

Something of myself

I have made several and largely unsuccessful attempts to record my early life. I remember during the last effort struggling with the chronology – something that seems so essential for a written reflective but entirely superfluous in any anecdotal expression of one's past. I suspect then that this struggle will rise again but I am at least determined that it will not stop me writing down what I remember as I remember it – congruity can come later.

My earliest memory or at least what I was always led to believe was my earliest memory was in 1947, looking out from my pram at the age of two and a bit as I was pushed between mountainous banks of snow at the Bakers Arms, Leyton some two miles from where I lived in Woodbury Road, Walthamstow, E.17, London (so sad that this postal code was adopted by a less than attractive 90's pop band). Woodbury Road was next to the Walthamstow Girls High School where some 30 years later my sister would demonstrate her not inconsiderable academic abilities – unlike her elder bro'.

1947 was one of those years of delight for weather watchers and statisticians – the great snow of 1947 (there is even a website dedicated to it, www.winter1947.co.uk) the snow started on January 6th and for most of London continued for 90 days until mid March. Reputed to have been the coldest winter since 1795 it was only rivalled later by the winter of 1962/63. Before I get totally immersed in snow let me draw back into my pram and recall that all I saw, if saw I did, were two giant banks of snow dominating the early screen we all enjoyed, the window looking out of our pram hoods.

I remember living with my parents at the house of my grandmother, Edith May Burley a fearsome lady believed to be of Jewish origin but adopted as a young girl by the family of a Samuel Warren. She was one tough cookie as the 60's vernacular would have it. She had been let down by pneumonia which had killed her husband, Reginald Eric Knowles, my grandfather and left her with a ten year old son who had suffered with rickets as a baby and if his stories are to be believed, a diet of undercooked chips, for most of his childhood. More of this later.

My grandfather's membership of the local freemasons meant that on his death his son, my father, Geoffrey was supported through school and attended the private commercial establishment known as Clark's College in Hoe Street, Walthamstow where he learnt everything to do with commercial life and business plus a smattering of English, arithmetic, geography and history. He hated most of it. Grandmother then turned her neat London terraced house into a hairdressing saloon, yes I do mean saloon, the penchant for most things tonsorial being expressed in French had not hit the city streets by that time. The same thing has happened since with anything to do with coffee being expressed in Italian - bring back 'milky coffee please!' The Norfolk dialect's reworking of latte has to be heard to be believed.

In their front room my grandmother and her lodger John Henderson (always known as her brother to keep customers and neighbours tongues still) plied their trade either side of

a plywood screen in barber's chairs where the smells of singeing hair, shampoo and Estolan crept through the house, back to the rear wooden conservatory heated by a paraffin stove bent on its mission to fumigate or burn down the house.

After service in the War my mother, RAF Corporal Stella Florence Hunter (teleprinter operator Codes and Ciphers Office at Manston and Northolt) and father, Sergeant Geoffrey Eric Knowles (NCO in charge of Codes and Ciphers Office at Manston and Northolt) made their home at the Woodbury Road Saloon with me in nappies. We stayed there until these particular members of 'the land fit for heroes' could find a flat at 145 Howard Road, Walthamstow that became my home for the next 13 years.

But I am getting ahead of myself.

Woodbury Road was full of sweet-sucking memories. Shelves formed from planks of crate wood supported by giant Marmite jars leant against the parlour wall. A black cooking range in the chimney, A cellar containing large chunks of sugar that had been kept all through the war waiting for a real emergency only to be unusable when the war was over. The horror and delight of seeing John Henderson peeling skin from hands made raw with dermatitis from handling chemicals used in dyeing and 'perming' hair. Dark rooms. The after effects of war. Most notably a feeling of togetherness and security that follows any shared triumph over adversity. Rationing with visits to the rationing centres where little bottles of orange juice with blue screw tops were handed out to mums for their young.

1947 was the year of the big snow and the big polio epidemic when in common with many others I caught (a fortunately mild bout of) the disease. This led to visits to a centre in Shern Hall street where I had to be tested to see if I was learning to walk properly - again - after the disease. These days are mixed with the collection of the orange bottles with the blue tops. Were they a reward for walking straight along a white diagonal line across the room? This and trips to Hitchman's Dairies in St. Mary's Road where milk bills were paid, bread and other groceries were bought with paper coupons cut out of the tatty pastel coloured stapled books that together with gas masks became the shared icons of the war years and part of the daily round.

The High Street market famed for being a mile long became the Saturday afternoon treat. Walking down Churchill Road to the High Street and then the long slow journey past the fruit and veg stalls, sarsaparilla the herbal drink with its strong enticing smell, the Black & White Café, the eel stall where eels were dispatched to the hereafter with a flick of the knife and placed still wriggling into shopping bags, pie, mash and liquor (for most only mash and liquor to keep the cost down). At the end of the market trawl a trip back by train from St. James' Street station to Hoe Street where just a short walk away were the delights of the massive J. Lyons restaurant with marble tables and bentwood chairs as far as the eye could see. The revolutionary self-service queue lining up in front of rows of lift-up glass doors behind which lay a variety of hot and cold foods. Small round pats of butter, scones, cake and tea and the clatter of trays, crockery and cutlery and the aproned

girls with tiny hats moving trolleys and chairs. Then back home to Woodbury Road and the safe smell of the familiar.

