

Chapter 3

I enter primary school

Although September, 1950, was two months before my fifth birthday, I was enrolled in the Infants section of the Laycock Primary and Junior Mixed School. Essentially a kindergarten environment, the Infants experience proved to be a useful introduction into the State education system. And I was ready for it. For reasons unknown, I was enthusiastic to participate in the activities, and paid no attention to the fact that I was separated from my mother for several hours during the day.

Laycock Primary and Junior Mixed School was located in Laycock Street—originally a cattle path bisected Richard Laycock’s dairy farm (see Appendix 2, *The old neighbourhood*). With the downturn in dairy farming the land was gradually developed for building lots, and by 1908 a number of factories were built on part of Laycock’s farmyard. More land along Laycock Street was sold and occupied by the London board school (1915), followed by the Islington Borough Council’s blocks of flats called Laycock Mansions (1926). Other light industries followed with such companies as Tidmarsh & Sons and Builders Industries Zinc (BIZ). The Samuel Lewis Trust Buildings, constructed by 1910, bounded on the southwest end of the street.

As the closest school of its kind to where I lived, it was no bother for Mum and I to walk through the ‘bottom avenue’ of the flats to Laycock Street and further down the road to the school building. A typical scene would be a collection of mothers congregating at the entrance gate, either shepherding their children inside the grounds, or welcoming them as they were released from the classrooms. Invariably, the noise would be significant with excited children still full of boundless energy clamouring for attention, and mothers of all stripes gossiping amongst themselves and trying to round up their charges. Then it was the return walk home and the inevitable questions along the lines of, “What did you do t’day, Dearie?”

Curiously enough I can recall the first day at Infants fairly clearly, although the remainder of the school years up until I entered Class 1 of the Junior Mixed grade remains hazy. The Infants was a good way for the young children to meet each other and share in mutual activities. Being coeducational, it was also beneficial for both sexes to mingle and feel comfortable in a classroom environment. I really don’t recall any bad incidents of bullying or ‘kicking over the traces’, and we seemed to mix very well. It helped, of course, that several familiar faces were also there, as other neighbourhood children of a similar age that I recognised were part of the group. I don’t recall the names of the Infants teachers, but they certainly had a great deal of patience and were able to provide rambunctious children with all kinds of things to do. These ranged from straight playtime to an introduction of the standard three ‘R’s – reading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic. Learning the alphabet with large cutout letters comes to mind.

The three storey school building was a solid structure built to London board school standard plans. The Infants section occupied the ground floor along with the staff common room and kitchen. There was also an inside gymnasium-cum-assembly room on all floors in the centre of the H-shaped building. The entire infra-

structure was presided over by the no-nonsense Headmaster, Mr. Thomas H. Cox, a Somerset man with a wealth of experience both in the military and in education. It was later in the Juniors when I learned first hand of ‘Coxy’s’ stern authoritarian influence on the school’s administration, and in the days of approved corporal punishment his word was law both to the children and the teachers. We quickly understood the meaning of obedience, and any deviations were dealt with appropriate punishment.

Soon the first full year at school would slide by, and the gradual introduction to subjects such as the alphabet and basic mathematics provided a solid foundation to the more advanced practice sessions that included reading and penmanship using methods unchanged for decades. In the days before computers, learning by rote was the tried and true way. And nobody thought any different. Consequently, when changing status from Infants to Juniors, much was dependent on memorising rules and principles—chief among them being the multiplication tables (times tables), a set of printed cards listing the combination of figures in terms of their interrelationships when being multiplied: e.g., seven multiplied by eight equals fifty-six.

Other memorable events

Before schooldays, I wasn’t lacking visits to historical and cultural parts of London. Mum and Dad made sure that we enjoyed trips to the Tower of London with its prime attraction of the Crown Jewels, Buckingham Palace to see the Changing of the Guard, the Houses of Parliament and Westminster Abbey. In 1951, I can also recall the Festival of Britain—a national showcase. This exhibition, located on the South Bank of the River Thames, was an attempt to advertise the country’s resurgence from the post war depression. A number of structures dominated the area. These included the Dome of Discovery, the Skylon, and the Royal Festival Hall. The Skylon was the exposition’s signature—a huge vertical column, needle-pointed at both ends, and seen from a distance, apparently freestanding: something that amazed me as I couldn’t comprehend the almost invisible guy wires that supported it. The Dome of Discovery expounded England’s scientific and engineering achievements, and the Royal Festival Hall was a state-of-the-art auditorium for displays of art and entertainment. The exhibition was a huge success, and did much to boost public morale.

Living opposite a busy railway meant that trains were part of my life, as I watched the daily activities from the front room window. This fascination was played out indoors with a model train set; a simple, clockwork train with a couple of carriages (cars) running on a basic figure eight track. ‘Tunnels’—always an infatuation—were made from folded newspapers. But the greatest appeal was when Mum took me to the basement of Gamage’s department store in Holborn to see the massive electric train layout. An incredible display of multiple tracks, rolling stock of all descriptions, and stupendous scenery. A vivid memory.

I had very basic reading abilities, but was drawn to pictorial magazines and relished in the cover illustrations of adventure publications such as *Wide World* that Uncle Keith bought. From 1948, both he and Aunt Win now lived in Potters Bar, Hertfordshire. Mum and I made occasional visits (Underground train from Highbury & Islington to Cockfosters, and bus to South Mymms) and I played with cousin Linda and her new sister, Avril Aileen, born on April 28th, 1948, and brother, Ian Keith, born on July 25th 1949. The girls came to London to see their grandparents, and sometimes we went to the inner park lakes to feed the ducks.



Laycock Primary School, Laycock Street



Laycock Mansions, Laycock Street



Laycock Street outside Laycock Primary School



Tidmarsh & Sons Factory, Laycock Street



Laycock Street with View to Liverpool Road, 1956



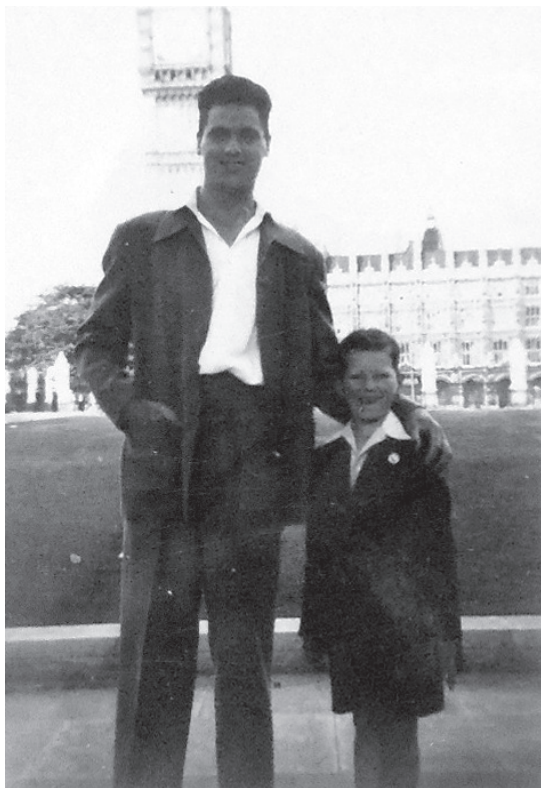
Laycock Street with View to Upper Street, 1956



Barry, Cannons and Tower Bridge, 1952



Barry, Tower Bridge Abutment Wall, 1952



Dad and Barry, Parliament Square, 1952



Linda, Barry and Avril, St. James's Park, 1952