

## SLOPERS by Graham Wootten

Having lived in the 'Slopers' area of Poverest since 1981, I became interested in the history of the area after talking to some elderly neighbours who often talked about what life was like years ago.

By talking to these neighbours, former residents and research at the Bromley Local History library, I have come up with this "potted history".

Two questions I'm often asked are, just what is 'Slopers' - or more accurately 'Slopers Island' - and what is the origin of the name?

The answer to the first is easy to answer - it is the common name given to the Victorian estate officially called Ford Croft, built in the 1880s and made up of Bellefield, Bridge, Cross and Fordcroft Roads, along with the south side of the existing Poverest Road.

The second is wrapped in local folklore, which has two explanations, neither substantiated. The first being that the builders 'sloped off' without completing the job !! Maybe the building firm went out of business or simply that not all the building plots were sold? The other 'explanation' given me was that the 'doss house' on the corner of Bridge Road and Poverest Road was once owned by a Mr. Sloper!!

But whatever the real reason, it is clear that 'Slopers Island' became the local name for Fordcroft very early in the estate's existence. The enumerator for the 1891 census described his district as "The whole parish of Orpington.... and including Poverest, (sic) the whole of Fordcroft, **commonly called Slopers Island**. At this time there were 500 inhabitants at Fordcroft, out of a total of 4,100 in the Orpington parish.

What was the area like before the Ford Croft estate was built?. We know that the area has been inhabited since at least the Middle Stone Age (around 10,000 to 6,000 years ago), as tools from this period have been found. And in 1947, Mr. Arthur Eldridge, who worked for the local council, reported finding Roman pottery and coins in the immediate locality. You can see some of these on display at Bromley Museum, in Orpington. He also spotted what he thought was a Roman wall when a trench was being dug in Bellefield Road. These finds, and others, led to major excavations in the 1960s, 1970s and 1988. A Roman bath house and a Saxon burial ground were unearthed, and the site, near the bottom of Poverest Road, is opened to the public every summer, and well worth a visit. More remains to be discovered under Bellefield Road and the adjoining vacant Johnson's Yard when the opportunity arises for further excavations.

Moving swiftly on to the 19th Century, (mainly because I haven't found anything to write about that's any earlier! !) the 1860s Ordnance Survey map shows that the area to the west of St. Mary Cray High Street and New Town (Lower Road, Wellington Road and Anglesea Road) was open farmland and woodland. Poverest Road is shown winding its way up to the Poverest Farm. Poverest Road's original route took in what are now Marion Crescent and the top end of Cray Valley Road. The farm, which was situated just before the present Sutherland Avenue, closed around 1937. The farmer in 1891 was a J E Marshall, while by the 1920s it was Stanley May.

Near the bottom of Poverest Road, on the north side, stood a couple of cottages, believed to be called Poverest Cottages. The land on which they stood was called Dipper's Slip. I haven't been able to find a plausible reason for this name, but a lady once told me that her mother had told her that the land once belonged to a chap called Dipper.

Whatever the reason, Dipper's Slip could have become the site for St. Mary Cray's cemetery. In 1880, there was an urgent need for a cemetery for Cray, as the graveyard at St. Mary's church was full. Two sites were proposed, Dipper's Slip and Star Lane, off St. Mary Cray high street. At several meetings, there were heated debates, recorded in the *Bromley Record*, between Mr. Stanger, owner of Stangers Stores, in favour of the Dipper's Slip site, and Dr.

Allfrey and Mr. Garratt, chairman of the St. Mary Cray Burial Board, who supported the Star Lane site. At one meeting, Dr. Allfrey described Dippers Slip as "a miserable place" and he had seen disorderly scenes, caused by the people as they left the mill. The cemetery was eventually built at Star Lane - maybe in retrospect Dipper's Slip would have been the better choice? The site was occupied, for many years, in the 1930s, by Pateman's scrapyards. Noah Pateman lived in one of the terraced cottages in Poverest Road, whilst Lottie & Henry Pateman lived, according to the 1939 Electoral Register at Dipper's Slip itself - presumably in one of the cottages on the site? There was also a Coal Merchant called H Kingham & Sons. After many years overgrown, council houses were built on part of the site in recent years.

A local spinnie, called Robin Hood Shaw, inspired the names of the roads built in the Poverest area in the 1930s, like Hood and May Avenues, Little John and Friar Roads.

Now a bit about other landmarks in the 1860s. Further North, towards St. Paul's Cray, was Manor Farm, near to St. Mary Cray station, opened 1860. Joynson's Paper Mill was not far away, and all were major employers in the area.

