

# Harcourt Road

## A Short Story about a Hidden Short Cut



by Theresa Smith

[a story from the 1970s, written in 2024]  
[contributed to Harcourt Road Mobile Museum]

Sometimes, as a small child, venturing out with my brothers and friends was so much fun back in the day. We were always trying to find a way to entertain ourselves during the summer holidays. We could venture to the Ponderosa – we called it the TIP back then. I remember it was a large field, which had a building on one side. Kids living on one side of the field, would often meet in the middle and play cricket against the kids living on the other side – which we claimed it as OUR side. It was always fun watching them because they were all mates anyway.

We were not big enough to play cricket, so we played our own game. We crouched in the long grass and spent our time springing up catching crickets and grasshoppers.

You could guarantee, one of the places we would go to play was in Western Park, which seemed massive at the time and where everyone seemed to meet and know each other. It was such a big thing for us smaller kids and especially this time, as we did not go with any parents.

We all left where we lived, whether it was on Sydney or Wellfield Road and walked along Burns Road. We crossed over Roebuck Road, which was a quiet easy road to cross, then continued until we reached and turned left onto Elliot Road, which had a small shop at the end, on the corner. If we were lucky enough to have a bit of money at the time, we would enter the shop to buy sweets or crisps. We always bought enough to share, then we would continue walking up Crookesmoor Road.

Along the way, we would walk, talk, and play jokes on each other, well before we reached the park.

When we got to the crossroad at Crookesmoor and Crookes Valley Road, crossing was easy. We stood and waited for the traffic lights to stop the traffic, then we would make our way to the other side.

As we got closer to the park, the excitement had become too much for some of the kids and they started to run down the hill. To get into that park, we had to cross the bottom of one, particular road and we knew it was not going to be easy. We had to have our wits

about us to cross this road and get to the other side to reach the entrance and get to the gate. The excitement of going to the park without our parents was enough, but getting there and back, were two missions on their own.

When we arrived at the edge of Harcourt Road, we would always remember, the final warning from our mum, in her strong Jamaican accent, she would shout out to all of us, just before we left “UNNA BETTA WATCH DE ROAD!” or we would get a reminder from one of the older kids to stop and pay attention, and suddenly, the messing around would sharply end.

Standing at the edge of Harcourt Road, if we looked to our right, just after the bend, there was a garage with a small petrol station, with the odd cars going in and out. When you looked a little further along, we could see houses lining the road. Big, tall houses, reaching the sky, all the way up to the top of the hill.

We could see the road got steeper and steeper, then stopped. It looked like it was blocked by trees, and what looked like where the road ended.

At that time, I never knew what was at the top of that road and I never needed to go that far. In my child’s mind, a voice always said, “This road is long!”

The houses on the opposite side were just the same. That side was just a long, road of big, massive houses, all stuck together. Yet, on that side of the road, all the houses looked very dark and somewhat creepy. Those houses didn’t reach the sky, but they looked like, every house, grew trees coming out from their rooftops.

One day, by chance – the risk we took, changed the vision of everything.

Still standing at the bottom of this long road and trying to cross, the fun really started here.

On our left-hand side, was the main road, Crookes Valley Road. It did not have a zebra crossing at the time, so cars, buses and bikes went passed freely without stopping.

On the odd occasion, a car or bike would turn left or right onto Harcourt Road depending on the direction it was going. We would watch it turn onto the road, go passed us, and all the way along, up the steep part of the road, then disappeared at the top of the hill. Once, I saw a car turned right and looked as though it had gone straight into one of the houses. I did not know at the time, there was a side road just on the brow of the hill. I now know this road is called Harcourt Crescent.

We would take our chance and look left again and try to cross what seemed to be, the widest part of the road. If we managed to get to the other side easily, things were good, and we would just run and play in the park.

But, if we got halfway across and a car came, ... we would hover ... not sure whether to run forwards or backwards. We would grab someone, anyone, ... then run for our lives, hiding behind the person we grabbed.

Eventually we'd all cross over. Someone would run to be the first to the top gate so to trap the others out and claim to be the first in the park.

After running down the dusty banking, we would spend most of the day playing within the boundaries of the railings, separating the park from the road. We would dare each other to swing standing up or swing high enough to see over the top bar. We would race to the top of the climbing frames or challenge each other running in the barrel.

For some reason we would always end up near the boating lake. Groups of older kids of different ages hung out and sat in different areas. Some sat near the boats, others near the pub, not old enough to drink, but trying their luck anyway.

