

Life returns to normal

Following a lengthy period of rehabilitation, Dad was able to re-enter the workforce, but his physical limitations meant finding a job that was not demanding. Not much is known after he left the Martin-Baker Aircraft Company in 1948, but Dad was interested in all things mechanical—especially motor vehicles. He had a technical aptitude, which he may have inherited from both his grandfather, Sidney Richard Page (draughtsman) and father, Sydney Stephen Page (electrical engineer). As a child brought up in straitened circumstances—his father died shortly before he was born (see Appendix 1, *Family lineages*)—and other handicaps such as being afflicted with a ‘squint’, Dad had to hold his own and, therefore, adopted an independent and perhaps stubborn attitude at an early age. This translated into a taste for adventure and a keen interest in wanting to know ‘how things worked.’

As an aside, it should be noted that before joining the armed forces, Dad’s full-time occupation was a cinema projectionist. This was in the days when film projection equipment was rudimentary and very temperamental. Technical knowledge was needed to operate both the projector and the sound equipment, which was often a gramophone type record containing the soundtrack. Since everything had to be coordinated, a specific level of technical skill was considered necessary for the job.

An additional aptitude was his handcraft skills, and he was well at home fashioning items from all kinds of material. The flat’s coal bunker lid became a makeshift workbench, and above the bunker there was a cupboard suitable for storing material, tools, nuts, bolts and paint pots. It was there that Dad made all my adventure toys from scratch; such as a wooden sword and a hardboard shield when I pretended to be one of the Knights of the Round Table. Another wooden sword was made to look like one used by a Roman soldier, complete with string wrapped around the hilt. They were all painted in realistic colours, and the shield bore a fictitious coat of arms—a black background with a silver diagonal stripe and a red snake or dragon. Dad constructed a toboggan with a welded metal frame that was as solid as a rock. This sledge (sled) replaced the all-wood version that he had previously made. Somehow he was able to find the right material, even though much of it may have ‘fallen off the back of a lorry (truck).’

If there was a downside to his sense of adventure and handiwork it was the almost catastrophic episode of the diving helmet. Although not all the facts are known, as a teenager Dad manufactured a helmet to be worn under water. Convinced that this invention was perfected, Dad decided to test it by wearing it and immersing himself in the nearby canal. The helmet’s flaws immediately showed themselves, and it was only by a quick intervention that he was saved from drowning.

The armed forces provided Dad with the opportunity to become mobile and, indeed, he learned to drive and secure his licence by operating army lorries. Before the Second World War, Dad indulged in motor cycling, and following the D-day offensive he became a proficient dispatch rider. At that time, automotive engineering was relatively simple, and his inquisitive mind and natural aptitude allowed him to understand the workings of cars and appreciate the quality of manufacturing techniques. This knowledge put him in good stead for his employment in later life.

Toddler years

As a baby, then infant, the days, months and years rolled by blissfully. Both parents were fond of the open air, and when the weather permitted, trips to the local parks were always a pleasure. The nearest parkland was Highbury Fields (see Appendix 2, *The old neighbourhood*) and the wide open grassed area was perfect for expending energy. When old enough, running and gambolling was encouraged under watchful eyes. Much enjoyment was derived from simple ball games, or merely just chasing a loose ball. Other toys accompanied me on these excursions, including a stuffed elephant and a stuffed dog, but the little blue ball was my favourite.

Further afield, larger London parks beckoned; some to be regular venues in later years when I was allowed more freedom on my own. Closest of these was Clissold Park, Stoke Newington; arrived at following a relatively short walk from Highbury Corner along St. Paul's Road to Highbury Grove and the entire length of Highbury New Park to Green Lanes. The destination was always apparent when the eccentrically designed Stoke Newington 'castle' water pumping station came into view. Excursions to the inner London parks such as Regent's Park, Hyde Park/Kensington Gardens, Green Park and St. James's Park provided new perspectives about the city. There were offshoots to the parkland, and attractions like the London Zoo and the Serpentine pond provided close encounters with animal and bird wildlife.

