

The Royal Visit

The Queen came to Oldbury in 1959, I think. I could check the date, I suppose – it will be recorded somewhere – but it's not really important for the purpose of this story. What's relevant is the effect that this had on our local councillors and, I guess ultimately, the townspeople, and my mates and me in particular.

Weeks before the big day, Council workmen were busy. The whole town was tidied up but the actual route of the Royal motorcade was given special attention. Streets, always litter free in those days anyway, were swept daily. Flower beds were immaculate, weeds totally eliminated. A fresh coat of paint applied to all Civic buildings. No expense was spared.

The same applied to the inside of the Council House where the Royal reception was to be held. Carpets and curtains cleaned, brass work polished until gleaming, portraits of past mayors straightened up and dusted. Even a new, private bathroom was constructed for the sole use of Her Majesty. I knew this because a friend's mother was a cleaner there and claimed to have secretly christened it before the big day. But for me, the best improvement by far was closer to home.

In the street where I was born and grew up stood a bus stop. That was where, when we had the money, I would catch the bus to school. Otherwise I would walk. Either way, I got wet when it rained and shivered when it was cold. Then, one day a lorry and a group of workmen turned up. They quickly erected a prefabricated concrete bus shelter on the patch of wasteland adjacent to the bus stop. And that was when we realised that the Royal procession would travel down our street.

I can't remember too much about the day of the visit. For sure, there were Union Jacks and bunting. And happy cheering crowds. But it was all over in the blink of an eye. Not the legacy that was left behind though. That lasted for me until teenage hormones took my thoughts elsewhere. Until then, the bus stop became a marvellous addition to our urban playground.

As soon as the crowds had dispersed, our gang rushed to their homes to change out of their Sunday best. We then raced back and met at the rear of the bus shelter. First we cleared the ground of any sharp objects; stones, broken glass, bits of scrap metal. Then we collected up bricks from the houses that had once stood there but had been demolished after the Second World War. This we formed into makeshift steps that took us up onto the roof of the bus shelter. Or more correctly, our parachute training platform.

Many joyful hours were spent there, jumping and rolling onto the bare earth. And many cuts, bruises and sprains too. What happy days!