

# Childhood memories of games far from the front



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**In the first of a two part series about childhood during the First World War, the Dacorum Heritage Trust presents the reminiscences of Harry Chandler, who lived in Church Street, Hemel Hempstead:**

“I suppose as one gets older, at some time or other one’s mind turns back the clock to what we now consider to be the best times of one’s life.

“Thinking about it, they were probably best because we were not troubled about the necessities of life.

“As a young lad, I spent what I now think was a pleasant, carefree time in old Hemel Hempstead, although it was not appreciated fully at that time.

“During the First World War, I was an infant in a school in Queen Street – now known as Queensway. It was built in 1878 for 180 children.



“We could lean on the railings and watch the Royal Horse Artillery go by with their horse-drawn field guns. We did not fully realise what a tragedy was going on.

Also during the Great War, there was a small army camp a little way up the Redbourn Road beyond Randall [Park](#), with a searchlight and anti-aircraft gun. The sentry would occasionally amuse us children by balancing his bayonet on his chin.

“As we lived nearby, we had two soldiers billeted with us. On a moonlit night, the officer in charge would walk up the road blowing a whistle to call out to all the soldiers to man the gun and searchlight in case a Zeppelin was about. This was the one time we were a bit scared.

“There was a big white house opposite the top of Bury Road, which used to house German prisoners of war. Groups of them were escorted up Redbourn Road to work on local farms. They seemed a fairly happy lot and would sometimes break ranks to chase us kids, all in good fun.

“At about the age of ten, I was transferred to the more ‘grown-up’ school at George Street, under the headmistress Kate Seabrook.

“During this time, life revolved [round](#) the childish activities of the seasons.

“Playing conkers was usually a favourite pastime in the autumn. Come the winter, which always seemed to have its share of snow, the sledges came out.

“In the springtime, it would be whip and tops, and cigarette cards, also marbles, which was mostly played by tipping one’s hand into a hole in the ground, up against a wall, about four feet away.

“Thereafter followed a scramble to count them: even numbers of marbles in the hole belonged to the thrower. If odd, the points belonged to the person who had supplied them. If all the marbles went in, there was a shout of “Gobs” and no argument.

“Another homemade game that I have never heard of anywhere else was what we called Catty On The Mountain, or Catty for short.

“This was generally played in Randall [Park](#). In those days, it seemed to be the recognised thing to carry a pocket knife, so there was no problem obtaining a stick (similar to a cricket stump) which was stuck into the ground.

“Another similar stick was used as a strike and a short one, about six inches long with a slight flat part in the middle, was balanced on the top of the wicket stick, similar to a bail.

“Having picked a ‘batting’ order, the fielders spread out and the ‘batsman’ struck the ball (or Catty) as hard as possible towards the fielders.

This would go quite a distance, turning in the air as it did so. If it could be caught, the batsman was ‘out’, otherwise it was picked up by a fielder and with surprising accuracy, was thrown at the wicket stump, trying to hit it, in which case, that also was ‘out’. While the ball was being thrown at the wicket, the batsman would try to defend his wicket and hopefully strike the Catty while it was in the air.

“Where it came to rest, having been hit or not, he would mentally calculate how many times the length of his strikes stick would go between the Catty and the wicket and state the figure he had in mind. Assuming it was acceptable, the reply was ‘Take’.

“If doubtful, the reply was ‘Measure’, which he would do along the ground with the striker stick.

“If it measured at least the estimated amount, he had the score, if not, he was out.

“The batsman kept totting up his score until he was finally out and then it was the next man’s turn.

> Do you have any memories of childhood games played locally? Email [thegazette@jpress.co.uk](mailto:thegazette@jpress.co.uk) or Dacorum Heritage Trust at [assistantcurator@dacorumheritage.org.uk](mailto:assistantcurator@dacorumheritage.org.uk)

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