Growing up next to Newbold Verdon 'Reccy' in the 1960s

Introduction

Children and adults who grew up in the village will all have their favourite memories and stories of playing in the 'reccy'. If you were a boy, then its where you scored your best goals and got your first century at cricket. And if you were a boy like me then it is where some things happened that still stick in the memory more than fifty years later.

So here is my little 'pot' of memories from someone who was still waiting to start school when the 60s began and a teenager by the time they ended.

Early memories and long summer evenings

I was two years old in 1958 when we moved to 28 Dragon Lane, a two-bed bungalow built on a plot donated by my grandfather from part of his garden at number 24. The hedge separating us from the reccy ran just a few feet from my bedroom window. In the long summer evenings when I was supposed to be sleeping, I could hear older children playing and talking. Worse still was when the fair came to Newbold and setup in the field. By standing on my windowsill, I could see the flashing lights and hear the rides spinning round.

> *'Aren't you asleep yet and what are you doing out of bed?'*

I remember reluctantly getting back into bed but wishing I could join in the fun.

Frozen in Time

The winter of 1962-63 is one that sticks in my mind. Records show that this winter ranks as the coldest in England since 1740 and so it came as a shock to most villagers (including us) who still relied on coal fires to keep warm and were yet to get central heating.

The oft repeated tales of milk bottles freezing on doorsteps and pushing up their little silver tops became a daily occurrence. Frost covered the inside of most bedroom windows; it did not melt even when the sun came out. The snow that fell on the reccy was of the fine, powdery variety. It blew onto Dragon Lane, making a long drift that was impossible not to play in on your walk to the school gates.

The cold lasted many weeks and was followed by a short, rapid thaw. A welcome relief for some but a nightmare for many when they suffered burst pipes. At one point water was pouring onto the reccy from the bungalows on Mill Lane and it collected into a sizeable pond behind the Baptist Chapel. This quickly froze solid when the frost returned in February. So, for the next few weeks, we had our very own 'ice rink' in the corner of the reccy. Of course, no one had any ice-skates, but I do remember have competitions to see who could slide the furthest.

Swinging Sixties

Two play areas were originally set up in the reccy. One opposite the school gates had very tall swings, a slide and a roundabout. A second area was set aside in the far corner of the reccy with smaller swings and a seesaw for young children.

At first, I was consigned to the little play area but gradually my friends and I migrated to the 'grown-up' swings. Being so close to the school gates it was a natural place to congregate after lessons were over and of course to 'show off' our skills on the various equipment. This involved some activities that looking back were exceedingly dangerous!

It became common to have two riders on each swing – one sitting down and a second standing up. Working together it was possible to get the swing going incredibly high – 'level with the bar' was the description we used. As if this wasn't risky enough, one or two boys decided to show their 'courage' by deliberately running under the path of a swing when it was being ridden high. This required precise timing of the run to avoid the swing on its way back and unsurprisingly the inevitable happened.

I vividly remember a scream as one girl on the swing was catapulted off by the impact, landing in a thorn hedge. The boy who mis-timed his run was covered in blood and the whole scene was chaos.

Fortunately, a certain Mr Clinton, the school deputy head, had also witnessed the 'accident'. He came running across to attend to the various injuries and soon had the situation under control. Those who remember Benny Clinton will not be surprised to hear that a very stern lecture was given to all concerned.

Flying High

Youngsters nowadays will be used to seeing drones flying around. In our day, it was kites and, very occasionally, someone would turn up with a model aircraft.

There was period when kite flying became a bit of a 'craze'. Homemade kites were crafted from canes and brown paper. It required skill to make one that was balanced and strong enough to cope with a stiff wind. But those that did could easily outperform the plastic 'Telstar' kites from Woolworths. If you had an uncle in the shoe factory, it was possible to get a large reel of strong thread originally designed for stitching soles to uppers. When the wind was just right, the kite would fly so high that only a small 'dot' was visible. All fine of course until the tail fell off and the kite spun out of control, leaving a huge length of string draped over trees and houses.

Model aircraft powered by small engines were occasionally brought into the reccy and they always generated much interest in my group of friends. This was before the days where radio control was available or at least affordable. Some models were attached by wires to an operator with a control 'handle'. These models had to fly in circles as the operator pivoted round so after a while, it became rather boring to watch despite their speed and power.

Then one day a boy turned up with a 'free flying' model powered by a petrol motor. He was rightly nervous about flying it in the reccy since once released who could guess where it might land. The (joint) decision was taken to put a just few drops of fuel into the tank and set the rear rudder so it would naturally fly in a circle. The first flight was brilliant; the plane rose to tree hight and proceeded to fly an almost perfect circuit round the reccy. Then, as it finished its lap, the motor began to stutter as it ran out of fuel. Finally, it made a perfect landing just a few yards from us.

For the second flight we all decided that we could put a lot more fuel into the tank. Afterall, we had 'proved' that we had the right settings so why not see it do two or three laps? Once again, the plane majestically took to the sky and at first all seemed well. However, it soon became clear that it was rapidly gaining height where it began to catch the upper breeze. By the third circuit only those with the sharpest vision still see it and they were sure it was now heading away from the village. We all looked at each other and shook our heads. It was gone and I don't think it was ever recovered.

How's that?

Having a game of cricket in the reccy was one of my favourite pastimes. Not that I was a particularly skilful batter, but I could bowl a decent over and this mixture of sport and relaxation on summer's day was hard to beat (and still is).

During the 1960s, the village was lucky to have several good cricketers and so it became the summer holiday norm for us to have a 'test match' (or two) in the reccy. In my day the two captains were Trevor Bates and David Squires. We would meet up on the first morning and the captains would pick their squads one by one so that you knew exactly where you stood in the 'pecking order'.

