Chapter 2

Home and community life in the early 1950s

The early 1950s started to witness the beginning of the 'affluent society.' Rationing was less restrictive and so-called 'luxury goods', such as televisions and household appliances, were becoming more available, as attractive hire purchase (HP) offers meant young couples were acquiring previously unreachable items on the 'never-never' as they set up home. My mother held a dim view of 'buying on tick', and adopted the attitude that unless an item could be bought for cash outright there was no reason to buy it at all. My parents did, however, relent on one acquisition and that was a new bedroom suite since their old furniture was at the end of its useful life. The suite, finished in blonde oak, was made under the trade name *Golden Key*, and the substantial pieces were: double bed with headboard and footboard, night table, dressing table with a large mirror, and double-width wardrobe. Somehow all the pieces were manhandled up the five floors and assembled in the 'front room' where they occupied most of the available space.

Another sign of better times was redecorating the flat with wallpaper instead of the utilitarian distemper. Rolls of inexpensive wallpaper and matching frieze (border) were bought from stores such as Jones Brothers in Holloway Road. At home, preparations would take place as Dad washed down the walls with a solution of *Mangers* sugar soap to give the wallpaper paste a good 'key.' Mum would take charge in measuring, cutting and passing the lengths of wallpaper over to Dad, who dextrously laid each piece out on the kitchen table and applied a layer of paste using a wide paint brush. Mum had the steady hand and keen eye when installing the lengths of wallpaper—especially the crucial first piece—ensuring the neighbouring patterns matched exactly and the frieze was parallel with the edge of the ceiling. Tricky parts, such as installing over the large, bulbous light switches called for patience and 'tricks of the trade.' In general, the production line ran smoothly and the final result—after the skirting boards (baseboards), door and window frames were painted—was considered a proud effort and significant improvement to the flat.

The living room furniture changed as time went by and funds were available. At one time it was dominated by the Ferguson radiogram, which was a huge, solid wooden box that contained the standard wireless and single-playing 78 rpm record turntable. There was a built-in loudspeaker and a record cabinet to store the heavy discs. Dad would often buy the latest 'hit', and I can recall such favourites as Pat Boone's *Love Letters in the Sand* and Paul Anka's *Diana* being played relentlessly. Each time the wireless was turned on, I was fascinated with the 'warming up' of the valves (tubes) before the sound came on.

Wall-to-wall carpeting was never considered essential, but the bare floorboards were covered with lino (linoleum) and scatter rugs were added for colour and warmth. Mum became proficient at making fireside rugs using a kit called *Redi-cut*. This consisted of a pliable fretwork used for the backing and lengths of coloured wool that were attached to the backing using a special tool. The rugs came in a variety of designs, which were printed on the fretwork to provide a template for the lengths of wool. One particular design that endured for many years displayed a number of different coloured leaves, and Mum would spend hours

during the evenings patiently weaving the lengths of wool into the backing. A couple of easy chairs and a small coffee table completed the room until later when the first television set (TV) and a 'whitewood' china cabinet arrived. The illusion of cosiness meant that the living room came up to expectations and was well used for this purpose. A sprinkling of ornaments—both practical and decorative, including a china black panther nicknamed *Rajah*, added to the overall feeling of comfort.

The scullery went through many changes even though it was essentially the utility room of the flat. There being no actual built-in bathtub, tenants had to resort to using a tin bath often placed in the scullery. Our first tin bath happened to be a modified forty-gallon oil drum supported on bricks with a gas ring placed underneath to heat the water. A rubber hose connected the gas ring with an outlet on the gas stove. Later, a conventional oval shaped tin bath replaced the oil drum, but the water was heated in buckets on top of the gas stove, and kettles of hot water were kept in reserve for topping up. The final version was a larger and longer tin bath for extra luxury. When not in use, the bath hung by one of its end handles onto a hook driven into the back wall by the coal bunker, refuse chute and toilet door.

