

Chapter 4

Junior school days

From what I recall there was little fanfare when graduating from the Infants, a time period of two years, to Junior school. Known as a Junior Mixed (J.M.) school because of its coeducational environment, Laycock had a high ranking in the standards of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), the official governing body.

As the Junior school years advanced, children were gradually introduced to new subjects, and the standard three 'R's became more progressive. When learning writing skills, emphasis was put on penmanship. Once the alphabet was mastered, handwriting exercises using pencils with rubbers (erasers) and the straight-nib pen and ink became standard curriculum practice. The ink itself was supplied in powder form and stored for safe keeping in a locked cupboard. It was the class monitor's job to add water to a measure of powder in a glass bottle. The resultant dark blue liquid ink was then distributed to the ceramic ink wells in every desk. This was considered an important job and the class monitor was usually a pupil (student) held in high esteem. Straight-nib pens were essentially wooden holders with an adaptor that accepted the separate metal nib for dipping in the ink. There was a standard handwriting style to copy in the lined exercise books, and repeating 'lines' was an efficient way to remember and improve handwriting. When writing, we quickly learned not to press too hard and 'cross' the nib point. During times of boredom, one mischievous practice was to fold a small piece of paper to use as a projectile, dip it into the ink and catapult it using a rubber band held between the thumb and forefinger. This often led to disastrous consequences when such projectiles hit a pupil's clothing—the ink being indelible. Such a fate happened to me when wearing a brand new suedette jacket, and my mother was not very pleased at all.

Pencils, of course, were popular, and using a pencil sharpener—either the small device held between thumb and forefinger, or the desk mounted machine with a handle—meant no messy ink and greater flexibility. Another dimension was that pencils came with different coloured leads. A collection of pencils, together with a small six-inch wooden ruler, a set of compasses for drawing circles, a pencil sharpener, and a separate rubber were the usual contents of the pencil case—a wooden box with an upper and lower compartment. The upper compartment was secured by a sliding lid with a semicircular shape at one end that engaged into a mating groove. After sliding out so far, the upper compartment could be swivelled on a screw, set in the opposite end of the tray, to reveal the bottom compartment.

My academic prowess in Junior school wasn't exactly stellar. In fact the opposite as it was plain to see from my course marks and consequent class position. A staff of strict teachers didn't help either, and the likes of Messrs. Green, Bell and Pulman, plus the brooding Miss Simpson and tyrannical Headmaster Cox made for some uncomfortable hours in the classroom. As mentioned previously, corporal punishment was considered a fact of life, as will be described later. However, there were also lighthearted moments when the normally stern teachers would soften their attitudes.

School reports (report cards) revealed much of my education standard in the following statutory subjects: English (reading, spelling, grammar, composition); Arithmetic; History; Geography; Science (hygiene, nature study); Art; Writing; Handwork, and Religious Knowledge.

It was obvious that improvements were necessary as mentioned in the end of term report in 1954 by Miss M.A. Simpson of Class 5—*Barry is a very capable boy, but is spoiling his chances by laziness*—as was emphasised by my position in the class as No. 36 out of 40. The next existing end of term report was for 1956 and although some progress had been made as now I was a pupil in Class 1—the highest in the Junior school—the teacher, Miss J.M.M. Scott, noted the following—*Barry must work harder. He is improving but much depends on the next term's work*. Positioning was marginally better at No. 31 out of 40. The last year, however, took a dive and the end of term report for 1957 included a scathing notation by Mr. R. Pulman of Class 1—*Shows little interest in anything except art. He has no self-discipline and unless he acquires it he will not do well in future*. My position had slipped to No. 33 out of 39. And this state of affairs was leading up to the all important 'Eleven-plus' examination, which determined the type of secondary school all pupils would attend; whether Grammar, Central or Secondary Modern.