The commonwealth of post war experience - lost forever after the dark travesty of the Thatcher years and still being weakly played out by the pretender to the throne, Tony Blair - was a richness of purpose and concern for the common good. It spawned universal suffrage, health care and education and left an exhausted nation at one with itself at least for the moment. For me it was a wonderful time to grow up. Security for the young at home and in the streets could be presumed – although I am sure that very bad things went on behind some closed doors as they have always done. Children walked alone and together everywhere, got on buses by themselves, played in large gangs in the street, tramped through neighbours front gardens and parents never worried about them going out as long as they were back for dinner (dinner was the mid-day meal of working class tradition).

Early photographs show me atop an Anderson shelter disguised as a rockery (the shelter not me) in a smart overcoat looking close to angelic amongst the large rosette Sedums that seem to have followed me through life. My Dad stands by playing the part of a slim lithe RAF chap proud as Punch of his new family looking very Michael Redgrave. These immediate post war years are lost to me in memory and only appear only through this select group of photographs when someone had a camera and used it.

We moved to Howard Road when I was finishing at St. Mary's Infants School a second stage in my education that began at the Higham's Park Nursery a repository for children of working mothers in those frantic years immediately after the War when everyone was expected to work. Mum worked at the Halex factory as a clerk. This early plastics factory was famed for toothbrushes, combs, ping pong balls and plastic bowls. I remember seeing a machine that put the bristles in toothbrushes operating at the factory, it reminded me of an electric cinema organ. Mum often brought experimental plastic bowls home – many of which disintegrated into flakes of plastic in daily use.

At the nursery I learnt how to sleep in a canvas cot after lunch and how to put small stones up other little boys arses. The nurses, in full nurses uniform with hats, would play with us and I have a picture of a rough and tumble with them on the grass at the back of the low ugly brick and concrete building in which we were looked after.

St Mary's Infant School was placed next to the parish church of Walthamstow St. Mary's in what is now called Walthamstow Village and was site of the original village of Wilcumstowe. The school survives as a community centre owned by the church and has curate's cottages in place of the large wooden shed that was the reception class run by a small round Mrs. Davies who could not have been more receptive. The classroom dominated by a large rocking horse that would have been given beach room by the Trojans. Its multi-paned glass walls looking over a playground dominated by a sycamore tree which became an aerodrome of flying seeds in the Autumn.

The same building design I had enjoyed at the nursery had been dumped at the bottom of the playground next to the open-air toilets and was used as the dining room. A grim setting for the grimmest food I can ever remember. As a result of the culinary experiences in that glorified bomb shelter I shall never be able to eat mashed potato shaped by an ice-cream scoop.

The wooden fence at the north end of the playground separated the school from the Walthamstow Girl's High School mentioned previously as the *alma mater* of my sister's secondary education. All school photographs were taken against the backdrop of this fence – a source of constant temptation to look over and see what appeared to be a wonderful flower garden with girls in the distance.

Later I struggled here under Mrs. Rose who lived in the next street to mine as I failed to grasp tables via the rote method of learning – not the first or last time that this method of illuminating my ignorance failed to work. My father, by then a teacher trained under the emergency training programme for ex-servicemen, spent hours at home making good this early deficit in my arithmetical skills. I swear we used slates when I first arrive in this class but I may be mistaken.

To return to Howard Road. It was at the age of 7 or 8 that we left my grandmother – the sigh of relief from my mother was audible – and moved to the flat at 145 with its wide black and white tiled front entrance leading to a well-pumiced front step that I was always being warned would give me piles if so much as thought of placing my young shorts clad cheeks on it. This rather grand entrance belied the small-roomed ordinariness of the flat itself with two bedrooms and a box room, a front room and a backroom with a kitchen and bathroom off overlooking an external iron staircase leading to a narrow strip of garden that became the muddy township where my Dinky toys ran the gauntlet of tortuous and repetitive adventures, and firework parties with my Uncle Jack, Auntie Errol and Cousin Alan who came all the way from Annerley to join the fun of a Brocks box of assorted star-filled cardboard tubes and spirals.

This was the place where my father once tried to grow spinach and ended up with blackened inedible leaves (this was before smokeless zones were introduced and smogs still a winter hazard to be endured). Under the metal stairs next to the coal bin I secretly kept a white mouse in a wooden box, which would have been fine if the mouse had been toothless (an unlikely scenario for a rodent) but as it was not, it escaped and created consternation. It was where Ian Purdy and I were photographed playing drums and double bass in our first venture into 'a group' a story to be told later.

This scene of most of our outdoor activity had a back door leading to Aubrey Road where small cottages existed as they had done for years and a steep hill moved down to Hoe Street the shopping nirvana where Bick's Toy Shop dominated my dreams. It would be a collectors idea of heaven. One window full of carefully displayed Dinky toys – I liked the racing cars with their large grey ridged tyres that raced through muddy imaginings in my back garden. In the main window there were sports gear and a variety of toys and long stringed puppets. Further up was the newsagents shop where I regularly stole out of date

comics from a box outside the shop door. The Hole in the Wall shop next door was an early DIY store offering everything from Paraffin to screws served by a small dapper man in a grey shop coat who had a twinkle and a way with young boys. A florists followed Bicks towards The Bell Corner the famous junction of the roads to London's West End and to the Docks. This five storey pub was the scene of my only pub brawl and the success of The Barristers, almost my last sally into music before leaving for college in Norwich. The a clothes shop and finally Hinton's the tobacco store on the corner facing Breezes the chemists. Opposite was The Empire noted home of early films and where Max Jaffa (who he?) a famous violinist who started his musical career accompanying early silent favourites.

