

## FROM RURAL VILLAGE TO MODERN SUBURB Eastcote and Ruislip reflected in Festivities and Celebrations

by Susan Toms

Throughout the centuries communities have celebrated communal events, whether they were local or national in origin. But the way these events were celebrated represented a mirror on that place. During the twentieth century our part of Middlesex underwent an enormous transformation when small rural villages like Ruislip and Eastcote became bustling suburbs with all the modern amenities. By looking at how some national and local events were celebrated during the first half of that century we have a snapshot of how our area has changed so dramatically.

Although before the twentieth century, I shall start with Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee of 1897. The celebrations on the actual date of the Jubilee on the 20 June were very low key locally. There was a special service at St Martin's Church which was gaily decorated with flags both inside and outside but nothing else was arranged. This was because in a predominately farming community the priority in the summer was the harvest, so the main celebrations for the majority of villagers were held several months later on the 9 September.

On that day school children marched from the Ruislip Church of England School in Eastcote Road to a cricket field 'gaily decorated with flags and Chinese lanterns' which was lent by H.J. Ewer. This field adjoined Manor Farm and is now St Martins Approach. There all the children and parishioners were served a free tea consisting of boiled and roast beef, mutton, ham, bread and butter with cakes and jam for the children. The food would have been a huge treat for most families who were unable to afford meat on a regular basis. This feast was followed by sports and games including races where wives had to wheel their husbands in a wheel barrow, and obstacle races. Mrs H. Ewer distributed Jubilee mugs and fruit to the school children and prizes for the sports competitors.

The day finished with dancing, and a good time was had by all, which was no doubt helped by the barrel of beer donated by Mr Ewer. The total cost of this event was £56 16s., all of which was raised locally and represented a huge effort for a small farming community where the population in 1901 was approximately a thousand.

Celebrations for the coronations of 1902 and 1911 followed a similar pattern of assembling on the Manor Farm fields for a substantial tea, to be followed by games and races and dancing. The reminiscences of James Frewin of Sharps Lane recall the children grabbing the cakes as soon as they sat down since they were unused to such large amounts of food. Two very popular games were chasing and catching a greased piglet and trying to reach a leg of mutton on a greased pole suspended over the Manor Farm Pond. Needless to say most of the contestants ended up falling in the water especially as some were the worst the wear for drink from the barrel of beer which was customarily donated.

The opening of Ruislip Station in 1904 saw the slow start of some limited housing development and more importantly the advent of day trippers from central London seeking the delights of the countryside. They possibly came to enjoy watching the Ruislip Sports Day, an annual event held between 1906 and the 1920s, on the same Manor Farm fields for a small admission price. The sports included an egg and spoon race, climbing a slippery pole and catching a greased pig. Although the sports were a light-hearted affair, contemporary photographs show formally dressed women looking very serious as they participated in events like the egg and spoon race, and determined marathon runners (see Fig. 1) waiting to start their race. The afternoon commenced with a fancy dress parade and a procession through the village so that all the community could participate.



**Fig. 1**  
**Ruislip Sports Day Marathon 1908**

Ruislip Day originates from the celebrations to mark the handing over of Park Wood and the Manor Farm site from King's College to RNUDC on the 23 July 1932. This marked the culmination of a long campaign by the Ruislip Association to secure these areas for the benefit of all the residents before they were swamped by the wave of development across northwest London. A few far sighted people realised that this unregulated development would destroy the very character of Ruislip which had attracted residents to move there in the first place, and active steps had to be taken to preserve it. This sentiment was echoed in *The Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* which praised 'the people of Ruislip, Eastcote and Northwood who have given a lead which might well be followed all over the country'. The tone of the day was of a high minded public spirit with the *Advertiser and Gazette* waxing lyrical 'that this ancient fairyland is to be retained by the people for ever.' The celebrations included an official handing over ceremony in Park Wood attended by the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres and Maynard Keynes, Bursar of King's College, followed by a tea in the Great Barn at Manor Farm. There was Morris dancing, a production of the comedy *Over the Garden Wall* by the Ruislip Dramatic Society and, to finish the day, a campfire with community singing. Although some of these celebrations may seem homely and low key to us, they demonstrate that Ruislip was certainly no longer a sleepy village but an expanding suburb where some residents recognised the importance of preserving this village heritage.

Ruislip Day was commemorated every year until 1951. The programmes for 1950 and 1951 give an indication of how much time and effort the Ruislip Association must have spent on organising all the events. A special event in 1950 was the Miss Ruislip beauty contest which was held over five nights Monday to Friday at the Astoria Cinema, with the winner of each evening being chosen by the loudness of the applause of the audience. These winners went through to the final competition and ultimate crowning on Ruislip Day at Manor Farm. In fact Manor Farm was the focal point for all the other organised activities of folk dancing, variety concerts, dog show and old time dancing which reinforced its importance as a centre for the community.