One day I was surprised with the ultimate in convenience. My parents had invested in the purchase of an *Ascot* hot water heater (or geyser). The cylindrical unit was installed over the corner sink in the scullery by one of the two jack-of-all-trades employed by the flat's management. The gas supply had to be brought from the mains to the *Ascot*, which meant installing pipes of various lengths and connecting them with elbows. There was a raw metal smell as the pipes were cut to length with a hacksaw, and the threads were formed using a die set. A sealing compound was applied to the threads, and the pipes and elbows secured together using a large adjustable spanner (crescent wrench). When the *Ascot* was attached to the wall and the gas and water connections made, it was time to light the pilot light and test the appliance. I was totally amazed when after the reservoir had sufficiently heated, instant hot water started to flow. I think that instant and constant flowing hot water was, for me, the first most significant and revolutionary technological advancement I realised as a child. No more waiting for water to be heated in the kettle on the gas stove, as hot water was immediately available to fill the sink for washing up the dishes or poured into the big brown enamelled bowl for personal ablutions.

As revolutionary as the *Ascot* was, it still relied on a supply of gas as fuel to heat the water. Town gas was available from when the flats were built in 1883, and each apartment was equipped with a gas meter. The meter allowed a certain amount of volume of gas on a pay-for-use basis. Our meter was installed high up on the wall of the small hall near the front door and contained the money slot, metering device and coin box. I can remember the original meter that accepted one penny (1d) coins, and it was an adventure for me to be hoisted up on Dad's shoulders and insert pennies into the slot. The hardest part was turning the coin dropping device, but a satisfying 'clunk' of the coin as it fell into the box was a reassuring sound. Later, when gas prices increased to the extent that pennies were too cumbersome, new meters were installed with three slots that accepted one shilling [bob] (1/-), two shilling [florin] (2/-), and half-crown (2/6d) coins.

Every so often we would be visited by the gas man whose job was to read the gas meter, empty the box, count the coins and make any adjustments. There were several small dials on the metering device and the gas man recorded the figures in a large register. He also carried a leather money pouch. After reading the

meter, he would remove the lead seal between the money box and the meter then remove the box. He would then carry the box to the table in the scullery, and tip all the coins out to be counted. The pennies would be neatly stacked in piles of twelve (one shilling [1/-] worth), and the total tallied against the amount of gas consumed according to the figures recorded in the register. Any surplus or unused gas was deducted, and a cash equivalent was returned to the consumer. He then returned the box to the meter and installed a new lead seal. The gas man was a familiar, friendly figure and usually there was a little banter or even a cup of tea offered during his visit. The job had its fair share of danger, since the gas man carried around a great deal of money on his person, but robberies hardly ever seemed to happen in those days.

There were two other callers on a regular basis: the coalman and the chimney sweep. Solid fuel for domestic burning was delivered by the Charrington's coalman. Charrington's was a large coal merchant firm that had an extensive holdings yard on the north side of the railway property opposite where we lived. All the shunting activity could be clearly seen, as wagon loads of various coal products arrived at the siding and were marshalled to certain tipping points for further distribution. A small donkey tractor pushed the wagons along the rails in the coal yard, and turntables allowed the wagons to be directed to short spur sidings. In the early days, all loading and sack filling was done by hand. Later, a new tipping hopper was installed in the yard and lorries (trucks) replaced horsedrawn carts.

Charrington's coal office was located in Holloway Road opposite the Highbury Picture Theatre, and adjacent to a cobblestone lane that led to the coal yard. It was standard practice to visit the office and place and pay for an order. We were told approximately when the delivery was to be made, and nearer the time I would eagerly look out the front window for the coal lorry and watch the coalheaver lift a one hundred-weight (112 lbs, [51 kg]) sack onto his shoulder, and prepare himself for the long climb up five floors. Once at the front door he had to skilfully negotiate his way to the coal bunker just behind the scullery. With one motion the entire contents spilled into the bunker, and the coalheaver folded the empty sack. Mum always pitied the coalheaver having to carry the load up five floors so usually slipped him a couple of bob (two shillings [florin or 2/-]). His coalblack face would produce a wide smile and his eyes would twinkle in response.

Burning coal or any other combustible material in an open hearth had its merits and its downside. The source of heat, despite most of it escaping up the chimney, was essential for basic comfort on long, cold winter days. It was relatively affordable given the rationing aspect, and self-regulating as families would burn as much or as little dictated by their individual requirements.

