

'ESSEX BOY'



**Some Personal Folklore and Memories
Walthamstow and Rainham**

1949-1959

By

BARRIE STEVENS

'Essex Boy'-Walthamstow and Rainham 1949-1959



The author one supposes aged about two years
outside Number 2, Jessie Cottages, Low Hall Lane,
Walthamstow, Essex about 1951

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Introduction

This work has been written from memory without any real reference or research and then thrown onto the page spontaneously with no editing from me at least in its original form. It was not primarily intended for publication at all, let alone as an autobiography, but for use as an historical record by the Essex Record Office (ERO) in the hope that the 60 years of life and times to be ultimately described by way of this planned series may, at some time in the distant future, be of both academic and literary use.

Indeed, I have commenced this work on or around my fifty ninth birthday having returned to Chelmsford, the county town, on or around April 11th 2008 after 22 years away from the area living in both Manchester and the Isle of Man. Some of these memories will be 53-55 years old if not more!

Further to the above, this work has been compiled in order to compensate me for the theft of my late father's "war diary" and photographs. They being a record kept painstakingly in miniature writing from 1944-1946 when, from 1942-46, he served as a Sapper/Field Engineer rising finally to Company Quarter Master Sergeant with 240 Field Company Royal Engineers.

It had been my intention to publish the aforesaid diary and photographs and thus I hold a certain copying shop proprietor in the Isle of Man as being responsible for their current status as "missing". I have my suspicions.

Consequently, I believe that the aforesaid war diary item and photographs may one day arise by way of sale or publication. Be warned! The copyright I assert is mine by inheritance as from April 1996 and furthermore, as the items have not been published, the copyright will subsist for many years yet!

In the meantime, my loss aforesaid has driven me on to complete this memoir and any subsequent additions. May someone, somewhere, sometime and someplace find them to be of use and or interest. Fair copy and quotation is permitted in accordance with statute but these works nevertheless remain my copyright and in which respect I assert my right to be identified as the author.

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I am it seems, a genuine 'Essex Boy' and which has come as a surprise as I had always thought of myself as having been born in London. Reference to my birth certificate however shows that I was born on September 25th 1949 in the Essex "UD" or "Urban District" at Thorpe Coombe Maternity Hospital, Forest Road, Walthamstow, London, E.17 and which was then apparently within the county of Essex. The bed it seems was beneath the fourth window along from the left on the first floor as you drive through Walthamstow towards London.

Walthamstow Town Hall, a massive structure, is on the right hand side of that same road and there is a nearby park. Is that the George Gascoigne Park? My late mother, Kathleen M. Stevens nee Fryer went to the George Gascoigne school Walthamstow following on from some time at the High Church-Anglo-Catholic St. Saviour's School, Mark House Road also in Walthamstow and close to Low Hall Lane. Who was George Gascoigne?

From my mother I know that I was born at half past one on a Sunday afternoon, 'in time for lunch' and being about six weeks premature it was long said to be the only time that I was to be early but which I have always considered something of a slander! Apparently my mother was scoring a cricket match at the time. It seems that I was not expected to survive despite being placed in some sort of oxygen contraption of an incubator or some-such. "Blue baby" was the then technical term.

My late father, Kenneth Harry Stevens known as "Harry" to his side of the family, used to play for a club called "Larkhill Cricket Club" somewhere within striking distance of Walthamstow. I was often told that I had nearly been born in a cricket pavilion!

"Navy time is always five minutes before time," was a phrase I recall my mother often using when I was a teenager. She had been in the "WRENS" during World War Two and amassed a minor collection of naval phraseology! These included crashing one out of bed in the morning with, "Wakey! Wakey" Rise and Shine. Show a leg there. The sun's burning your eye-balls out" and "Get up with a lark go to bed with a wren!".

Originally to be named Kevin as a counter to my cousin Kelvin, now the Reverend Kelvin Powell an Anglican Rector said to be currently living somewhere in Bedford, my name was spontaneously changed to "Barrie" by my mother when the Registrar came round the ward two days after my birth. Thus my father went off to work at Blue Funnel Line in the morning telling his work-mates that he had a son called Kevin, only to find two days later that he by then had a son called Barrie!

My parents were my mother, Kathleen Maude Stevens nee Fryer, born Walthamstow 15th June 1926 - they then held the General Strike in consequence as she always said - and my father, Kenneth Harry Stevens, born South London, Peckham or Nunhead, on 21st April 1924.

Described as a shipping clerk on my birth certificate, he worked in a dock-side office within the Royal Docks for Alfred Holt Steamship Company - the Blue Funnel Line. Later, in the 1970s, he would help buy, take over and run some of their unwanted cargo-liners of which more in another volume about my own time in the City as a ship broking member of the Baltic Exchange to which father was elected in 1955 and eventually myself in 1971.

My mother and father then lived or rather lodged with my maternal grandparents, Jack Fryer and his wife Alice Rose Fryer, (Nana Fryer) at No 2, Jessie Cottages, Low Hall Lane, Walthamstow, London E17. My mother and father had met earlier in 1942 I believe. My father had left Bancroft's School, Woodford, Essex, around the age of seventeen, been employed briefly by Blue Funnel Line and then at seventeen and a half had volunteered for Army service by joining the Royal Engineers. The "bait" was that if you volunteered prior to becoming 18 and certain conscription, then you had some choice - allegedly.

The Royal Engineers then had a port operations section which my father saw as combining war service with learning. Needless to say, he trained in mountain warfare in Scotland and Northern Ireland before being sent to the low-countries of Holland and Belgium by way of Normandy as a Sapper/Field Engineer! There they were, paddling around in rubber boats with "Mountain Division" flashes on their uniforms trying to mend the Dutch dykes and in particular, the Meerdam!

My mother left school at maybe fourteen or fifteen. She was certainly evacuated to Bedford at about this time. The local Walthamstow newspaper once published a memory-lane piece in the 1960s along with a photograph of Walthamstow children going off to St. James' Street Station for evacuation. Right there in the front is my mother, Kathleen Fryer, with suitcase in hand and luggage label round the neck as indeed they all did!

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Incidentally, that same local newspaper also published an account of my Grandparents (Fryer) golden wedding anniversary or some such memorable even. That would have been around about 1960 I suppose.

After her first job in Walthamstow in the offices of Lewis's Wire Works, which I recall as a factory emitting a strange and constant hum and an even stranger smell, she was employed in the City at the offices of the Shipping Federation in St. Mary Axe and which led to meeting my father.

In fact, my father had no viable family home to go back to after being released from the Army in 1946 and so he lodged at No 2, Jessie Cottages, Low Hall Lane, Walthamstow sharing a back room with one of my mother's brothers, William Lawson Fryer - "Uncle Will" who in 1948 emigrated to the USA subsequently becoming an American citizen living primarily in Cincinnati/Columbus Ohio and then latterly Toronto, Ontario, Canada where he eventually died.

My father had no viable family home to go back to as his parents and brothers and sister had been moved to a then new London County Council estate in Mottingham where they and some later sibling arrivals were to live for many years, namely, 137, Castleton Road, Mottingham, London, SE 9. The old family home at Nunhead, (Senate Street was it?) had been bombed in any case. My father also had spent much of his early life from the age of about eleven at Bancroft's School, Woodford Wells, Woodford Green, Essex.

Father had been recognised as being much brighter than most. Had started full-time school aged three and at about 10-11 been entered successfully for a Bancroft's Scholarship. He remained full-time at Bancroft's all the year round from 1935 to about 1942 as home-life conditions were a bit poor at the time.

My father told me that he never again recaptured the flavour of going to London with his primary school teacher in order to spend some of the scholarship money on the Bancroft's School uniform nor the taste of the "knickerbocker glory" to which he was on that same day "treated". Such treats were rare for a boy of his home background where times were hard, money short and even food absent on some days.

I still have the Church of England Book of Common Prayer given to my father by his teacher and I believe the lady who took him to London to buy that school uniform. The inscription reads, "K. H Stevens. 40. from W.M.C. September 20th 35". ie 1935. I know "W.M.C." was Miss. Someone or other. I have no idea of the significance of "40" unless every pupil received a copy and that was their class number? I do know that my father took this prayer book with him when he went off to war.

After a brief spell at home in Nunhead in 1942 from 17 to 17 and a half, when he joined the Army following Home Guard service and working for Blue Funnel Line, father had lived away from a home of his own as such for a total of some 14 years before he and mother, being by then married and myself born, bought the house at 45, Brook Way, Rainham, Essex.

It was a fairly common story to some extent although many couples ended up in allegedly temporary prefab housing of which much was still standing 50 years later!

As a consequence of my father living at 2, Jessie Cottages, Low Hall Lane, Walthamstow, my mother always claimed that she in effect, "married the lodger!" Such was the effect of many men setting out to war as teenagers with little or no work record and then returning as men in their 20s seeking jobs, homes, wives and families in a poor, bankrupt war torn country where many homes had been destroyed through bombing.

My parents bought the semi-detached house in Rainham at Number 45, Brook Way off Wennington Road aforesaid, sometime in 1952/53. I think I can even now recall the telephone number "Rainham 4560". I can also recall travelling from Low Hall Lane Walthamstow to Rainham on the day that we moved because the removal van was my paternal Grandfather's blue meat delivery lorry and at least one of my father's brothers, Frank Stevens, travelled in the back and came to Rainham to help with the move.

One of my early memories, apart from when we went to view the house under construction, was of the 1953 Coronation. Everywhere there were Crowns and such like "red, white and blue themed decorations". I was given a commemorative blue covered book with a medallion inset and which has been long lost.

Likewise, some of us were given a gold painted die-cast model of the Queen's Gold Coach and horses which, if I am right, we collected from the then local health clinic, a low red-brick building in Upminster Road someway along from the Rainham Infants-Primary School and from where were also collected my regular ration of cod liver oil and concentrated orange juice. I loved cod liver oil. Still do! I buy some every two weeks from Tesco's! There was also another type of cod liver oil with some

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fruit or citric flavoured vitamin enriched addition. I loved that even more!

I retain a vague memory of ration books with blue and red stamps. A family tale is that as two year old or maybe younger, I broke into the supposedly secure sideboard at 2, Jessie Cottages, Low Hall Lane, Walthamstow and ended up pouring all my rationed baby food such as "Fairex" on the living room floor. Other common baby foods at the time were Farley's Rusks, for which I had a peculiar liking, and then there was Woodward's gripe-water for the wind. My mother disapproved of dummies!

I still retain the Coronation crown coin in its clear plastic box after all these years but then they are very common. Would that I had saved that die-cast metal Gold Coach which I think may have been issued by some Rainham authority? Anyone? Or was it the Essex County Council? For many years I ran it up and down the window ledge in the front room of number 45 Brook Way, Rainham just as a little boy would run his Dinky or Matchbox toys. Come to think of it, maybe this item was made by Dinky Toys or Matchbox Toys?

Back to the 1953 Coronation. Did I watch it on television? Yes, I did but can recall little of the occasion. We travelled to the Elm Park home of my mother's brother, the late Len Fryer and his late wife, Gwen, and there watched it on a typical 1950s television having a small grainy screen set in a wooden case designed more like a piece of furniture when compared to today's rather more utilitarian technical presentations.

As I recall, I was more interested in playing with the toys of my cousins Stephen and Howard Fryer. They being rather better off than we were ourselves at the time as even I could recognise! One particular toy I recall being a TV repair man's van, tools and equipment! They also had a coloured telephone instead of the more usual and mundane black bakelite model.

Remember those days when televisions were so unreliable you had to rent them as they needed fixing or tuning every two or three weeks? Also, renting was the only way of keeping up with the latest models and aerials. The Radio Rentals and like vans were familiar sites in the streets paying as many house calls as did Family Doctors - now accorded the military sounding utilitarian title of "GP" meaning General Practitioner but more akin to "GP" as in "General Purpose" ie. machine-gun/rough terrain vehicle. (GPV or "Jeep".)

Before proceeding, I must add an anecdote regarding the purchase of the house in Brook Way, Rainham, Essex. In those days after the war, raw material such as timber was in very short supply as it required the expenditure of rare US Dollars. Consequently, housing was rationed by way of a licence. I believe that there was at least a three year wait for a licence which one obtained and then passed the same to a builder.

My father successfully applied for a hearing before a housing tribunal. When asked why he thought that he deserved a new house, he answered to the effect that he had recently visited the Roman ruins in St. Albans Hertfordshire, and noticed that two thousand years ago the Romans had indoor toilets, running water and central heating. He had, he said, a wife and child, a shared outside toilet, no bath or bathroom, one open fire and just one cold tap and sink serving the entire 1900 vintage two up two down house in Low Hall Lane, Walthamstow! He obtained the building licence.

For the benefit of those who live now or in the future at 45, Brook Way, Rainham, Essex I can describe the house as probably quite a substantial semi-detached property - substantial for its era that is although I would have doubts over the quality of some of the utility era materials of which it was constructed.

There was a decent sized front garden which I, in my own small way helped to "tame" ready for a seeded lawn. The entrance was via a solid wooden gate set between two strong brick pillars. A shallow porch guarded the front door and immediately to the left was the "front room". Further on a small passageway led to the backroom and then further into a small outside kitchen known as a "kitchenette". So called "French Windows" led to a small concreted back yard and then out into a long substantial garden terminating in an unmade lane that ran almost parallel to Rothbury Avenue. A narrow alleyway led from this lane into Rothbury Avenue itself.

A window let in light from a side passage on the right hand side of the house which led to a wooden gate and thence out into the backyard and garden. Facing this my father built a coalbunker and he and a neighbour both co-operated in building a lean-to in their respective houses so as to create a rain and windproof shelter over the kitchen door which led out into the back yard.

Remember how drafty doors and doorways were then? Of how we had long sausages of cloth stuffed with paper, rags and foam laid across doorways and known as "draft excluders?" Some were even more elaborate being strips of rubber, copper or plastic foam laid all round the doors.

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Remember too the coldness of houses heated by fire places and of how the heat stayed in one place. One could sit in front of the fire being toasted at the front and freezing at the back. Hot water bottles were a necessity and the trip upstairs from a coal-fire heated living room to the bathroom produced a notable drop in temperature. Sitting by such fires caused chillblains. Central heating and insulation has its good points!

A "cupboard under the stairs" led off from the living room. Stairs from the hallway near the front door led up to a bathroom at the top of those stairs and then there were two bedrooms facing the front and back respectively and a small bedroom known as the "box-room" which also overlooked the front.

Due to the shortage of timber the ground floor was covered with a sort of pitch or bitumen-based black composite material and which melted in the area of the fireplace and likewise when I, as a small boy, spent some time kneeling on it playing with toys. A lump of this composite remained in the garden and, as it was tortoise-shaped, I referred to it as my pet tortoise! The garden had a small hollow log infested with lizards as I recall.

The roof-loft was reached by a panel from the upstairs landing and I recall my father up there in his old Army battledress laying nasty fibre-glass stuff as insulation. Otherwise the house was additionally heated by nasty single bar wall-mounted electric fires in the bedrooms and fireplaces in the two main rooms downstairs. The smallest bed room or box-room was unheated.

These were early days in my parents' marriage and the upstairs floors were bare boards until they won £40 on the pools and bought both carpets and lino. It was also a time when few people had a washing machine and I recall my mother hand-washing clothes in the sink and squeezing the water out with an outdoor mangle.

Soon however a washing machine arrived but even then one had to fish the clothes out of the tub with tongs and run them through a hand-cranked "wringer" or rollers which was eventually fitted with an electric motor. There was of course no 'fridge but the kitchen had a larder air-vented to the outside and which seemed to work by the standards of the time.

So much was still home-made then. My mother sewed and knitted. Father repaired our shoes on the back-step using lasts, leather and tools bought from Woolworths. Many men had been in the forces and could do motor maintenance so, when the cars eventually appeared, every weekend brought forth an activity of mending and servicing and even body paint spraying using an attachment that came with the "Electrolux" cylindrical vacuum cleaner!

The house during the times of which I write was painted outside maroon and cream. I have included a photograph of me outside the front door of 45, Brook Way Rainham on my tricycle. Note the absence of a knocker on the letter-box. This came about on Boxing Day when my father had a glass of Mackeson or Guinness prior to leaving the house and slammed the door shut by way of pulling the knocker which then snapped off. That dark mark on the door was made by me banging on it with a stone so as to be let in!

I digress, and there is no direct connection, but my father's cousin, the late Auntie Vi or Violet Pine, sometime with her husband Labour Party deputy Mayor and Mayoress of St. Albans in the 1960s, was the reason for father at times visiting that town both before and after World War Two.

Auntie Vi was really my paternal Grandmother's cousin so that makes her some sort of cousin to me but I have no intention of writing a family tree! Auntie Vi's mother was Aunt Sarah, possibly born Sarah Taylor? She was my paternal Grandmother's aunt and thus my Great-great Aunt. She and her late husband had been music hall artists and from all accounts she was "a case" living in a little-changed Victorian to Edwardian house replete with aspidistras in the window and a stuffed birds under glass domes etc. I wish that I knew more of Aunt Sarah's theatrical career but no one seems to have bothered to set it down - and one reason why I am setting down this memoir for future use!

Auntie Vi and her husband Reg, who worked at a local garage, lived in what I recall as being a large house in Folly Lane, St. Albans. They had four children. There was Douglas Pine, a very tall and strong man of great artistic and practical talent.

