

LIVING IN KILMACOLM 1932-1955.

By Julia Lawrence

Kilmacolm was very much the good place to live during my early pre-war formative years, also post war, as it had everything that the average middle class family could possibly wish – pleasant setting, convenient for the Glasgow businessman, Plenty of young families, good available education and handy for the delightful Firth of Clyde, Bute and Arran, all sought-after summer holiday places and offering perfect sailing. There was also a good golf club, a tennis club and a bowling green. The Birkmyre Park, founded by the family of the same name who owned the then highly profitable Gourock Ropeworks, provided facilities for sport and a play place for children, as did what was known as 'the Wee Park' located in the older part of the village. There was a good train and bus service between Glasgow and Greenock, both calling at Kilmacolm. The morning trains were the four minutes to eight, the eight twenty and the eight forty, and catered for business people and students. The five seven, the five thirty five or the five fifty five brought them home again. Buses ran half hourly both ways, based in Clyde Street, Glasgow.

Kilmacolm had a certain reputation of being a 'snob' village, but it was probably no worse than a number of other similar places, known as dormitories for Glasgow. Helensborough for example was then in many ways a parallel. Kilmacolm was supposed to boast as residents in the early years of this period as many as five millionaires, but true or false I am not sure, nor did I ever know who they were. Certainly judging by the fine houses, there was plenty of money about, especially those residences located in the Glencairn and the Bridge-of-Weir Roads. 'Windy Hill' in Porterfield Road remains a beautiful example of Charles Rennie-MacIntosh architecture. Residents, and you were only truly 'Kilmacolm' if you were second generation, often looked on incomers with slight suspicion. There were plenty of them, especially during the war, since international Glasgow-based firms often selected the village as a suitable place for their senior staff to live and these representatives might even be foreign, in other words English!

Kilmacolm had the strange characteristic of being one of the few villages in Scotland that was 'dry', which being interpreted meant that there were no pubs allowed. It was rumoured that the 'hoy polloy' did not fancy the indignity of drunks destroying the peace and quiet of their village. Anyone wanting to drink had either to go to the neighbouring village of Bridge-of-Weir or the other way to Port Glasgow. This had the result that anyone travelling on buses just after pub closing time, 10 p.m. in those days, had to suffer the indignity of a rather rowdy ride back to Kilmacolm in what was known as the boozers' bus. The conductresses must have dreaded it, as the Scots working man took his drinking seriously especially if he had to travel that distance to obtain it. There was always much shouting of the proverbial 'Come-on-get-aff'. Alcohol could however be sold at the golf clubhouse, members only of course, which lay just without the official bounds of Kilmacolm parish.

There were three Presbyterian Churches; the Old Kirk which was the Parish Church, St. James's, now St. Columba's, as it amalgamated with the St. Columba's Church, located on the Bridge-of-Weir Road, when the original St. Columba's was demolished about 1967 I think. There was also a Scottish Episcopalian Church, then an edifice of corrugated iron but later replaced by a stone building. An upstairs room diagonally opposite the police station met the needs of the Plymouth Brethern's Sunday gatherings. Later there was also a place of worship for Catholics somewhere down Smiddy Brae, but I am not sure of its actual whereabouts. The Catholic population was small.

The oldest part of Kilmacolm was the High Street which ran from the police station up past what was then Lairds' Garage behind the Old Kirk. Between the Kidston Hall and on the site where the McGarvas' house currently stands there used to be an old farm steading. I can just remember it as a very small child, by which time it was semi-derelict and later completely demolished when that house was built, pre-WWII.