Events at junior school

Junior school was a time when learning could be either fun or boring. It was also a time when individual personalities matured and many of the daily experiences were, indeed, results of the 'school of hard knocks.' Despite their domineering attitude, to the teachers' credit they had to deal with children mainly from working class families. There were children from broken homes; others that knew no discipline, and some that tried to bend every rule. Offences were chastised in order of seriousness, and insubordination was meted out harshly both as a punishment and as a deterrent. Minor misdemeanours meant writing 'lines' or detention (staying behind after regular school hours, often standing and facing a corner of the assembly hall for a determined period of time). For grave offences the regular punishment was being 'caned' usually by the Headmaster; although senior masters could also inflict the penalty. The instrument used was a length of rattan cane and the punishment was a number of striking blows either to the open hand or the buttocks. Depending on the severity of the offence, four or six blows ('four-' or 'six of the best') were administered. Apart from the physical 'smarting' pain, the trepidation of confronting the Headmaster plus the element of shame once the news spread through the school had significant psychological effects.

I vaguely remember incidents of minor punishments such as writing 'lines' or the occasional detention. However, the one and only 'caning' that I received from Headmaster Cox remains a vivid memory. The event started innocently enough, but the consequences were dire. I was probably eight years old, and it was at the time when we were being taught English by Miss Simpson, a frumpish, middle-aged teacher. I sat next to another boy, Jimmy Rooke, and he goaded me to write in my text book the following phrase: MISS SIMPSON IS AN OLD SOW. Not wanting to bow out of this challenge, I promptly scribbled the defamatory remark in large letters on the page we were working from. It so happened that I was called up to the front of the class together with the text book. Miss Simpson took it upon herself to flip through the text book and, of course, came across the offending scribble. I think she was mortified when discovering this heinous insult, and I was drained of all strength as total embarrassment enveloped me. She demanded if I was guilty



Barry at 5-1/2, 1951



Barry at 6-1/2, 1952



Barry at 7-1/2, 1953



Barry at 8-1/2, 1954



Barry at 9-1/2, 1955



Barry at 10-1/2, 1956

Laycock Primary School (Infants and Junior Mixed) Photographs – 1951 to 1956



*Laycock Primary School Staff Group Photograph, 1950s
 Back Row: Rita Gilmore, Unknown, Mr. Green, Mr. Bell.*

Front Row: Miss Harlow, Miss Ward, Mr. T.H. Cox (Headmaster), Miss Gyselman, Miss Francis.

Academic History of Subjects and their Grades				
School	Subject	Jul. 1954	Jul. 1956	Jul. 1957
Laycock JM				
	Reading	44%	82%	60%
	Spelling	42%	47%	36%
	Grammar	80%	76%	58%
	Composition	56%	64%	48%
	Arithmetic	22%	63%	11%
	History	Very Good		
	Geography	Very Good		62%
	Science	Very Good		
	Art	Very Good		60%
	Writing	80%	65%	Good
	Handwork	Very Good		Poor
	Summary	Above 50%	12	
		Below 50%	7	
			19	

Summary of Laycock J.M. Academic Grades

in writing the phrase, and I couldn't deny it. So, I was marched down to the Headmaster's office with the incriminating evidence. The shock of discovery and the fear of impending punishment—which was obviously going to be a caning—did nothing to alleviate the situation.

Mr. Cox was nonplussed despite my blubbering explanation that I was egged on by Jimmy Rooke. There was no choice but to administer the appropriate punishment and that was 'four of the best' on the open hand. Caning was something I think that 'Coxy' relished. He was well experienced, and his temperament made sure that the strokes were inflicted with maximum force. After this punishment I was sent back to the classroom and endured further humiliation as my classmates saw me enter the room with a reddened face that was streaked with tears. I don't recall if Jimmy Rooke was ever implicated as an associate to the incident, but the buzz certainly travelled quickly and was heard by one of my friends, Norman Ridges.

I was now at an age that after school it was expected that I should meet my mother at the bus stop in Upper Street as she returned from her part-time job. This day was no exception, and Norman and I walked to the bus stop. I guess he accompanied me because I was still feeling low, and it was on his route to where he lived in Holloway Road. Mum arrived as usual, and as we started on our way home Norman said impulsively that I had been caned at school. Mother was flabbergasted at this news, and it didn't bode well for me either. So I was marched off home to be given a real dressing down by my parents. Norman probably didn't realise the impact of his remarks, but at least it didn't spoil our friendship.