The Empire is the scene of numerous stories. The day my Dad returned home to tell me that the film Bugles In The Afternoon was showing – what he actually said was Buggles In The Afternoon and for some reason that was funny, perhaps because it nearly sounded like 'bugger' and was quoted all my time at home. Secondly it was where I nearly committed suicide roller skating down the hill and around its front entrance into the crowds waiting to go into the cinema – no room! So into the traffic on Hoe Street and a near death experience.

The cartoon shows dominated the holidays and a Tom and Jerry was always a favourite (somehow not the same on the small screen). But the film I would love to see again was about the future of cars. It was a kaleidoscope of crazy futuristic ideas of what a car might look like and was hilariously funny. One car was very long and meant for the whole family with a long thin piece at the end followed by a bubble where mother-in-law would travel in isolation. Another one was a compact car from which the driver emerged and proceeded to fold the car in half and half again until it was the size of a wallet which he then placed in his inside pocket and walked off.

Childhood in Howard Road saw play on the two bomb sites that existed and Jimmy Nacker played with a tennis ball on a manhole cover. The baker's horse and cart from the baker's shop in Hoe Street left bread from wicker baskets in the houses and dung behind on the street – strict instructions from some parents that their children should let them know if the horse did the necessary. The Coronation of Elizabeth II was celebrated at both ends of the road. Our end was a steeply sloping hill so the creation of a stage was quite a feat.

My father was the MC for the day and introduced the highlight of the afternoon, the fancy dress competition. Virtually all the parents showed their love and affection for their offspring by pouring masses of gold and silver and red paper and fabric onto their children to dress them in complex and brightly coloured costumes as queens, page boys, horseguards or royal buglers that glistened in the afternoon sun as they paraded in their careful constructs up and down the hill. My father not wanting to make too much of his own 9 year old son - well he was in charge of events - dressed me as a Breton onion seller with beret, thin pencilled moustache, some old clothes and two long strings of onions that he and Mum cobbled together the night before. I was taking part but even I could see that the rest were in a totally different league from my parents rather dowdy attempts at an

acceptable ensemble. To my father's horror the manager of the Empire chose me as the winner because he said everyone else looked exactly the same and I was so totally different!

Later that evening we watched some kind of entertainment and I cuddled up to a teenage girl who was minding a few of the younger children. It was one of my earliest sexual experiences – feelings of physical yearning that I felt well enough but failed to understand. The only other early sexual experience I can recall was around the same time or maybe a shade earlier when I was part of a group watching a young girl playmate who pulled down her knickers and urinated behind an elder bush for our entertainment.

Tony Smith was the leader of the gang that played in the central part of the long road. Our gang played on the hill and rivalry was at times intense. My Mum hated him for the most snobbish of reasons. A passion was the swapping of comics. He had a storefull of well worn Marvel comics that everyone loved but few possessed. I eagerly swapped my pristine Mickey Mouse Weeklies for these gems from the USA. My mother was appalled and had to be held back from undoing the deals. It's ironic that the Disney comics she would have me hang on to have now paled in value compared to their superhero American cousins.

After my time at St. Mary's I went to Forest Road Junior School about a mile away past the gates of Lloyds Park where William Morris was born and brought up in what is now a museum celebrating largely his and Rossetti's work. Forest Road was part of a school complex that included an infant school and the William McGuffie (William McScruffy as we called it) Secondary Modern School. Miss Mauler, a less suitable name for this rather pretentious and sophisticated lady would be hard to find. She addressed her boys and gels each morning in the upper hall of this curious building that was built on a hill and consisted of two rings of classrooms built around separate halls. Steps linked the two halves. I was in Miss Coral's class in my first year an attractive young teacher who I now realise must have been in the first year of her teaching. In year two I was with Mrs. Bloor who was in many ways quite progressive. I remember we had to plan a two-minute talk for Friday afternoons for the class on a subject we chose. I chose water and after what I thought was a snappy beginning when I announced with a flourish that water was really H₂O I dried up and fumbled my way to an embarrassingly fizzled climax (shades of things to come perhaps).

Tom Osborne was my teacher in years three and four. Which reminds of something I should have said earlier. I was part of that generation that has become called the Baby Boomers. Children before and since can have no idea of the significance of this as far as our schooling and early lives are concerned. Every year group at school was enormous. Schools had to suddenly find extra classrooms and names for classes. Schools rapidly swelled in size. At Forest Road we became a five form entry but later at WMTS as I have always called the William Morris Technical School (for the sons and daughters of impoverished gentlefolk my father used to jibe) we had at least six forms in that year group. That is why there were gangs of youngsters playing on the streets and in front

gardens and a common acceptance that there was little where else that they could play. Such a collection of children in a modern street would cause or be considered a riot.

There was protection in numbers. In a class of 53 it was easy to be hidden.

