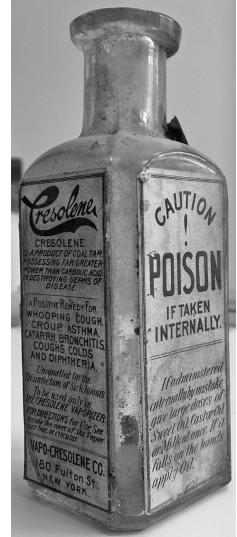


The Society Outing to Beckenham

by Angela Canning



It's incredible to think that when I lived in Pett's Wood near Bromley, I didn't know Enid had lived only 5 miles away at Beckenham! There was no Enid Blyton Society in those days. Now here was I, travelling with my friend all the way from North Norfolk on the 15th June for the purpose of seeing her houses!



James and Aruma Wilson

Our train sped down to London, and then we journeyed from London Bridge to Clock House Station, the meeting point at 11 o'clock for our party of 24 enthusiasts. How great it is to join others with the same interests as yourself! Amongst us there were even 3 generations of Enid Blyton lovers, the youngest being the little grand-daughter, Susan, just seven years old. Our guide, Cliff Watkins, was ready waiting, and off we set, turning left from the station and then right into Chaffinch Road, aptly named seeing that Thomas, Enid's father, was a connoisseur of wildlife.

Although Enid was born in Dulwich, when she was just a few months old the family had moved to Beckenham which was equally convenient for Thomas to commute to London. Soon we reached number 95 and admired the smart new blue circular plaque on the front announcing that Enid Blyton, who inspired generations of young readers, lived here from 1897 to 1903. The young residents, James and Aruma Wilson, are proud to own a house where Enid once lived. And which of us would not be?

The late Victorian brick-built semi-detached house with its bay window has had several occupants since Enid's time. Yet the

elderly man next-door told us his father could remember Enid living there! It has changed now, of course. The front garden has been concreted and the white painted windows no longer have sash-cords.

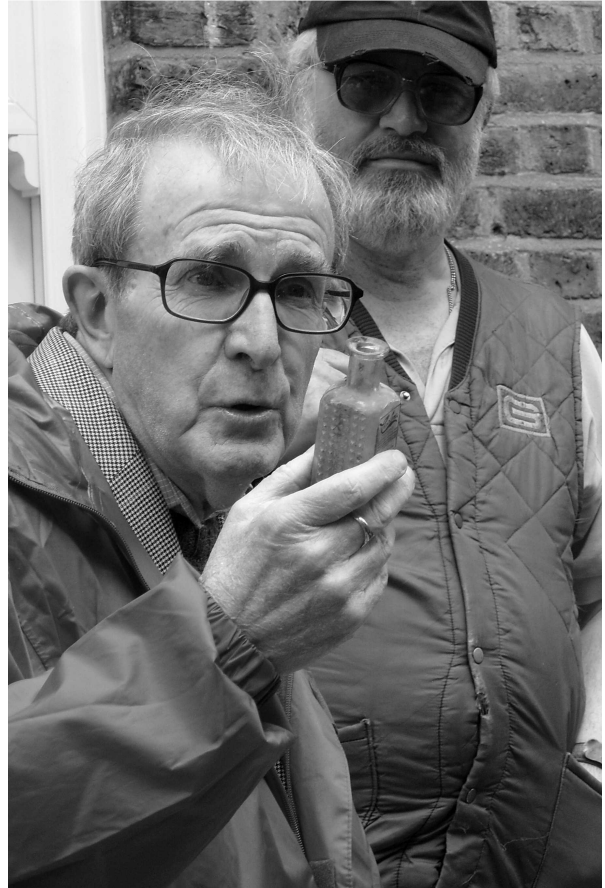
Despite the fact that our young hosts were in the middle of having extensive renovations done and are surrounded by builders' materials, they gave us a wonderful welcome with coffee and cakes, and allowed us to see over the whole accommodation. We viewed the sitting room, dining room and kitchen, plus the upstairs with its 3 bedrooms and shower room – and we hope we did not ruin their carpets!

