

MEMORIES OF MILLFIELD (2011)

Hi! This is a text version of a document which I could also send with some photos in it if you are interested, or I am happy for you to use it as it is, with an acknowledgement to the Piano History Centre, my name is not essential.

Bill Kibby-Johnson
Piano History Centre
www.pianogen.org

I was born at 8a Castle Avenue, Highams Park, in March 1947, and round about October/November, we moved to a newly-built council house at 129, Millfield Avenue, Walthamstow. This was described as a “centrally-heated” house, because it had the chimney in the middle, with heat vents off it to two of the bedrooms, and a radiator in the dining room, behind the fire. I have all sorts of little fragments of memories about life at Millfield Avenue, and I hope to put more of them into this space, although it looks like being a long job. I find a good method of digging them out of the inner recesses is by concentrating on a particular spot in the house or garden, so I will list the memories geographically rather than chronologically.

The front fence was a metal one, which had to be pulled out from time to time, so that a motorbike and sidecar could be parked on the lawn. The bike was an important feature of our lives, a means of transport that many other people did not have, so Dad would often give lifts to friends and family in the sidecar, but it was a terrifying experience for some passengers. June later told of a nightmare where the sidecar split away from the bike and went off on its own. I thought that was my dream?

The window frames were all iron, and they distorted with temperature changes, so they allowed lots of draughts, as well as inordinate condensation. The area by the front door had (and still has) a large ledge that ran all along the block, and was supported by thick metal pipes in the form of ladders. This made it easier for window cleaners and burglars, but also tempted many young children to climb where they shouldn't. I remember that as part of Dad's wicked sense of humour, he placed a loudspeaker in the hedge by the pavement, and the speaker doubled as a microphone, so he could listen to people, and frighten friends and family with this disembodied voice. We also enjoyed having a similar device listening through the chimney to pick up night sounds from all round the streets. When Dad put one on the landing, we were naughtily listening into Gran's nightly bedtime routine of swearing “bloody this” and “bloody that” as she thoroughly brushed her long white hair. She was extremely superstitious, and never swore at any other time, in case God heard her. Presumably her bedroom was God-proof? It was a funny yet chilling image that gave me a nightmare after she died. No-one thought to tell me that she wasn't in the room any more.

Later, I wanted to repeat the speaker idea, but with a microphone as well, so I had to work out how to keep three wires together neatly. I invented a method of twisting alternate sides, quite unaware that that was how girls plaited their hair. Dad and I invented a lot of things that other people also invented. Sometimes, we did it first, sometimes we both came up with the same ideas, but we never made money from the ideas! I remember when I had the idea of a guitar in which the strings touching the frets also sounded electronic organ notes. Dad separately came up with the identical idea, but unfortunately, the Vox company made it, and made money too. Another time, I designed an electric guitar which was hardly any bigger than the area of the strings, with no head at the top. Everybody said I was mad, but I sat there in front of the telly, polishing my new creation, and there it was on “Top of the pops”, a Hohner Jack, virtually identical! I have a computer idea now, but I am waiting for it to pop up somewhere, so someone else can make a fortune from it. After all, it doesn't seem to be my function in life to make any money, I never do. I invented a binary music keyboard, and later saw it used by stenographers. In the seventies, fed up with paying through the nose for bad haircuts, I invented and made an excellent hair-cutting tool, which I still used until it fell apart in 2011.

From Millfield's front step, stretching through the hall, and across the kitchen, there were red tiles that Mum polished with tins of Cardinal. I remember a later occasion when I was alone in the house, and found a trail of thousands of ants leading from the front door, along the edge of the carpet runner, and through to the kitchen, where they were having a party. Thanks goodness those tiles allowed me to boil kettles and brew some ant soup without any worries about where the hot water would end up. The kitchen was very modern for its time, with full-height fitted cupboards along one side, including a built-in small fridge, and a floor-level cupboard where Peter the dog lived. Beryl had come home from school one night with him in her pocket – "can we keep him?". Peter became the kind of best friend for whom I put up with being bitten occasionally. I had such fun with him, and took him shopping with me. I remember lighting a giant banger firework called an "Atomic Bang" in the garden, and then Peter arrived from nowhere, and headed straight for it. I tried to rescue him, but ended up with a loud bang in my ear. Still, it was better than my irritating school friend Alan, who stuffed a GLASS boiling tube with gunpowder from several bangers, and then lit it. The fuse went out, so he stuck a lighted match in the end, and nearly blew his hand off. There was something called "the side" which consisted of cupboards with a worktop. As a small boy, I found a screw lying on there, and promptly shoved it up my nose, so we had to go to hospital to get it removed. "The side" was also where the teapot lived, with its cosy, and the sugar bowl, where we dipped pieces of raw potato. Next to it was a tall, slim broom cupboard. The cooker was electric, it took an age to warm up, but then continued to heat the room for hours after it was switched off. Dad liked to eat only selected meat products, like sausages or spam, which he fried until they were well beyond the state of being "bien cuit", and bordering on charcoal. Not surprisingly, he had a lot of digestive problems, which he solved by gorging on indigestion pills as if they were sweets. Dad used to heat the dog food, still in its tin, as if the dog cared, but on one occasion, Dad forgot, and the tin exploded.

