GROWING UP
Between the Wars

by

Ralph Smith, O.B.E.
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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Ralph’s children: Brian and Carolyn; his grandchildren: Michael, David, Rowena, Alexander and Gregory; his great grandchildren: Lauren, Tyler, Jordan, Gracie Mai, Ellie, Max, Leila and Niamh; and to generations yet to come.

This is the story of your father, grandfather, great grandfather, etc.

It is a sobering thought that, if he had died of diphtheria as so many children did in those days (see page 11), none of us would exist.
FORWARD
by Ralph’s son, Brian

Ralph Smith was born in 1922 and lived through the rest of the 20th century and into the 21st. He died in April 2006. I knew him as father to my sister and I, and husband to my mother, Freda - but he also led a professional life in the Admiralty and Ministry of Defence.

This is his life story, written by himself and I’m confident that you will enjoy reading it. It will also be of immense value to anyone interested in the 20th Century, containing as it does facts and information about life before, during and after the Second World War and also an insightful view of later 20th century politics.

It’s a story that could so easily never have been written down. It came about because in the early 1980s my father bought a Sinclair Spectrum computer – one of the new ‘home computers’ that had just been developed. To my surprise, he quickly discovered word processing using the tiny rubber keys and a program called “Tasword”.

I suggested that he should use it to write his ‘memoirs’. I put the word in inverted commas because somehow we don’t associate memoirs with ‘ordinary’ people. Yet why shouldn’t we? A lifetime full of experiences, especially one which includes the six years of the Second World War and a career in the Ministry of Defence, is a story that deserves to be told and I, as his son, felt very strongly that I would like to read that story and be able to pass it on to future generations.

To my delight he did begin writing and his memoirs were eventually completed - on a different computer - some years later. The resulting printout is the best book I have ever read (though I freely admit bias).

Now, since the advent of the Internet, it can be published to the whole world and it is with immense pride that I present ‘Witness to a Passing Age’ by my father, Ralph Smith, OBE, 1922 – 2016
CONTENTS

1 Early Years 1
2 Childhood 13
3 Family Life 27
4 Local Life 37
5 Secondary Education 43
6 Leaving School 55
Footnote 65
CHAPTER 1
1922-1927
Early Years

A Shattered World
What sort of world did my eyes open upon at 82 Tantallon Road, Balham, in South London in the early hours of the 18th December 1922? Like all of us, it was many years before I began to understand the reality of that world or the situation of my parents into whose lives I had come. In fact, not until well into middle age, with the stimulus of television and publication of popular history books did I find either the time or the inclination to ponder seriously upon it.

1921 to 1924 were boom years for babies, not only in Britain but in Europe as a whole, a fact which had implications for the rest of my life. There were always numerous people of this vintage about - friends sharing common background experiences but also competitors for education, jobs and promotion. The First World War had ended four years previously but it took a long time to disband the huge British Army, added to which the victorious Allies kept an Army of Occupation in Germany for a time. By 1922, however, Europe was beginning to recover from the sheer exhaustion of four years of bitter struggle and the dreadful influenza epidemic which followed it, killing, so it was said, more than the millions who died in the fighting. But equally, the return to civilian life of millions of men coupled with the sudden stoppage of war production began to cast the first shadows of economic depression across the country.

Glittering world vanished
Britain’s position was probably less severe than that of other warring countries, though it presented massive problems which the Government was ill-prepared to handle. The First World War destroyed a whole way of life for Europeans in general and in some ways was even more cataclysmic than the Second World War. The great Austro-Hungarian Empire - the glittering world of Mozart, Liszt and the Hapsburg Emperors through whose complex politics the war had begun with the assassination of Archduke Otto at Sarajevo in 1914 - had vanished as if it had never been. So had the remnants of the Ottoman Empire of Turkey which had dominated much of the Mediterranean for 800
years, even reaching into Spain, and against which the Crusades had been fought. Austria and Turkey, who were allied to Germany and lost, became and remained minor figures on the world stage, apart from the former being the birthplace of one Adolf Hitler, of whom more anon. On the Allied side, the Russian Empire dissolved into revolution, born out of the defeat of the Russian Army by Germany in 1917. The Bolshevik faction emerged as victors, transforming a vast area of Eastern Europe and Asia into a communist “Empire of the People” which would before long compete with the major religions and governments of the world.

Map of Europe as it was before World War I

**Treaty of Versailles**

Along with Britain, France, Belgium, Holland and Portugal, Germany had acquired a substantial pre-war overseas empire, mostly in Africa, including the large area in the South West now called Namibia. The war ended with the signing of an Armistice which left the German homeland hardly damaged, unlike those of France and Belgium on whose territory four years of battles had taken place with enormous devastation. This was bitterly resented by the victors who, under the vengeful Treaty of Versailles, stripped Germany of all her overseas territories along with large areas of her homeland such as the heavily industrialised Saar, the Sudetenland and parts of Silesia. The Saar was placed under French control and other areas actually incorporated, with their populations, into Czechoslovakia, Poland and Russia. The German economy was shattered by the war and her subsequent loss of industrial strength, so that what was left of the country fell into a morass of unemployment, riots and staggering inflation, where a cup of coffee could
double in price in the time taken to drink it. In August 1923 ten million Marks were worth just one dollar. I can remember playing with wads of German banknotes which my father had brought home, many with face values of millions of Marks each but whose real worth was just scrap paper. Thus were sown the seeds of World War II.

While both countries faced huge difficulties, Britain and France were shielded from the worst effects of economic stagnation through the world-wide trading networks of their respective empires. But Germany and the impoverished Germans were regarded with disdain and I vividly remember the cheap metal toys and musical instruments with which they desperately tried to earn foreign currency, but which we contemptuously dismissed as “only German”. Far from being the terrifying, unstoppable Power portrayed in histories of the Second World War, Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s was considered to be of no account. As children, like those of the 1950s and ‘60s, we scorned things German; we played at wars which the Germans always lost; we read stories in which the brave British always won. And like the children of that later generation, it came as an awful shock to discover that a beaten and dismembered Germany could recover and dominate Europe, in our case militarily, in theirs so far only economically.

A new dawn
Although to later eyes it was still class-ridden and heavily labour-dependent, British society had in fact changed enormously by 1918. People emerged from the struggle not only possessing new skills but also with new expectations; and the pattern of wealth and privilege had altered more than was at first realised. The upper classes of hereditary landowning families had been badly affected by the loss of so many of their best and brightest sons on the field of battle, while many industrialists and suppliers of war materials had earned enormous profits and political honours through which they in turn became the “gentry” of the following decades. Significantly, technological advance had been colossal under the challenge of war and although its impact on peacetime life was slower in appearing, the glow of a new dawn of freedom from manual labour was beginning to be perceived by the civilised world, especially in the USA.
By 1922, when joy and relief at the ending of slaughter had subsided, ordinary men and women faced a harsh awakening. For many women there was now the certain prospect of life without a husband or children and, as unemployment began to be felt, the bitter realisation that it would be life without much of a job either. The enthusiasm with which women had been welcomed into war production and administration was now replaced by pre-war prejudices: women’s place was in the home, and those who were forced by economic circumstances to work were for the most part expected to do menial tasks at wages lower than men could command. Around one million British men had died and those who returned would have first call on any jobs going, but for them, too, there were harsh realities which the Government of the day had not prepared for. Old skills had often been outmoded or were unwanted because of changed patterns of life and social structure, while the processes of supply, demand and mass-production which today’s consumer society takes for granted were still undeveloped. Also, unlike bomb-shattered post-1945 Britain, there was no vast reconstruction programme to cushion the labour market against the sudden ending of arms production.

Earliest Memories
My father, Harry Percy Smith, was a chauffeur before the war, having been apprenticed to a motor manufacturer in Coventry by a far-sighted parent.

A chauffeur in the early days of motoring was a very superior member of the household, often having a house and servant of his own on the estate of his employer. As well as knowing how to drive a motor-car, itself a rare talent, he must possess considerable mechanical skills to keep the new monster going. He also needed to have tact, polish and intelligence in order to take it and his employers on journeys and over distances which had required enormous effort and fortitude in former coaching days.

My father and mother, photographed in 1913
Occasionally my father was able to use the vehicle for his own pleasure and would sally forth in dashing attire with my mother and friends or relations. But during the war thousands of people, including many women, were taught to drive vehicles of all kinds, and even to repair them. Many of them set out to become chauffeurs after the war, only to find that much of the mystique had gone and they were often treated simply as ordinary servants.

My father had served in the Army of Occupation and my mother and sister Vera lived for a time in Rouen, in France, before I was born. On his return to England he was fortunate enough to get a fairly prestigious job as chauffeur to one of the Wills family of tobacco fame (Wills Woodbines were probably then as well known throughout the world as Coca Cola is today), and my young life nearly came to a damp end when I was found tottering into the lake of their stately home, Kearsney Abbey, in Essex. But the long, unsocial hours and frequent absences of a chauffeur’s life had lost their appeal. My parents were not young when I was born, he being 44 and she 37. My sister Vera, born in 1908, was 14 years older than myself and I suspect that they thought a more settled life for this new addition to the family was desirable, both for their sakes and mine. Like many others, my father had met huge challenges and responsibilities during the fighting (he was commissioned in the field and Mentioned in Despatches for bravery), and the prospect of life as a servant, even a superior one, did not attract him.
My father was commissioned in the field and mentioned in despatches for bravery

So for better or worse he gave up the job. For me it was undoubtedly better in that it gave me a settled and safe home all through my childhood, for which I can never be sufficiently grateful. For my parents it was probably for worse. During all my childhood my father had no decent or permanent job of any kind, a fact which led to much unhappiness and bickering. Perhaps recalling past glories of a noble profession, my own birth certificate proudly records my father’s occupation as “Motor Cab Owner and Driver”, though what sort of vehicle he owned I shall never know. My first recollections of life are of a tiny first floor flat in Stronza Road, Acton, in West London, to which my parents’ reduced circumstances had driven them. By an odd coincidence, in about 1970 I was directed by the People’s Dispensary for Sick Animals of the Poor to a house in the same road in order to collect an unwanted kitten. It turned out to be immediately opposite our old house, and the street itself still as dismal as my parents found it all those years ago. (The kitten, promptly christened Bonzo by our son Brian, lived happily with us till 1988).
First School
Immediately adjoining the house was the school, called a Council school in those days, which I entered at the age of four and of which I remember little except that the tables were turned upside down for a short period each afternoon for us little ones to have a sleep. In an age still harsh in many ways, this was quite a benevolent practice. I still have a faded photograph of small creatures in the induction class, showing me wearing a fancy shirt, among cropped heads and jerseys.
Behind the house was a steam laundry which was noisy at the best of times, but imprinted firmly in my memory is my mother’s constant complaint at the unbearable din when they built a new boiler in situ, a process which seemed to take weeks. Next door lived a family of five who occupied a single room. I remember visiting them and wondering how on earth they managed. Such is the peculiarity of memory that I even recall their name - Appleby. My father at this time was employed at a sweet factory, doing what I have no idea except that he often brought samples home. He also brought me a small toy each day when he could afford it and the expectation and pleasure which this gave me remain quite sharply in my mind to this day.

**Home appliances**

Life for a mother was pretty hard. There were few aids to cooking meals or washing clothes. Water was heated by gas and carried to wherever it was needed. Rubbing and scrubbing by hand in hot soapy water were the sole means of getting clothes clean and after a lifetime of it my mother’s hands, like those of all her contemporaries, were red and raw, especially after the traditional Monday wash. Ironing was by a solid flat-iron heated on the fire or gas ring.

One mechanical marvel for those able to afford one was a mangle, which saved the agony of wringing out heavy clothes and bedding by hand. The expression “being put through a mangle” remains in the language as a symbol of physical stress or exhaustion, but I wonder how many of today’s children have ever seen one? They were generally massive affairs on a cast-iron frame, with a large iron handle turning iron cog wheels and great wooden rollers (made of a species of Willow, I learned years later). Needless to say, I managed to get my thumb caught in the teeth of the cogs and caused my hysterical mother instantly to gain many more grey hairs. Fortunately for me, I recovered with no long-term effects.