Enid's two brothers were born here at number 95 – Hanly in 1899 and Carey four years later. It was here also that Enid became very ill as a baby with whooping-cough and loved to hear her father telling her as she grew up how he had sat up all night nursing her.

We had no idea that we were in for a surprise. While renewing the floorboards the builders had found underneath a glass bottle labelled "POISON". Cliff turned the bottle over and we read the directions on the back – "To be inhaled only. Treatment for whooping-cough"!

It was sad to leave our kind hosts, and we thanked them heartily. But time moves on and we had a lot to see. The next house was in Clock House Road near the station. On the way back Cliff took us on a short detour to see the adjoining road, Malory Close, named in honour of Malory Towers!

It did not take long before we were at number 35 where the family moved to when Enid was five – a slightly larger semi-detached house with an attic and 2 bay windows, one at first floor level and the second below. Here Hanly had told Barbara Stoney he could remember "a front privet hedge behind iron railings with irises and lots of snails". Today a wall has replaced the privet hedge and although there are no irises, we didn't investigate the snails.



Cliff Watkins with the 'POISON' bottle, watched by David Cook



95 Chaffinch Road



31 Clock House Road



35 Clock House Road



Tresco, 79 Cedars Road

It was a pity the occupants were not in so that we could see the back garden which had been a delight for Enid, who had been given by her father a small square patch of her own to cultivate, running from the path to the wall. Mike Shaw's splendid DVD, "Enid Blyton – The Beckenham Years", tells us Thomas promised he would give her pocket money if she cleaned his bike, and cleaned it well – and she did. With her earnings she planted "Virginia stock, candytuft, mignonette, clarkia, poppies and many hardy nasturtiums that climbed high over the wall, thick with orange flowers". When not gardening with her father, he would take her to the park and teach her all about the wildlife.

In the evenings he would play his banjo and sing popular songs and nursery-rhymes to the children, and when they were in bed they would fall asleep to the sounds of Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Mozart and Rachmaninoff as he played his piano until late in the night. When Enid was six he gave her her first piano lesson, and had high hopes that one day she would become a concert pianist like his sister, May.

By then Enid had started at a small nursery school which was held in a house in the next road called "Tresco", and run by 2 sisters, the Misses Read. It is still there, although no longer a school, and we crossed over to see it. Number 79 Cedars Road is a semi-detached house with a black door and white windows, and has lost its name.

Enid loved her school-days. Although she found the most simple of sums difficult, she excelled in art and nature study, read every book she found, sang well, and when the school performed "Alice in Wonderland", Enid played the part of Alice herself. She could always remember the classroom, the little chairs, the pictures on the wall, the dog, the garden and the lovely smells that crept from the kitchen when they were having dictation.

When she was 10 the family moved yet again to a larger house just 2 doors away, number 31, yet built in the same style with a bay window above and below. Enid now became a pupil at St. Christopher's School for Girls in Beckenham, where we know in later years she became Tennis Champion, Captain of the Lacrosse Team and Head Girl.

Yet it was at number 31, just before her 13th birthday, that she received a shattering blow which changed her life. One night she heard the front door bang and her handsome, adored father left the house for another woman, never to return. The separation which followed was never spoken about in her family. However, Thomas still left them well provided for, for he was now the owner of the successful family clothing business in the City of London. It meant that in 2 years' time, Theresa and the children were able to move to a large detached Victorian house with a pleasant garden in tree-lined Elm Road, one of the better residential areas of Beckenham. Theresa was even able to employ a young general maid called Annie.