Anyway back to Miss Mauler's academy. Tom Osborne was an acquaintance of my father's largely I think through the National Association of Schoolmasters. It was the period when A & B Arithmetic ruled the roost and pupils were largely nailed to their desks for no other reason than there was no room for them to go anywhere else. All eyes were on the 11 plus examination. Tom was a good teacher and awakened an early interest in drama and theatre with rehearsals in the cramped space at the front of the class and appearances on the stage in the upper school hall. Mrs. Bloor had been the first to put me behind the footlights when I played the part of a gardener carrying a potted plant and wearing spectacles at the end of my nose. This was during my young corduroy phase when I had jacket and shorts to match. The height of our dramatic endeavours was when I played Omar in Ali Baba and the forty thieves dressed in a flowing blouse and baggy eastern trousers and sporting a concrete-like papermache turban that never quite fitted and was always a point of concern in any rapid action.

In the classroom I was less successful. I found English interesting but its formal structures hard to understand. I could never see the sense in comprehension exercises in fact in any English exercises. Grammar remained a fearsome battlefield for all my school life and clause and analysis a series of ciphers I could never decode. I read incessantly at home where a small revolving bookcase bore an interesting collection of volumes including my father's early copies of the Just William stories that I read again and again wishing my family had an elder brother and sister that I could torment. We had the outlaws, not meeting in an old barn maybe but certainly holding court on a manhole cover in the centre of the road and fighting Indians through the shrubbery of suburban England. Late in the last year at junior school we were invited into the fringes of geometry and the mystery of pi. But that was after the ordeal of the 11 plus and secondary school selection where the extent of parental choice consisted in listing in order the schools you would like your child to go to if he/she passed the test.

For some strange reason that I shall never fathom Miss Mauler liked me. Whether it was because my parents were considered of the professional classes or because I spoke nicely thanks to my Mother's determination and two years spent taking elocution lessons somewhere in Shernhall Street at a temple of thespis and the spoken arts – I think I may have performed here as well in various dramatic and musical ventures but their importance has clearly not stayed with me. It could have been that I was quite tall and good-looking and didn't upset anyone or that I was quite a confident speaker by then. Anyway I was made Head Boy and nurtured in that matronly way that only a short bosomy lady with an affected upper-class accent can manage. She knew I had more in me than I was currently showing. So for a year I wore an enamel badge and rang bells in various halls and hopefully didn't let the side down.

The eleven plus was taken in a nearby school (it could have been Selwyn Avenue) we had been prepared for the three tests – intelligence, English and arithmetic. I remember very little about it except diagrams and lists of words and being told when to start and presumably finish. After a painful wait of a few weeks I was awarded an oral. This meant that I had not gained an outright pass to a local grammar or technical school. My parents had put down WMTS and so one morning I went for interview in Gainsford Road in that imposing multi storey edifice that I got to know so well with its turrets of stairs at either end. Sadly all has been taken away (my grandmother's euphemism for a hysterectomy was always 'she's had all taken away' spoken as *sotte voce* as a fog horn) apart from the separate Domestic Science/Physics block and the dining room that have become day centres offering support services for various ethnic minorities.

Miss Mauler did her bit to protect me from myself. I had a nervous tic or rather a nervous sniff – my nose has always behaved strangely ever since I had my adenoids and tonsils removed at Connaught Hospital when I was in junior school. Any way she rang up the interview panel and told them not to be put off by this sniffing oaf who was really and OK chap – hardly her vernacular but you get the drift. It was like being held up at the altar – needless to say I passed my oral and strangely enough entered WMTS in the top W form where I remained for all my pre-sixth form time at the place. Williamson the headmaster was a small man in many senses. He was not a visionary but he did 'allow.' The drama group did some very interesting work thanks to the wonderful Dorothy Cornu, woodwork, metalwork and even plastering I think were treated with equal concern as Latin and Greek.

Characters abounded. Apart from Dorothy Cornu who I realise I gave the most terrible time to was a wonder turning out magical theatre productions with hormone-riddled show-offs with ease and grace. Mr. Payne the man who decided my instrumental future after a 60 second blast on a recorder – nil point I'm afraid became more of a hero when I joined the choir and thrashed my way through Handel's great choral opus. Mr. Etheridge, my form teacher and teacher of French - a new boy who lacked any real understanding of my sense of humour and asked Mr. Grainger an English teacher to cane me to aid his understanding (years later as a young teacher I met Mr. Grainger at an NUT conference and asked him if he remembered the incident – he said he did but I don't believe him)

Young Welshmen, Messrs Davies and Jeremiah who taught Biology and French respectively must have been the scourge of the teachers' common room. They appeared with a group of us in a school production of Sheridan's School For Scandal. I never received the benefit of Neville Jeremiah but Alan Davies taught me all of the biological sciences at O and A level. His most becoming phrase was 'well I'll just have a little check then' in sing-song Welsh when uncertain about the validity of a response to a question.

Half way through our A levels we took an additional O level in human Biology with V formers studying Health and Hygiene. I was wary of Alan Davies and clashed with him on several occasions – I think, quite rightly, that he thought I was a waster - so when he warned us to stick to the biological questions and avoid H & H if we wanted to pass the

exam, my bloodymindedness came to the fore and I deliberately flouted his advice and answered all the questions I fancied. Including one on planning a town to ensure that sewerage and services were placed in the most hygienic places – an H & H speciality if ever I saw one! Joy was unconfined when I gained the highest grade of the group.

