

Chapter 2

Home and community life in the early to mid-1950s

The early 1950s started to witness the beginning of the ‘affluent society’. Rationing was less restrictive and so-called ‘luxury goods’, such as televisions and household appliances, were becoming more available as attractive hire purchase (HP) offers meant young couples were acquiring previously unreachable items on the ‘never-never’ as they set up home. My mother held a dim view of ‘buying on tick’ and adopted the attitude that unless an item could be bought for cash outright there was no reason to buy it at all. My parents did, however, relent on one acquisition and that was a new bedroom suite since their old furniture was at the end of its useful life. The suite, finished in blonde oak, was made under the trade name “Golden Key” and the substantial pieces were: double bed with headboard and footboard; night table; dressing table with a large mirror, and double-width wardrobe. Somehow all the pieces were manhandled up the five floors and assembled in the ‘front room’ where they occupied most of the available space.

Another sign of better times was redecorating the flat with wallpaper instead of the utilitarian distemper. Rolls of inexpensive wallpaper and matching frieze (border) were bought from stores such as Jones Brothers in Holloway Road. At home, preparations would take place as Dad washed down the walls with a solution of “Mangers” sugar soap to give the wallpaper paste a good ‘key’. Mum would take charge in measuring, cutting and passing the lengths of wallpaper over to Dad, who dextrously laid each piece out on the kitchen table and applied a layer of paste using a wide paint brush. Mum had the steady hand and keen eye when installing the lengths of wallpaper – especially the crucial first piece – ensuring the neighbouring patterns matched exactly and the frieze was parallel with the edge of the ceiling. Tricky parts, such as installing over the large, bulbous light switches called for patience and ‘tricks of the trade’. In general, the production line ran smoothly and the final result – after the skirting boards (baseboards), door and window frames were painted – was considered a proud effort and significant improvement to the flat.

The living room furniture changed as time went by and funds were available. At one time it was dominated by the Ferguson radiogram, which was a huge, solid wooden box that contained the standard wireless and single-playing 78 rpm record turntable. There was a built-in loudspeaker and a record cabinet to store the heavy discs. Dad would often buy the latest ‘hit’ and I can recall such favourites as Pat Boone’s “Love Letters in the Sand” and Paul Anka’s “Diana” being played relentlessly. Each time the wireless was turned on, I was fascinated with the ‘warming up’ of the valves (tubes) before the sound came on.

Wall-to-wall carpeting was never considered essential, but the bare floorboards were covered with lino (linoleum) and either area or scatter rugs added for colour and warmth. Mum became proficient at making fireside rugs using a kit called “Redi-cut”. This consisted of a pliable fretwork used for the backing and lengths of coloured wool that were attached to the backing using a special tool. The rugs came in a variety of designs, which were printed on the fretwork to provide a template for the lengths of wool. One particular design that endured for many years displayed a number of different coloured leaves, and Mum would spend

hours during the evenings patiently weaving the lengths of wool into the backing. A couple of easy chairs and a small coffee table completed the room until later when the first television set (TV) and a 'whitewood' china cabinet arrived. The illusion of cosiness meant that the living room came up to expectations and was well used for this purpose. A sprinkling of ornaments – both practical and decorative, including a china black panther nicknamed "Rajah", added to the overall feeling of comfort.

The scullery went through many changes although it was essentially the utility room of the flat. There being no actual built-in bathing facilities, tenants had to resort to using a tin bath often placed in the scullery. Our first tin bath happened to be a modified forty-gallon oil drum supported on bricks with a gas ring placed underneath to heat the water. A rubber hose connected the gas ring with an outlet on the gas stove. Later, a conventional oval shaped tin bath replaced the oil drum, but the water was heated in buckets on top of the gas stove and kettles of hot water were kept in reserve for topping up. The final version was a larger and longer tin bath for extra luxury. When not in use, the bath was hung by one of its end handles to a hook driven into the back wall by the coal bunker, refuse chute and toilet door.

One day I was surprised with the ultimate in convenience. My parents had invested in the purchase of an "Ascot" hot water heater (or geyser). The cylindrical unit was installed over the corner sink in the scullery by one of the two 'jack of all trades' employed by the flat's management. The gas supply had to be brought from the mains to the "Ascot" which meant installing pipes of various lengths and connecting them with elbows. There was a raw metal smell as the pipes were cut to length with a hacksaw and the threads were formed using a die set. A sealing compound was wiped on the threads and the pipes and elbows secured together using a large adjustable spanner (crescent wrench). When the "Ascot" was attached to the wall and the gas and water connections made, it was time to light the pilot light and test the appliance. I was totally amazed when after the reservoir had sufficiently heated, instant hot water started to flow. I think that instant and constant flowing hot water was, for me, the first most significant and revolutionary technological advancement I realised as a child. No more waiting for water to be heated in the kettle on the gas stove as hot water was immediately available to fill the sink for washing up the dishes or poured into the big, brown enamelled bowl for personal ablutions.

As revolutionary as the "Ascot" was, it still relied on a supply of gas as fuel to heat the water. Town gas was available from when the flats were built in 1883 and each apartment was equipped with a gas meter. The meter allowed a certain amount of volume of gas on a pay-for-use basis. Our meter was installed high up on the wall near the front door and contained the money slots, metering device and coin box. I can remember the original meter that took one penny (1d) coins and it was an adventure for me to be hoisted up on Dad's shoulders and insert pennies into the slot. The hardest part was turning the rotating coin dropping device, but a satisfying 'clunk' of the coin as it fell into the box was a reassuring sound. Later, when gas prices increased to the extent that pennies were too cumbersome, new meters were installed that accepted one shilling [bob] (1/-); two shilling [florin] (2/-), and half-crown (2/6d) coins.

Every so often we would be visited by the gas man whose job was to read the gas meter, empty the box, count the coins and make any adjustments. There were several small dials on the metering device and the gas man recorded the figures in a large register. He also carried a leather money pouch. After reading the

meter he would remove the lead seal between the money box and the meter then remove the box. He would then carry the box to the table in the scullery and tip all the coins out to be counted. The pennies would be neatly stacked in piles of twelve (one shilling [1/-] worth) and the total tallied against the amount of gas consumed according to the figures recorded in the register. Any surplus or unused gas was deducted and a cash equivalent was returned to the consumer. He then returned the box to the meter and installed a new lead seal. The gas man was a familiar, friendly figure and usually there was a little banter or even a cup of tea offered during his visit. The job had its fair share of danger, since the gas man carried around a great deal of money on his person, but robberies hardly ever seemed to happen in those days.

