

## *Introductory notes*

### **Location**

The 'Coley' referred to in this book is the area called 'Old Coley'. That is, the area bounded by Castle Hill on the northside, down to the Inner Distribution Road roundabout, by the Kennet to the east, Berkeley Avenue to the south and Coley Hill, Garnet Hill and Field Road to the west. However, we have considered, for the purposes of this study, that households further up the Holybrook, in what is now Coley Park, such as Coley Kiln Cottages and Rifle Range Cottages, were part of the Coley community and certainly they considered themselves as such.

### **Early history**

For much of its history Coley was no more than a collection of cottages strung along Pinkneys or Pigneys Lane, a road running, roughly, from the present Holybrook House in Castle Street towards the old Somerville glass shop at the end of Wolseley Street. Probably its main distinctive feature was St Mary's parish poorhouse, which acted as the Reading Union Poorhouse after 1834 and which remained in use until 1867 when the new workhouse was built at what is now Battle Hospital. Beyond the end of Pigneys Lane, where St Saviours Church is now, was Little Coley, a farm owned by the Bushnell family at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Following the Holybrook out there was then Coley Park Farm, owned by the Wilshin family at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but taken over by the Bucknells by the time of our study. The Victorian farmhouse still stands there, now known as Bucknell House. The land around was all owned by the Monck family, who lived at the Coley Park Mansion until the early years of this century; it was they who sold off bits of land around Pigneys Lane, piecemeal, to developers through the nineteenth century.

Pressure for development in Coley seems to have come in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. Houses were needed for the labourers in the kilns and brickfields of Coley and Katesgrove, as well as for the many silk-weavers who worked from their own home. Census returns for 1841 show that all the courts and passages off Coley Passage were in place by then, but a street map of 1834 shows only Coley Passage and a few dwellings around it. The name Pigneys Lane had been replaced, officially, by Coley Street in 1832, perhaps to coincide with new developments there. The courts off Coley Passage, Bosier Square and Marshall Place seem, then, to have been developed in the 1830s.



Union Square was not developed until much later and was built on the site of the old 'Union' or workhouse.

The rest of Coley was built to the south in the 1870s and 1880s to form Wolseley Street, Garnet Street, Field Road, Dover Street and St Saviours Terrace. This was developed by local builders Collier and Catley and was superior to what was already considered the 'slums' around Coley Street.

### **Local names**

Locally Coley Passage was known as the 'Steps' because it was built up the side of a hill and was consequently stepped, the houses rising in tiers up the hillside. Garnet Hill was known as Stoney Hill simply because it was! At its top Dover Street met Coley Place and – perhaps to divide the newer, better housing from the worse – a brick wall divided the two streets. As is the nature of things this was soon breached and for many years the wall stood with a large arch in it called 'The hole in the wall'. Eventually the wall itself disappeared.

### **Population**

The population of Coley was estimated at about 4000 in the 1880s and seems to have remained at about that until the clearances started in the 1930s. About half the population lived in the slums.



*Making way for the Inner Distribution Road, built in the 1970s and now dominating the end of Wolseley Street. Demolition of Coley Street, late 1960s.*





*Class with Mr Piper, a highly respected headmaster (c. 1915).*

which would seem to indicate that boys were caned far more commonly than girls. Girls would be kept in or made to do lines. Mrs N recounts the following:

When I got to 7x, there was a partition between us. There was class 7x and there was class 4 and there was a glass partition and my mind used to wander and I was always looking into class (4) and my (teacher), I can always remember him, Mr Piper. The headmaster was Mr Ellis, but Mr Piper, he always took 7x, that was the highest class. And he came out to me and said, 'Adnams, come out here'. So, of course, I thought 'What have I done now?' And he said, 'Go and open that door.' So I had to open the door of Class 4. And he said, 'Now come back here.' And he got hold of me by the nape of the neck and he give me a push and he said, 'Now get in there.', he said, 'if you want to be in that Class 4. Your nose and eyes are always in Class 4,' he said, 'you can stay in Class 4 until you know what class you're in.' Now that was my punishment, you see.'

Parents didn't always take kindly to their children being caned. One particular incident was recounted by several people.

*Mr W* A lot of people used to turn up late for school, and always being told off. You see brothers used to have to bring other brothers to school and, well, they took 'em in the infants, and then came from the infants, got back and the register had been called. Well, this particular lad . . . the teacher says to him, 'If you come in late again, you'll get the cane'. So, lo and behold, he comes in late again. And the kid cries and shouts and kicks, you know, and says 'I'll tell our old man of you.' And the teacher says, 'You can tell your old man of me if you like'. And the kid flew out of the door, home. So, presently, it was a very big door, like a jail door, actually, upstairs.





*The children were better off out of the way of their busy mothers . . . In the days before heavy motor traffic . . . this was not as careless as it may seem. Even as late as 1960 the streets were quiet and safe. Willow Street (1960s).*

the Borough Bench for 'playing football in Garnet Street', and were duly fined. A lot of the boys actually played with a pig's bladder – probably the original 'football' – and Coley Rec was often the venue, safe from passing policemen. The girls, too, improvised their own toys.

*Mrs S* We used to have a celluloid doll, for a penny, . . . and we used to have a Wills Woodbine, you know they used to have five in a packet? Used to be a big flat box they kept them in, we used to dress that up as a cradle, in them days.

