

# Coming of age in Forty Hill: a personal vernacular history

Robert Nicholls, 2010

I have lived outside Britain for many years, in West Africa, the USA, and the Caribbean respectively, and something I miss more than anything else is the dawn chorus. For my tastes no birdsong I've heard equals that of England, and accordingly I want to start these musings about my Forty Hill genesis with memories of an area where it was fully manifest. As a child I always loved the dawn chorus. I would sometimes wake early maybe around 4:30 a.m. on a weekend morning and with nature's voice cascading from creation and filling the air, further sleep was impossible. So shaking off whatever dull sloth remained, I would go downstairs to the kitchen and rattle Johnny the dog's leash, causing him to pirouette gleefully in the air at the thought of adventures to come, and off we'd go, Johnny pulling me along, gagging as he strained at his leash until we reached "Beulah Land" where he would be freed.

My father, Eric Nicholls, was a birdwatcher and quite an expert. He led rambles over Whitewebbs and Hilly Fields for nature groups, boy scouts, and others. With his musical ear he could identify bird species by their sounds like no one else I've met. As a child, he demonstrated to me that he could imitate a hoot owl and summons it to him by keeping to a strict call and response sequence. There was I,



Screech owl  
(Courtesy of Tangledwing,  
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as quickly as I could back into the kitchen. During the dawn chorus songbirds execute lyrical musical passages from the safety of their roosts within a territory they recognize as their own. In Britain it's at its height in spring and early summer when the nights become short. The longest day lasts from approximately 4:45 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. Typically, blackbirds, thrushes, robins, warblers, and the other birds start singing about 45 minutes before sunrise and continue until there's enough light for them to move around. In the tropics the days and nights are virtually equal and the transition from dark to light is very rapid. Birds in most places have working noises which are the sounds of the day, cheeps, whirrs, squawks, whoops, territorial alerts, and other signals; and I noticed their prevalence during my time in Nigeria, but missed the dawn chorus. My father explained that because in temperate zones, dawn and dusk materialize slowly, birds remain in their roosts but are awake because there is a threshold of light. During the slowly emerging daybreak before they begin their daily routine, they occupy themselves by satisfying the impulse to sing, all at once from their various locations. The chorus at dusk is equally intense. The blackbird singing in my Granny's cherry tree was mesmerizing.



At the west end of St. George's Road, across Forty Hill Road behind a low chain link fence and an old farm gate were some pastures known as the Tailor's Field or simply the Allotments, and there were allotment plots there to be sure, stretching all the way to Clay Hill, but there was so much more. Rutted paths led to large tracts of Forty Hill estate but unlike the park these were not groomed and orderly, rather they were wild grassland with thickets, ditches, embankments, and large elms, oaks and conker trees (horse chestnuts). Apart from allotment-tenders it was closed to the public, but we kids made occasional forays and nobody bothered us. We found a derelict summerhouse by a small lake in the woods which doubtless once provided recreation for the Bowles family and their guests, but now was overgrown by trees and creepers, and made an ideal base-camp for our games. I caught a grass snake over the Allotments once and kept it in an empty aquarium in our back shed, but it gave out a pungent protective odour so I let it go. Poisonous adders were there as well as evidenced by a skin nailed to post, but I never saw one. For the St. George's Road and Goat Lane vicinity the Allotments provided an avian arena and a showcase for a chorale in the half-light.

It was not on every occasion that I found the dawn chorus so appealing. Later, when I was an Art student in Watford my college grant was withdrawn and I returned home to St. George's Road so I could continue my studies. Following nights on the town, clubbing rather than pubbing, I'd wend my way back home staggering in at 4:00 or 5:00 am, hazy from intoxicants and nursing the head-splitting beginnings of a hangover, and the bird chorale would be going at full blast. What a cacophony! It was like being in the middle of a menagerie. It seemed so loud that I found it amazing that anybody could stay asleep with such a racket going on.

Forty Hill is a semi-rural corner of the north London Borough of Enfield. Enfield was in Middlesex in my boyhood, but in 1965, the borough was formed by merging Enfield with the Middlesex boroughs of Southgate and Edmonton. I remember crisp clear mornings in autumn and winter when the far-off singing of commuter tires from the Great Cambridge Road spread across the Lea Valley and reached my bedroom window at St. George's Road and my mind's eye would rise aloft and look down at the traffic flowing to and from the capital. The Great Cambridge Road, the A10 arterial highway, runs due north from London and cuts through our area. It's located where the old Roman road, Ermine Street, passed through Enfield



Forty Hall

and Hertfordshire, connecting London with Lincoln and York. Forty Hill is to the west of the Great Cambridge Road and the New River, and comprises a few old cottages and houses, and streets of 1930s semi-detached houses including the one owned by my family. Forty Hall is an historic estate that lies to the west of the hill itself, with its massive gateway on the crest. In my time it had been made into a park and its hall a museum and was my childhood haunt. Colonel Sir Henry Bowles was lord of the manor during my father's and Norman Lewis's childhood. Lewis states:

The Colonel was a phenomenon of English rural life hardly changed since the invention of the open-field system of agriculture. He had represented Enfield as a Tory MP longer than anyone could remember.... Sir Henry ... remained aloof and God-like, isolated from such contact by his underlings. Sir Henry owned the houses his workers lived in, and they were entirely dependent upon him for work. (1985 p. 45-46)

In her youth, Pamela Slater, a relative of my father who lived at the cottages opposite the Goat pub, was in service at Forty Hall. Sir Henry's younger brother, Augustus Bowles, known as Gussy, was a noted botanist and lived nearby at Myddelton House, Bull's Cross, to the north of Maidens Bridge which spans Turkey Brook (the Dell), and the Bowles brothers' lands adjoined. The Bowleses were a members of a family connected with the New River Company inherited from Sir Hugh Myddelton. Myddelton (1560-1631) gained his fame by constructing the New River which brought clean water from the artesian wells of Ware in Hertfordshire to London. The waterway runs between Forty Hill and the Great Cambridge Road and crosses Turkey Brook in massive ducts.



Royal Small Arms Factory staff

The council housing estates with their rows of predictable two-storey houses were less than a mile or so away from Forty Hall on the east side of the Cambridge Road, though some straddled it. Local lore informed us that during the Second World War, working class East-Enders, "Cockneys," were evacuated and settled in council houses in Enfield Wash, Ponders End, and along Enfield Highway and the Cambridge Road, where they were recruited to work in the factories near the River Lea. But the exodus began earlier in their parents' or grandparents' times. Writing of the period before or around the First World War,

Enfield author Norman Lewis talks of a “stream of emigrants out of the East End, through Bethnal Green, Hackney, Clapton, Tottenham and Upper and Lower Edmonton ... until the great urban mess finally expired in the grim streets of Enfield Wash, Enfield Lock, and Freezy Water” (Lewis 1985, p. 65). The factories that provided jobs included Enfield Rolling Mills at Brimsdown and the Royal Enfield Small Arms Factory at nearby Enfield Lock. These made the area a target for German bombing during World War Two and my older sister and brother, Sally and Paul, remember the “buzz bombs” and the air raids of incendiary bombs, and the sirens that warned of impending attacks. Though too young to remember, I sheltered with them under the Morrison Shelter in our front room during the final years of the war. The industrial area is now much reduced. Established in the early 19th century, the Small Arms Factory was closed in 1987. When the plant was closed the people who had the job of emptying it said it looked like the workers were on a fire drill. There were half finished cups of coffee, work still in the machines half finished, completed weapons in racks, pallets of machined parts just unloaded from lorries (from The Enfield Council, records).

I’ve been dusting off memories from my early and mid-teenage years during the late 1950s – early 1960s and there’s a girl who lived to the east of Cambridge Road on Boleyn Avenue, whose name I can’t recall. I hope I remember it; it’s distracting and I’ve long since lost touch with people who might know. Why has she pushed her way forward among my memories and why have I become fixated on the kernel of her being, even without a name? Maybe it’s a psychic thing; it was a full moon when this nostalgia began. Perhaps she died and her soul is demanding due honour. More likely the annoyance of forgetting her name has elevated her significance. It’s irksome; names are like handles, how can you think clearly without names? They embody an individual’s essence and I feel I’ve done her a disservice. At first I dubbed her Paula Rudkin, but then I realized Paula Rudkin was a fellow Theobalds’ student who also had dark hair, but was taller. I tried to arrive at it phonetically and composed names that I felt sounded similar. I got as far as “Sue Bandana” because, despite its burlesque quality, I think her name had four syllables and some n’s or m’s in it. “Mona Peters,” “Rosa Damone,” “Molly Hunter,” “Diana King,” “Myrna Stevens,” [Maureen?] none is correct, but have the right feel and I suspect the surname holds the key, even Mona Roberts, but wouldn’t I know if she had the same name as me? I’ll call her Mona for now, although Mona is a bit exotic for an Enfield girl even one with a Creole look. In the 1950s they had standard names, Pamela, Sandra, Brenda, Joan, Susan, and the like. Norman Lewis (b. 1908) remembers common Enfield names of his generation as “Ethel, Gladys or Florence” (1985, p. 67).

Significantly, I had just finished reading the 700 plus pages of *The Semi-Invisible Man* by Julian Evans (2008) when this imprecise memory emerged. The book includes a rather unflattering view of Enfield which is depicted as a betwixt-and-between territory inhabited by a brutalized populace, and a good place to escape from. *The Semi-Invisible Man* is a biography of Forty Hill’s illustrious son, traveller-writer the Late Norman Lewis. It includes interviews with my father and aunts and uncles who remember Lewis’s childhood and teenage years. In due course Norman Lewis and all us Nicholls’s left Forty Hill anyway, in my own case for a more cosmopolitan environment. During my childhood, Enfield was pretty much uniformly Caucasian though as time passed it would become more heterogeneous. Many years later I was gratified to discover that my parents’ former house in St. George’s Road was the first on the street to be occupied by a Black family.