We also had a machine for cleaning steel knives, stainless steel being almost unknown to us and silver plate being out of the question. This was a round wooden box about eighteen inches across, inside which leather discs covered with knife powder burnished the blade like a mirror. I could safely turn the handle when no knife was present and would spend hours at this.
One modern miracle was the invention of Wireless Telegraphy and we possessed a Crystal Set with which to receive transmissions from the first public broadcasting station, called 2LO, located at Savoy Hill in the Strand. The crystal was about the size of a peanut and by judiciously probing its surface with a movable wire called the “cat’s whisker” one could tune in to speech or music coming apparently from nowhere through a pair of cumbersome headphones. Of course, I was not allowed to touch this precious device.

**Exhibition**

I have a distant but strong memory of being taken to the great Empire Exhibition at Wembley when I must have been about two years old. The British of those days, in spite of the immense ravages of war, proudly believed they belonged to the most advanced and civilised nation in the world and it seemed natural for them to proclaim this as often as they could. They also saw themselves still as the richest nation, though the USA with its vast resources and the unbounded energy of its people had probably by then overtaken them. Thus British men and women expected to take part in, and win, international competitions of all kinds from the Olympics to across-the-world air races. Of course, the number of nations able to compete effectively was rather fewer than it is today, if only because so many of them were then part of the British Empire, while others had not yet achieved the political or technical development which advances in science and communication have since allowed them.
The Empire Exhibition consisted of a number of splendid pavilions representing the major countries of the Empire and the fields of scientific and artistic endeavour in which Britain excelled. It was indeed an impressive display by all accounts. Some of these once fine pavilions remain today, mostly used as storehouses for Government materials. One, I believe, contains many hundreds of surplus paintings from the collection of the Royal Academy. During the 1970s I had occasion to visit one of them on an organisational assignment; it was sad to see how decrepit these monuments to imperial splendour had become.

Wembley at that time was virtually in the countryside and it was not until the Metropolitan Line was electrified that it was promoted as a desirable residential area, resulting in its becoming effectively a London suburb during the 1930s. A little-known fact is that towards the turn of the Century an enterprising gentleman formed a Company to build a tower, taller than the Eiffel Tower, to which he hoped the citizens of the capital would flock, both to see the work in progress and later pay handsomely to ascend it. In the event, they didn’t show much interest; money ran out and the tower was never completed. It was demolished, but curiously its site is now rather more famous - it is the green expanse of Wembley Stadium where the Cup Final is held.
Diphtheria
My last recollection of Stronza Road was of being taken ill suddenly. Not that I remember feeling ill, but I recall clearly being carried down the stairs to an ambulance. My father followed but then said he must go back for his hat; he did not return and I still feel the sense of despair at being torn away from my home, alone in the power of strange new people. In fact, I had caught diphtheria, a common disease arising from poor drainage but one which was often fatal, and indeed remained so until well into the 1930s.

Most fortunately for me, a new serum had just appeared and I remember the sharp pain of the needle as I was injected immediately on arrival at the hospital. It was a most contagious disease requiring strict isolation and my parents were allowed to visit me only occasionally, wearing long white gowns and resembling members of the Ku Klux Klan.

I recovered after an unknown period and suffered no ill effects apart from a persistent nervous twitch and cough, which my mother attributed to the disease and which she frequently endeavoured to rectify by taking me to various specialists, to no avail. Whether this was for my benefit or because I drove the rest of the family mad I never discovered, but I suspect it was the latter. I still display both symptoms on occasions of stress or excitement.

Curiously, I have few firm recollections of my sister Vera at Stronza Road. She would have been 16-18 years old and was working somewhere, no doubt beset by the problems of a teenager in a deprived neighbourhood, and living in a small flat containing a demanding and obnoxious child. Nevertheless, she was always most kind and affectionate towards me. When my parents announced that we were moving to somewhere with the enchanting name of Thornton Heath I was aware that she was overjoyed at the prospect of living in the countryside. Unfortunately, Thornton Heath was no longer in the country.
Discovering Thornton Heath
Thornton Heath was a suburb of Croydon, which itself was then a Borough in the county of Surrey though it is now part of Greater London. The status of Borough entitled Croydon to manage most of its own affairs, including Education, independently of the Surrey County Council. By 1928 Croydon had become virtually joined to London by continuous building development, but the boundary between Norbury, in Croydon, and Streatham, in London, was still marked and the Borough boasted an identity not unlike that of a County Town, with a proper civic pride.

I never discovered where the Heath was, or had been, since the area was almost solid housing, apart from a recreation ground and a small but pleasant wooded area called Grange Park, situated on a hill. It is true that when we moved there, the remains of a small farm adjoined our road; but this was very shortly built over. Thornton Heath Pond was then still a real pond, a landmark and bus and tram stop; and some road names carried impressions of times long past, such as Bensham Manor Road and Colliers Water Lane, the latter (so our teachers told us) referring to an opencast coal mine which once existed there.

Our New Home
Our house was No 7, Berne Road, which formed one side of a square of roads with similarly attractive Swiss names - Geneva, Zermatt and Lucerne. Zermatt and Lucerne houses were pre-1914 but Berne and Geneva were modern in the sense that they were smaller, cheaper and less well built. However, after Stronza Road it was all quite heavenly, especially the small garden. Ours was in a terrace of five, rented of course, since purchase was neither possible nor thought particularly desirable in those days. The landlords, who had bought the house as an investment, were a childless couple called George and Clare Phillips, who owned a sweet shop in Bermondsey and were destined to play a small but significant part in our lives.

My parents named the house “Ralvira” for obvious reasons and we even had a glazed sign proclaiming this fact. We also shortly acquired a black puppy of dubious parentage called Gyp and among the archives is a picture of myself aged about 8 with Gyp, standing beneath this sign. Vera and I actually had bedrooms to ourselves, a luxury not enjoyed by many young people. Mine was the smallest, while Vera had the back bedroom overlooking the garden and the blank wall of the first house in Geneva Road, until she got married and left home, after which my father moved or was banished into it on grounds of his truly horrendous snoring.
“Ralvira”, the house I lived in during my childhood
Like all houses until well after the Second World War, it had fireplaces in both of the downstairs living rooms and the two larger bedrooms. Coal was the sole form of space heating and only rarely were fires lit upstairs. However, I do remember being ill on one occasion and enjoying the luxury of a real coal fire in my parents’ bedroom, to which I was moved. There was a rudimentary back boiler in one fireplace downstairs for heating water but it was both inefficient and noisy, so the common method was to heat small quantities of water in a kettle or saucepan and larger amounts in a gas-copper holding 12-15 gallons, which had to be conveyed upstairs somehow for bathing purposes. With recollections of larger Edwardian houses in mind, my mother used to call the large back room the “kitchen” and the small cooking/washing-up room the “scullery”. The other living room was simply the “front room” to us, but called the “parlour” by our more pretentious neighbours. “Lounge” was unheard of. Although all rooms were quite small, people often kept the parlour unused except for the most important family occasions, a practice which happily my parents scorned and we used every inch of the house to the full.

The back garden was quite small but to a child who had never known such a thing it was a second home to me and I spent a great deal of time in it. There was also a covered area attached to the back of the house, with a rudimentary work-bench where I made or dismantled articles in the endless quest for knowledge displayed by most boys. Its great advantage to my mother was that the resulting mess was kept out of the house.

Early Schooldays
I now joined the Infants at Ecclesbourne Road School, some quarter of a mile away. I walked there of course, as we all did. There was little traffic on side roads in those days, though crossing them was not entirely without danger and there was the odd casualty. Life in the Infants was clearly placid because I remember hardly anything about it except my teacher’s name, Miss Wakelyn, and also being caught playing truant one day. However, one notable event was establishing a friendship with a boy 12 months my senior who lived in Zermatt Road. It was then 1927; I was five years old and he six. His name was Derek Robinson and he is a friend today, 65 years later at the time of writing.

I graduated at the age of 7 to the “Big Boys” (nowadays called a Primary or Junior School), where there were eight classes of fifty or more children. Boys occupied the ground floor and girls the upper floor, each having separate entrances and playgrounds. So well segregated were we that the Girls’ School made no impact on our lives or my recollection. The plan appeared to be to put brighter boys in the even-numbered classes and others in the odd numbers. I was in the former. In reality the division was between those who had good, stable homes and parents who took an interest in education, and those who did not. Some children came from frightful homes where poverty, overcrowding and ignorance made staying alive and unhurt the essential aims in life. As a child I was vaguely aware of my advantages; but like all children (and most adults) I accepted this as being due to some superiority on my part.
Ecclesbourne Infant School

Ecclesbourne Junior School
A small but vital income

In point of fact, the catchment area was such that the range of both money and ability was quite wide. Some boys’ families were distinctly better off than mine, though most were not. We did, however, have a slight but crucial advantage over most of our neighbours in that my mother possessed a small income of her own.

Traffic on Tower Bridge (picture from British Pathé)

This derived from her father, one William Morton, who had been a successful hay salesman in Vauxhall, London, until his untimely death in 1896 after falling under a wagon on Tower Bridge. His three younger children - my aunt, Nell, my mother, May, and my uncle, Leonard - were left in a parlous situation but a good friend of their father, named Atkins, collected all the bad debts and disposed of the business profitably. The proceeds were used to purchase some small labourers’ cottages in Clapham, the rents from which educated the children and gave them a small income for life. Wisely, Mr Atkins placed the estate in trust for the two girls, without which it would inevitably have been frittered away on some business venture of their respective husbands. Unwisely, he made a relation called Mr Sangs the trustee. This gentleman milked the proceeds disgracefully and my earliest recollections are of my mother’s efforts to get her quarterly allowance out of “Old Mouldy Mug”, as he was disrespectfully but deservedly known, and she frequently took me with her by bus to his house at Clapham Common to belabour him in person.

Nevertheless, the money did make the difference between rubbing along and real poverty when my father was out of work, and we never went short of food. It is hard to believe that people starved to death in the richest country in the world, with an Empire which
held sovereignty over one quarter of the population of the planet. But they did. Later, in Grammar School, a much respected and philanthropic history master named King (though we called him Smiler for reasons which were totally obscure) urged us when we grew up to ask why coal cost fifteen shillings a ton to buy but miners got only fourpence a ton for digging it out; and why over two hundred people had died of starvation that year according to official records.

Games and Pastimes
In those early days, children’s major pastime was playing in the street with one’s friends or, if it was wet, in each other’s houses. I had two particular friends who lived close by, one called Wilfred Lyons and the other Martin Matthews, later to die in a burning Lancaster bomber. The Lyons family were quiet, easy-going working class people and always made me welcome along with other companions of their four children. I spent many happy hours playing billiards on the full-sized table which almost completely filled their living room; sadly, I allowed the skill to lapse. They also often listened to Radio Luxemburg, a commercial station beaming programmes and advertisements in English from that small European state and the only one of its kind competing with the BBC until well after the Second World War. Ovaltine, Horlicks and popular medicines were the most common advertisements - Ovaltine with its “We are the Ovaltineys, happy girls and boys”, and Horlicks with its advice to avoid “night starvation” were repeated so often that they were imprinted permanently on our brains.

Ball games figured prominently out of doors, mostly concerned with throwing, catching or hitting someone with it. Conventional team games such as soccer and cricket were not much favoured and I have to confess that I have never acquired much interest in either of them. On the other hand, I developed and retain a quick eye for relative movement and even today can still catch a ball instinctively. To say that we were street urchins is going too far, though we certainly made a dreadful noise running about shouting and bawling. However, parents and neighbours (most of whom also had children, of course) must have been more tolerant in those days, or perhaps it was simply the case that anything was better than having us under their feet indoors. A popular game was bouncing a ball as high as possible up the windowless wall of an end house, until the demented occupants came and screamed dire imprecations at us.

