

A Roundhay Childhood - Further Thoughts.

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In my article in Oak Leaves Part 11 - Spring 2011, I was unable to include everything I wanted to write about owing to lack of space, so here are some further thoughts.

Because my father was the Nursery Manager at Roundhay Park he was often approached by people wanting advice about plants and garden design. He had a hand in more than one local garden. Our house, West Lodge, being close to the park, often became a gathering place, especially on summer evenings, for people enjoying a stroll to the park. They would drop in for advice and a chat with my father and the conversation was always about gardens and gardening. The kettle would be put on and some strollers would get no further. One particular tree aroused interest and even strangers would knock on the door to ask about it. It was a Paulownia, a flowering tree with leaves the size of dessert plates. When it eventually had to be cut down my father kept a 2 inch cross-section of the trunk. The wood is extremely light and, years later, I had it sealed and varnished. It still hangs on my wall.

One occasional visitor was the blind botanist John Grimshaw Wilkinson. He had started life as a grocer but turned to botany after becoming blind at the age of 22 following an illness. He was very well known in Yorkshire and gave advice on the planting in several Leeds parks. In 1915 his work was recognised by Leeds University when he was awarded an Honorary MSc degree. John Hillaby, in his book 'Journey Round Britain', writes "Old Wilkinson, one of the best botanists in Yorkshire, was blind, a strange, knowledgeable man who could name any plant by running his fingers over the stem and leaves. Sometimes he smelt them." He also used the tip of his tongue to check the texture of leaves. On shaking hands with my mother he commented on her new gloves and knew immediately when our dog entered the room. Wilkinson died in 1937 so I was only young when I met him but I remember that he called what we usually call dahlias (dayle ya) "darlias"; logical I suppose as they were named after the Swedish botanist Andreas Dahl.

I do not really know what brought Kenneth Sanderson to our house but, again, the connecting link was surely gardening. I remember him wearing a long black overcoat and a hat and he wore a heavy leather glove on one hand which I think concealed a false hand. Kenneth had a large collection of 18th century costumes, accessories and toys which was bought by Leeds City Council in 1949. The costumes were on display at Lotherton Hall until recently and still belong to Leeds City Museum.

Snow figures quite largely in my early memories. It often snowed on or around my January birthday and on one such occasion when my godmother was visiting it began to snow very heavily and cars were abandoned on Prince's Avenue. Auntie Hilda insisted on trying to get home to Halifax so my father set off to see how far the trams were getting and met them at Harehills. He walked back home and then escorted Auntie down to Harehills, saw her safely on to a tram and then trudged back home again - all in heavy snow. I don't think she ever visited in January again.

Getting to and from school in the snows of 1947 is another memory. Our school never closed unless the boiler broke down and we were expected to get to school in whatever way we could. Walking was the only option for most of us but, by and large, we got there!

Before the war it was the custom to have inter-park cricket matches. Usually they were against local parks but I remember going to Warter Priory on one occasion. My father was no cricketer but was sometimes roped in as an umpire. The Roundhay pitch was on the Soldiers' Field, with the pavilion roughly where the new children's playground is now. In those days every pitch had its own pavilion although 'hut' would be a better name for it. Probably because she lived the nearest, Mrs Garbutt, the Park Ranger's wife, was in charge of teas and every match-Saturday afternoon a large tin bath loaded with cups, saucers, tea and sugar was carried down to the field. There must have been an urn in the Pavilion but, however it was done, tea was produced.... and biscuits of course.

The Roundhay Flower Show was known in pre-war days as 'the Chelsea of the North' and was a very dressy occasion. Although

I don't remember it I know that I was taken in my pram to my first show at the age of 6 months. I have missed only a handful since then in all its forms. The show attracted most of the big trade growers in the country in big marquees.

There were also outdoor rock gardens and displays. I remember the floral decoration tents and the special displays put on by amateur growers, especially the wonderful delphiniums shown by Scorrah Wainwright. My overall favourites were, and still are, the trade tents, and in particular, the rose tent, (proper canvas tents then) with their wonderful overpowering perfumes and distinctive humid atmosphere, especially when empty of people. When the show restarted after the war we all renewed our interest. My mother exhibited in the floral art section and I actually won a third prize in the same section. I also acted as a steward and the photo below shows me with Monica Ford, both of us wearing our stewards' badges. Monica is the little girl whose place I took at the Opening Ceremony in 1939 when she had mumps.