There were two other callers on a regular basis – the coalman and the chimney sweep. Solid fuel for domestic burning was delivered by the Charrington's coalman. Charrington's was a large coal merchant firm that had an extensive holdings yard on the north side of the railway property opposite where we lived. All the shunting activity could be clearly seen as wagon loads of various coal products arrived at the siding and were marshalled to certain tipping points for further distribution. A small donkey tractor pushed the wagons along the rails in the coal yard, and turntables allowed the wagons to be directed to short spur sidings. In the early days, all loading and sack filling was done by hand. Later, a new tipping hopper was installed in the yard and lorries (trucks) replaced horsedrawn carts. Charrington's coal office was located in Holloway Road opposite the Highbury Picture Theatre cinema, and adjacent to a cobblestone lane that led to the coal yard. It was standard practice to visit the office and place and pay for an order. We were told approximately when the delivery was to be made and, nearer the time, I would eagerly look out the front window for the coal lorry and watch the coalman heave the one hundredweight (112 lbs, [51 kg]) sack onto his shoulder and prepare himself for the long climb up five floors. Once at the front door he had to skilfully negotiate his way to the coal bunker just behind the scullery. With one heave the entire contents spilled into the bunker and the coalman folded the empty sack. Mum always pitied the coalman having to carry the load up five floors so usually slipped him a couple of bob (two shillings [florin or 2/-]). His coalblack face would produce a wide smile and his eyes would twinkle in response.

Burning coal or any other combustible material in an open hearth had its merits and its downside. The source of heat, despite most of it escaping up the chimney, was essential for basic comfort on long, cold winter days. It was relatively affordable given the rationing aspect, and self-regulating as families would burn as much or as little as dictated by their individual requirements.

'Laying a fire' had to be done properly to make sure there were no false starts. Various methods were used such as placing pieces of kindling as a bottom layer on the cast iron grate followed by sheets of newspaper rolled into rings or knots. Small knobs of coal and then larger pieces were layered on top of the newspaper until a compact heap was made. The newspaper was then ignited by a lit match or 'spill' and allowed to smoulder through to the kindling which would also start to burn. The eventual slow burning of the kindling was sufficient to ignite the small knobs of coal and eventually the entire fire glowed red hot. A quicker method was using the gas poker. This was a hollow rod pierced along the side with a series of holes. It was attached to a rubber hose from the wall mounted gas outlet (originally the gas light over the mantelpiece). The gas was turned on and ignited as it escaped from the holes in the poker, which was then thrust into the pile of coal in the fireplace.



Charrington's Coal Delivery Lorry



Typical Coal Delivery Man



Typical Chimney Sweep

At the end of the day, the fire was allowed to die and the ashes raked through the grate to form a small pile underneath. In the morning, the ashes were scooped up with the coal shovel and placed in newspaper to be discarded down the refuse chute. There were many occasions when tenants in their haste to dispose of the ashes failed to make sure that the remnants were fully extinguished. Consequently we had a refuse chute fire to contend with and the acrid smoke permeated throughout the flats served by that particular chute.

Another impact of open fires was the accumulation of soot in the chimneys. Before anthracite, or 'smokeless fuel' was legislated by the Clean Air Act, most coal for domestic burning had a high carbon content and released combusted and non-combusted particles that dissipated up the chimney with the rising smoke. These particles attached themselves to the inside of the chimney and gradually accumulated to such an extent that smoke couldn't escape and the soot deposit had to be removed. Chimney fires where the non-combusted particles ignited were commonplace and, similar to the refuse chute fires, produced a particularly acrid and dense smoke.

The only way to prevent chimneys plugging and potential fires was to have the chimney 'swept' using the services of a professional chimney sweep. Chimney sweeps have been in existence for centuries. Some employed small boys to climb up the huge wide chimneys of large houses and remove the soot using a hand brush. This could lead to disastrous consequences as boys became trapped in chimneys and died of asphyxiation, and physical deformities plagued their small bodies due to the abnormal working positions. Fortunately this was now a thing of the past and even the chimney sweep's equipment was changing as modern technology in the form of specially designed vacuum devices started to replace the traditional manual methods using the circular broom.

The arrival of the chimney sweep was always a source of excitement. He appeared exactly as one would expect – carrying his circular broom, bundle of extension canes and an old hessian sack; dressed in a grimy suit and with a soot encrusted face peering from under a flat cap. He quickly set to work and cleared the hearth so he could literally ram the circular broom up the chimney flue. With the broom's cane still protruding the next step was to place the catch-all sheet over the cane and seal the complete opening to the chimney flue. At the end of each length of cane was a screw-type fastener. By adding lengths of cane to each other the sweep was able to force the broom up the chimney for as high as necessary. Pushing the canes and occasionally turning the broom was hard work as the accumulated soot became dislodged and fell onto the catch-all sheet. The highlight for me was to race up the stairs to the flat roof and watch for the broom to emerge from the chimney pot with a great flourish and shower of soot. After the broom had cleared the chimney pot, the sweep started to pull the canes and retrieved the broom; again making a circular scrubbing action to remove more soot accumulation. Before the broom could be removed, it was time to collect all the loose soot into the hessian bag. Finally the sweep would clear away as much of the soot dust as possible before being paid and moving on.

In the days before we had television (TV) there were few radio networks to choose from, but soon the pirate radio stations started to appear on the scene and one in particular, Radio Luxembourg, brought its own brand of entertainment. My parents had a small radio resting on the night table next to their bed and it was just right for picking up Radio Luxembourg's signals and listening to the adventures of

“Dan Dare - Pilot of the Future”. Another outer space series was called “Journey into Space”, starring Guy Kingsley Pointer. The sound effects were exceptional and super-realistic and, lying next to the radio in the dim light of the side lamp made it all the more mysterious. The radio signal would wax and wane with the prevailing atmospheric conditions and, there were the occasional commercial messages to contend with, otherwise this was free entertainment and food for the imagination.

At the same time as all this, I was able to listen to limited radio reception through headphones connected to my crystal set (or cat’s whisker). Dad had bought this and the ex-WD headphones at the “Dalston Waste” a large street flea market located on the high pavement of Kingsland Road, Dalston. The crystal set consisted of a number of coils attached to a small piece of printed circuit board. The aerial (antenna) was a length of wire attached at one end to a contact on the board and at the other end to the main gas pipe in the room. By connecting the headphones to a variable condenser, the radio frequency excited by the coil could be heard. My simple set was able to pick up the stronger signals and the headphones allowed for a nonadjustable but reasonable volume level.

This was in the days when radio was still king. Although television was making inroads into ordinary households, in general the large consoles were still expensive to buy and limited reception provided more of a novelty than actual entertainment value. There was an alternative to buying, however, and that was renting TVs from such High Street outlets as “Radio Rentals”. Hire purchase was another popular method of purchasing a TV, but, of course, payments had to be met or repossession was immediate.

My initial exposure to the technology of television was viewing the images on the nine-inch black and white screen of my grandmother’s [Dad’s mother] Bush TV. The Bush TV was a marvel of electronics engineering and packaged in a revolutionary way. Everything was neatly housed in a compact, dark brown Bakelite case. An accessory to enlarge the small image consisted of a convex Plexiglas lens attached to legs and placed in front of the TV screen.