I never quite got Secondary schooling.

I was far too busy singing and playing bass in a rock band (up yours Mr. Payne) to concentrate on schoolwork. I just about did the homework and I enjoyed a lot of what was going on but English Lit. especially Chaucer and Shakespeare and History left me cold. Sad as these have become passions in later life. But I won't start on that one – oh yes I will – why is it that so many aspects of our culture and heritage are taught so badly, even now. It's so obvious that you should start from the child and work outwards. Start with books that interest them and then switch them on to ever richer and demanding texts. Start historical research with them and their family and make the connections to national and international events of the past. The current passion for family history shows the obvious truth of that.

Enough.

Mr. Frank Winmill became my form tutor in the V form. I always thought his fey approach to English meant he was probably gay so it was some shock to discover in my fifties that he had married my beloved Dorothy Cornu fairly late in both their lives. According to an entry on www.friendsreunited.com Dorothy Cornu passed away on Sunday 17th November 2002 at the age of 97

The news of her death came as a total shock to me. I had for the past 25 years been trying to find out what had happened to Dorothy and whether she was still alive. I was told some 20 years ago that she had died so I did not pursue the quest to find her. To learn that she died so recently at the age of 97 was therefore the saddest news, the loss of such a wonderful teacher and person yes but selfishly the loss of those years when I might have found and talked with her.

She had faith in so many of us and sustained us when other teachers could only maintain control by corporal punishment or by 'putting us down.' In the Drama Group she encouraged us to believe in ourselves and to become the people we were portraying. She gave unstinting hours to rehearsals at school and at her house at weekends and during the holidays. I found her to be a wonderfully committed and intelligent teacher with a passion for theatre, a gentle sense of humour and an understanding of her young charges. She gave me a lifetime love of the theatre and performance - hence my involvement in so many theatre enterprises and now my deep involvement in the Noel Coward Society. I am so glad she had such a long and hopefully full life.

We were not always an easy group of pupils to control and with the adrenaline running and hormones unchecked we must have been a substantial challenge to her at times. She always shone through, took the jokes and the exuberant and undisciplined behaviour and

got her productions completed and dare I say to a high standard. I remember notable acting in *The Merchant of Venice* - the names of those who played Portia and Shylock escape me but their performances do not. Jean Honeyball is a name I recall - an actor who looked remarkably like Jean Simmons. A school colleague I rather feared Brian Mitchell sent a programme for some early school plays that had gone from my memory but reading the text some images and memories returned. I recall Peter Nicholl's notable performances - I was sure he would become a professional actor!

Looking back through a couple of Speech Day programmes I note that I never climbed the stairs of the Walthamstow Assembly Hall stage to receive an academic prize; never gained high ranking in class lists, and basically flunked both O and A levels. But thanks to Dorothy at one of these outings I took a 'Highwayman ... across the purple moor' and with a class of my contemporaries, sang the school song as a pubescent 14 year old in Mr. Payne's choir and on one glorious occasion as a Vth former climbed those same stairs to deliver Benedict's treatise on women to a packed auditorium. Now that's better than a limp handshake and a Roget's Thesaurus.

So I never really got secondary education but it certainly got me!

I never really liked many boys at secondary school. Phil Myers was a good friend (now a successful biochemist in Sydney, Australia) who carted us all about in a three-wheeled van breaking every traffic law in the book. John Ryder was not my type but religiously involved me in his life until the day that I badly let him down at a party at his house when I managed to slip past his parents and lock myself in the loo with a mouth-watering girl and to put it bluntly, ravaged her. A wonderful memory. The problem came when we needed to escape back to the party without his parents seeing us. We failed and that was the last time I ever visited his house and perhaps more sadly I never became intimate with that girl again. Oh I forgot I also poured beer over the head of ballroom dance medal winner Sylvia - God this is painful stuff. David Woolley suffered me but clearly thought me mad.

The worst of my bullish behaviour was always with girls. I lost one as a result of gently kicking her in the bottom at her house in front of her parents, another by talking insensitively at length about an all night party I had been to the day before all the way home after meeting her at the station from a long tiring trip back from a school skiing trip. Later sex dominated everything - loins before reason. It has taken me most of my life to realise what developing and sustaining a relationship is all about. But then conquest was all and the liquid loving of lips and thighs were highs I lived for. The only rival was rock music.

It was during the late WMTS years that I spent most of my spare time rehearsing or playing in various bands. It was the most naïve period of my life as agent after agent ripped us off through countless 'auditions' at venues across southern and eastern England. In various combos I auditioned at the 2is Coffee bar, discovery venue for Tommy Steel and Cliff Richard, auditioned as a warm up band at a gig at the State Ballroom, Kilburn where the up and coming Rolling Stones were the main act and again

with them at the Norweik Club at Tottenham, with The Hollies at Hounslow Baths, Georgie Fame and The Blue Flames at the Flamingo and toured US bases all over East Anglia for a pittance. The famed Gunnell brothers used and abused us.

The music thing started with a neighbour Ian Purdey who lent me the money (without my parent's knowledge) to buy a double bass (£17) and I started to explore the world of Cliff and the Shads. A little later I became part of Johnny Cassidy's band The Barristers playing bass and doing backing vocals. We played three nights a week at The Bell pub (gateway to London you will recall). This led to some recording work as Johnny was then a GoFer at a recording studio in Holland Park where the Black and White Minstrels recorded. We backed a singer called Johnny Reno, a Canadian trying to make a career out of recording Buddy Holly covers – not much mileage there!

