

Earlsdon Christmas Past

Of course every year there are those people from whom one hears Scrooge's cry "Christmas, Bah!" and the heartfelt moan "I'll be glad when it's all over!" But for me Christmas still holds the magic and wonder it did sixty and more years ago when, as a small child, I stood entranced in front of our little Christmas tree. Firmly held in their little tin holders, the tiny candles gave a flickering light which flashed red, blue, silver, gold, in dancing reflections on the coloured glass baubles, while the 'angel hair' decorations shimmered softly in the glow. The candles of course, soon had to be snuffed, and half the magic disappeared - but there were other delights to compensate.....

I had been aware that Christmas was on the way since the end of October, when Mother made her special annual trip to George Mason's, one of the good old Earlsdon grocers long since gone, to buy her pudding and cake ingredients, which she firmly believed were better than those supplied elsewhere. The pungent shop smell of the dried fruit, candied peel and spices, all weighed up and packed into purple paper packets while the customer watched and waited is a treat sadly missed in these days of pre-packaging.

Gone too in most households is the ritual, as Mother made the puddings, of each member of the family giving the mixture a 'lucky stir' and a wish for the coming year. There was always, however, the awful anxiety that Mother would scrape out too much of the mixture as she filled the waiting basins, and not leave any scraps for the small (and not so small!) 'cleaner upper', and many were the squabbles between brother and sister as to whose turn it was to enjoy the remnants which still clung round the sides of the bowl.

After the puddings, cakes and mincemeat had been made, we sat back for a week or two until the beginning of December. Then, and not until then the Earlsdon shops began to take on a festive air, and Christmas cards, crackers and a few small toys appeared in Roberts' paper shop and the Post Office windows. Mrs. Freeman in her 'fancy goods' shop displayed a great array of gifts for all the family, and the fronts of Joe Moore's, Sidwell's and Crump's greengroceries began to bristle with bunches of holly and mistletoe, with Christmas trees invading the surrounding pavements for the unwary to trip over. The Co-op, Mason's, Pears' and Maypole brought out their stocks of beautiful fancy tins of biscuits and tea and boxes of crystallised fruits, while Mr. Thatcher, Miss Bowry and other confectioners tempted and tantalised us with gorgeous boxes of chocolates far beyond our means.

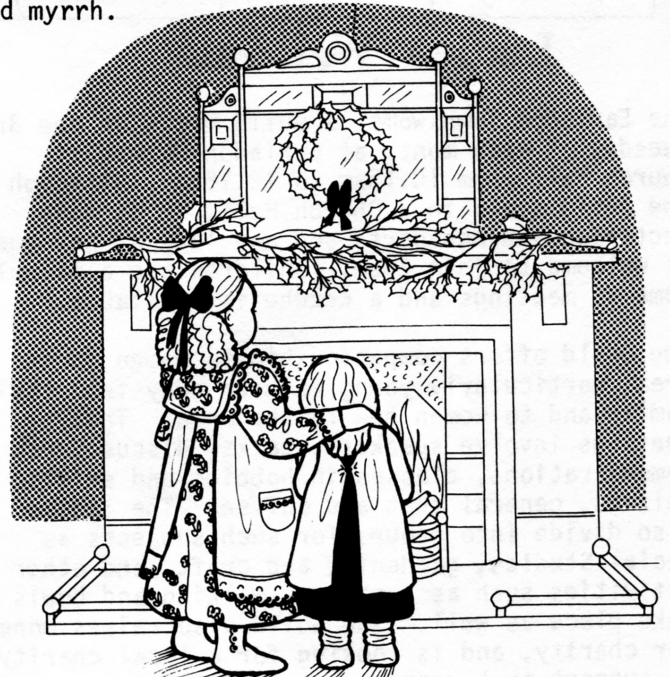
To a small child's eye, Earlsdon Street took on a very special atmosphere peculiar to Christmas. Because of the dull days and early nightfall, the shops were already well lit up by the time we came out of school, and their window displays

with a richness of variety and colour gave the street an unaccustomed air of expectancy and glamour.

At school Miss Golden and Miss Cole set us to the task of making paper chains from strips of coloured sticky paper to be festooned around the walls of our classrooms, giving them a most unusual air of brightness and gaiety. Teacher also provided us with a 'Post Box' - a cardboard box covered with red crepe paper in which we 'posted' cards to our best friends. (Do the Earlsdon School children doing these things today realise how many generations have done exactly the same?). The greatest joy to me, however, came when we began to practise and to sing the lovely old carols, the words and music of which became a part of our vocabulary - 'Away in a Manger', 'We Three Kings', 'Once in Royal', and one which is seldom heard today, but a great favourite of mine, 'Like Silver Lamps in a distant Shrine, the Stars are sparkling bright...' words as evocative of Christmas as any in the language.

