

## The Way I Remember It

This is a collection of memories and anecdotes which are what I can remember of my early life. I am quite sure that others involved at the time, my brother and sisters and other relations would have different versions but that is the way of memory.

Although I was born in London I only lived for there for the first eighteen months and so I have no memories of that time. I was brought up in a small cotton town in Lancashire called Great Harwood near Blackburn. Before the war it boasted thirty cotton mills but these were already in decline when I became aware of them. It was known, and possibly still is as 'snuffy 'arrodd' and on top of the town hall clock is a box representing a snuffbox. (I think it might have been removed now) The story is that Great Harwood was the home of the inventor of 'mercerisation' a process for treating cotton. You will have to look it up if you want to know more. This led to 'arrodders' appearing superior to those in the surrounding area, snuff takers, 'snuffy'. I haven't bothered checking whether any of this is true but it is what I remember and the main hall in the town was called the Mercer Hall, now converted to leisure centre last time I heard.

Virtually all housing in the town had been built for cotton workers out of local stone and they were entirely black as were all the other buildings. If you walked up Bowley Hill, outside the town, you could look back and see the cause. A pall of smoke from coal fires and furnaces sat over the whole area, not just Great Harwood but Clayton le Moors and Accrington and Rishton and stretching towards Blackburn one way and Burnley Nelson and Colne the other, nestling under Pendle Hill. On bath nights, the instruction was always to make sure we cleaned off the tide mark left from washing the soot and grime off our bodies.

We took for granted that there was a hierarchy in housing in the town. At the bottom end, literally, were the houses with no front garden and only a small yard at the rear leading on to a narrow backstreet, A little higher up the scale were those with a garden. Ours had a tiny garden at the front but only a back yard with the outhouse for the coal store and the outside toilet. There were chamber pots under the beds for night-time but during the day we used the outside toilet which could be freezing cold in the winter. We were one better than our neighbours in that we had a flushing toilet. Most others were simply well-scrubbed boards, with holes, over an open sewer. We called them the 'long drop' toilets. We had one other refinement, a bath in one of the two bedrooms. Most other houses in the row had a tin bath hanging on the wall outside, brought in once a week for the bath in front of the fire in the living room.

My Grandfather's house had a bathroom and a garden at the back big enough for a greenhouse. It was lit by gas. My maiden aunt, Aunty Cicely, did all the ironing using a gas iron. They were electrified eventually, of course but I can still hear the pop as the gas mantle was lit and the flood of light as the flow of gas was turned up.

At the top of the town were the semi-detached and detached houses of the managers and owners and white collar workers. When eventually my parents could afford to move, they moved into one of the semi-detached houses. I am told that my mother was worried that people would think they were 'getting above themselves' but it had gardens front and rear which she loved.

Now the town is a pleasant 'dormitory' town. The smoke has gone. Much of the soot and grime has been painted over or scrubbed off revealing the creamy white colour of the native stone. There is easy access to the most beautiful countryside, the Ribble valley, the Penines, the Trough of Bowland, the Yorkshire dales to the east and to the north, the Lake District.

There is little left of the cotton industry but one of the mills, before the war, was converted into the OXO factory making OXO cubes. My father was chief electrician there for many years. OXO pulled out in, I think, 1992 well after my father retired.

It is customary to say that childhood was an idyllic time when we roamed free as we explored the world and it is true that we had a great deal of freedom. With good reason this frayed my mother's nerves but it was just about impossible to keep us in the house with five children in four rooms, two up and two down. In fact, I had a lucky childhood, lucky to survive that is. I didn't drown in a mill lodge; I didn't set fire to myself when we were setting fire to the railway embankment; I didn't fall off the parapet of the railway bridge when we dared ourselves to stand there as the train ran underneath and I didn't fall off the cliff face in an abandoned quarry when I was dared to climb up it. That did scare me almost to death and I froze for a time a few feet from the top. There was at least one drowning in a mill lodge and there were accidents on the railways. It was by good luck and clearly not good judgement, that they didn't happen to me.

