

## **Memories of Poplar Road, by Peter Urquart**

At a dinner party with Gordon and Rosemary Lindsay at the end of 1966, we thought about moving from Liverpool to Birkenhead. My parents had moved to Brancote Road in the mid 50s; so I had got to know Birkenhead. We saw Braehead advertised in The Daily Post and on the Monday we rang the estate agents and said we were interested. They had already had a number of offers but it turned out fortunately that my father was a friend of the owner George Nixon - they drank together at the old Talbot. We bought the house for £8200. Our neighbours in Beechwood were Norman and Nancy Ward. Norman was a solicitor in Hamilton Square. They had 2 children, Jennifer, married to Simon Standage, a well known violinist, and Susanna. The previous owner was the Chief Constable. Birkenhead was of course a County Borough and had its own police force, transport system etc. The Chief Constable had a special air raid shelter built in the garden.

On the other side was Fernleigh, owned by Mrs Jager and her maid Kate. Mr A.H.T.Crosthwaite, a chartered accountant and company secretary of L.S.Dixon & Co paper merchants, lived in a flat in Fernleigh. Mr Crosthwaite's father had been a County Court Judge. Three of Mrs Jager's daughters lived close by. One lived in South Bank and two lived in Poplar Road, Molly married to Eric Goldsworthy, a solicitor employed by Unilever, and Charmian married to Paul Piper who worked for the Royal Insurance. The tennis court at the bottom of our garden was much used by the Jager family.

In Cedar Bank lived Herbert Penn and his wife. Mr Penn was the son of Will Penn a well known painter. He was a director of Tysons the well known Liverpool building company. The beams in his loft were reputed to have a high polish. They moved to Broadway in the Cotswolds and the house was then owned by the Woollams. John was the former Conservative M.P. for West Derby and a partner of Tilney, Syngé, Parr and Rae stockbrokers.

At the back of our house is Hope Lodge, clearly an older building. This was owned by Professor Frank Walbank. He was the Professor of Ancient History at Liverpool University and like me a graduate of Peterhouse Cambridge. He had a photograph of himself in a rowing eight with the actor James Mason in the crew. Moving down Poplar Road, next to the Goldsworthys, lived the Mr and Mrs Wrench. Mr Wrench was a solicitor and a partner in Lowndes & Co in Liverpool. In the row of terrace houses lived Harry Wood, an architect partner of Edmund Kirby and Sons and a little later Colonel Renison. I think that Mr Talbot, a bank manager, live in one of the houses. In Roslin Road was Roslin Court, where the flats now are. This was a fine white Victorian house with a Widow's Walk from which ships could be seen on the Mersey.

Further down Poplar Road at one time lived John and Mary Belchem. John is a professor of history at Liverpool University and the editor of Liverpool 800, a book of essays published in 2007. Further down again lived Councillor Brocklebank and his dog. A photo of them appears in an article in the July 1969 issue of Cheshire Life on Oxton, "Birkenhead's Hampstead". This was written by John Pratt, also known as John Winton, the author of We Joined the Navy, a naval version of Doctor in the House. John had come to Birkenhead as the captain of a submarine being built at Cammell Lairds. At the bottom, on the corner of Victoria Mount, lived Les and Molly Parrington. Les had the distinction of being an active member of the Communist Party. He had a high opinion of Harold Macmillan.

Coming back up the other side, on the corner lived the Blakemores. There are a number of newer houses built in the gardens of older houses. The Beeches was lived in some time after we arrived by Roger Morton and his family. Next to The Beeches was Yew Tree House, where Yewdale Park now is. It was a large house with a tennis court. The last owners of this were the Christies, one of whose daughters, Sally, I knew well when I lived with my parents. She drove the family Humber Super Snipe with great elan. They must have been very rich, since they moved to St George's Hill in Weybridge, an area now full of Pop stars.

In Rich View at number 1 lived the Croft family. Harold was a stockbroker. Number 2 was very run down, but Number 3 was very splendid and when I took out Anne Fletcher I saw for the first time the wonderful views. Jack Fletcher was an Estate Agent in Hamilton Square. He did quite a lot of research on the Shrewsbury estate which owned the freehold of most of Oxton. Shortly before we bought Braehead, George Nixon had bought the freehold from the Ashdale Land and Property Company which had bought the entire estate from the Earl of Shrewsbury. About this time Birkenhead B.C. had its Quinquennial Review, an exercise that had to be carried out by local authorities and which was the subject of a public enquiry. One of the main issues was whether Birkenhead should develop Oxton or Noctorum as a new housing estate. My firm of Bremner Sons and Corlett represented the residents of Oxton, already united by negotiations with Ashdale on the freehold, and persuaded the Inspector that the public housing should go to Noctorum. Things might have been very different.

Back to Mount Pleasant. In High Bank lived the Rockliff family. The family owned an old established printing firm in Liverpool. Their daughter Naomi married Mike Watkins a solicitor and partner of North Kirk and Co in Liverpool. They lived there after the Rockliffs moved on. Captain Beck built his house and Kim Zadow designed the house overlooking the Quarry. On the other side was Nunclose which was, before its demolition, very run down but with the tree which was retained in the front. Next to this lived John and Margaret Thompson who, with Molly Parrington, are one of the few survivors of the 60s.

Was the house on the corner of Mount Pleasant and Rosemount called Newburns Cottage? The Newburn family were long connected with Oxton. I don't know if they owned or built Newburns Lane. Roy Newburn and his sister used to live in 1 Victoria Mount. He was one of those who used to catch the bus from the village down to Woodside where we caught the ferry to the Pier Head which weaved its way through ships moored in the river waiting to get onto the Landing Stage or into one of the docks. In Newburns Lane was Dick Blease's garage from which we bought our first car, a Mini Traveller. Dick was a motor mechanic set up in business by the Corlett family at a time when Gerry, the former managing director of Higsons Brewery and my former law partner Dennis were interested in motor racing. The house at the bottom of Newburns Lane by the quarry was designed by Jim O'Donahue. Jim was one of the architects who said that once the old Talbot pub and its neighbouring shops were demolished an open green space would be created in the centre of the village where we could all play Boules. He was not the architect of the new Talbot; this was an architect employed by the Birkenhead Brewery. We said it would be a car park as indeed is now also the land in Prices Lane, again promised as a public open space. In Prices Lane on the corner of Victoria Mount was the cobblers shop of Alfred Watt with painted messages of what he did.

Back to Rosemount. In Sean Duncan's house lived the van der Meer family, the Captain, Mary, who later lived in Poplar Road, Francesca, Rachel and Fran's son Toby, whose father was Richard Heffer who took one of the main parts in Colditz on the TV and whose family used to own the main bookshop in Cambridge. Next to them lived, before Patrick, a man who also caught the bus. Talbot Lodge was owned by Colin and Molly Wilson. Colin is an architect and was a partner of Jim O'Donahue.