

Len (Leonard) Hall

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As the old adage states 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' and when you are about as far as you can get as I am in Perth, Western Australia you get a lot of longing to back in familiar haunts. So when some one in the friendsreunited fraternity sent me details of your website I had to have a look straight away. It is so very nice to read about Walthamstow as it was when I lived there as a young lad. I sent an e-mail to one of your previous correspondents Mr Les Cole and I was prompted to write a few of my own memoirs from 1940 onwards so I do hope I do not bore anyone but I will write as the thoughts occur to me. If you can sit quietly by yourself for long enough and really try hard sometimes one can remember things from the dim and distant past. It is not easy but having given it a try I will jot down some of my memory trivia.

I was born in Rochford Hospital in Essex on the 4th of August (QM's birthday) 1937, the second son (first one died before I arrived) to Leonard Joubert Hall and Emily (nee Wood). My father only had one eye and to this day I can't remember which one was glass even though he used to put it in a cup (next to his teeth) at bedtime. Probably due to his disability (25% vision) he had to work as a labourer and at that time he was a Cowherd near Wickford in Essex. I don't remember any of this of course. But up to the age of 22 I used to visit my Grandmother who still lived in a run down farm cottage in Runwell road on the outskirts of Wickford.

At some stage in my life when I was about 2 or three years old my mum and dad moved to Walthamstow and after a spell in a house in Springfield Road they started to rent a crummy little flat which was addressed 101, Markhouse Road. This was actually situated above and behind that actual address and was accessed via an alleyway that ran off Ringwood road. The bedrooms above the shop in Markhouse road looked across to Pollards the paint shop.

About once a month my Mum and Dad would take me to visit my grandmother who still lived in Wickford. As a child the weekends spent at her old house were wonderful times though I used to spend some of my time sitting outside of the 'Quart Pot' pub with a bag of Smiths crisps or an arrow-root biscuit and a glass of lemonade. My parents never owned a car due to dad's poor eyesight and also the fact that we were poor. So we always went to Wickford on a 'City coach' which was an adventure in itself.

My Grandmother's house or cottage did not have running water and we had to go to a standpipe near the road to fill up a jug or bucket for doing any washing up etc. The 'Dunny' or toilet was at the bottom of the garden and was just a bucket placed under the board that one sat on (or hovered above) as I always did. My Grandfather died of the demon drink and I do not remember him though I was often told that he was a champion boxer and he bred German Shepherd dogs. So My Gran used to live with a defacto named Dan who always gave me some pocket money when it was time to go home.

Now Dan was always trying to catch the local kids who came scrumping for the fruit in their garden, which as I recall was a couple of acres. He finally found a way of fixing the lads though, his remedy was to spread the contents of the toilet buckets around the base of the trees, this served the dual purpose of pest control and fertiliser at the same time.

I recall that on our side of the Markhouse road was Davis's Dairy and at the other end of the block in Markhouse road was the 'Common Gate' pub which became another familiar place for me to sit outside with a lemonade and a bag of Smith's crisps (if you were lucky you got two blue twists of salt) This pub was on the corner of Queen's road and I never did manage to get inside it.

Just opposite the Common Gate was Lancaster's fruit and veg shop on the corner of Downsfield road and opposite that was the 'Lighthouse' Methodist church (the scene of many Boys Brigade evenings later in my life) Also on the other corner of Queen's road was a Post Office that was later taken over by a Pakistani family. (that was when my Dad stopped posting letters from there as he was a bit like Warren Mitchell's portrayal of Alf Garnett)

Just a short way up Ringwood road was a little general purpose shop run by Mrs Golding and I can shut my eyes and still smell the paraffin and small bundles of firewood that were part of her stock. I don't know where she lived but at the end of her days trading she would walk up Ringwood road

pushing one of those little trolley things on a walking stick handle. I hated living behind a shop, and envied my friends Derek Rose and Arthur Brown who lived in Warner flats in Callis road and I also had a friend named Alan Upex who lived in a house in Ringwood road that his parents actually owned. Another friend was Terry Downs who also lived in a Warner flat in Ringwood road even though his parents were snobs.