I was involved in another incident that involved punishment—this time with far more reaching implications. From time to time, a small group of pupils would perform a short play or a series of vignettes in front of the assembled school. One of the chosen plays was called *The Scarecrow*, and I acted in a minor role. The production involved not just the child actors, but also set decorators and builders and offstage assistants. On the day of the production, the set was built and some of it consisted of wooden balance beams and at least two revolving blackboards. Costumes were made up of various items, and since my role was that of a schoolboy, my clothes were readily available and consisted of a jacket, short trousers, scarf, cap and Wellington boots. The setting of the play took place during winter, so to add some 'snow' authenticity I decided to wipe my cap across the chalked writing on one of the revolving blackboards. The play went on and shortly after making my entrance I spoke my one and only line, "Do you sleep under hedges and hayricks?" By and large the play was well received. However, at the following morning's assembly, Headmaster Cox stood glowering over the ranks of pupils and demanded to know who had erased the writing on the blackboard. Apparently this was very important information. With the caning incident still etched in my mind, I wasn't prepared for a repeat experience, so I kept quiet. The upshot was that the entire school was kept behind in detention for one hour after classes. A small price to pay, and nobody ever discovered the culprit.

Junior school provided opportunities beyond the regular curriculum. Various sports were encouraged and mainly confined to the school gymnasium and playground (schoolyard). Boys were put through their paces in gymnastics by using balance beams and the wooden horse and springboard. Stretches, press-ups and other aerobic routines also formed part of the physical exercises performed in the gym. I think indoor team sports such as handball (netball for girls) took place, as the gym's wooden floor was marked out with the appropriate lines applicable to the sport. During the warmer months, cricket was played, and special spring-loaded

stumps were placed on the asphalt playground. Football (soccer) was also well participated in, and we used to go to the Highbury Fields cinder pitches to play.

One of my favourite physical pastimes was swimming. This activity, too, was encouraged by the education authorities, and the Laycock pupils used the swimming baths located near Tibberton Square in Greenman Street just off Essex Road. Tibberton Square gave the baths its nickname: ‘Tibby Baths’ or just plainly ‘The Tib.’ The building also contained public baths and a public washhouse (laundry). On swimming days it was usual to see ‘crocodiles’ of schoolchildren—each clutching a rolled up towel containing their swimming costume, and chaperoned by several teachers—making their way from the school to the swimming baths. For us it was a relatively long walk from Laycock Street to Upper Street, Canonbury Lane, Canonbury Road, Essex Road and Greenman Street. Opposite the baths was the Peabody Trust estate of working class tenement flats. At the bottom of one of the blocks was Ada’s sweet shop where, after the swimming period, excited boys and girls eagerly queued up at the shop’s open window to buy a selection of confectionery. The favourite of all was Ada’s homemade treacle toffee. For a threepenny bit (3d), you could buy a small bagful of this super-sweet toffee—a sort of brickle—that took for ever to dissolve in one’s mouth.

I was no stranger to swimming, as my mother considered it very important to know how to swim. Even before I went to school, Mum would teach me the basic strokes. Her method was to place a kitchen chair in the middle of the living room and then put a cushion on the seat. I then laid on my tummy and practiced the stroke action as if I were actually in the water. However, I only mastered the breast and side strokes, as I found it difficult (and tiring) to co-ordinate the different arm and foot actions of the crawl.

Together with gymnastics and swimming, additional physical exercise was encouraged in the form of country dancing lessons. Boys and girls—as couples—were taught the steps and sequences of native English dances with their formation of changing patterns. The teacher also had to be talented, as the school piano was the only source of music for the dancers.

Health and hygiene were taken seriously at both the Infants and Junior schools. Periodically the school nurse, nicknamed “Nitty Nora”, would visit and check the children’s general health, including recording their height and weighing them. She would also dip a metal comb in a disinfectant liquid and proceed to run the comb through the children’s hair searching for head lice. A daily routine was the distribution of milk in 1/3 pint bottles to all pupils. The bottles were sealed with silver aluminium (aluminum) caps, and a game we played with the caps was called ‘helicopters.’ By holding the rim of the cap with the forefinger and middle finger, a flip action caused the cap to spin and fly away for some distance; often hovering for a second or two. Various modifications were made to try and increase the distance. For example, the cap surfaces were smoothed and the rim enlarged to provide an improved launching action. Impromptu competitions sprung up, and children brought other caps (gold or silver with red stripes) from home.