A common threat was to tell our parents, not an empty one in days when people were concerned about their image in the community and did not take complaints about their children as a personal insult, as many do today.
The ultimate, and invariably effective, deterrent was to say they would call a policeman. The “bobby on the beat” was much more in evidence then and exercised a powerful restraining influence on public behaviour.

Street Life
Winter darkness inhibited our activities somewhat but we enjoyed its soft concealment and would go out in the street as often and for as long as our parents allowed. We had no fear of molestation by adults, though larger boys were best avoided. In summer a girl or two would sometimes join us but rarely after dark until we were all somewhat older. I still recall the street lamp-lighter who would go round on his bicycle with a long pole, magically touching each gas lamp which would spring into golden life; but soon these were replaced by electric lamps and the lamplighter passed into history along with the “link man” of earlier times. The night watchman guarding road works in winter was also a wonderful sight, huddled against his coke brazier which he stoked to white-heat. He would be pleased to have someone to talk to until we were eventually summoned to bed, leaving him to the dark, silent streets.

As we grew older, we developed a new and rather anti-social activity. We discovered, or were taught, how to fashion a catapult out of a bicycle spoke. With elastic bands and a small leather pouch, these deadly implements could be concealed in the palm of one’s hand. They fired round airgun pellets with astonishing accuracy and effect, and a popular competition involved several of us taking five rounds rapid fire at one of the metal cowls which adorned many local chimneys and whose purpose was to swivel away from the wind direction and thus prevent smoke from gusting back into the living room. The unearthly and incomprehensible din would bring the occupants out to gaze at their roofs while we either stood with cherubic countenances pretending ignorance or, if rumbled, beat a hasty retreat.

These catapults were precision instruments and we became skilled at making them. Occasionally we turned them on each other’s bare legs but this was highly painful and each “ping” left a small blue bruise, so the practice was generally frowned upon. Others outside the circle were not so lucky but one had to be careful not to be caught as the wrath of the pinged one was terrible to behold.

A Secret Weapon
One day I made a “Big Bertha” (so named after a giant gun with which the Germans bombarded Paris in World War I) out of thick fencing wire, powered by two Hoover
cleaner rubber drive belts. This fired pebbles an inch or more across. It was quite impos-
sible to hold the device and pull the elastic at the same time so I had to wedge the handle
in a fence while pulling with both hands. Like the real Big Bertha, its scope was limited.
During a temporary feud with Wilf I endeavoured to show my displeasure at his leering
insults over the four widths of garden from my house to his by loosing a round in his
direction. He, quick as a cat, had ample time to take evasive action. Not so the house
behind him, and I watched with horror as the missile sped high over where Wilf’s ob-
noxious head had been to crash on the slates of his neighbour’s roof.

Discipline  The reader will gather that when I complain about children’s behaviour to-
day I am being grossly unfair. On the other hand, I do not recall anyone who had a
vicious or destructive nature enjoying evil for its own sake, and our escapades were
mostly sheer mischievousness. Indeed, we had a strong, if sometimes misguided, sense
of justice and fair play.

At school things were different. A rigid discipline was maintained at all times, reinforced
by cuffs about the head and liberal use of the cane. This was not then regarded as in any
way harsh, undignified, inhuman, or damaging to our tender sensibilities and likely to
cause us to grow into sadistic brutes. Nor did it. On the contrary, the saying “spare the
rod and spoil the child” was held to be an ancient truth and canes for thwacking children
would be displayed in shops to encourage parents to do their duty. The parents of some
of my friends had, and used, such a deter-
rent; my own, I’m glad to say, did not sub-
scribe to the practice. The reader must
judge whether a valuable formative ele-
ment to my character was thereby omitted.

A single cane served the whole school
(apart from the Headmaster, who had a
private stock of them) and a delinquent
was sharply told to “get the stick and black
book”, whereupon he must go from class-
room to classroom knocking on the door,
waiting to be admitted and stuttering out
his request, hoping desperately that it was not there. Of course, in the end it was there
and he was forced to clutch it to him and creep back to his classroom where his comrades
would sit back with brazen satisfaction, not to say pleasure, at the prospect of pain being
administered to a fellow human being. This ritual punishment was applied with vigour
regardless of age, leaving angry blue weals on the victim’s hands. There was a myth, of
the kind which young children accept as gospel truth, that rubbing one’s hands with
orange peel would cause the cane instantly to break; and inevitably there were those who
swore that they had seen it happen. But it never did.

School was not meant to be a particularly comfortable or homely place but if you were
reasonably well favoured it was bearable. Even so, I remember how often I would go
home seething at the unfairness and lack of feeling of one teacher, aptly named Miss
Birch; my mother’s utter indifference to the whole subject merely increased my indignation. No doubt Miss Birch had plenty to exasperate her. I remember her screaming at the boy sitting beside me who, instead of listening to her, was blissfully drawing a face in ink with a steel-nibbed pen upon the tip of his private part. And I can still see her taking such exception to a crayon drawing by Wilf that she seized the paper and rubbed it violently all over his face. He emerged looking like a Red Indian.

**History and Empire at School**

We learned a lot about British (mostly English) heroes like Drake, Nelson and Wellington, and were regaled with stories and poems of heroic feats of arms in our Island history, such as the Battles of Trafalgar and Waterloo, and the Charge of the Light Brigade in the Crimean War; it would have been unheard of even to question any of them, still less to debunk them in the fashion of today.

![A map of the world, showing the British Empire coloured in red](image)

We were, in short, British, self-evidently superior to all other nations, and our Empire was a totally desirable and praiseworthy institution, blessed and approved by the Almighty, to which its millions of subject peoples were eternally grateful to belong. And so they should be. Indeed any of them who sought to oppose us by force were rightly caught and, if necessary, disposed of, and no-one seemed to think this the slightest bit unfair.

A map of the Empire adorned every wall, together with a series of paintings showing how the Royal Mail was carried to its farthestmost reaches, illustrating the benefits of a peaceful, orderly and civilised way of life which the British had brought to so much of mankind.
And I remember with what pride the whole school was paraded in the playground to see the British Airship R101 floating gracefully overhead, large as an ocean liner, just weeks before it crashed in France on the 5th October 1930 with the loss of almost everyone on board.

Playground Games
At a certain time each year, no-one knew why, the school playground was given over to games with cigarette cards - fag cards to us - of which every child collected large quantities unless his parents belonged the small and distinctly peculiar minority of non-smokers.

The buttresses of the school wall afforded recesses in each of which enterprising boys would set up stalls and invite others to undertake skilled tasks with a well-skated cigarette card. A typical game required one to knock down a 1-inch wood screw standing on end or to cover a half-penny with the skated card, and odds of up to 10 cards to 1 would be offered. Then suddenly the craze would die and something else would take its place. Spinning-tops were a popular and regular event. They were of two kinds, whip tops and peg tops. The former were raised to prodigious speeds by whipping them with a string tied to a stick, and they could be persuaded to perform remarkable aerial feats in skilled hands. The latter, beautifully made of box-wood, were carefully bound with a piece of twine and then deftly hurled to the ground where they would spin for ages, the twine remaining in one's hand.

Other games were dictated by the season, notably conkers and sliding on ice. Conkers is, I believe, still as popular today as it was then, though possibly meeting with less adult approval. Children would desecrate local horse-chestnut trees to obtain prize specimens of the beautiful waxy brown globes, and gaze in awe at a famed “twelver” or more (which had probably been baked surreptitiously in an oven to make it hard as iron).
We must have had some very cold winters because playground slides were a regular feature and were formed by skilled little feet into lethal Cresta Runs twenty or thirty yards long. Groups of boys would run as fast as they could, then leap onto the slide and sail gracefully to its end. Teachers rarely put a stop to this, possibly on the basis that we were learning social and physical skills of a high order but more probably because it kept us occupied; and if some of us suffered grievous cuts and bruises, that too could be regarded as a useful introduction to the perils of life.

Transport and the Trams
Citizens old and young were accustomed to walking or cycling appreciable distances to get to work, school or shops; but public transport was also readily available in the shape of frequent buses or trams serving the main roads, while the Southern Electric Railway provided a wide network of lines covering South London with a similarly reliable service. Our usual journey was to the shopping centre of Croydon, for which purpose we used Route 42 of Croydon Tramways, a fleet of lumbering top-heavy vehicles run by the Council and plying between Thornton Heath High Street and the Greyhound Hotel, a distance of about five miles along just two roads.

The service they provided was reasonably good considering that they laboured under certain difficulties. One of these was the need to reverse direction at the end of each journey, requiring the electricity pick-up pole to be moved from one overhead line to the other, an operation calling for skill and patience. Another was a regrettable tendency to come off the rails, blocking the track and leaving a trail of immobile trams and incensed would-be travellers. This was a particular hazard at Thornton Heath Pond where they had to perform a sharp right-angle turn from Brigstock Road into London Road and in the process join or leave the tracks of the No 16 and 18 tram services, which ran from the Thames Embankment in London right down to Purley, on the Brighton Road.

Drivers of No 42 trams had very little protection at all from the elements. They stood with gloves, caps, greatcoats and goggles facing the oncoming rain or sleet and I can still see them now, stamping their feet and clapping their arms round their bodies against the bitter cold. Drivers of the trams from London, on the other hand, had a roof over their heads and glass screens around them, enabling them to stand in relative luxury. These screens were later fitted to the No 42 trams as well. Drivers did not sit down throughout the journey, because there was nothing to sit on. The ultimate and, some said, unnecessary luxury of a seat for the driver appeared only in a sleek new vehicle, the Feltham Tram, which was introduced shortly before the war. Lower-deck passengers had a modicum of upholstery but those upstairs had only hard wooden seats.
No 42 tram heading for Croydon.
Prominently displayed were notices saying “Do Not Spit. Penalty 40 shillings” - an interesting reflection of the habits of our forebears but happily rare by my time. The size of the penalty, being best part of a week’s wages for many people, showed the determination of the authorities to stamp out a practice which had been recently recognised as contributing to the spread of tuberculosis.

The road from London was very straight for long stretches and the great trams were capable of quite extraordinary speeds along them. Because tram rails were embedded in the ground, they were welded together and the wheels could glide smoothly over them without the “diddly-da” of expansion gaps which railway lines then required. No words can describe the thrill for a small boy of standing on the conductor’s platform as the swaying monster hurtled effortlessly along, with the wheel on its pick-up pole screaming defiance to the world, until some fool wanted to get off and rang the bell. Its loud clang would be followed by the scraping of iron brakes on iron wheels and a mournful protesting wail from below as the gears changed from driving to driven mode, until the massive contraption came to a grinding, shuddering halt, and the spell was broken.

As traffic increased, trams became a source of frustration to other road users since their tracks lay in the centre of the carriageway and passengers had to stream across the road to get aboard. All other traffic was required by law to stop and give way. The practice of forming a queue, now a distinguishing feature of the British throughout the world, was practically unknown before World War 2 and to have to wait while a milling crowd of blockheads fought to climb onto their clumsy vehicle in rain or snow was more than the average motorist could endure. London’s tramways with their fixed tracks were eventually seen to be causing more congestion than they relieved, and were done away with in 1952; but with them went a way of life and a tradition of service which was never quite replaced. They still remain in many parts of the world, providing cheap, pollution-free transport for the masses.
CHAPTER 3
1932-1933

Family Life

Aunt Nell and Visits to Putney
My mother’s sister Nell and her husband Albert Kempton lived in a large three-storied house at 46 Clarendon Road (now Clarendon Drive), Putney. They had lived there all their married lives, since the house was built when, incredibly today, fields and farmland adjoined it. My parents’ wedding reception was held there. Over the years it had been a haven for them and we used to visit it often.

A regular routine was to go there on a Sunday evening for the four of them to play cards while I played with my cousin Denis, three years older than I. Denis was a marvellous companion and we shared many happy hours throughout our childhood until he suddenly became a teenager, more interested in new clothes and girls than spotty younger cousins.