When the war ended someone in Ringwood road organised a street party and although I lived in Markhouse road they were considerate enough to ask me to the party. I can't remember much except the huge fire in the road that left a burnt scar on the road surface for years after.

No one seemed to object to kids begging in those days and our gang would make the most of Guy Fawkes night and beg with our Guy outside the local pubs. Another source of income was the 'Grotto' which comprised of a lot of moss and flowers stolen from someone's front garden. This was then turned into a sort of mini garden on the pavement outside of a local pub and passers by would be taunted with the cry "Spare a penny for the Grotto mister" To this day I do not recall what the Grotto meant but the proceeds were good, especially from the American servicemen who were probably visiting the local brothels in our area.

I started school when I was 5 or 6 years old and my mum took me to Queen's road infants on the back of her bike. The first day sticks in my memory because I wanted a pee and my mum let me do it in the gutter outside of the school. Unfortunately the head mistress saw me and gave my Mum a telling off for letting me do it.

My memories of that school are vague but I do remember learning to tell the time and I still tie my shoe laces up the way I was taught there. Not many years ago a girl named Iris Palmer (nee Ives) sent me some old school photographs and I realised that some of the children from that time had been with me through my school life.

Iris was one and another girl was Doreen Pavitt whose birthday was the same as mine. Doreen was a beautiful child and I mentally put her on a pedestal, she had long ringlets and her mum used to send her to school in lovely clothes.

After a short spell at that school I went to Gamuel Road School at around the age of 7 years I suppose. It was around this time that I started to have trouble with my eyes and I was diagnosed as being 'short sighted' that of course meant that I had to wear specs and of course the name 'four eyes' was used a lot. So much that I would remove my specs as soon as I left a class, as I was very self-conscious at the time.

Those years from 7 to 11 were wonderful times and the summer holidays were some of the most memorable of all. Our gang would go via St. James's Park to the Walthamstow Marshes and fish for tiddlers in the drainage trenches there, and sometimes would be able to get into the forbidden area, which we called the 'New River' and fish for Perch. This river or water passage was used for drinking water I believe and supplied the Reservoirs.

My mum and dad at that time were both working and mum worked at Coronas the soft drink Company in Staffa road. If we went to the factory we could get a bottle of drink sometimes. My dad worked as a 'timber porter' at Austinsuite the furniture makers in Argall Avenue and although he was really just a labourer he was very proud of the work he did which was to stack timber in the factory yard.

One of his bosses must have done a course in worker / boss relationships because my dad came home on his bike one night and I remember him telling my mum that Mr Cyril (bosses Christian name) had told him that he was very pleased with the very straight and safe way that my dad was stacking his timber. Someone once said whatever you work at, even in a low refuse collector's job set out to be the best at what you do.

As I got older I often had to do chores for mum and dad whilst they were at work and one of these was to collect the 'bagwash' from the laundry in Markhouse road. Another more difficult job was to get a bag of coke from the Gasworks in Lea Bridge road. That was quite a walk and my home made cart was quite heavy by the time I got home. This must have been after the coal was banned because I recall our coalman used to bring those huge bags of coal right through the living room and empty them under the stairs.

I think that this must have rotted the floorboards eventually because I recall we had to get out of the

flat for a while the floorboards were replaced with concrete. I expect our landlord Mr Cohen was annoyed but he never said too much. He lived next door and due to the conflicts that went on between his family and mine I grew up to hate all Jews and Conservatives (especially Churchill). Of course that all changed when I was older and now it is just conservatives (however I do vote for the Liberals over here).

During the war, when the siren sounded we used to spend our nights in the Anderson shelter in the back garden. This was an ordeal because on a bad night we had to share it with the people who lived in the same block as us and my dad hated them. We also had to share the W.C. with this family too.

Some of my friends the Browns in Callis road had a Morrison shelter (indoor type) because their back yard had a chicken shed in it. The Morrison type used to double as a dining table but was supposed to be strong enough to support a collapsing house and save the occupants if they were in the shelter. I don't know what happened if the place burnt down though. Does any one remember the huge brick built water reservoirs that were built on bombsites to provide a supply of fire fighting water.