In the Introduction to his book, Julian Evans provides a description of the Forty Hill area where Norman Lewis and I grew up. While Lewis lived in Carterhatch Lane near Bridgenhall Road where my father and siblings lived, I was born and raised at 27 St. George’s Road a couple of streets away, literally born there because none of us three siblings were delivered in a hospital. Forty Hill had not changed significantly during the intervening thirty-plus years between Lewis’s era and my own. St. George’s Road is at the bottom of Forty Hill and runs parallel to, and within a stones throw from, Goat Lane, where Evan’s starts his description. He depicts the west end of Goat Lane, “where the cut-through of tied cottages inhabited by Forty Hill workers opened out onto the hill” (xxiii). He states:

Turn left at the top of Goat Lane and within twenty seconds you find yourself breathing in the proximity of London. Forty Hill unrolling in front of you seems to set itself straight at the capital's great, incoherent skyline. (xxi)

Turn right instead of left, onto the hill, away from the city.... Rising gently, tree shaded on the left side and lined on the right by the walls and locked gates, softened by hedges and ivy, of individual Georgian houses, Forty Hill dismisses the city.... Its apotheosis comes at the brow of the hill in the grandiloquent but oddly heavy shape of Forty Hall.... Past the gates of Forty Hall the road drops away again, leaving the houses behind and narrowing between the dark trees to turn past the ugly Victorian front of Jesus Church and Forty Hill primary school and cross ... Maidens Bridge. (xxii)

Evans maintains that there are the two halves of Forty Hill, "downhill to the city and the democratic sweep of north London suburbia, uphill to the grounds of Forty Hall and Maidens Bridge and beyond, to green places with more than enough wilderness for an adventurous boy, but all owned by somebody else" (xxiii). Talking of Lewis but also ringing true for me, Evans concludes, "this boy's life began in edges and oppositions: the edge of the capital, the edge of a wilderness." I was able to access some of the (domesticated) wilderness because by my time Forty Hall estate had been transformed into a spacious public park stretching to Whitewebbs Park which connected to Hilly Fields. Moreover the Dell between Maidens Bridge and Cambridge Road was always accessible for strolls, trysts for Gypsy lovers, and fishing for sticklebacks, minnows, bullheads, and the occasional roach. Theobalds Park had its own tract of wilderness and was my secondary school.

While musing on my boyhood, I came across a photograph of Theobalds Park. It's a stately building, a large well-maintained Georgian mansion which, like Forty Hall, lies to the west of the Cambridge Road and the New River, but is located in historic grounds just over the Enfield border in Cheshunt, Hertfordshire. It is much larger than Forty Hall, and although now a picturesque hotel, was in my day, incongruously, a co-ed secondary modern school that I attended from eleven to fifteen. I had failed the now-obsolete



Theobalds Park  
(courtesy of DeVere Venues)

"eleven plus" exam at the end of my junior education and although subsequently "making good" as a late bloomer and obtaining a Ph.D., my post-primary education began at Theobalds School. Secondary modern schools were instigated in 1944 and catered for those students who did not achieve scores in the top 25% of the eleven plus exam. They were replaced by the comprehensive school system in the early 1970s. Theobalds drew students from Enfield, Waltham Cross, and local farms, while the majority, a rather rough bunch, came from the council housing projects east of the Cambridge Road and south of Bullsmoor Lane.

I was the only one of the children to fail the eleven plus. Paul passed and went to Enfield Grammar School and with a career as a Clerk to Tottenham, Enfield, and Ludlow Magistrate's Courts served for a while on the Grammar School's Board of Governors. Sally passed and went to Latymer's School and then on to a degree in Social Administration and Psychology winding up in Senior Management at London's City Literary Institute. I believe most if not all of my cousins passed. I was disappointed I suppose, I felt that I'd let the family down, but beyond that I probably had the same apathetic response that led me to failing in the first place. In truth I was nonplussed and didn't really know what to think. Why did I fail? Well, I would describe myself as a dreamy little character preoccupied with African landscapes and animals, but others might disagree, I spent most of my time playing games, carving wood, or rambling through wild places with Johnny our dog; although I did read a lot. The only question I recall is one that I got wrong, whereby on a multiple choice list I identified "several" as "seven."

As a boy I had accumulated an extended gang of friends that waxed and waned in number. I lived at no. 27 St. George's Road and core friends lived near me on the odd numbered side of the street. These included

Sammy Sheepwash who lived at no 15, seven doors down from me. Sammy, or Micky as we called him, had welts on his neck, shoulder, and one side of his face, and a pronounced stutter as a result of scalding himself by pulling boiling water over himself from the stove as a tot (these disfigurements lessened over time); Jackie my female age-mate and cousin, who lived at no 17 with her senior sister Linda and her mother, my Aunt Betty, and our grandmother, Rosalyn Bryan; my mate and main buddy, Mike Seegar, lived at no. 23 just two houses from me and was the same age as me and Jackie. Finally there was Peasticks (Peter East), whose house on Russell Road backed onto the same back alley as us. Mike Seegar went to Forty Hill Church School with the likes of soccer whiz Johnny Archer and budding beauty Anita Royal, both of whom ended up in my class at Theobalds. Forty Hill School was a small parochial primary school between Jesus Church and the Dell. I went to Lavender Road School, like the rest of my family. Sally had some of the same teachers that my mother had in her time. Being a couple of years older, Sammy Sheepwash was the first to fail the eleven plus, Jackie passed and went on to Latymer's like her sister, but eventually dropped out. Mike and I failed; Peasticks was a couple of years younger, but failed in due course and went to Chase Boys Secondary Modern School, later relocating to Australia in his late teens.

