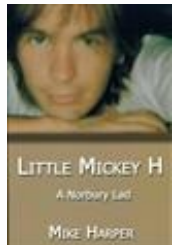




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LITTLE MICKEY H - A Norbury Lad

Mike Harper



Join the boy with a brain the size of a peanut for a rip-roaring rollercoaster ride down the avenues and alleyways of Norbury!

Will Hay... Kingsley Amis... Deryck Guyler... Derek Bentley... And NOW... MIKE HARPER! Could he be the fifth most famous person to have lived in Norbury? Not if you don't all read this great book about what life was really like growing up in a sleepy London suburb at the back end of the twentieth century. Join the boy with a brain the size of a peanut for a rip-roaring rollercoaster ride down the avenues and alleyways of Norbury. SCHOOL!...CHURCH!...WORK!...FOOTBALL!...GIRLS! COULD LIFE BE ANY MORE EXCITING?

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LET ME TAKE YOU BY THE HAND... (Part 1)

Norbury

Norbury's position on the northern boundary of the London Borough Of Croydon borders it with both the London boroughs of Lambeth and Merton. It shares the postcode London SW16 with nearby Streatham and is 6.7 miles (10.8 km) south of Charing Cross.

Until the late 1800s, Norbury was still a rural area, a buffer zone between Croydon and Streatham. It is thought the name derives from *North Burgh* due to its position in the former Manor of Croydon. Norbury was a sub-manor of Croydon Manor and was held by the Carew family between 1385 and 1859. The Carews also held Beddington where Carew Manor school is a reminder of their influence. Norbury Farm which stood near the junction of Kensington Avenue and Norbury Avenue was the manor house, demolished in 1914. Manor Farm Road and Norbury Manor Girl's School are nominal reminders of the building that once stood nearby.

The only really old building left in Norbury is Norbury Hall in Craignish Avenue. It was originally built in thirty acres of ornamental gardens, 400 yards to the south west of the old farm site in 1802 for William Coles. The gardens contained a large lake which was fed by the River Graveney and beyond this there was pasture across which a footpath ran from Norbury Farm to the north east of the house. The Lodge and main gates to the estate were in London Road where the Post Office now stands. The drive ran up to the house through woodland and past the stable yard which a sale document of 1855 described as having "standing room for several carriages, stabling for seven horses, loose boxes, harness and men servants rooms, hay and corn rooms, granary and a hen house". The woods were cleared when Craignish Avenue was built.

In the late 19th century, its owner was James Hobbs, local businessman and fifth Mayor of Croydon (1887-89) who had bought the house in 1884. A few years later, he was implicated in the Liberator Building Society scandal of 1892 with Member of Parliament and first Mayor of Croydon (1883-84) Jabez Balfour, and was convicted and imprisoned. The Hobbs family owned the Hall until the mid-1950s when it was sold to the County Borough of Croydon (from 1965 the London Borough of Croydon) to accommodate the elderly. However the grounds were too extensive for the Welfare Department to maintain so they were handed over to the Parks Department. The mansion was fenced off from the gardens which were opened to the public, the private cricket field having been sold off to Barclays Bank and is now owned by the neighbouring private leisure club. By then most of the farms and open land belonging to Norbury Manor and Hall had been built upon.

The Hobbs family kept the lake stocked with fish and entertained visitors from London for fishing and shooting weekends. The lake no longer contains water, except for occasional periods in wet winters, but the depression of the basin can clearly be seen. One of the most interesting features of the garden was the Gazebo which was a summer house and had a first floor balcony to allow a

good view over the garden. Sadly, this was destroyed by arsonists in 2002.

However, the distinctive large Cedar trees which surround the house and are typical planting of early nineteenth century villa gardens, remain. Norbury Hall which remains a retirement home and is a Grade II listed building, provides a peaceful green oasis in an urban area with year round colour from rhododendrons, roses and in the winter and spring months from the beds of heathers and conifers.

