

The School at 186 Kirkdale¹

A description of the school grounds with sketches

As they were in the early days

&

After Kirkdale School took up occupancy



¹ Photo courtesy of Alan Reid taken long after the school moved out and the developers had done their work.

The School at 186 Kirkdale

Part 1

A description of the grounds

The house was built in a Victorian mock Tudor style. The grounds though were somewhat neglected and overgrown still had a basic structure. It gave the appearance of having originally been laid out in a formal early to mid Victorian style.

Facing the property from the road:

On the left there was a gate opening onto a footpath up to the house. There were deciduous trees to the left of the path, many of which were hazel and other nut bearing varieties. Squirrels were often very busy in the branches of these trees.

On the right of the path the lower lawn and flower beds could be seen. A tall hedge began about half way up the path making the pathway feel enclosed and cutting off a lot of light. The hedge and trees continued to point where the path divided. A branch of the footpath to the right ran across the frontage of the house below the rockery and met with a left branch of the gravel driveway.

The main path then carried on passing a holly bush on the right and then divided once more. The main spur continued towards the remains of the old kitchen and soft fruit garden while a branch to the right lead though an overgrown banked area that was made tunnel-like by overgrown privet bushes. This right branch ended up at the side and rear of the property just behind the kitchen.

Returning to facing the property from the road.

A green wire mesh fence spanned the front edge of the garden between the path on the left and the gravel driveway on the right. Behind the fence ran a muddle of vegetation, shrubs and hedge etc which hid the house from the road. In the middle of this span stood a conker tree which shed its leaves and conkers both outwards onto the pavement and inwards into the garden.

Inset a good car's length up the gravel driveway was an old gate that hung rather badly on its hinges. The gravel driveways lead up the right side of the lawn, passing the lower large rhododendron bush and the middle rhododendron bush where it divided. The left branch ran directly in front of the house just below the rockery bank, thus connecting the driveway on the right of the plot with the footpath on the left of the plot.

The rockery was inlaid with flint rocks with bits of gleaming inclusion crystals. In between the rocks were planted a variety of low flowering plants that attracted bees. On the right of the driveway and level with the point where the drive divided, was a tree that we used for climbing.

The main driveway ran on straight up past the third large rhododendron. The main part of the drive ended at an old garage. This upper part of the driveway was set out in the shape of a mirror image letter 'P' which formed a turning circle for vehicles leaving the property.

Features to the front of the property

There was a large front lawn that sloped gently down from the house towards the road.

At the bottom of the front lawn were two flowerbeds that were edged with white marble sculpted edging stones.

Halfway up the lawn on the left was a large copper beech tree.

The right side of the lawn had edging stones and flints. I seem to recall some vestigial signs of several old flower beds set out at intervals up the right hand edge of the lawn². The remaining edging stones of these flowerbeds were soon removed by us children and the beds vanished into the lawn.

Near the top of the lawn to the left was an overgrown, dry, ornamental pond and feed stream. Old medicine bottles were occasionally recovered from this area giving a clue to the occupation of the previous owner. The water feed source, which I guessed was probably a well hidden old outdoors tap was never discovered, though I did hunt for it from time to time.

Across the top of the lawn were two or more flowerbeds with neglected rose bushes. One entered the lawn from the house by a narrowish strip of grass between these flowerbeds.

The house

To get into the house it was first necessary to climb one of two sets of stairs each of which bisected the rockery. There was a large one directly in line with the front door and a smaller one to the left side of the frontage leading up towards where the kitchen stood. The smaller set of stairs was probably for tradesmen while the larger one was for the use of the owner and guests.

Climbing either set of stairs brought one to a wide concrete pavement area that spanned the frontage of the building.

² My memory of the existence of these flowerbeds is very hazy and it is possible that my recollection in these specific features is faulty.

A further set of three large stone steps replete with a metallic pole handrail to the right, lead up to the large front door.

Access to the back garden.

It was possible to get to the back garden either via the footpath to the right mentioned above or via a narrow concrete pathway that lead round the side of the house to the right.

The back garden

Walking round the house to the right the first feature encountered was an ornamental hillock which was planted with shrubs and inlaid with the same sparkly flint as the rockery.

The back garden was extensive and at the time the school was started, was littered with rubble and corrugated iron and other 'spoil'.

The far back right corner was a raised bed with several layers and wooden edging which was planted with Japanese Knot weed. This area became known as the 'crash bang wallop' and was the subject of an early school rule "No one is allowed to bash down the crash bang wallop". In front of the CBW was a pear tree that attracted large numbers of wasps when in fruit.

There was a row of fairly widely spaced, badly tended apple and crab apple trees to the left of the pear tree. Behind these was a darkish leaf litter covered 'pathway' or narrow 'drove' that ran from the CBW on the right to the kitchen garden area on the left.

