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*So here we go, um, and can I ask you to say your full name and date of birth please?*

Yeah [coughs], my name is Billy Bragg, I was born on the twentieth of December nineteen fifty seven (1957).

*Fabulous, and can I ask where you were born please?*

I was born in Upney Hospital.

*Ok. And what did your parents do for work?*

My father was a warehouseman, it’s what it says on his wedding certificate. And er, he kinda worked for ancilliary companies around Fords, some testers, he worked for builders merchants for a while. And er, he died in nineteen seventy six (1976) of Lung cancer. And er, my mum did a lot, number of things. She worked for a little while at er, Barking Technical College, as a domestic science assistant. Helping out there with the cookery classes. Um, she ran a gang of women who did door to door leaflets in er, the early seventies (1970s). Er, round here. And then she worked for the last sort of, twenty years of her working life, she worked in er, a clearing house for NatWest, clearing cheques. And she passed away last year.

*Oh sorry to hear that. Um, so, so what early memories do you have of growing up in the area, like what schools did you go to?*

Well, I went to Northbury Junior School, which is not far from where I lived; I lived in a house on Park Avenue. Er, er, close to the park gates. Um, down in the, in the corner, of, of Park Avenue. And er, and our back garden backed on to the boating lake. So er, the walk to Northbury wasn’t that far, cross Tanner Street over the iron railway bridge, and you’re there. And then I went to er, Park Modern Secondary, I failed my eleven plus, went to Park Modern Secondary. And after a year it went comprehensive and it became Barking Abbey comprehensive, so I started off at the Sandringham Road building, and then as the time the, er, fourth years and fifth years were the Barking Park campus. Barking Abbey. So I just had to walk across the park, which was very handy, popped home at lunch time, popped back and do my lessons.

*Not a bad commute either is it!*

It wasn’t a bad commute at all, no, it was a lot of fun.

*Fabulous! And what would you say your earliest memory of the park was?*

Well the park was always been really present in my life, because growing up on Park Avenue, it, it really was the place where I did most of my socialising with my friends. Playing football, riding my bike, going on the boats, fishing, my first fumbling encounters with the opposite sex. Staying up late, and you know, staying out, that’s where we kind of hung out. So, yeah it was, it really was the centre of my, sort of childhood memories. They all take place in the park.

*Could you maybe describe some of those experiences to me, obviously only if you want to?*

Yeah sure. Yeah, yeah, well, the end of our garden, there’s a tow path and then there’s the boating lake, so in summer you know, the motor boats were going by all the time. The rowing boats were going by, and there used to be a er, a paddle steamer, called the Phoenix. Which, which went up and down as well, and that would go by. In fact somewhere I’ve got a photograph of it going by from our back garden, it’s a bit blurred but, um, I can remember that going by. So my earliest memories really, are, are, getting to go on the Phoenix, which was a real treat. But I, I really have earlier experiences and that, because there are photographs of me in a pram over the park. And my, my mum’s er, my dad’s mother lived with us, used to take me over there in the pram. And then, my dad’s old auntie used to take me over there to er, get an ice cream from the, the pavilion near by the swing yard. And she used to meet old people that she knew, so I would go over there and I’d be like er, little kid, and there’d be all these very old people. Victorian People, people from the Victorian age. And er, yeah that was my, kind of earliest memories. Um, the lake played a very big role in my park experience. The fact that it drained empty every year. Er, all the water disappears. I’ve never, to this day, know where it goes, but every Winter all the water would drain out and then you’d see all the things that people had thrown in there and everything. And a huge rite of passage for everybody, all the kids down out street was actually falling in the lake, everyone did it. And er, I managed to do it on a number of occasions, once when it was empty. And I split my head open! And I had xxxx two stitches in me head! And three stitches in my elbow. Which is probably the, thinking about the worst thing that happened to me when I was a kid, yeah, falling - I was trying to climb over the fence to get in to the boathouse, the old wooden boat house to let off some bangers, in the mud. Don’t ask me why! Things you do when you’re kids! And um, there used to a, a long low black wooden boat house, made of, of er, you know, slats of wood. Which nobody was ever allowed in, it was, it was, that’s where they kept the rowing boats for the original rowing club, before they had the, brick building there with the rowing tanks. And it was a very mysterious place, and it was down, it was there…that um, that was our local polling station. And there was an election. And I always thought it was really weird that my parents, I wasn’t allowed to go in, my parents would go in to this place where we weren’t allowed to go in, and when they come out there would be a new government!

*[laughs].*

Kind of had a mystic, it’s because it was very dark in there, and sometimes you could see through this, through the holes and see what was in there.

*Yeah.*

This mystic thing, that it’s always dark. It always held er, an air of mystery. ‘Cause it was painted, it was all you know, the wood was creosoted dark. Where the board, dark creosote. And before they built the, the current er, building there, the current boat house, it was a low old er, sort of quayside there, where the boats all docked. All the motor boats docked there, and the rowing boats docked there and the, the paddle steamer docked there. And then just past that on the right, there was an ice cream hut. What sold ice cream. And I got a little job in there, selling ice cream.

*How old were you then?*

Er, probably I was about nine or ten. And er, I helped the guy in there sell ice cream. And eventually he let me have a little cart, with dried ice in it. And he would send me up to the paddling pool, um, based from the pavilion, by the tennis courts, the central pavilion. He would send me up with this little cart, up by the paddling pool in summer, and I would sell er, ice creams to all the kids at the paddling pool. And if you put the dry ice in the paddling pool it made these fabulous white bubbles, like Doctor Who!

*[laughs].*

So that was my party trick! ‘Cause it was dry ice, ‘cause it was just like a wheelbarrow. It was a proper thing, and it was a proper ice cream freezer, but it was basically a, you know, two handles and a couple of wheels, and a load of dry ice, which burned you if you held it. And er, yeah he used to, let, send me up there. And before that, before I got a gig with him, the, how I got to know him actually, was um, it used to be, it, you would get thrupence back on coca cola bottles.