\*\*\*\*\*

My earliest memory is of sitting up in a Silver Cross style baby carriage. The rain cover is up and I am chewing it. I remember the taste. In front of me, sitting on a seat specially made by my father is my older sister. I can't see round her to my mother who is pushing the pram. I had ambitions to sit on that seat which I eventually achieved when my brother was born. My sister, presumably, had to walk.

What follows is a random selection of anecdotes and events beyond the pram.

## **Christmas Memories**

I was born on Christmas Day. Although people remark on this as something out of the ordinary a moment's thought will tell you that it is no more extraordinary than being born on any other day of the year. In any crowd of 20,000 people on average 54.79 will have been born on Christmas day. And it shows no great calculation on my parents' part. I only missed being born on Christmas Eve by a hair's breadth and that would, definitely, have been worse. Being born on Christmas day is memorable. Even at my age most of my family and friends remember my birthday and I get few messages apologising for forgetting even though that might be really what I want to do.

I was born in the early hours of the morning in a hospital in Marylebone and my father used to tell the story of trying to walk home to Wembley with a pile of women's clothing under his arm and fearing having to explain himself to a wandering policeman. He eventually decided that calling a taxi was a safer bet.

Other children used to think I had the rough end of the stick having only one day a year on which to celebrate but on Christmas morning there were always two piles of presents for me and only one each for my brother and sisters. There was a special pleasure in turning to my second pile after they had finished opening all theirs. Even the Christmas cake was divided with Happy Christmas on one side and Happy Birthday on the other.

On Boxing Day it was a tradition that we would go round and visit other members of our extended family. They always remembered. "Oh and it was your birthday yesterday. Happy Birthday" and they would give me sixpence or in my grandfather's case a halfpenny.

Back home, I would count up my loot – two shillings and sixpence halfpenny. I would show it to my dad. "Eee." he would say, "You're a bloated plutocrat."

I didn't know what he meant but I knew I was.

## **My Father**

At the end of his life my father was in a care home. His memory faded, not Alzheimer's I think but something more gentle which left his personality intact. The original care home on the site had been a grim Victorian edifice with the inmates sitting in a circle on brown plastic chairs. An Aunt Cicely had been there for a short time and I had sworn that my parents would not be committed to such an institution. However, when the difficult moment came we discovered that the old home had been torn down and a new one built which had the air of a well-appointed hotel. The dining room was colourful and the 'guests' sat at tables with their friends. The lounge was laid out with comfortable armchairs and coffee tables and the television was in a separate room.

My father had difficulty understanding the place. He thought he had ended up in a rather expensive hotel. On one occasion, they found him at the bus stop with his suitcase thinking that he had to get away and back to his own home.

Eventually we would be able to talk him round but the question always came up.

"Who's paying for all this".

We said, every time, "You are dad."

He said, "Well how's that? Where does the money come from?"

We said, "We sold your house and the money is paying for your place here."

He said, every time, "Well how much did I get for the house?"

We said "£40000."

He said, every time, "Eee, I'm a bloated plutocrat."

## **The Loss of Innocence**

On Christmas morning, we followed an unvarying routine. We would wake and dress quickly both because it was Christmas Day and because there was no heating in the bedrooms. We would creep downstairs to the hall and my father would peep into the living room and reassure us that Father Christmas had been. We then went to church. The tradition at that time was that the Priest would say three masses one after the other on Christmas Day but we could leave after the first one having done our duty. When we were older we were informed that attending all three masses led to a plenary indulgence when the stain of all your sins was wiped from your soul. This came in particularly handy during adolescence.

The masses were mercifully short, the sermon consisting only of wishing all a Happy and Holy Christmas and informing us that the retiring collection was a gift to the priests of the parish.