Television programming in the early 1950s was still limited and consisted only of one channel controlled by the BBC. Broadcasting began about four o’clock in the afternoon. Before this, the screen showed a static pattern, known as Test Card C, that technicians used when setting up new TV installations. With this static pattern, brightness; contrast, and alignment could be adjusted for optimum reception. It was very important to position the aerial (antenna) correctly. Most installations used an external aerial, and the familiar ‘X’ or ‘H’ shaped devices were attached to chimney stacks or the highest part of the roof for the best reception.

“The Radio Times” was a tabloid that listed all the radio and, eventually, television programmes. This was a *de rigueur* publication to buy every week not only for the programme listings but also for reading the articles and editorials that were intellectual in nature. The BBC concentrated greatly on cultural and political matters that were quintessentially English. For example, following the “Epilogue”, which was the last programme of the day, the National Anthem was played accompanied with film images of the reigning monarch.

Our first TV, bought in 1956, was a Ferguson tabletop model with a 12-inch black and white screen. Because we were located on the top floor and within the line of sight of the BBC's Alexandra Palace transmission tower, we were able to receive good reception using an indoor aerial. This was a vertical rod placed in the corner of the living room window frame. At that time certain programmes became fixtures, ranging from highbrow debates on "The Brains Trust" to popular documentaries such as "Panorama". Some of the more light-hearted programmes were US imports: two being "Amos 'n' Andy" and "I Love Lucy". News coverage had a heavy agenda at six o'clock and ten o'clock, and popular culture was catered for with the moralistic stories of "Dixon of Dock Green". For the sports-minded audience, Saturday afternoon had "Grandstand" and "Match of the Day" dealing with horse racing, motor racing and professional football (soccer) or cricket matches. Children, too, had "Watch with Mother", the first weekday programme broadcasted as soon as the station went on the air.

However, until the TV programmes improved and the number of channels increased (as with the introduction of ITV and BBC 2), radio entertainment still predominated. Sunday morning was always a good time to listen as this was when many of the household chores were done and the radio provided a source of enjoyment. Typical programmes were the long-running "Billy Cotton Band Show" and "Forces Favourites". Humorous vignettes were "The Goon Show", "Ray's a Laugh" and "Beyond our Ken", and interesting interviews could be heard in "Desert Island Discs". Sunday evenings, too, were filled with quality musical programmes such as "Sing Something Simple", "The Black and White Minstrel Show" and "Palm Court Orchestra".

Tackling the Sunday household chores themselves was a collaborative effort. Mum primarily worked on light duty sweeping and dusting – eventually using an "Electrolux" cylinder type vacuum cleaner – and Dad was more into the floor scrubbing and dirtier jobs such as grate cleaning and window washing. From an early age I was expected to pitch in, and the one permanent chore was to polish all the family's shoes. This was done with me perched on the lavatory seat and working with the various brushes and polishes. Somehow, highly polished shoes was almost a mania, the same as a general smart appearance in clothing, including well creased trousers (pants). Much of this regimen was an offshoot of Dad's army days, but also personal pride had much to do with it and that was instilled by my mother. At home there was a certain amount of scruffiness, but whenever visiting or receiving visitors, neatness was expected; including short and well-combed hair.

Growing up in the early 1950s

Outside the home, the community in the early 1950s was recovering well from the post war depression. For example, fewer items were on ration, and despite the presence of bomb sites there was activity by Islington Borough Council in clearing wasteland and erecting small blocks of council flats such as the one in Liverpool Road on the northwest side of the railway bridge. Later in the decade there would be further improvements and the 'affluent society' started to take hold noticeably as more people bought 'luxury' goods such as motor cars.



“Dalston Waste” Street Market, Kingsland Road, Dalston, 1950s



Bomb Site Children Playing Cricket



Liverpool Road, Islington. Bomb Site Opposite St. Mary Magdalene Chapel of Ease Churchyard, 1949

Bomb sites, however, were evocative playgrounds for young, adventurous and energetic boys. Two of the most extensive and accessible in the neighbourhood of the community were at Highbury Corner and opposite the Chapel of Ease (St. Mary Magdalene Church). These wastelands became instant battlefields for the ragtag groups of lads wanting to let off steam. Usually the group subdivided itself into two teams and then it was left to the imagination. A common practice was to build ‘forts’ out of the rubble strewn around and soon makeshift walls sprouted up to act as defences against the attacking side. Popular armaments at the time were cap pistols and pea shooters, but sometimes things became more interesting (and dangerous) with the introduction of bows and arrows and catapults (slingshots). The detonations of cap guns and exclamations, “Bang. Bang. You’re dead!”, were heard during the course of the battle, which often ended in one team chasing the other from the bomb site.

When Highbury Corner was devastated by the V1 explosion of Tuesday, 27th June, 1944, (see Appendix 3, *Family wartime experiences*) at least three separate bomb sites were created. The point of impact of the flying bomb was at the end of the Compton Terrace gardens with the resulting destruction or partial demolition of several of the Compton Terrace houses; part of the line of shops on the north side of St. Paul’s Road; the “Cock Tavern” and arcade of shops in front of the Highbury & Islington railway station building, and several shops on Upper Street between Highbury Station Road and Hampton Court. Until the redevelopment of Highbury Corner into a gyratory system or roundabout (traffic circle) in 1958, two of the bomb sites – Upper Street and Compton Terrace – were open to all comers, even though there were warning signs of NO TRESPASSING displayed in many locations. These signs gave rise to the local monicker identifying the sites by the neighbourhood kids as “Trespassers”.

“Trespassers” was often the place where ball games were played. Spontaneous or ‘pick-up’ cricket was popular among the neighbourhood boys, and a scratch team of urchins could be seen with improvised wickets of odd bits of wood, a well-worn cricket bat and more often than not a tennis ball that had seen better days. I distinctly remember one hot summer day playing cricket and positioned as the wicket keeper. My neighbour’s son, Billy Bowler, was batting and took an almighty backward swing at the ball. Unfortunately I was too close to him and the bat struck me just above the left eye. The force was sufficient to split open the skin and almost knock me out. The pain and large amount of spilled blood made me howl continuously until such time as somebody alerted my parents. Dad arrived on the scene, picked me up and carried me home still bawling loudly. After some basic first aid with lots of Dettol and an Elastoplast patch, Dad decided to take me to the hospital for further treatment: the nearest being the Royal Northern Hospital in Holloway Road. After being admitted, I was seen by an emergency doctor who proceeded to close the wound with four stitches. Curiously enough I bore this action without flinching even though no anaesthetic was administered, and this made my father immensely proud. I still sport the stitches to this day as they are not of the dissolving type.

The bomb site opposite the Chapel of Ease was much bigger than “Trespassers”. This was where the St. Mary Magdalene C.E. Parochial Primary School, built in 1842, and surrounding streets were badly damaged in air raids during the Second World War. The entire area had been cleared and was awaiting redevelopment, but in the meantime provided a ready made adventure playground for neighbourhood children.

In those days, children were given a greater latitude of freedom. Playing in the streets was acceptable practice; there being little traffic to be of any concern. It was commonplace for children of five years or younger to roam around the neighbourhood, often accompanied by older siblings. Usually their parents knew roughly of their whereabouts, but my mother was insistent on knowing my precise location. “You can go out and play,” she said, “As long as I know where you are.” So from an early age I was allowed my freedom and this later developed into a *wanderlust* as I walked around all parts of London merely for the enjoyment of exploration.