A choice was made regarding which secondary school I should attend. While Mike would be attending Chase Boys, we opted for Theobalds. Mum and Dad seemed effusive about Theobalds, I believe in part to compensate for my failing the eleven plus, and they launched my secondary school career by buying me a brand new bicycle for my daily commute. The bike was a nice colour, wine red with the word "Hopper" emblazoned in yellow on the frame, but I had to conceal a gasp of disappointment when they unveiled the old fashioned sit-up-and-beg bike, with rigid handlebars and metal brakes rather than one with flexible cable brakes, which gives one the option of having straight handlebars, dropped, or the upward crescent of monkey hangers or cow horns. I should have spoken up, I am sure they could have changed it. I spent many embarrassed hours on that bike, it was my primary mode of transport for five years, from the time I started secondary school to the time I was working and able to move up to a 250cc BSA motorcycle. Looking back it is true for most of us; there are occasions we regret, when one's own best interests are not served by staying mute. But, my parents were so proud of the gift they presented that I chose to conceal my disappointment; unfortunately I must have put on a pretty good façade.

Next I had to be equipped with a Theobalds' uniform which consisted of a mauve blazer, a mauve and grey cap, and grey trousers, which in my case were short because I had not yet graduated to long trousers. The uniform was smart and suitably academic, but in this case it is a fact that "a uniform doth not a school make." Thus, with a recent short-back-and-sides haircut, dressed in my short-trousered uniform with a new satchel for good measure, and seated on my sit-up-and-beg bicycle I optimistically set off for my first day at the new school. I cycled two miles north, over Forty Hill, along Bull's Cross, past Myddelton House and the orchards between Turkey Street and Bullsmoor Lane, then onto a long tree-lined avenue between farmland (now sacrificed to the M25) that led to the school's pillared gateway, adjacent to a mink farm and a riding school. As I entered the avenue with others on bikes and a lot of students on foot, and I was soon disabused of the notion that a uniform was compulsory. I came to discover that few students beyond the first form wore uniforms. Nevertheless, Theobalds turned out to be physically gorgeous. Although the historic Temple Bar Gate has now been returned to the City of London, in my time it was located in the school's spacious grounds. Within the main building, we urchins sauntered along corridors of mosaic and tiles and had class sessions in oak-panelled rooms with ornate stucco ceilings. We probably didn't deserve it. We used pens and inkwells in those days, and ink-soaked blotting paper missiles could be flicked across the classroom with a ruler. Later, I remember one of my classmates scandalizing the administration by flicking an ink blot onto an ornate ceiling and the class being held back until the guilty party was named. The class remained silent and eventually the culprit was shamed into admission. For this he was caned in front of the student body during the morning assembly.

My first day started on a high point. I locked my bike in the bike rack and made my way to the Cloakroom, where Brenda Jeffs, the Cloakroom Prefect fussed over me in motherly way. Students started school at a pre-pubic age and left in their midteens. In the intervening years they usually increased their height by a foot or more and matured into ripe teenagers. From the vantage point of a new boy the seniors looked like

grown men and women and they had the self-assurance and swagger to go along with their supremacy among students. Brenda Jeffs was one of the fourth form belles and she left an indelible image in my memory. She had soft dark eyes and dark auburn hair pulled back in a Tony Curtis style with a DA at the back. She wore a tightish dark-grey calf-length skirt with a white blouse under a tight black cardigan. She was slim and looking up at her I was awed by her neat sensuality.