*Ah.*

They always - They recycled them. And they give you, you buy the coca cola bottle, and when you brought it back they give you back thrupence. So, in summer, when the park was full of people if you went in to the bins, you could find, you might find half a dozen.

*Yes!*

In a day. Half a dozen. Coca cola bottles. And that’s a lot of money, that’s you know, that’s one and sixpence. You know, which is er, seven and a half p in new money, but one and sixpence at the time you could buy quite a lot of stuff. You could buy an ice cream and still have a shilling to take home. And when I got a gig, working in there, I had a deal with a mate of mine, that he would bring the bottles back, and then I’d give him the thrupence for them. And then I’d give them to him out the back, and he would take them up the pavilion and get thrupence for them again!

*[laughs].*

It’s a bit out of order, innit!

*It’s not the first time I’ve heard something like that…*

No!

*So…[laughs].*

So, so that was all around, around er, down by the boathouse and the lake. And also what was significant there, is that little hill where the train turns around, where the turntable is for the train. That hill was very significant to us when we was kids, I don’t know why, it was much, much higher than that. It was probably, it was probably as high as, oh, it was just incredibly high. It certainly wasn’t what it is now, which is about nine foot. It must have been about a hundred foot high then. And, well, it seemed it anyway. Um, and we used to ride our bikes down it which is pretty daring. And we, after we saw Mary Poppins, I can remember going there with an umbrella with us, and trying to jump off that hill and fly! But it didn’t quite work out that way.

*What was the result of that?*

Just looked stupid really!

*[laughs].*

We were only little kids, didn’t really xxxx.

*No broken bones of anything, ok [laughs].*

No we were fine. But um, if you went down to the er, back of the shed where the train is parked, or used to be kept.

*Yeah.*

There was just about enough gap there to get a ten year old through, you could sneak xxxx, to get in to the what we used to refer to as the jungle. Behind there, we would have our secret meetings in there! Which was like, you know, out where grown ups couldn’t see us. And that’s a great thing about the park, it has a series of these areas of like, you know, sort of, I suppose they’re arboretums sort of thing, you know. These areas where there’s loads of trees altogether, you could go in to them and disappear and make dens and er, and er, the one behind, the one behind the er, where the railway, the little train stops is quite significant because obviously it was close. All this stuff was incredibly close to our house. And um, just by those gates there, on the corner in Park Avenue, originally there was an open space there, and a, a line of Poplars. And we used to play football there, and er, against the gable end of the house on Park Avenue. And he was always coming out and chasing us away. And my dad said to me once, he said, you know you shouldn’t annoy that guy, he’d said what his name was, I can’t remember his name, he’s a Polish guy. He didn’t speak very good English either so it made it even more funny to us. But my dad said to me one night, you know, you know he was in the Polish resistance in the war, he’ll probably cut your throat like that [clicks fingers]. After that [laughs] we went and played football somewhere else! It’s totally untrue, I’m sure he wasn’t, I’m sure he was, er, I wouldn’t be surprised if he was in the war, ‘cause everybody was in the war, but the idea that he would come in the night and kill [laughs], and get us, that was totally freaky! Completely freaky!

*I suppose a story like that would have quite an impact on a young boy.*

It did, yeah. ‘Cause everyone had done something in the war, at the time this was in the sixties (1960s) you know. Everybody down the street, you kinda, you sort of knew, all the dads, all the adults had done something in the war, the war was you know, only 25 years before. You know, it was very close. So, that kind of informed a lot of, how we thought about the world. And so, yeah, there were even first world war veterans, there was a guy who lived a few doors along from us on Park Avenue, I used to run errands for him. There used to be, at the top of park Avenue, um, where the triangle is, where the betting shop is now, there used to be a little grocery shop. And um, I used to run errands up there for this old guy who’d been gassed in the first world war. And some days when you went to talk to him, he could hardly breathe, he had this very wet sort of [makes noise], not everyday. It’s to do, I think it was to do with the atmosphere. If it was a damp day, he had a really, he was a lovely guy, his name was Will Vernon. He was a lovely bloke. So yeah, a lot of that initial stuff, was, based around playing quite close to our house. And then as I got older, you know, you started to range a bit wider over the park, ‘cause it’s a pretty huge park…

*It’s a massive space!*

It’s a massive space, yeah. And you’ve got that lovely contrast between the kind of, the bit where the ornamental gardens are, which is quite enclosed. And then the wide open space where the pitches are, which we used to refer to as the big field. Where you know, it was just massive. And that had two attractions, the first was you could go and play football over there. You could usually find some other kids and have a match, have a game over there. And if it got boring, if there was no one there, you could go in the swing yard, the swing yard was there. And that was where the fair was, in September. Which was always a huge highlight, living so close to the park.

*Yeah.*

When the fair came. It changed the whole atmosphere of the park. Um, in a, in a positive way I thought. You could, you know, you could lay in bed at night, and you could hear the fair you know, instead of the normal railway and the road, and the…boats on the river. You could hear, you could hear the fair, going. So that, you know, that was, that was always an exciting time. And of course, the, the carnival, Barking carnival kind of ended here. You know, it turned through the park gates and in there, and so you only had to stand at the top of Park Avenue, you could see the entire thing go by, so we did that every year. And um, the swing yard was always a, er, exciting place, they, they had some fabulously dangerous things in there, in the sixties (1960s), they had, they had a thing that was like a, er, like a cone, that, that kind of, I don’t know how to explain how it moved, it kinda went in and out. And around. And you kinda pushed on it, and it pushed back, and if you pushed it really hard it made this clunking noise, and sort of and almost bent, you know. And, and if you could get half a dozen kids on it, you could really you know, put it to it’s, push it to it’s limits. And there was a couple of other swing things as well, there was like a swing boat, that you could sit on and push on that. That was, that was pretty hairy as well! Um, but of course, um, you know, it was, it was all re-designed in the eighties (1980s). And they put in stuff over the tarmac on the floor, so it sort of, probably not so.

