



AT SANDOWN ON THE ISLE OF WIGHT IN 1936 READY TO LEAVE FOR HOME AFTER A GREAT VACATION. I AM AT THE LEFT SPORTING MY NEW POCKET WATCH. MY FATHER, NEXT TO ME HOLDS HIS PIPE AS HE ALWAYS DID WHEN BEING PHOTOGRAPHED, MY MOTHER, COUSIN DERRICK AND HIS FATHER, MY FATHER'S BROTHER, RAY WHOSE WIFE HAD DIED TWO YEARS PREVIOUSLY. THE CAR WAS A RECENT PURCHASE OF RAY'S. WE ALL FELT VERY GRAND TO BE TRAVELING BY CAR RATHER THAN TRAIN. IT WAS CONSIDERED ESSENTIAL TO BE WELL-DRESSED FOR TRAVEL.

was Wolsey, a brand long since gone from sight. It was distinguished from all other cars by having the brand motif on the radiator made of milky glass so it could be illuminated at night. I felt very grand to be travelling in such a car and wore my new pocket watch for the occasion.

These were the days when transatlantic liners sailed in and out of Southampton so we spent time identifying the various ships as they sailed by. The holiday was a great success so we did it all over again in 1937. My father got to see much of the island that he had modelled so many times in plaster. Each day we spent the mornings on the beach in a little cove we had discovered — I suspect my father had checked maps beforehand, as I was unaware of any sense of discovery among the adults.

Following the daily swim, we would adjourn to a boating pond where Derrick and I would paddle around in canoes for a while before enjoying a fizzy drink. After lunch, we would drive somewhere and in this way explored much of what the island had to offer. What now would seem a rather dull time was full of excitement for Derrick and me.

In 1938, the two brothers and their families went their separate ways. I went with my parents to Feltham, a quiet village near Bognor on the south coast. It was another beach holiday but this year there was no car so we travelled around by bus or on foot.

The most memorable part of the holiday was the train ride from London to Bognor Regis by express electric train. My father took me to the refreshment car, another first. On the way, we passed through the guard's van through the roof of which was a periscope that gave a view of the track ahead — big stuff for a nine year old. In the refreshment car, my father treated me to my first bottle of Schweppes ginger beer while he drank a half pint of bottled beer. He must have had a good year selling models for such a demonstration of affluence.

A beach holiday at Feltham during the thirties when you had little money left me with little memorable to relate. We became friendly with another couple staying in the same boarding house and with them, shared the price of a beach hut in which the children could store buckets and spades and everyone get changed into bathing costumes for 'dips' in the sea. Nobody could swim.

By general assent, I was assigned to change with the ladies. Something embarrassing must have occurred of which I was sublimely ignorant because after a lot of furtive whispering, I was told I was to change with the men from now on. Sex must have reared its ugly head but I do not recall the circumstances.

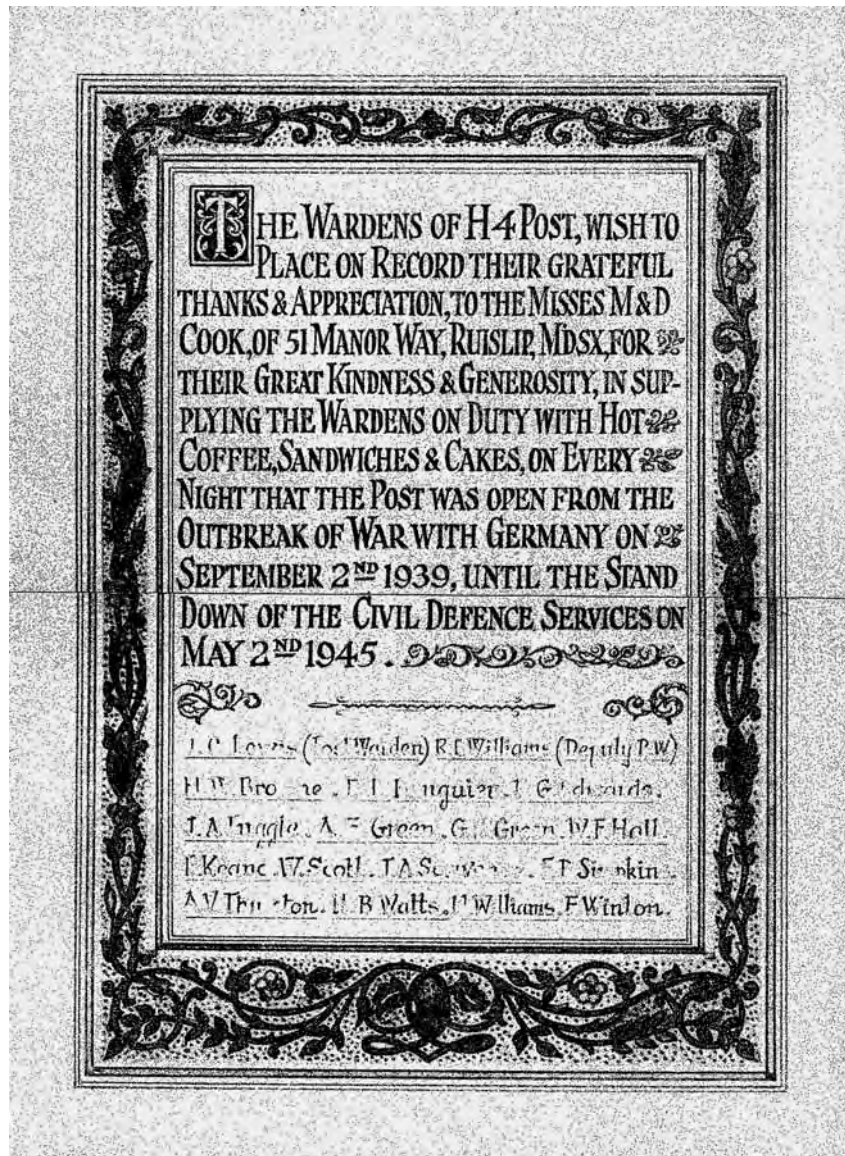
The other memorable event was when we emerged fully dressed from our hut one noon to find a lady standing self-consciously on the beach nearby wearing slacks! I had never seen a woman in trousers before. As I recall she was also wearing a matching flat-topped peak cap made from tweed such as men have worn for many years. Within two years, the country would be at war and every woman of working age had at least one pair of slacks. The introduction of slacks was a breakthrough in fashion that is now seldom commented upon although I recall saying quite a lot at the time, and being told to "hush up".

