

## 57 Firsby Avenue

*Some personal names have been redacted for privacy reasons.*

The death of my grandmother and subsequent sale of her home, funded our move up the property ladder so, on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1963, we moved to a semi-detached, mock Tudor, 1930s' home at 57 Firsby Avenue, Shirley. Not only was this a more upmarket property but it was also a 'better' area, significantly, a few miles further away from the town centre of Croydon.



**57 Firsby Avenue 1968**

Unfortunately, just a month later dad was made redundant and this must have been very concerning; luckily, he acquired a new job quite swiftly. Ironically, my parents paid off the mortgage just weeks before my father died in 1965; had they not done so, his life insurance would have covered the remainder of the mortgage.

The hall in our new home had a parquet floor and three cupboards. There was a conventional, triangular cupboard under the stairs, followed by two other, full height cupboards, one deep and one shallow. These were affectionately known as 'skinny cupboard' and 'fatty cupboard'. Fatty cupboard was the home of things like the Hoover and ironing board. Skinny cupboard on the other hand was much more interesting, containing as it did, stationery, jigsaws and the stamp collection. Mum's bureau was kept in the hall. I think this had probably been a wedding present. It had two bookshelves at the bottom and a flap that could be rested on pull-out wedges. This

revealed various pigeon holes and was in theory, used for writing on, although I don't remember anyone doing so. I used to play in the hall, pulling books from the shelves. I can still visualise most of these books and almost the order that they were in. There was an orange covered dictionary, a red-covered A to Z that fascinated me, an RAC manual, two large blue-covered books about Surrey and Scotland, a copy of Enquire Within, a Ready Reckoner, an Italian phrase book, dating from my dad's time there during and after the war and a book of tartans. There was also mum's collection of Mazo de la Roche's Jalna series. Many of these books and the bureau itself are still in the family. There was a slope at high school where a patch of four-leaved clovers grew. Sadly, later this was covered by a swimming pool. I pressed a number of the four leaved clovers in one of the larger books on the bureau. They met their fate when mum was doing some particularly vigorous Hoovering and I suspect knocked the book off the shelf, before sucking up its contents.

The stairs had a double dog leg and the banisters had plenty of sliding potential. The carpet was grey with splodges of black, blue, red and mustard, which sounds worse than it was. Shortly after we moved in, we had solid fuel central heating installed. This was paid for by selling off some of my grandfather's stamp collection. Peculiarly, it was suggested that I might have to stay away from home whilst this was fitted. The reasoning behind this had something to do with not being able to use the stairs. I was terrified of staying with friends, not because I was particularly clingy but because I was so fussy with food. I was to become one of the only children in the fourth (top) year of primary school who didn't put their name down for school camp for this reason. I therefore devised a way of getting from the top to the bottom without actually touching any of the stairs. This involved using the banisters and the landing windowsill. In the end I don't expect my being allowed to remain at home had anything to do with this athletic accomplishment. I am a great fan of central heating and an inveterate radiator hugger - nothing better than sitting on the floor with my back to the radiator, then or now, although the positioning of the radiators

in my current home and the expense of running them, means that I don't do this much anymore.

On the bottom dog leg of the stairs was the downstairs cloakroom with its high level cistern toilet. This was a real status symbol and it was wonderful for hide and seek. We kept coats in it but rarely if ever used the toilet. I have no idea why not. Maybe mum didn't want to have two toilets to clean. This room had a very distinctive smell that I can still recall. Dad's oil paintings were displayed in various rooms in the house. A large one of tropical fish was in the hall. Other favourites were a fruit bowl, a Scottish croft and a deer under a tree. There was one of me, aged five with my hamster, some of cats and a water colour of two children by a cottage.

The living room, at the front of the house, to the left of the front door, had a bay window and the front windows all had leaded lights, very 'posh' but a nightmare to clean. At this house the three-piece suite was re-covered. The sole purpose of the arms of the settee were of course to 'ride' on, in extended games of horses. The carpet was a swirly, 'Liberty' type floral pattern on a white background. Again, strangely, it is the lesser used dining room that I remember best. There was a tiled fireplace and a trailing vine plant that ended up very nearly reaching round the whole room. This house had room for a piano. My father was a self-taught pianist and I had lessons for just a year but continued to play to amuse myself; something that I resumed when my daughter had piano lessons. I eventually scraped through a grade one piano exam in 2022, thereby ticking something off the bucket list. The dining room wallpaper was an archetypal 1960s' bamboo pattern, later to be seen in the TV sit-com *Only Fools and Horses*. I loved it. This dining room had metal framed French doors leading to a piece of concrete with a glass roof, grandly called the veranda; handy for keeping guinea-pig hutches under to protect them and whoever had to feed them, from the elements. The dining chairs had leather-like backs and seats, fixed with rows of domed pins, about the size of drawing pins. The downstairs rooms were

adorned with completely unrealistic plastic flowers, that were very popular at the time.

