

Moggies, Marbles and Ball Bearings.

The name of the game was 'KILLER', nothing to do with cricket or football, nor was it ever included in the Annual Sports Day programme at Chailey. No, this is what you might call a 'wannabe type sport': different from those mass events held on sports day that could inflict pain. These 'wannabe sports' that should be recognised by the Olympic Games Committee but are not, usually derive from children's games and become all the rage, where reputations could be made or destroyed, where boys gained notoriety and influence. Like any other craze they had their own span of popularity and would disappear after a short spell but, during their spectacular rise to fame, they generated great excitement amongst us kids, like being a football fan but something more aesthetic, defined by its own set of skills. Don't ask about the rules, they were probably made up as we went along, or by the kid who could sound most convincing.

I'm talking about marbles, a game we called 'killer'. It sounded exciting and, if you had bulging pockets and trousers down to your knees, it was an image that could strike fear in the heart of your competitors. It was the sign you had become a 'Killer' or an 'Artisan' to be feared. It will become more obvious as you read on. But anyway, marbles came in all colours and sizes, and not all were made of glass. Some were made of different-coloured glazed clay, these were called Moggies, not to be despised, but they were inferior to a marble and, if you did a swap, I think you gave two Moggies to get just one marble, but a marble was twice as good, it was heavier and bigger and could pulverise a Moggie.



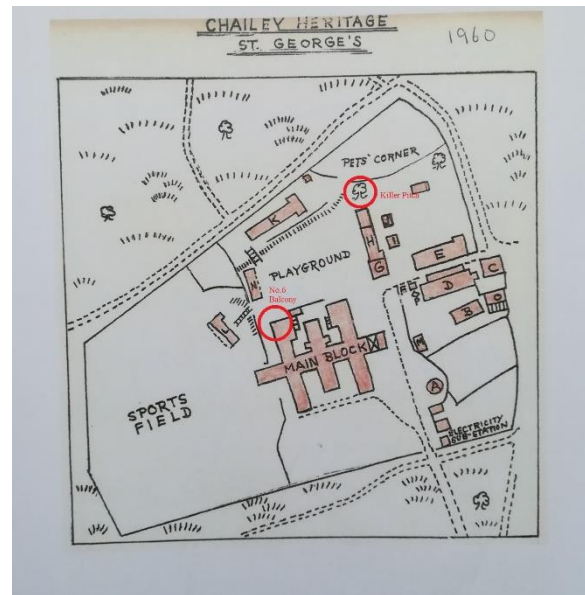
Clay Marbles known as
'Moggies'

Without doubt, glass marbles were things of great beauty, their translucent colours ranged from intricately swirling colours of intermingling blues, greens yellows and reds. Their drawback was, if you were lucky and became a 'Artisan', it meant you had crammed your pockets with marbles. The downside was they weighed so much that you had difficulty keeping your trousers up. You could always tell a champion 'Artisan', he had bulging trousers down to his knees. For obvious reasons you tried to avoid them on the 'Killer Pitch', he was better than you!

Marbles came in two sizes, normal and BIG, an aficionado would count them as objets d'art, simply to be admired, but it was different once on the 'Killer Pitch'. This had been hacked out of bare earth beneath an ancient beech tree on the corner of the playground, where it led down to Pets Corner (circled red on the plan from 'Grandmothers Footsteps' by Verena Hanbury). Its heavy branches were so thick they extended in a wide circle under which nothing grew, making it just right for a 'Killer Pitch'.

If you are a star gazer and are familiar with the star pattern called the 'Plough', then the 'Killer Pitch' looked a bit like that scraped out of the rough soil, only it was in the shape of an imaginary letter Y. At each point of the Y a hollow was made in the ground about the size of a tea cup. There was also one at the junction of the Y, making four dusty hollows that had to be negotiated. The idea was to get round without missing a hole to become a formidable 'Artisan', after that any marble you hit was yours. However, if he was in your way on the way round, you could smash an opponent's marble into the rough. You only got to keep the ones you hit after completing the round. A line was drawn at the starting point about four feet away from the first hole at the bottom of the Y. If you missed the hole, the next wannabe 'Artisan' stepped up to the line and with much glowering and muttering under your breath, he could belt your marble to the moon and back, blocking an early start.

Worse is to come, there was the BIG marble, these were huge, in fact you could say it was a GIANT marble. It was more than twice the size of an ordinary one AND four times bigger than a Moggie. All Moggie players dreaded coming face to face with a BIG marble player. I have seen Moggies smashed to smithereens, disintegrated and returned to clay, even to dust, by a blow from a



Plan showing the Killer Pitch and the Balcony of No. 6 Dormitory.
(Courtesy Verena Hanbury from 'In Grandmother's Footsteps')



Typical marbles used for 'Killer' showing a BIG one.

super BIG marble player. It could be curtains unless your trousers come down to your knees with deep pockets and something in reserve. Empty pockets meant out of the game. So, it really meant that if you wanted to join the revered ranks of ruthless 'Artisans' or even dare I say 'Super Killers' you virtually had to have bulging trousers full of BIG marbles. Two bulging pockets with BIG ones would be even more impressive and would gain the admiring glances from everyone crossing your path.

