

Memories of a Youth in Stonehouse Gloucestershire

These were our Rock'n'Roll Years

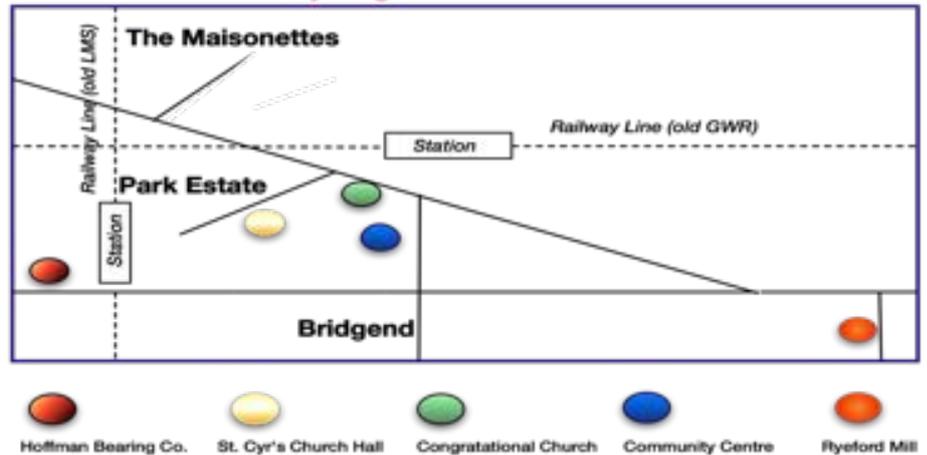
Roy C. Edwards - Summer of 2015



It was my friend Lilian Roberts (nee Blanch) that reminded me of our teenage years in The Parish of Stonehouse, Gloucestershire, during the years 1953 until 1962. It starts in 1953, as this was the year my parents moved from Slough (then in Buckinghamshire) to Gloucestershire, due to my father's work commitments. This is what it was like growing up as a teenager in Stonehouse, Gloucestershire.

Stonehouse at that time could be divided socially into a number of geographic areas. The centre of Stonehouse could be from the old GWR railway bridge at the western edge of the high street, past the Public School and down to the junction at the eastern end of Stonehouse, called the Horse Trough Junction. At the western side of the parish were a number of maisonette buildings built during the War years to house imported work staff. To the west of the Railway Bridge a large number of properties were built as part of the Government's new housing plans, and were being set up as the Park Estate. To the south of the parish was a mixed housing development at Bridge End. This area consisted of a number of private owner occupier houses, a set of prefabricated emergency homes, some Government supported semi detached new homes, and an area of temporary buildings used as a hostel for new

Communities where young Stonehouseians lived and met in 1953



immigrants to the UK from the eastern parts of Europe. Stonehouse had various other house locations such as 'The Reddings' on the Gloucester Road, and 'Happylands', adjacent to the then Hoffman Works, Oldend Lane and the Bristol Road.

I have taken the time to outline the local geography in order to determine the range of social areas and backgrounds that we as young people experienced.

Another variation for all the young people from Stonehouse was their type of State funded Secondary Education. Living in the age of the 11+ meant children were separated into Secondary Modern or Grammar School. However, it was not just a case

of one or the other. In the Stroud Valley, they split their Grammar School grades into Grammar and Technical: giving a range of schools: Stonehouse Secondary Modern for those boys and girls who failed the 11+, the Marling Grammar School for Boys; the Girls' High School; the Stroud Boys Technical and the Stroud Girls Technical, all located in Stroud. Girls and Boys from all areas of Stonehouse were distributed amongst these state schools, plus the option of private education at The Lawn School or Wycliffe College in Stonehouse.

It was outside of School activities that the young people of Stonehouse socialised. First it was likely to be the Church Youth Club's: The Congregational Church in the High Street, and St. Cyr's Church Hall in Elms Road. We also had the Regal cinema in Stonehouse with wide Panoramic Screen (The first in Gloucestershire), and then of course the Stonehouse Youth Club at the



Congregational Church, formerly in Stonehouse High Street.

Demolished in the early 1960's



Church hall of St. Cyr's C. of E. located in Elms Road.

Awaiting demolition, Sept. 2015.



Wycliffe College Chapel, used for Methodist Church meetings in my early years in Stonehouse 1953/55.



The Laburnham Playing fields in Stonehouse.

Also used as the Sports Field of Stonehouse Sec. Mod. School.



This building was the location of Miss Lords' Fish and Chip Shop.

In 1961 it became the 'Trevi Bar', more commonly known as Charlies Place



Formerly the Rodney Lewis Electrical Goods Shop.

Elms Road, Quietways, Stonehouse.

Community Centre, we used to play football in the Laburnum Playing field, with no goal posts, just a couple of coats, jackets or jumpers thrown down on the floor as goal markers. In the summer months we would play Cricket there as well.