*Do you think that was the introduction of health and safety laws?[laughs]*

Well you know, you don’t want to get, I can remember kids splitting their head open over there, and breaking their arms and stuff like that. Breaking their legs. You’re not going to want to do that in a kids play yard do you? So, it’s probably as well that that didn’t happen. Um, the Lido played a big part of our summers. My mum, and her friend Gloria, loved going over the Lido, they loved it! They would go there through the summer holidays, we’d be there all day if it was nice. We would literally be there all day. And I have lovely memories of um, the water being a fabulous colour, a blue colour. And always freezing cold, as would be an outdoor swimming pool in Britain. Of the, whoever put the um…the paving in there, it was impossible to fall over and not skin your knees, because there was water everywhere. You just couldn’t not skin your knees over there. And everything we, ‘cause we lived so close, they always brought orange juice and sandwiches, so we didn’t have to buy them. And course the queues were mad! The queues were just crazy, the place would be rammed. And so, you know, everything kinda tasted of Tupperware. Whenever I see Tupperware [laughs], I can immediately taste orange juice! [laughs]. From Tupperware. It’s kind of, very evocative. And my dad, my dad um, was around in the thirties (1930s), in nineteen thirty five or thirty six (1935 or 1936), Barking Council had er, a big pageant over the park. Um, and er, the um, the Lido doubled as Barking Abbey, they re-enacted Barking Abbey being burned down by the Vikings. And my dad saw that as a kid, he saw that there was all, er, student, er, school children from Barking Abbey were Vikings, and they came and attacked the Lido, and then there were all people in the Park dressed up as you know, um, Alfred the Great, and er, the Romans, and all you know, famous people that come here, um, if you go down to Valence House there’s photographs of them, it looks brilliant! And they did a whole pageant over the park, over a series of a week. I think it was, I think it might have been um, George the fifth’s jubilee or something like that, in nineteen thirty six (1936). Just before the war. Yeah.

*I’ve heard of um, the nineteen thirty one (1931) pageant, ‘cause I interviewed a couple of people who took part in that…*

It might have been thirty one (1931). It might have been.

*But maybe there was another one as well?*

I might be getting it mixed up, it might have been nineteen thirty one (1931). And that would certainly make my dad younger, ‘cause he was born in twenty four (1924) so, he would have been more of a kid in thirty one (1931). And then during the war, um, he was involved in er, he was a boy scout, so he had a, he had this gig, where by um, after the air raids were over, he had to go out on his bike, and take messages. Because often, if there’d been a bad raid, the phone lines would be down, and they couldn’t communicate, so they couldn’t say you know, we’ve got a house on fire, we need, you know, so boy scouts were, were, he had a list of places he had, you know, and they would say take this to, you know, certain letter, and he would, off he would cycle and do that. And, my grandfather, who kept a diary during the war, and talks of, you know, one night in, in the park, near the boat house, with er, being there with my dad, and them trying to deal with incendiary bombs. Well, while at the same time, the bombs were going over and the ack ack guns which were also in the park, were firing. I mean what it must have been like, you can imagine the, the noise and the flashing of the ack ack guns. And then the drone of the planes going over, and then these bloody incendiary devices, which were made for, phosphorous, which will burn, xxxx so you can’t er, er, I don’t think you can put them out with water. You have to, you have to smother them. Er, and then they, they, they eventually invented one that if you did that, it exploded. And killed the person who was doing it. So, you know. And that was where I was playing football fifteen years later.

*It must have been terrifying!*

Yeah, and you don’t think, you don’t think of those things, I only really, I never spoke to my dad about this ‘cause I only really read my grandfathers diary you know, the last thirty, twenty five years. And started to piece together, what was, you know, what it was like during the war here. But, but the park was you know, was Barking’s main defence. The anti aircraft guns here, in the park, so, it did get attacked quite a bit, it did, certainly the, the house of the old soldier that I, used to drop, er, do errands for, got hit, a direct hit, you know just sort of three houses along from our house on Park Avenue. And was totally destroyed. So um, you know, it did, the war did come right into the park.

*I can imagine it must have been absolutely terrifying for the people xxxx….*

Just hearing, just hearing them shoot, you know, because you know that if the guns are firing, the planes are right overhead.

*Yes.*

So people who were in the, in the shelter, know exactly, you know, instead of sitting there wondering if the planes are going to go over, you know they’re, you know, they’re going by.

*Do you remember any sort of um, remnants of war time being in the park, because I know other people have spoken about um, sort of tunnels and things that they used to play in just after the war? I was wondering…*

No, I don’t remember there being any remnants of the war in the park. There were remnants around Barking, there was still places that…had been bombed and hadn’t been rebuilt um but I don’t, I don’t remember any of those in the park and I kind of, I think there was very few places in the park where we didn’t go and have a good old nose around. We were very good at that me and my mates [interviewer laughs] but uh another thing we used to enjoy doing is to walk all the way around the lake, you know, walk up the tow path to the far end of the park, the South Park Drive End and then if you go round the back of that you can walk all the way along back the other side and I know sometimes you have to climb over trees and it’s quite an adventure. It seemed to take all day as well as I remember it and there’s one bit opposite the boat house where you have to go across, it’s got a kind a, of some sort of sluice gate there and you have to go across this rather narrow piece of concrete, which was always the height daring and um also there would be uh, there’s a river, there’s a little river just the other side of the, the far side of the lake called Locksford Water, which in some places was fordable and other places um it wasn’t but you also there was…people on the other side of the river in Ilford.