The kitchen was square and wonderful. On the left-hand wall was a built-in dresser and excitingly, a serving hatch between the top and bottom sections of the dresser. I used to post myself through the hatch regularly. On the frequent occasions when I had fallen over, I would sit on the bottom portion of the dresser to have my knees plastered.



**Mum in the Kitchen 10 April 1969**

Plasters on my fingers would be wrapped over the top and pinched at the corners to form 'ears'. Mum would draw faces on these to create 'dolly plasters'. Having the plasters taken off was more of an operation. Mum would soak them in lighter fuel from a large aeroplane-shaped table lighter and inch the plasters off a tiny piece at a time. A quick rip would probably have been preferable!

The kitchen had a bay window with a deep windowsill filling the bay. I would sit on this amongst the pot plants and look out. In front of the window was a red formica table with two small flaps. We ate our meals here. As I was such an awkward eater, mum used to try to distract me from the process by playing games. For a while, I had to eat a mouthful for each number of the *One Two Buckle My Shoe* rhyme. This gave rise to the phrase 'nineteen twenty', as in, 'That's a nice nineteen twenty', to refer to an empty plate. I was also encouraged to eat in rounds, a mouthful of meat, followed by a mouthful of vegetable, followed by a mouthful of potato. I remember playing Canasta whilst we ate, using two mini packs of cards that my great grandfather had acquired on board ship, when he travelled to the east buying tea in Victorian times. We sat on fold-up stools, two

green and one red. The tops were plastic with white lines on, creating a diamond pattern.

The first tableware that I remember was a service that was probably my parents' wedding present. It was cream with flowers round the edge, these were not at all chintzy but quite modern-looking, painted flowers in pink and yellow. Inevitably, the cups got broken first; I kept one of the dining plates as a memento. In the 1960s mum purchased a 'Moonglow' set. I think this was just dinner plates as I don't remember any other items and only the dinner plates survive. These came in different pastel colours; mine was the green one. Since mum died, I have inherited these and I am using them again. Friends had the popular 1950s'-1960s' black and white Ridgway's Homemaker china from Woolworths.

On the right-hand wall of the kitchen, as you came in the door, was the huge boiler, the sink and the cooker, which was to the left of the back door. These appliances were in a sort of tiled alcove, with a lower ceiling than the rest of the kitchen. We had two coal scuttles for the boiler fuel (anthracite), one fat and one thin. They were called --- and --, after mum's friends who were similarly sized. For washing, mum had a 'single tub' with a mangle attached. She also had a cylindrical 'Baby Burco'<sup>1</sup> spin dryer with a rubber inner 'lid' that was supposed to stop clothes getting tangled in the works but wasn't always successful. This appliance would career over the floor as it spun the clothes violently. It had a spout near the bottom out of which came the water that had been dislodged. You had to put a washing-up bowl under the spout to catch the water. This required careful supervision as the cylinder could jerk round of its own accord, so that the spout was no longer over the bowl.

I was late getting labour saving devices. In the early 1980s, I washed all my elder daughter's nappies by hand, spinning them still in the ubiquitous 'Baby Burco'. By the time I had my younger daughter, I had

1. I am convinced that this item was called a 'Baby Burco', although Google suggests that this was the name of a water heater.

been given a second-hand twin tub; I still don't have a tumbler dryer. I would hate my washing not to smell of outdoors. By the 1960s, rotary clothes lines were replacing single lines, held up with a clothes prop. In inclement weather mum would use a wooden clothes horse to dry the clothes. I can remember helping to mangle clothes on the mangle that formed part of the top of mum's single tub washing machine. With today's attitudes to health and safety, this seems like a hazardous activity for a small child.

On the door wall of the kitchen was the larder and another cupboard and then the fridge next to the door to the hall. When my dad worked as a projectionist, showing films in schools and nursing homes, he would bring films home and show them on the larder door, the most suitable large plain surface. I assume he had a screen for work but this was never used at home. In fact I should know about the screen as I sometimes accompanied him but I have no recollection of this. *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* was my favourite film and we saw this several times. I still love this film although it was considerably later before I understood why all the 'brides' claimed that the baby was theirs!