He went in to computers on the ground floor so to speak despite having left school at fifteen. He was something of an artist and painted a sort of Chinese fresco around the kitchen walls of the Folly Lane house. He bought and restored old cars like a vintage Alvis sports car. He bought some old cottages from the Crown Estate and restored those single-handedly. Latterly, he lived with his German-born wife in Harpenden in the same neighbourhood as Eric Morecambe of Morecambe and Wise, or so I was told. In latter years he owned and ran an antiques and fancy goods business in St. Albans. I last saw Douglas Pine at Chelmsford Crematorium in 1996 when he attended my late father's

funeral.

The other children of Vi and Reg Pine were Linda, Jackie and Wendy. Linda was diabetic and died aged forty. Jackie was killed as a teenager on his motor scooter before the days of compulsory crash-hats. Wendy married a Greek called Panos and went to live on the Island of Rhodes although latterly they have divorced and she has returned to England somewhere?

At the time of writing cousin Howard Fryer of Coronation time aforesaid is a Chelmsford solicitor practising as Fryer Chandler. He attended both Brentwood School and university. Cousin Stephen Fryer lives somewhere in Brentwood and not far from the High Street. Otherwise there is little by way of regular contact. Their father, Uncle Len Fryer died a year or two back at the age of 83 although like most of the Fryers he looked nothing like his age and the nursing staff at Chelmsford's Broomfield Hospital had to check and re-check his case notes with some disbelief!

Len Fryer went into shipping like my own father following, in his case, naval service in World War Two. He was at one time posted to a World War One vintage cruiser used as an anti-aircraft battery ship guarding the Mersey in Liverpool. Their one claim to fame was to have shot down the Dublin to Liverpool mail 'plane and I think I am right in saying a Free Polish Hurricane which came at them out of the sun. The Irish 'plane had made the mistake of giving the day before's recognition signal!

Uncle Len was in ship management rather than ship broking and worked for the Scandinavian-based Ugglund following some years with a rather more traditional and staid British ship owning firm of Watts and Watt. In much earlier times a young amateur actor and member of the Baltic Exchange by the name of Ronald Coleman also worked for Watts and Watt before he became a famous star in Hollywood silent movies.

Returning to the Coronation, I do recall being made to watch the scene where the Archbishop (Dr. Fisher?) placed the Crown upon the Queen's head. Indeed, I recall placing a round baking tin on my father's head as he sat in an arm-chair at 45, Brook Way and my mother saying, "He's Crowning you"! Crowns were everywhere at the time. Houses, shop-windows and even lamp-posts and telegraph poles. Crowns on the brain as well as on the head!

You would not expect me to remember very much of my time in Walthamstow as we left there when I was about three years of age. Much of what I shall herein recount happened to me after we had left Walthamstow and later visited the grandparents and likewise much is what I was told or listened to the adults talking about.

Like a lot of people I have supposed memories of being in a pram although this may have been prompted by glimpses of old "baby photos".

I know that I was taken on long walks to Epping Forest in a pram - or at least my mother did the walking. Also, that later when I could walk we went to a site called Connaught Water where I would float a wind-up clockwork boat that I had and then cherished for some years afterwards. Eventually it ended up minus its motor and rusting away behind the coal bunker at 45, Brook Way, Rainham. It would be a collector's item now!

I recall being taken to Walthamstow High Street or the street market with my Nana Fryer in order to buy eels. There were many stalls selling live eels then. They were kept in galvanised iron tanks round at the back. My Nana Fryer would take them home wrapped in newspaper in a string bag but they usually managed to half wriggle their way out.

Once home at 2, Jessie Cottages, Low Hall Lane, she would put the eels on the chopping board in the kitchen or scullery and literally they were topped and tailed. The heads and tails were put in a bowl on the floor for "Smudge" the cat. These pieces were wiggling by the way! The rest of the eels were skinned and dissected into chunks which were then stewed in their own liquor. Some people stewed them in a green liquor made from parsley. The traditional dish is eels with green liquor and pie and mashed potatoes. I hate to think what was in the pies!

Eels, mash and pie has become a "Yuppie" dish in recent years and the old working class restaurants that served them to the poor years ago, did for a while in the mid-1980s, achieve some cult status following on from the boom in the City and "City boys" looking for something to spend their money on. Manzi's or some such name became a well known eel and pie shop! My mother and her ilk were quite disgusted. Eels to them meant poverty! (as did rabbit which had been six pence for the rabbit and a penny for the pot vegetables. My mother refused to let me eat rabbit!)

I recall being pushed, shoved and jostled along Walthamstow High Street and walking back with my Dad after he had bought me a red pedal car which he carried back on his shoulder in a

cardboard box. "My car's in there!" I told everybody in the street!

Likewise I recall a branch of J. Lyon's - a cafe and bakery - close to St. James' Street railway station where I was often treated to a pack of small biscuits decorated with a whirl of royal icing and known as "Iced Fancies". You can still get them! Sometimes I was given a small meringue snowman.

Proceeding along Mark House Road towards Low Hall Lane and on the left was the sweet shop of Peter Strutt, known as "Strutt's". This was an old fashioned sweet shop selling fudge, coconut ice, hard toffee, nutty toffee, peppermint rock, barley sugar sticks and the like. I suppose Strutt's was really an old time sugar boilers. Long after we had left Walthamstow and lived in Chelmsford we would visit and come away with bags of "Strutt's Mixed" as the confectionary was known - and known globally. Relatives from Canada even took bags of the stuff back home with them. Many people now living will recall "Strutt's Mixed" from Walthamstow.

Further along the road, and also on the left, was the general store known as Newell's being owned and run by Len Newell. My memories of this shop include not only high shelves stacked with tins but the front of the shop which had rows of sacks containing pigeon feed, chicken feed and sacks of broken oyster shell for feeding to hens so that their egg shells turned out strong. These were the days when many people still kept chickens in the back yard. If they had not done so then they would not have tasted chicken, although by then the battery hen was being introduced. I have seen a grocers shop closely resembling Newell's in an Australian TV soap called, I think, "Home and Away".

A bit further along still, and almost facing the Mark House Road end of Low Hall Lane, was another sort of sweetshop and store that also sold broken biscuits set out in large square tin boxes laid out before the customers and tilted slightly. We often bought pounds of these biscuits and my Nana Fryer kept a long tall "Bisto" gravy-powder tin into which we dived for a sort of biscuit "lucky dip."

I was told that at the age of two I once ran out of this shop into Mark House Road and it was only by a miracle that a lorry driver managed to stop.

Next door to the aforementioned sweet shop was "Watson's Cork Lino" the trade of which is boringly obvious and whose shop contents consisted of a forest of rolls of lino.

Over the road and round the corner to the left from Low Hall Lane was Jackman's which was in quite an old building. Low and dark, it was reached by stepping down from the higher level of the street. Jackman's was a newspaper shop, tobacconist and a bit of a corner shop. I do recall Mr. Jackman coming round the houses towards the end of the week, selling the local newspaper I think and also collecting payments. He always had a leather cash satchel as well as a canvas bag for newspapers.

Next door to Jackman's, or very close by anyway, was an undertakers which I think must have been called "W.A. Johns & Sons. Funeral Furnishers 40, Mark House Road, E 17.....and also 343, Lea Bridge Road E. 10" I am quoting from two family archive documents issued by the aforesaid firm.

Also a caller round the door was the agent for Abbott Estates which owned many houses in the Low Hall Lane area. Mrs. Abbott actually lived in the area and took a hand in managing the estate. It was common in those days when Low Hall Lane had originally been developed for people with money to build houses to rent and then live in a larger house in the area themselves. A sort of early "buy to rent" which has become popular in recent years as I write and which has likewise been hit by the "credit crunch".

One sight and sound apparent in the neighbourhood was "the farm" as distinguished by one or two tall chimneys and a steam siren which let the workers know what to do and when to do it. "The Farm" was in reality a waste disposal site and the chimneys were incinerators. I think the local "bin men" were based there.

On the subject of rubbish disposal, anyone remember the pig bins? These were two enamelled metal dust-bin type containers set in an iron cage and located at the next road junction up from Low Hall Lane on the right going towards Mark House Road. Waste food was put in them and carted away by a contractor to make pig-swill. Nana Fryer often sent me to take newspaper-wrapped waste to the pig bins when on visits.

Over on the way to the "The Farm" was "the Dairy". London was at one time full of these little Welsh-owned shops and I think I am right in saying that they were originally supplied or financed by Welsh dairy farmers in the days when regular and reliable "milk trains" made the run to London.

I was often sent over to the Dairy for "cows milk" by which Nana Fryer meant milk that had not been sterilised and bottled in a crown top bottle. Cows milk was the ordinary milk in a foil-capped bottle holding one pint. No one had a 'fridge in those days, I mean, most of them did not even have a

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bath! Sterilised milk was stored unopened in the hall-way and then even when opened would keep two or three days if left in a cool place.

The Dairy, as I recall, was a cool marbled shop on the corner stacked with crates of milk but they also sold eggs, cheese and butter. Likewise, there was at one time a regular milk round in the area as operated by United Dairies and I do recall the bright red horse drawn cart. The horse knew the round and moved down the street stopping as necessary.

I forget to mention that one of the smells dominating the top of Mark House Road was the Tolley-Mache or Tolley-Cobbold brewery which I can smell even now. Of course much more beer was drunk in those days by the working people.

Other residents in that part of Low Hall Lane known as Jessie Cottages were firstly, the neighbours to the left if standing at the front door, namely, the Tomlins or was it Thomlins?

The head of the household, and indeed the bread-winner, was the formidable Julie Tomlin who was probably an East Ender of the old school and certainly from East London I would say. She had a daughter whose name I cannot recall but was something like "Dot" or "Dorothy". (Maybe even "Doll"). Then there was a son Frankie Tomlin who was a fireman on the steam railway then running along the Liverpool Street to James Street Line. I would imagine that I could see him as we walked near the railway bridge at the top of Walthamstow High Street.

There might also have been a younger Tomlin boy. Mr. Tomlin died years ago from a heart attack aged 64 and never had a job! What he did have was the old East Londoner's love of the country in the form of vestigial memories of common rural ancestry. He knew how to fish illegally with night lines in the reservoirs nearby and also kept caged wild birds which came from a market known as Club Row now long closed as this trade is outlawed.

He once proudly showed me his caged nightingale, a finch, a chaffinch and most traditionally of all, a linnnet as in "My old man said follow the van....me old cock linnnet etc". I do not know if it was a cock linnnet. Mr. Tomlin also had an old toilet pedestal sunk into the back garden and in which lived some very large fish being either goldfish or some other form of carp.

Mrs. Tomlin owned a small cabin or bungalow on Canvey Island and to where one year we went on our holidays. Yes! A holiday on Canvey Island! More of this anon. I also recall that Mrs. Tomlin was one of those people who could play the piano by ear although she could very nearly wreck any piano with the force of her playing! One year she played at the wedding reception of my cousin David Fryer and his wife Josie in the Thundersley Church hall. That's Thundersley near Rayleigh, in Essex.

A bit further down the terrace of Jessie Cottages was Mrs. Dawson whom everyone thought a bit odd as she was forever walking out of the house and down the road to get something "from the shops" and which she did several times a day. Then there was a Scot by the name of Foster who returned to Scotland to die around 1960. There either was, or had been, a German lady called Granny Dressler and mother to a one time professional wrestler by the name of Johnny Dressler. She was under suspicion by the neighbours during the Second World War and accused of signalling to the German bomber planes over head if she went to the outside lavatory carrying a small oil lamp!

I was told however, by my mother, that Johnny Dressler had actually gone through a sort of Nazi stage when he briefly joined Oswald Mosely and his "blackshirts" so I suppose some suspicion was justified. I assume that Granny Dressler had taken out British citizenship and likewise that Johnny Dressler was also British or else they would both have been interned on the Isle of Man like many tens of thousands of other enemy alien German and Italian civilians.

Finally, the one memorable thing that happened to me in Walthamstow was when I was scalded. My mother went to the door to pay the usual fee to the insurance man or "Man from the Pru" not knowing how well I could climb. I got on to a chair and reaching out for some milk pulled a pot of freshly brewed tea over myself.

Seemingly, my mother did the right thing and wrapped me in a clean sheet and I was taken to Whipp's Cross Hospital where I was to stay for many weeks. I had saline baths and a saline drip running over my right hand. I was in there so long that when I was released I called my mother "Nurse" and my father "Doctor."

My personal nurse at Whipp's Cross was Nurse Heal who soon thereafter married a doctor and they both emigrated to New Zealand. I still have the scars from this scalding although they have faded over the years.

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Most of my time in Rainham revolved around Brook Way, Wennington Road, the "tiddler brook", Rainham Marshes, Cowper Road, Melville Road, Ingrebourne Road, the old wooden British Railways railway station, the Clock Tower memorial and close by the ancient Roman Catholic Norman church and of course, Rainham infants and Primary or Junior schools in Upminster Road (South).

There were also excursions over the railway line at the bottom of end of Brook Way into the Essex marshes, the army rifle ranges, rafts made of railway sleepers and builder's timber floated on the creek and games played on an old Matilda tank! How many boys had a real tank to play with? More of this anon.

I also went to Sunday School at the Methodist Church in Wennington Road but not the one on its present site judging by a map on the Internet as I have not been back to Rainham for many decades! The Methodist church I attended was further up Wennington Road towards the railway station. More in the region of where Cowper and Melville Roads join Wennington Road close by and opposite to Dr. Sternberg's surgery then on Melville Road corner. It may even have been opposite or in the region of the shopping parade on Wennington Road and beginning from the end of Cowper Road.

Of great significance was the aforesaid surgery of Doctor Sternberg in a large Victorian house, as I imagine it was, on the corner of Wennington Road and Melville Road. I wonder if the red pillar box still stands outside on Wennington Road? Come to think of it, is the house still there or has it given way to a block of flats?

Across the road on the opposite corner was another large if somewhat run down Victorian house having extensive grounds and which resembled more an old farmhouse. Indeed, it seemed to have a certain amount of livestock in the form of dogs, geese and am I right in recalling a pony?

Dr. Sternberg came to Britain from Austria and was Jewish thus effectively an asylum seeker or refugee. He was actually very qualified and more of a physician than a doctor. I believe that he performed minor surgery. He also dispensed. Always he called me "Bobby" and all children got a very small boiled sweet, the smallest and cheapest you could get, if we behaved well and did not kick up a fuss during a consultation.

Another doctor then in the area was Dr. Deri Stephenson who practised from a shop-front surgery along the Wennington Road going towards the railway station and Clock Tower area. Maybe there were two parades of shops but I think the surgery was on that parade that ran from the corner of Cowper Road on the right hand side.

Dr. Deri Stephenson either wrote or chaired the production of a special Coronation year souvenir book about the history of Rainham and the four manors such as "Gernon" and "Berwick" of which it was once composed. Dr. Stephenson I think died in 1953 or 1954 and is buried in the graveyard of Rainham's Norman Roman Catholic church on Broadway opposite the Clock Tower war memorial. Do I accurately recall seeing this interment take place or was it another's funeral?

On the corner of this latter shopping parade, where it joined the top of Cowper Road was "Sibley's," which was a hardware-garden supplies store with a small yard or garden area fenced off at one end facing on to the corner of Cowper Road. I suppose it was like a miniature B&Q store. Sibley's also sold bamboo canes for making fishing nets with which to catch "tiddlers" in the "tiddler brook" and pea-sticks from which we would make bows and arrows - weapons that really worked to the point of being lethal being flighted even! The bows were cut green from bushes and trees.

On the subject of home-made toys. Remember when we made parachutes from hankies tied with string and a toy soldier, preferably made of lead, suspended underneath? One threw the package as high as possible and if all was well it would open and the "soldier" drift slowly to earth? Remember cap bombs? Ready made plastic ones bomb-shaped. Others in two halves like walnuts and if you were poor, two nuts and bolts fastened together?

Further along Wennington Road on the right proceeding towards the railway station, if I recall aright, was the wet-fish shop belonging to the Wakefield family and whose daughter, Linda Wakefield, was a classmate of mine in the Primary School. Poor girl, she was always being tortured about smelling of fish but I think looking back that it must have been a slander. School can be such a cruel place!

A bit further along was a sweet-shop and which also sold toys such as Matchbox toys, Dinky, Corgi etc. I was sometimes sent to this shop from our then home in Brook Way on a Sunday in order to buy a Lyons Maid Family Brick (Neapolitan) ice-cream for Sunday lunch "afters". Most people did not have a 'fridge then and this treat was not sent for until after we had eaten our lamb and green peas! I had to bring it back heavily wrapped in newspaper as was the custom.

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Quite a lot of people bought ice-cream for Sunday lunch after they had eaten their first course - although why it was necessary for me to go half way along the Wennington Road towards the station when there was "Wilson's" in the shopping parade at the top of Brook Way and Pennerley Road I have no idea.

Wilson's sold Wall's ice-cream and the owner even charged a farthing for the cone! I can see him now. A stout man, always in a vest with or without a jacket on, with a brown trilby pushed back on his head. He had small stubby moustache like Hitler's but bigger.

Remember the little oblong blocks of ice-cream, which I now understand were made from pig fat and whale blubber, bought for 3d in a grease-proof type of paper covered with the word "Wall's" in blue facsimile writing? Remember that they fitted into cones shaped to be oblong at the top or how they fitted exactly between two wafers? Remember too the orange squash drink "Jubbly" in cardboard triangular packs.

"Lovely Jubbly! Lovely Jubbly orange drink!" went the TV jingle. In more recent years "Lovely Jubbly" became the catch phrase of David Jason when playing Derek Trotter in the BBC TV hit comedy series, "Only Fools and Horses."