*Mmh.*

So it was, if you saw kids on the other side of the river it was, you could throws stones at them [interviewer laughs] because they weren’t from where we were. I can remember doing that a few times or maybe they threw stones at us but whatever. You know there was always, there was always a bit of a rivalry there.

*The early turf wars.*

Yeah always goes on doesn’t it, always goes on.

*Of course that’s children for you as well.*

Yes, yeah, yeah.

*Fabulous and when, you talked a little bit earlier um they would drain the lake every winter. That’s something I’ve never heard before.*

Yeah every winter, yeah. Every winter the lake was emptied.

*Do you know why they did that?*

No, I don’t know why. I don’t know where the water went.

*Okay.*

I don’t know why they did it. Um it was, you know, it’s basically mud and it’s not that deep the lake. If you fall in it, even when I was a kid, it couldn’t of been much deeper than, than this table.

*Right.*

You know, uh or perhaps a little bit deeper maybe, maybe two or three feet but I’ve never, I’ve never fell in, as long as you fell in feet first, you wouldn’t, your head wouldn’t go under.

*Right.*

You know. The most embarrassing time I ever fell in the lake was um one time in the 1980s when I was an adult [interviewer laughs] and I had, we were going out and I hadn’t took the dog for a walk so I took him in the park for a wee and the lake was iced over.

*Right.*

And he got on the ice and he wouldn’t come off the ice so I thought well if would keep, hold him up, it might hold me up.

*Mmh.*

I went straight through [interviewer laughs] and he came, as soon as he saw me go in he run off and came back home, sat on the doorstep so like an idiot. Another time um I was in a kind of punk band that we used to rehearse in my parents’ back room, Park Avenue, and we decided, we went over the park one night and had a sort of band meeting and we sat under that, not the, not the tow path but the slightly higher up um road that goes the length of the lake and um we decided that we were going to give up our day jobs and go and live up in this place in Northamptonshire and the keyboard player said ‘if you decide to do that I’m going to jump in the lake’ [interviewer laughs] and we did decide to do it and he did jump in the lake, which I thought, he didn’t have to [interviewer laughs] but he was trying to get us to understand that, and he jumped in the lake yeah and drove home after he jumped in the lake, [interviewer laughs] which is, which is a bit sad and one time I was and this was when I was a teenager so I must have been about I don’t know, fourteen, fifteen, I was in our back room and my mum was out, she was out um putting out the washing and I heard her scream and I looked out the back garden just in time to see her jump the fence at the bottom of our garden and jump in the lake. I couldn’t get over that fence, even though I was a teenager, I couldn’t get over the fence so I ran around to find her on the tow path soaking wet with an old man who’s crying and a soaking wet push chair with two kids strapped in it and she had seen this old man with a push chair and the push chair had gone in and completely instinctively, like sort of like superman, she had gone over the back fence. I mean she was quite athletic my mum, she always was, you know, she could always beat me to the top of the road in a race [interviewer laughs] but she literally with a single bound had gone over, jumped into the lake and then the roots of XXXX she lifted the two babies and the baby carriage out and plonked it on the side and they came in our house and they sat, sat down, sat them down, dried them off and the old man said to her ‘please don’t tell anyone this happened because my, my daughter would never let me out with the twins again’ and that was it and then a few weeks later he came round with some flowers and a box of chocolates for her and that was it. No more was said about it, yeah. Mother, mother went in and pulled these…

*What a hero.*

Yeah, pulled these two kids out. The whole thing and she didn’t even know what she was doing, you know, she just saw it and just went.

*Instinct almost kicked in.*

Yep, exactly, yeah a hundred per cent, hundred per cent. She knew if she run round it might take too long so she just went boom over that concrete fence. Mmh amazing.

*Amazing.*

In it. Yeah.

*We talked a little bit about the boats and things on the lake.*

Mmh.

*And you mentioned the old boat house.*

Yeah.

*I was wondering because it was such a mystical place to you, did you ever manage to get into it eventually or…?*

Ah I joined the rowing club.

*Okay.*

Eventually ‘cause some of the girls from school joined the rowing club. [Interviewer laughs] It seemed a good way to get in with them but by that time they had built the uh, the new uh, the new, what became the Tai Kwando Club but before that they had a rowing tank in there so I spent more time in their and it didn’t seem quite so mystic then. [Interviewer laughs] I didn’t really uh; I didn’t really see it in that same light. It’s weird how things isn’t it, after a while. You don’t really grasp but walking to school from my house to uh Barking Abbey, some mornings if it was really foggy, it was like going into a different world.

*Really.*

Particularly going across the great, the big field, you know, you had no idea where you was so you would go from your house to school through this kind of like, you know, like you were on Dartmoor or something like that, you know, you only knew where you were when you came to the little road and in the XXXX I would keep walking in this general direction and I found that quite adventurous that. [Interviewer laughs] I think I liked that.

*I could just imagine it feels quite spooky or something.*

Yeah very spooky yeah but at the same time, you know, it was…the spookiest place in the park, always to me was the war memorial and as long as I can remember the words on the names on the war memorial were illegible. It’s only been in the last few years I’ve now noticed that they’ve recast it. Whatever they originally did it in; I think the stone was too soft. You couldn’t read the names, you could read across the top ‘the honoured dead’ and I always thought it was a terrible irony that they was honoured but you couldn’t read their names but I see they’ve uh, they’ve done something about that now.

