

## *Life returns to normal*

Following a lengthy period of rehabilitation, Dad was able to re-enter the workforce, but his physical limitations meant finding a job that was not too demanding. Dad was interested in all things mechanical and, especially, motor vehicles. He had a technical aptitude, which he may have inherited from both his grandfather, Sidney Richard Page (draughtsman) and father, Sydney Stephen Page (electrical engineer). As a child brought up in straitened circumstances – his father died shortly before he was born (see Appendix 1, *Family lineages*) – and other handicaps such as being afflicted with a ‘squint’, Dad had to hold his own and, therefore, adopted an independent perhaps stubborn attitude at an early age. This translated into a taste for adventure and a keen interest in wanting to know ‘how things worked’.

As an aside, it should be noted that before joining the armed forces, Dad’s full time occupation was a cinema projectionist. This was in the days when film projection equipment was rudimentary and very temperamental. Technical knowledge was needed to operate both the projector and the sound equipment, which was often a gramophone type record containing the soundtrack. Since everything had to be co-ordinated a specific level of technical skill was considered necessary for the job.

An additional aptitude was his handcraft skills and he was well at home fashioning items from all kinds of material. The flat’s coal bunker lid became a makeshift workbench and above the bunker there was a cupboard suitable for storing material, tools, nuts, bolts and paint pots. It was there that Dad made from scratch all my adventure toys such as two wooden swords and a hardboard shield when I pretended to be the proverbial Knight of the Round Table. Dad constructed a toboggan with a welded metal frame and runners that was as solid as a rock. This sledge (sled) replaced the all-wood version that he had previously made. Somehow he was able to find the right material, even though much of it may have ‘fallen off the back of a lorry (truck)’.

If there was a downside to his sense of adventure and handiwork it was the almost catastrophic episode of the diving helmet. Although not all the facts are known, as a teenager Dad manufactured a helmet to be worn under water. Convinced that this invention was perfected, Dad decided to test it by wearing it and immersing himself in the nearby canal. The helmet’s flaws immediately showed themselves and it was only by a quick intervention that he was saved from drowning.

The armed forces provided Dad with the opportunity to become mobile and, indeed, he learned to drive and secure his licence by operating army trucks. Motor cycling, too, was pursued and he became a proficient dispatch rider following the D-day offensive. In the days of simple automotive mechanics, his inquisitive mind and natural aptitude allowed him to understand the workings of cars and appreciate the quality of manufacturing techniques. This knowledge put him in good stead later in life.

It was these attributions that steered him in the direction of becoming a full time chauffeur and, by joining a certain élite group – the Corps of Chauffeurs – he was able to apply himself to a worthwhile job and enjoy the privilege of driving prestige vehicles and maintaining them at the same time.

Dad's first employer in his chauffeur's role was Wavex Engineering. This was a manufacturing company – located in Willoughby Lane, Tottenham, London N17 – makers of the 'Wizard' line of children's tricycles.

## *Pre-school days*

As a baby, then infant, the days, months and years rolled by blissfully. Both parents were fond of the open air and, when the weather permitted, trips to the local parks were always a pleasure. The nearest parkland was Highbury Fields (see Appendix 2 for details) and the wide open grassland was perfect for expending energy. When old enough, running and gambolling was encouraged under watchful eyes. Much enjoyment was derived from simple ball games, or merely just chasing a loose ball. Other toys accompanied me on these excursions, including a stuffed elephant and a stuffed dog, but the little blue ball was my favourite.

Further afield other, larger London parks beckoned; some to be regular venues in later years when I was allowed more freedom on my own. Closest of these was Clissold Park, Stoke Newington, arrived at following a relatively short walk along St. Paul's Road to Highbury Grove and the entire length of Highbury New Park to Green Lanes. The destination was always apparent when the eccentrically designed Stoke Newington 'castle' water pumping station came into view. Excursions to the inner London parks such as Regent's Park, Hyde Park/Kensington Gardens, Green Park and St. James's Park provided new perspectives about the city. There were offshoots to the parkland, and attractions like the London Zoo and The Serpentine pond provided close encounters with animal and bird wildlife.

