driven through the tennis court wall, demolishing part of it -I don't know if anyone was hurt.

The Park came into its own during the war with the 'Holidays at Home' policy. There were the existing boats on both lakes, tennis courts, a bowling and a putting green, and a maze next to the cricket pavilion and lots of green open space. Every Sunday there were cricket matches on the arena between Jack Appleyard's XI

and a visiting team and there were often well-known guest players.

For at least one year a fair, which usually appeared only at Bank Holidays, stayed for the whole summer. There was also the 'Big Top' which was erected on part of the tennis courts and became something else to keep me awake. This big marquee was one of three or four erected around the city for dancing and it was very popular. Sometimes the Park was so busy that local people couldn't get on a tram! Another thing I must mention is the Open-Air Bathing Pool. It was never called the Lido. My friends and I spent our youth there. We each had a season ticket and marked off every visit and it took us about three weeks to get our money's worth. The big thing then was to try to be first into the pool on the first day of the season in early May. Some boys even went to the length of camping overnight! The Yorkshire Evening Post photographer was always there and we had our photos in the paper more than once. Some of the group are still going strong....and still swimming!

When the war was finally over there was a huge firework display at one of the big houses in Old Park Road to which everyone was invited. In 1946 there was talk of us moving to Red Hall but, instead, we moved to White House in the Canal Gardens. Those park lodges were beautifully situated and very attractive but had no such thing as central heating, insulation or damp proof courses. West Lodge had a bathroom but no inside toilet. In the severe winter of 1947 there was a coal shortage and I remember huddling over a tiny fire wrapped in blankets trying to do my homework. I slept with a bolster down the bed to keep out the draughts while the damp ran down the walls. Perhaps unsurprisingly I contracted rheumatic fever and spent most of that winter in bed emerging in May to find patches of snow still lying around. We lived there until 1955 when my father's health failed and he had to take early retirement and he died soon afterwards. Of course we had to leave and, although we moved only a short distance away, my close connection with Roundhay Park came to an end.



Gwyneth and friends at the opening of the new season of Roundhay Park open air swimming pool in 1946.

From left to right: Helen Williams (nee Saunders), Doreen Daniels (nee Saunders), Gwyneth, and Betty Zoltie (nee Wolfson). Photograph by kind permission of the Yorkshire Evening Post.



The same ladies in 2010, taking it easy!

From left to right: Helen, Betty, Doreen and Gwyneth.