Jubblys could be had frozen, chilled or otherwise for 3d but some shopkeepers charged a half-penny or a farthing for a frozen Jubbly. A similar drink was a frozen "Pinko" and then there was a chilled chocolate milk-drink also in a cardboard pack and known as "Mikki"... "Need a quicky? Have a Mikki."

Sometimes I on a Sunday was sent to bring back a "Tutti-Frutti" block of ice-cream and on very special occasions an ice-cream cake built on a sponge base decorated with a small cherry on the top. Neilson's Canadian ice-cream was another available brand as I recall and the local mobile ice-cream man was "Bastiani's" whose factory was on the road to Dagenham near the "Bulgin Sack Company". Yes, Bulgin sacks!

Also along this long road leading eventually to Dagenham and the area of the Ford Motor Company was the Beam Garage on the right hand side of the road. Somewhere along this same road to the right going in towards London was an unmade road from whence sprang the 1960s singer and artiste Sandie Shaw whose entry "Puppet on a String" won a Euro-vision song contest. Long time ago!

The Beam Garage was a large affair owned by a man named "Burchett". It boasted a long parade of used cars facing the main road, a central island of petrol pumps, and behind a grand showroom of both new and better quality used cars. The firm's badge or logo consisted of a neon lighthouse giving out beams of light set over the main entrance doors to the showroom. I wonder if the garage is still there in some shape or form as I write this in 2009?

My father bought his first car there in 1956 at the height of petrol rationing during the Suez Crisis. It was a two door sit-up-and beg 1948 fawn coloured Ford Popular costing £60! It had a heater and a radio, the latter being more like a domestic radio for home use. Remember those days when "Heater" and "Radio" stickers were put on car windscreens along with the price and likewise the number of owners? Remember the petrol fumes from car heaters?

These were the days of spartan motoring with ice-cold interiors during the winter, leaking door sills and window rubbers, the constant smell of petrol, batteries that needed taking in each night for charging under the kitchen table, blankets laid over the engine, leaking tyres, choked carburettors, starting handles, boards under the wheels when bogged down or snowed in and the help of friendly neighbours to push or bump start a reluctant car.

Remember when people used to paint chromic oxide over the chrome trim of their cars in the winter? You had all these cars going round with a sort of golden chromic trim although a clear varnish was sometimes applied. Remember too that few people had garages and as a result many a car spent the night lashed down under tarpaulin or a special plastic car cover that had microscopic holes in it so that the car could "breathe!" My father used to rig up a paddling pool in the back garden using his old car cover and some loose timber.

At that time no one else in Brook Way, Rainham even had a car! Men either cycled to work in Dagenham or wherever and bussed or walked to the railway station. Many others owned a scooter like Johnny Reeves's Dad up the road from Number 45 where we lived, or Johnny Sadler's Dad who had a motorcycle. Peter Bowyer's Dad had an old fashioned motorised push-bike known as a "pop-pop" bike with a kind of lawn mower engine attached to the rear wheel hub.

One unlikely spin off from this sudden and apparent display of my parents' post-war affluence was the death of a neighbour's rabbit caused by the other neighbour's dog getting to it across our back garden. We were in the middle of this crisis. We were held to blame.

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The neighbours to our left were the Taylors with their sons Billy Taylor aged about sixteen and Jamie Taylor a few years older than myself at the time, say about 11 to 13 because he attended the Lamb's Lane Seniors now known, as I see from the Internet, as the Chafford School and rather posh being an enterprise and technical college. In my day, Lamb's Lane School had a tough reputation and one day some of the boys rebelled and beat up one or two of the teachers also damaging their cars.

The other neighbours to our right facing down the back gardens were the Vycks headed by a Dutch ship's Bosun, Cornelius Vuyk who died fairly young of cancer many years ago after the family moved to Chelmsford's Moulsham Lodge Estate as we did ourselves but a bit earlier in 1959. Bosun Cornelius Vuyk now lies buried in Chelmsford's Borough Cemetery.

I supposed the Taylors must have lived at Number 43 Brook Way and the Vuyks at Number 47 Brookway. Either way, the dispute centred on the boundary line or fence for which my parents as householders were responsible. I should explain that in those days and for many years afterwards builders marked out the plots with two lines of galvanised wire strung between a series of pre-cast concrete fence posts. Possibly we were responsible for the demarcation line to our right through which passed the Vuyks's dog on its way to the Taylors' rabbit.

Mrs. Taylor seemed to think that my parents should have put in a chain-link fence on their boundary, telling neighbours, "Yes. Well, if people spent money on a proper fence rather than on cars this sort of thing would not happen."

Presumably, they also had only a wire boundary fence or how else could the dog have got through? Anyway, the Taylors had a small short-haired dog by the name of "Toby." Also, in time I came to look after their pet tortoise "Sally" when they were away and I do not recall having any problem getting into their back garden on my own so I doubt that they had a chain link fence.

My reward for looking after "Sally" was a small toy snub-nosed revolver-cap gun of the American police type and branded "Dagnet" after the TV series featuring the FBI. It came complete with an ID card which you cut from the packaging material and then marked with your own thumb prints.

Mr. Taylor I recalled did not work officially, or so I heard. He was on some sort of state Benefits. However, he managed to do window cleaning on the side. He had been an Army scout during World War Two and we boys often played with the small periscope which he had somehow retained hold of. Of such trivia are life and memories made.

Mrs Vuyk was a proper East End lady whose parents owned several fish and chip shops in East London as and possibly as far afield as Becontree Heath. They had money and I think owned their Brook Way home outright from the start. I think that they were cash buyers even when moving to Moulsham Lodge Estate some way higher up above the Lime Walk area. I am going to say that there was no finesse there, or as my mother commented, "Typical East Enders with money!"

How did I know that the Vuyks had moved to Chelmsford. Simply because I heard Gary's unmistakable voice in the lobby behind the stage and cloakroom area of Moulsham Secondary School some time in the early 1960s. I introduced myself saying, "I used to live next door to you at Rainham." To which Gary Vuyk replied, "Good God. You're not Barrie are you?". When I reported this back to my mother she said, "Tut! You're not meeting up with him again are you?"

I have not seen Garry Vuyk and his wife for about 23 years now and last time I did they were both local (Chelmsford) taxi-drivers and living on the left side of that stretch of Princes Road just before it reaches what used to be the Army and Navy roundabout and is now the site of a motel.

Bosun Cornelius Vuyk gave me his "Bosun's cap" and I wish I had kept it! Naturally, Gary knew when his father was due back home or off out to sea again. The back gardens of Brook Way, Rainham, were only a mile or two or even less from the River Thames as the crow flies and one could see the funnels of distant ships passing intermittently behind riverside buildings.

We would stand on the coal-bunker in the back garden of Number 45 and identify the house-emblem emblazoned funnel of Bosun Vuyk's ship as it made its way out to sea. During those days also it was not unusual to see the distinctively rigged tan coloured sails of the old Thames sailing barges as they passed by the same riverside structures across the marshes. Some of these old Thames barges can to this day be found moored at Maldon, Essex.

Returning to The Beam Garage, they later sold my father a blue-grey Morris Oxford which did not last long but sat on a concrete base in the back-garden of Number 45 facing the lane which led out past the backs of most, but not all Brook Way houses, to an outlet in Pennerley Road. I wonder if the rest of the garage was ever built?

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Another car got from the Beam Garage was a Zephyr Six which was akin to the police cars then in vogue and had actually been owned by a police officer. This one had been fitted with a large spotlight on the roof which could be moved by the driver. One night, when inching forward at the Four Wantz cross-roads near Upminster if I recall, father switched on the light all the better to see and the traffic stopped! Several times after that we noticed that some people thought that this shiny black Zephyr Six and its over-sized roof-mounted lamp was a police car!

Talking about Upminster, does anyone remember the mink farm - Hobbs Fur Farm near Upminster Common? It had an illuminated glass case at the entrance displaying the front end of a stuffed lion!

Perhaps the last car that Dad bought from the Beam Garage was a classic Rover 90 complete with fine upholstery, wood trim, cigar lighter, spare fuel tank and a radio with two speakers front and rear. He also tried to buy a Jowett Javelin but the car had been advertised too cheaply and proved to be overly expensive when the true price was revealed.

One day we collected the Rover 90 car from the Beam Garage following some minor servicing and I, looking at the back shelf, noticed a neat panel of hardboard where the rear speaker had once been. I asked Dad where it had gone to. He looked, drove back and the mechanic was summoned. "Oh," he said, "I saw that as you had two speakers you might not need the other one so I had it!" It was replaced very quickly!

My father was very good at making things derived from plans in such popular DIY magazines as "Practical Householder" and, in addition to making a doll's house for my sister Pauline, he also made me a toy garage with an open front for used cars, petrol pumps in the centre fore-court, illuminated showrooms for new cars and then a ramp to the top for yet more used cars on the roof. On the top too was a sort of office and a clock.

It was named "The Clock Tower Garage" with this name picked out on the front in plastic alphabet letters. It almost resembled the Beam Garage and I filled it full of Dinky Toys until later converting it into a fort with plastic soldiers! He also built for me a balsa wood "Kiel Kraft model Spitfire World War Two fighter powered by the usual elastic band by way of an engine.

On the subject of car spares - anyone remember the trips to Dagenham I think or maybe Seven Kings to visit Wag Bennet's? Anyone also remember boring trips round C&A's at Ilford? - a small boy in a maze of coats! Also, how about Roome's Stores in Upminster. They were open on Sunday so I suppose it was a Jewish-owned firm.

They were or had been up-market and apart from furniture did some good quality toys. I was given from Roome's Stores a very finely detailed clock-work model RNLI lifeboat, a Royal Naval pinnace and a small battle group of an aircraft carrier which opened up to reveal a destroyer, a frigate, a submarine, minesweeper and miniature submarine! Would that I had these collector's items now!

Back now to this same shopping parade boasting Sibley's which was also home to the barber's shop where I got my hair cut sitting on padded board laid across the chair. Electric clippers were not used but instead the hand powered variety which tore and plucked rather than trimmed.

School is so very important and memorable in our lives and so I suppose that I had better open up my memories regarding the schools in Upminster Road where I attended from I think 1955 onwards.

I was born on September 25th 1949 and which meant that I started school a year later than most children due to the first, or intake term, commencing before I had actually reached the compulsory age of five years. Consequently throughout my schooldays I was about one year older than my contemporaries.

This accounts for the fact that I was almost 20, or 19.75 years in 1969 when I finally walked out of the gates of Moulsham Secondary School, Princes Road, Chelmsford, Essex. I had "stayed on" as they then called it, passing nine Royal Society of Arts School Certificates in 1966, seven G.C.E. "O" levels in 1967 and two G.C.E. "A" levels in 1969. Add the extra year incurred at Rainham and thus one can see that I left school aged almost 20 years!

I cannot say that my first day at Rainham Schools was a happy event and neither was it happy for some days if not weeks afterwards. I believe that I cried for several days when being taken to school and later on when being collected although of course I did settle down eventually.

Rainham Infants School, in what would now be called Reception, was plainly and simply a

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Victorian museum-piece. Assuming that it was built in the latter decades of the nineteenth century than it must have been a mere 80 years old which in the circumstances I suppose was quite recent!

I am unable to remember the name of my first school teacher or class-mistress as they were called! The Headmistress of the Infants School side of Rainham Schools was Miss. Hussey. One teacher or maybe Assistant Teacher I do recall the name of was Mrs. Wormleighton who may even have taught us subjects such as "crafts".

Mrs. Hussey was very local indeed. The Husseys were local butchers with a very ancient business premises, possibly seventeenth century, which I recall as being low, single-storey and dark. I recall that it had a veranda-like arrangement in the sense that the pavement outside was under cover. The windows were very small and I distinctly recall that in one window there was the scale model of an old-fashioned horse-drawn butcher's cart drawn by one horse. This shop was located almost opposite and quite close to Rainham Hall, an eighteenth century mansion owned by the National Trust and facing out to Rainham Railway station if I recall correctly.

As an aside, for some reason my parents applied to be the resident custodians of Rainham Hall. Why, I do not know. Perhaps the mortgage on Number 45 Brook Way was too onerous. Maybe they had an idea of renting it out?...the Brook Way house that is! It would certainly have been handy for commuting daily up to Fenchurch Street station in the city by the then rickety coach built wooden carriages hauled by sturdy steam trains!

I do recall going along for their interview and climbing up what seemed miles of plain wooden stairs to a room where, overshadowed by a massive desk, two people asked me if I would like to live there. I said "Yes" but what would I have known? I cannot recall being taken round the entire house but I suppose that such must have happened. Come to think of it now, we did a tour. I think that I was barely three or four at the time.

Many of my school teachers both then and elsewhere were Welsh as education and a job in the metropolis was a way out of the pit, the valleys and the steelworks. Consequently I remember a Miss. Morgan, Miss. Morgan, Miss. Morgan and a Miss. Morgan! Or names to that effect!

There was in the Primary School side a Mr. George who was the Headmaster, a Mr. Tewkesbury and Mrs Davies. The Deputy Headmaster I recall was a Mr. Thomas. However, my school report shows that a G. A Hubbard was the Deputy Head Master and of whom I have no recollection at all? Mr. George, Mr Tewkesbury and Mr. Thomas were most definitely Welsh!

Mr. Tewkesbury had not a tooth in his head, seemed very old and bald and, this is honestly true, taught us that black people in Africa had such white teeth because they cleaned their teeth with split twigs, quite possible and likely to be effective, and also that they ate white food like bananas and coconuts! If he had told us that they ate white-men as well to achieve the same standard of dental hygiene then doubtless we would have been expected to believe that also!

There was no intention at all of being racist. This is just how it was and our simple school geography books, or one of them, described the life of children of our age in some then far-distant land. i.e. little Sambo in Africa - I'm not kidding! - and likewise little whatever the Eskimo, so and so who lives in the desert and rides camels and even some kid in the Amazon who was a deadly shot with a blowpipe. This at least was true and many years later I was to see it for myself in Brazil.

On this same theme I also recall one of the Infant School playground ladies who looked after us when the teachers had their lunch-break, a Mrs. Sutton, who referred to a coloured boy named Paul Bealo as "Inky" and a Sikh boy as "Darkie". Believe me there was no racist intention, it was just the way it was! Scottish boys were "Haggis", the Welsh were "Taffs", the Irish were "Paddies", the Chinese were "Chinky" and so on. Strange to relate there was no such name for anyone English but both then as now, being English does not seem to merit any form of distinction save when in Australia or the USA when we are all respectively "Pommy bastards" or "Limeys"!

The Reception or first year(s) side of the Infants School was housed in a single story, two roomed church-like building fronting on to Upminster Road. Iron railings faced the road pierced with two gates each labelled "Boys" and "Girls" although we were not separated and I think that only one gate was every actually in use at any one time.

There was a small tarred play area or yard and which must have been the original school-yard although by then it had been expanded out to what seemed to me to be an enormous area bounded on one side by the local park with its paddling pool, and where they had visiting fairgrounds if I am right, and the bottom area backing on to fields and where there was a range of wooden prefab or temporary classrooms. The main road, possibly the A 130, was in the distance.

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It seemed to me to be a long way from the old or original school house to these later timber structures and there were times when we walked there in a long crocodile holding hands in boy-to-girl couples with teachers fussing and supervising. I for some reason always seem to walk with a girl named Jane Brooks!

Back to the old or original school-house. This was like something out of a nursery book illustration depicting idyllic scenes such as "Mary had a little lamb" or "Georgie Porgie pudding and pie." Constructed of dull red brick, the entire school consisted of just one large room and a small room or class at the side towards the back. One entered through a lobby at the rear having a massive church-type door. In this area there were toilets, washrooms and cloakrooms. Remember the smell of that brown coarse school soap better suited to scrubbing the floors and for which it was intended? Remember the hard-bristle wooden nail brushes? The roller towel of one continuous length mounted on a wooden roller which always fell to the floor and was changed just once a week?

I have since read somewhere that this school was originally something to do with the Church and possibly built around 1877? I wonder if it is still standing as a listed building?

The main class area was like a church but without the pews. Church-type windows set high up let in light but one could not see out. The upper part of the windows could be opened and closed only with the aid of a long pole on which was mounted a brass hook. At the very top end of the room were three large church-type windows and a long rope attached to the bell set in the small outside bell-tower.

This must have been rung to summon the children to school in the days before Edwardian and post World War One expansion when Rainham was still a village. In fact, I can confirm that during my time Rainham still had this traditional rural village school even though back then in the mid-1950s it served a largely urban population. In can also confirm that the education it proffered was just as out-dated as the old Schoolhouse!

Instead of different class rooms the entire Reception, or intake of more than one year in fact, was gathered together in small groups or circles within this one large room and a small side room I mentioned earlier on. There may have been as many as 155 children aged 5-7 in that one room broken up into small instructional groups and each teacher seeking to manage a different stage or subject. Noisy it was!

I do recall sitting on a chair in a semi-circle of maybe 35 children or so all facing the teacher who stood before a large "black-board" of the traditional type mounted on an easel. She worked with a piece of chalk and cloth board "duster" and not the piece of felt mounted on a wooden block, the so-called "board-rubber".

Her job was to teach us our numbers and this I am certain is where I derived my ever present fear of maths and ever-lasting uselessness with numbers.

Teacher took a piece of yellow chalk and drew a lemon on the board instructing us to do likewise on the miniature fibre "blackboards" with which we had been equipped. Each one of us balanced such a board on our knees, clutched a stub of yellow chalk and our miniature square block of "board-rubber".