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Years later I was to learn that 1937 was a black year for my father. He had worked solidly for the Geological Survey now for over 15 years and got about as far up the tree as he could get without a degree, and the professional staff of the Survey was very conscious about the source and quality of academic degrees. There was an unwritten pecking order by which everyone was ranked in precedence according to university attended and class of degree. My poor father was unqualified yet seems to have done good work in the palaeontological department (fossils). Perhaps there was something else out there that he could do? He scanned the advertisements in the papers. These were still difficult times. He came across an advertisement for the position of curator of a museum in Singapore. He applied and got as far as number two on the list. Number one, who accepted the position, had a degree but this did not help the poor fellow three years later when Singapore was occupied by the Japanese and he spent the next four years in the notorious prison camp at Change (pronounced "Changey"). My father was luckier than he had immediately supposed.

Another disappointment came when he was in the running for a promotion that would have meant a good increase in salary. As he walked to South Kensington station on his way home one evening the man in charge of administration caught up to my father, offered his hand and, in breach of confidentiality, congratulated him on getting the promotion. My father was elated when he arrived home of course, even though I was told nothing of it at the time. When he arrived for work the next morning, fully expecting his boss to summon him to receive formal notice of the promotion, he heard nothing. It seems the phone lines had been a-buzz overnight with the result that a man in the Edinburgh office was given the job.

My mother commiserated with my father and they agreed he would cash in a small insurance policy in order to buy a second-hand car from someone at work who made a sideline from buying and selling such items after fixing them up. I knew nothing of all this until one day in the spring of 1939 he arrived in his car unannounced to meet me at school. Great excitement! He took a few driving lessons in the evenings and we were mobile.



THE ILLUMINATED ADDRESS PRESENTED BY OUR LOCAL AIR RAID WARDEN VOLUNTEERS TO OUR NEIGHBOURS THE TWO MISSES COOK, WHO GAVE THE WARDENS REFRESHMENT EVERY NIGHT THROUGHOUT THE WAR. I KNEW THESE LADIES WELL. THEY WERE VERY KIND TO ME.

Two years later Aggie was to die during an operation to remove her appendix. She was only 61. I do not believe the cause of death was ever determined but suspect there was a problem with the anaesthetic. Doctors were too busy at that time.

Aggie's funeral was nothing if not dramatic from my mother's report of the occasion. Cremation was still regarded as something of an innovation. This was the first my mother had attended. It was held at the then fashionable crematorium at Golder's Green in north London and attended by George's business associates who were uniformly attired in top hats and tailcoats. No sooner had the service begun than the air raid sirens sounded. Handel's Largo was being played on the organ as the coffin glided slowly out of sight. Just at the moment the coffin reached the curtains and was about to disappear, there was a tremendous crash of anti-aircraft fire overhead and Aggie slipped from sight with a multiple gun salute. My mother came away most impressed with the symbolism of it all.