The 1951 events for Ruislip Day were more ambitious because they were incorporated into the local Festival of Britain celebrations, although this project was certainly not embraced with enthusiasm by everyone when it was first suggested. This is indicated when the *Advertiser and Gazette* of the 23 February 1951 bemoaned the fact that no local organisations had 'made any arrangements public'. A letter to the paper in March from a disgruntled season ticket holder expressed concern that 'in order to window dress the Inner Circle line for the Festival of Britain - that flagrant waste of building material and public money,' many Metropolitan line trains have been transferred there and replaced by older rolling stock 'fit only for a museum'.

In contrast little opposition was expressed to the face lift given to Northolt Airport for the Festival 'to give visitors an agreeable first impression of England'. In fact during the Festival the public enclosure at Northolt Airport was open every day for visitors to watch aircraft landing and taking off for the princely sum of 6d for adults and 3d for children. By May, when the local programme of events had started, the *Advertiser and Gazette* could report 'in this area there is no lack of enthusiasm and support for the many activities with which every district is identifying itself. This is in marked contrast

to a few localities where nothing is being done.'

The first local Festival event, held on the 27 April, was a public speaking contest organised by the Ruislip Branch of the National Council of Women, at Ruislip Methodist Church. This was well attended and a wide range of topics were debated including 'Psychology in Advertising', 'Cinema going restricts Freedom of Thought' and 'Women's place in the Home'. (Incidentally, one of the members of the winning team from St Martin's Mothers Union was Helen Hoare, who later bequeathed her local history scrapbooks to the Society).

This was followed the next day by a concert of British music where the school hall was specially decorated with bunting and floral arrangements. Altogether throughout the Festival there were six musical events, all performed by different local groups, which indicates the enthusiasm of the community to be involved.

Another event showing the high level of local engagement was the pageant 'Glimpses of Local Life 1451-1951' in which 80 members of the local Women's Institutes and 20 children took part. This was performed at R.A.F. Number 4 Maintenance Unit Theatre in Ickenham Road. However some liberties were taken with the history since the second sketch depicted the visit of Elizabeth 1 to South Ruislip! The third sketch was more credible as it imagined the scene at Eastcote House when Cromwell's soldiers were billeted there. As befits the Women's Institute the event ended with a rousing chorus of 'Jerusalem'.

Besides the many arts events, the celebrations included a golf tournament and several cricket matches as there was no shortage of local teams. As a bonus the Eastcote Cricket Club arranged an ambitious 'Cricket Week' in June with The Amsterdam Cricket Club being invited as guests of honour. At a civic reception at Kerswells Restaurant in Eastcote, Mr E. Batten an official from the RNUDC welcomed the guests with a less than positive gloss on the Festival with the words: 'you

have come to us in Festival year; sometimes we wonder what we have to be festive about'. Despite this pessimism the matches were a great success and at the farewell party the Chairman of the Amsterdam Cricket Club spoke of the 'warmth of friendship and hospitality, the generosity and the welcome' that the team had experienced.

The Ruislip and Eastcote scout groups decided to revive their annual Sports Day on the 16 June at King's College Playing Fields with a wide variety of events. The most challenging was a hike through the woods while carrying 30lbs. of kit. Another scout group in Northwood was very inventive when they erected a replica model of the famous skylon at over 50 ft. high at their fete in Potter Street.

Another event was the Road Safety Gala and Fun Fair in July which had the aim of trying to reverse the increasing local accident rate. With unfortunate timing on the same day as the gala there was an accident when the top of a double-decker bus was sheared off by the railway bridge at South Ruislip which resulted in five injuries and several dramatic photographs in the local newspaper.

As a finale a Festival Horticultural Show was held on the 8 September at King's College Playing Fields, Ruislip when four local societies combined to produce 'one of the largest exhibitions of flowers, fruit and vegetables ever to be staged in the district,' which attracted over two thousand visitors. Besides the horticultural exhibits the crowds could watch a gymkhana, a bee keeping display and an exhibition 'Things from the Kitchen'.

When it came to summing up the impact of the local Festival of Britain celebrations the editorial in the *Advertiser and Gazette* was lukewarm. It commented that in comparison with other towns like Canterbury, Ramsgate and Hythe it was felt that this area came out badly mainly because the Council had not given its wholehearted support to many of the events because of worries about the costs. In fact the only one fully supported by the Council was the horticultural show. It felt there had been a lost opportunity to promote

civic awareness with the prevalent attitude 'there is precious little to celebrate' not being challenged. But the range and variety of events organised over six months by local groups and societies without official funding and assistance gives a different picture of a flourishing local community who could rely upon public support and participation although some of the events had been poorly attended. The local newspaper felt the district had not been 'much enlivened' by the Festival but I suspect many residents would have disagreed with that conclusion.