In the 1930s my mother was a member of the Women's League of Health and Beauty founded by Mary Bagot Stack whose belief was that synchronised exercise in the open air would empower women to renew their energy and make a better world and I

watching my mother and her friends, in white blouses and black knickers, exercising on the arena on summer evenings.

During the war there were often unexpected events taking place in the park to which we were invited. These included rehearsals for the Tattoo, a performance on the arena by the band of the Green Howards, the famous Yorkshire regiment, and a baseball game put on by American soldiers. The spectators watched in relative silence and had to be encouraged to shout and cheer in the American fashion.

I believe another informal form of entertainment was enjoyed during the long, light evenings of what was referred to as 'double summer time'. This consisted of sitting on a bench near the park gates and watching people, usually young couples, rushing out of the park to catch the last tram!

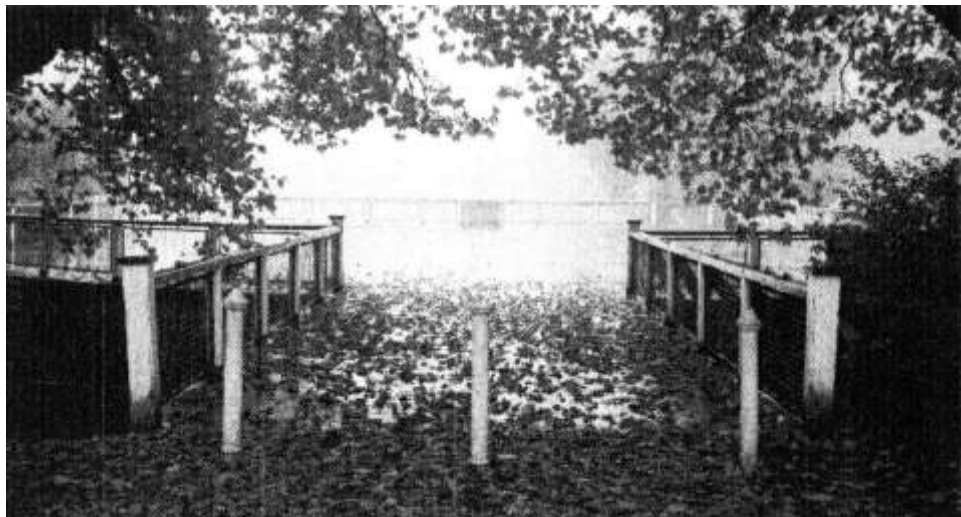
I must mention Children's Day as I was taken to task for not writing something about it last time. This important annual event lasted from 1922 until 1963 apart from the war years. Its history has been well documented. Although I watched it many times I never took part in it myself but I do remember, and this must have been before the war, seeing the decorated lorries from the procession parked up in the nursery on Park View Crescent. In the words of a friend of mine who has lived in Roundhay almost as long as I have, "It was an exciting day out. Picnic on Hill 60, noise and colour, crowning the queen etc. It was the whole city and every walk of life that took part. Real community spirit." I think that sums it up perfectly!

When The Roundhay Fox opened a few people who had had close connections with the Park were invited for a complimentary meal to mark the occasion. A novelty for me was to sit in the part of the Fox which had been my parents' cottage in the 1920s. I went along with my daughter and it was interesting to meet people I had known when we were children but hadn't seen for years. Jack Agar and his wife, Alma, nee Benn, had both lived in cottages behind the Fox. I think Alma's father worked for the Gilpin family and lived in Mansion Hotel Cottage and Jack's father started out as a carter and became a lorry driver after the demise of the horses. His mother, Nellie, was a dressmaker and made my

wedding dress in 1954.

I rememberroller skating on the top of the boathouse
(see the photograph below)

.....gathering water cress from the stream in the Gorge.....



Riding on the back of the Park Director's Labrador, Bruce, in the garden of Ramwood.....being taken by my father to see fox cubs playingthe acrid smell of the coke stove in the greenhouse in the Nursery which my father had to tend twice a day, even on Christmas Daytrying to walk round the boarding surrounding the bowling green without falling off while my father played bowls..... and flying down through the park on our bikes early on Sunday mornings before the Rangers were about (no cycling allowed in those days) to swim at the open-air pool to the sound of bells from St. John's Church. Happy days!

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