**Bluebell Woods**

**By Dave Taylor-Jones**

I suppose it was when I started to work as a paper boy at Farr’s News Agency at Carpenders Park in about 1956 that I noticed they sold maps of our area. I had been interested in maps ever since joining the Scouts, so I bought one and discovered the little stream which flows secretly under the parade of shops on St. Meryl Estate was called the “Ickle”. I have now learnt it is called the “Hartsbourne Stream”, so maybe the Ickle was a local name – I actually prefer it, so I shall use it in this essay. This stream begins somewhere above the Five Fields on the higher land at Bushey Heath and captures rainwater run-off from the fields of Brazier’s Farm and then ducks under Oxhey Lane.

Back then, in the 1950s, it flowed through a wood that was next to Highfields, before this area of land was changed to become one of the biggest cemeteries in North London. On this side of the lane the Ickle ponded into a shallow lake before cascading on over a small waterfall. The Ickle (and it is quite small!) then slips down through bluebell-carpeted woods to the bottom of Harrow Way to pass under the parade of shops at Carpenders Park.

In the 1930s when Mr Absalom had planned out St. Meryl Estate, it must have been decided to cover the Ickle so that the parade of shops and roads could be built over it, for just before the shops the Ickle disappears into a dark rectangular culvert for about 50 metres and emerges on the other side of the road that leads to the station.

After this, the stream meanders down to the railway and passes under the embankment and flows onto the Golf Course side to eventually join the River Colne near Rickmansworth, which itself joins the Thames south of Uxbridge. If a boy was to pee into the stream, as boys do, his water would follow this course and end up in the sea at the mouth of the Thames.

The Ickle, had always intrigued my brother Steve and me. With the Rowe boys from two doors up the road, we explored it in about 1952. We found a little path, which I expect people from Harrow Way had made to walk their dogs, and ventured into the woods. We found a woodpecker’s hole neatly drilled into a tree and saw a kingfisher flash by. About half a mile further on we came to the waterfall, into whose top crevice a crude tin boat was lodged. It was as though a long time ago someone had used the lake to try and float a home-made boat. But the boat was not really a boat, and we felt a strange foreboding atmosphere about the place, at least that’s how it seemed to our impressionable young minds. Someone said they saw something move in the wood’s depths so we all took fright and ran back down the path towards the safety of the shops. Looking back now it was as though we had been able to take a glimpse into the past and seen something that still haunted this ancient woodland area. Of course it fascinated us.

A year or so later, in the summer, Steve and I saw a film at Saturday morning pictures about an adventure in Africa where explorers were forced to wade up a river in the jungle – it looked really exciting. Our only “river” was the Ickle, so crossing the allotments at the bottom of Harrow Way, taking off our shoes and socks, we waded in. We started walking up the stream bed which was only about three inches deep and covered in smooth pebbles. A man could have jumped between the banks, but the stream was cut into the clay to a depth of two to three feet, so boys would be more or less hidden. In the summer you could see tiddlers swim in the clear water and frog spawn was collected by the children of St. Meryl School for their nature lessons. It wasn’t Africa, it was Carpenders Park, but I’ve always had a strong imagination.

The people who owned the houses that backed on to the stream from Harrow Way had built fences to terminate their land before it ended in the stream and someone had made a little opening in their fence bottom through which ducks could leave their garden and enter the stream. Wading past this we squinted in to try and see the ducks but there weren’t any. I asked Steve why the ducks didn’t just swim away up the stream and escape? I found the answer to my question when I caught my shin on some barbed wire fixed under the water. It was a nasty gash and it bled a lot, so it was back home for us. We wouldn’t be discovering much else that day.

What remains strongly lodged in my memory is that the wood was just wonderful in the spring time when its floor was covered in bluebells. They would stretch in a light blue carpet as far as you could see, contrasting wonderfully with the dark tree trunks. Their smell was a light delicious scent. Bluebells send down deep roots into the leaf mould and appear as a green swathe covering the ground in about March. They need light in order to flower so they grow best under deciduous trees like beech and oak, and show their magic carpet of blue blooms at the end of April or beginning May, just before the trees get their leaves. People from St. Meryl Estate would gather them and come back with their arms full, something that you are forbidden to do now. They must have been growing in this wood for centuries to have spread like they had.

When we grew older the wood and the land that are contained by both Oxhey Lane and Little Oxhey Lane was zoned for a change of use to become a Cemetery. A stout wooden fence was erected around the entire plot and secure entrance gates installed in Oxhey Lane. The lake was cleaned and enlarged and the waterfall improved and a nice little bridge constructed below it. You could walk down a neat gravel path to another new entrance, made for people who came by train to Carpenders Park station. In fact a peaceful area for mourners was created in what before had been a part of the countryside. It took some time to construct all this, and for several years the cemetery was not really in full operation – you hardly ever saw anyone being buried there or mourning their lost loved ones. The folks from St. Meryl Estate still used to walk up the path and visit their bluebells in the spring time, just like in previous years.

Steve and I didn’t like this change so we continued to enter the property by climbing over the fence. Here would see different birds than those we spotted in the spinney behind our house including doves, magpies, jays, wood pigeons, a heron, spotted wood peckers, and kingfishers. We also noticed that a man had now been employed to be a caretaker and groundsman. We always saw him before he saw us, for we knew he would object to our being there, so we kept well clear of him when cutting through to go to the fields on the other side of Oxhey Lane. But the “Cem”, as we called it, was now forbidden territory, which of course made it even more attractive.