We newbies assembled in front of the school and were placed into "Houses" to which we belonged throughout our time at Theobalds. The houses were named after historical figures that supposedly had some connection to Theobalds. My house was Burleigh after Lord Burleigh, other houses were Cecil, Gilmore, Stewart, and Meux. From there we had a house meeting and met the senior students who served as house prefects. We were assigned to classes; there were two classes per form. When I became aware that the IA form teacher was to be a Miss Richards, I was alarmed that it might turn out to be the same brutal Miss Richards that I had just escaped from at Lavender Road School. Fortunately this proved not to be the case. This was a relief, but it was all downhill from that point. We discovered that new boys were initiated to Theobalds by being "thrown down the pit." The pit was a large hollow, like a bomb crater with spiky undergrowth at the bottom, located on the far side of the front lawn. The uniforms were a giveaway and we new boys spent our lunch break scampering around looking for safe places to hide. I opted for the back of the building and admired Theobalds' architecture undisturbed. The threat of the pit turned out to be more bluff than reality though a few new boys were caught and dealt with accordingly. But my fate was worse. In my ignorance I committed the cardinal sin of walking down a corridor on the wrong side. I was nabbed by a prefect when I walked on the right hand side instead of the left and I was sent to Mr. Midgley for punishment. Mr. Midgley was a surly man with a loose jaw that sprayed spittle when he was angry. Although he frightened the smaller students, he ingratiated himself with the fourth formers who were as big as or bigger than he was. I duly climbed the ornately balustraded staircase to his classroom on the top floor, where I became the target for the jeers and ridicule of the fourth form men and women as he bent me over his knee, hoisted up my trouser leg and gave me a lathering with a tennis slipper. And this on my first day! Thus began my enculturation into the working class milieu.

As I look at the front portico of Theobalds in the photo, a memory surfaces of two ex-students who came back to visit and, surrounded by us admiring school kids, talked for a while with a couple of teachers near the entrance. Although their conversation was normal their smirks and presumption of equality with their former teachers smacked of insolence. I believe the main purpose of their visit was to parade their spivvy Teddy Boy duds to us juniors and to bask in our adulation. Working-class high fashion in the mid-1950s consisted of drape jackets, often with a waistcoat, and tight drainpipe trousers. Hairstyles for boys (and some girls) were variations of the "Tony Curtis" with a DA. Males might wear a bushy forelock or a brilliantined "elephants trunk" which pointed to the front. The "south bank" combined a crew-cut brush on top with the obligatory sideburns and swept-back hair at the sides. Ideally, shoes were suede, crepe-soled brothel creepers sometimes worn with luminous pink socks. These styles seem to have arisen somewhat democratically from grass-roots impulses, but by the end of the 1950s, according to the now commercially contrived dictates of fashion, the jacket length had swung to the other extreme and the long drape style gave way to short Italian bum-freezers while the chunky creepers were supplanted by pointed winkle-pickers.



Typical Teddy Boys

Despite her current persistence in my memory, Mona was not in the mainstream of my life-experience; she was tangential to it and fairly insignificant. Compared, for example, to my ardour for our new next-door neighbours, the Liddicoat twins, Carol and Margaret, whom I loved innocently but equally when they were fourteen and I was twelve and in the inceptive throes of adolescent passion; or to Pat Smitherman, my first teenage girlfriend, to whom I was duly loyal for two or three years. I first met Mona when I was eleven or twelve. Chronologically she may have been a year or so younger than me, but as with many girls of that age she was cerebrally precocious. Mike Seegar and I were visiting Forty Hall Park for boyish rambling and tree climbing, and, as sometimes happened, we ran into some girls. Although a few years later we would pursue girls to chat them up, at that time the trees, the lake, the animals' graveyard, the farm, and especially the orchards, were more appealing. Nevertheless, at the park's imposing pillared gateway at the top of Forty Hill we chatted with two or three girls, including Mona, who in my mind's eye wore a light blouse and dark slacks. What "juvenalities" comprised our conversation I can't remember, except that one of the girls, not Mona, made a fuss of me, describing me as cute and dark, like "a little Indian boy." I silently indulged her but couldn't grasp what was so cute about little Indian boys. Although Mowgli had a quite a lot going for him I fashioned myself more on Robin Hood. The irony was that Mona was cute and dark herself, quite like a little Indian girl. Probably some matchmaking was taking place, but at the time I was too young and naïve to realize it. Forty Hall breaths an ancient spirit and its Cedars of Lebanon are capable of anointing young allegiances.

I met Pat three or so years later in autumn 1959 at the Fairground during one of the Fair's periodic visits to the cindered lot where Carterhatch Lane meets the Cambridge Road. The Fair's soundtrack—miscellaneous sirens and ride noises, shrill squeals, and recorded music—wafted all the way to St. George's Road. Itinerant fairground hands helped open the Rock 'n' Roll spigot and contributed significantly to its musical dispersion. In the late 1950s it was pretty much all-American fare: All Shook Up, Diana, Lucille, Bony Maronie, Peggy Sue, Sweet Little Sixteen, Wake up Little Susie, Chantilly Lace, Will You Love Me Tomorrow, Great Balls of Fire, even Honky-Tonk Blues by Hank Williams. This was the era of R&R in England, though we had been well prepared by Trad Jazz (Dixieland) and Skiffle. My head had been turned in 1956 by Bill Haley's movie *Don't Knock the Rock* featuring Little Richard, which I saw at the Rialto Cinema in Enfield Town with the Liddicoat twins. In the years that followed, like some other Londoners of my age group who went on to gain acclaim as popular musicians, I listened at home to whatever folk-blues I could get hold of: Big Bill Broonzy, Leadbelly, Woody Guthrie, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and the like. In 1962, me and my pal Mike Seegar saw Little Richard perform at the Walthamstow Odeon during his British tour with Sam Cooke. Two years later in June 1964 we saw the Beatles perform at Leyton Super Baths, not far from Walthamstow.