St. Columba's School was owned then by the Girls' School Company which also was responsible for Park School in Glasgow and St. Bride's in Helensborough. During World War II, Park School was partially evacuated to Kilmacolm and most of those who joined us were of necessity boarders. What was then the prep school, Shieldhall on the Bridge of-Weir-Road was turned into a boarding house for them and the St. Columba's prep school pupils were squeezed into what was always known as the 'Big School' in Duchal Road. St. Columba's took boarders in these days, who lived in Shallot near the Birkmyre Park, which now houses the present junior school. Most of the Park School girls returned to Glasgow within two years, although a few stayed on permanently as St. Columba's pupils. I was a day scholar and first walked to and from school, later biked it, about half a mile each way. We went home for lunch in a rather meagre lunch hour between 12.50 to 2.00. The number of pupils up to the time I left in 1950 was 340 approximately, with probably about 40 boarders. School rules were much more strictly enforced then than now. We had to wear our hats, and gloves all the way home, and were in trouble if we were found not doing so, usually by school prefects or members of staff living in Kilmacolm. Nor were we allowed to be seen eating anything such as sweets or ice cream when in school uniform. Some Kilmacolm people sent their day pupil girls off to boarding school at the age of 13-14, but many of us completed our schooling at St. Columba's, of which I was glad to be one.

There were three private general practitioner doctors, each with their own private patients, who met health needs. The situation obviously changed somewhat with the advent of the National Health Service (1949?). Sick patients received house calls either in the morning or afternoon. I don't recollect there being an evening or morning surgery until much later, but think there must have been one or both. I can remember something called 'The Panel', pre-NHS, which I think provided healthcare at a reduced rate for those who were not well off, but don't know what it entailed or how it worked. I know you had to 'sign on'.

There was a good selection of shops – three butcheries, Patersons, later called Mitchells, Blackwoods, and one other. There were two fish shops, four grocers, and three dairies. There were also the ubiquitous Italian sweet and ice cream shops, always referred to as 'the Talianis' where coffee and fizzy drinks were also sold. The shops were The Cross Café, owned by the Pignatelli family, (opposite the GPO) and similar shops owned by the Baldis and the Coias respectively. Coias' was the smart place for morning coffee, pre-war. It was located near to Blackwoods the butchers. In 1940 these Italian shop windows were promptly boarded up when Italy entered the war in case stones were thrown, and Messrs. Pignatelli and Baldi were removed to internment camps. Their families continued to run the business, and happily no windows were broken. The two men returned from internment before the end of the war, although I can't remember exactly when – probably when Italy retired. To us children, it all seemed strange that these people who made such glorious ice cream and sold us sweets if we spent our pocket money in their shops, should suddenly be taken away like criminals. Another sweet shop was 'Miss Fairley's' which we also patronised. (Sweets were strictly rationed during the war). There were two shoe shops, and 'The Fancy Work Shop' where one bought haberdashery, such as threads, knitting wool and patterns etc. Stoddarts Nursery located near the Old Kirk Manse provided a good selection of fresh vegetables. It was customary to walk to the shops although during the war years many people purchased bikes with large baskets on the front. Some grocers ran a weekly delivery service.

Kilmacolm was a wonderful place in which to grow up, as in these days it was safe for children to wander or cycle at will. There were innumerable cycle rides, one of the most arduous being up to Loch Tom, then cycling along the side of two water reservoirs on an unsurfaced road, that eventually sloped steeply down in a switchback to the coastal town of Largs. It was quite a tough cycle but there were always Knickerbockers Glories (an ice cream confection), to look forward at Nardinis' on arrival. Once my friend and I cycled to Paisley to buy a gramophone record for some one's birthday. We felt very proud of ourselves as we rattled over the cobbles which then covered the Paisley streets. As smaller children we played endlessly in the nearby fields and woods, which we were allowed to do provided we turned up in time for meals. There were also beautiful walks which usually on Saturdays and Sundays I went on with my father. There was a small hill we climbed overlooking the Clyde, and I can remember listening to the riveters working in the shipyards, which even from that distance one could hear quite clearly on a still day. Later there was a change in shipbuilding technique and the riveters were heard no more. I also recollect when the original Queen Mary was launched, 1936 I think. My parents and sisters attended but I was considered too small, much to my disappointment. The Queen Elizabeth was launched just before WWII. During the war the two Queens and the Auqitania (or was it the Mauritania?) were used as troop ships between Britain and USA. We often used to see them if we visited the Firth of Clyde, painted grey and looking impressively enormous. I worried that they might be torpedoed but my father assured me that they sailed too fast for torpedoes to catch them – true or false I don't know. Troop trains between 'the tail of the bank' and Glasgow ran through Kilmacolm, so we always knew when a ship was in.

