

WINNIE WATSON

Interviewed for the FRP newsletter by Michael Davison



A good friend of Richmond Park for more than 30 years before the Friends were formed, Winnie Watson (*pictured on the left*) remembers the Park as a much-loved playground during her childhood in the 1930s. Her home was in Cambrian Road, Richmond, when her father William Bolton worked at the Richmond Institution, formerly the workhouse and infirmary, in Grove Road. 'It was a lovely time for me', recalls Winnie, now 89, and living in a retirement flat in Kingston, 'though the Park could get a bit eerie if you were there after dark and heard footsteps behind you'.

Even after public access to the Park was restricted during the war, Winnie had an easy way in: 'The Park Superintendent, A E Wilson, was a personal friend of the family – we called him Pop. He gave us a key to the gate at the top of our road, and with two girl friends who lived nearby we often went over to see him in his home at Bog Lodge [now Holly Lodge]'.

Winnie has one reminiscence that shows how attitudes towards health and safety have changed since the war. 'One day Pop suggested it would be a good idea if we learned to shoot. He set up a target range in his garden and said he would give a penny to the first of us to get a bull's eye: I turned out to be the best shot. As the war progressed and there was talk of a German invasion Pop said I would make a good sniper. I promptly said I couldn't shoot anyone. His reply was: "If it was you or him you would shoot". It was the same when he took me rabbit shooting. I got the rabbit in my sights but couldn't shoot. Pop said: "You obviously can't be hungry"'.

Pop Wilson appears to have been something of a character. On another occasion he invited Winnie and her friends to help him prepare Bog Lodge for a party he was holding. 'We entered the Park and started to walk across to Bog Lodge when suddenly we were surrounded by members of the Home Guard, armed with rifles. After answering their questions we were escorted to Bog Lodge. There we discovered that Pop had deliberately arranged for the Home Guard to patrol our area of the Park to see what they would do when they encountered us. He was more than pleased at the way they had handled the situation – but for us it was rather unnerving'.

During air raids the Bolton family used their cellar as a shelter. Much of the noise they suffered, however, came not from enemy action but from the AA gun battery at Sheen Gate. 'We kept hearing our door knocker banging, but after answering it a few times and finding nobody there Mother realised the AA guns were causing the vibration, so she wrapped material round the knocker every night'.

Winnie's other childhood memories of the Park include being taken by her parents to see herons building their nests and feeding their young in Sidmouth Plantation. 'They disappeared when the air raids began – I expect it was too noisy for them with the AA guns nearby'. The Park gamekeeper – 'he wore plus-fours and a green velvet jacket' – was a familiar sight outside his home near Cambrian Gate. Sheep and cattle shared the grazing with a much-reduced deer herd.

The war had one particularly happy experience for Winnie: it introduced her to her future husband Cliff Watson, whom she met at a dance at the Grove Road Institution. He was serving in the R.A.F. and billeted in Queen's Road; his section had their meals at White Lodge, where R.A.F. cooks had the use of the kitchen. The job of the airmen was to light dummy fires to make the Germans think they were over London and drop their bombs harmlessly on the Park. Pen Ponds were drained to further confuse the navigators.

'I was at Bog Lodge one day and heard Pop Wilson complaining that R.A.F. lads were putting up nooses to catch rabbits, which abounded in the Park in those days. When I confessed that one of the airmen was a boy-friend, Pop asked me to bring him over to meet him. He gave him a good talking to and told him how cruel it was to snare animals. Instead he lent him a gun to use on his day off. So we had the odd rabbit, and my mother always made Pop Wilson a rabbit pie or stew. Pop also sent a load of logs in the autumn, and the odd venison joint – I think he was allowed two deer a year'.

Another wartime memory is that of Italian prisoners of war being put to work in the Park. 'They were not very reliable'. Winnie recalls. 'The last straw came when they chopped down one of the oldest trees. Pop Wilson got rid of them the same day'. The Italians were replaced by German prisoners: 'They were far more reliable'.

Of Pembroke Lodge and its use during the war as the billet for officers of the clandestine Phantom Squad, Winnie has one fond reminiscence. 'One morning on my way to work, at a shoe shop in Richmond, I was reading a letter from my fiancé Cliff when someone bumped into me. It was David Niven, a Phantom Squad officer, on his way to take morning parade in Marlborough Road, where the squad's private soldiers were billeted. "So sorry", he said. "Your mail looks more interesting than mine, it's all bills". I walked to work on cloud nine, I really idealised David Niven. He was my favourite film star'.

Cliff Watson was posted from Richmond to Canterbury, where he volunteered for aircrew duties and became an air gunner, flying Bostons and later Lancasters at Waterbeach in Cambridge. Winnie and Cliff married in August, 1944, living with Winnie's parents in Richmond before moving to Ham in 1950 but still enjoying frequent visits to Richmond Park. They had a son and daughter. Cliff died in 1981.

How does the Park today compare with the Park of Winnie's childhood? 'There are so many more people, of course. In the war only people with business in the Park would be seen there'. One sight Winnie misses today is that of horsewomen riding side-saddle as 'it used to look so elegant'. She also misses the concerts that took place at the bandstand just inside Richmond Gate. 'We used to go with our parents on Sunday afternoons in summer'.

On the plus side, Winnie is impressed by the general well-being of the Park today, and particularly by the improvements that have taken place, and are still continuing, in the Isabella Plantation. 'In my younger days Peg's Pond wasn't even part of the Plantation'. And the Sidmouth Plantation has lost its dark and rather forbidding appearance. The Friends of Richmond Park, she feels, are playing an important role in helping to maintain the right balance between sensitive management of the Park as a Nature Reserve and free access for the huge numbers of visitors who come to enjoy the freedom to roam its open spaces.