This apparently simple expedition to Putney was in fact quite lengthy and illustrates the energy and determination of my parents’ generation. The journey to Putney began with a 15-minute walk to Thornton Heath Station, from where we took a train to Clapham Junction.

Here we caught a 37 bus to Putney and then had another fifteen minutes’ walk to the house. Fairly late at night the journey was reversed and we arrived home about 11pm or later (far too late for a child still at school, I fear). There was never any question whether transport would run: weather, strikes, staffing or mechanical problems were not allowed to interfere with the timetable. Only in the thickest fog did we experience doubt or delay.

A London fog in those days had to be experienced to be appreciated (if that is the right word): it was not only possible but quite commonplace to become utterly lost while crossing a familiar road or walking a few houses to visit a friend. Ordinary street lamps would be visible through the gloom only when one was immediately beneath them and the popular description a “peasouper” was entirely apt.

But even then, a naphtha flare would be placed at strategic main road junctions and the bus would somehow make it, with the conductor walking slowly ahead guided by kerb or tramlines. Trains similarly would crawl from one signal to the next. Such a journey merely for an evening’s cards would be unthinkable today but mobility seemed to be an essential part of life then.
The Kempton Family

Denis and I were of a later generation than our brothers and sisters, who had all left school by the time of my earliest recollections. He had three brothers - Maurice, Tim and Roy - and one sister, Violet.

Uncle Leonard also lived in their commodious house, an unmarried, unremarkable man with a long, thin face, woolly greased hair parted in the middle of his head and a small moustache with waxed, spiky ends which he would twist between his fingers. He lived solely on the proceeds of Granpa Morton’s inheritance and Nell’s charity, and his interests were horseracing and the pub. He was a standing joke, but a good humoured, likeable man and part of the fabric of our lives.

Albert Kempton had a strong Cockney accent and worked as a fitter’s mate at the Ham Gravel Company. He seemed totally out of place against Aunt Nell’s almost regal manner and the public school polish of his children. Yet the Kempton family was quite well-to-do. At one time they owned a glass works in South London (where Charlie Chaplin once worked for a short time before emigrating to America, as his memoirs show), and Arundel Kempton owned probably
the most famous greyhound of all time - Mick the Miller. I believe that Albert and my father once ran a taxi service together and through this met two sisters - my mother and Aunt Nell - who were apprentices at Whiteleys of Bayswater, a large and internationally famous department store, now vanished. Tim and Maurice went into Insurance, the former rising to be General Manager of the Pearl and the latter to Fire Manager of the Guardian. Roy was more restless and had a spell as a ship’s steward on the great Atlantic liners, then as a young Woolworth’s manager and finally general manager of a national laundry chain. Violet remained unmarried until just before the war. To my childish ears, the exaggerated stories of their exploits as young adults setting out in life were exciting and incredible.

Christmas at Putney was a very special occasion. Every year there was a huge turkey and the large dining room table groaned with food. As the older children grew up they acquired boy or girl friends and later husbands and wives, so that anything up to twenty people filled the house for two days or more. The standard attraction was a whist drive in the capacious drawing room on Boxing Day while Denis and I played around everyone’s feet until expelled. Then we would play with our Christmas presents and explore the bedrooms or even the large coal cellar where, we were often told, the family had taken shelter during the Zeppelin airship raids on London in World War I. The next morning we would repair swiftly to the stale-smoke-ridden drawing room to seek, and find, coins which the players had dropped.

**Smoking - a lost pleasure**
Almost everybody seemed to smoke in those days. Cigarettes were the predominant medium and there were many brands, competing by means of constant advertising and the lure of gifts.

![Cigarette advertising](image)

*Cigarette advertising promoted enjoyment, glamour and even health. Celebrity endorsement, as here, was also common.*
Men tended to favour Wills’ Woodbines, Players Navy Cut (whose packet was adorned with a bearded sailor) or even more fiercely strong tobaccos, while women chose Craven ‘A’, Kensitas or other gentler-sounding brands, usually with cork tips. Tobacco was grown in many parts of the world but American Virginia was by far the most popular in Britain; Turkish cigarettes were oval in shape and had a distinctive scented aroma which limited their appeal. Pipes were exclusively for men, with an even wider choice of both tobaccos and devices to burn it in, while cigars were generally confined to the more affluent strata of society except at Christmastime.

Smoking led to bad breath, respiratory diseases, costly and fatal fires, litter and grime. But all seemed to be regarded as acceptable if not inevitable consequences of the wholly natural and hallowed use of the weed.

The cigarette in particular, now penally taxed and the subject of such obloquy that it and its despised addicts seem likely soon to disappear into history along with swords and duelling, had become a profound social and often civilising influence. It was the custom for one person to offer a cigarette to another, even a complete stranger, as an aid or prelude to conversation, a gesture of comfort and consolation in private or shared misfortune, or to calm ruffled feelings; and for the compliment to be returned in due course by the other. It was cheap, easy, inoffensive, non-committal and universally accepted. No similar social instrument of communion between human beings has yet replaced it.

Food
Most food was still purchased from bulk quantities - today’s handy packs were rare until the late 1930s. The grocer would carve butter from a large cask and deftly mould it into the required shape and quantity by kneading it between two wooden bats. I can recall the days when the milkman had a large oval pail and would ladle the milk into one’s own jug, which had to be taken to his barrow or cart. All milkmen had a traditional cry of “Milko” expressed in a penetrating yodel, handed down through centuries, which alerted the housewife to their appearance; but it began to disappear when bottles arrived on the scene and were delivered to one’s door. Sweets would be transferred via the grimy hands of the shopkeeper from a large jar to a paper bag, or sometimes direct into the even grimier hands of a child.
Beef was the familiar meat, closely followed by lamb or mutton; chicken, so common today, was a luxury for most people until well after the Second World War. Fish was not unnaturally a staple diet of a seafaring island people and was both varied and cheap. Humble herrings appeared in various forms at most meals, often as smoked kippers, lightly cured and salted bloaters, or soused in vinegar. Cod and haddock were also plentiful. The Fishermen of England were praised in song and fable, endowed with a heroic image like the Yeomen of old. Today, the traditional British fishing grounds are largely swept by foreign boats and the huge fishing fleet almost gone: fishing is a hard and lonely life which does not appeal to most young people or to the intellectual opinion-formers of our time.

**Our Motor Cars**

During those early years at Thornton Heath my father somehow acquired a car from time to time. He could not bear to be without one. They were unbelievably awful by today’s standards, though I suppose not unusual then. Not that they were unsafe, insofar as the technology of the age concerned itself with safety; his mechanical skill saw to that. But they were not in their first youth and were subject to breakdowns of every conceivable kind. One such car was an open Humber tourer, one front tyre of which was twice the width of the other, having been purloined from some sort of commercial vehicle. Punctures and mending them were as natural to him as cleaning his teeth.

Another car was a Standard coupe, with what was known as a “dickey” seat for two at the back. The seat was in fact simply a wooden board which folded back and even with a cushion was most uncomfortable. If it rained, the fortunes in the front seat simply put up the hood, leaving the dickey seat passengers alone in cold, wet misery. When we had a car, we would go to the coast most weekends. Brighton and Worthing were our nearest destinations, travelling along the London-Brighton Road through Crawley, where a railway crossing bisected the road and caused enormous hold-ups no less solid than the traffic jams regarded with such horror today. The Standard had oil lamps and I recall returning from Brighton one evening accompanied in the dickey seat by Vera’s boyfriend, Reg Prior, whose duty was to keep an eye on the single miserable rear lamp and lean down to relight it with a match at frequent intervals. This same car later burst a tyre and before it could be brought to a halt had wound both outer and inner tubes round its front axle in a tight, immovable knot of solid rubber.

*A dickie seat. Notice how the hood will only cover the main occupants*
**Relatives at Brighton**

Brighton, which included the more up-market Hove to its West and the newly-developing Black Rock and Rottingdean to the East, was popular with my parents, not only because it was our nearest resort but because they had friends and relations there.

The pier, nearby aquarium, Volks’ mini electric railway, fish and chip shops and the seaside itself provided a variety of entertainment, while cheap rail tickets from London ensured that the place was always busy.

The beach was actually rather unattractive, being covered in pebbles except at low tide and its unwashed upper reaches quite grimy (it is much the same today, for that matter). But for most South-Londoners in the 1930s it was all they had, and on a sunny August Bank Holiday it was difficult to find anywhere on the beach to sit.

My mother had a wartime friend, also called Vera, who with her husband ran a tiny bar in a tiny street just off the seafront at Hove; it always reminded me of the Inn in Treasure Island where the sinister Long John Silver called. My father’s sister, universally called Auntie Sis though her real name was Annie, also lived at Hove with her husband Billy Moore at 1, Goldstone Villas. We had few holidays with my father, presumably because they did not go with the sort of jobs he had, and my mother and I would usually spend...
a week with Auntie Sis in the summer. Also living in Brighton was my paternal grandfa-
ther, Sidney Smith, with his second wife, whose name I cannot recall. We visited him
very rarely; in fact I recall only two occasions, one to a pet shop which he ran at Hove
and the other to a house at Worthing shortly before he died. I found him an amiable but
remote old man. He was apparently a keen naturalist and my deep interest in living crea-
tures was often attributed to his genetic influence. I never questioned this apparent ne-
glect of the old man on my father’s part, though my mother hinted that he had been a
rather difficult and unyielding character, harsh with wife and children alike, in which
respect he was probably no different from most Victorian fathers. My own father had
the kindest and most gentle nature which may explain the lack of communication, but a
more likely cause was the limited time available to him for filial duty when his wife and
family were pressing for more interesting activities.

Occasionally we holidayed with Aunt Nell and some of her five children. On one cele-
brated occasion, at the age of around 4, I was mooning along the promenade behind the
rest of the family when they observed that I had vanished. An urgent search revealed that
I had fallen some four feet onto the beach below. Fortunately for me, my fall was broken
by someone sitting there. Unfortunately for her, she had been brought there by her hus-
band because she had a headache, which was not greatly improved thereby.

Leisure Activities
At home, I acquired a small bicycle, succeeded by a larger one with, I think, 18-inch
wheels, on which I used to dash round the streets and, when Wilf also obtained one, to
more distant parts.

Firework night, the 5th of November,
was then as now of great excitement
to all children. Prior to the night we
would hawk a preposterous figure
round the streets accosting passers-by
with the request “Penny for the
Guy?”, a practice which was most
strictly forbidden to my own children
whose mother (rightly of course) re-
garded it as begging. But it was fun. In
those days there were no restrictions
on children purchasing fireworks and
we used to buy bangers and explode
them under tins with dramatic effect.
Children do the same today of course,
but just have more difficulty in ob-
taining the lethal objects.

I also read comics avidly, at first the mainly pictorial Tiny Tots, then The Rainbow with
its exploits of Tiger Tim, graduating through Film Fun to the mainly textual Wizard and
Hotspur with their stories of Sport and War heroes. Much has been written about the
value of comics in Education, most of it by people who know little about the subject or
have forgotten their own childhood. I too was suspicious of the unfamiliar publications which my children bought in the 1960s and the even weirder Supermen of the 1980s who evolved from them. But they encouraged us to read, which is more than some of our teachers seemed to be able to do.

![Tiny Tots, Rainbow and Hotspur comics](image.jpg)

About 1933, our landlords, George and Clare Phillips, conceived the idea (or were put up to it by my father) of purchasing a motor car which my father would look after and drive and which would be used for taking us all out on Sundays and Bank Holidays. A splendid Morris Oxford saloon was obtained and garaged near our house. We covered most of Surrey and Sussex in a style and comfort previously unknown. At the end of the day we would drop my mother off at home while I (and often Gyp too) accompanied my father to take the Phillips home to their flat over the sweet shop in Bermondsey - no mean journey then or now. As a result of endless driving beside my father from my earliest days I acquired a road sense and instinct for anticipating others’ actions which has stood me in good stead.

