

A Special Place

John Ellis 2004

My earliest memories of Wheatfen are of the move from Brundall in the early part of 1945. Dad left us the day before to travel round with the furniture van. It was not wise to leave a house empty at that time for fear of it being taken over by squatters.

The strongest memory of that time is of the smell of the place, not unpleasant but musty and strange. There was no light in the evenings except from paraffin lamps and cooking was done on a stove with two burners, over one of which the oven could be placed. Water was pumped by hand with a semi-rotary pump in the kitchen, from the shallow well to the tanks in the roof of what was taken over by dad as his den. We all had to take our turn. We pumped till the water came out of the spout of the overflow, poking out of the slope of black tiles on the roof.

Mum had a hay box, a later version of which still remains as a toy box in the kitchen today, in which the porridge used to sit overnight, slowly cooking in the residual heat. Heat was not really a word that you could associate with Wheatfen in those days. Nothing but a couple of open fires fuelled by wood which had to be cut, split and carried out by hand. They were certainly not as well fed as today's, and not lit till the evening! Duvets had not crossed the channel and cold damp sheets and heavy blankets had to be propped up by the knees for some time before contact with the rest of the body could be borne.

The woods, marshes and waterways were places to roam free and were full of adventure. Frogs were everywhere. The first visit to Mystery Pool was in a summer shower, and I still have vivid memories of the surface clad in upturned tintacks - all part of the mystery. Summer were trips to the bathing place with gaggles of school friends, now a very muddy passage and difficult to envisage as a swimmers paradise. Autumn was wigwams in the wood.

The navy called and I became a visitor, propped up by letters from mum and a last long gaze, at the end of a leave, over the marshes and broads from the top of the tree above the Machane, in those days a privileged climb up from the platform, only to be performed by the young. A special place.