

Memories of Priory Court 1949-1959

By Marion Cunningham, née Proudfoot

In the Summer of 1949 I recall as a young child going along with my mother and grandma to view the new flat that had been allocated to my family by the Walthamstow Borough Council, as it was then known.

For some months my parents, elder brother and myself had been living in one room of a very large house near the Water Works in Forest Road in what was known as a 'Halfway House' accommodation. This term I presume was for families who were in need of being re-housed for various reasons. We were there because my mother believed she had cause to disagree with our Landlord and he had given her a notice to quit, so we had to leave.

I still remember my mother's tears of joy when a letter arrived to say that we had been offered one of the new modern luxurious flats that were being built on a new estate called Priory Court. Even as a six year old I felt the anticipation and excitement as we walked through the enormous barrier gates that had been erected in the high wire fence surrounding the grounds whilst building work was still in progress. I can remember looking in awe at these magnificent towering buildings each five stories high and as I recall, all painted in different pastel shades.

We were directed by a workman to N. Block which was now completed and ready for occupation. Our flat was no. 242 on the second floor. Neat lawns were being laid out flanking an attractive path that lead to heavy glass doors and into the main entrance of the building. Here were situated toilets, laundry rooms with washing machines, spin dryers and gas drying cabinets for the residents use, all to the amazement of mother and grandma whom I am sure had never seen such wondrous washing facilities before. There was a lift to whisk people up to their required floor, coal could actually be stored in a cupboard on the landing outside our front door and shovelled out via a shute that was concealed in the hallway inside the flat. (some years later my brother had a very frightening experience when he got stuck in this shute after getting himself locked out of the flat)

There were three bedrooms, a bathroom with hot running water, no more dragging in a tin bath from the garden and filling it with water from the copper, "What a blessing" Grandma had said.

There was even a separate toilet which meant no more using the outside privie or having to use a 'goesunder' at night as we had often done before.

The fitted kitchen was absolutely wonderful according to the grown ups, the delight of having every modern convenience of the day! A fridge, an electric cooker, a sink with a double drainer and even a serving hatch which led into a spacious lounge where one wall fronting the flat was mostly windows. Glass doors led from the kitchen and the lounge onto a balcony where there were window boxes and in the following years, competitions were held to see who had the prettiest. Here on the balcony was the fascination of seeing all our household rubbish disappearing down a chute to the large bins hidden below and out of sight.

And so it was we moved to Priory Court. It was here that my parents managed to scrape together enough money to buy their first television set and I recall how my dad covered the small screen with green cellophane paper to give it 'colour'. Dad became one of the founder members of the very first Priory Court Tenants Association along with a man named Harry Pattel who I recall lived on the first floor in R Block. The newly formed committee campaigned to stop a Chapel of Rest being erected for deceased tenants and to have a Community Hall built instead along with tennis courts. The tenants won the day and the Hall was built.

Outings to the coast and London shows were organised along with other social events. I recall the wonderful party laid on for the Queen's Coronation, Baby Shows, Fancy Dress Parades and how wonderful all the flats looked decked out in red white and blue bunting.

It became a wonderful place to live and all my memories of growing up in Priory Court were very happy indeed. As time passed we had the Thursday night youth club to look forward to in the Community Hall and the Rock n Roll nights on a Saturday where we jived to Bill Haley. I had a portable record player at the time and anyone could bring their records along to play. Girls in flared skirts and brightly coloured can-can petticoats were the fashion of the day while the Teddy Boys wore their drape jackets and blue crepe shoes. Often lads in uniform were home on weekend passes from doing their National Service and a wonderful time was had by all. I honestly do not recall any fights or trouble, everyone was there to have a good time and that they certainly did. We were even honoured once by the well known guitarist Burt Weedon and the hall was packed to its seams.

There was often of course gossip, scandals and rumours going on. A woman said to have been murdered by her husband turned up alive and kicking several weeks later, the ghost of a hooded monk was reputed to have been seen wondering around the blocks at night but I was never brave enough to look out of my bedroom window to see for myself.

A radio ham by the name of Paul B. tuned into the local frequency and startled many of the neighbours when they heard personal comments coming from their wireless's!

In those early days milk, bread, groceries and coal were still delivered by horse and carts. Children were often sent out with a bucket to shovel up any manure left by the horses for their father's allotments that were allocated behind some of the blocks of flats. The cry of the coalman calling, " Coals for cash, Coals for cash only! " must have caused a few blushes because I now realise that he certainly wasn't referring to debit or credit cards which of course were none existent then. Then there was the Esso Blue dealer shouting, 'I say where you like, two bob a gallon!" (10 pence) and the cockle and winkle man on a Sunday. Then sometimes we could get a goldfish or a gold bracelet that turned your skin green from the rag and bone man who called out, "Ol' iron en ol' lumber!". Sometimes if we were really lucky we would get a ride on his cart around the estate.

Then in 1959 my parents, Jack and Milly Proudfoot had the chance to move to Canvey Island and I was heart broken at leaving Priory Court. I had made many friends there and my special friend was Maureen Penn (now Shanks) and to this day we have kept in touch and remain best friends.

Just a few years back I returned to Priory Court, now a great grandmother and oh, how sad it was to see how it has all changed. N. Block has since been demolished and bungalows are now in it's place but I have my memories and thanks to this wonderful site I can now share them with other people and give them an insight as to how the story of Priory Court began.

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