The part of the property not occupied by the school building was allocated for two playgrounds and outbuildings. The two playgrounds were segregated, boys and girls, and divided by a brick wall. On both sides of the wall was a rain shelter. The main reason for the segregation was to separate the toilet facilities—the boys’ urinal being at one end of their playground. Girls’ lavatories were located in a shed-like outbuild-

ing in their playground. Despite regular cleaning, these facilities were often cold and odoriferous, so sneaking time off lessons for a ‘call of nature’ wasn’t necessarily worthwhile.

I recall one incident in the playground that provoked a near-riot. Every St. George’s Day (April 23rd), there was a wave of patriotic devotion at school. One way of observing the patriotism was to encourage all boy scouts, girl guides, wolf cubs, brownies, etc., to attend school wearing their full uniforms. Now, it occurred to some hotheads among the ruffians of the school’s boy population that it would be fun to attack the ranks of uniformed kids congregating in one part of the playground. In fact, a loose council of war and general haranguing took place in the rain shelter. Having been all fired up, with a whoop and a holler, a crowd of undisciplined boys, myself included, rushed down the playground and swarmed the unsuspecting uniformed kids, whipping off caps and any other vulnerable item. All of a sudden, ‘Coxy’s’ bellowing voice thundered out from an upstairs window—“STOP IT!!” We all looked up to see his beetroot red face glaring at us. The rabble froze, broke up and gradually slunk back under his scowling countenance. The near-riot dissipated immediately and order was restored.

At playtime (recess) and just before and after school hours, the playground was always a hive of activity. Children running, gambolling, skipping and friendly wrestling were ever present. When in season, spontaneous games of ‘conkers’ sprung up. The object of the exercise was for one contestant to suspend his conker, while the opponent stood to one side and strike his own conker in a downward movement to try and break the other one on impact. This action was done in turns until one of the conkers (or sometimes both) was completely broken. The victorious conker player had bragging rights; especially if the original conker was able to break several others as determined by the terminology: ‘one-er’, ‘two-er’, ‘three-er’, ‘four-er’, etc. There was a specific ritual preparing the horse chestnut seed (conker), and the only proper tool to use for making the hole in the conker was a meat skewer. Dad used to drill a hole to prevent the skin from cracking and becoming a weak spot. The means of suspending the conker varied. For example, it could be a length of hairy Post Office string knotted at one end. The preferred method, however, was using a knotted shoelace. Gathering conkers was also an essential part of the game, and knowing the location of trees that produced the biggest and best seeds was important. Nearby parks such as Highbury Fields were prime hunting grounds, and once all the fallen seeds had been harvested, those still on the trees were ‘encouraged’ to fall by throwing a sturdy piece of wood at the clusters of spiky, green seed covers. My favourite horse chestnut tree was in the front garden of a deserted house where Orlestone Road and Furlong Road met. The tree was also easy to climb, and became a familiar focal point when hiding during a game of cowboys and Indians or similar hide-and-seek escapades.

One particular incident that happened in the playground turned out to be an unfortunate one. The school day had ended, and the children were heading home through the gate next to the caretaker’s house. As I was walking across the playground, I noticed a boy, whom I recognised as Terry Corcoran, in a crouched position and tying up a shoelace. I made a spontaneous decision to run up behind him and leapfrog over his shoulders. The action seemed to be successful, although he did collapse under my weight due to the element of surprise. I looked back to see him writhing on the ground but took no notice, believing that he was just playacting. I continued walking home. It wasn’t until later that my parents were informed that I had accidentally fractured one of Terry’s legs.

Terry, who was a year older than me, also lived in Liverpool Buildings—the block that overlooked Liverpool Road. Mum and I went to visit the Corcorans to apologise for the injury, and knowing that Terry would be out of school for some weeks, I was told to bring along one of my *Eagle* Annuals so that Terry had something interesting—and of a schoolboy nature—to read. Time passed and I was expecting my book to be returned. However, Mum informed me that by leaving the book with Terry I had, in fact, given him a token of consolation and not to expect its return. This was devastating to me, as the *Eagle* Annual was a prized possession. But I learned a lesson in responsibility and humility from the fallout of this incident.

