

QUEENS PARK EAST

My mother and I moved from the Royal Hotel into my aunt's house in Queens Park East. For me, it was a revelation, because I was used to established, leafy suburbs or town life. Queens Park East was a brand new, treeless suburb on the north-eastern edge of Bulawayo.

The graded dirt roads that served the suburb produced regular clouds of dust, as did our bare yards. Fortunately, few cars passed our house, which lay on the very edge of the suburb, with virgin bush across the road. The yard was not firm earth, but fine loose dust that found its way into everything.

If the wind wasn't blowing, or a vehicle passing, the air smelled fresh, and the sky was blue. The suburb was popular with new arrivals, all trying to establish themselves in the booming country.

Apart from my mother and I, the house held my aunt and uncle and three cousins, and my maternal grandparents. Along with my three cousins, I soon faced the ubiquitous childhood infections of the time. My youngest cousin and I didn't attend school, so my two older cousins must have brought the infections into the house from their schools.

First, chickenpox, and then ringworm. I think we'd all contracted measles before, so that wasn't an issue. A common view was kids should get past those infections at the earliest opportunity. Inevitably, we children, one after each other, suffered from those uncomfortable infections.

None of the houses in our street, or the street behind, were fenced. Our house's rear stood opposite the back of the house in the next street. After much debate, we concluded the ample man in the house behind us was Italian, because he spent his days in a sleeveless vest, normally worn as an undergarment.

One interesting Saturday afternoon occurred when he brought about eight chickens to his backdoor, and one by one, beheaded them with a meat cleaver. Without exception, the headless chickens ran towards our house before losing their balance and falling on their sides in the dust. The winner covered about fifteen feet.

The free-standing outside toilet was interesting. Without connected sewerage, the toilet was a hole in a flat wooden board over an unseen zinc container. A flap at the rear of the toilet facilitated removal of the container. Each week, African council workers would come around to replace the container with a fresh one containing liquid disinfectant.

The house was airy with parquet flooring and would have been cold in winter. But I can only recall sunny, warm days. One of my strongest memories is playing in the inch deep dust outside the stable door to the kitchen at the house's rear. All Bulawayo houses seemed to have stable doors to their kitchens, leading on to the backyards.

Another memory was learning to read. My youngest cousin and I enjoyed the process, guessing what the words meant, and remembering how to spell them. To us, it felt like a game, so we could read before we started school.

I turned six in January, and it was time for both of us to start at Newmansford Primary School in Queens Park West. The school was new, with a single row of classrooms, staff facilities, and offices. A low storm mesh fence surrounded the treeless school grounds, void

of any shade or grass. Our wide-brimmed floppy hats were all that protected us from the blazing summer sun.

The teacher spent her time writing the letters of the alphabet on the blackboard. We sat in the hot classroom copying them into our exercise books and willing the time to move faster. Learning to write was not as much fun as learning to read.

And I didn't much like break-time either, apart from the jam sandwiches wrapped in greaseproof paper tucked into my oversized leather satchel. But I did look forward to home-time, when our African nanny's smiling face would arrive to walk us home.

I spent little more than a term at the school as my mother and I were leaving Southern Rhodesia. My parents separated, and my mother felt isolated without transport in an outer suburb, so she decided we should return to England. I was aware of Hamleys, the world-famous London toy shop, Madame Tussauds, and the Tower of London, where they beheaded both people and chickens, so I was all for it.

We were going to live with my aunt and her family in Essex, near London. We left Bulawayo by train for Cape Town, where the Union Castle liner waited to take us to Southampton, but I cannot remember much about that trip.