

Pat Fox is Highgate made Flesh

by Kirsten de Keyser

When Pat Fox was brought into this world 93 years ago, her mum and dad took her back to the Highgate house in which she still lives to this day. For close to a century, Pat has been a familiar icon at Highgate Society and around the village. You'd have to search hard to find a local resident who doesn't know the immaculate, silver haired, tiny lady, shopping trolley in tow, busily going about her daily business, often not long after the break of dawn.

We love the Highgate of 2023, but how did it come to be what it is today? How has Highgate life changed – or has it?

Best ask someone who was there, Pat Fox: "My earliest memory is being taken by my mother to the Heath for a picnic. Just the two of us, myself in a pushchair.

"We children played in our gardens, in Waterlow Park or on the Heath, not in the street. We played with toys in the home, miniature railway, track on the floor, Bagatelle, board games, cards. Most of the houses in the street were single family houses.

"Traffic was trams and buses, there were just a few cars when I was young, but there were many bicycles.

"We walked to school locally. Most of the primary schools are still there, St Michaels, St Joseph's, Channing, Highgate.

"People also shopped locally most of the time, or just a bus or tram ride away. Local shops delivered groceries. Milkman always, still does. Newspaper always, still does. Daily.

"When I was young the Highgate Bowl, where Omved is now, was a glorified allotment belonging to a man called Sam Andrews. I can't tell you how many cats he had. He lived down there, growing tomatoes. I used to love going down there with my mother, I loved all the cats.

"The allotment gradually improved and eventually became a great garden centre. That was unbelievably valuable, I bought most of my plants there. It was a great loss to the village when it closed.

"During the winter, Highgate Hill was not usable when it snowed, except by foot. Still isn't.

At Christmas in Highgate, the shops and houses put up festive decorations, most had trees with lights, churches had cribs and there were always coloured paper chains.

"Outings were long journeys, mostly by train or coach, there were no aeroplanes. We went to the seaside by train from Holloway station. People did a lot of walking.

“Like nowadays, there were lots of pubs in Highgate. Many of them are still here, but quite a few others are no longer in business. Pubs did not sell meals, just crisps or pickled onions and lots of beer.

“The village had everything right here, a post office, two banks, a hat shop, a shoe shop, a hardware merchant and all the grocery shops. There was even a hospital on the south side of Southwood Lane, this is now the site of a row of modern terraced houses with long gardens at the back.

“I was nine when war broke out. It didn’t frighten me at all, you didn’t get frightened by anything when my father was around, you just got on with it. We put blackout on all windows and glass doors, no light could show out, not even a crack between the curtains. There was no smoking cigarettes outside. If you did, the air raid warden would sharp put it out. Sirens would warn about raids, and all-clear sirens sounded when the raid was over.

“Many schools were evacuated 1939-1940, pupils and staff. I was evacuated with St Joseph’s Primary, first to a small village in Bedfordshire. We all stood in a circle and the people, who’d volunteered to have us, came and picked us out. I think I hoped that I would get somebody nice and I’m sure that they probably hoped they’d get somebody nice. I think you tend to be quite stoic when you’re brought up as an only child.

“It was the first time I had been away from my parents, but I wasn’t worried at all. It was explained to me, that it was the best thing for me.

“I walked two miles to the school each day and two miles back. I liked it in the country. I don’t know why but we were then moved to Cromer, where the Messerschmidt’s bombed the pier.

“After my father had learnt about the bombing, he thought that I’d be just as safe in Highgate, so he came to take me home.

“There hadn’t been any bombing in Highgate, they waited till I got home! In 1944, when I was fourteen, we were bombed. The siren had gone while I was at the convent and the routine was that you got under your desk, and you stayed under your desk until the all-clear sounded. Then you got up and got on with your work again, no messing about.

“I came home on the bus to find our front door waving about on its hinges. All the neighbours were in the road with their squares of carpet, and we were all helping each other to shake them to get rid of all the rubble.

