

Account of Purley on Thames

Mrs Macrae's Memories of School

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An article by Jean Debney in the series From my History Notebook article 17 published in PPN November 1981

Mrs Macrae has lived in Purley for many years and she kindly phoned me in answer to my query last month about knitted Victorian cuffs. My grateful thanks are due to her for permission to quote from the information that she gave me.

Her early childhood and schooldays were spent in a little village near the east coast of Essex during the years just before the first World War and the following is just a little from the very interesting reminiscences that I recorded:

"Most of us wore cuffs in the winter which we mostly made ourselves; the boys as well as the girls wore them: I don't remember ever having any gloves. My elder sister taught us to knit before we went to school, and in my school it wasn't considered girlish for the boys to be found knitting. The cuffs were made on four needles (two if you couldn't manage four and then you sewed up the little seam), in 2-plain, 2-purl rib; they were about 3½-4" deep. Any old wool was all right - you undid old socks and things like that. The colours were heather mixture, grey or blue-grey, and older girls had stripes in theirs; I don't think they matched. And on cold days, when you couldn't hold your pen in school, you could just pull your cuffs down to your knuckles and your hands were lovely and warm."

Mrs. Macrae then went on to tell me more about her school days, which described conditions that were probably very similar to those in Purley- School:

"In our school the infants were in a separate room which had an open fire, and if you weren't well or were crying, the mistress might let you sit in front of the fire while she read a story. But Standards 1,2,3 and so on were all in the same room which had a funny black stove with a guard round, and the master had his desk next to it.

The noise in that one room was dreadful when we were all repeating different things at once - you daren't let your mind wander, you just had to keep glaring at the teacher and get on with it. Everything was repeated again and again until it was drummed into you. We learnt a lot of poems and did a lot of reciting.

We never did "mathematics, just "sums"; but I think I can add up and subtract and multiply just as quickly as the children do today. We used slates for writing and we learned history. Twice a week we had needlework which was very important. We had to do very minute stitching and not allow any blobs of blood from pricked fingers on the material. When we did the gathers, we stroked each gather with a pin and it did make such a difference - we did some 'very nice work.

We played with plasticine quite a lot and had to make THINGS, such as mushrooms and blackberries and leaves and we also did weaving with coloured-paper and when we were very tiny, we did "fraying we were given a piece of cotton material and a pin and we sat and laboriously shredded each little line of thread until we had a little pile of cotton. It had to be just threads, not bits of material. I don't know what happened to it afterwards - it was ,all collected up and may have been used for stuffing.'

Sometimes we were late for school and then we might be caned we had a lot of caning: the boys were thrashed over their shoulders, but the girls were hit on their hands or on the backs of the legs. The head master was much more lenient than the mistresses who sometimes lost their tempers and really did thrash you - I would much rather have a master, they did seem to be more reasonable"