To the east of Fordcroft was, as now, a road running over the River Cray and up to Reynolds Cross, and is known to have existed since Roman times. A ford crossed the river here, and presumably this was why the Victorian estate was called Ford Croft.

The road itself, now called Kent Road, has had a confusing variety of other names over the years. The River Cray was wider then than now, and this perhaps explains one name - Broad River - shown on the 1860s map. Back in 1573, Queen Elizabeth is reputed to have travelled up the Cray in her Royal Barge whilst on a visit to Orpington! The major properties then existing were Reidol Cottages (built in 1864).

In 1882, the Ford Croft estate was built. A building plan - a copy of which was given to me by the foreman at H Smith Demolition in Fordcroft Road - shows that there were 217 building plots including a tavern plot on the corner of Bridge Road and Poverest Road. These were auctioned in London that same year.

The land was originally owned by two local landowners, Richard Berens JP of Kevington, who in 1885, owned half of the land in St. Mary Cray - and the Hart Dykes of East Hall.

Building work commenced the same year, and at least the terraces in Bridge Road were finished that year, as the building date - 1882 - can clearly be seen on them. Two terraces fronting Poverest Road were built, as were terraces in Cross Road, but much of the estate as originally proposed was never built. In particular, only two semi-detached homes were built in Bellefield Road and only about half of the plots in Fordcroft Road were built on. Most of the undeveloped plots were to become allotments.

It would appear that the tavern never opened, but the building put up on this site, although now substantially altered, does look as if it was designed to be one. Until quite recent times it had a cellar with trapdoors in the pavement outside. This building opened as "The Bridge House Stores" - run by a Mr. Solomon Epsom, Grocer and Provision Merchant.

I mentioned earlier the 1891 Census return, and this gives a fascinating insight into the people that lived in Slopers at that time. For example, in the house that I now live in, then called Crofton Cottage, now number one Fordcroft Road, lived John & Prescilla Line and their three sons. John Line was a paper maker, almost certainly at Joynson's Paper Mill but possibly Nash's Paper Mill in St. Paul's Cray. Joynson's employed about 700 workers in the 1880s and many of these would have lived in Ford Croft. Next door at the Wooley household, Mr. Wooley was a railway porter - possibly at St. Mary Cray.

Spiritual welfare was taken care of by The Fordcroft Mission Hall, run by the Orpington Baptist Church, and opened in December 1892. According to the Church's archivist, John Parker, the first report of the Fordcroft Mission, in January 1888, talks of "three encouraging meetings" and a statement that a Sunday School was "about to be started". This Mission Hall finally closed in September 1953, but the building survives as a community centre, the Poverest Coronation Hall. It is held in trust for use by the people in the Poverest area. There was also, according to the Ordnance Survey map, a 'Mission Room' in Fordcroft in at least the

1930's but I haven't been able to find details but I believe it was next to the Bridge House Stores, in Poverest Road.

Turning to local shopping facilities. As I said, the Bridge House Stores was run by Mr. Solomon Epsom. He was in business there by 1888 as in this year he placed an advertisement in All Saints Parish Magazine. He was to run this shop until he was tragically killed, along with 9 other local businessmen, in July, 1906 when the omnibus taking them on an excursion to Brighton crashed at Handcross. This building was to house various food shops for at least the next 50 years. In the 1930s, there was John Bunyan, the grocer at No 2 Bridge Road, Leslie Bunyan, the butcher at No. 4 and William Watson, greengrocer at No. 6. William Watson owned many of the cottages in Poverest Road at this time.

Thomas Crawley, at No 4 Fordcroft Road, was listed as a Greengrocer in 1926, but a Fishmonger in 1935. He kept the stock out the back of his terraced home directly opposite where I live now. Shame he's not there now!

On the opposite corner of Bridge Road to the "Bridge House Stores" was a registered lodging house (or 'doss house' as the locals called it). Believed to date from when Ford Croft was built, its history is sketchy, but it is known that it was run, in the 1920s and 1930s, by a Mr. Cornelious Driscoll and later by his wife, Alice, when he died. It is not known when the lodging house closed, but this large building was still standing when photographed in 1965. It incorporated two houses, Nos. 1 & 3 Bridge Road. The Driscolls lived in No 1 and I have been told that there was a sweet shop here for some years. Indeed, in the 1926 Kelly's Directory Mr Driscoll is recorded as being a shopkeeper.

Bridge Road was extended in about 1919, and a row of fine council houses were built that still stand today. And a mock-Tudor detached house, No. 39 was put up in the thirties. This house was demolished in the 1980s and is a sad loss. Unfortunately I didn't photograph it which I've always regretted.