"Copy me. And do exactly as I do!" commanded the teacher. Obediently we each drew a yellow lemon and copied out the numeral "Number One". The teacher then rubbed the board. So did I and then we drew two lemons and the numeral "Two". Teacher rubbed her work clean and so did I. Well she did say to copy here! Eventually, when the lesson was finished I had a nice clean board for which I was told off as being awkward and disobedient whilst everyone else had a board showing groups of lemons 1-10 all ready for marking.

I sat next to a spiteful little Irish girl called Linda O' Sullivan who took great delight in tormenting me and inducing me to cry in those first few days at school. Later she graduated to pinching and scratching my knees which of course were exposed by the short trousers all boys then wore.

Naturally, I had noticed that Linda had a board full of lemons and numbers but then she was so very naughty and was I not being anything but obedient and doing everything that teacher said. Did she not say "Do as I do?". I did. I was told off. And from that point ever after had a fear of maths lessons and numbers and which is with me to this very day.

We were taught to write our numbers in a unique way in that every number was constructed to a story. The numeral five I recall was taught like this. The straight line was "A little boy," followed by the bulbous part, "Ate too many cakes". Then the top or cap of the numeral was drawn to the line, "Put on his hat and went to school!".

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The letters of the alphabet were also taught or chanted in the way that they would be spoken in real life so it was not "A" - "B" - "C" - "D" ---but as spoken ie. aa! - "ber" - "ker" - - "der" - "eh" - "fer" - "ger" - "her" - etc. This was then accompanied by sentences and pictures illustrating their use and of course the inevitable exceptions in pronunciation.

Next door to the school on Upminster Road, and to the left of the main gates looking inwards was a very tumbledown semi-derelict Victorian or maybe even Georgian house inhabited by a family of red-haired Irish travellers or tinkers who ran a rag and bone business from a horse-drawn cart. The smell from both the house and the horse wafted over to the Schoolhouse! We were forbidden to speak to the children who were very ragamuffin and unwashed! I am not sure which smelled the worst, the horse or the children.

The horse and cart was often parked outside the school gates when we came out at the end of the day, the horse with its nosebag on. I distinctly recall the rag and bone man feeding the horse on slices of white bread.

Further on from the "pest-house" was a sweet-cum-toy-shop by the name of "Steve's" and which was packed out with children both at lunch time but mainly after school. There was even at one time a truce between "Steve" and the school whereby he would not serve schoolchildren until after school for the day in order to avoid his merchandise spoiling both learning and school dinners.

"Steve's" was noted for "Steve's Penny Tray" and which consisted of a large black bakelite tea-tray on which every item was priced at one penny - 1d or at least two or four items for one penny.

These sweets could be quite a bargain depending upon whatever stock Steve had been able to acquire or make a deal out of. One could get penny sherbet dabs of a small variety, penny chews, farthings chews (Blackjacks) at four a penny, sticks and whirls of liquorice, small lollies, sherbet chews, sherbet filled flying saucers, bracelets made of coloured sweets strung on thin elastic and packets of five candy cigarettes, candy shrimps and chewing gum cigarettes and chocolate cigars!

I then received a multi-sided brass three penny bit as pocket money but cannot recall if it was every day or every week? Either way one could get a lot for it and I am inclined to think that it was every day for five days a week. After all this would have been just 15d a week and there were 240 pennies to a pound in those days and up until decimalisation in what, 1971?

Yes, I am sure it was 3d a day because if one did not invest in the "penny tray" then the "Lucky Bag" or "Jamboree Bag" were the alternatives at 3d each (old money). The then new (to me anyway!) potato crisp type of extruded baking snack known as "Nibbits" was very popular but I suppose expensive for children at 3d a bag. This product later succumbed to the popularity of "Potato Puffs" and now of course it is such as "Cheerios" and "Quavers"!

The Lucky Bag was a plain white bag with an orange edge stapled at the top. The Jamboree Bag was similar but came in different colours and bore the drawing of a traditional boy scout complete with large slouch-type hat and a bell tent in the background. Both bags contained a few sweets, chews, maybe a small sherbet dab, a lolly and a plastic toy or novelty. A typical toy might be a telescope, magnifying glass, yo-yo, kaleidoscope, cap-bomb, a plastic glass which showed a photo in the base when filled with water and a "viewer" shaped like a camera and in which you loaded frames cut from old Chinese films and then viewed them! Most of these items were made in Hong Kong.

"Steve's" also sold plastic toy soldiers and "cowboys and Indians" - a sort of early toy designed to encourage ethnic slaughter and genocide as today's politically correct battalions might have you believe.

At Number 45 Brook Way I even had "cowboy and Indian wallpaper" and in those days a "must have" for small boys. This was by way of a reward for giving up my large back bedroom over looking the back-gardens of Rothbury Avenue and moving in to the small front bedroom or "box room" - remember that term? - prior to my sister being born. Ethnic wallpaper engendering the advance of migrant Western superiority over the Native Americans! Does that explain anything?

Some of Steve's plastic soldiers when not painted were a penny each but most more like 3d and 6d. More expensive were the "Swoppits" which had interchangeable parts and such as cowboys with removable guns in detachable holsters. These were the precursors of today's "transformers".

Looking back, I am inclined to think that Steve's cheap soldiers were factory rejects as they all seemed to have severe physical deformities! Not to mind. Many of them were played with in the back gardens in real mud, undergrowth and stony terrain bombarded with small pebbles. Many became missing in action and for all I know are still buried under the lawns of Brook Way's semi-detached residences!

'Essex Boy'-Walthamstow and Rainham 1949-1959

Also sold were "Matchbox" toys or small die-cast models of cars, buses and army vehicles then made by Lesney Brothers in Stratford East London. Also there were larger die-cast models of the Corgi and Dinky brand. Steve's also sold the usual range of sweets weighed out from glass jars and probably cigarettes and tobacco as well. We children even had candy tobacco made from coconut shredded, dyed and then packed into paper tubes.

Whilst on the subject of childhood sweets, does anyone remember making soft drinks from either a fizzy powder in a sachet or a sherbet block both made by Robinson's and which latter could also be sucked like a sweet? Garishly coloured powders were sold in small packets complete with a straw for adding to water for the purpose of making soft drinks and with which children ate dry thus colouring their mouths?

I distinctly recall children filling their mouths with these powders undiluted and then going round the playground open-mouthed showing off the lurid purple, red, mauve, green and orange colours. And then there was the ubiquitous family sized cardboard drum of "Cremola Foam" for mixing with water and creating a soft drink which must have consisted largely of sodium-bicarbonate, sugar and flavourings - rather like an enhanced alka-seltzer.

Steve's also sold collectibles such as stamps, stamp albums and matchbox labels which were then in vogue. In those days, with rather more smokers and matches used in the home to light the gas and coal fires, matchboxes were more in evidence than they are today. Also, people cared little about littering the streets and so everywhere you went there were discarded match boxes which we children collected, soaked off the labels and attempted to build up a collection.

Remember "Criterion," "Empire," "Westminster," "Army and Navy," "England's Glory" - still available - and then there were the brewery brands advertising Fremlins, Friary Mieux, Ind Coope, Double Diamond, Flower's Bitter etc? Even so, the range was soon exhausted and it is my belief that somewhere someone was printing off a series of match-box labels in order to supply the trade.

Steve's sold these in packets and likewise the albums to mount them in just like stamp albums. These labels purported to come from all over the world but I am inclined to think that most of them were fakes.

On the subject of toys. Were you like me and coveted a toy called "Driving Test" and which consisted of a cardboard box which opened up to reveal a hard cardboard surface on which was printed an urban road pattern. Accompanying this were several miniature plastic road signs which you placed at certain intervals. Also included were miniature cars and lorries etc which had metal pieces inserted. These then connected invisibly with a magnet underneath the road system and mounted on a pantograph which one operated from by way of a joy-stick. The pantograph was lubricated by a light dusting of talcum powder! As you moved the joy-stick so the magnet beneath moved the cars around the obstacle course.

"Driving Test" was a "must have" for boys back then and cost the great sum of twenty five shillings or £1.25p? (I think!). We all had to wait for Christmas or a birthday for this one!

Just over the road from Steve's on the corner of Cowper Road and Upminster Road was another sweet-cum-corner shop and confectioners which also sold cakes but this was rather more proper and much less of a child-centred emporium of junk and rubbish.

Rainham Infants aforesaid was really an overgrown village school based on the old educational model whereby one simply marked time before being sent out to work at thirteen or fourteen.

They did not teach us very much. I recall that most of my time in the Infants was spent playing with toys, moulding plasticine, throwing bean bags and bowling wooden hoops around. We also had bizarre toys whereby we fitted loose "shapes" into the appropriately shaped holes. Useless once you had got the hang of it or am I missing something? Some of these toys must have been close to one hundred years old and maybe they had even come from even older schools elsewhere!

There was even an indoor slide and mats for rough and tumble. The teachers also played games with us in the playground such as "O Grady Says" and "What's The Time Mr. Wolf?" We did a lot of drawing on little blackboards now called chalk boards. A lot of painting on rough paper using "Dryad" powdered paints and also playing at shops with toy money made of cardboard and pressed fibre bearing the head of Queen Victoria and which gives you some idea of how backward it all was at that stage.

'Essex Boy'-Walthamstow and Rainham 1949-1959

I recall that we made our own Christmas decorations out of bought-in strips of coloured paper gummed at the edges for making paper chains and also were shown how to make paper lanterns cut out from single sheet of paper folded, cut and slit in a certain way.

One toy I recall making, and which graced the mantelpiece at home for a long time, was a model cat with two silhouettes of a cat shape cut from card, painted and then mounted one on each side of a matchbox to give it a base. Printing from a potato cut with a pattern using a penholder and dipped in paint was also a steady activity but seemed to have nothing to do with the real world.

Eventually my intake was moved from the old Schoolhouse down to the far end of the playground where there were the wooden schoolrooms. These resembled some sort of Indian Army bungalow-style structure being long low affairs consisting of two classrooms set either side of an ablutions block - cloakrooms and the entrances covered by wooden verandas.

Each classroom was heated in the winter by an enormous Tortoise-shell brand coke fired cast iron stove strategically placed and surrounded by iron railings. The caretaker had the job of constantly feeding these furnaces.

It must have been wetter and colder in those days because I recall that our raincoats, duffel-coats, gloves and balaclavas were draped over the railings round the stove to dry out. Likewise, our school milk issue in one third of a pint bottles left outside on the veranda used to freeze and we thawed it out by standing it on or around the coke stove. If eaten cold and unthawed we used to say that it was ice-cream.

These wooden or prefabricated class-rooms, which may have been very much pre-World War Two, backed on to waste ground and a distant view of Hornchurch airfield then used for parachute training by way of balloon jumps and glider flying probably with the air cadets. I also do vividly recall target-tug aircraft flying in the area and presumably these came from Hornchurch? One could not miss the large drogue being towed behind but as there was no shooting this must have been flight training.

At the time of writing I can remember only one class teacher, Miss Morgan in addition to all the other "Misses Morgan". I can recall only three fellow pupils. Harban Singh, Roydon Hunt and Hayden Bull. The latter was from some form of travelling family and lived in a caravan behind the Albion pub near the river Ingrebourne on the Rainham Road on the way out of Rainham towards Dagenham. He told me that he travelled around and had been to many different schools. The Albion was quite old and had a covered entrance like a porch extending out over the pavement.

This pub was at one time run by the James family and later I was to work in the City with Harry James in Louis-Dreyfus & Co, City Gate House, Finsbury Square between 1974-1977. Harry's father had the Albion during my time at Rainham. Harry James had been at Rainham Schools at the same time as myself and knew many of the pupils but I do not recall Harry at all.

When we both worked for Dreyfus I was then a shipbroker/chartering agent on the grain-trading side representing Sagland Ltd on the Baltic Exchange in St. Mary Axe - not the present Baltic but the one that was bombed by the IRA and which then was demolished. The cone-shaped glass structure now occupied by the insurance giant Swiss Re, the so called "Gherkin," now stands on that site which was also once Mitre Square and where Jack-the-Ripper killed one of his victims by the name of Kate Eddowes as I believe.

Harry James traded in jute and gunnies if I recall. Later, the James family moved from Rainham and ran a pub in Canewdon, Essex, and believe it or not Harry's Dad was called Jesse - Jesse James! Two famous names in the family. Harry James and his trumpet and Jesse James the outlaw. Father and son!

Most people will recall from their schooldays the individual class Christmas parties when we all brought cakes and jellies. Likewise, our own plates, bowls and spoons with our names attached written on strips of elastoplast.

On the subject of food, in those days we said grace before school dinners: "For what we are about to receive may the Lord make us truly thankful. For Jesus' Christ sake. Amen." or in the alternative, "For what we are about to leave may the pigs be truly grateful etc etc. Amen".

Another regular prayer was said at the end of each day when we had to put our chairs on the desks so as to help the cleaners. This prayer was sung or chanted and went as follows: "Thank you for the world so sweet. Thank you for the food we eat. Thank you for the birds that sing. Thank you God for everything. Amen". Then we were allowed to go out in an orderly fashion line by line!

The Infants school also ran its own postal service for Christmas with red cardboard pillar boxes in each classroom and pupils acting as postal sorters and postmen. We also had a school shop

in the corner of the class where, at about six or seven, we were taught what is now known as "life skills" - common sense in other words. For the life of me I cannot comprehend the world of today where sixteen year olds have not a clue as to how to make use of a post office nor even how to write and post a letter! Believe me, I have been asked by sixteen year olds to help them post a letter!

The class shop was of a wooden counter and shelf construction made by one of the "Dads" I think and we all were asked to donate items to "sell" by way of toy money and a toy till. We even made cakes, buns and loaves of bread out of flour and water past to which had been added a lot of salt so that it hardened and did not go off. I recall mass producing "ginger-bread men."

At the time of writing, that is between December 2008 and January 2009, am unemployed living on Benefits and receiving Job Seekers Allowance with no prospects whatsoever. This is due to age discrimination but I am attempting early retirement at 60. I am just counting down the days when I can go on to Pension Credits because believe it or not, they have written me off what with recession, the "Credit Crunch" and closure of many High Street retail chains including Woolworths (2008). The Chelmsford Woolworths is cleared out and closing as I write this. NB: I am writing this for future generations to read so present day reader please be understanding!

At a recent six months Back to Work interview at the Gemini Job Centre in New London Road Chelmsford, I was referred to as having good "life skills"....well if not now, when? And why the emphasis?

Rainham Infants and indeed the whole Rainham school set-up taught me very little by way of anything over and above the "Three Rs." But at least I could walk to and from school alone, aged seven or so, cross main roads, leave home weekends and school holidays at 9 am on my trike aged 8 years, ride up Lamb's Lane along the A 13 (?) and beyond returning home by 5 pm for tea "Blue Peter" and such as "Whirlybirds" or the "Range Rider". Remember Dick West the all American boy companion of the Range Rider who could shoot his revolver under the horse's belly at speed and dismount and mount at the gallop?

I could write and post a letter, spend money in a shop, run errands for groceries with money equal to £40 today and count the change! Believe it or not, at the time of writing "Life Skills" are being taught as a remedial subject post-school or in the last days of school life.

Incidentally, at Rainham I distinctly recall being taught how to make an envelope for my letter! I also recall that we were taught to write three letters. One of a personal nature, "Dear....." finishing "Yours sincerely"...One of a business nature "Dear Sirs"...finishing "Yours faithfully"...and one letter applying for a job in simplified form. As ever, it was "the basics".

I also recall that the postal address for anywhere in Scotland was then completed with the expression, "NB" meaning North Britain which was at one time the formal name of Scotland!

Another aspect of school life at the time was some type of kid's entertainer for which we all packed the school hall in the Juniors. In fact, the Infants School did not have a school hall and we attended an assembly there once a week with the Juniors. Prayers or some form of assembly was held in the classrooms in order to comply with the then 1944 Education Act.

In fact, although my recollection is hazy I think that even when in the Juniors or Primary School the solitary Hall was too small for even the full Junior School numbers. Certainly, there was no canteen or dining hall anywhere. The Hall was used as a canteen for school dinners being set out with trestle tables. Food came in military style hot-boxes in a green Essex County Council van and was eaten by way of shifts.

It was compulsory under the 1944 Education Act for schools then to hold an Assembly having a prayers or religious content. In this context I recall Mrs. Davies, my very last class teacher at Rainham Primary before I left for Chelmsford, holding assembly in the classroom itself. I think most of the other teachers did the same.

Is it possible that I was being made subject to Roman Catholic indoctrination at this point? Mrs. Davies had the Primary or Junior School caretaker construct a small wooden cross which was set up on a shelf mounted on the wall that faced out to Upminster Road so we all had to turn in that direction to face it and say our prayers.

Every day certain pupils had the duty of bringing in or at least arranging flowers on this altar. And every day we said our prayers and every day we recited in English the "Hail Mary" as taught to us by Mrs Davies. I am not even sure that this was lawful under the 1944 Education Act! If I recall correctly, at a certain stage when saying the "Hail Mary" the girls had to curtsey or even kneel and the boys to cross themselves. No one complained and I do not recall any parent writing in to make their child exempt as was their right.

'Essex Boy'-Walthamstow and Rainham 1949-1959

Come to think of it, Mrs. Davies also kept us up to date with Pope of the day who seemed to have been very ill and amongst other things afflicted with more or less continuous hiccups. Eventually he did die. Come to think of it, we did have photographs of him in the classroom and also were taught about the process of selecting a new Pope. Mrs. Davies was dead keen on the Pope and the Virgin Mary - and Jesus of course!

I suppose it must have been Roman Catholic in nature as surely a High Church or Anglo-Catholic theme would not have concentrated so much on the Pope? I am sure that holding a Roman Catholic daily assembly, save for the once a week we packed into the main hall in shifts, was not lawful in accordance with the 1944 Act? Anybody?