The *Eagle* was one of a number of schoolboy comic publications eagerly scooped up every week from the newsagent shop or newsstand. Before graduating to the *Eagle*, which was targeted at boys of nine years and up, I read more basic comics such as *Beano* and *Dandy*. I really enjoyed reading, and soon I was buying a succession of comics, including *Comet*; the short-lived *Rocket*; *Eagle*; *Hotspur*, and finishing up in my early teenage with *Express Weekly*. Each comic had a principal character, whose adventures were illustrated on the front and back pages in full colour. For example, *Eagle* had Dan Dare—Pilot of the Future, and *Express Weekly* had Wulf the Briton. The drawings were exceptionally well done and made the scenes almost three-dimensional. Inside there were other comic strips, pages of general knowledge and also correspondence. The middle of the *Eagle* was devoted to a double-page spread showing cutaway drawings of cars, aircraft, trains and other technical subjects—even a section view of the famous spiral tunnels constructed in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Following graduation to secondary school, I had outgrown schoolboy comics, and started to concentrate more on the classics and mature novels.

The final two years at junior school

Academically I still wasn't the brightest spark in the class. However, things had slightly improved and towards the final two years at Laycock Primary and Junior Mixed School, I climbed the scholastic ladder to Class 1—the highest in the Junior school—under the control of the redoubtable Miss J.M.M. Scott. Sitting next to me was a pretty dark haired girl, Susan Corfield, whom I met later in life.

The latter part of Junior school, particularly at ages ten and eleven, was when pupils were considered mature enough to be accompanied by teachers on trips that fulfilled historical, cultural and recreational interests. One favourite destination was the Geffrye Museum in Hoxton, East London. This museum preserved a series of English domestic interiors dating from 1600 in separate rooms; including fine examples of furniture created by the masters, Chippendale and Hepplewhite. We were shown many of the woodworking styles of the time, such as linenfold panelling, and changes made to interior design over a number of centuries. The museum itself was contained within the former almshouses of the Ironmongers Company, and had a wide, landscaped garden laid out between the building and the main Kingsland Road. There were many London plane trees in the garden, and the children ate their boxed lunches under the leafy canopies.

Recreational trips, or 'school journeys', were visits to seaside resorts usually of a one week duration. My parents considered the cost of these trips prohibitively expensive, so I never went on any to experience the advantages and pitfalls of such a holiday. The Isle of Wight was often visited by the school party, and separate dormitories were arranged for the boys and girls. Outdoor activity was promoted, and days on the beach

included games that encouraged camaraderie, and evening social interaction helped character development in a non-academic environment.

I was now at an age when the maturation process became evident, and typical of prepubescent boys I became aware of a natural attraction between the sexes. Up until then, little girls occupied a world of their own, complete with all the ‘girlie’ things that didn’t interest me. I was more inclined to pursue the rough-and-tumble activities associated with rowdy young boys such as tree climbing and the make-believe adventures of cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, and pirates of the Caribbean. Young girls with their dolls, skipping ropes and frilly dresses were often scorned by the neighbourhood boys. And yet, now there was a strange bonding and even a primitive recognition of *la différence*.

At age ten, a gradual sense of curiosity made me view girls in a new light. Perhaps, as the girls started to blossom, I began to understand the meaning of visual attraction. One or two girls in the class outshone the others simply by becoming ‘young ladies’; that is, by developing more quickly than their peers both in terms of appearance and intellect. They paid more attention to their looks, which fascinated me. One girl in particular became the object of affection, and it seemed that I was experiencing my first ‘crush.’ Lively, but with an air of mystery, Suzanne Lagoutte made my head turn every time she walked by. I was struck by her immaculate hair, which was long and silky, cascading straight down over her shoulders or sometimes sported as a well groomed pony tail. Her facial features were becoming more attractive and her mannerisms sophisticated. I discovered she lived in privileged surroundings—one of the middle class homes in Compton Terrace—and had a younger sister, Hélèn. It was clear to see, however, that there was no mutual attraction. This was disappointing and, indeed, lent itself to a feeling of rejection.

