

MY MEMORIES OF A 1950s CHILDHOOD

By the start of 1950 I was 4 and a half years old, (half a year is very important at that age) and lived in a two bedroomed bungalow with my parents and my mother's parents. In retrospect, overcrowded, but as a child, not noticed. We lived in a temporary emergency housing unit, one of some 260,000 erected between 1945 and 1948, to ease the desperate shortage of houses, caused by German bombing. They were known as prefabs, now mockingly referred to as 'Palaces for the people'.

My prefab was one of a row of five, built on ground where once had stood a terrace of Victorian houses. Our rear garden backed directly onto a raised railway line, and not very far away were other small clusters of prefabs, also built where once had stood Victorian houses. It was generally agreed that the houses had been destroyed by a stick of bombs that had been meant for the railways, but they missed the railway and destroyed houses instead. My father was demobbed in 1945 after having served 15 years in the RAF, so was considered a priority for housing.



As a child in the early 1950s, not so long after the war, I was shielded from the grimmer aspects of life, only realising much later that certain things such as sugar and clothing were rationed then, and I have no memories of having to do without anything, a tribute to my 'grown ups'.



One of my earliest recollections is of trains going by at the end of the garden, very slowly, full of soldiers in khaki, and all in happy mood, with much shouting and waving to any child out playing in their back gardens. Presumably they were happy because they had survived the war and were on their way to being demobbed?

Another early memory is having to be quiet when the 1 o'clock news was on the radio. My grandfather would come home for his lunch and avidly listen to the broadcasts on the Korean war. As a veteran of the first world war, a territorial between the wars and a member of the Reading civil defence during the second world war, his life had been directly and greatly affected by wars. Every Armistice day he would put on his best clothes, fix his medals to his chest and leave the house silently, to join his old comrades in remembrance of those who did not return. On



these days I was always warned by Mum to keep out of Granddad's way as this was his big day of the year and nothing should detract from its solemnity.



The first school I attended was a temporary affair held in the local church hall because the local primary school, built in 1904 had been destroyed in 1944 by a direct hit from a V1 flying bomb. Fortunately it was empty at the time. The school was rebuilt, and I transferred to it about 1951/52.

Winters seemed to be colder then, or is it because we have central heating now? On really cold nights, ice would form on the inside of the windows, and first thing on getting up in the morning a dash would be made for the kitchen, where the gas oven had been lit and the door left open to heat the only warm place in the house.

At the start of the 1950s our milk was delivered on a cart pulled by a horse. Often our milkman known by everyone as Alf, would stop at our house, about half way through his round, for a cup of tea. This was the horse's cue to lean over the fence and eat whatever it fancied from our front

garden. Later when Alf got his new electric cart, on a Saturday, I would help him deliver to a few dozen houses either side of ours, to earn a 'tanner' (2½p).

A wooden shed was provided with each 'palace' half of which was partitioned off for coal. Burning coal provided our main source of heat. The shed also doubled as Dad's workshop. Dad was brilliant at making things, and as toys were in short supply he would make them. One particular toy I remember was a small pedal car he made from scrap aluminium left over from the Hawker aircraft factory in Kingston, now covered in housing.

Dad was also a very keen motorist and had a car from a very early age, when car ownership was not widespread. He said that when we first moved in, his was the only car in the road. If you go there now you will be lucky indeed to find a curb space to park next to! Dad's love for his car saw him spend many happy hours tinkering with the engine, panel beating out minor knocks and generally 'messing around' with his much loved automobile.



At the end of the garden, backing onto the railway line, we kept chickens in a ramshackle building made from bits of 'this and that'. Granddad seemed to have an unlimited supply of old van and lorry doors that were somehow stuck together to shelter our chickens. Old bricks from the bombed out buildings were to be found quite readily and used to hold

wire netting in place. One aspect of chicken keeping that I found distasteful, and is no doubt illegal today, was the way they were killed. Strung up by their feet, they had their throats cut, and were left to bleed to death.

I was an only child, but two cousins lived nearby, one a year older, the other a year younger. We had an old pram, and during school holidays we would go from door to door asking for any old newspapers, which were generally readily given. With the pram fully laden we would take them to the local 'scrappie' who would give us half-a-crown or so, depending on the weight of them. This was enough, if I remember correctly, to pay for our regular jaunt to Saturday morning pictures at the local cinema, when they screened films especially for children. They were usually old black and white cowboy films with characters like The Cisco Kid or Roy Rogers. Comedy also featured with the likes of Laurel and Hardy, and of course plenty of cartoons, Tom and Jerry and the like.



Speedway at Wimbledon Stadium was another very popular form of entertainment that we enjoyed greatly. Nowadays it is nowhere near as popular as it was then. Four, or was it six motorbike riders would race round a small track, about the size of a football pitch, going round the oval ends almost on their sides, sending up great clouds of dirt, making a lot of noise and stink, and very often crashing. What excitement for three young boy cousins, as well as their parents. We would all be madly shouting encouragement to our favourite rider, which I am certain none of them could hear over the noise of their bikes. Some famous riders from the 1950s come readily to mind, Split Waterman, Barry Briggs, Ove Fundin, Olle Nygren and Ronnie Moore. Happy days!



Quite an eventful decade the 1950s, with British forces engaged in many small wars as the British empire declined. Almost a third world war over the Suez canal, and of course the 'cold war'. But on a brighter note, popular music became more accessible, with vinyl records readily available, with artists like Bill Haley, Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly being hugely popular. And, of course, Prime Minister Harold

Macmillan said that 'You've never had it so good'. He was probably right.

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