

Gangsters

“Don’t Call Me Scarface”

By Alan Miles (email) – Feb 2013

One of the regular visitors to The Bell pub was a notorious thug known as Eric Horst. I'll try and describe him to you as I remember him.

He was about five foot nine tall. Whenever I saw him he was always wearing a navy blue serge suit, under which he always wore a white shirt and opened at the neck. In the cold weather he sometimes wore an old brown gabardine mac. His face was reminiscent of a Hun. With high cheek-bones, brown eyes and his square-head, his hair was silver and cropped closely, he reminded me of Lee Marvin. Somebody else thought he looked more like George Peppard. Eric had a gravelly voice like Lee Marvin's, but what was most hideous about his face, was that he bore a dreadful scar; which ran from his left cheek across his mouth to the right cheek, and it looked like a jagged smile.

In the old days of the Underworld, this was known as 'The Smile, which made him a marked man. I was told this was given to him, by a well-known Romany who was at a party in Higham Hill. Apparently what had happened was, Eric had attempted to gate-crash the party. The Romany in deep fear broke a pint mug leaving the handle with enough glass on it, to cut Eric's cheeks with. I have been told the Romanies were up all night, roaming the streets looking for Eric Horst.

Eric was a one man band Protection racket and greatly feared.

In the mid-60s, Eric walked into The Bell pub and into the Public Bar and walked up to Dave (I mention no further name) and said "Are you looking for me?" Dave denied this to Eric, but as he tried to reason with Eric, Eric threw a quick right hook into Dave's face. Dave reeled back a couple of feet, and leaned against the bar. Eric attempted to throw another punch, but Dave 'nutted' him, full on his nose and Eric fell on his bum. Eric with his face bleeding attempted to get up off the floor, but two more of 'The Lads' set about Eric, kicking and punching him to the ground again. They finally let Eric stand up and he said to Dave "I'll be back for you". I want to say that it would take about three men to beat Eric, he was a handful.

Eric lived in Shakespeare Road E17, in the Higham Hill area, which then was notorious for 'rough' people. My Mum used to tell me to "keep away from the Higham Hill Roughts". There was a well-known prostitute in the area called Higham Hill Lill who was fat and spotty, and her Mum was also on the game. Also, in the area at this time was a large Romany Population, some of them are still friends of mine (I hope!).

Sadly, in the early 60s at some point, Eric's daughter Cheryl took her own life, she was a beautiful girl and I still remember her. She had lovely long black hair and

gorgeous brown eyes. An old mate of mine went out with Cheryl for a while and would call on her sometimes. My mate told me that Eric would sit in 'his' armchair by the fire reading his newspaper and as the couple went out of the door, Eric would shout out "Don't touch my daughter".

In the summer of '65, I went to the fair at Chingford Plains, with a girlfriend called Dolly. I decided that we should go on the 'Dodgem Cars". We got into the dodgem and it started to move. I suddenly looked ahead, and of all people to see Eric Horst was there driving a dodgem too, with his wife sat beside him.

Already his dodgem, was being rammed and bumped by other dodgems, and Eric seemed to be rolling round with laughter, he absolutely loved it. My own dodgem went out of control and I couldn't steer the thing, and we went side-long crashing into Eric's dodgem. This buffered Eric about a bit. I was thinking "Oh no the guy's gonna kill me". I feared that he may jump out of his dodgem and punch me one. I called out "Sorry Mate", and rammed him one more time. THAT was a very frightening episode.

What is about to be written now may seem unbelievable but is true.

In 1965, I was walking past the New China restaurant in Hoe Street, the front door was open and at the very back of the restaurant, I saw a few mates of mine. I walked in and waved at them, and then I saw ...oh no...not that man again, Eric! He looked at me in the middle of eating his Chow Mein, put down his knife and fork (yes he could use them!) and abruptly stood up. He quickly walked towards me; he was STILL wearing that rotten old gabardine mac.

I walked slowly backwards out of the restaurant, and on to the kerb. He walked outside and ventured towards me, and in his gravelly voice growled "Who are you waving at Mick Jagger? I tried to reason with this brute, telling him, that I was waving at my friends who were sat behind him, and he staggered a few steps towards me, and lifted his right arm ready to punch me. My inner voice said to me "Don't show him any fear, don't run away". As he let his right hook go, I timed it correctly and ducked. There must have been help from 'above', because Eric swirled around and fell in the gutter (some might say fittingly!). I said to him whilst he was laying there "The Police are up the road Eric" and he shouted out loud "Where is the f*c**ng Police, where is the f&c**ng Police?"

Eric's henchman was known by the name of Chopper Watts. I don't know why he was called Chopper. I suppose either because he used one in acts of violence, or he had a girlfriend who had a big mouth! Anyway, Chopper came running out of the restaurant, albeit a bit too late; stopped and looked at me in disbelief, and in his disbelief smiled. He looked down at Eric who was writhing around in his old gabardine coat, and he looked at Eric still in disbelief.

I have never forgotten this incident, as I heard the 'whoosh' of Eric's right fist whisking past my head. So it was just a case of "Local thug bullies teenager" as I was only 16.