I remember when St Saviours church in Markhouse road had a direct bomb hit and was burnt down. I stood under my dads coat and watched the firemen trying to save it. (I put up the banns for my wedding there later so it must have survived). We never got bombed and I was never evacuated though I did feel that I was missing out on something. I do remember the doodlebugs though and my dad saying "as long as you can hear them don't worry, it is when they go quiet that you hold your breath".

In this day and age, if you were to hear someone in your front garden you may think that you were experiencing a home invasion or a break in. But when I was around 9 or 10 we would think nothing of a game of 'hide and seek' and go and hide behind someone's privet hedge.

Or 'knock down ginger' was another 'harmless' way of passing a warm summers evening. We would sometimes tie two door knockers together on opposite sides of the street and then hide round the corner to see what happened. Good clean harmless fun, or so we thought at the time. Graffiti had not been invented fortunately but I suppose we could still be called vandals in a minor way.

There was a great craze when I was around 11 years old, we would make a scooter out of some old car wheel bearings and a few boards and a bit of improvisation. I recall getting as far as Highams Park lakes on our scooters but I could not find my way there now I am sure. They were noisy things too as I recall. As has been stated by others, High street was a Mecca for all and sundry and the in place to go on a Saturday afternoon. Actually I was standing in Willow walk about 5 years ago when a guy came up to me and said he had noticed my cap had the one word 'Perth' on it. He was from Kambalda which is about 600Km from where I live now. It is a small world.

I could never afford the eels at Manzes but often had a pie and liquor at lunch time. We never really knew why the floor was always covered in sawdust, maybe to soak up the spillage. We used to watch in awe as the man outside used to pick out a live eel and kill and gut it in a few seconds.

I used to be a student at Markhouse Secondary Modern from 11 years and on until I left at 15 and I recall we used to go to the swimming baths in High Street for our weekly lesson with our woodwork teacher Mr Fairfoull who by all accounts had been a good swimmer in his hey day. No bus for us kids as we used to walk in file all the way, with our teacher by our side. It was good exercise I suppose.

We did not have a bath at home, so in later years when I discovered what girls were (much later) I used to go to the slipper baths once a week (whether I needed a bath or not) what an experience that was. Later I decided that the baths at Leyton were much better and if you tipped the attendant you could get extra soap etc.

Back to the school trips to the baths, this was in the days of Denis Crompton and Brylcreem (a little dab'll do you was the slogan). Us lads found that by placing ones mouth over the dispensing nozzle and sucking you could extract enough to smooth down our wet hair. I wonder if it would be possible today with some of the vending machines that you get in these places. You certainly would not get Brylcreem.

From my experience the children of today demand that their parents drive them everywhere, but when I was in my teens we used to get to the Hollow and Eagle ponds (Bottomless) either on skates, scooters or just walking with our fishing rods etc.

Also you could get to Highams Park Lakes by getting a steam train from James street station. The things we used to get up to whilst on the journey are unmentionable but as they say 'boys will be boys' however one mate who shall remain nameless was not above having a pee out of the moving train window.

In later years I used to work at E.N. Brays at whipp's Cross and I remember one year it was so cold that the Hollow pond froze enough to go skating on it. (why Hollow?)

Who remembers the 'Teddy Boys' and the brawls in the High street I can't remember which year that started but I was not involved though I did get the question once "what are you looking at" that was usually enough to cop a whack with a motor bike chain if you said the wrong thing.

Long before I discovered girls I became a 'cyclist' which came naturally to me as my parents both rode bikes and when I was younger they had a tandem which nearly tore off my right foot when it went into the back wheel on one Sunday outing. As a result I spent years wearing boots and was in a wheelchair for a while, the wheel chair was on loan from a convent somewhere in Markhouse road I think. The thoughtful nuns also gave dad a crucifix to put over my bed though we were not Catholics. I can still remember looking up at that crucifix one night as I lay in bed and seeing an army of bugs coming out of it and advancing down the wall towards me. Needless to say the chair and the bug ridden crucifix went back the next day.