The way to become a proud owner was to knock a BIG marble competitor out of the game, then his became yours. However, this is a very difficult route to follow. BIG marbles are twice as heavy as normal ones, which just bounce off of them making very little impression, in reverse a BIG marble could knock your small one right off the pitch and into the rough. No, the best way to acquire your first BIG marble to give yourself a fighting chance of becoming a terrifying 'Artisan', was to barter. So, if you had been reasonably lucky and gained a pocketful of normal marbles, you could make them an offer they couldn't refuse by doing a swap for two of your small ones for one BIG one. However, if your trousers were filled with Moggies, then your chances went down. While prices went up to four Moggies for one BIG marble, but it could be worth it and put you on the road to becoming a 'Super Artisan' with baggy trousers down to your knees.

If you think that's no big deal, well, there's just one more 'fly in the ointment' that everyone feared above all else, yet was on everyone's wish list. It was dreaded even by the most feared kid with the biggest bag of big marbles, and that was the ANNIHILATER. It sent shivers of cold sweat down everyone's spine, even the 'Super Artisans' feared it. These Exocet's of the marble world even struck fear and trepidation into the hearts of the champion 'Artisans' with the BIG ones, but it was so rare that I only came across one or two during my whole marbles career, which must have lasted all of three months, but I did actually become an owner. They were deadly, heavy and made of stainless steel, and to have two of these chinking and rolling in your hand as you approached the 'Killer Pitch' inspired you with confidence while striking dread in the heart of the opposition. It was of course the Ball Bearing, a destroyer of reputations, a smasher of hopes, a demolisher of hard-won careers at the top of the marble game, yet it came in at about the same size as a marble but of course being stainless steel the weight of them could flake chips off a BIG one twice its size, or at least send it



Stainless Steel Ball Bearings.
The ultimate marble of
choice on the 'Killer Pitch'

flying into oblivion, and of course it could be disastrous for a Moggie, it had other awesome advantages too. Moggies and Marbles could easily be deflected by the smallest bump in the rough ground, to have this happen as it was about to drop into a winning hole was devastating, but an ANNIHILATOR went dead straight over, under or through anything. Some games banned them, it gave the owner too much advantage, but if you could do a swap and get one, you could obliterate the opposition. I can't remember the exchange rate but it was pretty hefty.

There was yet another route into becoming a feared 'Artisan'. At any point in time there was always other crazes doing the rounds, one was saving Cigarette Cards but you needed to have a respectable collection if you wanted to do a deal. These could be real works of art and highly sought after. It was a bit like stamp collecting but more select. Your chosen subject could be anything from sport, film stars, cars, aeroplanes, trains or planes, and other subjects long forgotten. My favourite was the glossy black and white photos of glamorous film stars of the past, those from the days of silent films were classic. I'm thinking of names like Lillian Gish, Gloria Swanson, Greta Garbo and many others. Their glossy cigarette cards were highly collectable, in my mind definitely works of art in miniature. Then there were the modern-day stars, ones that Anthony Kimmins would have known or worked with, Like Hedy Lamar, Margaret Lockwood, Googie Withers and others, all super stars. Nevertheless, if you were willing to part with some of your beloved treasures, you might be lucky after a bit of astute wheeling and dealing to shake hands on a deal that would make you an instant 'Killer Artisan' but, without the skills of a ruthless marble player, you could soon lose all your hard-won BIG ones to the next kid who dares.

Memories of my 'Killer Pitch' days were not so fraught, as with cricket or football, but still full of savage action that gave me my moments of glory. My chance to fame came when I acquired my first ANNIHILATOR, it was achieved with some very aggressive bargaining, my beloved glossy film star cigarette cards for two Ball Bearings. Word got around. As I approached the 'Killer Pitch' there were dark looks, menacing mutterings and more glowering. It had all the signs of a deadly blood match. The chunky feeling of the rolling weighty stainless-steel orbs in my hand inspired me with confidence as I approached the start line. It would have been ideal to start first, that would have given me the opportunity of getting round in one and becoming a death-dealing 'Artisan', then anyone within range would have been trashed. But several players had gone ahead of me, and the pitch was littered with marbles and

moggies where cruel battles had been fought and lost, and chances missed to sink their translucent spheres into the dusty dip of sanctuary, or had been whacked off course by someone else's BIG one. When that happened, eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation could threaten conflict and fracture the fragile harmony, with raised voices accompanied by much arm waving, and wild accusations of leaning over too close to make a hit. Reputations depended on not losing face.

