

Wembley, 1920–39

I have many happy memories of Wembley where I was born in 1920 and lived until 1939. It was only a village in my early days – indeed for many years the railway station was called ‘Wembley for Sudbury’. I am not sure what was so important about Sudbury, but certainly by 1923 Sudbury had faded into insignificance because Wembley by then housed the famous stadium where FA cup finals and other important football matches were held for many years. My father was one of the workers who built the stadium – and over the years I went to many events there. My father took me to see the greyhound races; I went collecting autographs from the speedway riders who rode there; I did ballboy and other duties at some football matches, as a local Boy Scout.

In 1924 and 1925 the British Empire Exhibition was held in the area and the stand and some of the buildings were still there in 1939.

I attended several primary schools in the area. I can still remember the words of the School Song of Park Lane School where on 24 June each year all the children who belonged to an official group wore their uniforms because it was Empire Day. In 1931 I moved on to Secondary School (Wembley County School) and had six happy years there where I enjoyed football and cricket – and even got some pleasure from academic work!

Wembley in the 1930s was growing rapidly as London expanded westwards. We were in the transition from horse-drawn transport to petrol and electric power. Electricity brought electric lights to replace gas in the houses and trams as public transport. I remember seeing horses fall when pulling carts and having to be released from their harnesses to stand them on their feet again; I remember seeing the arm of a tram coming off the wire which carried the electricity and the conductor with a long pole replacing the end of the arm on the wire. I remember seeing the trolley buses replace the trams. This had the effect of making rails (tramlines) unnecessary but meant that trolley buses got in the way of the emerging motor car transport.

Progress in Wembley raced on through the 1930s. I had some wonderful evenings at the Empire Pool – swimming in the summer, ice skating in the winter.

But the potential storm clouds were building up and the carefree days of my youth were numbered. In 1938 when Mr Chamberlain, our Prime Minister, came back from Munich waving his piece of paper with Hitler’s agreement to peace, I and several of my friends decided that war was inevitable and that Hitler would only desist if he was sufficiently scared off – so we joined the Territorial Army. To our surprise this did not seem to scare Hitler at all. So he made war on us in 1939 and I went off to war leaving Wembley just a memory.