'Laying a fire' had to be done properly to make sure there were no false starts. Various methods were used, such as placing pieces of kindling as a bottom layer on the cast iron grate, followed by sheets of newspaper rolled into rings or knots. Small knobs of coal and then larger pieces were layered on top of the newspaper until a compact heap was made. The newspaper was then ignited by a lit match or 'spill' and allowed to smoulder through to the kindling which would also start to burn. The eventual slow burning of the kindling was sufficient to ignite the small knobs of coal and eventually the entire fire glowed red hot. A quicker method was using the gas poker. This was a hollow rod pierced along the side with a series of holes. It was attached to a rubber hose from the wall mounted gas outlet (originally the gas light over the mantel-

piece). The gas was turned on and ignited as it escaped from the holes in the poker, which was then thrust into the pile of coal in the fireplace. To capture sparks spitting out, a guard was placed in front of the fire.

At the end of the day, the fire was allowed to die and the ashes raked or brushed through the slots in the grate to form a small pile underneath. In the morning, the ashes were scooped up with the coal shovel and placed in newspaper to be discarded down the refuse chute. There were many occasions when tenants, in their haste to dispose of the ashes, failed to make sure that the remnants were fully extinguished. Consequently we had a refuse chute fire to contend with, and the acrid smoke permeated throughout the flats served by that particular chute.

Another impact of open fires was the accumulation of soot in the chimneys. Before anthracite, or 'smokeless fuel' was legislated by the Clean Air Act, most coal for domestic burning had a high carbon content, and released combusted and non-combusted particles that dissipated up the chimney with the rising smoke. These particles attached themselves to the inside of the chimney, and gradually accumulated to such an extent that smoke couldn't escape. The only remedy was to remove the soot deposit. Chimney fires where the non-combusted particles ignited were commonplace, and similar to the refuse chute fires, produced a particularly acrid and dense smoke. Always an exciting time, though, as the Fire Brigade was called to deal with the situation.

The only way to prevent chimneys plugging up and causing potential fires was to have the chimney 'swept' using the services of a professional chimney sweep. Chimney sweeps have been in existence for centuries. Some employed small boys to climb up the huge wide chimneys of large houses and remove the soot using a hand brush. This could lead to disastrous consequences, as boys became trapped in chimneys and died of asphyxiation, and physical deformities plagued their small bodies due to the abnormal working positions. Fortunately this was now a thing of the past. Even the chimney sweep's equipment was changing, as modern technology in the form of specially designed vacuum devices started to replace the traditional manual method using the circular broom.

The arrival of the chimney sweep was always a source of excitement. He appeared exactly as one would expect—carrying his circular broom, bundle of extension canes and an old hessian sack; dressed in a grimy suit and with a soot encrusted face peering from under a flat cap. He quickly set to work and cleared the hearth so he could literally ram the circular broom up the chimney flue. With the broom's cane still protruding, the next step was to place the catch-all sheet over the cane and seal the complete opening to the chimney flue. At the end of each length of cane was a screw-type fastener. By adding lengths of cane to each other, the sweep was able to force the broom up the chimney for as high as necessary. Pushing the canes and occasionally turning the broom was hard work, as the accumulated soot became dislodged and fell onto the catch-all sheet. The highlight for me was to race up the stairs to the flat roof, and watch for the broom to suddenly emerge from the chimney pot with a great flourish and shower of soot. After the broom had cleared the chimney pot, the sweep started to pull the canes and retrieved the broom; again making a circular scrubbing action to remove more soot accumulation. Before the broom could be removed, it was time to collect all the loose soot into the hessian bag. Finally, the sweep would clear away as much of the soot dust as possible before being paid and moving on.

Charrington's Coal Delivery Lorry

Typical Coalheaver

Typical Chimney Sweep

In the days before we had television (TV) there were few radio networks to choose from, but soon the pirate radio stations started to appear on the scene. One in particular—Radio Luxembourg—brought its own brand of entertainment. My parents had a small radio resting on the night table next to their bed and it was just right for picking up Radio Luxembourg's signals and listening to the adventures of *Dan Dare – Pilot of the Future*. Another science fiction series was called *Journey into Space*, starring Guy Kingsley Pointer. The sound effects were exceptional and super-realistic. Lying next to the radio in the dim light of the side lamp made it all the more mysterious. The radio signal would wax and wane with the prevailing atmospheric conditions, and there were the occasional commercial messages to contend with. Otherwise this was free entertainment and food for the imagination.