When I met Pat at the fairground I was fifteen and already working full-time. I would rise early to bicycle and later, when I was sixteen, motorcycle the six or so miles north along the Cambridge Road to Rochford's House Plants in Turnford, Cheshunt, clocking in by 7:30 a.m. For trips to the fairground I dressed to emulate Teddy Boy fashions favouring a Mississippi gambler look and wearing a homemade bootlace tie. The clamour of the fairground gave my mates and me an opportunity to practice our primitive "chatting up" skills. Of the three or four of us, I was the least shy in this matter, and while they hung back, I'd approach a group of giggling girls with a show of bravado. I eased into this uncustomary routine by acting as a go-between. I'd launch into the vernacular and say something like, "Oi, see that bloke over there in the striped waistcoat, he fancies you! (Giggles) No don't muck about, seriously, he'd like to know you, d'y'wanna meet him?" I approached Pat in single-minded pursuit however, and with a few coins in my pocket took her on a Fairground ride or two, possibly the Octopus, Big-wheel, or Bumper-cars. She wore a short white plastic coat and matching high heels with a tightish knee-length skirt. She also wore a felt Robin Hood hat with a feather in it which I held for her during the rides.



Pat and Rob taken at the Kursal in Southend

These were fashionable for both sexes in North London in 1959-1960. My mate Gordon Harris wore one to cover the bald patch he got when his fluffy ginger quiff was torn from his scalp by the machine he was operating at the Rolling Mills. Pat's Dad worked at the Rolling Mills, while Gordy's old man was a dustman and he lived, like Pat, in a council house to the east of Cambridge Road. Apart from being rather petite, Pat had a look that I'd formulated as my ideal. This ideal would change over the years. Blonde and blue-eyed of course, this was the era of Marilyn Monroe, and my older brother Paul had already secured such a Saxon gem from Cambridge Road housing, as his wife. His wife's mother, May Outten, supervised the dinner ladies at Suffolks Co-ed Secondary School on Brick Lane that Pat, Gordy Harris, and Mona attended.

As Pat and I progressed from one fairground ride to another we abandoned our friends and at the end of the evening I walked her home, along Cambridge Road, past Sangamo Weston's factory where she worked, to her house at Boleyn Avenue, just west of the Cambridge Road at Hoe Lane. (In 2005, Sangamo Weston relocated from Enfield to a site in nearby Waltham Cross). Pat was cute; her slim triangular face emphasized her almond-shaped and heavy-lidded blue eyes. In the style of the times in due course she came to wear her blonde hair in a bouffant. I believe I may have seen her before, but I am not certain. One Christmas while I was still at Theobalds there was a Christmas service held at a church on Enfield Highway where we joined with students from Suffolks Senior School for a special Carol Concert. It was a surprisingly charmed and genteel occasion for such a bawdy bunch, but cowed by the presence of a new batch of the opposite sex to ogle we were on our best behaviour and much preoccupied by peeking at our temporary companions.

Regarding Mona, I can recall her face and demeanour quite clearly. As she reached her mid-teens she was pretty, dainty rather than robust; but of average height and with a healthy stature and a friendly nature. Although she had the soft straight hair and dark eyes of an East Indian, her cheekbones were broader, her lips fuller, and her lightly-tanned face was heart-shaped. There was something else, presumably African of a few generations back, the look of a light-skinned mulatto, a quadroon or octoroon or some such Creole designation. Her hair hung loosely, not quite to her shoulders, and turned inwards at the tips. She wore pale shirts and blouses and dark skirts or slacks, but rich maroons and pastel yellows also diffuse my memory. Mona lived on Boleyn Avenue diagonally across the street from Pat. When she rode pillion on her boyfriend's motorcycle she wore leather gear and a scarf knotted gaucho-style at the side of her neck which danced in the breeze as they darted amid the Cambridge Road traffic. Allen Reed was tall and slim with fair hair and a pale complexion. Like me, he lived in Forty Hill, in the local authority flats of beige brick at the top of Hallside Road, around the corner from St. George's Road. We weren't friends exactly, he was a year or so older than me, but we would nod a greeting to each other. He had a big BSA motorcycle, perhaps a 650 cc, which he parked in Mona's front garden when he visited her at her parent's house. He wore a silver helmet and dressed head-to-toe in black leather, as did she. We young couples, Allen and Mona, Pat and I, greeted each other in a routine rather than an intimate way, although Pat affected an overly affable manner to Mona as a territorial reflex.