I was never very religious as a child but as we always had religious instruction at school in those days and I also attended Sunday school I grew up to be what is loosely termed as a Christian thinking person. Many under privileged kids in my old haunts owed a lot to the owners of two florist shops in the High street area. One of these was Mr Stevens who had a shop in the High street near to Willow Walk. He must have spent thousands of pounds on us kids in his mission hall in Markhouse road.

I recall when I was quite young I had a younger cousin or near cousin named Heather Dodd who was killed by a post office van that rolled down Church Hill (off Hoe Street). The driver had not put the brake on, well the Stevens were a tower of strength to my aunt who never ever really recovered from her loss.

My years at Markhouse road secondary modern were very character building years and as they say "you can lead a horse to water etc" I enjoyed my school years and I learnt a lot from my teachers and they did a good job in my opinion. I only wish that I could go back to a reunion one year and say thank you. However having been in touch with the website www.friendsreunited.uk I think most of my ex teachers have passed away now.

That is an interesting site and everyone should have a look see to try and find old school friends. Unfortunately not too many people of my vintage are computer literate, however a few do look in via their children.

How many degrees are there in a circle?

This second part of my memoirs is from when I was aged 15 years which was around 1952 and at that age I departed from Markhouse Road Secondary Modern School.

My first job of work was with the Oppenhiemer Pipe Company in Finsbury Square and as I recall I used to make the trip from St. James Street station every morning to Liverpool Street and then from there I would walk to Finsbury Square.

At times I felt like a Lemming rushing through London's crowded streets and although the lunch vouchers were a help I was not enjoying my sudden transition from schoolboy to worker at all. The job was working as a junior in the repairs department and I was confronted every day with lots of broken tobacco pipes and cigarette lighters, these had to be repaired and it was really such a boring job and the journey was an ordeal for me as I much preferred to be riding my bike.

And so six months later when I saw an advert in the Walthamstow Guardian for an electrical apprenticeship with E.N. Bray Ltd. At Whipp's Cross I at once applied for the job.

The company was an electrical engineering manufacturing company and basically they made switchgear for all sorts of applications but at that time the main products were used in shipping companies and also in warships. Apparently the company had never taken on apprentices before and so the advert was actually for two lads (or lassies).

I was interviewed for the job by Mr. Chalmers who was about 50 years old (although to me he looked about 90) and as I learned later was referred to behind his back as 'Wingnut' this was due to the fact that his ears were enormous and the creases on the back of his neck added to the illusion of a wingnut.

The interview was conducted in the workshop office which was in an elevated position above the machine shop floor. This gave Mr. Chalmers a good view of all the workers and he could soon see if anyone was slacking.

After a few introductory exchanges Mr. Chalmers asked the one and only question that would either get me the job or send me away with my tail between my legs. He looked straight at me and said "how many degrees are there in a circle"? I at once replied "three hundred and sixty sir" and the job was mine. And so next week I started work at E. N. Bray after giving my excuses to the people at the Oppenhiemer Pipe Company who were not amused. For anyone who may have had experience of apprenticeships when I say that I was subjected to all the usual tricks that the older guys try on the new boy you will know what I mean such as being sent to the stores to ask for 'a long weight (wait). My education that I thought had been completed at Markhouse Road was in fact far from complete and the next five years were a half decade of pure joy as I went from department to department within the company. At the same time I was attending the South West Essex Technical College where I was enrolled in an engineering course with my fellow apprentice whose name was John Niall. But my real education was at the workplace in the hands of my workmates some of whom were Fred Phillips, Arthur and Jim Wakerly, Charlie Manning, Dennis Cooper and a lot more whose names escape me.

The company in 1952 was a family company and there were lots of marriages and associations developed amongst the employees. Adjacent to the main factory was a separate part of the complex known as 'the house' simply because that is what it was and although the downstairs was an annex to the factory, the upstairs still had a fully functioning bathroom and it was quite common for an employee to arrive in his boiler suit and leave later that day done up like a dogs dinner and smelling very nice after a hot bath at the companies expense. Some of the customs that I remember were toasting our sandwiches on the red hot heating stoves that were dotted around the place and going for a jug of tea at one of the local cafes.