At the same time as all this, I was able to listen to limited radio reception through headphones connected to my crystal set (or cat's whisker). Dad had bought this and the ex-WD headphones at the 'Dalston Waste', a large street flea market located on the high pavement of Kingsland Road, Dalston. The crystal set consisted of a number of coils attached to a small piece of printed circuit board. The aerial (antenna) was a length of wire attached at one end to a contact on the board, and at the other end to the main gas pipe in the room. By connecting the headphones to a variable condenser, the radio frequency excited by the coil could be heard. My simple set was able to pick up the stronger signals, and the headphones allowed for a nonadjustable but reasonable volume level.

This was in the days when radio was still king. Although television was making inroads into ordinary households, in general the large consoles were still expensive to buy, and limited reception provided more of a novelty than actual entertainment value. There was an alternative to buying, however, and that was renting TVs from such High Street outlets as *Radio Rentals*. Hire purchase was another popular method of purchasing a TV, but, of course, payments had to be met or repossession was immediate.

My initial exposure to the technology of television was viewing the images on the nine-inch black and white screen of my grandmother's [Dad's mother] Bush TV. The Bush TV was a marvel of electronics engineering and packaged in a revolutionary way. Everything was neatly housed in a compact, dark brown Bakelite case. An accessory to enlarge the small image consisted of a convex Plexiglas lens attached to legs and placed in front of the TV screen.

Television programming in the early 1950s was still limited and consisted only of one channel controlled by the BBC. Broadcasting began about four o'clock in the afternoon. Before this, the screen showed a static pattern, known as Test Card C, that technicians used when setting up new TV installations. With this static pattern, brightness, contrast, and alignment could be adjusted for optimum reception. It was very important to position the aerial correctly. Most installations used an external aerial, and the familiar 'X' or 'H' shaped devices were attached to chimney stacks or the highest part of the roof for the best reception.

The Radio Times was a tabloid that listed all the radio and, eventually, television programmes. This was a *de rigueur* publication to buy every week not only for the programme listings, but also for reading the articles and editorials that were intellectual in nature. The BBC concentrated greatly on cultural and political matters that were quintessentially English. For example, following the *Epilogue*, which was the last pro-

gramme of the day, the National Anthem was played accompanied with film images of Queen Elizabeth II.

Our first TV, bought in 1956, was a Ferguson tabletop model with a 12-inch black and white screen. Because we were located on the top floor and within the line of sight of the BBC's Alexandra Palace transmission tower, we were able to receive good reception using an indoor aerial. This was a vertical rod placed in the corner of the living room window frame. At that time certain programmes became fixtures, ranging from highbrow debates on *The Brains Trust* to popular documentaries such as *Panorama* and *In Town Tonight*. Some of the more lighthearted programmes were US imports: two being *Amos 'n' Andy* and *I Love Lucy*. News coverage had a heavy agenda at six o'clock and ten o'clock, and popular culture was catered for with the moralistic stories of *Dixon of Dock Green*. For the sports minded audience, Saturday afternoon had *Grandstand* and *Match of the Day* dealing with horse racing, motor racing and professional football (soccer) or cricket matches. Children, too, had *Watch with Mother*, the first weekday programme broadcasted as soon as the station went on the air.

However, until the TV programmes improved and the number of channels increased (as with the introduction of ITV and BBC 2), radio entertainment still predominated. Sunday morning was always a good time to listen, as this was when many of the household chores were done and the radio provided a source of enjoyment. Typical programmes were the long-running *Billy Cotton Band Show* and *Family Favourites.* Humorous vignettes were *The Goon Show*, *Ray's a Laugh*, and *Beyond our Ken*, and interesting interviews could be heard in *Desert Island Discs*. Sunday evenings, too, were filled with quality musical programmes such as *Sing Something Simple*, *The Black and White Minstrel Show* and *Palm Court Orchestra*.

Tackling the Sunday household chores themselves was a collaborative effort. Mum primarily worked on light duty sweeping and dusting—eventually using an *Electrolux* cylinder type vacuum cleaner—and Dad was more into the floor scrubbing and dirtier jobs such as grate cleaning and window washing. From an early age I was expected to pitch in, and the one permanent chore was to polish all the family's shoes. This was done with me perched on the lavatory seat and working with the various brushes and polishes. Somehow, highly polished shoes was almost a mania, the same as a general smart appearance in clothing, including well creased trousers (pants). Much of this practice was the result of Dad's army regimentation, but also personal pride had much to do with it, and that was instilled by my mother. At home there was a certain amount of scruffiness, but whenever visiting or receiving visitors, neatness was expected; including short and well-combed hair.