**A Dreadful Accident**

One Sunday morning we had a dreadful shock. As I mentioned, the source of hot water for baths was the aged gas copper in the scullery. Instead of carrying it up in sensible quantities, my father would use a large two-handled galvanised tub. On this occasion, he slipped while negotiating the bend in the stairs and fell to the bottom under gallons of boiling water. He lay in bed for what must have been some weeks afterwards and it was noticeable that his normal robust constitution was never the same again.

**My Sister’s Marriage**

Vera duly married Reg at St Saviours Church in Thornton Heath, and, conveniently for everyone, it coincided with a Church Sunday-School trip to the seaside at Hastings and St Leonards, on which I was thankfully despatched. We were not a religious family and in fact I am ashamed to say I do not remember any of them ever going to church except for weddings and christenings; but in my early years I was sent to Sunday school. For no reason at all the memory of sitting in the vicar’s garden clutching an orange is still with
me, though that is the sum total of my Churchgoing experience as a child. However, at school we were taught the Anglican religion and sang all the well-known hymns, while the enduring influence of the Church of England for centuries of our history still strongly pervaded society and implanted a deep Christian ethos in all our minds. Not that there was much turning of the other cheek on anyone’s part, as I recall. Hanging was mandatory for murder; prison would often be with hard-labour, which meant breaking granite rocks on the wild hills of Dartmoor; and flogging with a cat-o’-nine-tails for men or birching for juveniles were also administered for grievous offences.

Reg and Vera moved to a nice new house on a new estate at Mill Hill, as far North West of London as we were South of it. It was, and is, a very attractive area except that Vera’s house has since been demolished and its site lies under the M1 Motorway. At the end of the garden ran the main London Midland and Scottish Railway line which provided endless fascination for me. Along its four tracks sped mighty steam expresses and lumbering articulated locomotives drawing a hundred or more trucks each. It was a simple matter to climb over the fence and onto the track, which needless to say I often did; boys cannot resist such temptation. After a while, I was deemed to be old enough to make the journey to Mill Hill on my own to stay with Vera, there being a convenient Green Line bus which ran directly from Thornton Heath Pond to Apex Corner at Mill Hill, and I spent many happy days there.

**RAF Hendon**

The annual RAF Air Display at Hendon could be seen from their garden and was a great attraction, enabling us to marvel at the tremendous skill of pilots flying Hawker Fury biplanes and slow Fairey Battle and Hampden bombers which were then thought sufficient for the protection of Britain and the Empire.

![Hawker Fury biplanes at the Hendon Air Show in 1933](image)

Those that later met the Luftwaffe did not survive long but fortunately for us and the world the Hawker Siddeley and Supermarine Aircraft Companies (so it is said) had decided to ignore the Air Ministry and go ahead with developing the Hurricane and Spitfire
on their own account, just in time for the Battle of Britain. But only just. Fifty years later, while examining RAF records at the Public Record Office at Kew, I was surprised to discover just how extensive was RAF power throughout the British Empire in the 1920s and 30s; and how keeping peace across its vast boundaries required a constant flow of intelligence on the activities of friends, enemies and dissident groups, with endless political manoeuvring and frequent punitive strikes on trouble-makers. (Ironically, these included the same Kurdish tribesmen whom over half a century later the Royal Air Force would be called upon to protect against the current ruler of Iraq).

The RAF was in fact well suited for the job of controlling the unsophisticated warring subjects and neighbours of the Empire; but it failed to recognise soon enough the threat posed by a war with technologically advanced nations such as Germany and Japan. And so, to be fair, did almost everyone else in Britain.
CHAPTER 4
1933-1934

Local Life and Primary Education

Home, Unemployment and Hardship
The years between 1928 and 1934, when I reached the age of 11 and left primary school, still stand out fairly clearly in my mind. The argument whether we are fashioned as human beings by our environment or our heredity constantly recurs. My own observation is that while childhood years are crucial in forming a person’s outlook upon and approach to life - in their known environment. The most significant environmental influences are health, home and education. The child who is healthy and enjoys a stable home where he or she is part of an affectionate and accepted order of things has a strong base from which to face life. Similarly, friendship, appreciation and respect condition a person’s later ability to relate to others. But underlying and constantly overriding these factors is the basic temperament and intelligence that we are born with. This is what matters when we meet unexpected circumstances; when our world is turned upside down. None of the environmental factors seem to me to be able to make a basically pessimistic person more cheerful, a suspicious person more tolerant of others, a cruel nature more kindly, or a meek character more determined in adversity. These are inborn factors which are difficult to shift.

So far as my own environment was concerned, I was very lucky in having a loving, stimulating and congenial upbringing in a time of peace, and I look back on those days as being a most happy period. But in retrospect I see that for others they were quite the reverse. Following the Stock Market crash in America in 1929, the world was plunged into economic depression on a scale not seen before and unemployment caused huge misery in most countries. In the South of England we saw only a shadow of the heartbreak of the North and Wales. For some inkling of what it was like to be really poor, read “Two Pence to Cross the Mersey” by Helen Forrester, a small example being that her family of seven living in Liverpool had only half a comb between them because there was no money to waste on the luxury of a new one.

Many of our neighbours were in and out of work and my father seemed to have numerous short spells in dead-end jobs, interspersed with periods of unemployment when he would become dispirited, made more acute by his determination not to let me see it. He tried his hand at various business ventures, including making up small bottles of eau-de-Cologne which he hawked around the shops: none of them was successful. He was also a Hoover salesman for a time, a job which enabled him to have a car and me often to accompany him on interesting trips around the Reigate area of Surrey. At one stage he was thankful to get a job as a Corporation lorry driver and part-time labourer in a road repair gang. He often had no money at all in his pocket. Vera too lost her job at Oxford
Street Woolworths and I remember her arriving home in tears.

Although there was no obvious grinding poverty in our immediate area, we saw glimpses of the horror elsewhere. It was not unusual for people to walk round the streets singing, in the hope of being given a coin or two to buy something to eat. They usually had strange Welsh or Northern accents. But thanks to old Granpa Morton, who died long before I was born, we were never reduced to despair and always had enough food. Sadly, however, my mother frequently argued with my father about money or his lack of it, and I recall standing at the top of the stairs wishing they would stop, just for a while, so that I could go to sleep. But they never allowed their differences to affect their relationship with me.

Friends
I was also fortunate in having friends. Even in those early days there was a special and different relationship with each friend, a fact which continued throughout my life and one which no doubt other people also experience. For example, Wilfred and I would go fishing for sticklebacks and tadpoles, walking to the farthest side of Mitcham Common and back - some six to eight miles - without turning a hair, getting into scrapes and sometimes being chased by older boys or even enraged adults. When it was dark or wet we would play with our Meccano sets for hours on end, or do jigsaw puzzles. The Daily Mail 1000-piece puzzles were the ultimate challenge, being non-interlocking so that the slightest jolt threw the whole picture out of gear.

With Martin, who lived in a house immediately opposite mine, a different pattern of play emerged, involving toy soldiers and cowboys (which were made of lead, usually in Germany, and purchased cheaply at Woolworths). We transported them into imaginary situations of great variety and ingenuity, inventing a dialogue as we went along. Martin was a romantic, an only child, doted upon by his parents, and with a charming nature. We did not roam the wide world with the restless energy of nomads, as I did with Wilf. We didn’t go to the cinema or for bike rides or fishing or to try to steal rides at fairgrounds; and we never seemed to get into the scrapes which were normal with Wilf. Yet we played happily with particularly close companionship.

It was different yet again with Derek, who’s keen and indefatigable mind conveyed us into worlds of the future, with space-ships, planets and alien invaders. Although Derek was the year ahead of me, lived two roads away and even moved to a house a mile away, we still kept in touch and would sally forth together to the park, which would temporarily become the planet Venus and fallen tree one of the beasts which inhabited it; and puddles in the road must be circled around because they were pools of molten metal on the planet Mercury.

The Cinema
From the age of about 9, every Saturday night, with scarcely an exception, he and I would go to the cinema, of which there were at least ten within a penny tram ride. Often we would queue for ages then find ourselves either within a few feet of a huge screen or squeezed into the uppermost row of the uppermost balcony whence the screen was like a postage stamp. When there was an “A” film, we would importune some sympathetic adult to take us past the cashier.
The cinema was an inescapable feature of our world, much as the early black and white television inspired the dreams and interpreted life for our children in the 1960s. They were usually well attended, with queues on Saturday evenings which would take so long to clear that sometimes the major film was well under way before we got in.

We hardly ever went on Saturday mornings or afternoons since daylight was for messing about in. Most cinemas by then had reasonably comfortable seats, with arms, but the upper galleries of the Empire and the Hippodrome, which had been Music Hall theatres, were simply tiers with some sort of padding along their length.

If the person behind had long legs and you were an insignificant brat, they would not be at all concerned at kicking your backside or shoving a bony knee into the small of your back as they wriggled on the uncomfortable bench. There was no point in protesting; that simply confirmed that they were right to be beastly to you. But we were no better. I remember sitting with Wilf chewing peanuts and methodically dropping the husks into the open side pocket of the man in front of us.

Films were all black and white and nearly all American, but silent films were by then rare. We said we were “going to the pictures”, never to a “film” or the “cinema”. I suppose we understood most of the plots, though I can’t say I recall many of them. Gangsters, war, murder and Cowboy-and-Indian battles seemed to predominate, though possibly we were less interested in the “human” stories. Having been brought up on a diet of such unrestrained mayhem, I have reservations about the alleged influence of television violence on the young mind; but it was good clean violence and did not display gory details or dwell upon the sadistic pleasure in inflicting injury which modern producers seem to consider essential; nor was it introduced into our own homes, but was reserved to the
Sometimes there would be live stage turns to enhance the programme, sad remains of the great days of Music Hall. Most people were glad when they were over and the audience could return to the dark anonymity of the silver screen. But possibly the most striking feature for a modern child transported back to those years would be the dense clouds of tobacco smoke which filled the air, often casting a swirling shadow across the screen as someone lit up. The warm, cosy, friendly, smoky, smelly atmosphere was more treasured by us than the freshest sea breeze.

Although people were robust in their views and not disposed to regard children as of any great importance, I cannot remember a single instance of sinister physical threat to ourselves or any of our friends, or, for that matter, any public disturbance at all, during the several years Wilf and I traversed the town quite late at night as young children. The question simply did not arise. It was indeed a different world.

Animals
Then, as now, children would keep pets if space and the forbearance of their parents allowed. I had a small pond in the garden, inhabited by frogs, newts, toads, sticklebacks and anything else that the insatiable curiosity of small boys could discover lurking in the ponds and disused workings which abounded around Mitcham Common. Sometimes they lived in harmony - more often not. I also had a white rabbit and later several guinea pigs, the latter increasing in number exponentially until my mother insisted that the hutch be divided into separate boys’ and girls’ compartments.

One day Vera brought home a tortoise which she had found crossing the road, like the proverbial chicken. It was the first of several. Wilf and I found a pet shop at Broad Green, an adjoining district, which had a stock of tortoises and also a bottomless demand for high quality pond weed and fairly rare rams-horn water snails, two commodities which we found in a pond on a golf course. By stacking up credit, we were able to buy tortoises. I had three, including one truly enormous creature which I could hardly lift. We called him Granpa but sadly he did not survive one exceptionally cold winter.

During all this time, Gyp was a constant companion and pleasure until age and infirmity persuaded my mother that he should be put down. It was a horrible experience, not for him I hope, but for me, and I feel that it should never be done to any animal which has given loyalty and affection until one has really no alternative.

Primary Education and the Scholarship
During the years up to 1934, when I left the primary school, there was no hint of the holocaust to come. The war had bitten deeply into the souls of my parents’ generation and, unlike veterans of World War II, few ex-servicemen talked about their experiences. George Phillips, our landlord, had twice been buried alive by shell bursts and had also been severely gassed, as a result of which he suffered dreadful bouts of bronchitis when
he could scarcely breathe and coughed up revolting things. Others had seen and done things they couldn’t bear to think about. They were not going to inflict their memories on their children, with the result that war was unreal to us, glorified by story-tellers and film makers, but not remotely liable to happen. Yet the pacifism loudly proclaimed by the far Left was not shared by most people; it simply never crossed their minds that anyone could be so insane as to contemplate another war.