Back home my father would enter the living room first, remove the fireguard and stoke the fire. Then we were allowed to troop in. Stockings were emptied whilst my mother prepared breakfast. Breakfast, was eaten hurriedly then the stockings were emptied and the larger presents unwrapped. When the last present had been opened, that moment of anti-climax before we began to play with and compare our new acquisitions.

Of course, at some stage we started asking questions especially about the narrowness of the chimney and the fact that, during the winter there was always some sort of fire in the grate. Well, a modern Father Christmas, we were told, could use the front door. We also began to sense that, even such a magical being, might have difficulty getting round all the children in the world on one night. We were told he had lots of helpers. Both answers, of course, were true in their own way.

The fateful moment came when I asked my mother what those things were on top of the wardrobe in their bedroom. In spite of all the previous questions I was, at that time, a complete believer. My parents, thinking I had guessed, then blew the whole deception. I suppose there was a moment of disappointment but on the whole children are wired to reject innocence and the knowledge gave me a little more access to the adult world. My older sister and I became Father Christmas helpers when our younger siblings were in bed and we were only sent to bed ourselves when our own presents were being prepared. The excitement of Christmas morning survived with the added frisson of owning knowledge beyond the ken of a younger brother and sister.

There were debates at school about whether Father Christmas was real. Some clung to the evidence of half eaten mince pies and half empty glasses of milk. One boy stubbornly resisted our scorn by claiming that when he had been away from home one Christmas his presents still arrived. And how could that have happened without

Father Christmas? We had difficulty answering that one and there were a few waverers.

Of course, the magic faded to be recovered with children and grandchildren. If people asked me now that playground question “Do you believe in Father Christmas?” The answer would be, “Of course I do”. Giving where your only reward is in the pleasure of the receiver? It is one of the foundations of civilisation.

## **The Empty House**

At the end of the road on which we lived was the imposing presence of Our Lady and St Hubert's church, a Pugin mock gothic looming black presence. The church was the site of some of my earliest memories and next to it was my first school also soot blackened where on more than one occasion I was smacked in front of the whole school for fidgeting in church during the Sunday Mass. I was in the infant school. The head teacher who administered these punishments died and as we lined the route of her funeral procession we discussed whether it was a mortal sin to be glad that she was dead. She had been big on sin.

Opposite the church was a large house built of that same stone called St. Hubert's lodge. At the time, we took it for granted that this house was part of the area but looking back it is not at all clear why. I can only think that it was built before many of the surrounding houses and that the large yard at the back had once housed stables and possibly coaches or traps.

All other houses in the area were terraced and represented various levels of affluence from poverty stricken to just about getting by.

In my earliest memories it was not strictly empty. It was called the "Home Guard" because the local squad had its headquarters there. I would come out of church on a Sunday morning after day dreaming through another service and trying to remember if I had been fidgeting. The "Home Guard", including my father, would be parading at the end of the street, more or less in unison. I learnt later that one of their tasks was to guard a local bridge over a river. Their 'Captain Mainwaring' believed that when Hitler invaded it would be through Hull and the enemy would proceed directly west thus needing to cross the river Calder and this strategic bridge. Fortunately, given the general age and competence of the squad, the theory was never put to the test. Though my father, being an electrician, did wire up some massive rolls of concrete with sticks of dynamite ready to be detonated when the enemy approached.

What we all knew was that Hitler was evil, putting him in some way I could not quite capture on a scale, which included fidgeting in church. Both of which were examples of a propensity for human wrong doing triggered by events in the Garden of Eden.

When evil was defeated, at least as far as Hitler was concerned, the house became truly empty and consequently a magnet for local children, including myself and my brother. It must have been some of the older ones who broke in but we were dared to follow and we crept into a spacious hallway with a central staircase. I remember little of the interior except that there was a stained-glass window over the turn of the stairs and that someone lobbed a stone through it. That was definitely on the post Eden scale. The most interesting play area was the yard with its outbuildings. I have no memory of the actual games only that for a time it was our preferred playground.