The front bedroom was my parents' and later my mum's. I did sleep there, with mum's bed and furniture during the one Easter holidays. I can remember being in bed before it got dark and looking out of the window waving at the boy next door but one. While I was in the double bed my friend ———, who lived next door and I used to put one foot on the bottom of the bed and jump up doing a forward roll in the air, landing on our backs on the bed. Front rooms had net curtains. After a few weeks, the air from the open fan-lights gave the net curtains a very distinctive smell.

Most of the time, as in the previous house, I alternated between the back bedroom and the smallest bedroom. In this house however the smallest room was about ten foot square and at the back of the house. This room was decorated with wallpaper with violets on. My

quilt was nylon with purple flowers. In the mid-1960s, fitted nylon sheets replaced cotton. These usually came from Brentford Nylons. They were seen as a wonderful invention as they dried quickly and did not need ironing. I had yellow, green and orange pairs. By today's standards, they were unpleasantly ridgy and not ideal for someone who attracted static electricity. Quilted nylon bedcovers were also used. The curtains were made by mum from material I had chosen. These did not co-ordinate with the other soft furnishings. They were predominantly pink with cats climbing catkins on. Some of this material survives in the family. Once the central heating was put in, an airing cupboard was created in this bedroom. I had a new wooden bedroom suite in this house, a wardrobe and a kidney shaped dressing table with a glass top and curtains round the front. These were plain plywood and designed to be painted in a colour of the owner's choosing; in my case green emulsion was used. I later had a desk to match, although I think that was always painted with black gloss. The dressing table survived in my mum's house until 2006 and I still have the green wardrobe. At one point it was my daughters' toy cupboard and it has been refilled with toys in case my grandchildren come to stay and yes, it is still green.<sup>2</sup>

The larger, back bedroom had orange wallpaper, my choice. I also chose orange for the walls in my bedroom in the first house I bought and in the spare bedroom in my long-term, Isle of Wight home. By my bed was a small bookcase, each shelf painted a



**Me in the Back Bedroom  
11 April 1969**

2. I have no idea where this item of furniture was stored when we lived at 3 Parkfields; I think it must have been relegated to the garage for the duration. In fact, I think it stayed there until we were at Ranelagh Road. It probably moved to the Isle of Wight when mum left Croydon.

3. Two shillings and six pence in pre-decimal currency, the equivalent of 12½p.

different colour. This contained my collection of Armada books. Armada published paperbacks that cost 2/6d each;<sup>3</sup> just about the amount that a relative might hand over on a visit, or two weeks' pocket money in the mid-1960s. For four years I acquired a new book approximately every fortnight. I remember having 25 one Christmas, 50 the next and so on. Mum held some Christmas books back until Boxing Day one year, so that I wouldn't exceed 100 for that Christmas Day. I had a map of the English counties pasted to my wall by my desk. One county had been provided each week in a comic, *Diana* I think. These were meant to be cut out and assembled correctly. For some reason, I never got the East Riding of Yorkshire, so we had to make that out of coloured paper; it was never quite the same. I always had and indeed still have, a photograph of my dog, Sparky, by my bed. Mum stuck green felt to the back of the door so I could put up pictures. These were mainly pictures of the royal family, animals or tennis players cut from the newspaper.

I loved rearranging the furniture and tidying my bedroom. I would spend days moving from one bedroom to another or changing things round in the room that I was in. Primarily, this seemed to involve rearranging my many books. The end of the job, when you were left with the last few bits and pieces that didn't quite have a place, was always the hardest. The process also involved cleaning, well dusting and cleaning the windows at least. I don't remember Hoovering. At the age of eleven, I would precariously lean out of my upstairs window, with the glass veranda roof below, to clean the outside of my windows with purple, smelly Windolene. In retrospect I can't believe that my mum knew I was doing this; she, like me, did seem to see worst scenarios in activities. Even in the days before obsessions with health and safety, it doesn't seem like a very sensible pursuit for a child.

Also upstairs was the bathroom, at the front of the house, the toilet, between the stairs and the small bedroom and the former airing cupboard that became my walk-in toy cupboard. The bath had a



shower attachment that was used to rinse hair when we leant over the bath. It was not used in the way a modern shower might be and indeed the hose was probably not long enough. Soap and flannels, sponges came later, were kept on a plastic holder that bridged across the bath. We did have soaps that were sewn between layers of sponge.