At primary school we received no Twentieth Century history at all (nor, for that matter, did we at our secondary school). The fact that the British Empire was based on military domination of other people was never questioned or even discussed except in terms of its desirability and inevitability. At the same time, ours was very far from being a militaristic society and there was a curious absence of indoctrination into the attraction and duty of present-day military service. Past victories, on the other hand, would be described in detail and viewed in a heroic and glorious light, implying that every right-minded young man would gladly give his life for his country. The fact that none of us expected to do so made this idea all the more admirable.

As I progressed up the school I moved into the top echelon, though able to perceive that there were one or two who greatly outshone me. The ultimate aim was to obtain a scholarship to a grammar school or one of the “Central Schools” which were of slightly lower standing. There were three grammar schools - Whitgift, Whitgift Middle and Selhurst. All took paying pupils and the number of free places was quite limited. In those days the scholarship exam could be taken at age 10. I just failed to make it but one or two others succeeded, leaving me with less competition, and I found myself appointed School Vice-Captain, a position which Derek had held the previous year before going on to the Whitgift Middle School.

**Imperial measurements**

The system of Imperial measurements which was used throughout the British Empire and, with modifications, in the United States, must seem incomprehensibly archaic to today’s children who have been educated since 1973 in the Metric system with its universal base of 10 and its logically designed relationship between length, weight and volume. The Imperial system had descended from Roman and Saxon measurements which were entirely pragmatic and related to visible or readily-handled quantities, while to the later Danish invaders of these British Islands we owe the “duodecimal” (ie to base 12) method of calculation. Measurements varied according to the commodity being measured.

Thus in length 12 inches made one foot, and three feet made one yard (the distance from a man’s nose to the tip of an outstretched arm); geographically 1,760 yards made one land mile but 2,000 yards one nautical mile, with intermediate units of a chain (22 yards), a furlong (220 yards), a nautical cable (200 yards) and a fathom (6 feet). Small measurements were in fractions of an inch, going down to as little as one sixty-fourth of an inch, and a good ruler would show these divisions. There were also odd agricultural units, including a “rod”, “pole” or “perch” which seemed to mean the same thing depending on which part of the country you happened to be in.
Tables like this were printed on the back of school exercise books

Money was just as difficult: 4 farthings or two half-pennies (pronounced “haypenny”) to one penny, 12 pence to one shilling (colloquially known as a “bob”), and 20 shillings or 240 pence to one pound or “quid”. Additional coins were a three-penny piece (called a “thruppenny bit”), a sixpence (universally known as a “tanner”), a florin (2 shillings) and a half-crown (two shillings and sixpence). The old crown worth five shillings was virtually obsolete; likewise, the guinea coin (21 shillings) which had been made of gold and now appeared only to adorn gentlemen’s watch-chains and ladies’ bracelets, though it was customary until well into the 1960s to price works of art in guineas, and classic horse races are still known as, for example, the Two Thousand Guineas.

These tables and many others we were made to learn by heart and they provided a goldmine for those who set examination questions, a typical example from my own scholarship paper being: “The inside measurements of a box are 24 inches long, 12 inches wide and 18 inches deep. Find what weight of lead would cover the bottom and the sides if the lead used weighs 6 pounds to the square foot”. (The pound weight was, of course quite different from a pound in money). The answer - I think - is 66 pounds.

Nevertheless, in 1934 at the age of 11, I did get my scholarship by the skin of my teeth and was allocated a place at Selhurst Grammar School.
Grammar School
The move to grammar school marked a significant change in my life. Though I still saw Wilf and Martin fairly often and enjoyed their company for many years, our ways were bound to separate as I entered an academic education with a whole new range of friends while they continued at the basic level which would end at the age of 14, unless they could get into a technical college.

Selhurst was once a small Surrey village next to Thornton Heath but now formed a continuous part of the Croydon conurbation. Selhurst Grammar School was run entirely by Croydon Council, unlike the two Whitgifts which were partly funded by endowments from Archbishop Whitgift dating back to Elizabethan times. In most ways, Selhurst and Whitgift Middle were on a par. All the masters (there were no women teachers) wore gowns and we attended on Saturday mornings, since Wednesday afternoons were earmarked for sport.
For boys who had been avid readers of that timeless magazine, The Magnet, and the exploits of Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry respectively, Selhurst had the trappings of a proper public school. People were called “cads” and “rotters”, and one exclaimed “Cave!” - the Latin for “beware” - on the approach of a teacher. We all wore school uniform, of course, blue worsted in winter and grey flannels with black blazer adorned with the school badge in summer. Sixth-formers wore special ties; and the whole school looked down on us awkward first-formers with justified contempt.

School fees were £5 a term and there was a keen entrance exam for private scholars; but scholarship boys were also expected to cough up if their parents had the means. In fact mine were compelled to do so for some time, until they persuaded the authorities that they simply couldn’t afford it. There were three classes for each age group - Forms A1, A2 and B. The conventional wisdom was that the A1s were the brightest but also the least adventuresome; the A2s were bright but holy terrors; and the Bs were a bit on the dim side. I was put in A2.

### The Timetable

A striking novelty was the timetable, with a different teacher for each subject, instead of the single Class Teacher of primary school. Algebra, Geometry, English, French, Latin, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, History, Art, PT, Handicrafts and Religious Knowledge for around five hundred pupils added up to a lot of teachers. Our aim was to gain a Schools Certificate, the equivalent of today’s GCSE “O” Level, (Note: currently [2015] GCSE) with matriculation exemption if one obtained high enough marks. Unlike today’s system, there was I think a minimum of five subjects, all of which had to be passed at one sitting; failure in one meant failure in all. Although we did not realise it at the time, the pressure was intense but in those days I had the priceless ability to memorise data, formulae, Latin vocabulary etc. by visualising the page on which it was written. Thus, irregular verbs were scanned.
quickly before the lesson and in effect “read out” from memory as required. Of course, this kind of memory is only short-term, though I did have an aptitude for language anyway. This meant that I was never lower than third in the class for the whole of my school career. An interesting reflection on the academic education is that those who were consistently nearer the bottom of the class (for example Bob Mendoza and Peter Aris, who remain my friends today) invariably worked their way up to highly paid and responsible positions in Industry and Commerce, while those at the top tended to go into teaching or the public service where the rewards (and risks) were considerably less.

**School Friends**

I rode to school daily on my bicycle, rain or shine, but many pupils just walked. The wide catchment area meant having friends who lived several miles away, and I soon covered the whole of Croydon and surrounding districts visiting their homes. We often cycled into the beautiful Surrey and Kent countryside, eventually working up to quite long distances. In all the pre-war years, however, I never travelled outside the Home Counties except for one holiday with my parents in Devon, three intriguing days with them in Boulogne and a school visit to Fry’s chocolate factory at Bristol. Consequently the Midlands, North, Scotland and Wales were totally foreign territory until the Second World War changed all that.

My classmates were all widely different characters. Bob Mendoza had just returned from Canada with his parents, who had unsuccessfully braved the challenge of emigration shortly after he was born. He had (and still has) a pronounced North American accent which the teachers believed, with some justification, that he emphasised for effect. We were often diverted by his loud stage whisper which the teacher would pretend not to have heard. Peter Aris, whom I later came to know very well, was not a close friend at school, largely because he lacked a bicycle. Bob and I on the other hand covered hundreds of miles over the years, with a close companion called David Lemon who disappeared on the outbreak of war and whom I did not see again.

I enjoyed my studies, as did most of us; but tormenting one’s neighbours was a necessary part of life and a relief from the harsh pressure of work. Although we had individual desks, it was possible to lean across when the teacher’s back was turned and inflict some mischief on an unsuspecting fellow-student. A strong hand suddenly squeezing the inside of one’s thigh was agonising and led to an involuntary howl. It was quite unacceptable for the victim to blame anyone; he just had to own up to making an objectionable noise and submit to the teacher’s wrath. The point of a pair of compasses wedged in a shoe was handy for jabbing the bottom of the fellow in front, though there would be violent retaliation at break time.

Over a period of about two years, the masters and boys constructed a full-seized pipe organ on the balcony above the assembly hall, a really amazing achievement which greatly enhanced our morning prayer service and was used for after-school concerts.
Discipline

Corporal punishment was fairly rare, the masters being generally of such strength of character that they could dominate us, and it was administered only by the Head or his Deputy; but it was nevertheless an effective ultimate deterrent. The Deputy, one Dr Treble and called “Tank” for heaven knows what reason, was reputed to enjoy drawing a chalk line across a boy’s posterior and whacking away till he had rubbed it out. Fortunately, I only faced the Head on such occasions, though he too had a strong right arm. He kept a sheaf of canes in a long vessel filled with brine. I can only assume that the ancient expression “having a rod in pickle” for someone arose from this curious practice.

Two teachers whom we did lead a merry dance, however, were the Geography master, Mr Hollingrake, whose class was affectionately known as “Tubbyland”, and the Latin master, Mr Scott, known as “Crank”. Many of them had seen war service and one had lost an arm but like most other ex-servicemen they very rarely mentioned it. Crank was a dear, kindly man who shocked us deeply one day by revealing aspects of bayonet fighting on the Western Front. The Maths master, one Mr Katz and inevitably known as “Pussy”, was a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany but he too refrained from disturbing our young minds with unpleasant details of concentration camps. He was a brilliant man with a number of abstruse books to his name. Once, it pleased us to ask the History master what a particular sentence in one of them meant - “Dialectic is the reciprocal conditioning of interpenetrating opposites”. It pleased us even more when he could not answer; not that we knew either, though I later worked it out.

It was surprising what teachers would put up with and what they wouldn’t. Bad language of any kind, misbehaving during assembly, “letting the side down” or lying, were heinous offences and incurred such intense moral disapproval that more drastic punishment was rarely necessary. Anyone found with “disgusting” pictures of a kind which daily grace the pages of today’s newspapers faced expulsion. Sparring about in the playground was normal but anything resembling a real fight or indeed any truly aggressive attitude towards another boy called for the direst penalty. “High Cockalorum” was a popular playground game and involved first one boy then more and more making a “back” against a tree while others leapfrogged along the line as far as they could; in the end one hurled oneself into the air along a line of up to a dozen backs, landing with great force on some unfortunate and the whole edifice collapsing in a heap.

In general, however, we were treated as responsible beings and on the whole that is what we became. The school uniform was sacrosanct. In those days hardly anyone went to work without a hat: workmen wore cloth caps; City businessmen, minor officials and foremen would sport a bowler; and the middle classes had trilbys. As soon as we dared, therefore, we obtained trilby hats and wore them when away from the school premises, looking and feeling self-conscious. I recall someone turning up at the sports field in one
on a Wednesday afternoon. Next day the Headmaster thundered at us that the wearing of “outlandish headgear” would not be tolerated.

Selhurst Grammar School was closed during the sweeping post-World War II reconstruction of educational facilities, but its Old Boys Association, The 'Old Croydonians', still continues at the time of writing.

The Crystal Palace
The Crystal Palace, built in Kensington Gardens for the 1851 Exhibition and later moved piece by piece to a hill in Penge, dominated the skyline for miles and, with its two great towers, was clearly visible from the bathroom of 7, Berne Road until one night it caught fire and burned to the ground.