In contrast with the ambivalent attitude to the Festival of Britain there was wholehearted support from the community and the Council (see Fig. 3) for the Coronation celebrations in 1953. As early as January the RNUDC ordered 800 yards of assorted flags and ensigns and 4000 yards of coloured bunting. By February the local newspaper reported that 47 local organisations had applied to enter historical tableaux in a planned procession on the 6 June. The same report listed the planned souvenirs for children which were spoons for those aged 3-7, propelling pencils for ages 7-11 and a choice of mugs, propelling pencils or brooches for those older than 11 years. In March the Council approved a total expenditure of £4100 for the local Coronation celebrations covering four days, although there were some belated attempts to reduce the costs later. By the end of May everything was ready with all the roads and shopping areas suitably decorated and the souvenirs distributed to the children. This time, instead of criticism the local newspaper felt the RNUDC deserved 'complimenting on the neatness and thought put into the job of street decoration'.

Coronation Day itself was preceded by an all-night vigil at St Martin's Church from 8pm until 6.30am but in the interests of propriety all the watches after midnight had to be kept by men or married couples only. On the day, the 2 June, over one thousand residents watched the ceremony on the public television facilities provided by the Council in various locations. Others obviously watched on their own sets but this combined

viewing gave an eerie feel to the area with empty streets and buses. Life only returned to the district later with the many street parties although several of these had to adjourn hastily to an indoor location owing to the poor weather. Great ingenuity was shown by the organisers of the Southcote Rise street party when they used their cars to form a wind break around the tables to prevent everything being blown away. Even the children who were ill on the day and could not attend were not forgotten. All the surplus food from the Wiltshire Lane street party was sent for the children at St Vincent's Hospital. Diane McMillan was given her present before being taken into hospital with tonsillitis while Richard Braysheer, who had unfortunately collapsed earlier with pneumonia, was sent some treats in hospital from the party he had missed at the Eastcote Community Centre. The rash motto of this party according to the organiser was 'children do what you like'. The highlight of the evening was the lighting of a beacon by the scouts in the field at the junction of St Martin's Approach and Pinn Way to form part of a national 'chain of fires'. Three hundred local scouts and cubs marched from the car park in Pembroke Road, Ruislip to the beacon where the ceremony was watched by over a thousand people who then enjoyed a firework display.

The Children's Day on the 3 June was also affected by the poor weather since only an estimated three thousand children out of a possible ten thousand attended the free admission day at Ruislip Lido. The rain and strong winds deterred many from taking advantage of the free donkey rides, rowing boats and paddle boats and in the event it was felt there were too few attractions even for the reduced number of children, who spent half the time queuing. In the words of the local newspaper 'it is obvious children cannot stand about for long periods and be just good - they want to be occupied!'

Fortunately it was better weather for the Old Folk's Day - a term which would not be used today - on the 4 June, when the older residents were treated to refreshments and entertainment at King's College Fields.

The good weather continued for the grand finale to the Coronation celebrations on Saturday the 6 June when the proceedings began with the largest procession ever seen in Ruislip, featuring 73 entries with a historical, topical or humorous theme. This started at King's College Playing Fields and then toured the district on an eleven mile route before returning to the playing fields for the presentation of the awards. The procession was so long that buses were delayed for over an hour with the build up of traffic. The float for The Field End Women's Institute featured 'Queens of England' while Lady Bankes School entered a model of Corfe Castle to illustrate the connection with Lady Mary Bankes and the siege of Corfe Castle by the Roundheads.

While this procession was in progress an athletics meeting took place at King's College Playing Fields to commemorate the presentation of the running track and sports arena to the local community by the Council as a gesture of a permanent memorial of the coronation. The official opening was performed by Lord Luke who was Chairman of the National Playing Fields Association. Four London running clubs took part in the contest but unfortunately the local team from Ruislip-Northwood Athletic Club came last. However they consoled themselves with the hope that now they had better facilities their standards would improve. Celebrations continued into the evening with a variety of entertainment from the R.A.F Band, an acrobatics group, dog displays and trick motor cycling before the finale of a special coronation firework display which was watched by over seven thousand people. The crush when everyone tried to leave by a few narrow gates was so great that many took to pushing through the hedge to get out.