After the toss, the batting side would settle on the seats under the tall trees in the Rectory gardens. The captains would keep score in an exercise book until their turn to bat when the responsibility would be handed on – usually to me when playing in Trevor's team.

This was the time when the first large portable radios became common. If a 'real' test match was on we would listen to John Arlott describing Geoff Boycott batting or Fred Trueman bowling. But if not, then most likely it would be radio 'Caroline'. We would break for lunch and tea and of course for drinks. My job was always to go and buy the 'jubblies' – large ice lollies that were flavoured with a splash of orange juice but were perfect on a hot afternoon. Sometimes the older villagers would come along to watch, pass on their tips for batting and say how nice it was to see 'us youngsters' playing a 'proper game'.

Kick around goes 'flat'.

Most evenings we would have a 'kick-around' with a football in the reccy before going home for tea. Normally, nothing of note happened. We did however have a tendency to play rather close to the wooden railings that bordered Dragon Lane – this being long before the current high fence was erected. In fact, being lazy, we used the fence as a 'backstop' should we score a goal. Now occasionally the ball would go over the fence and roll onto the road but no matter- traffic was much lighter in those days.

On this particular day, one of my friends (who I won't name), turned up with a brand-new leather football – a much-prized possession. We immediately put aside our old plastic ball and relished playing with this beautiful new one. After a few minutes, I received a pass and shot for the goal. I distinctly remember that the ball just caught the top of bar of the fence, bounced up and slowly dribbled across the path and on to the road. I was already half over the fence when I saw the double-decker bus coming. The ball went between the front wheels (phew) but then wedged directly under a rear tyre. What happened next was a shock to all of us – including the passengers on the bus. Being so new and strong the ball lifted the wheel several inches off the ground before it exploded with a huge bang. Fortunately, the driver just carried on and I was left to pick up the remains – a brand-new ball that was now truly 'as flat as a pancake'.

Oh dear – I'm feeling guilty again 57 years on!

Boys will be ….

Another kick-around, this time on a soggy Saturday afternoon. Why should I remember that? Well, we were soon joined by a friend dressed in his weekend best – an immaculate white shirt with a brand-new suit.

> 'I'll just watch for a few minutes – my sister just got married and we're waiting for the 'Stute' to be ready.'

The 'Stute' being the 'Institute' or the Miner's Welfare Hall where many couples held their celebrations after their wedding service. For the first few minutes David stood watching us, carefully tapping the ball back if it came towards him. But the urge to join in was just too strong. Soon he was sliding-in and tackling with the best of us.

Another half hour quickly passed by, and someone mentioned he might need to go back to join the party.

> 'Oh yeah, I'd better get going'.

You can imagine that by this point he was not quite so 'immaculate'.

Now I'm wondering – when were the wedding photos taken?

Ghosts in the reccy?

My grandfather Frank Hill managed the Miner's Welfare for a several years in the mid-sixties. He put on a full schedule of weekly entertainment including dancing, bingo and a film night. I remember seeing the early Bond films, standing for the National Anthem and finally 'sneaking off' for a last meet up with friends in the now dark reccy.

Around 1970, there was a spate of Hammer Horror films released starring Christopher Lee as Count Dracula. One of these (I don't remember which) was put on at the Stute and it caused the usual 'screams' from the audience. But after it finished and we were outside chatting, there were 'rumours' that 'something is going on in the reccy'.

Of course, I had to investigate, and once in the field I could hear what sounded like 'moaning noises' and then more screams from the fence near the rectory gardens. A closer look provided the answer. Someone was dressed in white sheets with torches held underneath. Then, as the already nervous film goers made their way home, the ghost would rise, turn on the torches and start wailing. Quite an end to their 'night of terror'.

Wonder who that was under the sheets?

Who's the fastest?

In 1972 the world's best cyclist came to Leicestershire. Even more exciting was that the road-race course came up Dragon Lane and alongside the reccy! And not just once since the full race required many laps of a relatively short circuit that took in the Kirkby Mallory racetrack.

This meant I could see my Belgian hero, Eddy Merckx, leading the pack from my own front garden! In the middle of the race, we started to 'lean in' from the roadside as the main group of riders approached. At one point, my friend John needed to be pulled back to stop what could have become a 'front page accident'. Alas Eddy didn't win the road-race, probably since our local hills are hardly a match for the French Alps!

A little aside happened a few days before the race. Several competitors were observed on training runs around the course prompting us to 'hatch a plan'. The idea was to try to overtake one of these riders by catching them 'unawares'. We knew we could only match their pace for a very short distance, so we picked a slight downhill stretch on the Bosworth Road. As our 'victim' passed us we shot out of a concealed farm gate. With 'maximum effort' I just managed to edge ahead.

Of course, as soon as we were spotted, the professional rider sped away from us laughing and shouting something in Italian which I guessed I could probably translate.

Fireworks

I can't end my little series without mentioning bonfire night. Not that I remember ever seeing an organised display in the reccy, but rather it was the 'backdrop' for the days when most families lit a fire and set off a few fireworks.

From my vantage point in our back garden at 28 Dragon Lane, I could watch the fires light up, one by one, along Preston Drive. Then it would be our turn to 'get started'. Now the rockets would shoot up and release their stars across the reccy which had a steady orange glow from all the surrounding flames.

By the end of the evening a fog would form from all the accumulated smoke. It would drift across the field gradually hiding the last of the smouldering fires. The next morning, I would search the reccy to track down where some of the fireworks landed. Then, with expired rockets recovered, that was it – until the next year.