

THE BOTTOMLESS PIT

We called it the bottomless pit, but it wasn't. My dad told me it was lined with clay and had been put there, right in the centre of the allotment plots as a useful place to collect water for the gardens; its depth completely dependent on the rain.

As children we were told not to go there, for we would all surely fall in and drown. Without exception, being children, we ignored that cautionary advice and went there anyway. The adults seemingly overlooked our childlike misdemeanours safe in the knowledge that by warning us they had exercised their parental duties. We on the other hand were smug in our satisfaction that we had got one up on them.

The pit was like a magnet to us children, a mystical forbidden place, notorious, a monster waiting to suck us down into its never ending depths; yet simultaneously tranquil and welcoming. Its steep sides surrounded by unruly plant life, nettles, grasses and self-sown bushes and shrubs. Wooden steps led down to the shadowy, water's edge, worn away by the generations of railway workers, descending with their buckets and cans.

It was different in the 1960s, the seasons just merged into one and other and all that changed was the clothing.

As spring arrived, we would scramble down those rickety steps to gather frogspawn to take home or to school. At home we would improvise with enamel washing-up bowls or buckets left out in the garden. The school frogspawn lived a comparative life of luxury in an aquarium. We would watch as the tadpoles emerged feeding them with tiny pieces of beef and pondweed, fascinated by the stages of metamorphosis, until it was time to return the survivors to their habitat.

In the school summer holidays, my city cousins William and Diana would come to stay for a couple of weeks. William especially, relished the semi-feral nature of my childhood and the pit was a perfect place for us to hide and hang out with my dog Paddy, away from the adults. It was shady and peaceful, an excellent place to lie on the damp ground and watch the vapour trails of distant aircraft, or sit and listen to bird song whilst watching pond skaters and dragonflies skimming around the surface of the water.

On some days, we took butterfly nets and punched holes in jam jar lids to stalk butterflies. We would carefully remove them from our nets and place them in the jars and watch them for a while. The lid would be removed from the jar and creatures would fly away, seemingly unscathed.

Without seemly much warning we all grew up. The numbers of village children slowly diminished as they moved on to more grown-up pursuits and the city cousins stopped coming. Diana became too cool and William got a job. Paddy grew older and less energetic and spent most of his time relaxing with my equally aging Nannie Jessie.

My visits to the pit continued for a while with Sunny, my young Border Collie by my side until they gradually stopped.

The 'Bottomless Pit' is now a fond and distant memory of when all the seasons ran into one, like a recording on repeat. Allotment gardens went out of fashion and became a housing estate. The pit being deemed a health and safety risk was filled in, so the only evidence of the 100 years or so of its life is a grassy mound.

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