I was introduced to Hampstead Heath—an even larger expanse of natural parkland—as a baby, and Mum allowing me to bask in the sunshine on hot summer days. Later, Hampstead Heath became a popular year-round recreational destination for many reasons. Of all the diversions offered by the Heath, one of the annual major attractions was the August Bank Holiday Fun Fair where a large area was set aside for the numerous roundabouts, rides, vendor stands and the trademark helter-skelter tower. The atmosphere of the fair was unique: from the sights of the sideshows, smells of the roasted chestnuts and popcorn, and the sounds of the barrel-organs and hawking showmen. An evocation of the fair can be heard in the piece of music called *Bank Holiday* written by the Birmingham born composer, Albert Katèlbey. I was enthralled with the attractions, especially in the evening when everywhere was lit up by strings of electric light bulbs or the glow of hissing hurricane lamps. Dad's accurate rifle aiming abilities came in handy at the shooting gallery and, indeed, I still possess one of the prizes—a stuffed Teddy bear named Jimmy.

Mental recollections as a baby through the toddler years are scant. Those outstanding are the odd views from my pram or pushchair (stroller) and visual memories of carefree days following the discovery of mobility that was constantly being put to the test either on the flat roof or in the nearby parks. It seemed that there were many sunny and warm days—perhaps more than in today's world—and sunshine was forever streaming through our top floor flat windows. To keep me content and under Mum's watchful eyes, Dad rigged up a baby swing that suspended from the wooden beam traversing the ceiling of the living room. This arrangement was particularly convenient when Mum was ironing the clothes, and the occasional gentle shove kept the swing moving as I chuckled with great delight.

Christmas was always a fun time and much socialising with friends and family took place. The flat was decorated with colourful swags of crêpe paper, paper chains that were carefully glued together, balloons of

different shapes, and stand-up ornaments of popular Christmas characters. Somehow a small Christmas tree was procured and decorated with lots of tinsel strips, glass ornaments and the inevitable fairy on the top. Alcoholic beverages were relatively inexpensive at the time and a quick trip to the off-licence at the bottom of the road meant there was a ready supply of sherry, port and beer on hand for visiting guests. Some of the brands were: *Emu* (sherry), *Sandeman* (ruby or tawny ports), *Peter Heering* or *de Kuyper* (cherry brandy liqueur) and *Advocaat* (eggnog).

Exchanging presents was almost a ritual, and as I grew older, my expectations remained modest and so the stocking filled with nuts and fruit was accepted as the norm, and only until later boyhood years when money was more readily available would I receive gifts of greater quality and meaning.

After the festivities were over, it was time to remove the decorations and store them for next Christmas. This, too, was ritualistic, and one privilege I had was to ride on Dad's shoulders and burst all the balloons either with a pin or the end of a lighted cigarette. The 'pop' was somewhat daunting and dust showered everywhere, but it was a nice family affair and still stands out as a vivid memory.

In the years leading up to infants school, life was a constant round of playtime and parent bonding. I gradually got to know some of the neighbouring children of a similar age, and friends and relations who visited with their offspring became a familiar sight. Of the visitors, the most frequent were Aunt Win with her daughter, Linda, and Doris Felstead accompanied with daughter Christine. Of course, the young mothers had much in common and, by and large, the halcyon days of early childhood were happy ones.

Summer holidays

Apart from the occasional trips to the parks, I anticipated looking forward to the annual summer break. This was in the late 1940s and early 1950s when the budgeted savings were sufficient to finance a one week excursion to the seaside. There were various destinations within relatively easy reach by road or train, such as Bexhill, Bognor Regis, Brighton, Broadstairs, Clacton-on-Sea, Eastbourne, Hastings, Hayling Island, Herne Bay, Margate, Ramsgate, Southend-on-Sea, Worthing, and the furthest being the Isle of Wight.

An excursion to the Isle of Wight was a significant holiday as we could combine the trip with a visit to Dad's sister, Betty, and her husband, Sid Smith, who lived in Havant, Hampshire. The Smiths had three children, Edgar, Martin and Susan, cousins who were in and around my age. Also, living nearby in Portchester, Hampshire, was Dad's older brother, Norman (always known as 'Tony') and his wife, Hilda. Hilda's retired parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jones, lived the same road. We were always treated royally during these visits and there was usually lots to eat—a familiar cry being, "There's plenty of bread." Later when I was older and allowed to venture forth on my own, regular visits to Uncle Tony were eagerly anticipated.