Some of us were not old enough to go on the boats, or in the pub, so we just stayed in eyesight of each other.

Being one of the smaller kids, we would take turns running up the grass banking, then slide down on bits of cardboard for hours. This had to be one of the best rides ever, even when you crash landed

at the end. We could be just racing or deliberately bumping into each other and created cheat moves to help us win the race.

We shaped like pencils and roll down the hill, or just Roly Poll-lid, praying that we would stop before landing on the hard gravel path, or crashing into the metal railings below.

As time went on, groups of kids would appear from out of the bushes that ran along the top of the banking and join the others, sitting on the grass, by the pub, or on the benches that were lined along the pond. The full length of the bushes showed no gaps. We often wondered where they came from and how they got there.

We spent most of the day doing our own thing, having our own laughs, and just keeping out of trouble, until the time came for us to leave and go home.

Everyone went home in different directions and on this particular day, some of us smaller ones decided to follow on. This day we were paying attention when the bigger kids left. We watched them walk to the top of the hill and followed them when they climbed through the bushes.

When we realised what we had done, and where we were, we had to run like mad once we got through the bushes and ran between the trees. By then, the speed of our legs matched the speed of our heartbeats. We did not have time to look around, we just frantically kept our eyes on the bigger kids in front and the things we had to pass. It was hard trying to keep up with the older kids, as they jumped over the rickety wall. We could feel the weakness creeping into our legs as we scrambled to climb over it. As they ran across the yard and headed around to the side of the big, dark, scary looking house, a hesitant pause stopped us in our tracks, just for that moment, because we knew, at that time, we were trapped. Trapped between our fear of running towards the scary house and the fear of getting caught.

We followed and continued with tears building up in our eyes, and the fear of being left behind. The bigger kids disappeared, up in to the long, dark, narrow passageway, getting smaller as they reached the end. By the time we got there, we'd seen they'd darted across the front of the house, and headed for the gate that bounced back and forth each time a kid ran through it, making a

loud clanging noise, which then brought attention to the occupiers. When we got to the other side of the yard, we had our own fight with the gate, before we managed to get through and continue running, so there was no time to look behind and see where we had just appeared from, or who was unlucky enough to get caught while fighting to get out of that ricocheting gate.

We would end up coming out between two of the houses. Some kids ran up the road and the others ran down. Finding ourselves halfway up Harcourt Road was the biggest surprise ever and what else made it good was it was easier to cross Harcourt Road there; you had a better view of the road and could cross safely.

This particular day was great, the exit from the park was quicker and the excitement of back-knacking through someone's back yard was fun - but not if you got caught and I'm sure someone did.

If we were not paying attention, as we often did, and did not see the older kids leave, we would have to go the long way out of the park, and this was not good, especially when we were tired after another long day of playing. We had to walk back the length of the pond, past the swings, the barrel, and the roundabout, up the dusty banks or take the two or three sets of winding stairs. Once we reached the swinging gate, you could guarantee, someone was there waiting and trapping everyone in, creating an effortless tussle of pushing and pulling with different cries of "Get off the gate...!"

Eventually, when we got to leave the park, we found ourselves standing at the bottom of Harcourt Road - again.

Some of the kids who took the short cut, were already on the other side of the road. One or two of them had left and gone home ages ago. A few of them were hanging around by the petrol station, sitting on the wall at the corner of the road, or standing by the gate, still waiting for their younger siblings to appear.

Leaving the park and crossing the road, to make our way back home, took on a style of its own. This time the focus was over everyone's right shoulder.

Covered in grass and dirt, carrying bits of sticks, twigs, leaves, and stones.

The mind's vision, brought back the memory of - 'A group of tired, hungry, dusty looking kids, walking sideways like crabs, and looking for that car that was going to turn off Crookes Valley Road, and on to Harcourt Road, creating that last burst of energy, appear from nowhere, making everybody drop their worthless goods and run in all kinds of directions. The younger kids held on to each other and slowly started edging their way back across. Other kids were too tired to pay attention and one or two were too tired to even care.'

I don't ever remember seeing a car ever coming down Harcourt Road, so at this point, we did not really pay much attention to what was happening behind us, plus we were just too tired by then.

If anything were to come that way – we were probably hoping that one of the kids on the other side would have surely let us know.

Eventually we all made our way back across the road, in no orderly fashion and with no respect to our speed or the amount of time we took.

We knew the whole day had been fun. We'd made it back across Harcourt Road and traced our paths all the way back to where we started from, arriving withered and worn, yet all safe and sound, then split to go our separate ways home, to end another memorable day.