An early type of mobility provided enormous enjoyment and a means of extending my explorations. My parents bought me a set of roller skates – the deluxe model with rubber tyres instead of the plain ball bearing wheels. The fully adjustable design required no special footwear. Roller skating was a popular recreation and also provided an outlet to expend surplus pent up energy. I often ranged far afield on them and I’ve been known to venture for miles beyond my home neighbourhood.

A particular journey that stands out is one to Waterlow Park. The park is named after Alderman (later Sir) Sydney Waterlow, a philanthropist, and is located off Highgate Hill just south of Highgate Village. Skating that distance was no mean feat in itself; although the stretch along Holloway Road to Nag’s Head was the easy part. From Tufnell Park Road onwards the road inclined through Upper Holloway. Highgate Hill started at the Archway Junction and the slope angle increased considerably just past the Whittington Hospital to St. Joseph’s retreat and Highgate Village beyond. Part way up the hill I noticed a side street that provided a steep incline of its own. The daredevil in me decided to brave the consequences and freewheel down the slope. So I adopted a crouched position and sped down the pavement (sidewalk) to finish intact at the end of the road without having to take evasive action (considering that I didn’t have any means of braking). Following that adventure I finally made it to the gates of Waterlow Park. After skating over irregular paving stones, the smooth asphalt paths in the park were a joy to travel on. However, dodging around pedestrians on a winding and sloping path was tricky and one particular stretch proved too much. The only way to brake was to leave the asphalt and head for the pristine lawn alongside. The braking action worked but to the detriment of the manicured grass, and four long, deep ruts indicated my trajectory. This was no time to hang around in case a ‘Parkie’ was nearby so I beat a hasty retreat out of the park and made my way home.

A different way of moving around on wheels was using a trolley (soapbox). Trolleys were coveted and very personal vehicles and each one was unique. Dad made my trolley out of all kinds of scrap material. Essentially, the trolley had a wooden frame chassis; usually a long, reinforced spine and wooden extensions to accept the lateral rear wheel axle. Although not obligatory, a wooden crate– open at the front end – was attached to the spine at the back of the chassis and over the rear axle. A wooden beam at the front carried the front axle and pivoted in the centre for steering. A large bolt with washers and nuts retained the beam to the chassis spine and allowed the swivelling action. Pram wheels of various sizes – usually two large at the back and two small at the front – were attached to the front and rear axles. Sometimes large ball bearings were used as the wheels. Braking was done two ways. Basic models relied on the operator to drag his heels on the ground, but this method drastically reduced the life of plimsolls. Friction brakes on better trolleys consisted of a wooden lever that pivoted on the chassis and either engaged the ground or the rear wheel tyre. Last but not least was the decoration and this is what made each trolley a one-of-a-kind vehicle. The usual item was

the common bottle top: the colourful metal crown that could be hammered directly into the wood of the chassis or retained by a small nail driven through its centre. Patterns of all kinds of shapes and colour combination adorned the chassis and other appropriate parts and were a measure of pride as well as a unique identity.

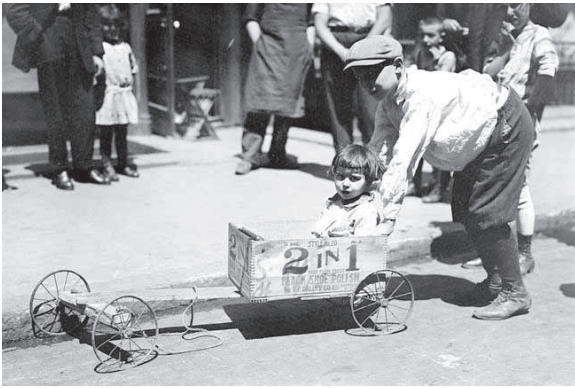
Trolleys were towed to the play area by a length of string attached to each end of the steering beam. My favourite run was the wide expanse of asphalt pavement (sidewalk) on the Highbury Fields side of Highbury Crescent. This was on a slight incline so lent itself to freewheeling for a relatively long distance. Dad would tow the trolley to the top of the incline near Fieldway Crescent, then I would sit on a cushion added to the back of the chassis and place my feet on the steering beam on both sides of the swivel bolt. I then grabbed hold of the towing line to help with the steering action and waited for Dad to gently push the trolley so I could coast downhill and steer with relative ease.

During my childhood I remember that summer was summer and winter was winter. Snow was welcomed by children; even though their parents continued to grumble. I suppose looking through a child's eyes, the 'white stuff' was magical and an open door to a different kind of fun. Inevitably, after the snowfall it was up to the flat roof to frolic around and build that all important snowman. Standard, traditional design, of course. His accessories were whatever was handy – lumps of coal for eyes, nose, smile and buttons; a scarf around his neck and a tea cosy on his head. Dad even relinquished his pipe for Mr. Frosty to suck on (always remember that pipe; it was Dad's favourite – a Captain Black briar). Later, I earned a few bob (shillings) from the neighbours digging out the paths to their entrances. Could only use a small coal shovel, though, but it worked.

Ah, but the best time of all was tobogganing down Parliament Hill on Hampstead Heath. Dad and I would ride on a No. 611 trolleybus to Highgate Village or, alternatively, take the train to Hampstead Heath station. I pulled my trusty toboggan behind me in anticipation of the thrill of the descent. Dad made a couple of sledges (sleds) for me. The first was all wood in construction and painted silver. Somehow he managed to obtain the materials from a building site. The thing was rock-solid and performed well.

However, the next generation was even better. In fact it was awesome. Dad was labouring in a better construction job - this time steelfixing. So he could find a few bits of discarded rebar and have a welder mate create the toboggan's main frame and runners which made all the difference between the two models. A wooden platform was added to these formidable runners, and a substantial towrope attached to the front of the frame. The toboggan was then painted fire engine red (the same paint we used for the scullery floor – a yearly ritual). It was a like a Rolls-Royce!

One day, hurtling down the slope at breakneck speed (or so it appeared), a small boy on a wooden sledge crossed into my path, and one of those formidable steel runners literally scythed through the flimsy wood, smashing it to smithereens, and catapulting both of us into the snow. Surveying the damage, not only was the wooden sledge wrecked, but the impact was sufficient to break one of the steel runner's welds. The other kid was howling his head off and I was thoroughly brassed off, so I left him to his fate and dejectedly dragged my wounded toboggan back to the train station and home.