Because of the restrained holiday budget we usually stayed at a typical seaside boarding house; what became Bed & Breakfasts or B&Bs. All these establishments would be run by the classic landlady, who stood for no nonsense and produced the proverbial greasy English-style breakfast to start the day. Waking up

to the telltale frying odours and perhaps burned toast was indicative of the breakfast offering. Sometimes starting with a bowl of corn flakes or cold porridge, the main course being a couple of fried eggs, streaky rashers of bacon, a few small sausages, slices of fried bread, half a tomato and, if you were lucky, pieces of black pudding. Triangles of toast in varying stages of browning were stacked in the toast rack awaiting a layer of butter and jam or marmalade. Knowing that meals for the rest of the day would be simple, inexpensive ones, we ate as much of the breakfast as possible.

Dad was always careful of how the holiday expenses were spent, but Mum was of the opinion that “We’re on holiday”, and made sure she enjoyed herself given that for the rest of the year she would be working in her part-time job that was something of a daily grind. The sunny summer days were spent on the beaches of Sandown and Shanklin. Rented deckchairs were characteristic of this pastime, and armed with my Mickey Mouse bucket and spade, sandcastle building with the assistance of Dad, the castle’s designer, was an exciting experience. Expertly built structures with walls, towers with gull feather ‘flags’ and a moat arose near the water’s edge where eventually the incoming tide would engulf the creation, much to our amusement. Beachcombing and observing life in rock pools were other activities, as well as collecting all kinds of seaweed, shells and other flotsam and jetsam.

It should also be remembered that other members of the family didn’t miss out on seaside trips. During the weekend, daily train excursions to Southend-on-Sea were usually crowded. Throngs of holidaymakers waited for the special Southend excursion train on the platform at Highbury & Islington railway station, and sometimes Mum, Grandma and myself went on these cheap day outings. Southend-on-Sea was extremely popular with Londoners, who could relish eating the local fresh winkles, whelks and fish and chips. There was much to amuse visitors, from donkey rides on the beach to visiting the Kursaal, the huge fun fair with its roundabouts, rides and extensive switchback (roller coaster). Punch and Judy shows, attractions on the famous pier, itinerant photographers using their tame parrots or monkeys as incentives to pose, and the ice cream, sticks of peppermint rock and candy floss stands doing a roaring trade. Nighttime, too, had its own charm with the multicoloured strings of lights on the promenade and bingo halls in full swing.

A memorable childhood disappointment

The real world also has its share of disappointments. Another of my favourite toys was a box kite, and the best place to launch it was on Hampstead Heath’s Parliament Hill. Just getting to Hampstead Heath was an adventure for a small boy. There were two principal routes depending on which side of the Heath you wanted to visit. On the Highgate Ponds side, it was travelling by No. 611 trolleybus from Highbury Corner to Highgate Village and walking down West Hill to Merton Road and the park’s entrance. Reaching Parliament Hill on the other side of the Heath was best done by taking the train from Highbury & Islington to Hampstead Heath and walking to the park from the station.

One fine day, Dad and I decided to ‘go fly a kite.’ With the box kite, flying line and reel we set off to Highbury & Islington railway station. The train ride was always magical. It started as we entered the booking office. This was part of the old 1872 North London Railway station building that was badly damaged by enemy action (see Appendix 2, *The old neighbourhood*). Inside the huge booking office that was lit by gas