Hoe Lane provided a through street that connected Forty Hill with Enfield Highway. More significantly this quiet road with its allotments and sparse housing linked my home to Boleyn Avenue and as time passed it was a route Pat and I commonly used. Walking her home at night we'd cross the New River canal, and even though the traffic was virtually nil, instead of crossing on the road we'd detour across the wooden footbridge because this gave us an opportunity for some last minute "snogging" before we parted on her doorstep, and then I would walk home alone. Hoe Lane reverted to a country lane for the seventy or so yards between the canal and the Garnault Road-Goat Lane junction. The path for pedestrians was on an embankment between some old-growth trees and a field which on the far side was backed by a line of shadowy trees. This was owl territory and a pair of barn owls would fill the night with their eerie screeching as they hunted, causing the voles and moles to tremble in the undergrowth, and this teenager to quicken his pace. My earlier encounter with Mona at Forty Hill was never revisited, but on some nights when I left Pat for my half-mile walk home along Hoe Lane, Mona's bedroom light glowed through the closed curtains. It registered emotionally and provided grist for contemplation, but what could I do?

After a couple of years I became weary with going steady. I'd read a nineteenth century biography of a Londoner, "The Houses in Between" by Howard Spring and felt a yen for new styles based on foppish Edwardian fashions, and for witty conversations across drawing rooms with piano nocturnes tinkling in the background. Trying to expand my horizons, I enrolled with Pat in evening classes in Art which were held weekly at Chase Boy's School near the Hop Poles pub on Lancaster Road. I only remember painting a portrait of the Black folk singer Odetta copied from a photograph, doubtless a sign of things to come. Nevertheless, I still felt confined and my future seemed to be closing in. I felt that there must be more to life than this. This wasn't helped by Pat hinting she wanted to buy some knives and forks "for the bottom draw," which signified a seemingly inevitable and unwelcome fate. Inevitably I broke the news to Pat, God bless us all, and amid her tears tried to assuage my guilt by saying we'd simply try separating for three weeks. My sister Sally says, "I well remember the drama of the night you split up with her, when I stood looking up the stairs, wondering what was happening, after you had come in and bolted up to your bedroom as if the mad axe-man was after you" (personal communication, 10/12/2008). There are some occasions in my early life when Sally really came through. For example, a life changer was getting me enrolled in Newbattle Abbey Liberal Arts College in Dalkeith, Midlothian, some few years later, but that night she was my hero when she answered Pat's Mum's soon-to-come irate phone call and, with her matter-of-fact manner and refined accent, doubtless intimidating to Pat's Mum, gave her short shrift and refused to get me saying, "I think it's better we leave it the way it is, don't you?" and quickly hanging up. Pat called me after three weeks by which time I found that I had briefly dated her co-worker during the heady freedom of the intervening period, and it was finally over.

I had learned Mona was adopted and I believe she was an only child. She was classy in her own way and not beholden to conformist fads and fashions like others of my peers. She didn't tread the same beat as we did; the streets, parks and cafes of Enfield Town, Enfield Wash, Ponders End and Edmonton; or the Fairground, bonfire nights, Southbury Road swimming pool, that kind of thing. I don't even remember seeing her at the Jesus Church Fetes at Forty Hill or the Gymkhanas above Bluebell Island but she could have been there.



Rob the Mod

But there was a moment that I do remember! I believe it was towards the end of my relationship with Pat. Mona was riding in the rear seat of an open car while I was walking on the sidewalk. We saw each other and her radiance triggered my enthusiastic wave which she

returned in kind. The rawness of this unexpected encounter found us unguarded. Our eyes and smiles met, and for a brief moment our mutual admiration was exposed. I later mused on this but didn't act on it. I never pursued Mona, or Marsha, or whatever her name was, nor thought of doing so, even after I broke up with Pat. I was pursuing other girls enthusiastically, but my formulaic aesthetic preference had not yet swung towards maidens of a dusker hue. In any case, it would have seemed like more of the same, from one dutiful Boleyn Avenue girlfriend to another, and by that time I was seeking wider horizons and redefining my self-image. The 1960s were revolutionizing everything and my Brylcreamed hairstyle and Teddy Boy garb had been abandoned for a soft hairstyle and the garb of an aspiring Mod (Modernist) with a French look. I rode a Vespa scooter wearing bell-bottom trousers, a short shiny



Rob and his scooter. I bought my Vespa GS Scooter secondhand in April 1963. In November 1964 it was stolen and although it was later recovered it had been stripped and repainted and was a write-off. This photo was taken as a keepsake.

(Photo by Jacqueline Taylor nee Thompson.)

oilskin coat, a black beret on the front of my head. I was discovering new London stomping grounds in Wood Green, Hornsey, and Highgate. Later I left home for a flat in West Hampstead. For five or so years, I shared a supraliminal neighbourhood with a now nameless friend who I barely knew, all those miles away and all those years ago. Mona remains young and vital in my mind; and that is the extent of my memory of her.