* * * * *

The official boundary between Norbury and Streatham on the London Road (A23) is at Hermitage Bridge over the River Graveney which flows into the River Wandle, which itself flows into the River Thames at Wandsworth. The London County Council built an estate of almost 500 homes in Norbury between 1906 and 1910, one of its first 'Out-County' estates. This is effectively the area bordered by Tylecroft Road and the eastern half of Northborough Road.

For a few years in the 1870s, horse-racing fans flocked to Norbury. Streatham racecourse had been set up stretching roughly from present-day Rowan Road and Streatham Vale to Northborough Road, Norbury. Races were stopped in 1878 - mainly because of the unruly nature of the meetings.

Norbury railway station opened in 1878, although the railway line itself had opened in 1862. Originally its purpose had been to make easier the delivery of horses to Streatham racecourse, the long ramps leading from the platform down to road level built especially for horses to walk down. The station was rebuilt in 1902 and connects Norbury with Brighton, Croydon, London Victoria and London Bridge. Although Croydon's horse-tram network never reached Norbury, electric trams were introduced in 1901, connecting the town all the way through to Purley. However, Croydon trams and London trams used different systems and until 1925, could not use the same tracks, leading through-passengers to change trams at the Hermitage Bridge. The trams were removed after World War II but there are now plans to extend Tramlink from Croydon to Streatham via Norbury.

Norbury's main open space, Norbury Park, was purchased by Croydon Council in 1935, having been the North Surrey Golf Course since 1920.

The Official Guide for Croydon (1948) comments: "Within living memory... Norbury was a park-like countryside with wooded and meadowed eminences to east and west. It has become a suburb of pleasant villas running down on either side to the roaring London Road."

And here is a description of Norbury from Where to Live round London: Southern Side (2nd edn. 1907) [S70 ROW]:

"Although nominally part of Croydon, Norbury is growing so rapidly that it deserves separate mention. The main thoroughfare is a wide road, on which large modern and high-class shops have been, and are still being, erected. The demand for houses is great, and this has led to large estates being opened up and developed, and the houses already erected are of good appearance and moderate rentals. There are also some good self-contained flats fitted up with all

modern conveniences.

The neighbourhood is healthy, the Croydon district having for the last sixteen years shown the lowest death rate of large towns in the kingdom. A good service of trains accomplishes the journey of eight miles to town in a short time. Electric trams to Croydon and Purley run every few minutes, and omnibuses run to the City or connect with trams at Streatham and thence to the Bridges.

There are tennis, cricket and football clubs. Two golf courses available: the Norbury Golf Club having a 9-hole course, and the North Surrey Golf Club an 18-hole course. Two good local theatres are within easy reach - the Grand Theatre at Croydon and the Brixton Theatre - both good houses, with a weekly change of programme provided by excellent companies.

There are many open spaces in the district, one of the most recently acquired within easy walking distance being Grange Wood. The wood has been left in its natural state, and the grounds adjacent to the house are kept in good order. Standing high as it does, extensive views can be obtained there from of the Surrey hills and surrounding country.

- **Railway Communication** - London Bridge, Victoria, and Kensington by the London, Brighton, and South Coast Railway
- **Rents** - To suit all classes £35 to £100 per annum
- **Rates** - 7s 8d in the £ (including water)
- **Gas** - 2s 8d per 1000 cubic feet
- **Electric Light** - Sliding scale 7d to 2d per BT unit; flat rate 5d per BT unit
- **Subsoil** - Gravel and clay
- **Altitude** - About 200ft
- **Early Closing Day** - Wednesday
- **Schools** - Boys: Norbury College, London Road, Principal Mr. Smith; Girls: St. Hilda's College, London Road, Principal Miss Agnes Robinson
- **Places of Worship** - St Philip's Church and Wesleyan and other Nonconformist Churches
- **Recreations** - North Surrey Golf Club, Norbury: Secretary W. Blackford, 18 holes, subscription £5 5s, a good sporting course with close turf and well-kept greens. Norbury Golf Club: Secretary F. Holmes, 9 holes, subscription £4 4s, fairly good, well-drained course with numerous natural and artificial hazards well placed “