How an edifice made almost entirely of steel and glass could be so completely consumed was mystifying and there was talk of a convenient end for what had become a white elephant. The towers remained for some years but now the name exists only as a railway station, sports stadium and football team. A small, rickety, open-topped tram ran from West Croydon to Crystal Palace, a relic of the days when no public transport had a roof on the upper deck. For wet weather there was a leather apron fixed to the back of the seat in front which was pulled around one’s knees for protection. I remember Derek calling one Saturday morning to collect me for a ride on the last of these machines before they were replaced by electric trolleybuses, themselves now museum pieces in London.
Politics and the Threat of War

Looking back now at old newspaper cuttings of the time, it was obvious that Germany was going to be a problem, but the prevailing mood was to ignore it. The Spanish Civil War filled much space and we even had a refugee boy attached to our class; but there was little discussion of the pros and cons in our circle and we were just too young to be touched by the feelings of outrage which prompted so many young men to join the International Brigade. Indeed, the popular view was that “the Reds” had caused the whole affair by their wanton disruption of the fabric of Spanish society and their general incompetence - a view which held some truth. The intervention of Germany in the war and in particular the horrific indiscriminate bombing of the little town of Guernica did however arouse strong revulsion.

The death of King George V, the accession and subsequent abdication of Edward VIII and the enthronement of George VI pushed everything else off the headlines for months and divided friends and families in support for or condemnation of Edward. His honesty and determination to face up to the Church and Establishment struck a chord with many British people but I doubt whether, in the event, they would have been too happy in those more conventional times to see someone who was a commoner, a foreigner and a divorcee become Queen. She was also unlikely to have children which, while decently kept from public discussion, could have complicated the succession.

When Italy under Mussolini invaded Libya, Ethiopia and Sudan we at last began to wonder why Britain said so much but did so little, and the vacillating incompetence of the League of Nations under British and French dominance left us feeling rather disgusted.
Even so, there was no keen and urgent discussion of the matter at school and we con-
tinued what was left of our happy childhood, undisturbed by the sinister fears of nuclear
war which oppressed our own children in the days of the Cold War.

Other Interests, including Spiritualism
I used to visit Derek’s house often as I moved into my ‘teens. Mr and Mrs Robinson
were always very kind to me and I felt almost part of their own family. Derek, their only
child, was an accomplished pianist and I enjoyed listening to him. He also had a stock of
fine records with the aid of which he imparted to me the glimmerings of appreciation of
classical music. Under his imaginative guidance we wrote “radio” plays which we per-
formed from a bedroom through a microphone connected to their wireless set, to the
patient and supposedly appreciative ears of his mother, father and grandmother. They
were always science fiction of course, since that was our major interest, and quite medi-
ocre; but we enjoyed doing them. Mrs Robinson had become involved in Spiritualism
and through her I too developed a mild interest. She eventually became obsessed with it
and tragically estranged from family and friends, but at the time it was appealing and I
still feel tolerant towards its ideas and beliefs. I saw odd table-lifting phenomena and the
strange and unexplained appearance during a seance of objects called “apports”, some-
times loose flowers which were still fresh and scented. One of them, a small ivory figure
of a monk which dropped into Derek’s living room, I carried round my neck during the
war as a lucky charm, which it proved to be. After the war I kept it among my personal
valuables but it disappeared as strangely as it had come.

Derek and I also conceived the idea of writing our own language. I had dabbled in Es-
peranto and was good at Latin and French. We set about this daunting task and over a
period of many months wrote vocabularies of several thousand words with supporting
grammatical rules. We corresponded in the language for some time and in fact both still
have all our books in our possession. But with the advent of the war, messages in a
strange tongue were sure to be regarded with suspicion!

Other interests included making flying scale model aeroplanes. The frames
were meticulously cut out of strips of
balsa wood and glued together, then
rice paper was carefully stretched over
the frame and painted with aero dope.
A school friend and I became quite
skilled at making models with a wing
span of up to 60cm, powered by spe-
cial elastic, which we would fly on
Coulsdon Downs. Swimming was also
a popular pastime but I fear that or-
ganised sport still bored me and I can-
not say that my services on the rugby
or cricket field were ever in great de-
mand.
The Radio
Throughout the 1930s there was a steady and dramatic increase in technology and particularly in the emergence of mass markets and mass-production, fuelled by wider literacy and intense advertising. The motor car was one clear example, becoming by the end of the decade a legitimate and achievable aim of working-class people. Less obvious but socially very significant was the spread of radio, still then called the “wireless”. This was made possible by the invention of the thermionic valve which enabled weak radio transmissions to be amplified so much that they could be funnelled into a horn or “loudspeaker” which the whole family could listen to instead of just the one individual who had commandeered the headphones. The considerable extra low-voltage power needed to operate the valves was provided by a lead-and-acid battery in a glass jar, called an “accumulator”, which could be recharged when its strength ran out. Those who had the rapidly spreading mains electricity in their homes could effect this themselves using a battery charger; otherwise, one took the accumulator to a dealer for re-charging. Within a few years radio sets were constructed which took all their power supply from the mains and the modern instrument was born. By 1938 we had a set on which I explored short-wave transmissions from as far away as the USA, though it was a tricky business finding, and keeping, them.

Listening to a radio broadcast in the 1930s
Music
My mother was a first rate pianist and had been popular at parties in her younger days. She still played regularly at home for her own amusement but I, for some reason, never took to the business of learning it. One day, however, my cousin Denis acquired a small ukulele, which so fascinated me that he presented it to me. I resolved to take lessons in it and as luck would have it noticed a house in the very next road bearing a hand-written legend saying “Guitar Lessons”.

I called there and made the acquaintance of one Bert Sargent, a most intriguing character. Having missed out on education and coming from a poor East End home, he nevertheless possessed enormous natural intelligence and a wide-ranging curiosity. He had turned his hand to many things including a musical career on the Halls as a banjoist and guitarist, and had now settled down to life as a sign-writer and part-time music teacher.

He tactfully observed that the ukulele with its four strings was more of a toy than a musical instrument and produced an enormous Gibson guitar with six steel strings from which he struck the most entrancing sounds. I fell for it, purchased a cheap guitar, and entered a world which has given me an interest and pleasure for most of my life.

Father - a Proper Job at Last
My father was out more and more often and my mother developed a passion for whist drives, which were very popular at the time and attracted large numbers with their high prizes. After the war, they were ousted by Bingo drives.

Unnoticed by many people, the Government had started to prepare for war and this injected life and money into the economy so that unemployment dropped. Life for the working man was still precarious, however; supervisors were expected to be imperious and unsympathetic, and a man could be sacked at the drop of a hat as the God-given right of his employer. Unions still worked against great odds and large numbers of people were totally unorganised.

Nevertheless, things had begun to get better. Our landlords, the Phillips, had another bright idea: they would purchase a small garage with two petrol pumps, a salesroom and a workshop, which my father would manage. The business chosen was at Merton, near
to Wimbledon. He threw himself into this venture with great enthusiasm but limited success. His mechanical skill and knowledge were exceptional, but his business acumen was not up to the game of buying and selling cars, which was a minefield for anyone of a sympathetic or trusting nature. The war would have changed all this since many such workshops went over to war production with Government support and their owners made lots of money. But sadly this was not to be.

**Munich - “Peace in Our Time”**

Suddenly, in 1938, the Munich crisis was upon us. Germany had insisted on moving troops into the Sudetenland, which was then part of Czechoslovakia, ostensibly to “protect” the German-speaking population there, and the Czechs were prepared to fight, calling upon Britain and France to honour our treaty obligations to them. The streets of our cities were blacked out, traffic lights were covered except for a small cross of light in the middle, and car headlamps fitted with a plate which directed a thin shaft of light onto the immediate foreground. Plans were rushed ahead to evacuate school children to the country and the nation stood ready for mobilisation. As I learned later when my job involved emergency planning, mobilisation is relatively easy to start but very difficult to draw back from. The historian A J P Taylor suggested that the First World War, which on the face of things ought to have been avoidable, became inevitable because Germany and France mobilised their armies and set them in motion but had prepared no plans for halting the process while diplomacy took its course; confrontation followed with tragic results.

But Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain made his dramatic dash to meet Hitler at Munich and did a deal which gave the latter the territory he wanted, leaving the Czechs helpless and humiliated. The following Spring, Hitler occupied the whole of Czechoslovakia anyway, leaving History to agonise over whether Chamberlain had been right or wrong; and whether postponement of war gave Britain just enough time to prepare, or whether he really had any other choice.
But for us it was back to peace and another precious year of a well-ordered world which was about to disappear for ever. We were conscious that we were getting a good education and that we were a privileged minority; and with it went a confidence which we carried throughout our lives. But possibly more important was the mark left upon us by the character and example of our teachers, who themselves reflected the spirit and mores of the Britain of those days. They showed us how to behave towards others. They represented civilised mankind at its best and made us into passable human beings, until it became necessary for the nation to teach us to kill.
CHAPTER 6

1938-1939

Leaving School

Adolescence
That September we returned to school as Fifth-Formers, preparing to take our Schools Certificate examination in the following June. We realised we were almost men by then. Our voices had broken and adults had strangely become the same size as ourselves. The new term’s boys, awed by their metamorphosis into a new life, were looked down upon with tolerance rather than as contemptible little weeds. We read widely, studied hard, went on long and testing bike rides, experimented with the odd puff of pipe or cigarette. While we were intensely social and visited each other’s homes, and of course were curious about the opposite sex, we were nevertheless much less sophisticated than young people of around 15 years of age today. We didn’t drink alcohol at home or have mixed parties; and while one or two of the more dashing fellows boasted girlfriends whom they met and walked home with, the majority looked on with interest rather than envy.

There was actually a Selhurst Girls School, built alongside ours but, in the tradition of the day, totally screened from us and with no normal contact whatever. However, at the end of the Autumn term in 1938 it was announced that there would be a Dance for Fifth and Sixth Formers to which some of the next door young ladies would be invited. Chaps with sisters could bring them too if they wished. This occasioned enormous interest and speculation and from what little I remember it was quite good, though inordinately respectable. I met a young lady whose twin brothers had been in my form at Ecclesbourne and actually visited her home a few times afterwards. The house was later destroyed by a bomb.

Ballroom dancing was the norm. It required disciplined foot routines that you had to learn.
but fortunately she and her family were in their air raid shelter. Although, in company with two friends, I had daringly taken lessons with a private lady tutor, few of us could dance with any degree of grace or proficiency, a somewhat severe limitation in days when dancing meant Ballroom dancing and demanded disciplined foot routines. Anyone trying to “do their own thing” in the uninhibited fashion of today would have been hustled off the floor pretty smartly; that sort of behaviour was for less civilised people in faraway lands. In general, however, romantic interests were subordinated to the need to work, though Derek and I were deeply intrigued by two film stars, Vivien Leigh and Ann Todd, whose photographs we purchased from one of the film magazines.

![Vivian Leigh](image1.jpg)  ![Ann Todd](image2.jpg)

**The World Around Us**
We also accepted the world as it was, much more than did later generations. The Britain of our youth was more stable than today’s, its national institutions firmly respected and the BBC dedicated to preserving them, with newspapers critical mostly in arguing for a stronger and more positive role for the country. There was nothing resembling the crusading “investigative” television programmes or newspaper articles which today delight in finding deficiencies in every facet of our national life. Our attitude was one of supreme if, as events proved, rather optimistic confidence in ourselves and our historic role, unlike the universal suspicion of authority which has arisen since the war. History will say whether the former was a source of strength or a ridiculous delusion, and the latter a healthy awareness or a self-destructive folly. Either way, we were rarely invited to criticise the world of our elders.

Certainly there were social matters which ought to have been aired more strongly. People in the South had been disturbed by the hunger marches of a few years previously but such public agitation as there was directed itself more to the antics of
Germany and Italy and the apparent spinelessness of Britain and France. Oswald Mosley and his uniformed fascists regularly paraded through the Jewish quarters of London’s East End, provoking fights and police intervention which helped stir British public opinion belatedly into realising what was happening in Germany, though the full horror would not be revealed until after the war. I remember that a particularly wealthy lady cruised up and down the English Channel in her private yacht with the words “WAKE UP ENGLAND” emblazoned on it in bright lights. An ordered world is a comfortable one, but with hindsight I can see that ours involved an acceptance of practices and injustices which later generations would want to correct.