I am a little confused over the passage of time as to the boundary between the Infants and Junior or Primary School. Certainly, the red brick row that fronted on to Upminster Road was the Primary or Junior School but there were various timber additions added over the years I imagine.

I recall a line of timber sheds or garages marking the demarcation between the Infants School playground and the Junior School side. But then there was a maze of wooden buildings accessed from the Junior School side and facing across the one and only School Hall which was reached up a slight incline on which there may have been some bike-sheds.

I was in the class of Mrs. Howe on the right hand side of a timber building in the corridor of which was the room of the School Secretary and first aid lady Mrs. Sargent and another classroom just opposite. I think this corridor then led down to a small gym used by the Infants School and close by was the classroom of Mr. Lindo who taught music. I recall doing the works of Benjamin Britten and the folk collections of Cecil Sharp. Oh and once a week we did English country and folk dancing in that solitary School Hall!

I recall being expected to vault across small versions of vaulting horses and boxes. Doing forward rolls and playing a game where we had to get round the gymn using wooden benches, mats and vaulting horses without touching the wooden floor. They use similar tests on applicants for officer cadet entry into the armed forces and we were doing the same at seven if I am right.

Come to think of it, This must have been part of the Infants School as the Juniors had their own much larger gym lower down and which edged on to the Primary School playground.

I have attached a copy of my surviving school report from this period when I was in the class of Miss Legg. I think this must have been my first Primary School class following on from the Infants School side.

The class teachers I recall most were Mrs. Davies aforesaid, Mrs Howe and Miss Legg. Come to think of it, Mrs. Howe was also Welsh! Everybody was Welsh! Once again, I am not sure if Mrs. Howe was in the Infants or Junior School?

There was also a School Secretary and first aid lady called Mrs. Sargeant/Sergeant/Sarjent (?) She was somewhat distinctive with make up and a fox fur pelt or fur coatee! Which reminds me, many ladies in those days wore a fox-fur pelt complete with head and feet around their neck. One day on a Walthamstow trolley bus (like a double-decker Routemaster but powered from over-head lines) I saw one lady so dressed and asked, "Mummy! Why has that lady got a dead cat round her neck?"

Remember the school first aid room? Remember the standard treatment? Acriflavin jelly or Gentian Violet? The boys had short trousers and the girls skirts, so any fall damaged knees rather than clothing, but as a result you would see all these kids going round with yellow and purple knees and noses or whatever. As bad as it was, acriflavin was a big improvement on the earlier "kill or cure" for cuts, namely, Mercurio-Chrome - a compound of mercuric oxide and chromium dioxide or some such!

The only fellow pupils I recall with great clarity were those of my last class, namely that of Mrs. Davies. There was a very technically up to date Clive Holmes who gave us all a talk on the Sputnik was it? Also, the progress of Sir Vivian Fuchs and the Antarctic expedition.

There was Paul Bealo, a mixture of African or maybe Jamaican father and a Danish mother with whom I shared a bench and desk complete with ink-well. He wore garish shirts and was always laughing at life even then! Jane Brooks aforesaid somewhere in this work. Linda Wakefield from the wet-fish shop on Wennington Road. Linda Went who I think lived in Brook Way or maybe South Hall Avenue the slightly newer estate in the Brook Way area.

Philip Hoare whose father had a plumbing business run from home along Wennington Road on the right on the raised bank of terraced houses long past Lamb's Lane School and the old Post Office. Red haired and very Celtic Roy Brown who used to swim competitively as did a boy called Spurgeon. They even had Friday afternoons off to go to the Heron swimming baths somewhere to train.

'Essex Boy'-Walthamstow and Rainham 1949-1959

Roy Brown was a haemophiliac always fighting and boxing other boys and then half bleeding to death but he could swim like a fish! Another character was Falco Reich or Retch as we called him.

He had a German father. Other classmates or certainly schoolmates I recall were Charles Belcher, John Prince and a boy having the surname of "Pilgrim" - possibly John Pilgrim. I always recall this because there was a wholesale foods firm operating in the area by the name of "Pilgrim Foods" but no relation.

Together we played "war games" and used as our fort the steps that led up from the playground to the Junior/Primary school gym, a wooden building occupying one side of the playground and an approach road round the other side. These steps had sturdy railings ideal for boys to climb on, over and to slip through.

Remember putting your hands together as if holding a "Tommy-gun" and going "Huh!-Huh!-Huh!-Huh! to imitate firing? Or blowing air through the lips as if to imitate explosions and the cry of "Your dead!" ... "No I'm not!" ... "You are mine's a Tommy-gun!" ... "You missed!" ... "You're a German you always lose so you must be dead." ... "We'll all right but I'm not being a German the next time - it's your turn!"

Similar games involved "cowboys and Indians" and whatever was topical at the time such as running around with arms extended making machine-gun noises in emulation of the then current movie "Reach for the Sky" about World War Two RAF fighter pilot Douglas Bader. Likewise, playing "The Alamo" starring John Wayne and Jim Bowie with his seven bared pistol. "Billy the Kid" was in vogue and we used to take turn in staging a "reach" and "draw" using just our fingers and taking it in turns to be "the Kid" or alternatively the man who shot him, Sheriff Pat Garrett.

Of course there were also less violent games such as "He" or "It" and one game played most mornings when we made little boats or even just pellets of paper or cardboard and floated them down the stream or brook that ran down the far side of the playground but guarded by a high iron railings. We would throw our "boats" in at the top and then follow them racing to the end of the brook where it passed out of reach and into the Essex fields beyond.

As I recall, the Junior or Primary School had what may or may not have been a Head Boy and that was a stocky lad with a fuzzy shaving-brush type of haircut by the name of Trevor Maze and who was pointed out as a star having gained a scholarship to Brentwood School.

Patrick Quinn was another fellow pupil who had the unfortunate disadvantage not only of a terrible stutter but a father, Mr. Quinn, who was also a Rainham Primary School Teacher in the Juniors. He taught a class a year or two above me and one day Mrs. Davies sent me round to his classroom on some errand or other to fetch something.

Now I was very well behaved and rather strictly brought up, for which please see my school report in the Appendix. Consequently, I was possibly a bit inflexible and timid. I went to Mr. Quinn's room and knocked on the door frame, the door being wide open.

Mr. Quinn looked up from his desk and as he did not invite me in I made my request from the doorway. He agreed to whatever it was and so I waited. The item, which I cannot recall, was laid out, but I was not invited in. I waited. Eventually I went back to my own classroom and Mrs. Davies to report that, as regards the item, "Mr. Quinn wouldn't give it me to me Miss!"

I was naturally disbelieved and another pupil was sent to collect the item and returned with a message that I was to go and see Mr. Quinn. This I did at once.

This time Mr. Quinn beckoned me in and, in an example of trying to be too clever before his own class and this to a boy who did not really comprehend what he had done, asked sarcastically. "And what did your last servant die of?" The class looked up and went quiet. I looked at the class full of "big boys" about to go on to secondary school and fearfully replied. "I don't know Sir!"

Result? Gales of laughter. Breakdown of class discipline however brief. Confused 8 year old boy and a very angry teacher innocently beaten at his own game! I was dismissed and sent back to my own classroom again.

The real problem was that I was too polite to enter the classroom to collect the item without express permission and in the absence of same had naturally expected the teacher or, someone else, to bring it out to me as I stood obediently in the corridor. Remember, these were the days when schools were more regimented and teachers were gods and goddesses.

"What did Mr. Quinn say to you?" asked Mrs. Davies. "I don't know Miss. I didn't understand him." Shortly after that an annoyed Mr. Quinn came into the class and loudly complained to Mrs.

Davies of my behaviour! I had apparently been very cheeky! Not so!

Had I been a better sort of an Essex Boy with cheeky intent I should have replied regarding the mysterious death of my servant along the lines of, "Don't know Sir! The post mortem's not till next Friday," or some such.

Many of my fellow pupils at Rainham Schools, and likewise playmates in the Brook Way area, were products of displaced persons or "DPs", ie. those who had come to Britain courtesy of World War Two either as refugees, former prisoners of war, or members of the exiled Free Forces of formerly German-occupied countries.

One girl in the class with me was Pamela someone or other whose name sounded like "Yarmulke" and she had a Russian father I recall. Then there was Robert and Elsie Kuyper who lived over the back of Brook Way in Rothbury Avenue. Roy Brown who lived towards the top or Pennerley Road end of Brook Way had an Austrian mother and who ran a hair dressing salon from the house. Also in Brook Way, if not at Rainham Schools with me, were the family Duclos who may or may not have been French.

Finally, from the class of Mrs. Davies I recall shy little Jill Waterman who was chosen to make a farewell speech to me before the class on my last day. I recall Jill Waterman vividly and for a very simple reason. She used a Waterman fountain pen loaded with Waterman's turquoise-blue ink! I wonder what has happened to them all since?

Other Rainham Primary recollections include Mr. Thomas who came into the classroom and asked if anybody wanted to play the violin but that they had to answer there and then! I put my hand up. Of course I wanted to play the violin. Don't we all? We all want to! Does not mean to say that we can or even think that we can! The rest of the class laughed their socks off.

I should explain that I was then, and have always been under-estimated although my degree of achievement is directly proportional to my level of interest. In example, this memoir has been written down straight on the page over five days from 1st to the 5th of January 2009 inclusive.

"What you?" was the reaction of Mrs. Davies. I was something of a late developer. In fact, so slow was I that my mother had gone up to the school and seen my then class teacher, whose name I forget but I feel it must have been one of the last of the Infants School classes, and asked for a list of the books I should by then have been able to read.

Consequently, she taught me to read herself using the Beacon Reader series which I by then had not mastered being still stuck on reading cards of the "Janet and John" variety when everyone else was able to tackle books from the class library and also write in long-hand whereas I was still printing my work.

Mother tackled this by making me write using a Victorian style copy book intended to teach Copper-plate style. I improved but was barely able to do "real writing" with a fountain pen by the time moved to Chelmsford and I began at Moulsham Juniors on Princes Road. Also for years my still very bad writing was "That big stuff" as the teachers referred to it as.

My hand writing is still bad but I can burn through entire libraries and pour out words sufficient to compete with Charles Dickens on "Speed" if I am a mind to which I am doing working on this memoir! (15,400 words at this point and it is still only 15.21 hours on Friday 2nd January 2009).

"What's it like to be the stupidest boy in the school?" asked Philip Hoare the plumber's son also a violin student as we waited outside the tuition room, in reality a spare cupboard or stockroom in the corridor opposite our classroom. I had no reply. I knew that I was not thick. That I was not stupid. I knew even then that I had a memory. A taste for the unusual. A feeling that I was someone else. That I was really on or from a different planet! Many people have since under-estimated me and paid the price by way of law or reading something that I have written and had published.

The Greek ship-owner, the late Captain N. D. Papalios of Aegis Shipping and whose fleet once totalled 120 ships, described me as being unemployable by virtue of being antipathetic. In Greek this means way out from the rest of the herd. How right he was!

My reputation for stupidity was not relieved when, as board-monitor, I used the cloth intended to wipe up spilt milk for wiping the black-board (chalk-board) clean in the morning thus making it smell like a cheese factory. The caretaker had to wash away the effect with bleach and water thus suspending operations!

I digress. Mr. Thomas called me out to the front of the class and for some reason raised my chin and examined it to see if I could hold the violin there? Odd! Well, to cut a long story short, my Dad paid for my lessons and via the school I made my choice and again my parents paid for a child's violin.

'Essex Boy'-Walthamstow and Rainham 1949-1959

As Mr. Thomas pointed out to me, it was autographed by the then very well known violinist and comedian-cum-club entertainer Vic Oliver. I believe that one time Vic Oliver was married to the daughter of the Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill.

In addition to Vic Oliver's autograph, the back of the instrument carried the lines: "This is my very first mahogany violin." done in ink and scratched into the varnish. It cost £5 in around 1958 or whatever and we sold it on for £5 when I gave up even pretending to learn. I dread to think how much it is worth now in 2009! No, I never did learn the violin but then I did not say that I wanted to. I answered the question. "Who would like to play the violin?" All of us of course. It was an early lesson in the old maxim, "Never volunteer!"

Other classroom memories are of the "nature table" in one corner of the room and on which we daily placed flowers, weeds, and horse chestnuts and whatever. In season, the nature table was home to jars of butterflies, moths, frog spawn and I don't know what!

I recall that a shelf to one side of the class held a series of measuring jars and jugs such as bushel jars, pint, quart and gallon measures and a large ruler or measuring rod! Likewise I recall reading and chanting the "times-table" as displayed round and about.

Remember do you, those red "post office" brand note-books with times-tables on the back and detailed information such as one truss - of hay -weighs in at 56 lbs? Likewise tables showing rods, poles, perches, furlongs, lengths and chains? Only recently did I realise that these "lengths" are the same lengths as used by horse-racing commentators!

Recall Mum making a "slipper bag" to hold your school-issue plimsolls and the row of hooks from which that bag hung by a loop?

Savings stamps? Recall bringing your National Savings book to school with some money to buy perforated stamps from the teacher? Those with Princess Ann's head on them were sixpence each and those having the head of Prince Charles weighed in at 2s 6d (12.50p?). A very strict account was kept and once the book was full of stamps it was cashed in and the sum paid into a Post Office book.

I remember correctly.

So how did I come to be born in Walthamstow, move to Rainham and thence onwards to Chelmsford? I know very little of the family history and do not intend to bore you with it. However, taking my mother's side of the family, the Fryers, I do know that my maternal grandmother, Alice Rose Southgate nee Fryer, her brother George Harry Southgate and sister Daisy were born in Epping, Essex sometime in the early to middle 1880s.

My Grandmother's father, Harry Southgate I believe, died when she was just five years of age. He had worked as a blacksmith and is buried somewhere in Epping. But there is more to it than that. The Southgate family come from the Bury St. Edmunds area of Suffolk and maybe from the then village of Whepstead. Was there an Abraham Southgate and his wife Sarah whose gravestone I saw in the churchyard there?

Coincidentally, my cousin Maurice Powell, whose mother was my mother's sister my Auntie Hilda nee Fryer, made a few bob in Guernsey and retiring to Suffolk bought a farm near Whepstead, Bury St. Edmunds. What was it called? Southgate's Farm!

Mainly the Southgates from which I spring were resident in Ipswich along Fore Street and North/Long Street? Like many in the area they were involved in the grain trade, malting and milling. There are many Southgates in the Ipswich 'phone book.

The Southgates who were my maternal Grandmother's Grandparents were Southgate and Co or Southgate & Son grain merchants. I am given to understand that their firm was taken over during the 1914-18 war, possibly as a result of food control regulations.

A much larger grain firm, possibly Boulton & Paul or some similar name, came to occupy the quayside site in later years and I believe that a branch of the Southgates had a mill now the site of Ipswich College. Two large millstones were unearthed when the College was built and once stood in the gardens. The whole harbour and quayside area of Ipswich has now been redeveloped and indeed my nephew Thomas Clarke, my sister's son with her husband Richard Clarke, has recently moved there thus almost closing the circle.

The Southgates in later years may also have had a rag and bone or scrap metal business and also a wet-fish shop! I do know that my maternal Grandmother's father "got religion" and for some reason gave up the middle-class life in order to become a blacksmith.

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He was strict and made his children go to church and learn the Catechism. His wife was a proper Essex country girl from Toot Hill, Stanford Rivers in Essex not far from Ongar and Tawney Common on which stands the old "Mole Trap" public house.

Annie Hartgrove was my maternal Great-Grandmother and her father was Daniel Hartgrove "Dan" to the locals who was what was then known as a "higgler". He drove his pony and trap around the Rodings or "Roothings" buying eggs and poultry from the wives of local farmers later to sell on his stall in Romford market. (Rumford as my Grandmother would say the word)

Last I looked over twenty two years ago now, Old Dan Hartgrove's cottage was still there on one corner of the green laying back from the road behind some hedges and made of white-painted Essex timber barge-board style construction. It has or had an "L" shaped garden or patch of land to one side and this was Dan Hartgrove's market garden from where grew produce to sell to the "Green Man" public house opposite. The "Green Man" was then a venue for charabanc day-trippers coming out from London.

Dan Hartgrove's local was the "Mole Trap" on Tawney Common to where he would go on his pony and trap. The pub was allegedly acquired and developed by Joseph Threader who invented and patented the tongs-like mole trap. My Grandmother and her sister Daisy who later emigrated to Canada both recalled these two pubs.

Dan Hartgrove I know had a son called Tom Hartgrove who may well have inherited the cottage when Dan and his wife died. Tom or "Uncle Tom" died during or just after the First World War. However, family contact remained for some years and my mother's cousin, Air Vice marshal Harry Southgate, son of my maternal Grandmother's brother George Harry Southgate, wrote and told me that he was wont to stay in Dan's cottage with an "Aunt Emily" but he was not sure who she was!

I have no idea who Emily was. She may have been Dan Hartgrove's daughter or maybe the widow of his son Tom Hartgrove. Either way by the time that Harry Southgate, "Cousin Harry" stayed there Aunt Emily was married to a man who drove either a steam roller or a traction engine which he parked outside the cottage.

There is an Emily Fish buried in the graveyard of Stanford Rivers churchyard close to the path left of the main gate. As I recall she died in 1949 close to my own birthday and which makes me feel that this is indeed, "Aunt Emily".