* * * * *

Norbury isn't famous for very much at all. As far as I know, only three or four well-known people have resided there, one being the comic actor Will Hay who lived on 'The Chase' which runs between Briar Avenue and Gibson's Hill – he made eighteen films while living in Norbury, his heyday being the mid-late 1930s. Another comic actor Deryck Guyler, most famous for his roles in the television series 'Please Sir!' and 'Sykes', lived along Norbury Crescent. Writer Kingsley Amis grew up in Norbury, the son of a family, he once told an interviewer, that “had slipped a rung ... [and were] frightened of toppling into the working class”. Finally Derek Bentley, hanged in 1953,

though he did not himself commit the fatal shooting of policeman Sidney Miles that led to his demise, lived at 1 Fairview Road. His story is told by the film "Let Him Have It" starring Christopher Eccleston. Norbury is also mentioned in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes story "The Yellow Face".

As one grows so one's environment expands. While the family home was always the central hub of my surroundings, gradually I was introduced to areas further afield, mainly through starting school and going to church.

Towards Streatham And Mitcham

From an early age there were three main routes along which we would generally travel. The first ran from our house along Northborough Road and Rowan Road to the coach stop where the red coach picked us up and set us down going to and coming from junior school in Mitcham. Northborough Road which by its name signified its position north of the borough (as did the name Norbury) ran steeply up from London Road (the A23) – known to us as 'the Main Road' or 'the High Street' – and steeply down again to where it met Norbury Cross at the bottom of the hill. To the west of Norbury Cross, Northborough Road extended further still across the Croydon/Merton boundary line to the crossroads where it met Rowan Road, Manor Road and Wide Way.

Just before the Croydon/Merton boundary was the entrance to the recreation ground. We would often go to the rec to play on the swings, the 'witch's hat' roundabout and the climbing frame. There was an overweight, dark-haired and moustachioed old woman with a face like a slapped arse who would supervise, whether officially or unofficially I never quite knew. The rec was a minefield for dog muck and on one occasion, maybe apocryphally, Liz had climbed the metal fence separating the grassed area from the playground, fallen off the other side and plunged her hand into a large turd.

It was just outside this park that in March 1976, aged eleven, I was bitten by the mangy black mongrel that lived on the north-eastern corner of Darcy Road and Northborough Road. The dog had trotted out of the park as I had nonchalantly crossed Northborough Road on my way to the sweet shop. The mutt growled and ran towards me before leaping up and biting me on the left arm just below the elbow as I raised my arms to protect myself. Fortunately I was wearing my infamous lime green jacket so my skin was not broken, not even scratched. Mum told me not to worry about it, however, having recently become aware of the disease rabies, I had a very genuine fear that I had somehow contracted the disease and as I understood it, had something between eleven days and one year to live. I must admit that for sometime, every time I failed to swallow properly, I was convinced that hydrophobia was kicking in and I would end up passing away in a hospital bed with swollen lips and a lolling tongue, unable to drink a drop.

Gill was less than sympathetic too and pretended firstly to froth at the mouth as if she had the disease and then bit me hard on the upper arm. That same year was the first year that we holidayed abroad, Gatwick Airport failing to allay my concern about the disease by displaying numerous posters stating that "Smuggling your pets can bring rabies into Britain". A television public

information film on the dangers of the disease was also occasionally transmitted. My fear was exacerbated by an episode of the TV series 'Survivors', (a series conceived by writer Terry Nation who had also conceived the daleks in Sci-Fi series 'Doctor Who, so he knew how to give people the willies) which dealt with the global aftermath of a deadly virus. This particular episode focussed on a pack of dogs that the survivors thought might have rabies. I must say I was really quite worried for a long time, a fear that only died away once a year had passed since the dog had bitten me. I avoided the bugger as far as possible after that and rarely walked along Darcy Road, preferring instead to scoot up Northborough Road and along Isham Road when heading for Sean's house or towards church.