*Other people must of thought the same thing as you thought.*

I guess so, yeah, I guess so and before they built the indoor bowling alley, kind of opposite the war memorial about um fifty yards onto the, actually onto the field there was the best conker tree in the park. That was a brilliant conker tree there. I was heart-broken when they chopped that down because that was a really big thing as well, conkers. You know, you’d, a certain time of year there would be, the park would be full of kids throwing sticks [interviewer laughs] into the trees which, there was one kid who would try to climb the trees who was a bit of a nutter from down our road and he finally uh proved at what a nutter he was by using a metal bar to get conkers. Now the difference between using a stick and a metal bar, it only really becomes clear when it falls and hits you on the head, which of course it did, it fell and hit him on the head eventually. It split his head open so that was uh, that was a heart-break but getting conkers was a big part of uh the rituals of, you know, living next door to the park, we always had more conkers than all the other kids, the kids who lived in the Lintons, didn’t have anywhere to get conkers so readily and easily so that was a, that was one of the pluses of living next door to the park.

*Okay and from a lot of your stories it sounds like a lot of, you know, as a child you probably got hurt quite a lot in the park.*

[Interviewer laughs] Oh I wouldn’t say hurt. [Interviewer laughs]

*Um but were there kind of people around like um, I don’t know, park wardens or keepers keeping an eye on things.*

There was always Parkies, there was loads of them. Well it seemed there was loads but, and you couldn’t walk on the grass, they really didn’t like and you weren’t supposed to ride your bike, they didn’t like that in the park but there was one guy called, who is Irish who we all referred to as Paddy. I don’t know what his real name was. He was a lovely guy, he was a really nice guy, he was a little guy and was a, he had a very, very strong Irish accent and he was sometimes hard to um understand and his, his salutation was [in Irish accent] ‘how are ya?’ ‘How are ya?’ ‘How are ya?’ Like that. How are you, you know, that’s how he would say it and he always seemed to have his, because they had, you know, Parkies had peak caps in those days. You know, they looked like, you know, like they were proper doing something, not someone in a high-res jacket who’s basically a glorified gardener. These guys had an authority and he never ran fast enough to catch. They had whistles as well. [Interviewee whistles] They’d point at you like that and it was a constant because you weren’t allowed into the, into the bushes, into the gardens, you know, which was where we loved playing, that’s where we always wanted to play war in there because you can get bits of dirt, what we’d call dirt bombs, basically bits of dirt together, and throw them and they would, when they hit the ground they would burst and they’d look like someone was shooting machine gun, you know, tut, tut, tut, like you’d see on a film so we loved throwing dirt bombs, not real stones, just dirt bombs. Just loved that whole, if they’d been a war film on that night we would all be over the park running round and the Parkie would come and chase us off and there was some of them were right toe rags. They were really nasty, they should never should have been near, allowed anywhere near anyone, you know, having fun, definitely not children but Paddy was a lovely guy and I used to see him, even after I’d moved away I would occasionally see him in Barking and say ‘hello, how are you?’ I mean he did, you know, he did his best to try and say, you know, tell us not to do things but he just really was like, you know. [interviewer laughs] He always had his hat pushed back and a fag on, you know, and he kind of looked like, if you can imagine a sort of cheerful um old man Steptoe.

*Okay.*

Without such a black view of the world. He had kind of more, he only really got angry if he was with another Parkie and then he would go through the motions of getting angry but, you know, he used try and, you know, cadge us for fags and stuff like that. [Interviewer laughs] I have very happy memories of him. He was a lovely, lovely bloke. You could sit and have a chat with him.

*Sounds like a pretty cool fella.*

He was. He was a nice guy. You know, he was a nice sort of. You know he loved the park and he loved kids. He obviously, you know, I don’t know if he had kids of his own, I don’t know where he lived but he was kind of somehow he was sort of part of it, you know, without being in our lives he was part of our lives. We knew he was there if there was any trouble in the park. You know there was always someone around who could sort of sort you out, help you out, not that I can ever remember there being any that kind of inverted commas trouble.

*Okay. Do you remember any sort of um, I mean we talked a little bit about the carnival and the fair?*

Yeah.

*Um and you mentioned that you used to stand at Park Avenue and sort of watch all the procession, did you ever used to come into the park and join in the celebrations?*

Yeah of course, yeah, yeah.

*Okay, could you talk a little bit about that?*

Yeah, yeah, well on the Saturday of the Carnival, it was always brilliant because it was like a social event because you’d have the people who wanted to come, it was the day of the fair so you’d have all the people and I think the rides were cheaper on the first day, you know, and they had all great stuff in those days. I mean they still had um boxing booths where, you know, you’d go and fight someone if you was stupid enough. [Interviewer laughs] Someone would do that and they had, they didn’t have the freak show but they certainly had the thing were you went and saw pictures of freaks, you know, that sort of weird stuff and uh ghost trains and dive bombers and there were always, whatever the youth cult of the time was, there was always loads of them looking for a fight because the people who run the fair were always willing to fight whoever was around and they was always kind of like, people who run the fair always seemed to be greasers and the local people always seemed to either be mods or skinheads or suedeheads or casuals, you know, sort of people who fight greasers but I used to love the fair for the bright lights, for the chance to do something with your mates that was brave and prove that you were, you know, go to on dive bomber or something, on the ghost train and to hear great music. They always seemed to play music that you couldn’t get there’s a rather risqué reggae song by a guy called Max Romeo called ‘Wet Dream,’ which when I was a teenager, when I was at school when I was thirteen or fourteen, was something that everybody was talking about but nobody had heard, nobody had a copy, didn’t know where to buy it but people talked about it and if you went over the fair invariably there would be a couple of rides that would be playing it very loud and as the rides started the record brrrr…and then on it would go but there something really cool about being on a ride with your mates with some girls watching listening to this risqué reggae song. [Interviewee and interviewer laugh] Somehow this seemed to be the absolute sort of zenith of teenhood.