Later I became involved with a band called The Spartans who started off as a Django Reinhardt style group and then became a Country and Western outfit and ended up playing mainstream pop and the usual gig material of the time imported from the USA. Gerald Kirk was the leading light. His mother was a rather refined music and piano teacher in Chingford and it was here that we sometimes practised as well as at a local school youth club. This band played regularly at the Castle ballroom, Richmond to a large half empty dance floor. Gerry and I sang and we became passably good. Our Merseybeat selection was quite something. Long before then I had bought a bass guitar and a Selmer bass amp (without my parent's knowledge) and was paying £9 a month in hire purchase payments all financed from gigs.

In recent months, due to the development of the Walthamstow Memories website, I have been able to make contact again with Gerry Kirk who has lived in Australia for the past 30 years making a living as a musician playing locally. It is interesting that on his website he mentions so many of the places where we played. He put me in touch with Howard Watson who played guitar in the same band and now lives in Burnham on Crouch and ran a coffee business for some years – he appears to be semi-retired. As a result of these contacts and one with Ian (Thunderfoot) Purdy my memory has been jogged and I am now able to remember Chris Anthony the Greek girl who sang for a while with the band and details of the last band I played in before going to college- The Riot Squad. It was this band and the promise of a tour in Germany that created a decision point for me. My parents wanted me to go to college and they won the argument. I would have loved to have gone and started a career in the pop business but I knew it was risky and yes I would have lost contact with my parents for a while. In the event I went to college and the band toured the Hamburg pop trail in the wake of the Beatles and returned after three months to continue touring in the UK for about a year or so.

Gerry sent me some photographs that I had never seen of The Riot Squad and The Spartans. Two of them show The Spartans playing in the National Beat Contest with Chris at The Lyceum in the Strand, London. I remember that we wore turquoise jackets and under collar bow ties. In one picture Gerry is holding a poster that shows us playing at the Hounslow Swimming Baths with The Hollies – proof at last that we played with some famous bands. Other pictures were produced for The Riot Squad as publicity

photographs. I now know the names of those who played in the band. Tony Randall on lead guitar, Pete on drums and Alan on Rhythm guitar with me on vocals and bass. I have a copy of one of the publicity photographs of The Riot Squad. I remember driving all over London looking for places to take photographs of us and being driven in Tony's old Rolls Royce he worked in the City of London and decided on the venues for the photographs that were taken on The Embankment and in the City. Later I either sold or handed back all that new band gear before leaving for Norfolk.

Whilst on this constant reference to working outside my parent's knowledge it still amazes me that I was allowed so much freedom. I must have started playing at the Bell pub when I was sixteen or seventeen. I travelled all over the Southern and Eastern counties with a man they could not stand called Roy Thompson who looked like Yul Brynner and whose daughter was my first sexual conquest (she occurs later in my disastrous arrival at college in Norwich). I can only congratulate them on giving me the room to make every possible mistake I could manage and providing so many near death escapes from disaster. I feel sure I did not give that freedom to my daughter - although she says that she got it all the same by deceiving to me - so nothing changes.

We got off on this music tack from my time at WMTS so let me return to that scene of academic failure. After completely muffing my O levels - I got four at the first go and collected three more through resits and the famed Human Biology success. So with seven O levels I progressed reluctantly through a VIth form course that consisted of Botany. Zoology and Scripture - evolution and divinity how more balanced a course can you get. The reason for this strange amalgam was that I had failed chemistry the final part of an acceptable A level triumvirate. So timetabling left few holes for someone like me to assume a more normal study profile. My limited success with O level Scripture led naturally to joining an A level group that because of its size could be timetabled to fit virtually any subject configuration.

The Alan Davies/Biology phenomena I have largely dealt with but Mr. Goddard I have not!

When much later I read part of Anthony Powell's 'A Dance To The Music Of Time' Widmerpool was always Mr. Goddard, thin as a willow with trailing gown and the stance of a striding cock sporting a long roman nose held slightly aloft as it and he ploughed their way through school corridors and life (and not remotely like the lardy interpretation seen in the television version of this literary masterpiece).

He had a cutting, dry delivery and never understood me (he slipped me once when I was in the Vth form). I remember little about his lessons but a great deal about his passion for cross-country running. This form of torture so particularly associated with schools was carried out in various venues after travelling by coach - Ainsley Wood Park at Chingford was one place I recall where we trudged mindlessly through muddy paths puddles and over fallen logs and ditches to come in close the rear of the field and only just in time to get the coach back to school where we showered, compared the size of our willies by eye and changed back into the Respice Finem designer clothing known as

school uniform. Maroon, grey, navy and white were the school colours and on top of the cap that no-one ever wore after the first day was the coloured button that marked your house (green for Lister in my case).

I detested Goddard because I was frightened of him but many others I gather liked him. He is still alive I understand and has a passion for Orchids – God bless him! The most dreadful and feared teacher was a Geography master whose name escapes me. I once saw him drag a boy across several rows of desks with his victims limp body crashing down between each row before being keel-hauled over the next. This master took great pride in his chalk drawings of maps which we painstakingly copied under the misapprehension that this had something to do with geography – much later as a teacher I was to understand that skill in colouring-in was the main object of most subjects on the school curriculum.