Following on from the death of Harry Southgate, Annie Southgate nee Hartgrove, met and married a man by the name of Hobbs who I think came from Rugby? Either way, my Grandmother Alice Rose Southgate, Daisy Southgate and Harry George Southgate all moved to Chelmsford, Essex where they lived somewhere in Springfield Road. I know that it was not far from some place where "they killed the pigs" and a "pop" or ginger-beer/soft drinks factory, possibly even Macphersons as was pre-eminent in the town when we came to Chelmsford in 1959.

My Grandmother told me of hearing the pigs squeal and the pop-bottles go pop as the marble was forced into the necks of the bottles which sounds were apparent when walking on her way to school in the old Friars School or British School which I recall as a two storey building on the right hand side of what is now Parkway.

I am one of those Chelmsfordians who recalls the town before Parkway cut it in two. On the other hand there is no doubt that the previously run-down area of Moulsham Street, now re-invented for estate agents purposes as "Old Moulsham", has been the better for it. Apart from many pubs in the manner of old market towns, Moulsham Street was home to many dilapidated old shops. Remember the derelict pawnshop "Pettigrews" that stood shuttered and barred covering two shop fronts. Remember also Frank or was it Ralph Catt's traditional grocers complete with bowls of tea and sugar such rock candy in the window?

The site had once been a pub and the proprietor, presumably Mr Catt, took me out the back and showed me an old bowling alley! On second thoughts, this might actually have been Bellamy's pharmacy also located nearby. I seem to remember the old bowling alley full of pharmacy stock!

So old was Catt's that my Grandmother recalled the shop as she also recalled the now long gone Harrison's by the bus stops outside the Cathedral. I think that it is now an estate agency but many old Chelmsfordians will recall the grocers and its coffee mill which blew delicious fumes out into Duke Street for several generations. My Grandmother recalled Harrison's grocers and their coffee specialisations from when Queen Victoria was still on the throne!

Harrison's did move to Broomfield Road for a number of years in a corner shop opposite the "Ship" public house but has since closed being a victim of changing tastes, high rents and presumably the super markets.

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A famous old pub now long gone due to Parkway was the "Windmill" and opposite this on the other side of Moulsham Street was Milson's sweet shop. My Grandmother told me tales of slipping out from the Friars School, going to see Nelly Milson, collecting a jug and then going over to the "jug and bottle" of the Windmill to fill it and then carry it back across for which Nelly Milson paid with a penny lump of toffee!

Some old watercolour and postcard views of Moulsham Street carry views looking down towards the town and on some you can just see the name "Milson's".

While I am at the subject of Old Moulsham, my Grandmother when still a child in Chelmsford used to earn a penny every Saturday morning by wheeling a Moulsham resident by the name of Bundock up and down Moulsham Street. This Mrs Bundock, is I believe, buried in the churchyard of St. John's church, Moulsham Street. I recall once seeing her name in the Parish burial register and vaguely recall that her family grave was near the wall and facing out into Moulsham Street to the left of the main entrance. I was once shown the register by the Curate Rev. Mander who lived in the Glebe Cottage in Vicarage Road next door to St. John's Church Hall. His son Neil Mander was in the 15th Chelmsford Scouts with me but this must be reserved for the next volume covering Chelmsford from 1959 to 1969.

Strange to relate, my Grandmother's first-born, Annie, presumably named after her maternal Grandmother Annie Hobbs nee Hartgrove, and thus my Auntie Annie, grew up to marry a man by the name of Albert Bundock. My Uncle Albert. Both are now long gone. For many years they worked for the Leyton-based building firm and joinery manufacturers J & J. Dean on Ruckholt Road, Leyton.

Eventually, J&J Dean went into liquidation and the owners offered to rehouse Auntie Annie and Uncle Albert in a bungalow in Frinton-on-Sea, Essex. They declined! I suspect a few strings were pulled because they ended their days in a council tower block just over the road from J&J Dean. Uncle Albert had his allotment just over the road also and this may have had something to do with it. There is a photograph of me taken in the yard of J&J Dean sometime in about 1955-56 I think.

Auntie Annie worked the switchboard and covered the front office and Uncle Albert was the caretaker, security guard and odd-job man. They lived in a flat over the offices. Always they seemed to have a fierce little dog which attacked anyone who came close and which had to be locked away if we visited. These dogs grew fiercer and fiercer and almost all had to be put down by the vet. One, of the last of these dogs even bit Auntie Annie's foot such that she nearly lost her toes.

Annie Hobbs, my maternal Great-Grandmother, nee Hartgrove and formerly Annie Southgate before widowhood, had two more children when living in Springfield married to "Hobbs". These were Lilly, who later met and married a Belgian by the name of Adolf - long on the "A" not like in German - forever known as "Auntie Lilly in Belgium". She lived in Ghent. Then there was also Bert of whom I have heard nothing and just one mention in a letter to me from my Grandmother in the 1960s. These latter two were thus my Grandmother's half-sister and brother.

My Grandmother, or Nana Fryer, told me of some great storm that hit Chelmsford. Of floods in Springfield Road and of great trees torn up in Central Park. Such happenings were well photographed at the time.

Later, the family moved to the Moulsham Street area of Chelmsford and lived in a town house in the very poor neighbourhood of George Street, now a car park running parallel to Moulsham Street. My Grandmother and Aunty Daisy, who later emigrated to Canada to be near her own family who had gone there before, both recalled Moulsham Street, George Street and the corner pub by the name of the United Brethren. Still there! I think "Hobbs," my Grandmother's step-father, worked for Hoffman's the ball-bearing factory, now of course long gone and turned into flats.

Hobbs was not a nice man. He used to shove my Grandmother's hat up the chimney if she came home with it nicely trimmed. In those days, one bought a big hat and then for a farthing could have it trimmed or decorated with flowers, feathers, etc.

I do not know at what stage or age my maternal Grandmother and her brother Uncle Harry, their mother and "Hobbs" moved to London and Walthamstow in particular. In those days Walthamstow was quite a recently developed suburb close to London and not far from the City, hence the many modest houses in the Walthamstow, Leyton etc area.

I know that at some time my Grandmother Nana Fryer, but then still Alice Rose Southgate, left Friars School and worked as some sort of servant or maid in a big house in new London Road, Chelmsford. In a letter I now recall that they all left Chelmsford for East London when she was eleven.

I also know that the family Nana Fryer worked for in Chelmsford used to rent a villa at

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Southwold in Suffolk and take the whole staff there for six weeks in the summer. This was more than likely the only holiday my Grandmother ever had and probably the first time that she had ever seen the sea. I do not know that she ever had another holiday as such for the rest of her life save for a post-war trip to see her half-sister in Belgium, the odd day trip with us maybe to Clacton or Walton and certainly a short holiday on Canvey Island when I was about four or five. A holiday? On Canvey Island? Yes!

It seems incredible now but both then, and in my own parents' time, it was rare for the working class to have an annual holiday especially with pay. The industrial north had its Wakes Weeks but in the London area I have never heard of anyone in my family having a holiday prior to the years post 1945? My parents did not have holidays in their younger days but then they had the war to interfere with it all as well!

Well, anyway at some time my Grandmother Alice Rose Southgate, Uncle Harry her brother and sister Auntie Daisy fetched up in East London where Alice met a sailor by the name of Jack Fryer then home on leave in or around 1899-1901. I am not sure when. My Grandmother was about sixteen or seventeen and Jack Fryer about seventeen. I think that he was home on leave from the Boer War 1899-1901 where he was engaged in taking Afrikaner or civilian internees from Cape Town to St. Helena in the South Atlantic.

I know that Jack Fryer (Granddad Fryer) and Alice Rose Southgate (Nana Fryer) married around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Granddad Fryer declared that he had found them a little cottage to live in. This proved to be where I as to spend the first three years of my life from 1949-1952, namely, "Two Jessie Cottages, Low Hall Lane, Walthamstow E17."

I could not tell you as I write when my maternal Grandparents were married although my cousin Alan Fryer has created a Fryer line going back to the 1740s and it is on there somewhere! However, something took place around 1900-1901 and both Jack Fryer and his wife Alice Fryer - she wrongly wrote her name as "R. A. Fryer" calling herself "Rosie" - were to live their entire married life at 2, Jessie Cottages. Granddad (Jack) Fryer died in 1968 and Nana (Alice Rose Fryer) in the 1972 and though she died in hospital was carried to Manor Park crematorium from the home that she so badly wanted to return to.

This couple, each born in 1882 and 1886 respectively, had seven surviving children. Annie, Hilda, Jack, Will, Lillian Beatrice or Beatty who died in 1935 aged 18 of tuberculosis, Len and my mother Kathleen. The house still stands there in "the Lane" presumably opposite the allotments down on ancient maps as "the common fields." I am told that today it has been renovated, has a bow window and a burglar alarm. It goes without saying that my Grandmother kept the front door key on a ledge over the door lintel in line with the keystone!

The house inside consisted of a dark narrow passageway. Leading off from the left was a front room which my parents later used as their living room and which later still was never used at all but was the "best room" and had photos of Auntie Beatty and her "young man" and one or two allegedly valuable ornaments.

Out the back was a living room or parlour and fireplace with a coal cupboard on the right hand side by the fireplace. In my mother's day this fireplace had held a cooking range and the whole effect was a bit like a smaller version of the TV programme, "The 1900 House".

A narrow window looked out high above a mean narrow yard at the back and a view of the backs of other houses around about. Down the steps from the back parlour or living room was a scullery. By the time I knew it there had been installed an ancient gas cooker and a sink with a single cold water tap. This was the sole water supply save for the outside toilet which was reached by a rickety wooden door leading out into the yard. A food cupboard or larder stood in the parlour to the left of the steps descending into the kitchen or scullery.

This kitchen had originally been a laundry room. The cooking was done on the range in the parlour aforesaid. The laundry room had been equipped with a coal or coke fire which heated a dome shaped copper bowl or "copper" in which clothes were boiled and swirled by means of a "copper stick."

Outside in the back yard there still stood a huge cast iron mangle consisting of an iron frame, two wooden rollers and a massive handle. One ran the clothes through the mangle, and mangle them it did. Clothes were then hung out on the line. Further down the garden were some old chicken sheds and a tool shed. It was the custom then for people to keep their own hens.

My mother told me that her father would grab a chicken, wring its neck and then drain it by

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hanging it from a nail hammered into the back wall. That nail was still there in the early 1970s although the chickens and an Anderson Shelter erected during World War Two had long gone.

The upstairs was reached by a suicidally dangerous narrow stairs more like something a budgie might walk up. There were no handrails or banisters. At the top, left and right, were two rooms. One was the parental bedroom overlooking the front and Low Hall Lane. This room had a fireplace and mantelpiece.

The other room was much the same, empty when I knew it, and had just the one window overlooking the mean back yards of the neighbourhood. In the left hand corner was a cupboard and in which I found two union flags dating from VE Day and which I used to run around the streets parading at speed until one hit a tree branch and the pole snapped short!

Back to the coal cupboard in the back parlour. I never did until years later understand why Nana Fryer put "Smudge" the cat in that cupboard. Later I was told it was mice! "Mice" said Nana Fryer, "Haven't seen a mouse for years!". Then Smudge would be hurled into the cupboard!

My Maternal Grandfather Jack Fryer deserves a mention all on his own if only for an account of what a working class Victorian man could then experience if not say that he achieved.

Jack Fryer was born in Bermondsey some time in the early 1880s. Bermondsey used to have a biscuit factory which was said to be the reason he liked biscuits! My cousin Alan Fryer has made up a family tree which I do not have at the time of writing. Therefore, I only know what Granddad Fryer told me, and he did not tell people very much!

It seems that the Fryers come from Norfolk and were farmers. Cousin Alan Fryer has identified a grave of John (Jack) Fryer some time in the 1740s? I like to think that there is a kinsfolk link back there to John Fryer who was the master of the "Bounty" of "Mutiny on the Bounty" fame and who came from Wells-next-Sea Norfolk. We shall see! Anybody?

Jack Fryer or Grandad, told me that his father had served in the Royal Navy on a ship called the "Rattlesnake," some sort of gunboat, and had been wounded in the head at the bombardment of Alexandria in 1886 or something. His Dad was certainly a bit doolally and one night long ago he ran down Walthamstow High Street in his nightshirt. I think he ended up in the funny-farm. He also had a great white beard which he draped over the front of the bed counterpane reminding my mother of the old musical hall song: "Does Grandfather sleep with his beard over or under the bed sheets" or some such theme!

I know that my maternal Grandmother Annie Hobbs, or Granny Hobbs to my mother, lived over the back in the next street to Low Hall Lane but it seems that my mother's Grandfather or her "Grandad Fryer" also lived in Walthamstow.

Jack Fryer told me that when he was as young as five he would go down to the Pool of London, that stretch between Tower Bridge and London Bridge, and swim out to the ships that had just cast off carrying any last minute messages or telegrams wrapped in oilskin and popped into his mouth. For this they were hauled up over the side and given a shilling (5p). Today they would summons the parents and put the child in care!

Jack Fryer did not declare the shilling and his father one day took up his clothes left on the quayside and walked a mile or two just to see if the boy could really swim. After that he was allowed to carry on swimming out to the ships but presumably had to surrender part of that shilling!

When he was eleven, Grandad Fryer ran away from home despite apparently having gone to a good school in Bermondsey by the name of St. Olaves I believe. He joined the Royal Naval training establishment HMS Lion which was then based in Portsmouth Harbour. The establishment consisted of an old sailing warship HMS Lion on which they learned sail training and other tasks and which was in turn linked by a bridge to the hull of a French warship captured possibly at Trafalgar?

Once qualified, Jack Fryer then joined his first ship a fishery protection craft called HMS Swallow. Constructed like a miniature frigate or sailing yacht with prominent prow and bowsprit, this ship sailed from Oban in Scotland up to Iceland with the fishing fleet. It boasted two or three forward firing guns and was mainly a sailing ship having a steam engine for getting underway. The screw went down and the funnel up if the steam engine was used. "Up funnel Down screw". Jack Fryer told me of going up aloft to unfurl and furl the sails whilst hanging on with his teeth. The "Swallow" class of ships are well documented and were scrapped in the 1890s I think.

Later, Grandad Fryer progressed to the engine room where he learned what was to be his civilian trade as boilerman and in which context he worked locally near Walthamstow for the metal

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can manufacturers the "Metal Box Company".

Jack Fryer also served on the battleships HMS Monarch and HMS Cuirassier. I am not sure if he left the Royal Navy and then rejoined between the end of the Boer War and the First World War. I do know that sometime after getting married he sailed in the Merchant Navy going between the UK and South Africa for the Union Castle Line so he may have been away from home quite a lot - not unusual for those times.

During the First World War Jack Fryer served in the Army in some sort of mounted infantry or Yeomanry outfit. He certainly served in Mesopotamia in what we now call Iraq and which just shows you something but I am not sure quite what save that there is nothing new under the sun!

I am told that Jack Fryer tried to join the Royal Navy on the outbreak of World War Two but was told that he had not got the right experience. A friend of his of about the same age did manage to join despite his age but was killed when the German U-boat or submarine commander Gunther Prien sneaked into Scapa Flow, the great British naval base in the Orkney Islands, and sank the battleship HMS Royal Oak.

The only other thing that Grandad Fryer told me was that his Grandfather "was an Irishman" and that he sold shellfish off a barrow which he kept in the White Hart pub Bermondsey. That he "buried a fortune" under a cobblestone in the yard and that his father went and dug it up after the old man had died! Families often refer to lost fortunes but the sums involved were probably then very modest, maybe a few sovereigns. Well, I hope so! Everyone in the family seems to have a tale of a lost legacy or having been cheated by "they varmint!"

Jack Fryer eventually retired from the Metal Box, presumably at the age of 65, and then spent the rest of his 86 or so years sitting in his chair or occasionally going out to watch Walthamstow Avenue football club or even Leyton Orient. Dare I say it? He was for a time the school crossing patrolman or "Lollipop Man" in Markhouse Lane outside St. Saviours' School, Walthamstow. One day he took me over to either Leyton or more likely Leytonstone police station to collect his wages. I recall a building with a lot of glass bricks! The Desk Sergeant then locked me in the cells for a treat!

Poor Nana Fryer, she did not have much of a life but then in those days there was not much opportunity for women other than marriage, babies and menial tasks. She did work in a radio factory during World War Two when there was a need for workers, but other than that never strayed far from Low Hall Lane and Walthamstow High Street. She was however, gifted and very bright but I am afraid that once the children had all left home she sat on one side of the fire and Jack Fryer on the other. They never said much and Jack Fryer developed deafness. Some of it real. Some of it convenient! I am told that they did not get on but I saw no sign of it.

Nana Fryer used to take me out of the back parlour and sitting on the stairs in the hallway would, "tell me the tale of the old iron pot" - No, I never did understand but I knew that Jack Fryer or Grandad would lose his temper over it! Nana Fryer also taught me what I believe were Victorian nursery rhymes, possibly even older than that? "Naughty Jack went out to play in the fields, yesterday. His mother told him not to go, in the fields where the water cress grows. But he did and tumbled in. And got wet right up to his chin. Now he has to stay in bed. Such a cold is in his head. Sneezing makes his face so red. Atishoo! Atishoo! Doctor's medicine he must take. Oooh! What an ugly face he makes!"

Then again: "I had a little donkey. I called it dapple grey. I gave it to a lady to drive a mile away. She whipped it. She smacked it. She drove it through the mire. I'll never lend my donkey now for all the lady's hire."

And more: "Doctor Foster went to Gloucester all in a shower of rain. He fell in a puddle right up to his middle. And never went there again!"