Childhood in the early 1950s

Outside the home, the community in the early 1950s was recovering well from the post war depression. For example, fewer items were on ration, and despite the presence of bomb sites there was activity by Islington Borough Council in clearing wasteland and erecting small blocks of council flats, such as the one in Liverpool Road on the northwest side of the railway bridge. Later in the decade there would be further improvements, and the 'affluent society' started to take hold—noticeably as more people bought 'luxury' goods such as motor cars.

Bomb sites, however, were evocative playgrounds for young, adventurous and energetic boys. Two of the most extensive and accessible in the neighbourhood of the community were at Highbury Corner and opposite the Chapel of Ease (St. Mary Magdalene Church). These wastelands became instant battlefields for the ragtag groups of lads wanting to let off steam. Usually a group subdivided itself into two teams, and then it was left to the imagination. A common practice was to build 'forts' out of the rubble strewn around, and soon makeshift walls sprouted up to act as defences against the attacking side. Popular armaments at the time were cap pistols and pea shooters, but sometimes things became more interesting and dangerous with the introduction of bows and arrows, and catapults (slingshots). The detonations of cap guns and exclamations, "Bang! Bang! You're dead!", were heard during the course of the battle, which often ended in one team chasing the other from the bomb site.

When Highbury Corner was devastated by the V1 flying bomb explosion on Tuesday, 27th June, 1944, (see Appendix 3, *The Second World War*) at least three separate bomb sites were created. The point of impact of the flying bomb was at the end of the Compton Terrace gardens, with the resulting destruction/partial demolition of several of the Compton Terrace houses; part of the line of shops on the north side of St. Paul's Road; *The Cock Tavern* and arcade of shops in front of the Highbury & Islington railway station building, and several shops on Upper Street between Highbury Station Road and Hampton Court. Until the redevelopment of Highbury Corner into a roundabout (traffic circle) or gyratory system in 1958, two of the bomb sites—Upper Street and Compton Terrace—were open to all comers, even though there were warning signs of NO TRESPASSING displayed in many locations. These signs gave rise to the local monicker identifying the sites by the neighbourhood kids as *Trespassers*.

Trespassers was often the place where ball games were played. Spontaneous or 'pick-up' cricket was popular among the neighbourhood boys, and a scratch team of urchins could be seen with improvised wickets of odd bits of wood, a well-worn cricket bat, and more often than not a tennis ball that had seen better days. I distinctly remember one hot summer day playing cricket and positioned as the wicket keeper. My neighbour's son, Billy Bowler, was batting and took an almighty backward swing at the ball. Unfortunately I was too close to him, and the bat struck me just above the left eye. The force was sufficient to split open the skin and almost knock me unconscious. The pain and large amount of spilled blood made me howl continuously until such time as somebody alerted my parents. Dad arrived on the scene, picked me up and carried me home still bawling loudly. After some basic first aid with lots of *Dettol* and an *Elastoplast* patch, Dad decided to take me to the hospital for further treatment: the nearest being the Royal Northern Hospital in Holloway Road. After being admitted, I was seen by an emergency doctor who proceeded to close the wound with four stitches. Curiously enough I bore this action without flinching even though no anæsthetic was administered, and this made Dad immensely proud. I still sport the stitches to this day as they are not of the dissolving type.

The Liverpool Road bomb site opposite the Chapel of Ease was much bigger than *Trespassers*. This was where the St. Mary Magdalene C.E. Parochial Primary School, built in 1842, and surrounding streets were badly damaged in air raids during the Second World War. The entire area had been cleared and was awaiting redevelopment by Islington Borough Council, but in the meantime provided a ready made adventure playground for neighbourhood children.

'Dalston Waste' Street Market, Kingsland Road, Dalston, 1950s

Bomb Site Children Playing Cricket

Liverpool Road, Islington. Bomb Site Opposite St. Mary Magdalene Chapel of Ease Churchyard, 1949

In those days, children were given a greater latitude of freedom. Playing in the streets was an accepted activity; there being little traffic to be of any concern. It was commonplace for children of five years or younger to roam around the neighbourhood, often accompanied by older siblings. Usually their parents knew roughly of their whereabouts, but Mum was insistent on knowing my precise location. "You can go out and play," she said, "as long as I know where you are." So from an early age I was allowed my freedom and this later developed into a *wanderlust* as I walked around all parts of London merely for the enjoyment of exploration.

