

Memories of Holly Park School, Bellevue Road N11 (1971-1977)

I arrived at Holly Park aged 5 in 1971. My dad had recently left home - I was small and very shy. I was assigned to Yellow Class with Mrs K (Mrs Kyriakos – but always called Mrs K) – a very friendly teacher with dark hair piled atop her head and glasses (a bit like Mrs Pepperpot, although Mrs. K was Greek). Yellow Class was located in what was then ‘the new block’ – a late 1960s low boxy building with a striking, multi-coloured plastic ‘stained-glass’ frontage and toilets with very small cubicles and tiny sinks – perfect for us infants. Our classroom was ‘modern’, nicely carpeted, with shoe boxes for our shoe bags (everyone changed from outdoor shoes on arrival) and colourful décor. The child-sized tables were arranged in small units (rather than rows), where you sat with your table monitor and fellow pupils. There was a wonderful playhouse in the corner with an equally enticing dressing-up box, the obligatory nature table strewn with a few ancient leaves, dried up conkers and dusty shells, plus a reading corner – oh, and plenty of coloured crayons (‘cherry red’ was a favourite colour). Mrs K taught me to read – I remember vividly sitting cross legged on the floor with my class, looking up at Mrs K beside a board where she could arrange different letters, words and construct sentences which we read out loud. We had milk time around 10am with glass bottles and paper straws (later it came in triangular Tetra Pak packaging) and lunch was served in the infant school hall, where our junior monitor served us with culinary delights such as liver and bacon, greens, mashed potato and gravy followed by semolina, pineapple upside-down cake or cold custard (we loved this) for pudding. Mrs Clinch (the Head Dinner Lady) presided over the whole dinner hall and, woe betide if you didn’t finish your greens! The hierarchy was: Nursery (housed in a separate building which looked like a WW2 ‘prefab’), Red Class, Yellow Class and finally Blue Class – before you were ‘promoted’ to the junior school which was housed in the original Victorian school building across the windy playground, constructed in the classic formation of large hall with six classrooms – three on each side. This building had not changed for years and didn’t even have any toilets when I was first in the juniors (you’d have to go down into the playground to use the old Victorian toilets which were stand-alone, very draughty, a bit scary and didn’t smell too good). Thankfully, a new extension was built with spanking new loos in about 1975.



*Me and my mum Gwen – school photo taken at Holly Park
c.1976*

Holly Park felt like a very friendly place and had a great holly-coloured themed uniform of red and green, which was really cheerful. I made friends in Yellow Class who moved up the school with me. It could boast of its multi-cultural credentials before that became common terminology. My school mates spanned a mixture of heritages – Finnish, Italian, Greek, German, African, Indian, American – that was just my class! And Mrs Maxwell – the Headteacher – encouraged us to celebrate many of the different religious festivals such as Diwali. There was a rich mix at Holly Park – kids from all sorts of families and diverse backgrounds (most of us very scruffy, I seem to recall) – many without much money, others from more affluent families and a few kids whose parents had escaped some overseas regime or tyranny and come to Britain as a safe haven, ending up in Friern Barnet – but we did seem to all muck in together. There were quite a lot of children like me, from what was then called a ‘broken home’ (now called a ‘blended family’).

Mrs Maxwell was Headteacher all through my years. She was a small but very determined woman who wore bright dresses in man-made fabrics and had her short hair 'set' in steely grey curls. She had a voice which could 'carry' right across the playground, if necessary (e.g. if you were caught playing netball at breaktime without having your plimsolls on – highly illegal). But she needed to assert control, as the consensus amongst the staff was that she had worked very hard to 'pull the school up by its boot-straps', as previously it had a very rough reputation in the '50s and '60s. I recall most of us respected and liked her, and when our class was leaving the school in 1977, many tears were shed.