Our primary enjoyment time in the evenings, was visiting friends' homes, and walking around Stonehouse meeting and chatting to other groups of young people. For some of us, Saturday nights meant a trip to Miss Lord's Fish and Chip Restaurant in the High Street, opposite a public house known as 'The Crown and Anchor'. Stonehouse had, at that time, a fish and chip shop at the eastern end of the High Street, and during the daytime there was the 'Corner Cafe' next to the Crown, which is now a fish and chip shop.

For all these after school activities there was the release from having to wear those all defining school uniforms. For many of us it did not matter what school you attended, we were all united as fun loving carefree teenagers, aged 13 to 16

It was my friend Colin (Slim) Roberts who in the summer of 1956 told me about a amazing singer he had heard over the music system at the Fairground being held in a field at Ryeford Junction, called Elvis Presley. Without doubt, for many of us just turning fifteen in 1955/56 the main life changing event was popular music. From being the type played by our mums and dads to one of the new styles; Skiffle, Jazz and Rock'n'Roll. We listened to this new music on radios tuned to various 'AFN' (American Forces Network) stations broadcast to US bases in Europe, and the most popular station was 'Radio Luxembourg'.

In Stonehouse we had our own already established record dealership shop of Lewis's Electrical, run by Rodney Lewis. Every Saturday some of us would gather in his shop and listen to the BBC radio show with Brian Mathew called 'Saturday Club'. We heard the song, asked Rodney to order it and so justified the time he gave us listening in his shop. Throughout the different parts of Stonehouse lads and lassies were getting together to listen or play these new types of music.

It may be interesting to note what type of machines we were using to play these 78r.p.m. records. Some people were able to play them on 'Radiograms', large electrical units that held radio tuner/record playing unit/speakers all together. Others had 1930 type wind up furniture style gramophone units, record turntable and speakers. A more popular type was again a 1930 style portable wind up player. The latest style was the popular 'Dansette' electrical unit. For me it was a strange contraption my brother acquired which was an electrical turntable that had to be started by spinning the table to start the machine. Power was generated by the friction of magnets in the unit to continue playing. Sound was achieved by plugging a connecting wire into a radio, and use its speaker for sound output. It worked, and many hours were spent by all my friends listening and dancing to the likes of Chuck Berry, Little Richard and Jerry Lee Lewis. Whatever equipment was used, it was always the music that was important.

For our older brothers and sisters there was a weekly Ball Room Dance Band performing at the Stonehouse Community Centre where they could dance away to their hearts content, but we the younger ones were NOT welcome!

At the youth clubs we managed to get a record player from someone, and others supplied the records, and we taught each other to Jive to one or other of the pop music styles. Gradually we gained in confidence, and guess what, boys started dancing with girls 'Wey Hey'. From these early get togethers a style of jive was achieved which became unique enabling a Stonehouse jive style to be developed, allowing easy inter action on the dance floor as you moved from partner to partner.



The Marling and Evans mill building, Ryeford/Kings Stanley



On the top floor of this Marling and Evans mill building, was, I think, the room where the Rock'n'Roll Dances were held



Stonehouse Community Centre:

The Home of Stonehouse Rock'n' Roll - 'Disc a GoGo'

Around this time there began an original Rock'n' Roll dance session held on a Wednesday evening at a room on the second floor of the Marling and Evans Mill at Ryeford This was started by a number of rebellious older teenagers, it was noisy, alarming and exciting to be involved in such an activity.

I first attended the Mill when my brother and his mate's skiffle group were giving a performance. At one stage in the evening they gave me the microphone and I attempted to give a performance of 'Tutti Frutti' a record just released by Little Richard - It went down like a lead balloon and I was never asked to sing again.

Perhaps it was that I was ahead of my time! Skiffle had yet a few more years to run.

Trust me, Skiffle was big, from Lonnie Donnegan, the Vipers and Chas McDevett, sang songs that made the radio waves exciting. Many of the songs were originally performed by artists such as Woody Guthrie, Lead Belly, which as time passed merged the original styles of Country/Folk/Rhythm and Blues, into Rock and Roll music. We, the young of Stonehouse loved it.

As more and more villages around the district let their young people organise Rock'n'Roll dances, Teenagers in Stonehouse felt as though we were beginning to get left behind. Some people at the Community Centre youth club were trying to book an evening on a Saturday for a Rock Evening, instead of the Ballroom Dance Evenings, but could not get permission.

All the usual excuses were given; it was decadent, too rough, only the yob element were into such music. Look at all the trouble the movie 'Rock around the Clock' was causing; fights and hooliganism everywhere 'Oh No'. Rock Dances were not suitable for the young of Stonehouse. . . look at the trouble from that crowd at Ryeford Mill (There had unfortunately been a number of incidents reported in the local

newspaper). There was a chance that we could try a Jazz Dance evening as that was thought to be from a more cultural and intellectual background much adopted by the university crowd. But NO we wanted to hold Rock'n'Roll Dances. The Community Centre had a specialised Audio Sound System already installed. All it needed to get things started I said, was my record collection.