Typical Trolley or Soapbox



Typical Rag-and-Bone Man



Walls Ice Cream Man with Tricycle



Tonibell Ice Cream Van



Liverpool Buildings Street Party in the 'Bottom Avenue' – Queen Elizabeth IInd Coronation, 1953

Playing outdoors also promoted mixing with other neighbourhood kids of a similar age whether or not they were from the same block of flats. Relationships developed by way of mutual interest – as diverse as sport; for example, supporting a particular professional soccer team – to childhood pastimes such as playing marbles or collecting cigarette picture cards. There was little turnover in tenancies so we all grew up together over several years and often forged strong friendships right into teenage and adolescence. We attended the same school so contact was maintained even when not playing together at home. Some of my earliest playmates were: John Godfrey (R.I.P., 2014), Albert Smith, Terrence (Terry) Eyles and Terrence (Terry) Corcoran. Older boys that I associated with were William (Billy) Bowler, John (Johnny) Lock and Patrick (Pat) Hawkins. There was a sprinkling of girls, too, such as Jeanette Eyles and Christine Spencer. Children from Lewis Buildings sometimes ventured into Liverpool Buildings territory and vice versa. Two lads from Lewis Buildings that I frequented with were Peter Shepherd and Christopher (Chris) Webb.

Life through my eyes seemed somehow static, almost as if time had stood still. Very little appeared to change visually. People dressed the same, day in and day out. Even the weather was seasonable and largely predictable. Looking down Highbury Station Road from the flats one could see the short terrace of ‘two up and two down’ cottages leading to the opening to the central yard of Laycock Mansions. Then the caretaker’s cottage and playground wall of Laycock Senior Boys School up to the collection of small industries that lined both sides of Swan Yard. At the bend in the road stood the saveloy and peas pudding shop and off-licence. On the opposite side of the road – with the exception of the railway workers’ cottages – was the unbroken length of the brick wall that bordered the railway property.

The road, itself, was a microcosm. On a typical foggy night, the gas lights and damp pavements (sidewalks) created a mysteriously haunting environment; made even moreso by the occasional melancholic hooting of tugs on the river. The muffled traffic noise and periodic passing of trains added to the surrealism of the scene, amplified by the omnipresent smell of the swirling fog.

Sunday morning’s tranquillity would be interrupted by the strident blare of bugles as a procession of the Boys Brigade marched down Liverpool Road to the Chapel of Ease for church parade. Soon after, the neighbourhood was visited by the rag-and-bone man, announcing himself with his unique street cry – “Any old rags or lumbah!” The dishevelled individual, usually dressed in an unkempt raincoat and wearing a dirty flat cap, pushed a costermonger’s barrow – the wheel’s metal rim of which grated along the cobbles in the gutter – and progressed slowly down the road. Occasionally he would look up at the flats in case anyone threw him an object that could be recycled. Around noon and sometimes in the afternoon you could hear the unmistakable sound of the ice cream man on his tricycle and tinkling bell. This would change a few years later when the “Tonibell” van’s distinctive musical jingle attracted hordes of children eager to buy ices and lollies as dictated by the amount of pocket money (allowance) given to them by their parents. On weekend evenings the tenants were serenaded by a choir and small brass band of the local Salvation Army Corps hoping to drum up funds for their cause.

The community was a vibrant neighbourhood and the streets and estates echoed with children’s laughter and boisterous shouting as they took part in many of the street games such as hopscotch, tin-tan-tommy and knock-down-ginger. Impromptu soccer games with piles of sweaters acting as goal posts sprang up on the

spur of the moment and, of course, chase games of tag, skipping and whirling around the lamp post on a length of rope were common activities.

Circuses intrigued me, and the Harringay Arena, Tottenham, was well known as a venue for circuses. It was home to Tom Arnold's annual Harringay Circus for ten seasons from Christmas 1947 to Christmas 1957. Other events, however, included a handful of western cowboy shows in the Fifties, including the 1952 "Texas Western Spectacle", starring the famous cowboy singer/actor Tex Ritter, and I specifically remember Mum taking me to this show. One of the outstanding acts was the re-enactment of an Indian attack on a wagon train. The wagon train would be formed into a defensive circle and all kinds of gunfire took place during the mock attack. Expert horsemanship and stunt work made the act even more compelling and life-like. Supporting sideshows such as acrobatics; sharpshooting; trained animal routines, and the inevitable clown antics created indelible images that remain in my mind today.

The street party, which is very much a part of London's cultural fabric, seemed to magically happen. Once the word spread around, neighbours got together and pooled their resources mainly with the children as the focus. Flags and strings of bunting, decorations of all kinds including plaques and Royal portraits materialised and the street became festooned with colourful, waving pennants. On the day marking the actual special occasion the street was blocked off to traffic and residents manoeuvred trestle tables into position along the centre of the road followed by chairs of all sorts and sizes. A crew made sure the tables were covered and there were adequate plates and cutlery. Children, many in fancy dress and with at least a funny hat, took their places at the tables and eagerly awaited the treats of sandwiches and jelly and ice cream. Somewhere came the sounds of a honky-tonk piano and there followed a succession of well known sing-along songs as the adults entered the spirit of the 'knees up' party.

In June 1953, several street parties took place in the community to recognise the coronation of Queen Elizabeth IInd. The most immediate one for me was held in the 'bottom avenue' of Liverpool Buildings. It seemed that the entire block of flats had pushed the boat out to celebrate the occasion. Apart from the huge amount of food and drink, the children were entertained by a magician and they all received a commemorative china cup and saucer. It was a wonderful experience at a time when the nation was recovering from the war and everyone was trying to improve their lot.

Primary schooldays

Although September, 1950, was two months before my fifth birthday, I was enrolled in the Infants section of the Laycock Infants and Junior Mixed School. Essentially a kindergarten environment, the Infants experience proved to be a useful introduction into the State education system. And I was ready for it. For reasons unknown, I was enthusiastic in the activities and paid no attention to the fact that I was separated from my mother for several hours during the day.

Laycock Infants was the closest school of its kind to where I lived, so it was no bother walking through the 'bottom avenue' of the flats to Laycock Street and further down the road to the school building. A typical scene would be a collection of mothers congregating at the entrance gate either shepherding their children



Barry at 5-1/2, 1951



Barry at 6-1/2, 1952



Barry at 7-1/2, 1953



Barry at 8-1/2, 1954



Barry at 9-1/2, 1955



Barry at 10-1/2, 1956

Laycock Primary School (Infants and Junior Mixed) Photographs – 1951 to 1956

inside the grounds or welcoming them as they were released from the classrooms. Invariably the noise would be significant with excited children still with boundless energy clamouring for attention, and mothers of all stripes either gossiping amongst themselves or trying to round up their charges. Then it was the return walk home and the inevitable questions along the lines of, “What did you do t’day, Dearie?”

Curiously enough I can recall the first day at Infants fairly clearly, although the rest of the school year up until I entered Class 1 of the Junior Mixed grade remains hazy. The Infants was a good way for the young children to meet each other and share in mutual activities. Being co-educational, it was also beneficial for both sexes to mingle and feel comfortable in a classroom atmosphere. I really don’t recall any bad incidents of bullying or ‘kicking over the traces’ and we seemed to mix very well. It helped, of course, that several familiar faces were also there as other neighbourhood children of a similar age that I recognised were part of the group. I don’t recall the names of the Infants teachers, but they certainly had a great deal of patience and were able to provide rambunctious children with all kinds of things to do, which ranged from straight play-time to an introduction to the standard three ‘R’s – reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic. Learning the alphabet with large cutout letters comes to mind.