An early type of mobility provided enormous enjoyment and a means of extending my explorations. My parents bought me a pair of roller skates—the deluxe model with rubber tyres (tires) instead of the plain ball bearing wheels. The fully adjustable design required no special footwear. Roller skating was a popular recreation, and also provided an outlet to expend surplus pent up energy. I often ranged far afield on them, and I've been known to venture for miles beyond my home neighbourhood.

A particular journey that stands out is one to Waterlow Park. The park is named after Alderman (later Sir) Sydney Waterlow, a philanthropist, and is located off Highgate Hill just south of Highgate Village. Skating that distance was no mean feat in itself; although the stretch along Holloway Road to Nag's Head was the easy part. From Tufnell Park Road onwards the road inclined through Upper Holloway. Highgate Hill started at the Archway Junction, and the slope angle increased considerably just past the Whittington Hospital to St. Joseph's retreat and Highgate Village beyond. Part way up the hill I noticed a side street that provided a steep incline of its own. The daredevil in me decided to brave the consequences and freewheel down the slope. So I adopted a crouched position and sped down the pavement (sidewalk) to finish intact at the end of the road without having to take evasive action (considering that I didn't have any means of braking). Following that adventure I finally made it to the gates of Waterlow Park. After skating over irregular paving stones, the smooth asphalt paths in the park were a joy to travel on. However, dodging around pedestrians on a winding and sloping path was tricky, and one particular stretch proved too much. The only way to brake was to leave the asphalt and head for the pristine lawn alongside. The braking action worked, but to the detriment of the manicured grass, and four long, deep ruts indicated my trajectory. This was no time to hang around in case a 'Parkie' was nearby, so I beat a hasty retreat out of the park and made my way home.

A different way of moving around on wheels was using a trolley (soapbox). Trolleys were coveted and very personal vehicles, and each one was unique. Dad made my trolley out of all kinds of scrap material. Essentially, the trolley had a wooden frame chassis; usually a long, reinforced spine and wooden extensions to accept the lateral rear wheel axle. Although not obligatory, a wooden crate—open at the front end—was attached to the spine at the back of the chassis and over the rear axle. A wooden beam at the front carried the front axle, and pivoted in the centre for steering. A large bolt with washers and nuts retained the beam to the chassis spine and allowed the swivelling action. Pram wheels of various sizes—usually two large at the back and two small at the front—were attached to the front and rear axles. Sometimes large ball bearings were used as the wheels. Braking was done two ways. Basic models relied on the operator to drag his heels on the ground, but this method drastically reduced the life of plimsolls (running shoes). Friction brakes on better trolleys consisted of a wooden lever that pivoted on the chassis, and either engaged the ground or the rear wheel tyre. Last, but not least, was the decoration and this is what made each trolley a one-of-a-kind vehicle.

The usual item was the common bottle top: the colourful metal crown that could be hammered directly into the wood of the chassis or retained by a small nail driven through its centre. Patterns of all kinds of shapes and colour combination adorned the chassis and other appropriate parts, and were a measure of pride as well as a unique identity.

Trolleys were towed to the play area by a length of string attached to each end of the steering beam. My favourite run was the wide expanse of asphalt pavement on the Highbury Fields side of Highbury Crescent. This was on a slight incline so lent itself to freewheeling for a relatively long distance. Dad would tow the trolley to the top of the incline near Fieldway Crescent. He then held on to the trolley, and I would sit on a cushion added to the back of the chassis, placing my feet on the steering beam on both sides of the swivel bolt. I then grabbed hold of the towing line to help with the steering action, and waited for Dad to release the trolley so I could coast downhill and steer with relative ease.

During my childhood I remember that summer was summer and winter was winter. Snow was welcomed by children, even though their parents continued to grumble. I suppose looking through a child's eyes, the 'white stuff' was magical and an open door to a different kind of fun. Inevitably after the snowfall, it was up to the flat roof to frolic around and build that all important snowman. Standard, traditional design, of course. His accessories were whatever was handy—lumps of coal for eyes, nose, smile and buttons, a scarf around his neck and a tea cosy on his head. Dad even relinquished his pipe for 'Mr. Frosty' to suck on (I always remember that pipe; it was Dad's favourite—a Captain Black briar). Later, I earned a few bob (shillings) from the neighbours digging out the paths to their entrances. Could only use a small coal shovel, though, but it worked.