Inside the house, in the living room there was no ceiling, no wall. We weren’t allowed to go to the top floor because there was no roof. The doodlebug bomb had fallen on the tennis courts in Waterlow Park.

“There was a lady sitting there with a hat on and the only thing that happened to her was that her hat blew off. People in the houses might have been a bit bruised and what-not, but otherwise no injuries. It was July 20, 1944. I remember because my birthday is on the 22nd. I don’t know how but I still went to school the next day in a

clean summer dress, with white collar and cuffs. And polished shoes and white socks.

“On Saturday, the 22nd, my birthday, there was second bomb, a flying bomb this time. It landed on a house in Archway, where they had a christening party. And I can remember in church on Sunday there were ten little white coffins in front of the altar. I still have a photographic memory of that.

“We used to sit around the wireless for the nine o’clock news and I vaguely remember the end of war broadcast, but I was more interested in playing tennis, really.

“At the end, when it was all over, there was no street party or anything. In fact, the Waterlow Park air raid shelters are probably still there, where the rose beds are now, there’s still the air vent coming up from them. But we never went in the shelters. Mother was all for cleanliness, and she didn’t reckon that they’d be clean. We didn’t go to the cinema either because we didn’t know who’d been sitting in the seat before you.

“Later, I worked as a teacher at a school at London Bridge. I went by tube, I don’t know how I survived! I used to meet a friend of ours who lived in Whistlers Cottage, his mother owned the hat shop in the front, and he lived with his wife in the cottage. We used to catch the same train to London Bridge. He’d be at one end of the compartment, and I’d be at the other end. We were so packed like sardines that I couldn’t open a newspaper, so he’d shout to me about something interesting in the paper “Pat! Page six column seven!”

“I didn’t know that there was an RAF Intelligence School at Athlone House, it was called Caen Wood Towers in those days, until I was older, and I got to know the old tramp on the Heath, and he asked the caretaker to show me around the house.

“The caretaker took us up to the tower where all these cables were hanging down the walls. They’d been used to keep an eye on the things.

“Highgate has always been home to interesting people. I studied the poets, which I was particularly interested in. Also the people who lived at Witanhurst were interesting. I remember waiting with my mother on the other side of the road, where the 214 bus stop is now, for when Princess Margaret and Princess Elizabeth came to play tennis there and we’d see them arrive. They came a lot.

Several people lived in The Grove – Yehudi Menuhin, Sting, George Michael, Jamie Oliver, Stanley Baxter, and Victoria Wood also lived in Highgate. Always very generous people. Few people knew, for example, how generous George [Michael] was to the Highgate Society and to things here in general. All they knew was that he was gay and could sing or something, but that wasn’t the side of him at all. As was proved when he died. People came from near and far with flowers and tributes. We just take them all for granted, that’s why they like living here. Nobody ever takes any notice of them at all.

“I don’t know if the world is in a better or worse place these days. But I do think everyone is complaining too much. Everybody complains. And as for politics, I don’t know what’s going on! It’s all just about the money.

“But it’s not all bad. I’ve learnt how to use the iPad, so I can go to mass in Dublin. I still have to learn how to do apps on my mobile phone, but I do prefer my landline. I’ve also bought a computer, which I’ve got to master. More and more, if you want to order something you have to do it on the computer. It’s very hard for older people and I’m incredibly lucky to be surrounded by neighbours who will come in at the drop of a hat and help. Highgate is still essentially a village.

“My favourite things about living in Highgate are fresh air, green spaces like the Heath, Waterlow Park, Highgate Woods and Pond Square. Also Upstairs at the Gatehouse theatre. I love the sound of the bells of St Anne’s and the St Michael’s clock chiming every morning. And feeling safe. The friendliness of the people, someone’s always ready to help you.

“A little girl, who lives along the street brought me a beautiful bunch of pink flowers this morning “for being a good neighbour.” She could have been me, 90 years ago.

So perhaps Highgate’s secret is that, for at least a century, it really hasn’t changed much at all. Apart from Pat’s iPad, of course.