Jack Fryer was not the only one of his family to join the Royal Navy. His son, my mother's brother also Jack Fryer or Uncle Jack, also joined the Royal Navy as a regular. He served on destroyers before and during World War Two. Some of those ships were of First World War design and concept. He took part in the battle for Norway and was in action in Narvik Fjord.

Jack Fryer Junior rose to the rank of Petty Officer but was at one stage demoted and "stripped before the fleet". He was escorting a naval prisoner when they passed through Liverpool Street station. Well, Walthamstow is just a couple of stops down the line at St. James' Street and Uncle Jack put the prisoner on his honour to remain whilst he made a quick visit to Mum in Low Hall Lane, at 2, Jessie Cottages. The prisoner promptly ran off. Uncle Jack soon made it back to Petty

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Officer but I suppose he must have learnt something!

Sadly, Uncle Jack was killed at work in the early to mid-1960s. He worked as an electricity linesman and with a big family they all lived at 5, Borrowdale Road, Thundersley, Essex. Jack had slipped off the pole once or twice and was not using his safety harness when he fell and later died in the ambulance. There was little or no compensation paid as he had not followed safety rules and thus there was no insurance payout for similar reasons. The story merited a small mention in the daily mail the next day but Uncle Jack was named as Jack Flyer.

Grandad Jack Fryer's son Len also joined the Royal Navy but I think that he was initially a Writer as they called it in the Supply and Secretariat. He was eventually commissioned. Cousin Harry was best man at Len's wedding post war and Cousin Harry by then had become an RAF Officer. Cousin Harry Southgate's career is listed in Who's Who if he lives or in Who Was Who if he has passed on.

They can say what they like, I know where they came from. And they all went to St. Saviour's School in Mark House Road, Walthamstow. For all he became an Air Vice Marshall and CB, Cousin Harry Southgate started off his working life as a clerk in a Walthamstow coal-yard. Not bad for one who entered the RAF as an Aircraftman Second Class or AC/2 (AC Plonk Two!)

Then my own mother Kathleen Fryer joined the Royal Navy, or at least the Womens' Royal Naval Service (WRENS) when she was just seventeen having cried and cried until her father, Jack Fryer, got so fed up he just signed the consent papers.

My Mum served in the Fleet Air Arm at Lee-on-Solent at HMS Daedalus and HMS Aerial I believe. When she died we were surprised to find a navy suitcase full of photographs including those of a New Zealand fighter squadron she obviously served with. Despite this, there was also found a telegram warning that she had gone absent without leave (AWOL). Apparently, they wanted her to be a barmaid or servant in the officers' mess and she refused! She had joined to fight the war! Eventually, Mum worked in the galley in the rank of Steward and after having been persuaded to return by her naval officer brother Len Fryer who had been especially sent for the purpose.

As an aside, my mother actually joined the WRENS with a friend of hers who lived in the side street just off Low Hall Lane on the left as you walk down from Mark House Road. I cannot recall her name but in the 1950s and 1960s for sure she became celebrated writer of romantic fiction and short stories for women's' magazines. This she did from an iron lung as at some stage she had contracted polio possibly during naval service? They joined together but were split up when once in the WRENS.

This lady's father was apparently a coal delivery man complete with horse and cart and he resembled the part played by Stanley Holloway in the film "My Fair Lady" starring Rex Harrison. He was also unusual in that he did not drink or smoke and was by all accounts, "always very clean".

But now for a word about Uncle Harry Southgate or George Harry Southgate (GHS) or "Poor Uncle Harry" as my Nana Fryer referred to her brother. As I have already said, Harry was born in Epping where his father Harry Southgate was a blacksmith and who died young in 1892. They all then moved to Chelmsford. At some time Uncle Harry and his sister, Alice Rose my Nana Fryer fetched up in Jesse Cottages Low Hall Lane Walthamstow. So bother and sister lived as neighbours for many years.

Uncle Harry and his then wife Auntie Lilly Southgate occupied the corner plot house next door to 2 Jessie Cottages Low Hall Lane and this rented property was somewhat bigger, better appointed and had a larger garden area. I suppose for the area it must have been what passed for posh - if anything in Walthamstow can be described as "posh"!

I recall Uncle Harry as an upright man and always suited with a gold watch and chain. Why was he better off than the others? Because he was a bookie's runner or collector of then illegal off-course street betting long before betting shops became legal. He was also friendly with Mr Clark and Mr Nichols who stated a Walthamstow sweet factory called "Clarnico". Their goods were once stocked by Woolworths but they have long gone as now has Woolworths of course.

Uncle Harry was quite artistic and theatrical and he could draw a bit. My Grandmother gave me Uncle Harry's little note-pad from World War One in which he has drawn cartoons of life on the Western Front from when he served with the Middlesex Regiment. I have reproduced some of these drawings throughout this memoir.

Uncle Harry was born in Essex. He lived in Walthamstow when that was Essex and so I am putting him down as an Essex Boy who deserves a mention and credit for his cartoons.

I think that Uncle Harry might have been married before. He might have been a widower. Auntie Lilly, his second wife, might have been a widow. There were two children in the family. Cousin

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Harry or Air Vice Marshall Harry Southgate CB aforesaid, and Lucy or Auntie Lucy who has since passed on we have heard.

I know that Uncle Harry and Auntie Lilly were the parents of Cousin Harry Southgate but I am not sure if Lucy was not Auntie Lillie's daughter by an earlier marriage. I know that she was introduced to Uncle Harry by my Nana Fryer, Harry's sister..

Uncle Harry was a scout during World War One and had scars where he was cut by barbed wire when working between the lines. I am told that he did not like loud bangs and was very upset by the Blitz on London as was Uncle Will Fryer who had come back from Dunkirk in a cement boat covered in dust. Downgraded due to partial deafness in one ear from Royal Artillery Service pre-war and with the 1939-40 BEF in France, Uncle Will (Fryer) spent the rest of World War Two as an instructor in Catterick which in itself was some form of endurance!

Perhaps now is time for a word about St. Saviours Church. My parents were married there in 1948. I was Christened there and so was my sister. I suppose a lot of the Walthamstow Fryers were Christened there as well and likewise went to St. Saviours School. I have only recently been made aware of the fact that St. Saviours is Anglo-Catholic or High Church. Once upon a time an order of teaching nuns was attached to both the Church and the School. My own mother told me of being taught by Anglican nuns.

On the subject of churches. Anyone who knows Walthamstow would know of Walthamstow Lighthouse!!! A church or chapel with a maritime lighthouse instead of a spire or steeple!

But back to Rainham and Brook Way. Meet the neighbours. Well, as I have already said there were the Taylors and the Vuyks. Gary Vuyk had at least one sister I think called Stella and another born during my time next door called Elizabeth. Next door but one were the Clarks and their daughter and sometime playmate, Christine Clark.

Proceeding further up the road towards the railway line end lived the Reeves and my playmate Johnny Reeves. He would meet his Dad coming home from work on his Lambretta scooter almost every day and get a ride back down the then unmade and unadopted road, Brook Way.

One day I too had a ride along with Johnny Reeves on that Lambretta and I can recall that on this day Mr. Reeves opened his pocket and took out a tortoise as a gift for Johnny. He was overjoyed but today I think that such a trade is illegal! Almost as illegal as giving two kids a ride on the front of your Lambretta scooter!

Also along the way towards the tracks lived a house full of what we called "The old ladies" who had a large Lassie-type of dog - called Lassie! Then there was the Saddlers and their son and my playmate Johnny Saddler. Saddler senior worked in the Thames ship repair industry and which like so many like it priced themselves out of a job due to restrictive practices.

One day I did ask as to where Johnny Saddler's Daddy had gone? "He's working away but he'll be back soon." was the reply. Years later Gary Vuyk told me that Saddler had been caught as a part of a group smuggling across the Rainham Marshes from the Thames-side area. Well, they were only indulging in a long-established tradition.

A bit further up still lived the Robbs, Trevor and Peter Robb. Next door to them lived the Bowyers and their son Peter Bowyer. Next door to them lived the Scriveners and I well remember their daughter leaving the house to get married. "Here's the bride you lucky people!" she declared as she came out of the house to the waiting car.

The Robbs are worth a mention. They too seemed a bit well off but in those days many men worked in manufacturing and which paid better wages than such as my father's dock-side or City office job. I recall that they kept chickens in the garden but also had exotic toys like a car modelled on a well known brand of the time such as an Austin and which seemed to have an electric motor and real lights? My pedal car was just a pressed steel shell by comparison bought from Walthamstow market. The Robbs moved to Potters Bar.

A bit further on and round the corner was South Hall Avenue where there lived another playmate, namely Graham Pete (or Peet?). The houses in this area were bigger than in Brook Way and they seemed better off. Graham Pete had a very large and extensive up-market Meccano set collection. Now go and ask Grandpa, "What's Meccano?"

Meccano was a graded series of civil engineering educational kits of metal strips and plates, wheels, pulleys, axles, plus nuts and bolts out of which one could create bridges, machinery, vehicles, towers and many other structures.

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Also in vogue was the Bako set consisting of plastic brick panels and other items which could be mounted on thin metal rods set in a board pierced with many tiny holes. The panels & etc were then slipped down the rods. It was very similar to the prefabricated "system-building" responsible for many 1960s tower blocks now demolished.

A more advanced building system toy consisted of small clay bricks like real ones painstakingly cemented together with a water soluble mixture using a mini-trowel so as to create miniature buildings. Both kits came with roof parts, doors, window frames & etc.

Also very common were the Tri-ang and Hornby Double-O electric train sets. Wish I'd kept mine! The motor racing game Scalextric was also well established.

Going back down Brook Way up towards Pennerley Road there lived just up from us the Duclos. Were they French? Or Belgian? Possibly. Mrs. Duclos was in charge of the kitchens making the school dinners at the Lambs Lane School (Seniors - now the Chafford School)). They also cooked the dinners that were placed in hot-boxes and shipped round to the Rainham Infants and Juniors where we ate them in shifts in the school hall from hastily erected trestle tables and long benches like in Oliver Twist.

Nice it was not. I eventually ended up bringing sandwiches in a satchel and eating them in a designated classroom on the far side of the school where wooden buildings overlooked a small stream running parallel to the Primary School playground. To this day I can recall the combined smell of satchel, banana, apple, orange squash in a plastic bottle, Kit Kat or Artic Bar and cheese or spam and beetroot sandwiches.

The brown paper bags and greaseproof wrappers were then saved for future use due mainly to the cost and availability of such items. Even the "silver paper" or aluminium foil from the Kit Kat was saved as were the aluminium foil caps from our one third of a pint milk daily milk issue.

Remember, the War and rationing were still in mind the War having finished in 1945-6 and I am writing about 1957-1958 or just ten to eleven years previously. Sugar and sweet rationing was not abolished until 1953 I believe? By 1955 my father was by then on the Baltic Exchange in the City and working for R. S Dalglish and Co, a Newcastle firm owning ships but also managing the ships for Tate and Lyle the sugar refiners of London and Liverpool.

I had calendars depicting the ships such as "Sugar Producer", "Sugar Transporter" etc. Samples were taken from the holds of the ships for testing and these sample bags of raw sugar could be highly prized but we did not get any of that. Most of it went to the company directors.

Proceeding further up Brook Way lived Richard Reader with whom I used to walk to school and also Barry Silverman who possessed an air-rifle! His mother worked in the little grocery or convenience shop called "Kildare's" which consisted of a flat-roofed affair set back from Wennington Road on the left just next to the track that led to the allotment gates. A bit further up on the right is Melville Road to give you some idea.

There were no real supermarkets then other than grocery shops like International Stores, Maypole, Home and Colonial, Sainsbury's and the Co-Op. Most people shopped at small corner stores and which now have become convenience stores often owned by people of Asian origin.

I liked going past Kildare's. They had a chewing gum machine outside selling "Wise Owl" brand gum for a penny and if the arrow on the handle pointed a certain way you got a free packet. Then there was the bubble-gum machine which was salted with plastic novelties. Inside the shop was like a grocers of the time. Remember the ubiquitous, and lethal if mishandled, bacon slicer on the counter? In those days cigarette, chocolate and milk vending machines were placed OUTSIDE shops for all night service! Catch that today!

Hardly any frozen food then though. That was a novelty although available in a limited Birds Eye range but most people did not then even have a 'fridge! In fact many local people from that end of Rainham would go down Wantz Lane, an unmade cinder track off Lamb's Lane then also a cinder track, and buy from a little small holding that both grew and bought in vegetables, cane fruits, soft fruits and which also raised a few pigs - this made the visit worthwhile for small boys! "Let's go and see the pigs!"

The puppet Archie Andrews was then big on the BBC Radio Light Programme with his operator and "voice" Peter Brough. Can you imagine that now. A ventriloquist act on the radio? However, "Educating Archie" introduced many later stars of the day and gave them their first break or regular work. I was always please to go into Kildare's where my Mum would buy me a banana flavoured Archie Andrews ice-lolly - and have one herself! She also acquired Artic Bars in Kildare's for

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putting in my school lunch satchel. Artic bars were like a narrow chocolate coated wafer in a gold metallic wrapper

Right at the top of Brook Way was a house holding one or several Indian or Pakistani families. A bit further on, where Pennerley Road met Brook Way, lived the Verriers and another playmate Paul Verrier. Another Brook Way resident was John Williamson who was forbidden to play with me after I dropped a lump of sun-baked clay on his head from a small tree in self-defence. He needed stitches. I can remember our Dads having words on the subject.

Over the back in Rothbury Avenue lived a Michael Jeffries who was part of the "gang" and also in Rothbury Avenue, in a house close to the alleyway that led up from the lane at the back of Brook Way, lived June Cracknell. I used to watch TV in their house before we had a set at home. The family emigrated to Australia in I suppose 1955-1956. I notice that there is an Australian actress of mature years by the name of June Cracknell but I imagine that it is not one and the same person?

No mention of Rainham, and in particular the Brook Way area of Rainham, would be complete without a mention of Nurse Chalk the local midwife. I suppose that she must have lived very locally but we only ever saw her as this navy-blue clad figure in a bonnet or Salvation Army-type hat pedalling a heavy bike and weaving her way up and down the puddles and ruts of the then unmetalled Brook Way.

With so many young couples then in the area she must have been kept very busy! No mobile phones then! Few people had a telephone at home although doubtless Nurse Chalk did have one. People must have run to her house which would have been very local or used a nearby 'phone box. A large basket was mounted on the front of Nurse Chalk's bike over which was draped a white cloth out of which poked various tools of the trade.

Nurse Chalk paid a visit to us at 45, Brook Way when my sister Pauline was born on April 23rd 1956 at about 4 am. I heard nothing and was not aware that anything had happened until I was called to the back bedroom by my Dad at ten to seven in the morning. Thereafter Nurse Chalk paid several visits as she did to other homes in the neighbourhood and wherever she went she sang my father's praises in the role of what would now be called, a "house-husband." ie "Mr. Stevens is such a wonderful man!" - I doubt many men then could cook, clean and keep house but in my father's case it had been a family necessity from an early age or so I believe.

Now for the shops at the top of Brook Way with Lamb's Lane opposite and the then new Lamb's Lane School - now the Chafford aforesaid. This was an "L" shaped block of shops with flats above. The very first on the corner was the Off-licence where we could get large arrow root biscuits for one penny when there were two hundred and forty pennies to the Pound Sterling.

Next I recall the sweetshop and newsagents Wilson's who sold Wall's ice-cream and for a 3d cone would charge one quarter of a penny or farthing for the square stubby cone!

I suppose that there must have been a chemist or pharmacy. Then there was a really old style grocers by the name of "Readings" with high shelves stacked with tins such that a step ladder was required.

A glass counter front displayed cheese which was cut to order using a cheese-wire and board. Loose biscuits were weighed out from square tins and likewise loose eggs taken away in ordinary paper bags.

Mr. Reading delivered groceries by way of a bike with a basket on the front pedalled by a boy and always wore a white coat when serving. He also knew all of his customers personally. I seem to recall that this shop employed quite a few staff.

Further up from the shopping parade, set on a grassy rise, stood the little green hut and its fold-away front belonging to "Lil," a proper Cockney lady who ran this site as a greengrocers - but not every day of the week. I can recall the banter between Lil and the customers as she weighed produce using a brass bowl and a series of cast iron weights.

I was often sent there with a shopping list especially when my mother was expecting my sister in 1956. "Doan 'e talk posh!" said Lil as she scooped potatoes into a "granny-bag". Either Christmas or my birthday that year was a good one. I do recall being given a ten shilling (50p) note in a card from my mother. Inside the card was written, "To Barrie. My little messenger boy!"

How many boys and their playmates have a real tank to play war games with to the sound of real small arms fire and the distant boom of 18 inch naval guns? Well, we boys of Brook Way,

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Pennerley Road and Rothbury Avenue, Rainham, Essex - we did in the 1950s!

The Essex Marshes, now a conservation area, was then very much the preserve of the War Department now the Ministry of Defence. Over the entire spread of the marshes there were many rifle ranges some going back to the Victorian era. There were also a few tanks scattered about. I am told that further out into the marsh there were some old World War One tanks but our toy tank was a Matilda tank. Not the type built in the 1930s but a later model and which had armoured sheets covering its wheels and tracks.

One can read about Matilda tanks on the Internet. They were obsolescent all right before the 1940s but did service with the 1939-1940 British Expeditionary Force to France where they proved inadequate and thus were later deployed to less demanding theatres of war.

The Matildas were stockily armoured but lightly armed. Our one stood on the range a few hundred yards from the end of our road across the main Fenchurch Street to Southend railway line near a block-built grenade range and watch tower. Climbing into the tank I could see where the driver/gun-layer sat at the controls in a bucket seat around the edge of which were holes that looked as if they had once held ammunition. I think the Matilda had but a crew of two?