As we grew older there were visits to Glasgow, Paisley and Greenock to the cinema, or to the theatre in Glasgow. The D'Oyley Carte Opera Company performed Gilbert and Sullivan in the Royal Theatre every autumn for a season of three weeks. The Wilson Barrett Repertory Company at the Alhambra put on a new play each week. This was always a pleasant evening's entertainment and often involved a dirty rush back to St. Enoch's station to catch the last train home, the 10.10 if it was a long play. Then there was the delight of calling in to Baldie's chip shop to get sixpence worth of chips. We were always asked 'Do you want salt and vinegar?' Then with or without, the chips were wrapped in a greaseproof and newspaper 'poke'. For me there has never been anything like these chips before or since. The King's Theatre usually hosted plays on tour. The Old Vic did a stint just after the war, complete with Sybil Thorndike, Olivier and Ralph Richardson. There was also St. Andrews Halls, which later burnt down, where the Scottish Orchestra played and also hosted the play 'The Three Estates' with Duncan MacCrae, on tour after the Edinburgh Festival. The Citizens repertory Theatre in the Gorbals was a great favourite and put on many plays of Scottish origin such as those of James Bridie, who was currently popular. They also staged William Walton's 'Miracle in the Gorbals'.

Kilmacolm social life was excellent. When at university, where there was an equally good 'life', I was often the envy of my friends when it was time for vacations, as I always had so much to look forward to going home – many of them didn't seem to be so lucky. There was the Dance Club which held regular dances - much looked forward to events with a good mixture of both young and the parental generation. We danced 'ballroom', what was called 'old time' and lots of Scottish and Highland dances. Some of these functions were held in the Kidston Hall and a few every season in the Kilmacolm Hydro, which always seemed rather grand and was often the venue for wedding receptions. The Hydro during the war became a naval hospital but closed after a fire and eventually was renovated and reopened. I have no idea where the guests came from who stayed there and what facilities they enjoyed, although I do recollect a swimming pool and remember there was a resident physiotherapist or masseur as they were called then. There was also a private Hydro golf course attached, and I do remember seeing people playing on it, although I think it fell into disrepair as a result of WWII. There was an active tennis club which was

popular during late spring and summer but closed down in early autumn. There were various other annual events such as a spring point-to-point meeting, held somewhere near Houston, and rugby at Greenock where the Wanderers played. Occasionally we went dancing course at the Plaza in Glasgow or at Largs, The Moorings. That was always a great evening out, but of course one had to be taken by a partner.

Church played a significant role in many of our lives, and most people but not all, went to Church on a Sunday, if not twice then certainly to morning service which was at 11.30 a time chosen many years earlier to suit farmers who had a long distance to travel. We went to the Old Kirk where later I sang in the choir. This necessitated choir practice on a Friday night, morning and evening services on Sunday when we also attended Bible Class on Sunday afternoons, held in the church vestry, the oldest part of the building which was supposed to have originated with the advent of St. Columba in the sixth century. Kilmacolm means of course the cell of dear Columba. The village name used to be spelt Kilmalcolm, but Dr. James Murray the Old Kirk Minister in the early years of the twentieth century, assessed that this was incorrect and had it changed officially. (See his book on the history of the parish).

Sundays were quite strictly observed, especially before the War when no one would have thought of or dared to commit the terrible crime of hanging out a washing on the Sabbath. I can remember wanting to collect sticks for the fire once during my Sunday walk. My nanny told me that I'd get my face put in the moon if I did that – an idea that I must say quite appealed to me. Playing cards on a Sunday would also have earned disapproval. One lot of neighbours used to close all their curtains on Sundays from which they peeped disapprovingly at us if we lay out in the sun on rugs and cushions in the front garden. We were not particularly disconcerted by them. Shops of course all shut on Sunday except for the Talianis – great if you needed ice cream, sweets or cigarettes. We did have Sunday papers though, and loved The Broons and Oor Wullie in the Sunday Post. Sunday golf was another no-no although later it was permitted after 2.00 p.m. My father always played on a Saturday morning. Women were not allowed to use the course at weekends, nor were they allowed to wear trousers. I don't know when these rules were dumped. It must certainly have been after the War.