**What Sort of Career?**

A few boys had ambitions to go to University but this was hugely expensive. There was a small number of scholarship places but the competition for them nationwide was immense and even then one needed reasonably well-heeled parents. So for most of us University simply wasn’t an option and the question of a job began to exercise our minds. We had hardly any vocational guidance but conventional wisdom suggested a bank or insurance company as offering the most favourable career. One or two people thought about the Armed Forces, Colonial Service or Merchant Navy but I do not recall any wildly adventurous ideas. It must be remembered that society was just emerging from a period of devastating unemployment when the crucial need was to have a job at all; if it was reasonably secure, that was a huge bonus, and if it was also interesting one’s cup was full.

One boy, John Heap, a natural leader and Surrey Schools swimming champion, caused concern to teachers and amusement to us by announcing that he had obtained a place in a barber’s shop where he would not actually be taught much but could pick up the trade from customers who were rash or impatient enough to allow him to practise on them. In the event, he became a distinguished fighter pilot, a Squadron Leader, and was sadly killed in 1944. Another friend, Rex Cotterell, started work as an apprentice at the Monotype Printing Works which built machines for converting typed letters directly from molten metal into a printing block, a quite staggering advance on the traditional printer’s art of picking letters out of a box (hence Upper Case and Lower Case), but one which also seems archaic against modern computer and photographic technology. Rex too became an RAF pilot but survived to become Chief Pilot of United Airways.

Derek had in the meantime left school and taken the Civil Service Clerical Officer examination. I never knew what inspired him to do so but possibly his school gave better vocational guidance than mine. He was appointed to the old Board of Education as it then was, and he urged me to follow suit. I accordingly took the Civil Service examination in the Spring of 1939, somewhat to the surprise of the school, to whom the Civil Service seemed to be a closed book. The examination was highly competitive and of a standard comparable with, if not slightly higher than the
Schools Certificate. Out of 5,000 entrants, only 1,500 were accepted and I was surprised to find myself No 504.

The Admiralty, and a Decision Which Determined my Whole Life
I duly applied for a post at the Board of Education but was disappointed and rather mystified at being told to report to somewhere called The Admiralty, of which I had never heard. Also to my surprise, they wanted me to start at once. I explained that I was about to take my Schools Certificate examination and asked if I could have a few days off for that purpose, only to be told rather sniffily that I could not. They added reluctantly that if I wished I could defer my entry until after the exams but on pain of “loss of seniority”. As I had no idea what such loss might entail I decided it would be safer to start at once, thus losing both the Schools Certificate and the matriculation exemption which I would certainly have gained. The loss was later inconvenient and irksome though not serious, but that one decision determined the area of Admiralty work which I should enter and set the whole of the rest of my life on its course.

I discovered that the Admiralty was in fact the office for administering the Royal Navy. It provided for the vast array of material, men and services needed to run a modern Navy, and through it Parliament furnished the necessary money and exercised political control. Its Head was the First Lord of the Admiralty, a Cabinet Minister, of whom more later. But the Admiralty, unlike the War Office for the Army and the Air Ministry for the RAF, also acted as an operational Headquarters exercising direct control over naval affairs all over the world. As such it had large Operations and Intelligence centres manned by naval officers, and an extensive high-powered radio network which transmitted orders to ships and listened to their messages in all the oceans of the globe.
This dual operational and administrative role was facilitated by a curious mixture of civilian and naval elements working closely together - a singularly British arrangement. Thus warships flying the White Ensign were manned and operated entirely by uniformed Royal Navy personnel; but they were supported by a world-wide fleet of Navy tankers, ammunition and other supply ships sailing under the Blue Ensign, manned by Royal Fleet Auxiliary personnel recruited from the Merchant Navy, but controlled by the purely civilian Supply Departments of the Admiralty. Both were distinct from the Merchant Fleet proper, whose ships flew the Red Ensign - the old “Red Duster” which at one time adorned one quarter of the world’s entire mercantile tonnage. The Merchant Navy was owned and operated by private companies but the Admiralty kept a very close interest in it through a Trade Division.

**War Registry**

However, all this was beyond my ken when I presented myself at the Admiralty Offices in Whitehall on 5th May 1939. I was told to report to somewhere called War Registry. In keeping with the odd practice just described, it was a wholly civilian unit handling naval messages (“signals” we called them) to and from the Admiralty and
working in conjunction with a Navy-manned Wireless Station and a Naval Operations Room. Its task was to encode and decode signals, decide the means of transmitting outgoing signals and see that copies of all signals were sent to the right people in the vast Admiralty organisation. Its unexciting name was intended to divert attention from its significance in Naval operations.

At the time, it consisted of about 40 people occupying a small suite of rooms overlooking the Admiralty courtyard in Whitehall, but it was in process of rapid expansion. Five other young men joined at the same time as I, and we were put to work amending code books. These reminded me of schoolboy games with their references to Squadrons and Flotillas of Battleships, Battle Cruisers, Aircraft Carriers, Cruisers, Destroyers, Submarines and many other craft whose functions then meant nothing to me. Many of the amendments concerned the renaming of RAF airfields as Royal Naval Air Stations, reflecting a recent decision to restore the Fleet Air Arm to Naval control.

The Royal Navy had pioneered the use of aircraft launched from ships but after the First World War control of all Air matters was transferred to the Air Ministry, an arrangement which ensured that the special needs and unique advantages of shipborne aircraft were ignored. As a consequence, the Fleet Air Arm entered World War II with slow and cumbersome Fairey Swordfish biplanes which their pilots
called “stringbags” and was unable to play its full strategic role until the later stages of the war. For the same reason, most Royal Navy Officers had acquired very little experience of air matters and some took a blinkered view of the use of Naval Aviation, with tragic results. Fortunately for us all, the Americans had arranged things better; but that is now History.

After a few weeks, we were initiated into the mysteries of codes and cyphers, the difference being (in our case) simply that the latter were of higher security. The code or cypher books themselves remained in force for several years but the actual figures were changed by the use of Tables of random numbers, which were renewed frequently. In case the reader is interested, the method was to subtract the number in the code book from a number in the table without “carrying” the tens; this gave a third number quite unlike either of the others. When the recipient reversed the process using the same place in the same table (indicated by a keyword), the original code was revealed. For example, 1654 subtracted from 6925 gives 5371, which was the figure actually transmitted; 5371 subtracted from the same 6925 miraculously gives 1654 again. Each number was called a “group”; operational codes and cyphers had four-figure groups but there was a ponderous administrative code of five figures. The subtracting was done from left to right and we learned to do it at lightning speed, but it played havoc with our normal mental arithmetic.

London

London was a wonderful place to me. When quite young, I had been taken by my mother at Christmas time to Gamages, a huge department store with an incredible toy section, now sadly demolished and replaced by an impersonal office block. Now, in my lunchtime, I could if I hurried reach it on foot, race round the many delights it offered and get back more or less on time. In those pre-war days no-one could pretend that the Civil Service was hard-worked. The Admiralty’s hours were 10am till 5pm, which meant that we could make a leisurely journey to and from the office, avoiding the scurrying, downtrodden shop and business staff who were expected to work from 8.30 or 9am till 5.30 or 6pm or even later. “Real” workmen - manual workers - normally started from 7am onwards and special cheap fares were available for them. After the war, when things had changed beyond recognition, I would myself often leave home early to catch the Workman train or tram. My salary was thirty-nine shillings a week, equivalent to £1.95 at the time of writing. This was good: the family of five who lived opposite us in Berne Road subsisted on fifty shillings or £2.50 a week. I was able to live at home and paid only a modest amount for rent and board but many of my colleagues came from the farthest corners of the British Isles and after paying board and lodging had very little left for clothes and journeys home. But one could get a good lunch in the Admiralty canteen for sixpence (=2½p today); and as a special treat we would go to Lyons Corner House in the Strand, where a three-course meal served by a waiter in black tie and jacket to the accompaniment of music from a real orchestra would cost a mere one shilling and sixpence,
or 9p today. The Strand Corner House and its companion at Piccadilly Circus have needlessly to say long gone.

A School Trip
By July 1939 I had acquired an entitlement to some leave and notwithstanding their niggardliness over my examination the authorities allowed me a week off to go on a pre-arranged school trip to Annecy in France, with a night at a Paris hotel on the way. It was the first real journey abroad for most of us and we all set off by train and boat in very high spirits, visiting the Eiffel Tower, Montmartre and Sacre Coeur and sampling the famed Metro before travelling overnight to our tented camp in the beautiful French Alps. We were accompanied by Smiler King, the History master, and some Sixth-formers and began to enjoy ourselves wonderfully. However, after a couple of days a mysterious telegram arrived addressed to me saying “Leave cancelled, return at once: Admiralty”. This caused some concern, not only because we were blissfully unaware of a sudden worsening of the international situation but more particularly because the whole party had travelled on a group passport. But after a visit to the local mayor I was furnished with an attestation enabling me to travel back to England without a passport. Rex Cotterell insisted on accompanying me to Paris. “How touching”, said Smiler. “Not a bit”, muttered Rex to me, “I just fancy a night in Paris on my own”. We set off next day and in conversation with worried French people on the train gathered that things had deteriorated rapidly since our departure. Rex wasn’t sure that he and the rest of the party would get home before the storm broke. In fact, they did so with just three days to spare.

Watch Keeping
On reporting to the Admiralty, I found that things had assumed an urgency formerly unknown. The place was actually preparing to do the job it was created for. I was put on a watch-keeping rota of twelve hours on duty and twenty-four off, an unsettling arrangement of alternate day and night watches which meant that one lost every third night’s sleep. As I had never missed a night in my life or for that matter worked for an unbroken twelve-hour stretch, this was a novelty which I found unappealing; but there were other young people there, including a number of young ladies, and we found compensating humour in our suffering. This appalling routine, which played utter havoc with the bodily systems of all who suffered it, actually continued throughout the war in spite of pleas to change it to a weekly basis, and many people stuck it for the whole six years, to the detriment of their health.

The cause of the crisis was that Hitler had been demanding the return of the so-called free port of Danzig (or Gdansk), which had once been part of Germany but was then under Polish protection and was approached by a wide “corridor” of land cutting through northern Germany. This was another of the penal conditions imposed on Germany by the Treaty of Versailles after the 1914-1918 War, which a modicum of foresight would have shown to carry the certainty of future conflict. Hitler, after his previous successes with the pusillanimous governments of Britain and France, was in no mood to discuss matters reasonably. Nor for that matter were the Poles, bolstered (as they thought) with cast-iron guarantees of British and French protection, willing to make concessions to this strutting upstart. Germany’s ultimatum to the Poles was couched in terms they could not possibly accept and on 1st September 1939, after a German cruiser on a “courtesy” visit to a Polish port adjoining Danzig suddenly poured shells into the defenceless city, German troops flooded across the Polish frontier. Britain, followed by France, issued a warning that they would not stand by - and demanded that the Germans withdraw.

On Sunday 3rd September 1939 the British people were told to stand by their radio sets, and at 11am we heard the voice of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain saying dismally “I have to tell you that the German Government has not replied to our message and that consequently this country is at war with Germany”. From War Registry and the Naval Wireless Station in Whitehall went a “Most Immediate” General Message to every ship and naval authority in the farthest-flung corners of the world, with just two words:

“Total Germany”

The proud life of Britain and her Empire, and indeed the fruits of centuries of history, were about to end.
This is not the end of the story.


My plan is to publish Ralph’s memoirs in book form for the benefit of following generations, in whose number I include myself. Publishing a book is something I have never done so this is an experiment to see if self-publishing will produce a product worthy of Ralph’s story and worthy of the many people who will receive a copy.

The full story is entitled “Witness to a Passing Age – the Diary of a 20th century gentleman” and the volume you are holding in your hands consists of the first six chapters – the pre-war, growing up years. I have given it a different title just in case, once it’s published, the full story cannot have the same title.

It’s a major project and this is the first step. I hope you enjoy it and will be motivated to go online and read the following chapters. You can pick the story up at Chapter 7.

Brian Smith
July 2016