Holly Park staff photo 1976 on the 'field'. Standing l-r: Delia (?), unknown, Mr Ray Harrison the Caretaker, unknown, Mrs Olive Clinch the dinner lady, unknown who was Mrs M's secretary, unknown, unknown, unknown, Mr Ray Clarke, unknown, Mrs Marjorie Shipp, unknown, Mrs Barbara Craig (very tall and stylish – brilliant storyteller). Seated row l-r: unknown, Mrs Mary Harrison dinner lady, Mrs Leslie Hunt (brilliant artistically), the wonderful Mrs K, Mrs Margaret Maxwell Headteacher, Mrs Brenda Masters Deputy Head, my mum Gwen Holmes Music Teacher, Mrs Trevias, Mrs Chris Pugh, unknown.

Creativity in all its forms was much encouraged at Holly Park. My best friend Phoebe and I were always being plucked out of classroom when we were 10 and 11 to go the cloakroom to 'make a freeze' on the theme of transport, foods of the world, WW1 etc. for display in the hall. These freezes adorned every available wall space in both the infant and junior school – and had to be changed termly (quite a pressure for the class teachers!). Dancing was also high on Mrs Maxwell's agenda. Not only did we have the delights of the school dance troupe 'Pugh's People' (run by my wonderful class teacher Mrs Chris Pugh – who sadly died in 2019 aged only 71) but Mrs M was absolutely crazy for county (folk) dancing. In the summer term, boys and girls (including me and all my friends) were regularly hauled out of class to practice our reels and jigs so we could be contenders in the inter-school County Dancing Championships with our rival schools (the posher, but not-so-cool schools, like St. John's or Queenswell). It was a bit of a thankless task for Mrs M – the record player would be wheeled out onto the patch of grass known affectionately as the 'field', attached to a series of extra-long extension leads. Then folk music would ring out - rather distortedly - from a lonesome speaker, across the suburbs of Friern Barnet, as we clod-hopping kids would pound up and down, often running to keep up with our partner, as we tried in vain to look graceful 'Stripping the Willow'.



1973

County dancing in 1973. Girls l-r: Jane, Sandiya, Sharon, me and Cathy – note the piano has been wheeled out for some al fresco singing! Mrs Diana Farrant presides over the proceedings.

Music was an important part of the school curriculum at Holly Park. My mum Gwen Holmes was the music teacher from about 1972 – 1986, when she retired. How did she get the job? A bit unorthodox – she was in the audience at a school assembly when the usual person who played the piano was away ill. Mrs M, not to be thwarted, asked if anyone in the crowd could come up and play as a stand-in. My mum, an excellent pianist (and a trained teacher), offered to play, and that was the start of a long professional career at Holly Park. She got us kids singing wonderful ‘pop cantatas’ such as *Jonah-Man Jazz* and *David and Goliath*, as well as classics like *Let’s All Go Down the Strand*, *There’s a Worm at the Bottom of My Garden* and *his name is Wiggly Woo* and *Jenny Jenkins* (with the tongue-twisting lyrics “I’ll buy me a foldy-roldy, tildy-toldy, seek-a-double, use-a-cozza roll to find me”).



My mum Gwen Holmes depicted in a school freeze c. 1981

Max Price was the Music Adviser for Barnet and he raised the bar high – us kids from Holly Park actually sang at the Festival Hall as part of a large ‘Barnet Schools Choir’ in 1976 – an amazing experience for ten-year olds! And my mum accompanied a similar Barnet schools’ concert at the Festival Hall a few years later. Assemblies – always taken by Mrs Maxwell herself – were concluded with a rousing hymn from our 1970s hymnbook ‘Sing to God’ which comprised new, funky hymns no one had ever heard of like ‘There are Hundreds and Thousands and Millions of Sparrows’ and ‘The Ink is Black, The Page is White’.