It all came to an end when my younger brother was hit on the back of the head by a slate falling from an outhouse roof. He was carried home, bleeding profusely. My sister was so sickened by the sight of the blood that she left her meal on the table and ran out into the back yard. In an act of solidarity, I joined her though truth to tell I was hungry and would have preferred to stay and finish the meal. The doctor was called and he stitched the wound ignoring loud screams from my brother and his heartfelt cry "I wish Adam and Eve had never committed that sin".

I can see from Google Streetview that the house is still there, the stone cleaned of soot like a soul after confession. It has become St. Hubert's Lodge Rest Home. Perhaps one or more of the children who invaded and vandalised the empty house are cleansed of their sin and are now residents at rest.

## Glasses

I was a good boy at primary school. For example, I learnt my catechism -Who made you? Why did God make you? Etc. One teacher had the bright idea of lining us all up and going round the class asking us each a catechism question. If you got the answers right, you moved up the line. If you got them wrong, you moved down. Heaven was clearly at the top of the line and hell at the bottom. I was dismayed to begin with because the initial placements were quite random and I found myself closer to hell than heaven. Although this is a position I have become more familiar with, at the time it was unsettling but I soon approached sanctity by answering questions correctly whilst others failed.

More normal seating arrangements in class were also based on perceived goodness ie. being able to do the work given and I was placed at the back of the class alongside the other saints. This position I maintained for some time but eventually there was a problem. I couldn't see the blackboard. The teacher must have noticed this and gradually I was moved forward until not only was I among the damned but when the teacher wrote on the blackboard I had to come out from the front desk to stare myopically at the board.

At home, the house was small and nothing was very far away. In the streets, I learnt to live in a world becoming gradually less distinct and I don't remember being particularly handicapped except occasionally when I failed to see some missile approaching such as a football or a tin can.

Eventually a nurse turned up at school and examined our hair for nits and tested the eyes of a chosen few. I was one of those. I was asked to read letters on the now familiar card. I could only manage the top one with a few guesses at the second line. I was also shown a book with lots of coloured dots on the pages and asked to say what number I could see. This was a puzzle until I noticed that each page had a tiny number printed in the corner which clearly was not the page number and so I simply read that out. This seemed to satisfy the nurse.

My parents were informed that I needed to have a proper eye test and that I should visit the optician, which in due course, I did.

I went through the routine that became very familiar over the years of reading the test card whilst a succession of lens was inserted into the metal frame balanced on my face. I could immediately see that there could be advantages in being able to see clearly.

Frames were chosen from the available selection and eventually the glasses arrived and were fitted by the optician. He had a peculiar self-important way of sniffing and tutting as though fitting some glasses on a boy's nose was a matter of great delicacy and skill.

I walked out of the shop wearing the new glasses and the world leapt into focus. From our house, for example, I could see right down to the church at the end of the road. I could see individual leaves on the trees. I could see birds flying not just a blur in the sky. These sensations were so remarkable that I commented on them to my friends until I realised that they regarded this as a strange thing to do. Small children might remark on the utterly ordinary but nine year olds were meant to take it for granted.

I have wondered since why it was that it took so long for my short sightedness to be recognised. It is possible that since I was able to function at home that my parents didn't actually realise that I had a problem but another explanation occurs. I was nine years old in nineteen forty-eight, the year of the beginning of the national health service. I was one of the first beneficiaries. To be fair, I think if my parents had known that my eyesight was so poor they would have done something about earlier but never the less it must have been an extraordinary first bonus from the NHS that my eye tests and glasses were free.

Of course, it did mean that you had to choose one of the NHS frames but since such frames were sprouting on the faces of a number of my contemporaries there was no real stigma attached. I was called 'speccy four eyes' which I didn't like but one rather pretty girl called me 'professor' which I found quite acceptable.