A short distance on facing across the marshes away from any habitation were several rifle range butts and which were reached from a main gate on Ferry Road accessed close to the railway station.

Two or three times a week soldiers from the Royal Artillery barracks at Shoeburyness would come to Rainham for training on .303 Lee Enfield Rifles and the .303 Bren light machine gun. They also fired the 3.50 inch rocket launcher known to the US Army as the "Bazooka" - an early infantry anti-tank weapon.

In those days reminders of the war, of which we were the post-war generation, were very much in evidence. Boys ran around with imaginary "Tommy-guns" making burb-gun noises. We had cap-guns shaped like German Lugers, cap-firing plastic Thompson sub-machine guns, cap-bombs to throw in the air and of course guns and costume outfits of the "Cowboy and Indian variety".

You get the picture! Perhaps you were there? In addition, many of the Dads could be seen digging the garden, painting the house or working on the car dressed in scraps of service dress - either their own or genuine items then bought very cheaply from the plentiful Army surplus stores. Mostly, it was their own brought back from the war. Looking out over the back gardens of Brook Way and Rothbury Avenue one could see Army and RAF battledress much in evidence as men mowed the lawn, tended the vegetable patch or painted the guttering.

The same applied to men working on the allotments then just over the road from Brook Way. My father used his old army greatcoat to lag the immersion heater tank at No. 45. Is it little wonder then that we read comics full fictional and non fiction war hero stories. The paperback war library series. Or in the "Eagle" quality comic founded by the Rev. Marcus Morris where we followed Macdonald Hastings's series "Men of Glory" and which was my prized Christmas present in one of those years costing all of ten shillings (50p)

Macdonald Hastings was then a well known journalist and reported with a background I think as a war correspondent. His son Max Hastings wrote accounts of the 1982 Falklands War and was for a while editor of the Daily Telegraph.

I well recall MacDonald Hastings on the flagship, and then very advanced BBC TV early evening news and documentary programme "Tonight," as hosted by Cliff Michelmore and featuring Derek Hart, Geoffrey Johnson Smith, Kenneth Allsop, the lean Scot Fife Robertson roving reporter of distinctive oft imitated tones, and one who later made his name on the BBC Radio 4 "Today" programme, Brian Redhead. The same "Tonight" programme introduced the topical singers and composers Cy Grant and Ewan and Robin MacGregor. Now do you remember?

The "Eagle", "Girl" and "Robin" quality comics also sponsored the "Boys and Girls Exhibition" at Olympia to which one day my father took on a day out. It was there that I tasted the delights of the Dan Dare Space Walk and likewise shook hands with MacDonald Hastings at a booth and at which time he signed his autograph in my father's pocket diary.

Actually I wanted to meet and shake hands with the Western hero of the time Roy Rogers also then in attendance. I had a genuine Roy Rogers cowboy outfit given to me by my maternal Grandmother, Nana Stevens, but the line-up was too long - and so I settled for MacDonald Hastings instead.

And what of those big guns? Well, in those days the Thames Estuary was still guarded from

the landward side by huge 18 inch calibre if not bigger battleship guns set in permanent shore side emplacements.

These would be fired once or twice a week it then seemed to me and, when that was done, the shock waves would roll across Rainham Marshes creating a pressure wave that had goldfish jump, budgies tremble, windows give and creak, milk bottles rattle and clink on the step and in Brook Way, and at Number 45 for sure, the knocker on the letter box would rise up and give a gentle "rap".

Other entertainment could be a bit more organised such as the fair which sometimes appeared in the park next door to Rainham Schools in Upminster Road. I recall a steam-powered machine called "The Cake Walk" or possibly "Lambeth Walk" and which had attached a steam organ operated by a stream of punched cards.

One year this fair and many other activities were closed by an outbreak of Scarlet Fever/Scarletina which seemed to have its epicentre in Rothbury Avenue. I recall the Council cleaning the drains, disinfectant in the gutters, Rothbury Avenue being a restricted area and the ponds and pools in the park drained for the summer. People had their bedding taken away and burnt and library books were "baked" to sterilise them! You never hear of that sort of thing today - 2009 that is. But there is still time as TB is making a come-back.

Then there were birthday parties where you took a present, had jelly, cakes and ice-cream and came away with a piece of cake and a balloon or some such. Now they hire venues and the parties come ordered cut off in slices by the hour. I also recall one rare party for those days anyway, a Halloween party with turnip lanterns. Such are much more regularly held at the time of writing due to having been imported back from the USA to where the concept was exported during the New England settlements.

Southend-on-Sea was a place to be taken to then if only to see the lights and go for a ride on the pier. One birthday, instead of a party, I was taken to Southend and treated to tea in Keddies department store was it? I remember saying that it was not like a real birthday!

Then there was Sunday School. I suppose we are a Church of England family but there was no Anglican church in Rainham. Consequently, I was sent to the second choice, the Methodist Church then on Wennington Road in the area of Cowper and Melville Roads.

I may have stopped going when I was six years old but I did receive a prize for attendance namely, "Herbert the Little Red Jet" - a sort of aviation version of Thomas the Tank Engine - for perfect attendance during the year 1955.

My memories of Sunday School seem to encompass as many as two visits a day? I recall being in a side room to the right of the main door and doing what you do at Sunday School when we had the regular collection. On the wall was the framed reproduction of some obviously famous painting depicting a little black boy naked on a silk cloth as I recall. "We're collecting your pennies so that the little black boy up there can buy some clothes," was the explanation. Which must have meant something if I can recall it after all these years but it was not by the standards of today very politically correct!

I also recall singing two songs in the annual concert held by the Methodist Church. I was actually supposed to sing one in a duet with another five year old by the name of Colin Moore who had a fog-horn voice but he cried off.

I remember sitting up at the front with all the other "tinies" and then walking towards a stage or dais beyond which higher up was the choir. It was awe inspiring to me! I sang something like, "Jesus bids me shine with a clear, clear light. Like a little candle burning in the night." and "Jesus Wants Me For a Sunbeam." I had no fear then but today I would be petrified!

This same Methodist Church also took us on the annual bun-fight which I recall one year was a day out in Thorpe Bay, Essex! I think that my parents took me there by train or perhaps we all went by train? I do recall an impossibly stony beach as shown in the photograph at the back of the work. Note the "Donald Duck" bucket. I think that I left it on the train or perhaps I was given the bucket and spade, used it at Thorpe Bay and then lost it on another trip such as Ramsgate? Anyway. I lost my "Donald Duck" bucket!

I recall that one of the treats was a trip round the bay so to speak in a boat. Even then I noticed that this boat, which took about ten children at a time with a crew of two, had no engine. It was pure sail and I would say that at some stage it had been used for close inshore fishing. Also, I can recall the lunch of a miserable salad presented on a flimsy cardboard plate all covered with sellophane.

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Rainham in those days had its very own carnival and I have included at the back of this work, and likewise on the cover, a photograph of me standing at the top of Brook Way and Wennington Road eating an orange ice-lolly obtained from Wilson's on the shopping parade with the carnival procession approaching in the background.

Note the state of my shoes. Brook Way in those days was an unmade road not yet adopted by the local council and prone to flooding from the brook from which it derives its name. Houses did get flooded - after all the whole place is built on the Essex Marshes!

In those days, the Brook Way residents clubbed together and I think paid the Council or a contractor to lay a covering of waste obtained from the old Beckton gas works and on one occasion some grey clinker or slag from a steelworks which may well have been the steel works and foundry of the Ford Motor Company at Dagenham. In those days Fords operated its own blast furnaces using iron ore imported from, amongst other sources, Narvik in Norway. I know because my father chartered ships to carry the ore! Perhaps that slag accounts for the state of my shoes?

Back to the Rainham carnival. At the head of the procession there is, I think that I am right in saying, a small contingent of the Dagenham Girl Pipers! Next, in the procession of lorries was our very own coalman, Hudson's Coal and the usual procession of clowns and people with big heads - and I do not mean the local authority councillors!

Note too if you will, the ubiquitous mid-1950s clothes typical of boys back then. The sleeveless pullover, woollen socks with stripe on top and grey flannel short trousers! Like an old Clarke's "K-Shoes" advertisement!

The council houses viewed on the opposite side of the road are at the top end of a triangular sized piece of garden or parkland facing on to both Wennington Road and Ingrebourne Road. One of the reasons we took this longer route to school in the winter was for the purposes of collecting spiders' webs on a loop made from a bent twig.

You see, that triangular shaped piece of garden between Wennington Road and Ingrebourne Road was hedged about with evergreens as were most of the council houses in Ingrebourne Road. Such evergreens house spiders whose webs glisten with moisture in the early morning rains, dews, fogs and frosts.

The name of the game was to collect masses of this damp web material in the loop until it was thick and springy to the extent that it was like a silicone-based material that could be stretched for ever. Of course, once the moisture dried out the web compound became brittle.

Another entertainment indulged in then, especially on the way to school by the long route, was to vanish into the thick fogs and smogs we then had. One hardly sees these now due to smokeless fuel and the like but believe me back in the 1950s it was possible for boys to vanish at speed into fog banks seconds after leaving their own front door or when let loose into the seeming vastness of the Rainham Schools playgrounds.

Remember also, this was a time when even six and seven year olds walked to school and crossed Wennington and Upminster Roads on their own. The crossing patrol was only placed outside the schools.

The quickest way back from school was up Melville Road and then turn left down Wennington Road but we often went the long way down Upminster Road and then right down Lambs Lane and back to the top of Brook Way. As we ran most of the time there was not much in it but I would not like anyone to make such a journey in these times!

Another route back was along Cowper Road which seemed to retain the old square lantern-shaped gas lamps? There was then a non-conformist chapel in Cowper Road and a stone set over the door read: "The Wages of Sin is Death." We would read this out loud and then run off in mock fear!

One form of outdoor entertainment consisted of going down the Wennington Road, past the shops at the top of Brook Way and along towards Wennington where the road crossed small stream by way of simple white painted iron bridge. Then to us it seemed like a river but was probably very small in reality. Most of us caught sticklebacks using either a small net on a bamboo pole and which was a luxury or treat to have bought for one, or by way of a jam jar on a piece of string.

I attach a photograph of me holding just such a tiddler net and I am not sure that it was not made by both my mother and father, she by stitching a section of net curtain, and he by twisting some wire into it and then mounting the same on a piece of garden bamboo cane such as one bought from Sibley's aforesaid. Some economy for the times!ⁱⁱ

I did actually catch and bring back tiddlers in a jam jar and we put some of them in jars and a tank or goldfish bowl on the sideboard in the back room. They always jumped out during the night as I

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recall and any way we had nothing to feed them on. They do not eat goldfish type food and need running water. Tap water kills them in the end.

Success did come however with the catching of a much prized and sought after "Redthroat" which I assume must be the male of some species of tiddler like a stickleback in the same way that a cock robin has a red front. My Redthroat lived in an old enamel bowl in the back garden under a stone covered with weeds and fed with goldfish food for about six weeks which must be some sort of record?

Other entertainment came in the form of novelties given away in packets of cereals. Kellogg's cornflakes once offered plastic Cowboys and Indians so that you could start your day the sunshine way by working up a genocidal tendency and feeling of cultural superiority. I am saying this to keep the social worker happy. The treatment is working!

Then there was the "Puffed Wheat" which at one time sponsored "Lone Ranger" items. It was possible to pour out the cereal and discover two of that "masked man's" silver bullets in your bowl.

"Hi-Ho Silver away!" Remember, Clayton Moore who played the "Ranger" aka Kemo Sabby and Jay Silverheels, the Canadian Indian from Ontario who played Tonto his faithful Indian companion! Western superiority again.

Cowboy and Indian wallpaper, a Roy Rogers cowboy suit, two Lone Star brand cap guns and bullets for breakfast all eaten to the background rattle of British Army 303's and the distant boom of 18 inch naval guns hurling faulty five ton shells out on Maplin Sands in order to frustrate all future attempts at building London's third airport on an ordnance littered mud bank.

And if that was not enough, Armour brand makers of corned beef and other canned meat products, sponsored Davy Crocket items which you could get by saving up the labels and sending off a postal order. Personally, I did not get any of these items. I went for the now racist and non-politically correct enamelled Gollywog badges gained by saving the little Golly images from inside jars of jam and marmalade.

Peter Bowyer up the road at Brook Way, he did have some Davy Crocket gear. The movie "The Alamo" with John Wayne was a big hit at the time, as was "Bridge on the River Kwai" and "Reach for the Sky". Peter Bowyer had a Davy Crocket coonskin cap with a tail, a powder horn and a double barrelled pistol. I think he also had a large rubber Bowie knife named after the designer Jim Bowie who was killed at the battle of the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas. I went there myself about thirty years ago to look around.

Some children were allowed to go to Dagenham and the ABC Cinema or was it The Princess at Dagenham for a children's' showing of some rubbish material like "Zorro" - but I was never allowed to go nor even to see anything on television that my mother did not personally approve of and which remained a family tradition until I was almost thirty!

Before I move on from the contents of cereal packets, I must mention such as model nuclear submarines issued at the time that the USS Nautilus made a journey under the North Pole ice-cap. These models had a cap to be filled with baking powder such that when put in a washing up bowl of water they sailed around, sank to the bottom, dived, resurfaced and then sank down again. Neat!

Then there were the divers or frogmen based on the TV series made by the deep-sea naturalists Hans and Lottie Hass - a sort of precursor to Jacques Cousteau. Cereal packets then contained little divers and sea creatures each moulded with a space for an air bubble to collect. When dropped into a screw-type lemonade bottle, or such as an R. Whites American Cream Soda bottle filled with water, the figures would dive right down and then as the top was released would rise right up. Neat!

I said that I would make some mention of a holiday on Canvey Island, Essex and not far from Southend -on-Sea. Nana Fryer's neighbours, the Tomlins at 3, Jessie Cottages, Low Hall, Lane Walthamstow, owned a sort of DIY "bungalow" or tin-roofed shack set in an unmade road not far from the sea-wall on Canvey.

I believe that many East Enders bought plots for £5 during the Depression of the 1930s when farmers sold off their land in this way. I recall this wooden hut being divided into small bedrooms, a kitchen-sitting room, light bulbs hanging down from long flex and a gas cooker. I think that there was no main sewer as I was forbidden to use this mysterious hut at the end of the garden. (We went into "town" quite a lot!)

As for entertainment on Canvey, there was little enough of that in 1954 although I do recall

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going into the sea and getting covered with oil from the nearby refinery and tankers. I even brought back a model oil tanker! Also, there was a fun-fair and an arcade but apart from walking miles along the sea-wall and dykes and noticing the sinking wrecks of old Thames barges, there was not much to do on Canvey Island!

Some boys around Brook Way made forays over the rifle ranges on the marshes and brought back spent rifle cartridges. A rare find as these are usually collected by soldiers at the end of the day's shoot.

They also got hold of railways sleepers left by the track and bound them with builder's timber from then South Hall Avenue estate then building so as to make rafts which they then punted up and down the creek into which ran the brook of Brook Way.

The marshes were then home to herds of grazing steers and some sheep. Indeed, one could see a distant farmhouse nearer the Thames. Wooden gated bridges served to move these cattle around and likewise to impede the progress of the rafts. I never went further than the first bridge but the bigger boys managed to run the rafts under each bridge, reboarding on the other side, and got as close to the River Thames as it was then possible to get. Now that is an adventure for a ten year old!

Eventually, the time came for me to make a solo trip over the railway tracks at the end of Brook Way and on to the Rainham Marshes. The red flag was up. Rifles cracked. Machine guns rattled.

Cautiously, I skirted my way round to the firing point. I could see heads turn uneasily towards me as I approached. The Range Officer looked worried as well he might. A seven or eight year old loose on the range with hundred of bullets flying about. I moved closer and closer until I stood behind a group of soldiers all standing around another soldier on a ground sheet behind what I would later come to know as a Bren gun - but later renamed the LMG (Light Machine Gun).

The gun fired a deafening burst making my ears ring and go dull and woolly. At that point a civilian guard, probably ex-forces himself, came towards me from the main gate and entrance on Ferry Road. He asked how I had got on to the range and I replied that I got there over the railway tracks. He took hold of me and escorted me from the site and would not let me go back the way I had come.

I then had to walk all the way back along Wennington Road to Brook Way and was back in time for tea and most probably "Blue Peter." They never showed you how to field strip, clean and fire a Bren gun on Blue Peter - let alone how to make one from pipe cleaners and the cardboard tubes from empty toilet rolls.

As I wrote this work various songs from the 1950s era came flooding back into my memory and some would not even go away! One particular hit at the time heard many times a day on the wireless - sorry, I meant the radio, had the refrain, "One day I'm going to write.....the story of my life"....Well, I am going to attempt to do just that purely to add to the Essex Record Office archives. I hope it will not be too boring! If you have been, thank you for reading this far!

Postscript

My schoolfellows:- Robert and Elsie Kuyper, Roy Brown, Paul Bealo. And Terry Spurgeon who, along with another Roy Brown, was a champion swimmer. Jill Waterman. Barry Silverman, Trevor Maze. Linda Wakefield, Jane Brooks, Clive Holmes, Falco Reich, Charles Belcher, John Prince, John Pilgrim, Philip Hoare, Richard Reader. John Williamson, Linda Went, Graham Pete, Michael Jeffries.

My neighbours, Jamie Taylor, Billy Taylor,

I last saw them all in Rainham in 1959. I wonder what has happened to them all since?

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