The Kidston Hall was unofficially the Old Kirk Church hall, but was used for many other functions as well. I don't know what the terms of occupancy were and whether the Church had priority of use, but it had many purposes, e.g. as already quoted dances. It was also the venue for the Church Women's Guild and the Girls Association. Films were occasionally shown there during the war – always great excitement – also ENSA concerts were occasionally held. The local Dramatic Society used the hall for their productions, always lots of fun.

Air raids during the war always caused great excitement for us kids, but probably not so for our parents. My father was a fire watcher and went out in an air raid armed with his grey tin helmet. We all had gas masks of course, which travelled with us to and from school and in the early years of the war if we travelled anywhere. We also were obliged to wear identity bracelets with our names and addresses on them. I never remember feeling scared during air raids – more excited and wondering/hoping if we'd perhaps have a day off school the next day. Kilmacolm was on the perimeter of the two terrible Clydebank raids when the main enemy purpose was to destroy as many humans and their habitation as possible in a demoralisation exercise. There was also the night that Greenock was bombed. I can remember the sky bright red on the western horizon, since one of the first direct hits, a whisky distillery in Dumbarton, lit up the sky. Oddly enough not a single ship in the estuary was hit, although again homes and tenements suffered considerably. The bombs that landed on Kilmacolm were mostly those dumped as German aircraft returned home. There was one that landed almost on the telephone exchange and narrowly

missed Rosebank Terrace, just opposite. Another near miss was almost on the railway line, a crater that we could see from our house on the Port Glasgow road. School pupils who travelled by train from Paisley or Greenock often had hair raising tales to tell. Not many people in Kilmacolm had air raid shelters as such and usually one huddled in the safest downstairs room in the house which would be shored up with great wooden props. We foregathered in our cloakroom and slept, sort of, on the floor on cushions off the drawing room sofa. A great treat was sucking Ovaltine tablets!

Another war memory was the Free French destroyer that blew up offshore at Greenock. No one every discovered quite what caused this, or more correctly we were never told – whether it was sabotage or a genuine accident. There were morbid stories of corpses, or parts of, being washed, ashore for days after. The destroyed destroyer stuck out of the water for many years to come. I don't know if it was ever removed or just left to sink into the mud.

Not many people owned cars pre-war, and those who did had, unless they were specially entitled to petrol for a justifiable use, to put their cars up on blocks for 'the duration'. It was quite a while after the War before cars and petrol became available to the public, and when they did new cars were in limited supply only. One make, and rather hideous it was too, was the Standard Vanguard, which had a particularly ugly radiator grille. Someone once said it resembled a grinning Japanese General.

Rationing went on for many years after the War, till 1953 I think. Being in the country we were better off than those who lived in big towns, especially in the south of England. Most of us grew vegetables and my father was one of the best, both with them and with fruit. (A special allocation of sugar was permitted to jam makers, if they had fruit growing in their gardens). I can never recollect being short of meat although I can remember my father grumbling about the Argentine beef, one of the first examples of the use of cold storage in transporting foodstuffs, and saying much to my mother's annoyance that it was tough. Some people kept hens, as did our neighbours. We saved all our scraps, outer leaves of cabbage, potato peelings etc. to help feed them and in return received six eggs a week. Eggs, when they were more readily available in the summer, were preserved by putting them into a liquid called waterglass, which sealed them. (Another method was to rub the eggs in lard and lay them out on newspaper in the attic). Ours were put into the old copper boiler in the wash house. These were a great bonus in winter months. We also existed on rationed powdered egg.

Up the Finlaystone Road, which had its origins in the oldest part of Kilmacolm, and past all the houses there was a residence called Old Hall which always intrigued me as a child, although it had a long drive and could barely be seen from the road. It was, I was told, the abode of the Laird of Kilmacolm whose name was, I think, Brown. However I never saw him and no one ever volunteered any information about him. On the same road, just adjacent to Lang's farm was a very old house called Watery Yetts. It was occupied before the War by an artist who wore a rather eccentric-looking brown swirling cape, and who was occasionally seen in the village. I always wondered what he painted but never found out. The house was very picturesque, with extremely thick whitewashed walls, and green shutters. I have often wondered if it is still there. The last occupants I knew of who lived there were called Thomson.

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