Ah, but the best time of all was tobogganing down Parliament Hill on Hampstead Heath. Dad and I would ride on a No. 611 trolleybus to Highgate Village or, alternatively, take the train to Hampstead Heath station (see Chapter 1, *A memorable childhood disappointment*). I pulled my trusty toboggan behind me in anticipation of the thrill of the descent.

Dad had made a couple of sledges (sleds) for me. The first was all-wood in construction and painted silver. However, the next generation was awesome. Dad was labouring in a better construction job—this time steelfixing. So he could find a few bits of discarded rebar and have a welder mate create the toboggan's main frame and runners, and this made all the difference between the two models. A wooden platform was added to the formidable runners, and a substantial towrope attached to the front of the frame. The toboggan was then painted fire engine red (the same colour used for painting the scullery floor—a yearly ritual). It was a like a Rolls-Royce!

One day, when I was hurtling down the slope of Parliament Hill at breakneck speed (or so it appeared), a small boy on a wooden sledge crossed into my path. We collided, and one of those formidable steel runners literally scythed through the flimsy wood, smashing it to smithereens, and catapulting both of us into the snow. Surveying the damage, not only was the wooden sledge wrecked, but the force of the impact was sufficient to break one of the steel runner's welds. The other kid was howling his head off and I was thoroughly brassed off, so I left him to his fate and dejectedly returned home with my wounded toboggan.

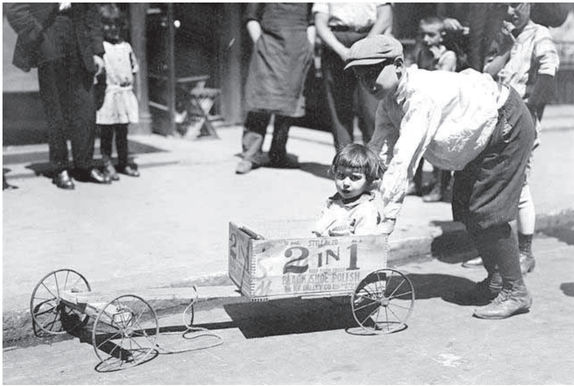
Playing outdoors also promoted mixing with other neighbourhood kids of a similar age, whether or not they were from the same block of flats. Relationships developed by way of mutual interest—for example, supporting a particular professional soccer team, or typical childhood pastimes such as playing marbles or collecting postage stamps or cigarette picture cards. There was little change in tenancies, so we all grew up together over several years, and often forged strong friendships well into teenage and adolescence. We attended the same school, so contact was maintained even when not playing together at home. Some of my earliest playmates were: John Godfrey (R.I.P., 2014), Albert Smith, Terrence (Terry) Eyles and Terrence (Terry) Corcoran. Older boys that I associated with were: William (Billy) Bowler, John (Johnny) Lock and Patrick (Pat) Hawkins. There was a sprinkling of girls, too, such as Jeanette Eyles, the Matton sisters—Brenda, Sylvia and Clarissa, and Christine Spencer. Children from Lewis Buildings sometimes ventured into Liverpool Buildings territory and vice versa. Two lads from Lewis Buildings that I frequented with were Peter Shepherd and Christopher (Chris) Webb.

Through my eyes, life in the early 1950s seemed somehow static; almost as if time had stood still. Very little appeared to change visually. People dressed the same, day in and day out. Even the weather was seasonable and largely predictable. Looking down Highbury Station Road from the flats one could see the short terrace of 'two up and two down' cottages leading to the central yard opening of Laycock Mansions. Then the caretaker's cottage and playground wall of Laycock Senior Boys School up to the collection of small industries that lined both sides of Swan Yard. At the bend in the road was an off-licence on the corner and a peas pudding & faggot outlet next door. On the opposite side of the road—with the exception of the railway workers' cottages—was the unbroken length of the brick wall that bordered the railway property.

The road, itself, was a microcosm. On a typical foggy night, the gas lights and damp pavements created a mysteriously haunting environment; made even moreso by the occasional melancholic hooting of tugs on the River Thames. The muffled traffic noise and periodic passing of trains added to the surrealism of the scene, amplified by the omnipresent smell of the swirling fog.