George and my father decided that when the raids became heavy, we should all shelter in the back sitting room. This room had glass doors that opened onto the back garden. My father produced some ancient cork linoleum about one centimetre thick that George and he cut up and hung from hooks on the insides of these doors and the adjacent windows to serve as both blackout material and protection from flying glass. George and my father went all over the house pasting adhesive strips of brown paper in cruciform patterns on all the windows, again to prevent flying glass. Details of how to do this were advertised by the government in the daily papers that were becoming slimmer with time. How effective these paper strips were was never discussed in any publication I saw. Later, when air raids came every night, I slept with my parents in the downstairs room.

By Christmas 1939 George and Aggie decided the war would last longer than they had expected so they moved into more permanent quarters at the Peahen Hotel in St. Albans. Simply nothing was happening in the progress of the war as far as we could see except that more and more men were being called up and we heard disturbing reports about ships being sunk at sea.

A great blow to morale came with the sinking of HMS Hood, a battleship and pride of the British fleet. During the chase into the North Atlantic of the Bismark, a German battleship and the heaviest battleship afloat, a stray shell hit the magazine and blew up the Royal Navy's flagship Hood. Only three of the crew of over one thousand were saved. Every effort went to find and then sink the Bismark. That was effectively accomplished in what was really the end of battleship warfare. From then on, war at sea was fought using aircraft based on carriers. At least, the side with the carrier born aircraft was the side that won, as the Japanese were first to demonstrate in the Pacific before the Americans perfected the technique.

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By now the air-raid wardens were a force to contend with. Volunteers from our street were formed into "Post H5" which was manned around the clock until the end of the war. These wardens would



THE ACADEMIC STAFF IN 1945 OF THE HARROW COUNTY SCHOOL FOR BOYS WHICH I ATTENDED FROM 1940–7.

BACK ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT:

‘SPUD’ HEATHFIELD, ‘SAMMY’ WATSON WHO TAUGHT MUSIC AND REPUTEDLY PLAYED IN A DANCE BAND AT NIGHT, ‘BEAKY’ FOOKS A GREAT TEACHER OF ENGLISH. HE LIVED TO 103 AND WAS AWARDED THE MILITARY CROSS FOR VALOUR AS AN OFFICER AT THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME IN WORLD WAR I, ‘JACK’ HACKMAN WHO LIVED WITH HIS MOTHER UNTIL SHE DIED AND THEN MARRIED THE LADY STANDING IN FRONT OF HIM, ‘JERRY’ CAST WHO BOASTED THAT HE COULD WRITE THE PERIODIC TABLE OF ELEMENTS ON THE BACK OF A POSTAGE STAMP AND THAT WAS ALL THE CHEMISTRY YOU NEEDED TO KNOW. EVERYTHING FLOWED BY LOGIC. HE WORE A TIE DECORATED WITH HAMMERS AND SICKLES, ‘KILLER’ KING WHO TAUGHT ME APPLIED MATHEMATICS, A GREAT TEACHER, PAR STREET, ‘COB’ WEBB WHO TAUGHT MECHANICAL DRAWING WHEN NOT SWAPPING STAMPS WITH BOYS, ARMSTRONG, ROBINSON, ‘DICKIE’ REV. DR. DYER WHO TRIED TEACHING RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE BUT COULD NOT CONTROL CLASSES, BLYTHMAN WHO TAUGHT ME PHYSICS AND WISHED HE HAD BECOME A GEOPHYSICIST — A PLEASANT MAN.

MIDDLE ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT:

‘EGGY’ WEBB WHO TAUGHT BIOLOGY. HE STRIPPED TO THE WAIST, THEN STOOD ON HIS HEAD AND LOCKED HIS LEGS INTO THE LOTUS POSITION. HIS CLASSES PRODUCED FOUR OR FIVE DOCTORS EVERY YEAR. ‘BILL’ DUKE A MATHS TEACHER AND HEAD OF THE AIR TRAINING CORP, PARKINSON TAUGHT ENGLISH AND CLAIMED FRIENDSHIP WITH AUTHOR J. B. PRIESTLEY, FIVE LADIES RECRUITED AS A WARTIME MEASURE, ‘TRIXIE’ GOWER MARRIED THE MAN BEHIND HER, MRS. SMITH CLAIMED SHE COULD TEACH A STONE. SHE HAD TWO SONS AT THE SCHOOL, MRS. BARANYAY TAUGHT HISTORY AND CURRENT EVENTS. AN INTERESTING PERSON WHO CLAIMED TO USE HISTORICAL DATES TO REMEMBER PHONE NUMBERS. TWO LADIES WHO DID NOT TEACH ME, ATTRIDGE WHO TAUGHT GERMAN, BUT NOT TO ME, ‘SWANNY’ AMOS WHO TAUGHT PHYSICAL TRAINING AND SWIMMING, ‘EASY’ EVANS AN ECCENTRIC BUT EXCELLENT TEACHER OF MATHEMATICS. HIS GOWN WAS THE MOST TORN OF ALL. ‘TOMMY’ ATKINS THE SCHOOL SECRETARY. HE HAD A WITHERED ARM SO TYPED ONE WITH HAND BUT AT A RAPID RATE. FAMOUS FOR ‘DON’T STAND THERE DRIPPING BLOOD ON MY RUG BOY. GET MR. AMOS TO TAKE YOU TO THE HOSPITAL’.