Kilgour was a classics man Greek and English were certainly part of his pedagogic quiver. More importantly he was a jolly, Pickwickian figure whose presence at assembly I always welcomed and watched. Miss Murdie, the Deputy Head and for me an ineffective teacher of French who will forever be remembered for her stirring warnings that boys were not to bounce their balls against the walls during playtimes – a timely reminder for the masochists amongst us. She was probably a quite lovely person for those who grasped languages as easily but for me they were nettles and I stopped French at 13. Stockdale I barely knew. I remember a limited number lessons on Technical Drawing with him in the last prefab classroom behind the bicycle racks. He struck is rather a bully but I know many liked him and his sporty car. The Domestic Science teacher – I wish I could remember her name – looked after me well. There was some kind of arrangement whereby for one double period on a Friday you could join a class of something that you were not taking as an exam. I think I was the only boy to choose DS although I have a feeling Piggy Pearson might have been there as well. The problem was that during that age prior to the rise of feminism I found that after a few lessons certain ingredients were already weighed out when I arrived and I developed the kind of stance that the Cordon Bleu chefs must have enjoyed of adding the final master touch to the preparations of the lesser sous chefs. I remember making a Christmas cake and icing it, drop scones, choux pastry for éclairs and enjoying this short term engagement as a leading man fronting these culinary chorus girls.

Cooking was nothing new for me. My father taught me to cook from the age of five when I imagined I had prepared Sunday dinner (working class for lunch – remember!) well he at least let me think so. The passion he had for food rubbed off and we ate the most exciting range of foods that were a mystery to my contemporaries. I loved my father's passion for food. The care in preparation. Making cheap cuts of meat taste wonderful through slow cooking. I hated the scrag end stew which we had at least one day a week to keep costs down. When Mum returned to work we had roast each Sunday with the remains as a curry on Monday. Sunday's joint was followed by tinned peaches and a rock hard brick of Walls ice cream.

At Christmas he pulled out the tendons of hens by twisting a skewer around them and placing the bird on top of one side of the kitchen door and the skewer on the other and then pulled until the tendons popped out of the leg. The bird was pulled in the other sense by eviscerating it. The juicy, smelly flop as the entrails were sucked out of the body by hand held a grisly fascination. Then followed the singeing of the feathers on the gas stove ring and the job was done.

Earlier during immediate post-war rationing both my parents gave up their weekly egg for me. Something they told me about much later which left me with an irrational feeling of guilt for years. But it is memories of what I discovered later others thought of as strange foods that are my strongest mealtime memories. Sucking out brains from the skulls of cooked rabbits; the crispy ears of a slow-cooked half pig's head; salt and pickled herrings brought home from Petticoat Lane on a Sunday; shellfish from Manze's; pigs trotters; cow heel and tripe cooked with onions; savaloy (in later years eaten with French mustard); a decaying salty Canadian Cheddar that burnt your tongue brought home from my Saturday job at Pearks the Grocers (part of the Home & Colonial empire) in the row of shops at the bottom of the hill; real coffee, ground and then percolated on the stove and the horrific scrag of mutton with floating grease and inedible white bullets of gristle.

My reputation as a bone-picker began young when I fought my Dad for the privilege of eating the bone from the joint. Two challenges: get the bone before Dad and then to avoid his scorn if I failed to get every last scrap of meat, fat, sinew and skin off it. The ultimate challenge was the crisped foot at the end of a shoulder or (rarely) leg of lamb. After scraping away the obvious meat and crisped skin clinging tightly to the shank the task was then to break up the tarsal or carpal cluster of small bones and like a diligent Piranha demolish every nutritional nugget from the tiny bones. Unstated scores were given by smile, sigh or wink and in the early days a chorus of encouraging approval from my grandmother who may have had a totally different agenda. Dad was always generous in his approval but the glint of envy was always in his eye.

Food was the scene of one of my most memorable battles with my father. It was the Christmas after my 17th or 18th birthday. I had returned from somewhere and my ever thoughtful Dad said help yourself to ham and bread. Outside on the stove was a ham simmering away on the stove. I took it out, cut off a couple of slices and made an enormously thick sandwich, covered it with mustard and returned to the front room to watch TV. My father looked at first with interest and then with concern at what I was eating and then exploded – I should apparently have used the thin sliced ham that was in the fridge and not taken a sizeable chunk out of what was clearly reserved for the festivities to come. With typical teenage hormonal self-control I threw the whole thing plate and all into the fire and ran from the room chased by this irate gourmet, down the stairs and out into the night. In bare socks I ran down the hill past the Bell pub and up the back hill and hid for an age in a small wooden shed in the back garden that I had made months before out of orange box wood for my bike. Mum the peacemaker eventually guessed where I was and matters were resolved.

At this point it is proper to record some of the stories told on those glorious Sunday mornings when Dad read the Observer and we argued about all things political, well at least those things that impact on the immediate post-pubescent brain of a 16 year old. Those discussions were always tempered by the peculiarly robust way he consumed bacon and eggs – mouth partially open revealing the masticating contents, breathing through his mouth and finishing with a fat rolled up cigarette of Golden Virginia that gradually stained as his saliva worked its way towards the ash. Those discussions and the opportunity they offered for developing new ways of thinking were later to be condemned by my first personal tutor at college as ‘bohemian!’