Sunday morning's tranquillity would be interrupted by the strident blare of bugles, as a procession of the Boys Brigade marched down Liverpool Road to the Chapel of Ease for church parade. Soon after, the neighbourhood was visited by the rag-and-bone man, announcing himself with his unique street cry, "Any old rags or lumbah!" The dishevelled individual, smoking a cigarette, usually dressed in an unkempt raincoat and wearing a dirty flat cap, pushed a costermonger's barrow—the metal rim of one wheel grating along the cobbles in the gutter—and progressed slowly down the road. Occasionally he would look up at the flats in case anyone threw him an object that could be recycled. Around noon and sometimes in the afternoon you could hear the unmistakable sound of the ice cream man on his tricycle and tinkling bell. This would change a few years later when the *Tonibell* van's distinctive musical jingle attracted hordes of children eager to buy ice creams and ice lollies. On weekend evenings the tenants were serenaded by a choir and small brass band of the local Salvation Army Corps hoping to drum up funds for their cause.

The community was a vibrant neighbourhood, and the streets and estates echoed with children's laughter and boisterous shouting as they took part in many of the street games such as hopscotch, tin-tan-tommy and knock-down-ginger. Impromptu soccer games with piles of sweaters acting as goal posts sprang up on the



Typical Trolley or Soapbox

Typical Rag-and-Bone Man

Walls Ice Cream Man with Tricycle

Tonibell Ice Cream Van

No. 35 Tram at Highbury Corner, 1950

No. 33 Trams at the Kingsway Tunnel, 1950s

spur of the moment, and skipping, whirling around the lamp post on a length of rope, and chase games of tag were common activities.

Circuses intrigued me, and the Harringay Arena, Tottenham, was well known as a venue for circuses. It was home to Tom Arnold's annual Harringay Circus for ten seasons from Christmas 1947 to Christmas 1957. Other events, however, included a handful of western cowboy shows in the 1950s, including the 1952 *Texas Western Spectacle*, starring the famous cowboy singer/actor Tex Ritter, and I specifically remember Mum taking me to this show. One of the outstanding acts was the re-enactment of an Indian attack on a wagon train. The wagon train would be formed into a defensive circle and all kinds of gunfire took place during the mock attack. Expert horsemanship and stunt work made the act even more convincing and life-like. Supporting sideshows such as acrobatics, sharpshooting, trained animal routines, and the inevitable clown antics created indelible images that remain in my mind today.

Leading up to school

Playing in the streets and parks was to become curtailed as my compulsory school years were soon to start. Before schooling, everyday knowledge was learned by parental instruction, some rudimentary reading and sometimes by imitation. Mum, Dad and family elders would often take me aside to teach good manners. As Mum would say—occasionally with a stern voice—"He has to learn!" This was especially true when knowing right from wrong in speech. Although both parents swore and blasphemed, I was strictly admonished against repeating 'bad' words, many of which were picked up in street conversations with other children. Once, I innocently uttered an offensive phrase in front of my grandparents, who naturally were horrified and quickly scolded me for saying a 'bad' word. Their chiding had its effect, and I was careful in the future. Other reprimands for such things as disobedience, lying, tantrums and procrastination were dealt with more severely; often accompanied with a spanking. At the time, corporal punishment in the home was not frowned upon, and cases of child abuse abounded.

In the meantime, the halcyon days of freedom and parent bonding continued. Trips to the West End or a leisurely stroll along the Victoria Embankment entailed a memorable ride on either a No. 33 or No. 35 tram from Highbury Corner. The tram had its own sound and smell, and the highlight of the ride was when the tram descended from street level into the Kingsway Tunnel, stop at the underground stations, and emerge at the northern portal of Waterloo Bridge. Attractions at the Embankment were Cleopatra's Needle, the research vessel *HMS Discovery*, and the dramatic bronze statue of Queen Boadicea (Boudicca).

The time came for school enrolment. The L.C.C. Laycock Primary and Junior Mixed School in Laycock Street was the nearest elementary school. It was here that I entered the Infants class and was introduced to the trials and tribulations of the State education system as described in Chapter 3, *I enter primary school* and Chapter 4, *Junior school days*.