It was also the custom to have to sign ones name for a key when going to the toilet and there was a hue and a cry if you were outside for too long.

After four years I was allowed to work in the 'test bench' area and whilst in this exalted position I was allowed to use the executive toilet which was kept for the older and more respected employees, for this trust I was greatly honoured. When I had worked at the company for about four years it was announced that the company would be expanding in size and creating new switchgear, and in order to do this it would be necessary to relocate the company to Waltham Cross.

The other change was to the company's name which was changed to the new title of

ENBRAY PTY. LTD.

Of course this news was met with lots of disapproval from the older employees who were very set in their ways and did not take to change very well. There were pay offs and retirements but the majority of workers decided to stay with the company and so began the regular commuting of employees in some large blue second hand double deck buses. Of course I had to stay with the company, but as I was a cyclist and raced every week I just rode my bike every day from my home in Markhouse road to Britannia road in Waltham Cross. This was good training for me and it was only in the winter that I really objected to the trip.

Many of these trips were made in the company of another lad named Ray Algar who was a member of my cycling club at that time. Life was still good from my point of view and despite the fact that there were changes to the management and the company was later bought out by a larger company I was still enjoying my apprenticeship.

One other highlight of every year was 'the Christmas Draw' this was the culmination of a year long collection of payments and depending on how many shares one had bought and how your luck went it could either make or break ones Christmas Cheer.

For my last year as an apprentice I was put into the Drawing Office and it was this last job position was to dictate to me what I would do for the remainder of my working life.

After I qualified as an electrical draftsman I was allowed to stay in the drawing office and I continued to work there in contentment until I suddenly realised that I was 22 and hadn't had a girlfriend or a relationship.

Up until that time I was still living with my parents and my sole pursuits were bicycle racing and visiting pubs with my mates and a now and again a visit to the Wood Green Jazz club. Of course there were girls in the wiring department and the offices that attracted me but none so much as my wife Pam who I noticed one morning when she was sent down to the factory with some paperwork.

This was a terrible thing to happen for a new girl because her trip was hastened along by wolf whistles and rude remarks as there was no such thing as sexual harassment in those days. Well it wasn't a crime at that time anyway.

And so I started to eat in the staff canteen so as to get a glimpse of this beautiful young typist as she was in those days. This went on for months and all the time I was being urged along by two friends Dennis Cooper and Brian Cook to make my feelings known to her.

Maybe you can understand my frustration and feelings for this girl and I was really suffering I can tell you, and then one day I left the bike shed at the same time as Pam and somehow managed to pluck up enough courage to ride alongside her down Britannia Road.

And then as we turned to ride up the hill I decided to give her a push up the hill and the rest is history because we were married in 1960 and today we are still together forty four years later.

What is more I still race on my bike at 67 and now Pam does the pushing as she rides behind me on our tandem when we go on a ride around the river paths. This is despite the usual calls of 'Daisy, Daisy' and 'she's not pedalling' etc.

Dennis Cooper by the way was my 'best man' and that was a duty he certainly deserved as I would never have taken the plunge without his good advice.

Unable to afford a house at that time and as flats were not available for rent we bought a caravan and installed it on a site known as Breech Barns in Waltham Abbey where we lived for three years. However after three British Winters in the caravan and now having two of our four children we then put down a deposit on a house in Bishops Stortford and I started to ride my bike to work and back (50 miles) every day for about two years

And then one day about two years after we were married the company employed a new drawing office manager and when we had an overload of work he decided to take on some outside 'contract' draftsmen and my eyes were suddenly opened, because here I was riding my bike to work everyday from far away and these new guys were turning up for work in their posh cars.

This was due to the fact that more money could be earned on a contract basis and so after 12 years of very happy work I left the company and started to work in various jobs around the Essex and Hertfordshire areas.