Singing at The Festival Hall in 1976

Playtimes were very important! There was a massive old Victorian shed – called ‘The Shed’ by us kids. If it started to rain during playtime, the whole school, plus dinner ladies, would congregate in The Shed. It was open to the elements on two sides and had low wooden seating round the other two sides – it was a classic Victorian school out-building. I hope it hasn’t been torn down! Popular playtime activities included a game called ‘Drains’ (a tag game where you were ‘safe’ on a drain!); skipping with a really long rope which ended up including practically the whole school (well, nearly); playing singing/ clapping/ dancing games like *Oranges and Lemons*, *In and Out the Dusty Bluebells*, *A Sailor Went to Sea Sea Sea*; lots of make-believe games; then there were the ‘bars’ – very dangerous at that time, as if you fell off (like I once did) you hit concrete – and fast! No ‘critical fall height’ and bouncy surfaces in the 1970s! We were hard! I still have a cracked front tooth to prove it! The boys played football on the ‘field’ – that was a very male dominated domain. Old-fashioned pastimes like conkers and marbles were still very popular, but the new-fangled craze Klackers (two balls on a string which swung around rather dangerously) were banned by Mrs M. We girls also practised shooting at the netball hoops (with plimsolls most definitely on!) and making up numerous dance routines. On a ‘wet play’ in the junior school you would go out to the hall and hug one of the big, Victorian radiators for warmth, whilst having a chat with your friends – possibly about boys.



1974 – photo taken in the playground – we were scruffy kids, but happy kids – infant school on the left, nursery school on the right

Widening our cultural perspectives was one of Mrs M's aims. She certainly wanted to expose her charges to the world outside N11. For instance, UK travel - the staff took two classes (including my class) for a day trip all the way up to Hull and Grimsby in about 1975. We went by train, arrived, did a tour of the docks to see the fish being hauled in, went to a fishing museum, had high tea (fish and chips) in a hotel and came back to London!! Can you believe it?! The school regularly had what was called a 'Social' - an evening event for the whole family which staff *had* to attend. It took place in the hall in the junior school which had been miraculously transformed into a 'nightclub', with dimmed lighting and little tables and chairs dotted around the edge. The grown-ups enjoyed grown-up things like alcohol and smoking (you have to remember, everyone smoked in the 1970s – even in the staffroom!), and the kids, wearing their best party gear, ran around - sort of dancing in an embarrassed way - to ABBA records and 10-CC. We also had French lessons provided by Madame Fowler and her reel-to-reel-tape (the only thing I remember from this was my French name – Veronique – which I hated – but you have to agree that it was far-sighted of Mrs Maxwell to include this on our curriculum). Although our school didn't have a swimming pool of its own, we used to go to St. John's pool round the corner. They once beat us at netball 19-0 and they had their own swimming pool, but we still thought our school was better!

Christmas concerts were a BIG deal. Every December, Mr Harrison - the kind and long-suffering (no doubt) caretaker who lived on-site in the Caretaker's House - had to erect this aged, rickety wooden stage in the junior hall. All the junior classes had been practising their Christmas plays diligently – making the costumes, learning their lines, singing their songs etc. Tensions were high on opening night – we usually did two performances over two nights. One year the actor David Jason was in the audience, as he was the uncle of my classmate Michael. We loved performing and everyone seemed to be involved. Steven Savva was the best Widow Twanky ever (until his mum banned him from performing when she realised he had to wear a dress – a devastating blow to our class!). Every time you walked on stage the whole edifice rocked madly and creaked ominously - one gentle footstep caused the boards to bounce like a trampoline. It was fab.



1976 – Mrs Pugh and her class of Third Years: I am at the end of the first row on the right, next to my best friend Phoebe

My years at Holly Park were very happy ones. I left to go to QE Girls in Barnet, which was very two-dimensional in comparison – I suppose I could say black and white, as opposed to technicolour!

I've worked in the cultural/ education sector most of my life. Now I live in Somerset and work at a museum in Bath. I never visit North London, but that little corner of Bellevue Road has a special place in my heart.

Saira Holmes (pupil at Holly Park from 1971 – 1977)