I was introduced to Hampstead Heath – an even larger expanse of natural parkland – as a baby; Mum allowing me to bask in the sunshine on hot summer days. Later, Hampstead Heath became a popular year-round recreational destination for many reasons. Of all the diversions offered by the Heath, one of the annual major attractions was the August Bank Holiday Fun Fair where a large area was set aside for the numerous roundabouts, rides, vendor stands and the trademark helter-skelter tower. The atmosphere of the fair was unique: from the sights of the sideshows, smells of the roasted chestnuts and popcorn, and the sounds of the barrel-organs and hawking showmen. An evocation of the fair can be heard in the piece of music called "Bank Holiday" written by the Birmingham born composer, Albert Katèlbey. I was enthralled with the attractions, especially in the evening when everywhere was lit up by strings of electric lights or the glow of hissing hurricane lamps. Dad's accurate rifle aiming abilities came in handy at the shooting gallery and, indeed, I still possess one of the prizes – a stuffed Teddy bear named "Jimmy".

Mental recollections as a baby through the toddler years are scant. Those outstanding are the odd views from my pram and visual memories of carefree days following the discovery of mobility that was constantly being put to the test either on the flat roof or in the nearby parks. It seemed that there were many sunny and warm days – perhaps more than in today's world – and sunshine was forever streaming through our top floor flat windows. To keep me content and under Mum's watchful eyes, Dad rigged up a baby swing that suspended from the wooden beam traversing the ceiling of the living room. This arrangement was particularly convenient when Mum was ironing the clothes, and the occasional gentle shove kept the swing moving as I gurgled with great delight.

Christmas was always a fun time and much socialising with friends and family took place. The flat was decorated with colourful swags of crêpe paper; paper chains that were carefully glued together; balloons of different shapes, and stand-up ornaments of popular Christmas characters. Somehow a small Christmas tree was procured and decorated with lots of tinsel strips and the inevitable fairy on the top. Alcoholic beverages were relatively inexpensive at the time and a quick trip to the off licence at the bottom of the road meant there was a supply of sherry, port and beer on hand for visiting guests.

Exchanging presents was almost a ritual and, as I grew older, my expectations remained modest and so the stocking filled with nuts and fruit was accepted as the norm and, only until later boyhood years and money was more readily available, would I receive more meaningful gifts.

After the festivities were over it was time to remove the decorations and store them for next Christmas. This, too, was ritualistic and one privilege I had was to ride on Dad's shoulders and burst all the balloons either with a pin or the end of a lighted cigarette. The pop was somewhat daunting and dust showered everywhere, but it was a nice family affair and still stands out as a vivid memory.

In the years leading up to infants school, life was a constant round of playtime and parent bonding. I gradually got to know some of the neighbouring children of a similar age, and friends and relations who visited with their offspring became a familiar sight. Of the visitors, the most frequent were Aunt Win with her daughter, Linda, and Doris Felstead accompanied with daughter Christine. Of course, the young mothers had much in common and, by and large, the halcyon days of early childhood were happy ones.

The real world also has its share of disappointments. Another of my favourite toys was a box kite and the best place to launch it was on Hampstead Heath's Parliament Hill. Just getting to Hampstead Heath was an adventure for a small boy. There were two principal routes depending on which side of the Heath you wanted to visit. On the Highgate Ponds side, it was travelling by No. 611 trolleybus from Highbury Corner to Highgate Village and walking down West Hill to Merton Road and the park's entrance. Reaching Parliament Hill on the other side was done best by taking the train from Highbury to Hampstead Heath and walking to the park from the station.

One fine day, Dad and I decided to 'go fly a kite'. With kite, flying line and reel we set off to Highbury & Islington railway station. The train ride was always magical. It started as we entered the booking office. This was part of the old 1872 North London Railway station building that was badly damaged by enemy action (see Appendix 2, *The old neighbourhood*). Inside the huge booking office that was lit by gas lamps (later upgraded to fluorescent lights), passengers walked over to the barred opening and requested their tickets from the clerk. In exchange for the fare, the ticket was taken from a rack and placed into a machine that noisily stamped the date and time. We headed along the gloomy corridor to the stairs that led down to the platform.