To the left back and left side stood the remains of the kitchen garden including a soft fruit garden. This could also be reached by the pathway to the left side of garden and house.

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Part 2

Modifications made to the house and ground

Once the school had opened a sign was put up near the conker tree that said:

Kirkdale School

Parent Owned Co educational Day School for Children Aged 3 ½ to 13³

Further modifications to the grounds.

In order of construction these included:

- The building of the Wasp sandpit behind the Wasp library⁴
- The building of the Bee paddling pool
- The building of the Bee sandpit
- The building (by the Wasps) of the Wasp paddling pool
- The building of the Hornet's hut
- The building of the tripod and aerial runway; the installation of the telegraph pole sloping up to the branches of the copper beech tree and the installation of two monkey swings hung from the copper beech tree
- The building of the 'dome'⁵

³ Is this correct or was it '15'?

⁴ I think this was a relatively quick fix with sand being placed in an existing external 'area' that might have been originally intended as a drying area or waste bin hard stand.

⁵ I have represented this as a pentagon though it may have been a hexagon.

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Part 3

A unique and unrepeatable experience

In the Department for Education school inspection report of 1974 several references are made to the poor condition of the house and grounds. These included:

- Poor interior decoration
- Rotten skirting boards
- Lack of cleanliness of walls and shelves
- Poor exterior paintwork, including that of the Hornet's hut
- Blocked drains
- Missing slates
- The grounds generally muddy.
- The former lawn being more of a muddy slope.

To place these comments in context it is necessary to review the nature of the school's occupancy of the house and grounds.

The house and grounds were leased to John Powlesland from circa 1965 -1973 pending demolition of the house. The building was in a state of near collapse in some areas. Supporting beams had to be treated for rot and shored up with new timbers and the rear wall of the house had to be supported with a purpose built wooden buttress. There were no funds for large scale refurbishment or restoration and even if funds had been available it would not have been wise to spend them on a building scheduled for demolition.

In terms of the grounds, over time grass gave way to mud over much of the back garden and the front lawn suffered similarly. The ornamental stream and pond remained in situ but over time became variously overgrown and worn. Once again though, with no funds and such an uncertain future, investing in the upkeep of the grounds neither possible nor wise.

That said, over the years of occupancy a great deal of effort was put in by the adults and the children to improve both the facilities and the the decor.

With regard to decor, in 1973 for example the Bees was redecorated and refurbished⁶ while the floor in the big room was sanded and sealed and the walls redecorated⁷. The front lawn was also re-seeded.⁸

With regard to facilities, over time we children were provided with sandpits, paddling pools, large wooden packing crates for making hide outs, the tripod of three telegraph poles plus its platform and areal runway. In addition a telegraph pole was installed that sloped up to the branches of the copper beech tree while monkey swings were hung from its branches. The Bees was improved⁹ and the Hornet's hut was built.

One specific benefit to the children was to have the unfettered full run of the ground floor and grounds of the property. It was usual to exit the Big Room by climbing onto the window seat and going out of the windows. One could play outside but come and go e.g. to the toilet or for breaks, meals or for other activities. One did not have to 'decide' if one was being 'outside' or 'inside'. Equally if the weather allowed, we could work, read, be read to, have a sing song etc outside.

The 1974 school inspection report uses the term 'adventure playground' in connection with the back garden but in fact the whole site was our adventure playground.

Our use of the house and grounds could be seen as 'abuse' the familiarity with the site has had a lasting impact on those of us that had played and done our schoolwork there.

We became very aware of Victorian architecture and garden layout. We became familiar with the workings of various types of windows, wooden shutters, shutter boxes and window related pulley systems. We understood about servant's bell systems, how they worked and what they represented in terms of the class divisions of Victorian times. Similarly we got to know how the frontage and architecture of the house was designed to reflect the social standing of the owner while the rear of the building and the back grounds were more functional and related to servants and their work.

Our outdoor activities made us aware of stag beetles in full battle, Japanese knotweed, squirrels in the nut trees, bees in the rockery, wasps round the pear tree. We observed that few plants thrive in very shaded areas and we became party to the secrets contained within deep leaf litter.

Kirkdale School capitalised on brief moment in time when it was possible to set up and run a school in a dilapidated building with large overgrown grounds full of wildlife and plant life but littered with rubble, old rusty sheets of corrugated iron and other bits of builders rubbish. In my view, those of us that went to school at Kirkdale were very fortunate indeed.

⁶ See 'Note from Virginia' in 'Layout of the Building circa 1965 -1973'

⁷ See 'John Powlesland's Letter to Parents' in Layout of the Building circa 1965 -1973'

⁸ See the Electric Egg No. 1 March 1973

⁹ As per footnote 5



Cookout



Hideout



Readout (?)

Sketches of the grounds before and after the school moved in are appended below.