There were other consequences. When playing football, there was a distinct advantage in being able to see the ball clearly at more than about three yards. On the other hand, if you mistimed a header the ball would crush the glasses painfully into the bridge of your nose. On more than on occasion this meant that the glasses got broken and since even the NHS would not supply new glasses as frequently as I broke them I spent much of my time with the lumps of glue on the nose bridge or on the side pieces.

In my first year at grammar school, in the first flush of excitement, I decided to join the boxing club. The PE teacher was ex-army and he matter of factly laced a pair of gloves onto my hands and sat me on a stool in the corner of the ring. I remember no instructions being given about how to box. Basically, it was a matter of hitting your opponent and trying not to be hit by whatever means you thought appropriate. The PE instructor careful removed my glasses and then rang a bell. A blurred form approached me from the opposite corner and just as he came into focus he swung a punch which caught me on the side of the head and then danced away into a slightly blurry distance. That was my first and last boxing match.

As an adult, you got so used to glasses that you were hardly aware of wearing them. Some activities were restricted though. You could swim in the sea with them on but the fear of losing them took most of the pleasure away. I used to swim without them and on rising from the sea would have to stare round the beach in the hope that someone in the family was paying attention and would wave frantically to guide me in. I enjoyed swimming and wanted to snorkel. Early attempts to put a mask over my glasses and hold the sides to try to keep the mask watertight were of limited

success. Eventually I unscrewed the sides of a pair of glasses and wedged the into the mask. This worked brilliantly. It was a little like the first experience of glasses all over again. I returned to the beach ready to enthuse about the wonders of the deep and now I could see my family clearly. They were collapsing with laughter and my wife took a photograph. For quite some time it was brought out whenever it was felt I should be made fun of. I am standing up to my ankles in water looking from ankles to lower face reasonably Daniel Craig like (more laughter from family) but this was topped not just by four eyes but five (eyes, glasses, snorkel mask) and the effect that was clearly hilarious.

When I did my national service, all army personnel had to have glasses with thin strips of metal for side pieces. This was so that they could be worn with a gas mask. (And would incidentally have been ideal for snorkelling.) I was tested and the glasses duly arrived but were clearly wrong in some way. I was sent from Lancaster to Chester where the army had a medical corps base to have my eyes retested. They discovered that the lenses had been put in the wrong sides and that was easily corrected. As part of the test the book of coloured dots appeared. Once again I was asked to say which numbers I could see. This time I realised that this had to be something to do with the dots and indeed I began to see numbers on some of the pages. I was diagnosed as being slightly red green colour blind, which is no great handicap except sometimes when choosing combinations of colours to wear and I have a wife to help with that. I can console myself with the knowledge that some believe that the artist Turner might have had the same limitation.

I still get my eyes tested for free and in school you still see children with their much-improved NHS glasses, seeing the world in focus and taking it for granted as they should.

I don't believe in heaven anymore but I do believe in the NHS.

## Visitations

We were a staunchly Roman Catholic family with strong Irish links. We were a family heavily influenced by priests and religion. Priests were respected and feared slightly. I remember the visits by the parish priest perhaps once or twice a year. He would arrive unannounced and my mother would invite him in. My father was always out at work. He would stand in our living room and hold a stilted conversation with my mother who would be a little flustered and constantly looking round to see if the state of the room was presentable as though God's representative would find something sinful in dust and untidiness.

If we were there we would hang back sheepishly in a corner, perhaps even under the table which was a favourite play space, or we would hide behind our mother's skirts. The priest, always Irish, would leave with an exhortation to us to be good and my mother would look at us with a fond expression as though these words from the priest would be a great help in her daily battle to keep us clean and well behaved.