The Orpington by-pass (Arterial Road) was built by the local firm of Fordyce Brothers in the 1920s and the building of this road changed forever the rural character of the area. New estates and associated roads were built near to Fordcroft in the late 1930s. One of these new roads was a straight one, now part of Poverest Road, but originally called Sherwood Road. The old, winding, part of Poverest Road was to be re-named Marion Crescent. Talking of local roads that have changed names, the road between Reynolds Cross and Lower Road was at one time called Kent Row, and the road between Lower Road and the river has now had three names. As I said a while back, this road was called Broad River, then became part of Poverest Road, now the whole road is Kent Road. All this has made it very difficult for me to identify various buildings from street directories of different years, as of course, the street numbers kept changing. For example, "The Parade: Poverest Road" has been identified, I hope correctly, as the oldest buildings of the parade of shops in what is now Marion Crescent. And what was No. 162 Poverest Road became No.5 f !

A newcomer to Fordcroft in about 1937, was a Mr. Harry Smith. He set up a lorry business on part of the undeveloped land at the top of Fordcroft Road. Residents could still walk through to Cross Road at the top until, without warning a fence and gate was put up, with a notice saying "Private Property - Keep Out". Residents protested, the council threatened legal action but, to this day, Fordcroft Road is still blocked off. The business was to expand and diversify into demolition over the years and, although now not owned by him, his name lives on in the firm still occupying the site. - H Smith Demolition.

In the 1950s, Orpington Urban District Council, produced the Fordcroft Redevelopment Plan. This would have seen Fordcroft demolished and the site used for light industry, but although everyone received notice of compulsory purchase, there followed years of uncertainty. Landlords, unable to increase rents and, with this uncertainty, were naturally reluctant to spend money on homes, particularly those fronting Poverest Road. These gradually became more and more derelict. By July 1956, The Orpington & Kentish Times, were able to describe living conditions in one such home, No. 23 Poverest Road. The eight occupants had damp walls with plaster falling off and holes in the floor. Then there was the iron bar that ran along the wall upstairs that helped to keep the house together. The reporter also visited No. 7, the home, that a year later would make the front page of this newspaper. Council workmen had to

shore up the front wall that was sagging and in danger of imminent collapse. Most of the homes in the two terraces in Poverest Road and one in Cross Road were eventually demolished in the late 1950s and most occupants re-housed on the then new Ramsden Estate. But Nos. 17, 19 & 21 were to linger on until the mid-1960s, along with the 'Doss House'.

Another row of homes in Fordcroft now but a memory is the terrace called Epsom Cottages in Fordcroft Road. These survived until, one night in September 1969, a close neighbour saw flames coming from one empty property. Three properties in the terrace were gutted and all were demolished around 1971. Residents soon demanded fencing around the cleared land, to stop fly tipping. The Liberal Councillor for St. Mary Cray, Roy Edey, is quoted as saying that the land looked "like an African Shanty Town" with every type of rubbish lying about. This land is till vacant but has been tidied up and is now public open space.

The council were still talking about proposals for redevelopment of the area. But this time it involved a road being built across Fordcroft to link up the bottom of Orpington High Street with Poverest Road, far away from the junction with Cray Avenue junction to allow a two-lane flyover. Any land not required for the road would be used for industry. This hair-brained scheme was fortunately to stay on the drawing board.

The only homes to have been built in Bellefield Road were purchased by the council in about 1969 but lay derelict for years before they were bulldozed and the land joining the rest to lie unused to this day.

The 1970s saw a dispute with a local business. a lorry firm called Truder Haulage Company. At all times of the day and night, heavy 30 ton, six wheelers rumbled in and out of the yard fronting on to Cray Avenue but with the entrance in Bridge Road. Angry residents formed a group called the Bridge Road Wheel Ban Association. As part of their campaign, they organised a road block by 'pretending' that a car had broken down, and repeatedly crossing and re-crossing the road.

The eighties saw another campaign - this time to get an alleyway running between Fordcroft Road and Bellefield Road re-opened . Following numerous break-ins to their yard, the demolition yard put barbed wire across both ends, having first sought permission from Bromley Council. The yard foreman was quoted in the press as saying that the footpath was like a public toilet. "You put a foot in one end and you would literally slide to the other". The barbed wire was removed by the Council a month later, but it remains so overgrown, no-one can use it any way. There was, about this time, an arson attack on the demolition firm, which suffers many break-ins.

The nineties have seen protests against a coach firm, which occupies the old 'Doss House' site, and naturally there's still no firm redevelopment proposals.

Life in 'Slopers' life goes on, but in many peoples' opinion, the community spirit, once so strong, has all but gone.

There may well be some inaccuracies in this piece and I'm sure - indeed I am hoping - that people are able to add to this selective history.