### **Mystery Resolved! (“He called me his little octoroon”)**

The original impetus for this essay began in September 2008 as the result of my forgetting the name of a teenage girl who I knew fifty years ago. Initially, I worried that I might be getting senile; fearing I might be losing those memories which, at the end of the day, are what are left to console us in our dotage. At that time, to combat this potential loss and as penance for the disrespect to the young lady in question, I wrote down everything I could remember about her, minus a name. The dilemma was eventually resolved when, as a result of having my essay on Enfield Society’s website, I made contact with Pat’s younger brother Barry and his family. As a result, on 8 December, 2011, I received a letter from one Mrs. Diana Tebb of St. Cezaire sur Siagne, France, to discover she is in fact the long-sought-after Mona, her name at the time being “Diane Wisbey.” In my article I surmised that the surname held the key, but I missed “Wisbey” altogether, despite it being a pleasing name with a rustic lilt to it. “Diane Wisbey,” like “Paula Rudkin” and “Johnny Archer” would seem to fit right into Old Tom Cobley’s roll. Coincidentally, in my article I included “Diana King” among possible names, and Diane writes, “It’s strange I did marry a Geoff King who lived in Tenniswood Road ... so at one time I was Diana King.” But her first marriage occurred after I knew her.

For a while I was on a wild goose chase believing that the girl in question was Maureen Tomlin who once lived opposite Pat at No. 82 Boleyn Avenue. Her name met my criteria having “four syllables and some n’s or m’s in it” and in November 2010, I tracked down Maureen Smith nee Tomlin. But she told me it was a case of mistaken identity, saying, “Sorry ... but I am very fair.” She did however suggest that my description matched “Diane Wisbey” who lived two doors from her. Maureen kindly did some sleuthing on my behalf and finally reported, “She [Diane Wisby] married someone in the music business and last heard she lives in Italy ... [and has] two large Afghan type dogs.” How chic!

I discovered I was wrong about Diane being an only child. In reality she has four sisters, in fact I got in touch with her through one of them who still lives at Boleyn Avenue. Diane says that her Mum was “an immigrant from Edmonton.” Some other memory lapses were corrected also, for e.g., Allen Reed’s motorcycle was a Triumph Bonneville not a BSA and although he wore black leather, Diane did not. She states: “Allen Reed was my first love and yes, he had a Bonneville 650 motorbike. I never wore leather but always wore black.” In accordance with my observation that “she was classy in her own way,” Diane states, I was a fan of Juliette Greco. I never was a fan of rock ‘n’ roll.” Interestingly Diane states, “I never would have considered myself as a Mona, my name is Diana,



“I have enclosed a photo of myself, it’s the earliest I have, I was 18, I have no others as we never owned a camera”

– Diane Tebb, née Wisbey.

everybody called me Diane as two syllables are easier to pronounce than three, and my family called [me] Diny all the time.”

These revelations resolved my nagging question and provided an epiphany of sorts. I feel reconciled with Diane, but Pat is another matter. I learned that Pat was married in the 1960s, had a son and daughter, and sadly died of cancer at the young age of 48 in the early 1990s. With this knowledge, the essay stands as a tribute to Pat’s largely anonymous life. I was gratified to discover that Barry Smitherman and his wife June were each awarded an MBE in 2005 for their contributions to the environment, and Barry is the Chairman of Trustees of the Wildlife Rescue & Ambulance Service (Enfield). The Smitherman husband and wife team established WRAS as a charity in 1985 and in 1989 opened a sanctuary for injured and endangered animals in Trent Country Park in Enfield. <<http://www.wras-enfieldwildlife.org.uk>>

In due course, Diane’s exotic appearance caught the eye of singer John Tebb and their marriage has taken her to warmer climes, currently the French Riviera. She states, “My second husband John Tebb was lead singer with the 60s group the Casuals. He called me his little octoroon. We have been together for 42 years”. John Tebb and the Casuals hail from Lincoln and in 1965 won the TV talent show “Opportunity Knocks” three times. Following this, the group moved to Italy and in 1968 had an international hit “Jesamine”, which reached No. 2 in the British charts. The Casuals disbanded in 1976. The Internet site <[twocasual.com](http://twocasual.com)> states, “John decided to have a change and left with his wife, Diana, in 1987 to relocate to France and become a solo artist in piano bars and clubs along the Cote d’Azur”.

My article opens with memories of childhood in the extended grounds of Forty Hall and my first meeting with Diane Wisbey is revisited. In her letter Diane doesn’t say whether she remembers this encounter or not, but she does comment on Forty Hall. She states: “I think Forty Hall was very important for us in the 50s and early 60s, for me it still is. Every time I go back to Enfield I visit Forty Hall. I have friends whose ashes are scattered there.” Thus it’s not Mona’s soul that is demanding due honour.



Forty Hall breaths with an ancient spirit and its mighty Cedars of Lebanon are capable of anointing young allegiances

Names are important in the context of this essay and I’ve left them intact. They provide

authenticity to the narrative and distinguish it as vernacular history. As a disclaimer, I will say I’ve strived to be as accurate as possible, but my memories are framed within the rudimentary cognitive templates and frames of reference of an adolescent. The views expressed are purely my own and are not attributable to any other person or institution. On another level, in my own case, the essay is about being initiated into the mores of working class yob-dem fifty years ago, and then beginning to put this situation behind me. I later obtained a degree in Art and eventually a Ph.D. and I am currently a professor in Social Sciences at the University of the Virgin Islands.

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