This did not mark the end of all festivities, since throughout the week all the local cinemas were showing the feature film of the coronation 'A Queen is Crowned' to packed audiences. There were also further street parties throughout June (see Fig. 2). One of the largest and noisiest was the party organised by the Ruislip Gardens Estate for hundreds of children and adults. It was held

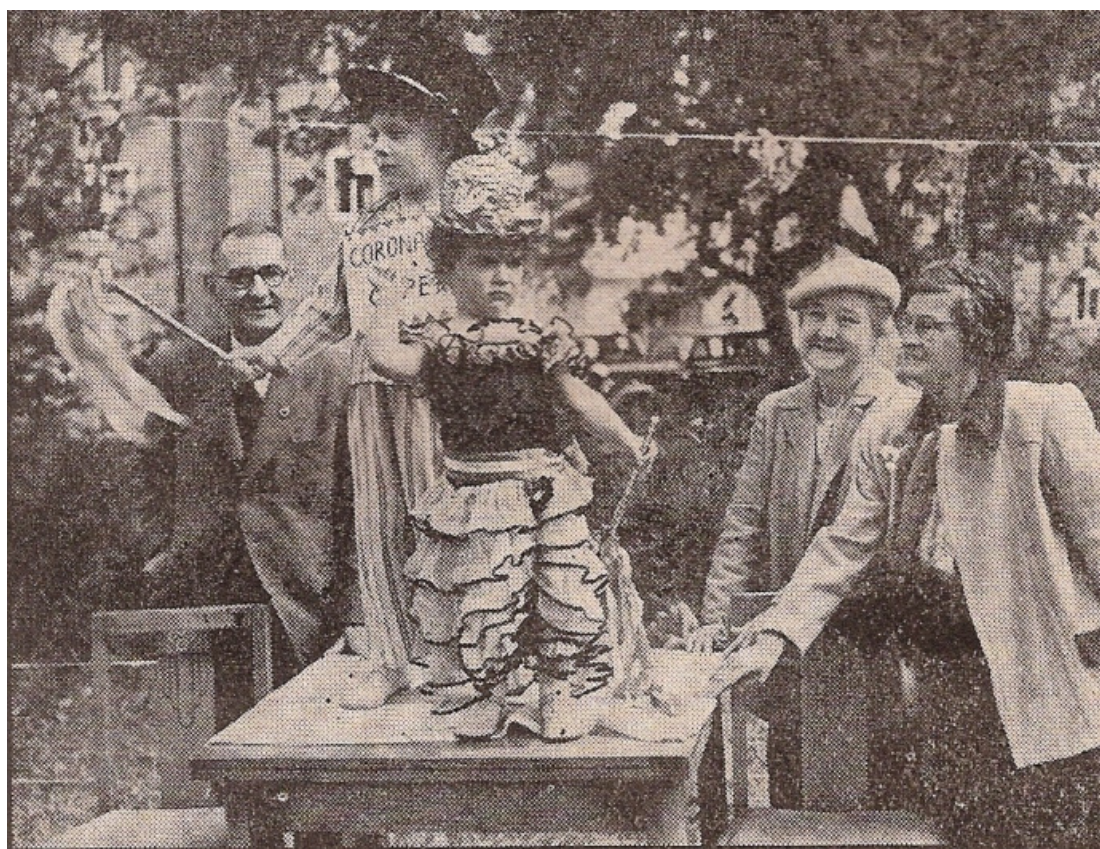
in a huge marquee and was financed by weekly collections of 6d per household - but everyone had to take their own spoons for the jelly and fruit! A photograph of the event begs the question how anyone managed to eat since people are standing shoulder to shoulder in the marquee. A coronation fete was also held at Eastcote House with the guest of honour being Alan Lennox Boyd, Minister of Transport.

Another event of particular interest to our Society was the Ruislip Archives Exhibition held in July at the Great Barn, Manor Farm which was organised by Miss Pollard, the Librarian of Manor Farm Library. As early as February there were requests for material to supplement the property deeds, photographs, parish magazines and Hawtrey family papers already collected by Miss Pollard. The exhibition also included material from King's College and the Middlesex County Record Office and hopefully it sparked an interest within the community into the history of the area in which so many were newcomers.

The general consensus was that the Coronation celebrations had been a great success with many being taken aback by the large number of street parties organised, and how much they had been enjoyed. The district 'awoke and was aroused' with thousands attending the final event on the Saturday. The residents had proved the pessimists wrong in showing that they were supportive and interested in local community events.

This survey of celebrations held between 1897 and 1953 help to demonstrate the gradual evolution of our area from a small rural village, where festivities were very simple and somewhat boisterous, to a modern suburb capable of holding a wide range of events supported by the growing number of local societies. The second half of the twentieth century saw a further development of these trends.





A frisky look from a frisky little girl at the Southcote-rise, Ruislip, party held on Saturday. With two-year-old Ann Godden is her brother five-year-old Michael who, although he was dressed for bed, enjoyed many hours of entertainment before getting there.

**Fig. 2**  
Coronation Street Party



**Fig. 3**  
Coronation Programme

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