

“Hartcliffe, Bristol”

An audio history of Hartcliffe in south Bristol

By Gill Simmons

[sound of police siren]

Hartcliffe. What do you think of, when you hear that word? Riots? Poor? Rough? You ever been here? Do you know anyone who lives round here? Hartcliffe. Right on the edge of the city. Just a few more streets, before Bristol runs out, the Dundry Hills rise up like a green counterpane and says “I’ll take it from here.”

Right on the edge.

[sound of a pebble dropping into water]

Ripples from the Centre don’t reach this far. Or, if they do, they’re so small, it’s hard to notice. Tower blocks, then fields.

[sound of birdsong]

People live their whole lives in this area. And under their feet, under the concrete of fast-planned, ill-thought-through development of post-war Britain, is a rich history that’s nearly lost. I want to find it again. I want to tell you about it. I want you to think again about Hartcliffe. And Withywood. Oh yeah, Withywood. Where’s that? Well, it’s kinda near Hartcliffe. Oh, yeah, I know Hartcliffe. I’ve heard of Hartcliffe. Yeah, Withywood’s like a tiny tiny tiny bit between Bishopsworth and Hartcliffe. Just a few streets, from what I can tell. Always lumped together with Hartcliffe. Kinda similar, kinda not. It’s where I’m speaking to you from, right now.

Anyway, that hidden history. Shall we dig down through the layers of concrete and time and space to reveal something other than riots and poverty and all those things that you associate with the word. Because there’s more here than that. Far more.

[sound of digging earth and stones]

Around 170 AD, Roman soldiers are building a road from the lead mines of Charterhouse on Mendip to the Roman port of Abonae in Seamills. It goes right through Withywood, along the Malago river, a tributary to the Avon.

[sound of digging in earth]

Fast forward to 1990, where Mr Arthur Gingell of 4 Gay Elms Road, Withywood, digging in his back garden, finds a copper coin featuring the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. He used to use it to decide who would begin the bowls match.

Manor Woods, a small pocket of very ancient woodland. In 600 AD, Saxons are building a manor house here

[sound of river flowing and birdsong]

Right next to the Malago river.

Malago. Malago? Old English 'malaho', to make mischief. The Malago river frequently floods.

1540. Stone from Dundry quarries is floated on rafts down the Malago river to build Bristol.

1600. Land-owning lords sell off large parts of Manor Woods. It becomes Headley Farm.

1750. Enclosure. Fields hedged off to allow for crop rotation and selective breeding.

1820. Manor Woods fenced off to protect against poachers. There's gamekeepers and man-traps.

[sound of metal springing shut on flesh]

1860s. William Woodall and Mercy Evans own Withywood Farm. Withy-wood. Withywood. Is it the withies, the willows that grew here? Or is it the Withy family who farmed large parts of Dundry? We'll never know.

Farms in the 1920s. Their names echo on in the modern maps today. Headley Farm. Crox Bottom Farm. Filwood Farm. Inns Court Farm. Pigeonhouse Farm. Pottery Farm. White House Farm. Red House Farm. Brook Farm. Withywood Farm. Church Farm. Bishport Farm. Home Farm. Elm Farm. Yew Tree Farm. Castle Farm. Highridge Farm. Oak Tree Farm.

Rita Neal remembers:

“Before they built the houses, Hartcliffe was made up of beautiful fields of corn and woods with bluebells and primroses. There were farms. We'd take lemon fizz, bread and sugar, and walk over to Pigeonhouse Farm. When I look at it now, and think of it then, it's so different. The countryside has given way. I know we got to have houses, but it was so beautiful.”

[sounds of rifle fire]

In the 1940s, Mr Rudd is farming Withywood Farm. He allows the Bishopsworth Home Guard to set up a firing range in one of his fields. They have to raise their sights to avoid accidentally shooting people on Dundry.

[distant sound of bomb falling].

In 1944, a land mine drops in Manor Woods. Derek Pelly remembers:

“The freedom of the fields was a wonderful playground for a young boy. He makes a memory map. Lovely stone bridge. Mushrooming fields. Cattle-watering place. Kite and model-plane flying. Bonfire site.

Tobogganing field. Stickleback and newt fishing. An ex-Japanese prisoner of war lives here. There's Godfrey's veg shop."

[distant sound of construction vehicles]

Derek Pelly remembers the developments starting in 1952.

"I found masses of fossils excavated by the earth-movers. Us lads had cement bomb fights at dusk."

In 1952 it was just fields and a few farms. By the end of 1953 there were already 700 families living in Hartcliffe. People were moved here from the worn-out 19th century of Bedminster and other inner-city areas. Such was the haste to get people housed, however, that there were many people living in this area well before there were any facilities to serve them.

Kathleen May remembers:

"When we come up here there was nothing. If you wanted anything, you had to go all down Headley Park to get your groceries. You couldn't buy a lot, 'cos you never had a lot of money."

Lynne Clark remembers:

"We moved into number 9 Gatehouse Drive when I was 10 months old, and it was just mud track. There were no roads, just mud tracks. And there were no streetlighting either.

[sound of baby crying]

It was all young couples coming in with their babies. They were starting their lives here."

Margaret Brook remembers:

“You got to remember it was a young estate. The parents were young, they had young children, and they had a young outlook. They just joined in with everything.”

Dennis Street remembers:

“The time to be in Hartcliffe, as a matter of fact, was the 60s and 70s, ‘cos there was tremendous community spirit then. Everybody got involved in the community. There was no question of being paid for anything. It was just the will to do it.”

Annie Howe’s diary from 1961. Remembering Withywood.

Queens Head pub. Viv’s fruit and veg shop. Liptons. Mike’s Autos. Amelia Nutt Clinic. Withywood Youth Centre. Scout Hut.

[sound of crowd walking on pavements]

Symes Avenue in the 1960s. Everything you need, right on your doorstep.
Rita Neal remembers:

“We had every shop you could think of. Barclays. Co-op that sold furniture and clothes and everything. Woolworths, Tescos, hardware, TV shop, the clothes and shoe shops, butchers, then a wool shop, hairdressers, fruit shop, fish shop, everything you could want.”

[sound of heavy rain]

July 1968. Flash flooding causes a tidal wave to surge down the Malago. Pavements and roads are destroyed.

1972. A culvert is created, forcing the maker of mischief Malago underground.

[distant police sirens]

Symes Avenue, the hub of those riots, July 1992, saw the destruction of a lot of those shops, by then already run down. Those riots, 3 days in 1992, and still that's what people think of.

We are more than just what you read about in the papers.

This is a place of families

[sound of baby crying]

Of connection, of support

[sound of footsteps on a pavement]

Of community, of fields

[sound of birdsong]

Of horses, of the river

[sound of the river]

The Roman coins, the saxon buildings, the farms, the orchards, we're all that too.

Come and walk in Manor Woods. Come and feel the layers of history beneath your feet. We are not just riots and poverty. We are more than that. So much more.

[sound of birdsong and river slowly fades]