*Mmh.*

At the time and then when it, when the fair went if you came over there was kind of like all these marks in the grass where the rides had been like there footprints where the grass hadn’t grown for a week or two, it was yellow and if you XXXX [interviewee rubs hands] you would sometimes find money that had fell out of people’s pockets while they were upside down on the dive bomber. You know, people would, I suppose people now come with metal detectors but in those days it was left to, you know, teen, you know, sort of twelve years olds like me. Just…

*I’ve got this vision in my head like a hundred twelve years olds just sort of going through the grass.*

Not quite a hundred but it was always, it was a known thing to do for those of us that, because there was little gaggle of us that lived down Park Avenue. There’s this little um sort of, I suppose you might call it a Battenberg of streets, like a Battenberg cake of crossed streets, Park Avenue, Monteagle, Faircross and Fanshawe. That little, the houses that were actually built when the park was built, before they built the houses on, these house on Longbridge Road are all from the, from the twenties but the Park Avenue houses are actually all from between 1900 and 1910 and when they were built they actually called New Barking. They were like the absolute limits and when my dad was a kid, Upney Lane from the, from the Royal Oak onwards was really countryside, it was a lane, it wasn’t, you know, it was fields and Upney Lane was covered over with trees and it was only when they started building the Leftley Estate in the twenties and thirties that all that, all that changed so the kids of us who lived in these older houses on Park Avenue and Faircross, Fanshawe and Monteagle we kind of came together because they were older stock than the Leftley Estates and because they were cheaper they tended to be immigrant families so when I, first kids I remember living in the houses opposite were all Irish and their parents all worked for Fords and they all went to St Joseph’s Primary so I didn’t see them at school, they went to a completely different school because they were Catholics and then they moved off somewhere leafy and then a load of people came from the Caribbean and then they were followed by people from South Asia, you know, Bangladeshis, all to work at the car factory and you know they all worked the line for a few years and then moved off somewhere, Chigwell, Chingford, Chelmsford, you know, all these kind of places and the, and the park just responded to them. They came and it responded and, you know, just after my mum died last year I was over for the house and the Mela was on, you know, it was exactly the same like when the fair was on. The streets were full of, you couldn’t park nowhere [interviewer laughs], families were thronging in and out of the park. You could hear a distant hum. It’s the same, same complete same thing, you know, and I’m sure it’s the same vibe over there, you know, young people trying to look impressive, members of the opposite sex. [Interviewer laughs] You know, kids trying to have a good time and their parents holding them back and you know. That’s what it looked like to me, it looked like exactly the same thing.

*You mentioned then about, you know, obviously coming over and try to impress the opposite sex and things like that, it’s something I’ve heard quite a lot, there were certain areas in the park where courting couples would go and hang out or, you know, they would take a lady on the motorboats. Would you ever do anything like that?*

No I’m afraid I was more kind of like, it’s more about going in the bushes, [interviewer laughs] my teenage experience I’m afraid because you’ve got to remember my parents could be walking round the park looking for me.

*Right.*

Because of the close proximity, you know, it wasn’t, it wasn’t unusual to be um involved in a football game, an ad hoc football game with jumpers for goal posts.

*Mmh.*

That was coming to its inextricable climax and you were very, very close to your team scoring the winning goal and everything was going to be absolutely, you know, everything was, was finely balanced to resolve the issue and your dad would turn up and say ‘come on time for your dinner.’ And you’d [interviewer bangs on table] ‘Steven’ [interviewer laughs] and he wouldn’t come away, he’d shout and I’m XXXX or someone else has to go or, you know. I can remember what you used to, this was a weird, weird part of it, you would regularly see over the park members of the West Ham team of that period, you know, over there. I don’t know if they, you know, perhaps they had relatives who lived around on the Leftley or, you know, around. I can see, I remember seeing Martin Peters over there. I can remember seeing a few footballers and, you know, and they were always happy to sign autographs because, you know, when I was a kid West Ham won the cup, they won the European Cup, they won the World Cup so you know they were pretty big around here.

*Did Bobby Moore play for West Ham by any chance?*

Yeah he did.

*I’ve heard that he used to be seen in the park quite a lot.*

Yep he was the captain, yep.

*Sorry I don’t know very much about football.*

No, he was the captain, he was born in Upney Hospital as well and um yeah but at the time almost all West Ham’s players were born in the East End, you know, it wasn’t, as I got older, you know, in seventy-five when they won the cup, it wasn’t uh uncommon to see members of the team in a bar in Barking or in the shops, you know, in the middle of the week so, you know, it’s different now. Teams from all over the place, nothing wrong with that, wrong with that but at the time it was much more of a local thing.

*That’s lovely and you mentioned um the lido a little bit earlier as well.*

Yeah.

*I was wondering if you could describe like a typical day at the lido for you.*

Yeah a typical day at the lido in my memory would be searingly hot. Um would be absolutely rammed packed with people uh and the far side, you came into the lido from the, from the south, the entrance was on the south side, opposite side to the lake, facing Longbridge road and there was always queues to get in. The changing rooms were pretty basic. Uh there were cubicles but there, and they had metals lockers so there was a continual clang of metal lockers in there all the time and kids, mums shouting for their kids and kids shouting for their mums, and vice versa. Um at the either end of um the two, of the big swimming pool, it was a huge swimming pool. I mean the biggest swimming pool I had ever seen in there. I wouldn’t be surprised if it was Olympic and it was really deep as well, it was seven foot deep in the middle. The depth was in the middle and they had two or three tier boards uh that, you know, Mr Wig used to dive off the top one. You should ask him about that yeah that was his party trick. [Interviewer and interviewee laugh] It was like ‘wow it’s Wiggy’s dad.’ He’d go, he was very good at it and um at either end there was a white ornamental fountain that was running all the time and you often ended up in the fountain [interviewer laughs] messing about, splashing about in the fountain and then on the far um northern side there was a big uh flat area, um which were you would put down your towel and you would sit there with your family like on a beach. It was kind of like a beach, you know, how you put your stuff down and you make a space and that’s your space and you come and go. It was like that but accept it was really crammed really, you know, it was like Glastonbury Festival [interviewer laughs] trying to get through and find where your mum is and everything like and then, you know, your little brother’s fell over, you’ve got to go and, go back and tell your mum, come get your little brother [interviewer laughs] and it was like a mixture between a day at the beach, Glastonbury Festival and some crazy market, you know, [interviewer laughs] where people are trying to do loads and loads of different things and a constant noise, like a, like a uh penguin colony ra, ra, ra, ra, ra, ra all the time. [Interviewer laughs] That doesn’t sound like penguins at all, does it?