14 Elm Road

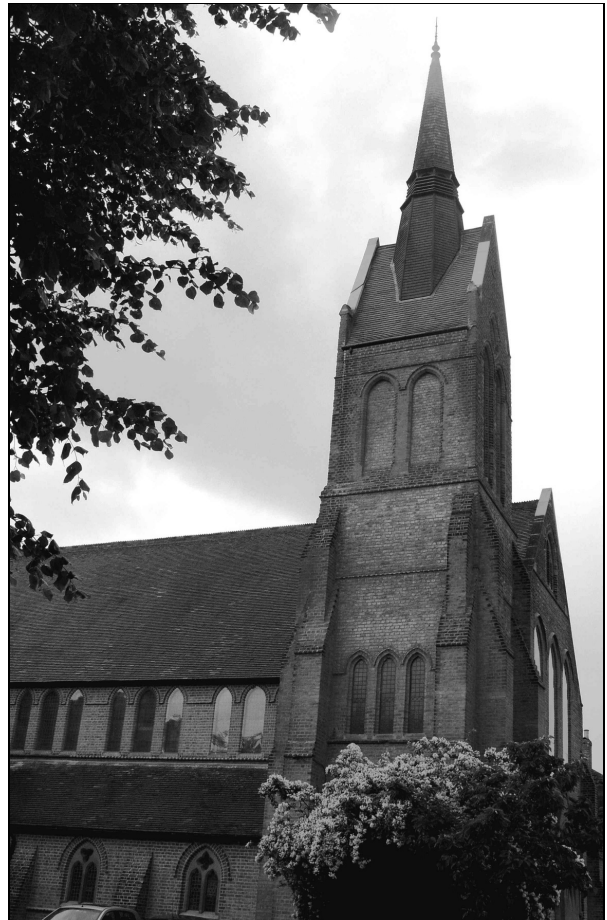
flowers to its side. From the moment Enid entered the house, she knew the room she wanted – one on the first floor overlooking the garden, where she could have her desk, all her books and treasures, and live isolated from her house-proud mother who considered her writing a waste of time and felt her daughter should help her instead. When one day Enid discovered her mother had read her diary, she even fixed a knocker on her door and turned the key inside.

At the far end of Elm Road was another building that we wanted to see – the huge Baptist Church occupying a corner site, where Enid had been baptised at the age of thirteen. The brick-built edifice with its tower and tracery windows was built in 1883, and in 1902 the father of her close friend, Mary Attenborough, who was an affluent Solicitor and lived in nearby Beckenham Road, gave the money to build a communal extension in the same style. It was in this annexe that Enid and her brothers first attended Sunday School in 1907.

We arrived, and what good fortune! It was open. But when we stepped

For our party this meant a walk along Cedars Road and stopping quickly on the way to peer over the wall at the Chaffinch Brook running beneath it. But would Elm Road round the corner still be tree-lined, we wondered? We arrived – and yes, there were trees, but no elms. They most probably had disappeared as long ago as the 1970s when the Dutch Elm Disease ravaged the country.

The front garden of number 14 where Enid lived is full of trees. The three-storeyed house is virtually covered with wisteria, while a tall pineapple plant displays its beautiful yellow



Elm Road Baptist Church

inside, we were greeted with a notice on the board labelled “Enid Blyton Society. A training session is in progress.” Whether we were welcome or not was debatable! However, we spent our time waiting in the huge Sunday School area with its rose window, and when the members went to lunch, we were told we could go into the church. Although the sunken bath where Enid was baptised is still in use, it is covered by the green chancel carpet. In fact both the chancel and the knave have probably changed little since Enid’s time. The tall organ pipes against the wall, the brick arches and numerous rows of wooden pews so well preserved, reflect a bygone age. Yet I am sure she would be pleased to see, with its growing population, how active the church still is.

On coming outside we were met with a slight shower and were glad of our umbrellas, for there was still another house to see before lunch. In 1915 when Enid was 18, presumably her father’s business suffered a decline in the war, and Theresa and her family were forced to move to a less-costly house 3 streets away in Westfield Road. We all



13 Westfield Road

expected it to be a small house, but to our surprise, number 13 with its bay and white-rendered facia possesses 3 bedrooms. Yet Enid was so unhappy here, being unable to escape her overpowering mother, that she was driven to stay most of the time with the Attenboroughs in Mary’s grandfather’s house in the Oakhill district of Beckenham.