These visits, however, paled into insignificance compared to the visits from the family priests. There were two priests on my father's side and two priests and a nun on my mother's. This was excessive even by the standards of Irish Lancashire and an assumption of holiness rubbed off on us which sometimes had benefits but was often a burden. Not least was the issue of whether you had a 'vocation' yourself. Once I was asked the standard question by an adult, 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' I said I wanted to be either a priest or an electrician, my father was an electrician. This caused some amusement, I assume because of the collision between the sacred and the secular. The first choice ceased to be an option once puberty struck and the full meaning of celibacy became apparent but I am the family amateur electrician.

My father left school when he was twelve and went to work in a cotton mill. My mother went to work in the family bakers at fourteen. They were both intelligent and creative people who today would have easily achieved university entrance and indeed my father eventually spent two years at Oxford gaining a diploma which qualified him to teach industrial relations, industrial history and economics at night school.

My father was one of nine children and my mother one of seven. All left school as early as possible except those who went into the religious life, all of whom gained scholarships and had a grammar school education. Their siblings were expected to stay at home and work to support those with a 'vocation'. To have someone with a vocation to the priesthood was regarded as a great blessing. Where other families might look to marriage and grandchildren the Irish tradition was for celibacy and the religious life, a complete contradiction of the so called selfish gene theory.

The two priests on my mother's side were both Jesuits. They trained for between fourteen and sixteen years before being ordained and I remember the ordination of

the youngest of them well, mainly because at the reception afterwards I was allowed my first taste of alcohol, a small sweet sherry.

Every now and again one of the brothers would visit. Like the parish priest I remember them standing in our living room chuckling and sucking on pipes. I don't know whether the chuckle was something they were taught in the seminary or the convent but both priests and the nun had it to excess, though, now I come to think of it, it was perhaps just an exaggerated chuckle which the whole family used. This might be hindsight but I have the impression there was a sort of chuckle hierarchy with the most dominating and condescending from Uncle Bill, the older priest, down to my mother who had a shy and self-depreciating version.

The conversations were as stilted as those with the parish priest. Education and experience had created a gulf between the siblings which would never be totally bridged. Uncle Bill spoke French, travelled the continent and wrote books. Eventually this was his downfall as far as my mother was concerned. He wrote a book called 'Married Life'. My mother was given a copy. It was only years later that she admitted how angry she had been and what nonsense she thought it was. I found the book after she died and out of curiosity, I read it. I know why she was angry. It was written by someone who was not only celibate but who could not or was afraid to imagine not being celibate, someone who had never had a close and intimate relationship. Complete nonsense. But he was a priest and his visits were always occasions.

It is my father's side, which produced the greatest priestly surprise. Both his brothers were in the missions, one in Salisbury, now Harare, in what was Southern Rhodesia. He was a parish priest and at one time he taught in St George's school there. The other and far more interesting was in Fiji from where he wrote letters telling of journeys through the jungle to primitive villages. At least that is how I imagined them. He had been away for twenty years, right through the war. Then the letter came saying that he was ill and had been sent to Australia. A further message said that he had had a leg amputated and after a period of convalescence he was coming home.

If a visit from an uncle priest who lived more or less locally was an event, then the return of Uncle Herbert from the missions after almost twenty years' absence was a major family occasion. I remember the sense of anticipation and the stories which circulated about him. He had obviously been something of a joker, even a rebel. He attended a Jesuit grammar school but became a Marist priest. I picked up a sense that this was somehow perverse and a lesser calling.

At this distance, I cannot remember the exact sequence of events but I remember clearly the gathering in my grandfather's house. How many we were in the small living room I have no idea but, if I was there, it must have been a considerable number. Uncle Herbert had recently arrived and was sitting surrounded by family who stared and tried to converse but had little to say. What do you say to a brother or a son arriving back one legged nearly twenty years as a missionary?

Eventually uncle Herbert said he wished to have a bath and to change. He clumped his way upstairs refusing all help and the rest of us sat round and waited. There was some talk but I have no idea what about. Eventually we heard the clump of footsteps above, approaching the top of the stairs then there was an almighty crash. There was a rush to the bottom of the stairs. There they found Uncle Herbert's dirty clothes and Herbert himself at the top of the stairs grinning.