Since we were travelling to Hampstead Heath we had to make sure that we boarded the train heading for Richmond and not the Watford train as the two routes separated at Camden Town, two stations west of Highbury. There was plenty of traffic to watch, including the goods (freight) trains often pulled by steam

locomotives. The electric passenger trains glided into the station under the watchful eyes of the station staff and everything worked according to plan. The action of the signalmen in the signal box at the end of the central platform dictated the up or down position of the semaphore signals and the operation of the points (switches). We could see the front of the train approaching from Canonbury station and once we determined it was the Richmond train from the destination board and stopped, Dad turned the door handle, opened the door and we would climb in to sit on the cloth covered bench seat that extended the width of the compartment; one on each side.

The train compartment reeked of a variety of smells, mainly stale tobacco smoke and old varnish. Usually the bench seats were comfortable although some had hard springs or even no springing. Luggage could be placed on the string meshed luggage rack above the seats. Extra ventilation was possible by lowering the window pane a number of increments. This was controlled by a stout leather strap pierced at intervals by a number of metal holes that could be engaged on a brass peg.

It was the view out of the window, however, that dominated the train journey. Between Highbury & Islington and Caledonian Road & Barnsbury stations the railway ran in a deep cutting and only by looking up could you see the backs of the houses. After the lines crossed the Caledonian Road bridge the vista opened up to reveal a mix of industrial and residential buildings, including the ornate chimney of the Ebonite company and the Victorian clock tower of the original Metropolitan Cattle Market (“Cally Market”). Then came the network of railway sidings as we passed north of Kings Cross on a viaduct over the original LNWR tracks at what was known as the Copenhagen Tunnels. If you looked north you could see the three tunnels flanked by the castle-like brickwork retaining wall. In the days of steam, it was possible to see trains coming out of the tunnels and belching smoke as they emerged. To the south you could see the skyline of St. Pancras station with the prominent tower of Sir George Gilbert Scott’s 1856 Midland Grand Hotel building. Soon the train would rattle across the Camden Road bridge and stop at Camden Road (formerly Camden Town) station. After leaving Camden Road, the rail lines diverted on long brick viaducts – one heading towards Richmond and the other towards Willesden Junction and, eventually, Watford. Kentish Town West and Gospel Oak were the next stops before we arrived at Hampstead Heath station.

Once outside the station we turned right and followed the pavement (sidewalk) for a short walk towards Parliament Hill, the highest point in North London (319 ft. [97 m] AMSL), with an unobstructed view across the capital. Nearby was the Parliament Hill Lido open-air swimming pool, athletic track and Parliament Hill Fields soccer pitches. It was here later in senior school where many of the sports periods and competitions took place. The high altitude and hillside encouraged fairly substantial wind forces – ideal for kite flying. Dad and I set out the equipment and it wasn’t long before Dad ran a short distance with the box kite finally to release and watch it sail aloft. The reel was a heavy, solid spool and the line played out as the kite gained height. But the wind that day was fickle and would rise and fall in strength so making the kite’s control difficult. Although most of the hill was devoid of trees, there were several copses of tall mature horse chestnuts and willows at the lower levels. At one time the wind decided to abate and so allowed the kite to fall under its own weight – straight into one of the copses. We were never able to release the kite from its imprisonment in the top branches and, indeed, one particular tug of the line caused it to snap and all hope was lost. I was devastated.