The three storey school building was a solid structure and built in 1915 to London board school standard plans. The Infants section occupied the ground floor along with the staff common room and kitchen. There was also an inside gymnasium-cum-assembly room on all floors in the centre of the H-shaped building. The entire infrastructure was presided over by the no-nonsense Headmaster, Mr. Thomas H. Cox, a Somerset man with a world of experience both in the military and in education. It was later in the Juniors when I learned first hand of “Coxy’s” stern authoritarian influence on the school’s administration and, in the days of approved corporal punishment, his word was law both to the children and the teachers. We quickly understood the meaning of obedience, and any deviations were dealt with appropriate punishment.

Soon the first full year at school would slide by and the gradual introduction to subjects such as the alphabet and basic mathematics provided a solid foundation to the more advanced practice sessions that included reading and penmanship using methods unchanged for decades. In the days before computers, learning by rote was the tried and true way. And nobody thought any different. Consequently, when changing status from Infants to Junior, much was dependent on memorising rules and principles – chief among them being the multiplication tables (times tables), a set of printed cards listing the combination of figures in terms of their interrelationships when being multiplied: e.g., seven multiplied by eight equals fifty-six.

As the Junior school years advanced, children were gradually introduced to new subjects, and the standard three ‘R’s became more progressive. When learning writing skills, emphasis was put on penmanship and, once the alphabet was mastered, handwriting exercises using pencils with rubbers (erasers) and the straight-nib pen and ink became standard curriculum practice. The ink, itself, was supplied as a powder, and it was the class monitor’s job to add water to a measure of powder in a glass bottle. The resultant dark blue, liquid ink was then distributed to the ceramic ink wells in every desk. This was considered an important job and the class monitor was usually a pupil (student) held in high esteem. Straight-nib pens were essentially wooden holders that accepted the separate metal nib for dipping in the ink. There was a standard handwriting style to copy in the lined exercise books, and repeating ‘lines’ was an efficient way to remember and

improve handwriting. We learned quickly not to press too hard when writing and ‘cross’ the nib point. Pencils, of course, were popular and, using a pencil sharpener – either the small device held between thumb and forefinger, or the desk mounted machine with a handle – meant no messy ink and greater flexibility. Another dimension was that pencils came with different coloured leads. A collection of pencils, together with a small six-inch wooden ruler; a set of compasses for drawing circles; a pencil sharpener, and a separate rubber were the usual contents of the pencil case, a wooden box with an upper and lower compartment. The upper compartment was secured by a sliding lid with a semicircular shape at one end that locked into a mating groove. After sliding out so far, the upper compartment could be swivelled on a screw set in the opposite end of the tray to the semicircular groove to reveal the bottom compartment.

My academic prowess in Junior school wasn’t exactly stellar. In fact the opposite as it was plain to see from my course marks and consequent class position. A staff of strict teachers didn’t help, either, and the likes of Messrs. Green, Bell and Pulman, plus the brooding Miss Simpson and tyrannical Headmaster Cox made for some uncomfortable hours in the classroom. As mentioned previously, corporal punishment was considered a fact of life as will be described later.

School reports revealed much of my education standard in the following statutory subjects: English (reading, spelling, grammar, composition); Arithmetic; History; Geography; Science (hygiene, nature study); Art; Writing; Handwork, and Religious Knowledge.

It was obvious that improvements were necessary as mentioned in the end of term report in 1954 by Miss M.A. Simpson of Class 5 – “Barry is a very capable boy, but is spoiling his chances by laziness” – and emphasised by my position in the class as No. 36 out of 40. The next existing end of term report was for 1956 and although some progress had been made as now I was a pupil in Class 1 – the highest in the Junior school – the teacher, Miss J.M.M. Scott, noted the following – “Barry must work harder. He is improving but much depends on the next term’s work”. Positioning was marginally better at No. 31 out of 40. The last year, however, took a dive and the end of term report for 1957 included a scathing notation by Mr. R. Pulman of Class 1 – “Shows little interest in anything except art. He has no self-discipline and unless he acquires it he will not do well in future”. My position had slipped to No. 33 out of 39. And this state of affairs was leading up to the all important ‘Eleven-plus’ examination, which determined the type of Senior school all pupils would attend; whether Grammar, Central or Secondary Modern.

Events at Junior school (1953 to 1957)

Junior school was a time when learning could be either fun or boring. It was also a time when individual personalities matured and many of the daily experiences were, indeed, results of the ‘school of hard knocks’. Despite their domineering attitude, to the teachers’ credit they had to deal with children mainly from working class families. There were children from broken homes; others that knew no discipline, and some that tried to bend every rule. Offences were chastised in order of seriousness, and insubordination was meted out harshly both as a punishment and as a deterrent. Minor misdemeanours meant writing ‘lines’ or detention (staying behind after regular school hours, often standing and facing a corner of the assembly hall for a determined period of time). For grave offences the regular punishment was being ‘caned’



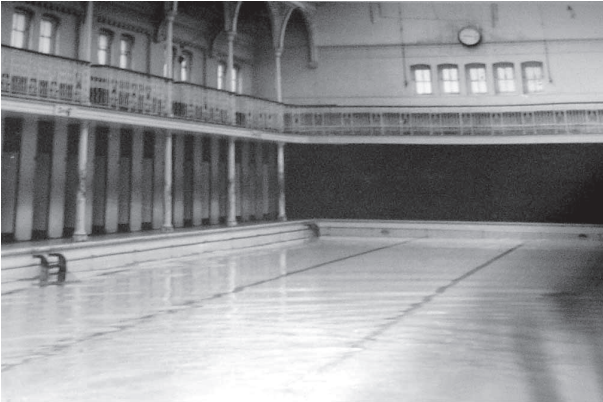
Laycock Primary School Staff Group Photograph, 1950s
Back Row: Rita Gilmore, Unknown, Mr. Green, Mr. Bell.
Front Row: Miss Harlow, Miss Ward, Mr. T.H. Cox (Headmaster),
Miss Gyselman, Miss Francis.



Schoolboys Playing Conkers



Greenman Street, Islington, Peabody Estate
Opposite the "Tibby Baths"



Interior of the "Tibby Baths"

usually by the Headmaster; although senior masters could also inflict the penalty. The instrument used was a length of rattan cane and the punishment was a number of striking blows either to the open hand palm or the buttocks. Depending on the severity of the offence, four or six blows ('four-' or 'six of the best') were administered. Apart from the physical 'smarting' pain, the trepidation of confronting the Headmaster plus the element of shame once the news spread through the school had significant psychological effects.