That dog hung around for years. I considered the owners were lower than the lowest lowlife for allowing a dangerous dog to roam unchecked. And they lived on the council estate. Some years later, walking from Norbury Cross into Northborough Road with Sean and Nick, Sean having heard from us about the dog's reputation, attempted to prove that it was nothing to be worried about by approaching the dog. Nick and I, having walked off in double time up the hill, could only watch and laugh as the dog chased Sean across the road. It would have bitten him too had he not acrobatically vaulted a convenient garden hedge.

Between Norbury Cross and Rowan Road, there was a row of shops, including the off licence Galleon Wines, an electrical shop, a betting shop, a barber shop, a chip shop, a launderette and a sweet shop called Lawtons. It was always Lawtons to us, though it changed its name many times over the years. Early on, sweets were generally bought either from Lawtons or the Post Office at the Rowan Road crossroads. Once in a blue moon, a foray across Rowan Road to another sweet shop a few yards along Manor Road might be made. It was at the Post Office on the corner where for many years I held a Post Office Savings Account (passbook number 762 185 358). Mum and Dad at some point opened an account for each of us with an initial deposit of £1, presumably with the intention of helping us to learn to save money. I believe I made some small attempts to save but these did not last long and sooner or later I cashed in the few measly quid I had managed to squirrel away and closed the account. While the intention of encouraging us to save some of our money was noble, perhaps the inclination to do so could have been nurtured more enthusiastically.

Lawtons on the other hand was the scene of my first crime. Gill and I would often stop at Lawtons to buy sweets on the way home from school, usually Blackjacks or Fruit Salads which at the time were four for a penny, or perhaps a Chol (a chocolate lolly), a 'traffic light' (another type of lolly), a packet of refreshers (fizzy sweets), Spangles (boiled sweets that came in modern flavours and later 'traditional flavours'), Opal Fruits (these days called 'Starburst'), flying saucers (sherbet in a wafer that had the consistency of paper) or a sherbet fountain (sherbet with a hollow stick of liquorice stuck in it). I was particularly fascinated by some dinosaur cards, perhaps six to a packet, but as they were on the expensive side, I started pinching them. I guess I got away with it several times before, much to my embarrassment, getting caught, after which I did not frequent that shop much at all, until the ownership had changed hands.

One of our neighbours, an Asian chap who lived at number 54, ran the launderette, which I attended once or twice in later years when Mum and Dad were away on holiday.

Further down Northborough Road towards the Rowan Road crossroads, a Chinese takeaway Lee Shings supplied me in later years with an occasional meal (usually the cheaper dishes such

as beansprouts or mixed veg). A Liptons minimarket, a chemist, another launderette and a flower shop were also less frequently visited.

Towards Norbury Central

The second main route took us towards the Main Road (A23), usually achieved by walking along Norbury Court Road as it started higher up than Norbury Cross's junction with Northborough Road, so there was less of a hill to climb. Halfway along Norbury Court Road, one could branch off along Beech Road, past St Philips Church (the choir of which sang on Sal Solo's hit single "San Damiano") towards the library on Beatrice Avenue, a frequent Saturday morning entertainment. From a very young age, we were all introduced to the library as a source of acquiring free knowledge and entertainment through reading.

The library was divided into four sections. To the right of the revolving entrance doors was the children's section which is where of course at first, our primary interests lay. The young children's books with plenty of pictures were found in some lowdown boxes on legs next to which stood the children's reference card cabinets topped by a fish tank containing two goldfish.

Around the room, the bookshelves housed the older children's books. My favourites as I grew up were the "Jennings" series by Anthony Buckeridge and the "Doctor Who" series written by a variety of authors and based on the television stories. On visiting the library each time, I would scour the shelves hoping to spot a Jennings or a Dr Who that I had not yet read and it was always with great joy that I would take home my prize knowing I was in for a literary treat.