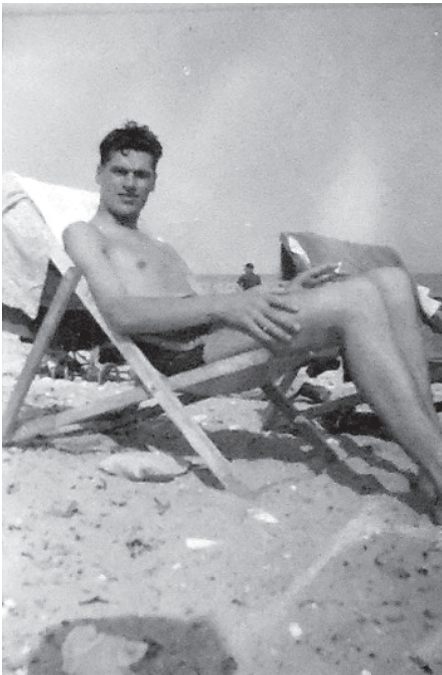
Mum and Barry, Southend-on-Sea



Barry , Southend-on-Sea, 1949



Barry and Gran, Southend-on-Sea



Dad, Isle of Wight, 1949



*Barry, Dad and Mum,
Isle of Wight, 1949*



Mum, Isle of Wight, 1949



Highbury & Islington Station Forecourt, 1950



Highbury & Islington Station Looking East, 1950



Dad and Barry, Parliament Hill. 1950s



Barry's Box Kite, Parliament Hill, 1951



Barry, Hampstead Heath Station, 1951

lamps (later upgraded to fluorescent lights), passengers walked over to the barred opening and requested their tickets from the clerk. In exchange for the fare, the ticket was taken from a rack and placed into a machine that noisily stamped the date and time. We then headed along the gloomy corridor to the stairs that led down to the platform.

Since we were travelling to Hampstead Heath we had to make sure that we boarded the train heading for Richmond and not the Watford train, as the two routes separated at Camden Road, two stations west of Highbury & Islington. There was plenty of traffic to watch, including the goods (freight) trains often pulled by steam locomotives. The electric passenger trains glided into the station under the watchful eyes of the station staff and everything worked according to plan. The action of the signalmen in the signal box at the end of the central platform dictated the up or down position of the semaphore signals and the operation of the points (switches). We could see the front of the train approaching from Canonbury station to the east. Once we determined it was the Richmond train from the destination board and had stopped with a hiss of brakes, Dad turned the compartment door handle, opened the door and we would climb in to sit on the cloth covered bench seat that extended the width of the compartment; one on each side. Once all the doors had been closed, the platform guard blew his whistle one shrill note and raised his green flag to tell the train driver (engineer) it was safe to move and continue his journey.

The train compartment reeked of a variety of smells, mainly stale tobacco smoke and old varnish. Usually the bench seats were comfortable although some had hard springs or even no springing. Luggage could be placed on the string meshed luggage rack above the seats. Extra ventilation was possible by lowering the window pane a number of increments. This was controlled by a stout leather strap pierced at intervals by several holes that could be engaged on a brass peg. Metal bars across the window opening prevented passengers from leaning their heads out—a safety feature to prevent decapitations!

It was the view out of the window, however, that dominated the train journey. Between Highbury & Islington and Caledonian Road & Barnsbury stations the railway ran in a deep cutting, and only by looking up could you see the backs of the houses. After the lines crossed the Caledonian Road bridge the vista opened up to reveal a mix of industrial and residential buildings, including the ornate tower of the Ebonite company and the Victorian clock tower of the original Metropolitan Cattle Market ('Cally Market'). Then came the network of railway sidings as we passed north of Kings Cross on a viaduct over the original LNWR tracks at what was known as the Copenhagen Tunnels. If you looked north you could see the three tunnels flanked by the castle-like brickwork retaining wall. In the days of steam, it was possible to see trains coming out of the tunnels and belching smoke as they emerged. To the south you could see the skyline of St. Pancras station with the prominent tower of Sir George Gilbert Scott's 1856 Midland Grand Hotel building. Soon the train would rattle across the Camden Road bridge and stop at Camden Road (formerly Camden Town) station. After leaving Camden Road, the rail lines separated and diverged on long brick viaducts—one heading towards Richmond and the other towards Willesden Junction and, eventually, Watford. Kentish Town West and Gospel Oak were the next stops before we arrived at Hampstead Heath station.