Finally came the last day of term. Lessons as usual in the morning, but in the afternoon we all relaxed, and after a short gathering of all classes together in the hall, we returned to our own rooms, played games and enjoyed the fruit and sweets our teachers, according to their generosity and means, had supplied. (Dear old Miss Cole was very generous, some of the others much less so!). Four o'clock came almost too soon and we all straggled home through the gas-lit streets.

At Sunday School we listened wide-eyed to the old, old story, the reason for all these festivities, of the mean and lowly stable with the tiny baby in the manger, of the shepherds watching their flocks, the wondrous Star and the Three Kings bearing their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.



At last came Christmas Eve and the hanging up of our socks and pillowcases on the ends of our beds. Not that my parents had much money to spare for presents for us - times were very hard for many in the 1920s and early '30s, but we were fortunate in having a lot of generous aunts and uncles, so our pillowcases were always full to overflowing and never disappointing. It was usually still quite dark when I woke on Christmas morning, but I knew that, hard though it was I would have to wait until at least a glimmer of daylight crept through the curtains. At last I could bear the suspense no longer and as quietly as possible I crawled to the bottom of my bed to investigate. Had Father Christmas been? Had he

left the doll I'd set my heart on? Had he brought the books I craved? If he hadn't fulfilled my requests to the letter, what he had left made up for any minor disappointments and I would play and read happily, and munch my chocolate pennies until breakfast time.

Because the buses ran even on Christmas Day then we were able to join my Mother's family in Kenilworth for dinner, coming back in the late afternoon to the best time of all - the big family party at my Aunt Sarah (my Father's sister) and Uncle Will's bungalow on Canley Road.

Large families do have their drawbacks, and in some ways one is glad to see the smaller family unit, but it seems sad that so few of today's children experience the joy of a really large family party. At ours there would be at least 30 of us, all ages, and the aunts would join together to stack the table to overflowing with goodies of all sorts, sweet and savoury, with a big iced cake in pride of place in the centre, and tiny Grandma seated at the head presiding proudly over us all. After tea we played the usual party games - 'Pass the Parcel', 'Musical Chairs', all the old favourites and always including 'Charades', in which my Father and a couple of uncles provided the high spot with a routine repeated year after year. One of the uncles, tall, thin, lugubrious, but with a wry sense of fun excelled himself one year, about 1930, when he performed a ballet solo dressed as a fairy, complete with pretend wig, tutu and sink mop wand!

In the early hours of Boxing morning we dispersed, and arriving home I was soon put to bed, conscious of only two things - one that it was all over for this year, and that next year's Christmas was a long way off!

In the cold dreary days of winter, the familiarity of all the old traditions and rituals formed over the years, gives a glow which, with the light streaming from the Star and the Stable brightens up the darkness however momentarily, and gives a hope for peace and joy throughout the weary world. Happy Christmas everyone!

Mary Montes



ABOVE: Trevor and Audrey Pittaway ready to do a roaring trade at St. Mary Magdalen's Christmas Fayre.

BELOW: All smiles at the Girl Guides stall at St. Barbara's Christmas Bazaar.



ANSWERS TO QUIZZES:

ECHO CHRISTMAS QUIZ: (1) The large house at 2 Belvedere Road which was originally to be demolished to make way for a multi-storey flats development but was eventually saved. (2) Alpha Engineering in Osborne Road, which closed the following month with the loss of 80 jobs. (3) Schoolchildren in the Beechwood/Canley Gardens area whom it was planned to send to Henry Parkes School rather than Earlsdon. (4) Houses in those streets were included in the Repairs Area after Hammon (both Conservative, Earlsdon ward and Kevin Maton Labour, Whoberley). (5) The Butontop pub in Beechwood Ave. (6) Mary Jane 'Ma' Cooper, landlady of the City Arms pub from 1897 until her death in 1924. (8) Plans were at last announced for proper public toilets in the centre of Earlsdon. (9) The 2nd Earlsdon Fun Run. (10) Our gardening column 'Down to Earth'.

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE: Differences in right-hand picture, per 'day': (1) extra pear in tree; partridge's eye open (2) aerial on dove cote; different dove holding twig (3) middle hen's eye closed; hens 'fresh' not 'french' (4) top bird holding different leaf; wing detail missing on bottom bird (5) bauble in middle of centre ring; top left ring is a triangle (6) egg missing from under centre goose; goshing under goose bottom left (7) extra swan at top; water lilly bottom left (8) top left maid turned round; bottom centre maid's apron missing (9) bottom right drummer's legs missing; design on drums different (10) title '20' not '10' pipers; extra pipe top left (11) top left lady has bottle; lady missing top right (12) top left lord's arm not up; bottom centre lord's legs crossed differently.