**24 June 1969**

Sparky used to put her paws on the hand basin and drink out of the taps.

The gardens in this house were a paradise. The front garden was of less interest, although the large wooden gate was wonderful for swinging, climbing or just sitting on. This may be the origin of the many drawings that I later did of people sitting on gates. I remember the hollyhocks in the small semi-circular bed to the right of the front porch. There was also a not-very-attractive Yucca plant in the front



**Mum and Sparky outside Firsby Avenue  
29 September 1968**



**The Yucca Plant**

garden. This plant is supposed to flower once every seven years. Sure enough, it flowered just once in our six year sojourn in that house. This house had a garage. There was an unfortunate incident when I was sitting in the car on the drive, whilst dad was in the garage with the doors open. For some reason, accidentally or deliberately, I don't remember, I disengaged the handbrake. Being on a slope, the car rolled down the drive into the



**1968**

garage, narrowly avoiding squashing dad on the way. I'm not sure why but a large oil painting of five angels' heads hung in the garage. I have no idea where this had lived in our previous house, presumably in the loft. I don't think that it was left in the house by the previous owners (a Mr and Mrs ——— who kept Finnish Spitz dogs - why do I remember that - I was seven for heaven's sake!?). I have a feeling the painting had belonged to mum's paternal grandparents; it was a common image, taken from the painting by Joshua Reynolds, I expect. In any case, it remained in the garage where the paint gradually peeled off the canvas.

Whilst on the subject of the previous owners of the house, I distinctly remember viewing this house before we moved in. A garden seat sticks in my mind. I don't remember viewing any other houses, perhaps I didn't but I don't know who would have looked after me whilst my parents viewed - neighbours maybe. The evening before we moved in, we visited the house. Mr and Mrs ——— must have been up all night because when we took possession the next day anything removable had gone - no door handles, no light fittings just bare wires hanging from the ceiling and no garden seat!

It was the back garden that I thought was wonderful. It was large,

with a row of copper beech trees along the bottom fence, brilliant for climbing and I learnt that one near the middle of the row was the best. For a while, the man who lived the other side of the trees had frequent bonfires. My friend ——— and I used to chant 'not another bonfire'. There were also numerous apple trees including one in the middle of the lawn, which we felled shortly after moving in. We found many tiny green dice in the grass round the base of that tree; I still have these. The apple trees weren't without their problems as the dog ate the tiny green apples that fell from the trees and inevitably made herself sick. There was also a peach tree, which had some kind of fungus and never grew a single peach. All these trees meant that I could enjoy raking up piles of leaves in the autumn and jumping on them. Best of all, there were grey squirrels in the garden.



**September 1963**



**October 1964**

Two thirds of the way down, was a trellis going across the full width of the garden, with an arch in the middle. Deep red Josephine Bruce roses, dad's favourites and I think part of mum's wedding bouquet, crawled across the trellis. Either side of the central grass path, beyond the arch, ran two concrete paths. The first one on the left was surrounded by strawberry plants and the far left path was where my

swing was erected. The concrete path ensured that my swinging feet didn't wear away the earth below, that this might have been less than safe never occurred to anyone. I loved my swing I would swing and dream, standing, sitting, lying across the swing on my tummy. You could climb high on the A frame supports on either side, you could watch the boy next door but one on his similarly positioned, identical swing when you whirled high in the air. The short chains, designed to adjust the height of the seat, that were above the solid metal bars from which the seat was suspended, were just long enough to allow the seat to be twirled round twice and then gradually untwirled. Two people could swing at once, either one seated and one standing, both standing looking at each other or, more uncomfortably, one sat on another's lap but facing in opposite directions. The swing was taken to our next home but mum was unable to concrete it in, so it wobbled and was never quite the same. The first path on the right beyond the arch was overgrown with raspberry canes and the back right path was where the compost heap and another apple tree were.

Near the house were the coal sheds and the outside toilet. This was used as a shed and is best remembered for the year in which it contained a wasp's nest. The water butt, which always seemed to be surrounded by midges, or 'mozzies' as mum called them, was outside the kitchen window.

In the garden I would race slugs across my hands or collect ants in jam jars. After a day of doing this, I could still see the ants when I closed my eyes at night. The garden was great for playing farms. One year I distributed various old washing up bowls and other receptacles around the garden as water for my imaginary livestock. One morning I went to check on the animals only to find that the sheep's water, situated near the swing, contained a dead rat. Mum took some persuading when I told her of this mishap.