Once outside the station we turned right and followed the pavement (sidewalk) for a short walk towards Parliament Hill—the highest point in North London (319 ft. [97 m] AMSL)—with an unobstructed view

across the capital. Nearby was the Parliament Hill Lido open-air swimming pool, athletic track and Parliament Hill Fields soccer pitches. It was here when I attended secondary school that many of the sports periods and competitions took place. The high altitude and hillside encouraged fairly substantial wind forces and heat thermals—ideal for kite flying. Dad and I set out the equipment, and it wasn't long before Dad ran a short distance with the box kite—finally to release and watch it sail aloft. The reel was a heavy, solid spool and the flying line played out as the kite gained height. But the wind that day was fickle and would rise and fall in strength so making it difficult to control the kite. Although most of the hill was devoid of trees, there were several copses of tall mature horse chestnuts and willows at the lower levels. At one time the wind decided to abate and so allowed the kite to fall under its own weight—straight into one of the copses. We were never able to release the kite from its imprisonment in the top branches, and one particularly vigorous tug caused the line to snap and all hope was lost. I was heartbroken.

My sombre mood meant that the return journey didn't enthral me as it would normally have done. Dad was dejected, too, with just the reel and flying line to take home. But to his credit he tried his best to console me, and as a measure of compensation bought an ice lolly that I consumed hoping to keep my mind off the calamity. Whether or not Dad replaced the stalwart box kite with another I can't remember, but this experience made me think about the true worth of personal possessions and how not to be frivolous where property is concerned.

Austerity continues

The late 1940s, though, was still a time of acute austerity. As the country started to stand once again on its own feet, the general, and particular the working, population was still finding it hard trying to make ends meet. Certain types of rationing remained in force and a succession of severe winters made life a misery as domestic burning coal was in short supply.

One particularly bad winter meant that 'keeping the home fires burning' was an important issue. It was at a time of desperation, and one of the only ways out of the situation was to scavenge. My father and his brother-in-law, Uncle Keith, rose to the challenge and decided to 'raid' the nearby Charrington's coal yard. They were both veteran paratroopers, physically fit and mentally experienced in commando-style tactics. The plan was carried out under cover of darkness. Both men carried a canvas sack and scaled the gates at the entrance to the coal yard driveway on Liverpool Road. Once on Charrington's property, they crept via shadows to the shed where the railway coal wagons were parked. They then picked up surplus lumps of coal to be carried away in the canvas sacks. Once again, the men scaled the gates before returning to the flats with their booty. In later years when it was necessary to supplement the meagre coal stocks, Dad would find wooden blocks, soaked in creosote, that were discarded at the time the tram tracks were being removed at Highbury Corner.

In the meantime as I was approaching school age, the neighbourhood and its inhabitants were becoming more and more familiar to me and I was learning the names of other tenants and people who lived in the street. Accompanying Mum on local errands meant going in and out of shops, mainly those in the Upper Street and St. Paul's Road arcades. We went as far as the junction of St. Paul's Road and Highbury Grove to

shop at Ernest W. Noakes, a traditional butchers with an excellent reputation. Inside, the floors were strewn with sawdust and the fresh meat would be cut to order on the marble countertop. The walls were tiled and spotless, and at the front window, sides of beef, pork, rabbits and fowl would be hanging on display above marble trays of various meats, sausages and offal. Mr. Noakes would be there dressed in his striped butcher's apron and straw boater hat, ready to pass the time of day as he filled our order and cancelled the ration book stamps.

On our way home, as we walked along Highbury Station Road from Highbury Corner, we often stopped to chat with Mrs. Cornish, who lived in the old railway workers' cottages opposite Laycock Secondary Boys School. I was always intrigued with these three cottages as they seemed to me so ominous with their dark Victorian interiors. I could only see a little past Mrs. Cornish's portly body standing in the doorway, but there were massive drapes across the door openings, and gilt framed photographs hanging on the hall walls. In retrospect, I assume Mrs. Cornish was the widow of a railway employee and lived in a company house. She would be seen standing at her open door ready to make conversation to any likely person wanting to share a yarn or two.

I was now beginning to know my immediate neighbours. Opposite us was the Jacobs family, who lived a reclusive lifestyle and were rarely seen. Below them was Mrs. Greenfield, whose daughter and new husband lived opposite and directly below us. Underneath Mrs. Greenfield was Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins and their son, Patrick. Beneath them were the Stantons, one of the roughest families on the estate. On the ground floor lived two elderly spinster sisters. They remained completely in the past and shunned electricity, preferring to light their flat with gaslight. In general, the tenancies didn't change often and at the time the flats were demolished in the 1970s there were many long-term tenants still in residence.