It was due I believe, to the effort of my good friend Barry Powell (Ganger to his friends) that he and some of the other club members persuaded the Community Centre Manager, a Mr. Charles Thornton; forever known as 'Charlie', that we got the green light to hold a Rock'Roll Dance evening at the Centre. We were told it had to be held on a Wednesday evening, but as noted previously, that meant we would have to compete with the Ryeford Mill event, thereby reducing our appeal. This event would be a non ticket event, but was to be aimed at the Stonehouse Youth Club members.

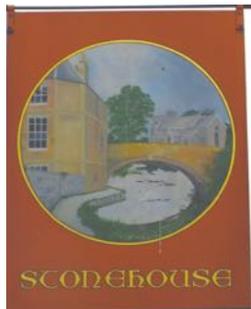
As expected when we held our first session, we were down on numbers. We only had 34 people in attendance, and whilst we enjoyed ourselves, it was a bit like dancing in an aircraft hanger, the atmosphere was lacking. We were told by some that it was a waste of time holding it on a Wednesday because of the competition of the Ryeford Mill event. Barry and I did not agree. We thought we should take them on because we had a better hall, better sound system, better location, we had to be able to give it a go. Well we did. By week two we had doubled our numbers, week three we trebled them, and had to close the doors because we had a full hall. Oh yes, we had a winner.

Due to the ever increasing number of people turning up at the doors of the Community Centre, some rethinking had to be done to limit the numbers attending. A brainwave decision was made to make



The Main Hall of the Stonehouse Community Centre

Where we could Dance the time away . . .



Stonehouse small in size, big in our memories

the Dance Sessions into a members only admission. This required a considerable effort by all concerned to set up a directory of membership. This new club was to be called 'Discs A GoGo'. Membership cards were produced and those persons on the list were entitled to become members. Once this was done, we increased our dance evenings by holding regular Saturday Night sessions, and Bank Holiday evenings. Sometimes we could hold three dances in a week and fill the hall to maximum capacity (about 150 people a session). Boy did we have some fun.

The number of lifelong relationships that were started at that time, and are still in existence, is quite surprising. We all loved it and obviously as you can tell by reading this, I remember it quite well, as I hope this little memoir has shown.

The Day The Music Died: The evening of the 3rd February 1959 will always be remembered by the youth of that time. The atmosphere that Wednesday evening at the Community Centre, was one of disbelief and sorrow, at the news of the plane crash that had killed Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens and Jilles P. Richardson - known as the The Big Bopper. These were our heroes: some of us had seen Buddy and the Crickets at the Colston Hall in Bristol, last year, it seemed like only yesterday, and now they were gone. But not their music, to quote Don Mclean, verse four of his 1970's hit song American Pie:

*"Oh, and there we were all in one place
A generation lost in space
With no time left to start again
So come on Jack be nimble, Jack be quick
Jack flash sat on a candlestick
'Cause fire is the devil's only friend"*

I have deliberately left out many names involved in these events in case of offending anyone. But, remember, whoever you are, it is likely that someone in Stonehouse will always remember you from the "Discs A Go Go" days.

Growing up in these times gave us the opportunity to see many of our heroes appearing live on stage in local cinemas, such as the Gloucester Regal, at Cheltenham, I think it was the Odeon and at Bristol in the Colston Hall, many of the local clubs hired coaches and buses to take us there.

Seeing such stars as, Buddy Holly and The Crickets, Charlie Gracie, Bobby Darren, Duane Eddy and Cliff Richard at Bristol was amazing. The Lonnie Donegan show at Gloucester was cancelled, and we had to put up with the Most Brothers, (one brother,) Mickie, was to become a successful music manager, later in his career). Jerry Lee Lewis was to have appeared in Cheltenham, but his tour was cancelled, so we had 'The Treniers' instead. These Shows consisted of a star act supported by small less popular one's and a comedic compere, such as Des O'Conner keeping the show going. Always fun, noisy and exciting, allowing us to share memories of the night, when we got back to our get togethers. Towards the end of these times, when into our 20's many of the lads had motorcycles, some of us our own cars and we were able to venture further afield.

It was during this later time that Charles left the Community centre, and set up a coffee shop in the former Miss Lord's establishment, in Stonehouse High Street, called *The Trevi Bar*. This venue became the local top spot for many of us to meet, drink coffee and listen to Rock'n'Roll music on the Juke Box.

By 1962, many of us had completed our Apprenticeships and could look for work away from home, some had gone off to University, some had even got married, and we were all setting out of on life's next adventure, but always, we would be able to keep our memories of our teenage years, growing up in and around the Stonehouse area with our Rock'n'Roll loving friends.