*It’s a brilliant mental image though.*

Puffin. Yeah, yeah like a seagull colony. Ra, ra, ra, ra. All the time. [Interviewer laughs] You know, the whole noise but incredible, you know, incredible place on a nice day you would never believe you were in the middle of the East End you would think you were in Marbella or something. It was brilliant.

*It sounds so wonderful.*

It was, it was great, it was cool.

*It’s one of my biggest regrets, I’ll never see it.*

And then the whole thing was cool. The whole thing was, it was like, it was like, you know, having your own playground.

*Yeah.*

You know and it’s great. Where I live in Dorset now, I live on a beach and if it’s a nice day, there can be like 600 cars in the car park, next to our house, the next field, you know and people say to me ‘don’t it annoy you, all the grockles?’ and I say ‘look mate I grew up next to a park in a city.’ Alright if you live in a place like this, how lucky I was to do that, you live in a place like that, people are going to come.

*Yeah.*

People are going to come, you know, they’re all gone by tea time, it’s the same with the park, you know, on the beach, they’re gone by teatime to get their lunch in a B and B or their dinner or whatever,. You’ve got it all to yourself, you know, and it’s the same with the park.

*Yeah.*

You know, everyone’s gone by home by the evening and if you get up in the morning or there’s days when it’s beautiful and it’s, not everyone’s off school and you’ve got it all to yourself, you know, it’s just a fabulous thing to grow up next to because, you know, it’s pretty packed around here. Always was as long as I can remember, it’s not a new phenomenon, you know, you have to drive a long way to find some fields and a, and a lake so, you know, I feel, I feel very privileged to sort of grown up with that experience and to have had the opportunity to run wild in safety, relative safety um so close to home, you know.

*Yeah, it’s something a lot of young people don’t have these days isn’t it?*

No and didn’t then, didn’t then. You know when you think of all those kids who lived in the Lintons.

*Yeah.*

They didn’t really have, even have back gardens, you know, and uh had to cross several main roads to get to the park but that’s, you know, that’s something that I'll always think was a fortunate part of my childhood to be, to have grown up in, you know, in such a wondrous, magical place.

*It’s amazing. Would you mind if I just quickly ask you one more question? I know you’re really busy*

No it’s alright, we’re good, we’re good, we’re good.

*Um I was wondering if you could sort of describe going on the paddle steamer because a lot people have talked about it but a lot of people don’t really remember being on it, whether they just didn’t or…*

Okay.

*If that’s okay?*

Yeah, yeah, I’ll try. I’ll try and describe it. The paddle steamer was, it was very basic. Um it, it was kind of, it was sort of oblong in shape. It had the paddle wheel at the back, which was the whole width of the thing. It wasn’t, it wasn’t very wide and it had um, it had a sort of canopy over it, held up by uh struts so it was open, a little fence and the seats were um. The whole thing was made, was made of uh, the deck was made of wooden uh slats. There were little gaps in them, they were really darkly varnished and the, and the seats, um I don’t think you sat front on. There were two benches either side and a, and a middle bit down the middle and everyone sat, it was back to back so the people on the left hand side were looking out to the left and people on the right hand side were looking out to the right. That’s how, that’s how I remember. It wasn’t like seating like on a, on a bus, you know, on a train. It was more, you know, geared to seeing and uh it went down to the, to the Ilford Lane Gates, turned around and then I think it, I’m not sure if it went as far as the first island and turned, it might have behind have gone behind the first because, because the motorboats only went to the first island, you know, and then and then came back. You weren’t allowed, the motor boats didn’t go all the way down to the South Park end. The rowing boats did. The rowing boats could go all the way to South Park but the motor boats had to turn after the first island and uh and the paddle steamer just kind of like XXXX, it didn’t go very fast. I’m sure it wasn’t very big. I mean it’s big in my memory it was big but I’m sure and I don’t think it was a steamer. I think it was electric. I think it was, I don’t remember it. I think it had a little chimney but I can’t remember them stoking up and making it go. I think it was just, you know. It looked great. I mean it looked really, really brilliant and uh, you know, it, on that little narrow lake, where those, because the motorboats were sat quite low in the water uh and it was, it was a nice thing to go on and there was always queues. There was always queues to go on the motorboats and there was always queues to go on the paddle steamer.

*Mmh.*

The Phoenix it was called.

*Yeah.*

And uh my nan used to take me on it. [Interviewer laughs]

*Did she used to enjoy it as well?*

Yeah she did. Yeah she’d grown up there. She’d uh, she lived in the house next door as a girl and she got married there as well in 1918 and then she gave birth there. Well dad was born in 1924 in that little house on Park Avenue so she kind of spent her whole life there. I’m not sure, I don’t know if they, well I don’t think the houses were built when the park opened in, in the 1890s and that house where we lived was kind of built in 1905, 1906 but um certainly she was still a girl when she moved here with her sister and her mum and dad so the park would have been as familiar to, I mean there that’s gone. The bandstand has gone, that’s not there anymore. The good old conker tree has gone. [Interviewer laughs] Um I’m pleased the paddling pool and the lido are still there. I don’t know if there’s any plans to do anything with the lido.

