

High Wych History – 74 part 2 - Camp High Wych

We continue our story from last month.

As the years went by Sawbridgeworth Town Council continued its involvement. Perhaps the camp was discussed at council meetings but there is next to no mention of it in the minutes. It is possible the town clerk was very much left to get on with things on his own, allocating places at the camp and offering alternative accommodation.

Teresa Pavely (nee Ellis) was born in 1955 at 'the huts' in Parsonage Lane. It was February and the snow was thick on the ground as John, her dad, walked to the phone box to call District Nurse Cohen. Upon their marriage on 23rd June 1952 Teresa's mum and dad, Margaret and John, had lived with Margaret's granny at Trimm's Green / Rook End on the outskirts of Allens Green near the Chase. They had to move out however as the farmer would not let them share the same tied cottage. Luckily(?) they were given accommodation at the camp by the authorities at SUDC. They must have been one of the last people being allocated accommodation at the camp as by 1953 SUDC had announced they would not accept any more tenants. John Ellis was a bus driver working for Eastern National Bus Garage in Bishop's Stortford at the time. Margaret Ellis told her daughter how some large families had two huts, one to live in and one to sleep in; they paid the rent from the family allowance. Every now and then a green grocer would call with his horse and cart. Things were changing though; by 1955 a demolition programme was well under way with the worst equipped huts being taken down first and people moved to slightly better huts. This also happened to John and Margaret. However, at the end of that year, when Teresa was 9 months old, the family was rehoused in a council house at Kecksy's Sawbridgeworth.



Pictured above: Margaret Ellis in front of her hut with baby Teresa in 1955.

The Wilson family lived at the camp for longer than most. Jim, whose proper name was in fact Alfred, had served in the Royal artillery during WW2 and after demobilisation came back to live in Bishop's Stortford. He worked as a coal man with a firm called Bennet's. Olive Walker lived in Trimm's Green with her parents. During the war she had worked in Chelmsford at Marconi's making radios for the military. Jim and Olive met at a dance and got married in 1947 upon which they came to live at number 5 East Side Camp. In 1949 their son Robert was born.

Times were hard at the camp. Thanks however to his wartime military driving licence father Jim got a job as a long distance lorry driver. As a result he sometimes brought home some 'treats' that were often shared with neighbours at the camp. In 1953 at the coronation of the Queen the people at the camp organised a big party. One year later sadly, young Robert fell ill and subsequently died. He is buried in Sawbridgeworth Cemetery.

On 25 February 1955 a second son, Terry, was born. As we have already seen above this was during a particularly harsh winter with lots of snow about. Nurse Cohen had to struggle to get through but got there just in time. There was a nice fire in the bedroom to welcome the new arrival. Terry remembers being told about Mr. Neil's farm which was just at the camp's entrance. Mr. Neil sold eggs at the door as he had loads of chickens. Some of these sometimes vanished and turned up at the camp residents' dinner table. Needs must! Jim Wilson also kept pigs which were fattened up for pork and butchered by uncle Ron Cracknell, who also lived at the camp. Terry does not remember much from his first 4 years but does recall a shop at the bottom of Spelbrook lane that sold most things and can remember sitting on the counter looking at all the sweets.

The years went by. Next door to the Wilsons lived the Brace family with their son John who became a good friend of Terry. John was born only 3 months after Terry; they grew up together and became good friends. John never had a driving licence and in later life biked everywhere. Tragically he was killed cycling to work one morning in Dec 2009 which upset Terry greatly.

It should be noted that the hut in which both Terry Wilson and Johnny Brace were born in is still standing. If you go into Parsonage Lane from Cambridge Road, go past the Play Barn on the left. At the junction with Spelbrook Lane there was Mr. Neil's farm on the right and the old hut is then on the left. There's a business there now: Pro Laminates a fibre glass supplier whose address is given as 'the Billet, obviously referring to its wartime use by RAF people.



● Five miles from Harlow New Town 11 families and three elderly people are living in these conditions. This is part of High Wyck Camp, which squatters settled on after the war. Now it is to be closed down. Three families and three people living on their own are still not assured of alternative accommodation.



The Wilson family were eventually rehoused on the newly built High Wych Broadfield Estate. They moved into their new council house on 10 April 1959. Terry remembers that date so well as the family always kept the front page of that day's Daily Mirror as a memento.

Also above is a picture from the Harlow Gazette of 27 February 1959. The Gazette interviewed two families then still living at the camp and who had been on the Braughing housing list for ten years, the Richards family and the Higgins family. The Higgins family had two children Marjorie Higgins told the Gazette reporter how in desperation she had written off to the queen and to the then MP Derek Walker Smith. Buckingham Palace passed her letter to the Housing Ministry. Walker Smith expressed confidence that Braughing RDC was doing its best.



High Wych camp power supply disconnected

AS units of accommodation at High Wych camp have been vacated by licensees rehoused by Braughing Rural Council the electricity supply has been disconnected. This has been done because of the danger that trespassers, particularly young children, might not realise that cables running through empty premises were alive.

This procedure was reported to the Council at their meeting last Thursday by the Housing Estate Management Committee. But, the report continued, in two instances recently this had not been possible because to do so would have meant disconnecting the supply from units still occupied.

The committee recommended, however, and the Council approved, that the supply should be disconnected and the people concerned told to make other arrangements for artificial light. In point of fact it will affect only three families, and the Council are trying to clear the camp as soon as possible.

On the left, Marjorie Higgins pictured in the Harlow Gazette of 27 February 1959. in the centre and on the right an article from the Herts and Essex Observer of 12 June 1959. It looks as if electricity was cut off whilst people were still living at the camp.

Trying to get personal stories 60-70 years on from the time of the camp proved difficult. Most of the original inhabitants are now dead, their children have dispersed and many have only vague memories of their time there. Quite a few do still live locally however. Research has also proven difficult as I was not able to visit the archive as often as I had wished. It is therefore quite possible this article will soon need a rewrite. So if you have corrections or additional information to offer, do contact me

Today there is not much that reminds casual passers by of where the camp was. A google maps screenshot, on the left below shows Parsonage Lane, the road from Allens Green towards Blounts Farm. The picture on the right shows the airfield memorial.



The two main published sources for these two articles were Paul Doyle's 'Where the Lysanders were' and an article from the Harlow Gazette from 1959. Other sources were: Brian Buckley, Ena Haugham, Teresa Pavely, Hayley Erica Bird, Mark Kempthorne, Michael Prior, Steve Prior, Janet van de Bilt Adrienne Wilson, Terry Wilson Wikipedia, Ancestry.co.uk, and County Archives aka HALS. Help with this continuing series will be very much appreciated. Phone me at 01279725468 or e-mail me at theo@vandebilt.co.uk with suggestions, corrections or ideas for future projects.