FRONT ROW:

‘SORBO’ DR. HARTLAND WHO TAUGHT ME FRENCH AND LATIN AND WALKED WITH A BOUNCE, ‘TWINK’ DR. BRADLEY WHO TOOK ME ROWING, ‘SPADGER’ HAYS, ‘JOE’ BRISTER AN INSPIRED TEACHER WHO TAUGHT ME MATHEMATICS, ‘LADY ALICE’, WIFE OF RANDALL WILLIAMS THE HEADMASTER, SHE WAS VERY SUPPORTIVE OF SCHOOL EVENTS, RANDALL HIMSELF ON THE POINT OF RETIRING TO TAKE HOLY ORDERS, A DEDICATED MAN BUT NOT NOTED FOR SMILING, ‘CREEPER’ DAVIS TAUGHT ME LATIN BUT NOT SUCCESSFULLY, GEORGE NEAL WHO TRIED TO TEACH ART BUT WAS REALLY PAST IT. HE HAD BEEN AT THE SCHOOL FOR 34 YEARS. ‘WHIFFY’ KING WHO TAUGHT ME FRENCH — AN ECCENTRIC, ENERGETIC TEACHER, ‘GEORGE’ THORN WHOSE LIFE WAS MUSIC BUT TRIED TO TEACH SCIENCE, WHICH HE DID POORLY, AND SUPERVISE SCHOOL LUNCHES. ‘JUMBO’ JONES WHO TAUGHT LATIN AND ORGANIZED CRICKET — A VERY PLEASANT MAN.

THE STAINED GLASS IN THE WINDOW OVER THE DOOR IN THE BACKGROUND COMMEMORATES THE WINNING FOR BRITAIN OF THE SCHNEIDER CUP FOR RACING A FLOAT PLANE THAT WAS DEVELOPED INTO THE ‘SPITFIRE’ FIGHTER OF WORLD WAR 2 FAME. THE PILOT, BOOTHMAN, HAD ATTENDED THE SCHOOL.

would soon all be flying everywhere and these pens did not have to be emptied like ordinary fountain pens which would otherwise leak their ink at the lower pressures encountered at altitude. The first ballpoint pen I saw cost four times the price of the fountain pen with a gold nib that I used. It was a graduation gift from a rich uncle to a friend of mine. The cost represented about 25% of a week’s wages for a newly graduated engineer.

The word “spiv” went out of everyday use when austerity finished. Spivs were people who could always be relied upon to, for a price, supply something in short supply. Around the end of the war, spivs started to offer what was known as “soapless soap” or “teepol”. It was the advent of detergents. If you knew the right person, he would get you a bottle of the unscented, amber-brown liquid in an unmarked bottle. Teepol did a great job in laundering clothes and helped extend the soap ration. Presumably, the stuff was drawn from a drum but where that came from was anybody’s guess. All we learned was that it was made somehow by the oil industry and our friendly local spivs knew where to get it. How the stuff came to be marketed for the first time at the end of the war with absolutely no advertising fanfare remains a mystery to me.

The British Empire was about to start its decline with India being given its independence, and Russia was about to set up its “Iron Curtain” across Eastern Europe. We knew nothing of this but it was becoming clear that conditions would not return to those of the world we knew in 1939. About 40,000,000 people had died and great movements of population were taking place all across Europe. Virtually every country in Europe that had been involved in the war, be they winner or loser in the conflict, was bankrupt, just like after the previous war. In retrospect, the whole event seems the ultimate idiocy — all those deaths and all that destruction. All those unsettled lives, and for what purpose? The best that can be said is that it was hopefully the ultimate eradicator of any will to employ warfare in Europe as a way of settling differences. Could this be the ‘war to end wars’ that had been promised 27 years earlier at the end of the First World War?

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For better or worse, a new world was surely at hand.

As for me, did the war experience leave any scars? There are of course memories of people I knew who were killed. All that I can point to that I am aware of by way of lasting effects of which I am conscious, is the austerity that continued from the preceding years of the Depression. This experience during a decade of my formative years has left me reluctant to this day to throw food away or replace things. Added to that I suppose is my cynicism about the abilities of military and elected public officials in high places no matter what ‘side’ they are on. Many, I am sure, are well intentioned, but they are demonstrably not always effective. After all, their collective inadequacies caused the whole conflagration with the deaths of forty or more millions of people and untold misery across Europe and Asia.