"I thought that would give you a fright," he said and laughed.

Aunty Cicely said, 'Well! He hasn't changed much.'

It broke the ice and I suppose that was the idea.

Uncle Herbert was something of a revelation to the boys in the family. He fed us cigarettes, he took us to see our first X films, although these days they would probably appear on children's television. He even encouraged us to drink Kava which is a mild soporific drink brewed in the Pacific islands. Eventually he was given the job of bursar at a boys' school near Exeter and he would invite us down in the holidays to help with painting and the gardening. At the end of the day we might be invited into his room. His spare leg leant against one corner. There were more cigarettes for us and cigarettes and whisky for him.

Looking back, I know the end of his life was unhappy. He drank and smoked to excess and I assume this is partly what killed him.

There is one postscript. Uncle Percy, the one in Rhodesia, decided to come home for a visit as well. He had been away even longer. My Aunty Cicely told the story of him coming down stairs one day carrying his shoes and asking how he could get them cleaned. In Salisbury, he had always had a 'boy' to do such things for him. The brother priests did not get on. Herbert, who had lived with his parishioners, loved and admired them. Whereas Percy had absorbed the racism of Southern Africa. He returned to Rhodesia and was not seen again.

## Bonfire Night

These days bonfire night seems to be a semi commercial venture controlled by the men in the community and accompanied by firework displays managed by adults. There is still some teenage guerrilla activity, letting off bangers whenever they can get hold of them.

In my day, it was the children who were in charge. Our house had a tiny front garden and a back yard at the end of which were two outhouses, one for coal and the other an outside lavatory. The roofs of these outhouses were called 'coits'. Don't ask me why or how to spell it because it was, in my experience, only ever spoken.

It was on top of these coits that we stored our bonfire wood. From September onwards we scoured the rubbish tips and surrounding fields, grabbing old timber fallen branches and when these ran out lopping off more living wood from the already amputated tress. Having gathered the loot it was necessary to guard it from raiding parties from other bonfire teams. I have no recollection of a raid every having taken place, which either means that our guard was very effective or that we lived in a fantasy world generated by listening to Dick Barton on the radio. I suspect the latter.

If we had the money then it was easy to get hold of fireworks. A favourite trick was to light a banger, wait till it began to fizz and then throw it at some rival gang or, failing that, at some girls. The problem was that sometimes the banger failed to fizz and simply exploded. At school there was always at least one boy with his fingers greeny yellow from mercurochrome and covered in bandages.

The bonfire itself was in the narrow backstreet between two rows of houses. On VE night we had an emergency bonfire, all the wood being collected in two days. It was lit close to our backyard, outside of which was a telephone pole, which began to burn. The bonfire was quickly shifted and I still have the vivid image of my father climbing on the coits to pour water down the burning pole. It survived and was a source of useful charcoal for sometime after.

The most stupid thing I ever did at a bonfire was to tie a banger to a rocket in the hope that it would take off and create a bigger bang in the sky. Unfortunately, the banger was lit before the rocket and as it began to fizz we all scarpred as quickly as possible. I was some distance away when I turned to see what was happening just in time for the banger to explode. I felt a blow on my upper lip. I had been cut by a piece of flying glass.

It was clear I needed medical attention. Holding a handkerchief of doubtful provenance over my lip, I arrived at the doctor's surgery. The queue of people waiting took one look at me and ushered me immediately in see the doctor. I suspect I was marginally more interesting than the usual finger burns but the doctor seemed unfazed. He wiped a clean circle round the wound, put in two stitches, covered the cut with a plaster and sent me on my way.

I arrived back at the bonfire mortified that my baked potato was burnt to a cinder.

My mother, once she had got over the shock, was also mortified. I had gone to the doctor's with a dirty face.

© 2017 Michael Cockett