To see this it meant catching the number 227 bus, but before doing so, our hungry mob proceeded to “The White Horse” in Beckenham High Street, where we spent a happy hour eating and chatting. But time passes all too quickly. Soon it was 2 o’clock and we needed to travel a few stops eastwards for Oakwood Avenue itself. We wondered if all 24 of us could get on the bus, but we did, and after dismounting, Cliff pointed out the present St. Christopher’s School (now for boys as well). The one which Enid and Mary had attended was pulled down, yet the school still claims proudly that they possess Enid’s desk!

Soon we reached number 34 on the right-hand side of Oakwood Avenue, where Enid felt most at home. Like herself, Mary had excelled at tennis at school, and the two spent happy hours playing together in the court in the back garden. But within a short while Mary left home to go to the Slade’s Art School, and Enid became a great friend of her auntie, Mabel Attenborough, who was not only a confidante but gave her advice with her writing.



34 Oakwood Avenue, the Attenborough's house

The beautiful large detached house, rendered white above and brick-faced below, is surrounded by trees, and in Enid's time looked out on to Oakwood. Five front bedrooms are obvious, the central a bay, and we filmed the first on the left, which we believe was Enid's. David Chambers tells us how she wrote "From my Window" in *Teachers World*, and re-named Oakwood and the lane beside it "Cuckoo Wood" and "Cuckoo Lane".

"On a warm May night I get up and go to the window. Sloping down from the broad wooden ledge is a red-tiled roof. I swing myself outside, so that my feet rest on the sloping roof, and I am sitting comfortably on the wide ledge. Then I listen and watch all by myself, quiet and alone". But in 1924 very sadly she was to write again, "Cuckoo Wood is bereft of its chiming cuckoos and some of my beloved trees have been hewn down". Today she would find that there is no wood left at all.

Our last port of call was the first house that Enid and Hugh bought after they were married, and to which she gave the delightful typical Blyton name of Elfin Cottage. After ten minutes' walk we came to it in Shortlands Road, hidden behind an extensive front garden filled with ornamental trees, and with the blue plaque on the wall telling us that she had lived here, only just visible from the road.

When Enid and Hugh had moved in in 1926, it had been a fairly new house, but with its "handsome greyish-yellow bricks, blue-painted front door and shuttered windows, they felt it possessed a feeling of maturity". Today the house is no longer called Elfin Cottage, and although it still has a blue door, the 6 front windows have no shutters. In *Teachers World* Enid wrote, "My Peter Pan door knocker is to be used in a special way. Children are expected to knock four times,

adults twice, and the Little Folk from the Woods, seven.” (We can only think these were the elves.) But as expected, the Peter Pan door knocker has gone as well.



83 Shortlands Road, Elfin Cottage

We were so disappointed that the owners were not in. They could have shown us the back garden filled with flowers which Enid created from a quarter-of-an-acre buttercup field. They could have shown us Enid's pond where Bobs, her four-month old fox terrier, would probably have romped and fallen in. But it was not to be.

With so lovely a house, it was a great shame that Enid and Hugh did not stay here long. Just 5 years later they learned to their dismay that a new arterial road was planned to be built near the cottage, and knew that, like Oakwood Avenue, the serenity and rural surroundings would disappear forever. Isn't this the story of all our lives? What was it John Betjeman wrote?

Come, friendly bombs, and fall on Slough.
It isn't fit for humans now.
There isn't grass to graze a cow

Come, friendly bombs, and fall on Slough
To get it ready for the plough.
The cabbages are coming now

But no more dreaming! It was already 4 o'clock and time for us to return to Clock House Station. With our group photos taken, we thanked Cliff so much for his time and expert knowledge and said our sad Goodbyes. But before going our separate ways, we all agreed it had been a wonderful day.

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