God how times have changed.

Dad met Mum in an Orderly Room when they were both in the RAF Codes and Ciphers section. She was a corporal teleprinter operator and he was the sergeant in charge of the office. Most people think their parents are special but for me and later my sister they were the epitome of loving family life. There were moments of discipline, tension and drama but they let us breathe and taste the world as we saw it. Their wartime courtship and memories of the depression of the 1930s gave them a strong desire to see their children ‘secure.’ Most pressures stemmed from that very natural desire, elocution lessons to get rid of the London accent, making good the shortfalls of schooling, going to college, getting a secure job and pooh-poohing any desire to try more exotic or creative paths in life.

It’s thanks to Yellow Jaundice that I am here at all and for that I must be eternally grateful. Dad was making his way south for the ‘D’ Day landings. He was to land on the beach and set up a codes and ciphers unit for the landing forces. On the way down by train he felt sick and faint and was seen to be changing into an interesting shade of yellow. He was whisked off the train and hospitalised and completely missed the channel excursion that meant death for so many Allied forces – his genes and mine survived!

Those who did make the battle front or were imprisoned are perhaps naturally always reported as unwilling to talk of their wartime past. Dad had no such experiences or concerns. His war was largely about the curious and the ironic moments of the forces close at home, rather than the death and humiliation of those far away.

Most of the weapons produced for the offensive were shipped off for front-line troops leaving hardly anything for the defence of the realm. Dad was issued with a pike to defend Manston aerodrome and spent his watch on a deckchair holding a pointed stick to the sky to keep the hun from the door.

His only dogfight was when he was on watch and was spotted by a lone returning fighter plane. He ran for cover behind a haystack that was sprayed with fire on one side – as the plane prepared for a return run he dashed round the other side and let the hay take the punishment once again. After a couple of goes the pilot gave up and flew off.

Stories included trips to dances at Margate where the armed forces who were looked upon as a nuisance in the 1930s were now welcomed as saviours. Fear has a wonderful way of changing prejudices!

After they married Mum was evacuated to Hitchin in Hertfordshire and I was born at Foxholes Hospital in the early hours of 21st November 1944. The relief that birth brought must have been considerable. Dad had previously christened me 'Sodlet' due to my violent physical activities in the womb.

Dad was a member of the National Association of Schoolmasters. He believed quite strongly that men should earn more than women. This stemmed from the accepted social model of man as breadwinner and woman as homemaker and it was therefore important that a man brought home enough pay to keep the family. The growth of women at work that born out of wartime necessity had become a desirable economic if not yet social goal. It may have been the starting point for modern female emancipation but it was certainly not perceived as such at the time. The family was the be-all and end-all of immediate post-war Britain where rationing was king and making the family income stretch as far as possible a daily obsession. Black markets flourished and everyone knew someone who could get them something off-ration. Spivs flourished and families survived. When I joined the National Union of Teachers at college, the largest union and the only one to campaign for equal pay the scene was set for more heated Sunday morning debates on teacher politics.

Mr. Bible the manager of Pearks the grocers deserves a section in any biography. I worked at Pearks on Saturday's when I was 15. Mr. Bible was a slim Irishman with a swarthy skin and slicked back blackhair. He fancied himself with the ladies And possessed a ballpoint pen that had a transparent barrel that containing a picture of a woman in a swimming costume. When tilted the costume disappeared revealing a blurred pink nakedness that is those days of Health & Efficiency was a fair way up the pornography scale. Pearks consisted of a single shop front with an 'L' shaped counter that dispatched cold meats, cheeses and groceries. The immediate back room was a room that was both an office with a tall 'stand-up' desk where Mr. Bible wrote on bits of printed paper and the home of the feared bacon slicer. The joke that was rehearsed each week started as I started to clean the machine when he held up his hand showing only two fingers and a thumb and said that's the fifth bacon slicer I've cleaned this week!

The back room was a meat and cheese store and the staff rest room. The air was always full of cigarette smoke and decaying bacon. The sides of bacon were placed on slatted wooden racks under a large work surface. My main job of the morning was to take the sides off the racks and scrape them clean, scrub the racks with bleach and return the bacon to its home. Upstairs were several small rooms that were clearly intended to be used as a small apartment but were used to store sacks of dry goods including currants, sultanas, candied peel, brown and white sugar. My job here was to weigh them into blue paper bags and seal them by the clever folding of the tops in such a way that the bags were sealed. The rooms were dark foetid places that smelt of dark sugar and spices and

must have attracted vermin – traps were regularly laid but I cannot remember ever seeing any victims.

Downstairs in the yard the cardboard boxes were dumped and had to be broken down and stored in flat bundles ready for collection by the dustmen.

Occasionally I made deliveries on a Grenville-like grocer's bike. One regular call was to an old man who lived in Hale End Road some two miles away up a long hill from Wood Street lights on the way to the Water Works on the edge of Epping Forest. The hope was that I would get a tip but usually I was just offered a drink and a homily.

I was tried out as a shop assistant but failed miserably when I couldn't remember the prices of items and panicked if I was asked for anything that needed weighing or preparation.