Any newcomer to the 'Killer Pitch' soon realized this was no finger flicking airy fairy marble game, it was all-out war. A top skilled 'Artisan' with a well-aimed underarm Ball Bearing shot could connect with his opponent's BIG marble like an anti-tank missile. Dreams of glory were destroyed on the 'Killer Pitch'. My brief moment of fame rested solely on my ruthless underarm delivery and deadly accuracy. Having thrashed my way round the pitch with lethal precision, dropping my 'Annihilator' into one hole after another, I was free to make my kills. My swashbuckling skills sustained me as I swashbuckled my way through the field of Moggies and marbles littering the pitch around me. My weighty pockets bulged with winnings, my trousers sagged around my knees. Gathering up my winning marbles one after the other from the decimated pitch brought groans of despair from the mortified losers. But for them there was always hope of cleaning up at the next match, especially if they could swap a few moggies for a couple of Biggies or maybe just a Ball Bearing or two.

It wasn't just marbles that caught the imagination of us kids, there were other events that became all the rage in their moments of glory, but nothing as competitive as the whack 'em and thrash 'em spirit of the 'Killer Pitch'. We have to remember we were living through difficult wartime conditions of rationing and shortages of everyday items. It was not possible to walk into any shop to buy anything at any time. Children's toys were most likely to be handmade. My Christmas present one year was a model aeroplane, bright and shiny made from a biscuit tin by a German prisoner of war, it was from my uncle. The following Christmas it was a model of HMS Ajax, a famous British cruiser that had taken part in the battle of the River Plate. It was in such times as these that us kids at the Heritage, Chailey, made our own fun and our own toys, providing it was not too complex.

Turning back the clock I remember when kites were all the rage, easy to make and great fun, mostly squares or triangles made from crossed sticks and a sheet of newspaper and, through trial and error, a long tail was made with twists of paper tied in string. We had hours of fun flying our kites on the common and would write a secret message on a small piece of paper, make a tear half way through then threading it on to the string, and allow the wind to carry it up to the kite before it fluttered away on the wind to its secret destination. The thing about playing on the common was that the playing field had been commandeered for growing food to help the war effort, but the common was much more fun, we had the bracken to hide in, ditches to explore and a feeling of being part of nature. As you can imagine, with our minds being filled with wartime issues, most of our games were based on wartime events, so we were always shooting each other in war games. But we did do normal things. I have memories of smoking rolled up Shredded Wheat boxes as homemade cigarettes and being sick all over the common, it was fun.



A typical homemade kite that could be seen at Chailey c. 1946.



A recent paper plane made from memory from the ones launched from the balcony of No. 6 Dormitory c. 1946.

We also made paper planes and flew them from the balcony of No. 6 Dormitory. If the wind was light and in the right direction, they would fly across the playground. It all depended how the plane was trimmed to get the right balance and sometimes needed a small piece of plasticine stuck to the nose and a tail of the right length to give it balance. On one occasion a plane made an epic flight across the playground and was carried by the wind onto Chailey North Common. This was a hot topic of debate for days. I have circled the balcony in red on the Verena Hanbury's plan.

The amazing thing about these trips down memory lane is how different life is today. I entered Bath Orthopaedic Hospital at the age of 18 months in 1935 diagnosed with TB of the hip, but known today as osteomyelitis. Mother died the same year, Dad was in the forces, and I had no memory of either of them until Dad came home from military service in 1948. My first sixteen years were institutionalised with my formative years spent at the Heritage, Chailey. These were the years of war, with shortages, but more pressing was the demand

placed on staff. Women were called up or placed into reserved occupations, as well as men, to assist the war effort. Yet within these confines I count myself as being blessed. I had a happy childhood, obviously within the limitations of my disabilities, and of course despite the war and air raids.

My memories are of staff who cared for me with empathy, particularly during my hospitalisation at St Martins. I mention Sister Simpson who took a particular interest in my welfare at the time of my amputation and gave me her own treasured book on British Birds for my birthday, and Nurse Buckley who looked after me during my spell in isolation. I recall during the Battle of Britain all of us kids slept with our mattresses on the floor as a safety measure to protect us from flying glass if the windows were blown in. On these occasions Nurse Trestrale and Nurse Vicarage (Vicky) took charge of us and settled us down with comforting words for the night. I was eight years old.

Looking back my childhood was mainly a fun time, the days were structured by necessity with the best interest of 150 disabled children at its heart, but it never felt to be a burden, notwithstanding the ever-present awareness of a war going on. I have good feelings about my relationship with an empathetic staff. My childhood disablement stretched across the first half of the 20th century. It cannot be equated to today's governance of health, welfare and social regimes, with its accessibility to undreamed of medical science, although people do try to make a comparison. But, how can they? Such systems never existed then and people could be just as caring in those days as today. Our good fortune was blessed by being part of the Heritage experience during its days as a charity-based trust, to be cared for with compassion and with best medical facilities that science could provide, at a time of severe wartime shortages and restrictions, while at the same time being given the chance to live an independent and constructive life, which we might not otherwise have had.

Jack Hayward. Chailey OSA 1939-50.
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