*Um yeah with the lido they’ve, they’ve actually removed the pool and it’s going to be like a wet play area?*

Oh lovely.

*There’s going to be like fountains for kids to run through.*

Exactly, sounds great.

*Yeah.*

Because of all the things that we did when we were over the lido, going in the swimming pool was not [interviewer laughs] predominant in my memory, really because it was too cold and uh it was, you know, a width there was pretty, pretty wide, you know, you can do a lot of swimming but running around, messing around, getting wet.

*Mmh.*

Splashing each other [interviewer laughs] that was much of the attraction. [Interviewer and interviewee laughs] So it makes sense it should be something like that.

*Yeah and obviously with the British summers it’s probably not going to get much use as a?*

Well you’d be surprised. I think the good people round here, if there is a bit of sunshine, they tend to come out into the park.

*Mmh.*

You know, it don’t take much to get people to come out there.

*I’m thinking more of people, they actually have holidays abroad and things more now I think than they used to so maybe they’ve not so much.*

Actually, you know, I live by a beach and people are spending more time, coming.

*Really.*

Yeah.

*Oh fabulous.*

It’s not so expensive.

*Yeah.*

You know and a park is like a, a, you know, it’s like a local uh, a local way of. If it’s a nice day you can go to the park.

*Yeah.*

What are we going to do today, where’d go over the park. You know.

*With day a like this it's wonderful isn’t it?*

Yeah, it’s always and it, you know, changes all the time, changes with the seasons.

*Yeah.*

You know, it's not like something that’s the same every time your there, you know, like a, like a theme park or, or Legoland or something like that, you know, it’s always different.

*What would you say your favourite season in the park was?*

Autumn.

*Could you tell me why?*

Well because it changes colour. Um you get the conker season. It’s the, the fair comes.

*Yeah.*

You have to go back to school but [interviewer laughs] you know. It always seemed to me to be the time like I, I most enjoyed. I mean summer was nice and then spring too. Even winter but autumn I think, you know, the piles of leaves, where you could go and kick them. The Parkies would pile them up and you would kick them down again. [Interviewer and interviewee laugh]

*Just winding up Parkies then yeah.*

Yeah, at constant war with the Parkies yep and uh I think, you know, the football season was about to start so everyone was geared up for that again. Summer seemed like very, very long in those days. Long old gap when there was no football and that came around again. So yeah.

*Fabulous.*

Autumn, autumn was good for me.

*And obviously I know we’re running out of time a bit. Is there anything else that you’d like to say about the park?*

Uh I’m trying to, just trying to think of, looking at the map. I’ve been looking on the map on the wall there as aide-mémoire of all the things that I, I’ve done, you know, in there and uh, I think, maybe probably covered most things. There weren’t any squirrels there when I was a kid.

*Really?*

No squirrels are a recent phenomenon. [Interviewer laughs] Not that recent, they’ve probably been there thirty years but I don’t remember any squirrels when we were kids that’s a, that’s a different thing and uh the hills seemed hillier and the trees seemed taller and the gap, you know, the big field seemed bigger. [Interviewer laughs] Ah.

*So the whole park shrunk down a little bit.*

The train, the little train.

*Ooh do you have memories of the train?*

Yeah we used to race it on our bikes, the train. We used to ride on it. Um if you were really cool, you might get to help the bloke who ran it.

*Right.*

Sometimes if he’s, because he always had a kid who helped him, it might have been his son or his nephew, I don’t know, or whoever and if he wasn’t around they might let you help so you get to ride on it. Sit on the back and ride on it, stuff like that because there used to be um half way up the track there was, there was a gate, a little uh crossing there so they would need someone there to close, to open the gate and close the gate when the train running so that was, that was quite a good function and they’d turn the turntable as well but um most of the time it was just racing it on our bikes. I can remember doing that quite a bit because they never had the speed bumps there either in them days, [interviewer laughs] that wasn’t part of it. It was a little bit more straightforward.

*Lovely, okay well if there is anything else you would like to say.*

I can’t remember if there is anything else to say really.

*You’ll think of half a dozen things tonight won’t you?*

I will. I certainly will [interviewer laughs] and that’s the other thing. I do sometimes come here to the park in my dreams.

*Yeah.*

I find myself in it. Wondering around somewhere doing something, knocking around with people I’ve totally forgotten, doing some crazy thing. Uh it was, it was where my childhood more or less sort of was centred on for me and those kids that we knocked around with. That’s a great place.

*Yeah. It sounds like it's had quite an influence on you, doesn’t it really?*

I wouldn’t say an influence in that sense but when I, if you want, if you wanted to talk about my, you know, childhood, the first fifteen, sixteen years of my life, then the park does loom very large in that, you know, it was too good a resource for my parents not to bring me in here every day in a pram. All the earliest pictures are all sitting somewhere at the park, doing something in the park and um it still, it still has its pull I think. People still, you know, my nephew now lives in the house we grew up since my mum passed away and um we always used to refer to it as Nanny Maries? House and now she’s passed away they call it the Park House.

*Okay.*

And hopefully, you know, if they have some kids, they’ll, they’ll get the run of the place as well.

*That’s fabulous. I like to think of all these different generations.*

Certainly how it was in our family. My dad and Mr Wig and all those kids, had the run of it when they were growing up in there. You know and it benefited them and me and my brother and that generation, we, you know, we’ve had a good run round and I know my nephews, not my son because we’ve spent a lot of time away, we haven’t lived here, but I know my mum always used to take my nephews over there, three of them and uh, you know, it’s just a, I think it has great social value, a place like that were you can, you know, go do a number of different activities even if it’s just walking around, it’s good to do that.

*Yeah, definitely. Well brilliant. Thank you very, very much.*

My pleasure.

*Really, really XXXX to take your time.*

Nice to talk about it.

### The End

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**Interview details**

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