I vaguely remember incidents of minor punishments such as writing 'lines' or the occasional detention. However, the one and only 'caning' that I received from Headmaster Cox remains a vivid memory. The event started innocently enough, but the consequences were dire. I was probably eight years old and it was at the time when we were being taught English by Miss Simpson, a frumpish, middle-aged teacher. I sat next to another boy, Jimmy Rooke, and he goaded me to write in my text book the following phrase: MISS SIMPSON IS AN OLD SOW. Not wanting to bow out of this challenge, I promptly scribbled the defamatory remark in large letters on the page we were working from. It so happened that I was called up to the front of the class together with the text book. Miss Simpson took it upon herself to flip through the text book and, of course, came across the offending scribble. I think she was mortified when discovering this heinous insult, and I certainly was drained of all strength as total embarrassment enveloped me. She demanded if I was guilty in writing the phrase and I couldn't deny it. So I was marched down to the Head's office with the incriminating evidence. The shock of discovery and the fear of impending punishment – which was obviously going to be a caning – did nothing to alleviate the situation.

Mr. Cox was nonplussed despite my blubbering explanation that I was egged on by Jimmy Rooke. There was no choice but to administer the appropriate punishment and that was 'four of the best' on the open hand. Caning was something I think that 'Coxy' relished. He was well experienced and his temperament made sure that the strokes were inflicted with maximum force. After this punishment I was sent back to the classroom and endured further humiliation as my classmates saw me enter the room with a reddened face that was streaked with tears. I don't recall if Jimmy Rooke was ever implicated as an associate to the incident, but the buzz certainly travelled quickly and was heard by one of my friends, Norman Ridges.

I was now at an age that after school it was expected that I should meet my mother at the bus stop in Upper Street as she returned from her part time job. This day was no exception and Norman and I walked to the bus stop. I guess he accompanied me because I was still feeling low. Mum arrived as usual and, as we started on our way home, Norman said impulsively that I had been caned at school. Mother was flabbergasted at this news and it didn't bode well for me either. So I was marched off home to be given a real dressing down by my parents. Norman probably didn't realise the impact of his remarks, but at least it didn't spoil our friendship.

I was involved in another incident that involved punishment – this time with far more reaching implications. From time to time, a small group of pupils would perform a short play or a series of vignettes in front of the assembled school. The chosen play was called "The Scarecrow" and I acted in a minor role. The production involved not just the child actors, but also set decorators and builders and off stage assistants. On the day of the production, the set was built and some of it consisted of wooden balance beams and at least two revolving blackboards. Costumes were made up of various items and, since my role was that of a

schoolboy, my clothes were readily available and consisted of a jacket, short trousers, scarf, cap and Wellington boots. The setting of the play took place during winter, so to add some ‘snow’ authenticity I decided to wipe my cap across the chalked writing on one of the revolving blackboards. The play went on and shortly after making my entrance I spoke my one and only line, “Do you sleep under hedges and hayricks?” By and large the play was well received. However, at the following morning’s assembly, Headmaster Cox stood glowering over the ranks of pupils and demanded to know who had erased the writing on the blackboard. Apparently this was very important information. With the caning incident etched in my mind, I wasn’t prepared for a repeat experience so I kept quiet. The upshot was that the entire school was kept behind in detention for one hour after classes. A small price to pay and nobody ever discovered the culprit.

Junior school provided opportunities beyond the regular curriculum. Sports were encouraged and mainly confined to the school gymnasium and playground (schoolyard). Boys were put through their paces in gymnastics by using balance beams and the wooden horse and springboard. Stretches, press-ups and other aerobic routines also formed part of the physical exercises performed in the gym. I think indoor team sports such as handball (netball for girls) took place as the gym’s wooden floor was marked out with the appropriate lines applicable to the sport. During the warmer months, cricket was played and special spring-loaded stumps were placed on the asphalt playground. Football (soccer) was also well participated in and we used to go to the Highbury Fields cinder pitches to play.

One of my favourite physical pastimes was swimming. This activity, too, was encouraged by the education authorities and the Laycock pupils used the swimming baths located in Greenman Street just off Essex Road near Tibberton Square. Tibberton Square gave the baths its nickname: “Tibby Baths” or just plainly “The Tib”. The building also contained public baths, but I don’t think it housed a public laundry. On swimming days it was usual to see ‘crocodiles’ of schoolchildren clutching their swimming costumes and a rolled up towel, chaperoned by several teachers, making their way from the school to the swimming baths. For us it was a relatively long walk through Canonbury to New North Road, Essex Road and Greenman Street. Opposite the baths was the Peabody Trust estate of working class tenement flats. At the bottom of one of the blocks was Ada’s sweet shop where after the swimming period excited boys and girls eagerly queued up at the shop’s open window to buy a selection of confectionery. The favourite of all was Ada’s home made treacle toffee. For a threepenny bit (3d), you could buy a small bagful of this super-sweet toffee – a sort of brickle – that took forever to dissolve in one’s mouth.

I was no stranger to swimming as my mother considered it very important to know how to swim. Even before I went to school, Mum would teach me the basic strokes. Her method was to place a kitchen chair in the middle of the living room and then put a cushion on the seat. I then laid on my tummy and practiced the stroke action as if I were actually in the water. However, I only mastered the breast and side strokes as I found it difficult (and tiring) to co-ordinate the different arm and foot actions of the crawl.

Health and hygiene were taken seriously at both the Infants and Junior schools. Periodically the school nurse, nicknamed “Nitty Nora”, would visit and check the children’s general health, including recording their height and weighing them. Also she would dip a metal comb in a disinfectant liquid and proceed to run the comb through your hair searching for head lice. A daily routine was the distribution of milk in 1/3 pint

bottles to all pupils. The bottles were sealed with silver aluminium (aluminum) caps, and a game we played with the caps was called ‘helicopters’. By holding the rim of the cap with the forefinger and middle finger, a flip action caused the cap to spin and fly away for some distance; often hovering for a second or two. Various modifications were made to try and increase the distance. For example, the cap surfaces were smoothed and the rim enlarged to provide an improved launching action. Impromptu competitions sprung up and children brought other caps (gold or silver with red stripes) from home.

At playtime (recess) and just before and after school hours the playground was always a hive of activity. Children running, gambolling, skipping and friendly wrestling were ever present. When in season, spontaneous games of ‘conkers’ sprung up. The object of the exercise was for one contestant to suspend his conker while the opponent stood to one side and strike his own conker in a downward movement to try and break the other one on impact. This action was done in turns until one of the conkers (or sometimes both) was completely broken. The victorious conker player had bragging rights; especially if the original conker was able to break several others as determined by the terminology: ‘one-er’; ‘two-er’; ‘three-er’; ‘four-er’, etc. There was a specific ritual of preparing the horse chestnut seed (conker) and the only proper tool to use for making the hole in the conker was a meat skewer. My father used to drill a hole to prevent the skin from cracking and becoming a weak spot. The means of suspending the conker varied. For example, it could be a length of hairy Post Office string knotted at one end. The preferred method, however, was using a knotted shoelace. Gathering conkers was also an essential part of the game, and knowing the location of trees that produced the biggest and best seeds was important. Nearby parks such as Highbury Fields were prime hunting grounds and once all the fallen seeds had been harvested, those still on the trees were ‘encouraged’ to fall by throwing a sturdy piece of wood at the clusters of spiky, green seed covers. My favourite horse chestnut tree was in the front garden of a deserted house where Orlestone Road and Furlong Road met. The tree was also easy to climb and became a familiar focal point when hiding during a game of cowboys and Indians or similar hide-and-seek escapades.