Between the cooker and the sink, under the draining board, there was a copper, which had electric elements inside, and provide the means of doing the washing by swishing it around with a big copper-stick. There was a mangle in the garden. The porcelain butler sink had hot and cold taps, but the hot supply depended on a back-boiler from the coal fire in the front room, which also fed the radiator in the dining room. Hot air rose through vents from the chimney to gently warm the two larger bedrooms, where there were also lethal electric bar fires. One day, I tried to light a little oil lamp from one, and was initiated into the family tradition of electric shocks. June had grown up to be terrified of everything electrical, because of Dad's many crackles and bangs. Dad had the knack of repairing televisions, so we had them before most people, but they were usually other people's rejects, especially Uncle Len's, which Dad had to work on, so they were often running with the cabinets removed, and, today, would be considered a health and safety nightmare. We became connoisseurs of the characteristic pungent odours of burnt-out rectifiers and exploded condensers. The aerial was just a piece of wire, and Dad would go around the room, trying to find good reception, but eventually he got angry, and just threw the wire. This, of course, resulted in much improved pictures!

The dining room was small, and Dad decided to paint the ceiling with some dark blue paint he got for nothing. We were horrified at the prospect, but it made the room seem strangely taller. Then, he had uncontrollable need to use up the free paint in all sorts of other places. In the middle of the room was a rather fancy-legged squarish dining table with extendible flaps. The place mats were brown and hexagonal. By the window was the sideboard, which held the family photos, knitting materials, and a radio, where we listened intently to such delights as "Journey into space". The house's only radiator was where I tried to warm up while I was dressing in the mornings, and I remember what seems to have been a very rare occurrence – Mum smacked me, and I wasn't sure quite what I did to deserve it. Who knows what was going on in her head at the time, she rarely showed anything but smiles. The back door from the dining room led into the garden, but Peter the dog found a convenient way of getting out there urgently when a cat passed by, he just leapt through the glass. *Years later, another dog did that to my front door when the postman came.*

By the door was a small strip of flower-bed, with metal rods to carry plants growing up a piece of wall. Then a paved area, with the mangle, and manhole covers, as well as space for mending motorbikes. Occasionally, bigger jobs like building sidecars were done on the tiled floor of the kitchen, where Uncle Arthur also liked to tap-dance.

From the kitchen's back door, we stepped out to a coal shed, which nestled into an L-shaped concrete shed in the garden, making a squarish building shared with the neighbours' sheds. One of my delights when I was alone was to climb out of the bathroom window, and leap down onto the garden from the shed roof. *I wonder if that is why my knees don't work properly?* Between the shed doors was the air gun target area, where Dad said that Chris and I shattered far too many old 78rpm records. I was an angry young man, and sometimes spent long periods in the garden, and I can't remember how much of that was taking out my temper on a shovel, and how much was actually achieving useful things for Mum in the gardening line. I remember she kept asking Dad to dig over the area of earth near the house, but he never got around to it. I did it and, of course, got told off! When I was quite young, Mum decided she wanted an area at the far end of the garden closed off by a trellis, Dad made it all completely from scratch, and stained it dark brown. I am not sure what the idea was, apart from supporting Rosa's roses, but it became an area of great calm and interest for me, being well away from the arguments in the house. I remember a gooseberry bush and blackberries, more of which could be found halfway down the garden, so we had lots of yummy blackberry pies.

On the adjoining house, and elderly couple named Kennedy lived, then later a slightly younger family, the Meads, and Mrs M's piano was backed onto our wall. The first neighbours across the alley were the Sowerbys, I seem to remember them being old and grumpy, but don't recall anything much of them. Then it was the Jaggars, people who spent a lot of money decorating and improving a home that wasn't even their property.

When Brenda's family, the Rackhams, moved in next door, Mum and Win spent many tea breaks chatting over the dustbin area, and on one occasion I took what seemed to me a very poignant photo of cups of tea on the dustbins. I had it made into a greetings card. I wish I still had that. I got engaged to Brenda and married her. Her brother Dave married Viv Hards, who lived across the road. Her brother Gary married Elaine, who lived next door to them.