*Highbury & Islington Station Forecourt, 1950*



*Highbury & Islington Station Looking East, 1950*



*Dad and Barry, Parliament Hill*



*Barry's Box Kite,  
Parliament Hill*



*Barry, Hampstead Heath Station*





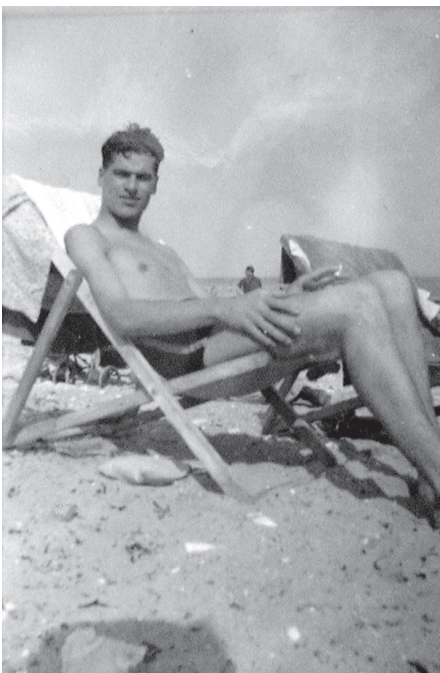
*Mum and Barry, Southend-on-Sea*



*Barry , Southend-on-Sea, 1949*



*Barry and Gran, Southend-on-Sea*



*Dad, Isle of Wight, 1949*



*Barry, Dad and Mum,  
Isle of Wight, 1949*



*Mum, Isle of Wight, 1949*

My sombre mood meant that the return journey didn't enthrall me as it would've done. Dad was dejected, too, with just the reel and line to take home. But to his credit he tried his best to console me and, as a measure of compensation, bought an ice lolly that I consumed hoping to keep my mind off the calamity. Whether or not Dad replaced the stalwart box kite with another I can't remember, but this experience made me think about the true worth of personal possessions and how not to be frivolous where property is concerned.

Apart from the occasional trips to the parks, I anticipated looking forward to the annual summer break. This was in the late 1940s and early 1950s when the budgeted savings were sufficient to fund a one week excursion to the seaside. There were various destinations within relatively easy reach by road or train, such as Bexhill; Bognor Regis; Brighton; Broadstairs; Clacton-on-Sea; Eastbourne; Hastings; Hayling Island; Herne Bay; Margate; Ramsgate; Southend-on-Sea; Worthing, and the Isle of Wight.

An excursion to the Isle of Wight was a significant holiday as we could combine the trip with a visit to Dad's sister, Betty, and her husband Sid Smith, who lived in Havant, Hampshire. The Smiths had three children, Edgar, Martin and Susan, all in and around my age. Also living nearby, in Portchester, Hampshire, was Dad's older brother, Norman (familiarily known as Tony) and his wife, Hilda. Hilda's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jones, lived in retirement down the road. We were always treated royally during these visits and there was usually lots to eat – a familiar cry being, "There's plenty of bread". Later when I was older and allowed to venture forth on my own, regular visits to Uncle Tony were eagerly prepared for.

Because of the restrained holiday budget we usually stayed at a typical seaside boarding house; what became Bed & Breakfasts or B&Bs. All these establishments would be run by the classic landlady, who stood for no nonsense and produced the proverbial greasy English-style breakfast to start the day. Waking up to the telltale frying odours and perhaps burned toast was indicative of the breakfast offering. Sometimes starting with a bowl of corn flakes or cold porridge, the main course being a couple of fried eggs; streaky rashers of bacon ; a few small sausages; slices of fried bread; half a tomato and, if you were lucky, pieces of black pudding. Triangles of toast in varying stages of browning were stacked in the toast rack awaiting a layer of butter and jam or marmalade. Knowing that meals for the rest of the day would be simple, inexpensive ones, we ate as much of the breakfast as possible.

Dad was always careful of how the holiday expenses were spent, but Mum was of the opinion that "We're on holiday" and made sure she enjoyed herself given that for the rest of the year she would be working in her part-time job that was something of a daily grind. The sunny summer days were spent on the beaches of Sandown and Shanklin. Rented deckchairs were characteristic of this pastime and, armed with my Mickey Mouse bucket and spade, sandcastle building with the assistance of Dad, the castle's designer, was an exciting experience. Expertly built structures with walls, towers with gull feather 'flags' and a moat arose near the water's edge where eventually the incoming tide would engulf the creation to our amusement. Beachcombing and observing life in rock pools were other activities, as well as collecting all kinds of seaweed, shells and other flotsam and jetsam.