The whole of Coley was the playground from the courts and alleyways to the Holybrook, and up to 'Cundles', the allotments and beyond. The buildings themselves were utilised.

*Mrs I* That used to be our rounders, the old fish shop, the wall there, we used to mark it on the fish shop wall, and we used to go to Titchmans, from Titchmans to Iremongers, from Iremongers to that relation of yours and over to the fish shop.

There were games still familiar today; marbles, cricket, fishing, skipping with a length of rope across the road, and games less familiar:

*Mrs N* We always had Diabolos to play with. That's the two sticks you see and it's like a cone and you got it going in the middle, like this, you see, and once you got it going you'd throw it up and catch it.

or:

*Mr A* We used to have hoops, them iron hoops . . . and you used to run



errands and that with them, miles, with a stick. These hoops, you had a little hooky thing on 'em, it caught and it kept on making it go round.

or

*Mr B* Oh whip and top, it was a game you played in teams as well . . . you had special ways of spinning tops, you could hold the bottoms with them right up in the air and they'd go right up and come down spinning . . . The most popular top of all, there was the mushroom top. And the mushroom top, it was about the size I'd say of a fair size mushroom. And you always coloured it. Bits of chalk, you always made little designs, so that when it was spinning it looked lovely. But with a mushroom, you would hit it and it would go for miles. And after that came a larger one called a window breaker, because it was an unsteady top, and once you hit it, instead of going straight up like a mushroom top would, a window breaker would swerve either side and typically did break a lot of windows . . . After that came the turnip, like a turnip, flat at the top and going narrow right down to the bottom. Little turnip top . . . that was a girls' top . . . as I say, you could hit the old mushroom . . . up the street and other people'd hit it back and then you'd gang up, two a side probably . . . Oh it used to be wonderful fun.

Another popular game, obviously a variant of 'Hide and Seek' was called 'Erky Erky' – a game still played, and now apparently called 'Kick the Can'.

*Mr W* We used to get on a manhole cover and they all used to run and hide, you know. And then they would have to come and find you. If he could see you first he had to run back and bang that quick to catch you out. But if you got back to that manhole cover before him, you were still in.

As another said:

*Mr B* We knew all the nooks and crannies in Coley and we used to play 'Erky Erky 1, 2, 3' and we'd hide from everything everywhere . . . there was many a canoodling done in that . . . From that 'Erky Erky' we found out things that birds and bees never do.

There was Hot Rice, Puff Coming, Sally Go Round The Moon, Dickie Dickie Dyke and Hopscotch.

Naturally they enjoyed their practical jokes as much as children ever have done:

*BM* Release and tying the knockers up, with a bit of string all along the street. As one opened the door, that one she shut her door. The other one banged didn't it . . . And they used to tie all the string on the letter boxes.

*IM* We used to play the policemen up as well.

*BM* Have a shoebox on a piece of string and you used to put it out on the pavement and when somebody come along, we used to pull it along so's they couldn't touch. Anyway, a copper came along one day and caught us.

I think the policemen was frightened to come round our way in those days.

Scrumpping, as described elsewhere, was also popular, whether it be walnuts or fruit.

A popular place for playing was the Holybrook – ‘a proper little lido’ as it was described. Where the river actually ran through Coley then, as now, it was protected by railings, although some of these were easily removed. However, further out, behind Rifle Range Cottages, it was different – deeper and cleaner.

*BD* It being sparkling and clean, one could always see the gravel bottom and shoals of minnows and dace.

Mr A remembered:

We used to go fishing, but there used to be an old bridge there and when you went over that bridge to Rifle Range Cottages you went over that little old bridge. The gates were nearly always locked but you could squeeze through, and turn left and there was a little sluice gate that led into the Kennet and we used to play there. Opening, no we didn’t used to open it but we used to play with the water there, like, you know. Used to spend hours over there.

Fishing was enormously popular, although tackle was of the most basic:

*RF* One of my little sports was getting a line and one or two little shops in Coley sold fishing hooks, because it was near the River Kennet. You got a penny hook and tied it on the line, put a bit of bread on and dangle it down the wall and take a chance that somebody’d come push you in or anything. You know . . . lay down there and dangled it down the side and the gud-geon used to come along in shoals . . . And I always used to wonder if, when I see these men with these big fishing rods, I always think, well one day I hope I can get something like that, which I did.

The proximity of the rivers may well explain the Coley children’s proficiency in both swimming and fishing, although it did have its dangers. The Coley School Log Books record ‘whilst playing 10/7/1908 George Plested drowned.’

Many games were by their very nature seasonal, such as swimming, cricket, football, conkers and winter games:

*IM* I remember when the snow was on the ground, all the kids used to come on little trays down (Stoney or Garnet Hill). One used to stand at the bottom to see if it was all right – there wasn’t many cars about then – and they’d come straight down the hill . . . and some of them went nearly down the Brook, didn’t they?

*BM* Some of them used to finish up in the shop.

Even as children reached their teens or even older the streets were still the main meeting place, hanging about under the gas lights, or playing cards in the little alleys and courtyards:

*Mr B* The most used and abused being the Box Tunnel, here in hidden corners many a game of cards were played. Ask any Old Coleyite what the Box Tunnel Shuffle was and they’ll tell you . . . these games were only played for half pennies and pennies but there was more urgency to win than any game played at Monte Carlo.