After that due to yet another increase in the family we moved to another house in Stansted Mountfitchit where we began to enjoy the village life and I carried on commuting to Chelmsford, Stevenage and Cambridge in my pursuit of steady work.

About two years later Pam was advised that for the benefit of her health we should move to a warmer country and so we became 10 pound Poms and so we migrated to Australia where we still are today.

Memories of schooldays in Walthamstow

What a long time ago it was, but I must have left Gamuel Road infants and started at Markhouse Road around 1948/9 so my memory is a bit hazy about room numbers etc. but I could probably find my way around the school today if it was still there. Especially the 'spiral staircase' between the ground floor and 1st floor which was a definite 'no go' area unless permission was given by a teacher. I was in Lowhall house (yellow) and managed to become a prefect at a later year, but that was as high as I could get.

Some early memories were of the evil smelling boys toilets and having my legs wrapped around a pole in the playground so that I could not get up when play was over. I was an ink monitor at one point before ball pens were allowed and it was a good game to put a piece of carbide in an inkwell and watch it froth over onto someone's desk, carbide was freely available from the bike shop in Markhouse road and was used for making the gas that lit bicycle lamps. Although I was a good student in my opinion I did get the cane on one occasion for throwing pens at the ceiling in Mr Bowyers class which was a very silly thing to do I now know, the ceilings were made of wood and usually had a few pens hanging up there just waiting to drop on someone's head.

I remember Mr Pearce our science teacher used to strike terror into just about every student in my class, but he never actually taught me, just lucky I suppose.

Wood work was something I used to enjoy with Mr Fairfoull (or fairclough) the woodwork teacher, he used to also take us up to the Walthamstow baths for swimming lessons, we would walk in crocodile formation all the way to the baths in High street, when they let us out we were free to savour the delights of the High street.

However during one fateful wood work lesson I took the top of a finger off with a wood plane and had to be escorted to Dr. Juhn's surgery in Markhouse road by Miss Hall (no relation) who was Mr Easton's secretary, she was very attractive as I remember.

Does anyone remember the school camps at Horsham, this was where us under privileged kids were allowed to go for a month a year and it was a very character building experience for me. One of my sons now lives in Brighton which is where we used to go for a seaside trip half way through the month. We stayed with him and my D.in L. last year and my how it has changed. we could not get back to the peaceful life in Perth quick enough.

When I arrived back at school after one of these "holidays" I was called to Mr Easton's office who asked me if I wanted to follow a commercial or a practical career. This must have been a real cross-road for most kids and I wonder how many chose the wrong road as I did (commercial) all that typing and shorthand, what a waste of time (however I did spend all days in front of a keyboard at a computer before I retired a few years ago). It only took 6 months of travelling by train from James St station to Liverpool Street (and Finsbury square) every day to make me realise that I was going the wrong way in my career path, so I took up an apprenticeship as an electrical fitter with E.N.Bray at Whipps Cross and the rest is history as I met my wife at the company when it moved the business to Waltham Cross and I eventually ended up as an electrical designer in the Western Australian Mining Industry.

The teachers that helped to build my character at the school were Mr Bowyer, Ms Townsend, Mr Muddiman (PT) and Mr Burg (science). On one weekend I remember Mr Muddiman had our class over to his house in Chingford (or near there). I think he was ahead of his time with teacher/student relationships. He was a nice guy but I was told that he died of a heart attack, and he was such a fit man too.

On another occasion Miss Townsend had the class act as ushers and attendants at a play she was involved with in Higham's Park. I don't think any of our teachers actually lived in Walthamstow. I remember making a thermometer with Mr Burg in the science lesson and also making soap. I sometimes wonder if he had an ulterior motive because not many of my friends or I had bathrooms and maybe we smelt a bit.

I used to have a once a week trip to the slipper baths in Leyton whether I needed it or not (Australian joke about Poms). As they say over here most Poms only bath once a week whether they need one or not.

Does anyone remember the field trips to Yardley's and Everready Batteries and of course to Fords at Dagenham. Great memories.

Goodbye for now from Len Hall