St. Meryl Estate had been built just before the Second World War and in the 50s it was not completely finished. At the top of Harrow Way the road ended in a little copse, on whose edge a farmer used to build a big haystack every summer. Compton Place should have really joined Harrow Way at its top part but that too ended in the little copse. When you look on old maps there is a wooded area called GibbsCouch Plantation exactly where this copse stopped the roads from continuing, so maybe some ancient law prohibited construction on GibbsCouch at this time. It was only ten years after the end of the war that both roads were completed and Harrow Way joined into Little Oxhey Lane and Compton Place connected to Harrow Way. New houses were built on these roads and the estate’s private roads, which were in lamentable condition, were taken over by Watford Rural District Council and repaired and resurfaced. The same extensions and improvements were made to other parts of the estate where new bungalows were built and sold.

My brother Steve developed an interest in hunting, well, really shooting a 4.10 rifle at pigeons and squirrels, with his classmate Dan, whose Dad was a farmer in Merryhill Road, Bushey. They used to spend their Sundays touring the fields, Dan with his 12 bore, Steve with Dan’s 4.10, mostly in the pouring rain. I suppose it was inevitable that Steve would want a gun of his own, but there was no doubt that neither my Mum nor our step father would allow it. However, Steve bought an air rifle from someone in his class at school and hid it in our attic, so that they wouldn’t find it.

In fact, although there was only eighteen months between Steve and me, when he was fourteen, I think he thought I was still a kid, which to be honest I still was, so he did not tell me either. Our parents had built a room in the roof of our bungalow and there was a small door in the side wall which gave access to the water tank. It was in here that I found Steve’s secret, pushed under the bedroom floor between the ceiling joists. I waited to let him know about it because I had discovered another of his secrets too.

One day I was staring out of the dormer window of our bedroom onto a rainy garden when I turned back to the room and noticed something odd, secreted in the back of an old radio we had picked up at a Scouts’ jumble sale. These radios were operated by valves that used to get hot, so the back panel of the radio was in cardboard with slotted ventilation holes. Pressed against this back, clearly visible against the grille, were some books. I opened up the radio to discover “The Woman of Rome” by Albert Moravia, and a couple of other rather “hot” looking books. I held up one book by its spine and the pages swung open at a favourite spot and so I could read the sexy bits which Steve enjoyed when I was not there, “His hand caressed her silken knee…” etc.

I decided I would let him know that I was not as young as he thought and knew about his secrets. So that is why he let me go with him in the school Easter holidays when his school friend came over to visit, bringing his air pistol too. Steve decided that we would all go shooting on the Five Fields, like he and Dan did at the weekends. We nipped through the Cemetery, easily avoiding the groundsman, crossed Oxhey Lane and entered the fields. I was dying to have my turn with the rifle, but did not want to shoot any birds, so I just shot at a fence post.

Air rifles work by compressing a spring when you break the barrel to reload. This in turn compresses air which is released behind a little lead 0.22 pellet when you pull the trigger and shoot the gun. It’s not very dangerous unless you use specially shaped pellets – we only had simple round shaped ones. These were not enough to kill a large bird, only a very small one like a sparrow.

Anyway we messed around a bit and then came back through the Cem by climbing over the fence on Oxhey Lane. I was behind Steve and his friend, who were probably talking about girls or motorbikes, when all of a sudden from out of a bush jumped the groundsman and grabbed Steve by the arm.

“’Spose you thought you were being clever coming in here, did’ya? ‘Spose you thought I hadn’t seen you? Well I’ve got you now and I see you’ve guns and have been hunting on this land. That’s against the law. I’m calling the police to charge you,” he blurted out.

Sliding carefully behind some rhododendron bushes, I hid myself and watched through the leaves. Steve and his mate were marched off to the office near the lake and the police called. I guessed that Steve would know there was nothing I could do, so taking a circuitous route I scarpered back home and waited. About an hour later a policeman called at our house with the boys and their air guns. Mum was livid with Steve. He received a right dressing down, from both her and our step-father. The gun was confiscated and sold. I was sworn to secrecy by Mum not to mention the incident to anyone at school or at Scouts.

A summons was received for Steve and his friend to appear at Watford Magistrate’s Court for illegally using firearms in the Cemetery property. Steve felt really bad about letting his friend down, and letting Mum down too. For a few weeks a period of gloom settled over us both, because I was included in all this by association.

But after some time the atmosphere lightened when the parents of Steve’s friend telephoned to say that they had taken a solicitor to represent the boys at court. Both parents agreed to split the legal costs.

In the end Steve and his friend went to a hearing at court but never had to appear before the Magistrate because the case was thrown out on a technicality found by the solicitor. Air rifles are not firearms apparently, so the case was dismissed. Quite right too, they had actually not done anything wrong, had not fired their guns in the Cemetery and the over-zealous groundsman should just have given them a ticking off for climbing over the fence and explained that Cemeteries are not a place for children to be without their parents.

So time passed, the kids grew up and the parents grew old. What have not changed and appear in all their beauty every year, no matter what, are the wonderful bluebells growing next to the Ickle/Hartsboune stream flowing through these ancient woods.

St. Blaise, April 2016