The Jennings series centred on a group of eleven-year-old boarding school boys and their various adventures, which would make me vainly hope that I would one day be so incarcerated and experience the same. Although my wishes never came true, I was able to live out those wishes through Jennings' adventures. Sometime later in life, I started picking up the odd book again from second-hand book stores and gradually collected nearly all of them in their recognisable red hardback Collins covers – though I did manage to find one or two with original dust jackets. I still revisit them occasionally and still hoot with laughter at some of the stories, and look forward to sharing these adventures with my own children.

The shorter Dr Who books usually ranged from around 128 to 180 pages and could easily be read over the course of a single day. But where is the relish in that? Bear in mind that many of the adventures at the time would have involved the earlier incarnations of the Doctor in stories that I had been too young to have witnessed on television. It was therefore always much more satisfying to read a chapter at a time, put the book down and look forward to a time later in the day when the next chapter could be attended to.

In our younger days, after visiting the children's section, we would go and find Dad who would be browsing in the adults' section. By following him around here, I found a veritable cornucopia of goodies in the games section. Books on card games, magic tricks, E W Swanton's various compendia on cricket detailing old test match scorecards from the days when Hutton, Washbrook

and Bill Edrich would open for England, abounded. In those early '70s days, these matches were only fifteen to twenty years before, though anything before I was born seemed to me to be aeons earlier. The equivalent these days would be the late 1980s when the quality of England test players seems so much less heroic than those 1950s legends.

Further round, the bookshelves revealed the adventures of Ellery Queen, a detective who was currently enjoying visibility through a television series, which the whole family including Mum (a rarity) would watch. Previously, I had only known her to watch 'The Onedin Line' though she did also admit to tuning into Coronation Street in its earliest years. Thinking myself something of a detective, I would try to solve the mysteries but rarely got anywhere close, though by the law of averages one or two of my guesses as to the criminal's identity turned out to be right. Squirmishly, on one occasion, I claimed that I had hit upon the solution which centred on the word Schadenfreude and the French words "Chaud and Froid", but I don't think anyone believed me.

An example of books loaned from the library appears in my diary entry for 20th January 1977 (aged 12) – as expected, a Jennings book (The Trouble With Jennings), a Doctor Who book (The Ice Warriors), and a book from the grown-ups section (Modern Board Games).

The remaining sections of the library comprised of a reading room where daily newspapers could be read for free and town plans could be viewed, and a reference section which also served as a quiet room where many years later as a student, I revised for my 'O' levels in the company of my Italian girlfriend, the lovely Selina Spinozzi.

Whilst I was never guilty of incurring library fines for returning borrowed books late, I did find myself so taken with J R R Tolkien's "Lord Of The Rings" that I committed my second great crime and slipped it into my student bag and never returned it. In my view, this is definitely one of the greatest books ever written, though without wishing to spoil the ending if you are currently toiling through its thousand-plus pages (all three books combined as one) and have not seen the films, the climax of the plot occurs about two hundred pages before the end of the book. The film reflected this also with a tedious coda that while true to the story as written should not be awarded any prizes for maintaining tension.

My final memories of the library, a big airy building which could get very warm in the summer, were the balding bespectacled librarian and the sound of the original ticket machine which would read the punch cards with three echoey clicks (at a guess pitched at B, D and Am) as it sucked the card into its mechanism and then spat it out. The silence and lack of occasion of the inky stamp that replaced this wonderful machine was inversely proportional to the pleasure that the ceremony and anticipation of waiting in the queue for that machine noise afforded me.

Some years later, I noted that my nemesis, Vernon Quaintance (read all about him in the Church chapter) ran computer demonstrations there and I never went back.

* * * * *

Chapters

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ml66uk wrote 12 hours ago



You may be interested in the recent article in the Croydon Advertiser headlined "Croydon circumcision campaigner caught with child porn videos".

"THE head of a pro-circumcision group who used to run a children's computer club was caught with a hoard of child porn.

Vernon Quaintance, from Upper Norwood, has avoided a jail term – despite having three video cassettes with nine-hours' worth of clips showing boys as young as 11 engaging in sex acts.