One particular incident that happened in the playground turned out to be an unfortunate one. The school day had ended and the children were heading home through the gate next to the caretaker’s house. As I was walking across the playground I noticed a boy, who I recognised as Terry Corcoran, in a crouched position and tying up a shoelace. I made a spontaneous decision to run up behind him and leapfrog over his shoulders. The action seemed to be successful although he did collapse under my weight due to the element of surprise. I looked back to see him writhing on the ground but took no notice and, believing that he was just play acting, continued walking home. It wasn’t until later that my parents were informed that I had accidentally fractured one of Terry’s legs.

Terry, who was a year older than me, also lived in Liverpool Buildings – the block that overlooked Liverpool Road. My mother and I went to visit the Corcorans to apologise for the injury and, knowing that Terry would be out of school for some weeks, I was told to bring along one of my “Eagle” Annuals so that Terry had something interesting – and of a schoolboy nature – to read. Time passed and I was expecting my book to be returned. However, Mum informed me that by leaving the book with Terry I had, in fact, given him a token of consolation and not to expect its return. This was devastating to me as the Annual was a prized possession. But I learned a lesson in responsibility and humility from the fallout of this incident.

The “Eagle” was one of a number of schoolboy comic publications eagerly scooped up every week from the newsagent shop or newsstand. Before graduating to the “Eagle”, which was targeted at boys of nine years and up, I read more basic comics such as “Beano” and “Dandy”. I really enjoyed reading and soon I was buying a succession of comics, including “Comet”; the short-lived “Rocket”; “Eagle”; “Hotspur”, and finishing up in my early teenage with “Express Weekly”. Each comic had a principal character whose adventures were illustrated on the front and back pages in full colour. For example, “Eagle” had Dan Dare, and “Express Weekly” had Wulf the Briton. The drawings were exceptionally well done and made the scenes almost three-dimensional. Inside there were other comic strips, pages of general knowledge and also correspondence, and the middle pages of the “Eagle” were devoted to a double-page spread showing cutaway drawings of cars, aircraft, trains and other technical subjects – even a section view of the famous spiral tunnels constructed in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Eventually I realised that I had outgrown schoolboy comics following graduation to Senior school and, from then on, I was expected to concentrate more on the classics.

The latter part of Junior school, particularly at ages ten and eleven, was when pupils were considered mature enough to be accompanied by teachers on trips that fulfilled historic, cultural and recreational interests. One favourite destination was the Geffrye Museum in Hoxton, East London. This museum preserved a series of English domestic interiors dating from 1600 in separate rooms; including fine examples of furniture created by the masters, Chippendale and Hepplewhite. We were shown many of the woodworking styles of the time, such as linenfold panelling, and changes made to interior design over a number of centuries. The museum itself was contained within the former almshouses of the Ironmongers Company and had a wide, landscaped garden laid out between the building and the main Kingsland Road. There were many London plane trees in the garden and the children ate their boxed lunches under the leafy canopies.

Recreational trips, or ‘school journeys’, were visits to seaside resorts usually of a one week duration. The cost of these trips, however, was prohibitively expensive to my parents so I never went on any to experience the advantages and pitfalls of such a holiday. The Isle of Wight was often visited by the school party and separate dormitories were arranged for the boys and girls. Outdoor activity was promoted, and days on the beach included games which encouraged camaraderie and evening social interaction helped character development in a non academic environment.

I was now at an age when the maturing process became evident and, typical of prepubescent boys, I became aware of a natural attraction between the sexes. Up until then, little girls occupied a world of their own complete with all the ‘girlie’ things that didn’t interest me. I was more inclined to pursue the rough-and-tumble activities associated with rowdy, young boys such as tree climbing and the make-believe adventures of cowboys and Indians; cops and robbers, and pirates of the Caribbean. Young girls with their dolls, skipping ropes and frilly dresses were often scorned by the neighbourhood boys. And yet, there was a strange bonding and even a primitive recognition of *la différence*.

At age ten, a gradual sense of curiosity made me view girls in a new light. Perhaps, as the girls started to blossom, I began to understand the meaning of visual attraction. One or two girls in the class outshone the

others simply by becoming ‘young ladies’; that is, by developing more quickly than their peers both in terms of appearance and intellect. They paid more attention to their looks, which fascinated me. One girl in particular became the object of affection and it seemed that I was experiencing my first “crush”. Lively, but with an air of mystery, Suzanne Lagoutte made my head turn every time she walked by. I was struck by her immaculate hair, which was long and silky, cascading straight down over her shoulders or sometimes sported as a well groomed pony tail. Her facial features were becoming more attractive and her mannerisms sophisticated. I discovered she lived in privileged surroundings – one of the middle class homes in Compton Terrace – and had a younger sister, Hélèn. It was clear to see, however, that there was no mutual attraction. This was disappointing and, indeed, lent itself to a feeling of rejection.

This depressing situation came to a head just before the Christmas holidays of 1956. The pupils were required to decorate the classroom for the Festive Season and teams were organised to perform various tasks such as making paper chains. Together with classmates, Malcolm Morecroft and Norman Ridges, I was asked to hang decorations on the Christmas tree. I had noticed another boy in the class waving a small bunch of mistletoe around and making a bit of nuisance of himself. This lad was Ronnie Carty, who was an extrovert and self-proclaimed favourite of the girls. His aim, of course, was to snatch as many kisses as possible from the unsuspecting girls using the mistletoe as a ploy. He had cornered three of them, Iris Ballard, Linda Pinner and Suzanne Lagoutte, and enticed each of them under the mistletoe. While Iris and Linda reluctantly succumbed, I was horrified to notice Suzanne willingly embrace Ronnie and give him a significant peck on the cheek. She let him go and coquettishly tossed her head so her lovely pony tail flicked with the action. All of my jealous emotions came to the fore and I was totally upset to the extent that I sulked for the rest of the day. My “crush” soon dissipated after that, and I eventually found solace with another girl, Iris Severn, who lived in Upper Street virtually opposite Suzanne’s house.

1957 marked the final year at Junior school and it was time to face the ‘Eleven-plus’ examination. Depending on the final marks, candidates were judged to enter Secondary school, in order of descent: Grammar school, Central school or Secondary Modern school. I knew from my course work and teacher’s remarks that any hope of entering Grammar school was out of the question. There was a fear of being relegated to the bottom and that was to a Secondary Modern school, which was rough at best and totally humiliating at worst. Central school, however, was a reasonable compromise and, in any case, that’s where my pal Kenny Pratley, a year older than me and who I thought was an intelligent boy, ended up. Somehow I scraped through with sufficient marks to win an opening at a Central school; the most logical one (and where Kenny attended) being Barnsbury Secondary School for Boys. In September of 1957, I started my Secondary school education.

