

# THE STORY OF RUISLIP GARDENS

by Mary Pache

"It was sunny that day in 1934 and our first sight of Yeading Brook with willows overhanging the banks and wild flowers waving in the breeze was the prettiest we had ever seen. A cow had wandered across the fields from the farm at Ickenham and was rubbing its back against an oak tree."

The first houses on the Ruislip Gardens Estate were already built, more were under construction, and Bert Merrett and his wife were viewing with the intention of taking the bold step towards home ownership. The naming of the new area as 'Gardens' reminds us that in those years between World Wars I and II the Green Belt and garden cities were the popular themes of the age. A year or so later the picturesque stream overflowed and the Ruislip Gardens Residents' Association was formed with the purpose, I quote the minutes of the 13 November 1935, '...to discuss the recent floods at the Ruislip Gardens Estate, what action could be taken to deal with the proper authorities, whose responsibility it was etc...'

Another meeting was held eleven days later and officers were elected. Bert Merrett became the Secretary and he fulfilled the duties with dedication until his retirement thirty years later. The committee urged the Council Surveyor to improve surface water drainage, and it resolved to set up communication with Mr Trevor of the Ruislip Development Company. An immediate concern was a letter to the Surveyor that had been lost in the post thus delaying any remedial measures. One member was all for pursuing the postal culprit, but the majority voted in favour of dropping the matter as '... nothing could be gained by taking further action without involving hardship to a person or persons connected with the Post Office.' A satisfactory meeting with the Surveyor was eventually held and the cause of the flood was identified as rubbish blocking the flow further downstream where the Brook passed under the newly

constructed Western Avenue. At the AGM of February 1937 the Chairman was able to report that the improvements carried out by the County Council had been '...severely tested this winter ...' and not found wanting.

The committee then turned its attention to the lack of amenities. Children had to travel to Northolt to go to school, coal lorries were too long to turn the corners in the back tracks so coal had to be delivered through the terraced houses and there was no suitable venue for meetings such as the AGM. The hire of St Paul's Hall at a guinea (1 pound 1 shilling) for an evening strained the young Association's funds, as the last reported balance was 3 pounds 6 shillings. Members requested more steam trains to stop at Ruislip Gardens Halt on their way to Marylebone (the Central Line was in the future), a viable bus route to serve the Estate and an end to the nuisance of milk bottles left lying around. The committee harassed various authorities which resulted in smaller coal lorries and the euphemistically named 'dust collections'. Also a promise of a bus service when the population increased. They canvassed for members and collected subscriptions, which at 2 shillings per person were considered to be unacceptably high, and which were later reduced to a shilling. A homily was delivered by the Chairman that brought shame to anyone who did not control their milk bottles, and they persuaded the Council to consider building a school.

The Association lost support during the next few years when the economy of the country was recovering from the disastrous 1929 collapse and, like today, the housing market was depressed. Many houses were let and blame was laid on tenants for uncultivated gardens and general lack of interest. The committee initiated a Horticultural Society with competitions and prizes for the best displays. The dispute about who was responsible for the maintenance of the backtracks rumbled on, with Councils

and Developers abrogating responsibility. Mentions of meetings to learn about Air Raid Precautions began to creep into the minutes and the last recorded committee meeting before the outbreak of World War II was on the 16 April 1939.

The Association was revived in 1945 but that is another part of the story. By then Ruislip Gardens was celebrated by that enthusiast of the suburbs, John Betjeman, with his poetic lines, 'Gaily into Ruislip Gardens/Runs the red electric train/- Out into the outskirt's edges/Where a few surviving hedges/Keep Alive our lost Elysium - rural Middlesex again.'

**Sources:**

The minute ledger of the Ruislip Gardens Residents' Association

Conversations with post World War II residents.