Vernon Quaintance is the head of the Gilgal Society, a group dedicated to promoting male circumcision"

"Quaintance, who the court was told had been celibate for his entire life, admitted three counts of possession of indecent photographs of a child.

The retired telephone engineer was handed a 40-week jail term, suspended for two years, ordered to complete a sexual offenders rehabilitation course, and told to pay £300 costs."

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Norbury Girl wrote 349 days ago



I have lived in Norbury for a long time, went to St Joseph's Primary School and still go to St. Barts Church in Ellison Road. I roared with laughter at some of the things you said about people that I still know and how true they are!

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eloraine wrote 695 days ago



Well written, loved it. Good luck with it. E.Lorraine Royal Blood Chronicles book one

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Burgio wrote 725 days ago



LITTLE MICKEY

This is an interesting coming of age story – interesting because the narrator is much older than in the average coming of age story. And because it's so detailed it reveals much more than usual about the narrator and his family. It's courageous to write this type of story because it holds back no family secrets. Those reveals, tho, are also what makes it a good read. I'm adding this to my shelf. Burgio (Grain of Salt).

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Melcom wrote 725 days ago



A truly humorous read. And it's all true, great stuff.

Happily shelved
Melxx

Impeding Justice

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Harpic wrote 726 days ago



Thanks for your comments Missy, very much appreciated:~) Mike

“ I love the nostalgic feel to this, you brought that time period alive! The style is great and your pacing is just the reight speed. I got involved quickly and sayed in volved. Kept forgetting this was a biography, thanks for sharing this with us.

Missy
Mark of Eternity ”

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carlashmore wrote 726 days ago



You know, if nothing else you have left this for your descendents. It is a sharp, well written, humorous and moving book that is highly involving. And you've lived it all. I felt there were a few too many semi-colons in Chapter 2, but that aside it is a wonderful book.

Carl
The Time hUnters

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missyfleming_22 wrote 727 days ago



I love the nostalgic feel to this, you brought that time period alive! The style is great and your pacing is just the reight speed. I got involved quickly and sayed in volved. Kept forgetting this was a biography, thanks for sharing this with us.

Missy
Mark of Eternity

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soutexmex wrote 727 days ago



Mike: Actually, I can go with both pitches. With the long pitch, I would break it down into smaller paragraphs so it reads faster. End it with one succinct question. Perfecting your pitches is how you climb in ranking to gather more exposure and comments to better your novel. The writing is good so I am SHELIVING you.

Though I have been a very active member for over a year, I can still use your comments on my book when you get the chance. Every little bit helps. Cheers!

JC
The Obergemau Key

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SusieGulick wrote 727 days ago



Dear Mike, I love that you shared your story - especially your singles & tapes names - I'm 70 (memoir named below) & still have all of my singes, 45, LPs & tapes since I was in high school in the 50s. :) I can hardly wait until you write volume two of

your story. :) Before I began to read your book, I was prepared by your recap/pitch that was before your story which was very well done. Your story is good because you create interest by having short paragraphs & lots of dialogue, which makes me want to keep reading to find out what's going to happen next. I'm commenting/backing your book to help it advance. Could you please return the favor by taking a moment to comment/back my TWO books, "He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not" & the unedited version? "Tell Me True Love Stories," which tells at the end my illness now/6th abusive marriage." Thanks, Susie :)

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lynn clayton wrote 728 days ago



Forget aliens and fantasy, this is my sort of book. The more parochial, the better. When autobiography is well-written it can't be beaten for fascination and truth. My only complaint is about the size of the text. Three cheers for promising to give us your thoughts without apology - any writer who's afraid to shouldn't write. Backed. Lynn

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AJB wrote 730 days ago



I've enjoyed reading your autobiography, Mike. I grew up at roughly the same time and a lot of your memories have brought back vivid ones of my own - particularly the music and TV references!

Your writing is smooth and easy to read and I like your honest, open style (although your experience with Mr Wilshire was somewhat disturbing!!).

Perhaps your experiences won't have a huge commercial appeal, but as a piece of family and social history, this is a fascinating read.

Amanda

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