I was bought a bike, but given no proper instruction on how to ride it, so it rarely left the garden, and was often turned upside down to serve as a space ship, a ship's wheel, or whatever was needed at the time. It was probably another thirty years before I found how easy and satisfying it was to ride a bike. I was not really encouraged to go out and play, but don't remember feeling restricted by it, I just played the parts of the cowboys and the Indians, in the days when it was considered entertaining for Hopalong Cassidy and Roy Rogers to shoot Indians by the dozen. I was never a team person, and didn't have any desire to join the crowd at Roger Ascham school or play team sports, although I was on good terms with the other kids. It was socially acceptable then to be a loner, and my only close friend Jeremy Weinstein (son of a councilor) was coincidentally the only other boy to pass the 11-plus exam. Aggression and swearing was virtually unknown to us, we had a great time being young, fighting was fun to the crowd, although I never learned the skills, and it was not until I moved to the senior school across the road that I kept hearing lots of rather short words that I didn't understand at all. I remember a friend trying to demonstrate what a "pansy" was, by strange wrist movements, but it was all wasted on me. A different world, but we were brought up in ignorance of many important things like sex.

The alley between the two houses was echoic, and I liked to make noises in there, and record them, it was an interesting place to play the guitar. Above the alley, we seemed to have the advantage of more house-room than the neighbours, with the bathroom, large landing cupboard, and part of Gran's boxroom above the alley. However, all of these were extremely cold. The bathroom was heated by a tower paraffin heater, which stank, and scared us, especially when Dad messed about with its adjustments.

The downstairs had a continuous circular route through its various doors, where (I'm told) I liked to rush round and round in my pedal car. The front room was the hub of the famous Kibby parties, centred around Gran's upright piano, which was bought in 1933 from W.H. Barnes at 4/6 per week.

I remember years later, when I sold it to one of my tuning customers, Dad decided to WASH the dust out of the inside with a wet cloth, which turned it all to mud. Then, Dad decided that we didn't need the receipt, so he threw it away. I also remember how Gran loved to plonk away on the black notes, with old favourites like "Sweet Rosie O'Grady", and "When I grow too old to dream". Bad as it was, it was no worse than Irving Berlin's piano playing. I played around on the piano, learning to imitate various sounds such as trains with musical notes, but it irritated Dad, who wanted me to just play proper tunes.

In the days before people shredded personal information, we just chucked it all on the coal fire, and I remember how we loved to put crisp packets on there, and watch them shrink, whilst remaining perfectly formed until they disappeared. In earlier times, I was given a bath in a little tub in front of the fire. In the recess by the fire was a wind-up gramophone, where we would listen to Les Paul or Frankie Laine. The double door between the front room and dining room will live in my memory as the place where my sister Beryl could poke her tongue out at Dad without him seeing, during one of their many rows. Beryl and I have never in my memory found it necessary to get annoyed at each other, but Dad was too much for her to bear.

Inside the front door, there was a tall cupboard at the bottom of the stairs, which included the electric meter. The stairs were a favourite area for me, I loved to see how many steps I could jump down without injuring myself. (When I wasn't jumping off the shed!) I had dreams where I could fly all the way down the stairs. *I remember trying to jump in a similar way off a breakwater at Canvey Island, and landing on my stomach, knocking all the wind out of me. I didn't do that again.* At the top of the stairs, there was a big cupboard where Dad set up a photographic darkroom, and I used to experiment with "light art" on photographic paper. The tiny toilet room was unpleasant, with only the minimum elbow room, but one of the lighter moments associated with it was when Dad painted the seat just before a party, and the paint didn't dry. When I went to a tearoom called Twyfords in recent times, all I could think of was seeing that name on the toilet bowl every day.

I was in each of the bedrooms at some time, I may get the sequence wrong. As a small child I was in with Mum and Dad in the back bedroom, then the front bedroom, but when Beryl and Terry married, I was moved into the boxroom, where I had a smaller space, but it was all mine. It had a big, square box-like structure over the stairs. Later, I had the back bedroom all to myself, and that was where my music really got started. I remember finding out that the water tank was above where I slept, and it took some time to get used to the noises it made. I liked to squeeze myself into the little top cupboard, and hide from Gran. June and Beryl did the same. I had a train set, but was never especially interested in the trains, I just loved setting up a model village on the board, which I called Bilston. (Get it?)

By 2003, Millfield had a bus route running through it, and new windows and doors, but for many years, the glass in the front door continued to bear the mark where "Billy" had thrown a stone at it when I was a toddler! I was known as "Billy" for the first few years of my life, but decided quite young that I preferred "Bill", and I've been stuck with it ever since: I wouldn't mind if I didn't have two different initials, but at least I'm not Willy. Gran Williams called me "Billiam", a version of the name that always feels comfortable: Surprisingly, it is only in recent years that it ever occurred to me that Liam is a shortened form of William too.

Bill Kibby-Johnson
Piano History Centre

Email: bill@pianogen.org