It should also be remembered that other members of the family didn't miss out on seaside trips. Daily train excursions to Southend-on-Sea during the weekend were usually crowded. Throngs of holidaymakers

waited for the special 'Southend excursion' train on the platform at Highbury & Islington station and sometimes Mum, Grandma and myself went on these cheap day outings. Southend-on-Sea was extremely popular with Londoners, who could relish eating the local fresh winkles, whelks and fish and chips. There was much to amuse visitors, from donkey rides on the beach to a visit to the Kursaal, the huge fun fair with its roundabouts, rides and extensive switchback (roller coaster). Punch and Judy shows; attractions on the famous pier; itinerant photographers with tame parrots or monkeys as incentives to pose, and the ice cream, rock and candy floss stands doing a roaring trade. Night-time, too, had its own charm with the multicoloured strings of lights on the promenade and bingo halls in full swing.

The late 1940s, though, was still a time of acute austerity. As the country started to stand once again on its own feet, the general, and particular the working, population was trying to make ends meet. Certain types of rationing remained in force and a succession of severe winters made life a misery as domestic burning coal was in short supply.

One particularly bad winter meant that 'keeping the home fires burning' was an important issue. It was at a time of desperation and one of the only ways out of the situation was to scavenge. My father and his brother-in-law, Uncle Keith, rose to the challenge and decided to 'raid' the nearby Charrington's coal yard. They were both veteran paratroopers, physically fit and mentally experienced in commando-style tactics. The plan was carried out under cover of darkness. Both men carried a canvas sack and scaled the gates at the entrance to the coal yard driveway on Liverpool Road. Once on Charrington's property, they crept via shadows to the shed where the railway coal wagons were parked and picked up surplus lumps of coal. The lumps were carried away in the canvas sacks and, once again, the men scaled the gates before returning to the flats with their booty. In later years when, once again, it was beneficial to supplement the meagre coal stocks, Dad would find wooden blocks, soaked in creosote, that were discarded at the time the tram tracks were being removed at Highbury Corner.

In the meantime as I was approaching school age, the neighbourhood and its inhabitants were becoming more and more familiar to me and I was learning the names of other tenants and people who lived in the street. Accompanying Mum on local errands meant going in and out of shops, mainly those in the Upper Street and St. Paul's Road arcades. We went as far as the junction of St. Paul's Road and Highbury Grove to shop at Ernest W. Noakes, a traditional butchers with an excellent reputation. Inside, the floors were strewn with sawdust and the fresh meat would be cut to order on the marble countertop. The walls were tiled and spotless and, at the front window, sides of beef and pork, and rabbits and fowl would be hanging on display above marble trays of various meats, sausages and offal. Mr. Noakes would be there dressed in his striped butcher's apron ready to pass the time of day as he filled our order. On our way home as we walked along Highbury Station Road from Highbury Corner we often stopped to chat with Mrs. Cornish who lived in the old railway workers' cottages opposite Laycock Secondary Boys School. I was always intrigued with these three cottages as they seemed to me so ominous with their dark Victorian interior. I could only see a little past Mrs. Cornish's portly body standing in the doorway, but there were massive drapes across the door openings and gilt framed photographs hanging on the hall walls. In retrospect I assume Mrs. Cornish was a widow of a railway employee and lived in a company house. She would be seen standing at her open door ready to make conversation to any likely person wanting to share a yarn or two.



I was now beginning to know my immediate neighbours. Opposite us was the Jacobs family who lived a reclusive lifestyle and were rarely seen. Below them was Mrs. Greenfield, whose daughter and new husband lived opposite and directly below us. Underneath Mrs. Greenfield was Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins and their son, Patrick. Beneath them were the Stantons, one of the roughest families on the estate. On the ground floor lived two elderly spinster sisters. They remained completely in the past and shunned electricity, preferring to light their flat with gaslight. In general, the tenancies didn't change often and at the time the flats were demolished in the 1970s there were many long term tenants still in residence.