This depressing situation came to a head just before the Christmas holidays of 1956. The pupils were required to decorate the classroom for the Festive Season, and teams were organised to perform various tasks such as making paper chains. Together with classmates, Malcolm Morecroft and Norman Ridges, I was asked to hang decorations on the Christmas tree. I had noticed another boy in the class waving a small bunch of mistletoe around and making a bit of nuisance of himself. This lad was Ronnie Carty, who was an extrovert and self-proclaimed favourite of the girls. His aim, of course, was to snatch as many kisses as possible from the unsuspecting girls using the mistletoe as a ploy. He had cornered three of them, Iris Ballard, Linda Pinner and Suzanne Lagoutte, and enticed each of them under the mistletoe. While Iris and Linda reluctantly succumbed, I was horrified to notice Suzanne willingly embrace Ronnie and give him a significant peck on the cheek. She let him go and coquettishly tossed her head so her lovely pony tail flicked with the action. All of my jealous emotions came to the fore, and I was totally upset to the extent that I sulked for the rest of the day. My ‘crush’ soon dissipated after that, and I eventually found solace with another girl, Iris Severn, who lived in Upper Street virtually opposite Suzanne’s house.

1957 marked the final year at Junior school and it was time to face the ‘Eleven-plus’ examination. Depending on the final marks, candidates were judged to enter Secondary school—in order of descent: Grammar school, Central school, or Secondary Modern school. I knew from my course work and teachers’ remarks that any hope of entering Grammar school was out of the question. There was a fear of being relegated to the bottom, and that was to a Secondary Modern school, which was rough at best and totally

humiliating at worst. Central school, however, was a reasonable compromise, and in any case, that's where my pal Kenny Pratley, a year older than me and whom I thought was an intelligent boy, ended up. Somehow I scraped through with sufficient marks to win an opening at a Central school; the most logical one (and where Kenny attended) being Barnsbury Secondary School for Boys. In September of 1957, I started my secondary school education.

Other activities and an historic event

Weekends offered a welcome relief following a week of confinement at school. I was now trusted to go out on my own, although Mum insisting on knowing my precise location; "As long as I know where you are" being her catchphrase. This meant that I could go to the Saturday morning pictures—a weekly event, almost a ritual—much anticipated by boys and girls.

The films of the Saturday morning pictures (children's *matinée*) were a cheap form of visual entertainment aimed solely at young children. Cinemas opened their doors to a queue of semi-riotous kids anxious to pay their tanner (sixpence [6d]) admission and be shepherded into the seats by usherettes. Depending on the cinema company, a rousing welcome song was sung by the young audience before the start of the programme. There were at least three components to the show: cartoon, adventure serial, and main feature film. Some theatres added a 'B feature' film or Pathé Pictorial documentary. The cartoons had popular characters such as Mickey Mouse, Pluto and Donald Duck, and a great cheer erupted as their comical antics appealed to the children's sense of humour. Next came the adventure serial—so called because the story consisted of many episodes. Usually each episode had a 'cliff hanger' ending where the hero or heroine was trapped in a life-or-death situation. The final frames solicited the audience to: *Come back for next week's thrilling instalment*. Heroes such as Superman, Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon kept us on the edge of our seats with their derring-dos. The main feature film captured everyone's imagination. Often set in the Wild West with well known cowboys such as Hopalong Cassidy, Gene Autry and Tex Ritter, these moralistic stories pitted clean-faced, law-abiding citizens (called 'goodies') against the swarthy, roguish criminals (called 'baddies'). Despite the overt gunplay, wholesale killing and racism (where Indians were concerned), the audience lapped up the action; shouting, screaming and egging on the 'goodies' to eliminate the 'baddies.' In extreme cases where the 'baddies' were particularly obnoxious, it wasn't unknown for elements of the audience to pelt the screen with missiles such as peanut shells and orange peel. Order was maintained by the usherettes, who flashed their torches (flashlights) at the mischief makers.

The nearest cinema to home was the Highbury Picture Theatre on Holloway Road not far from Highbury Corner. The massive façade with its twin towers dominated this part of the road. Once through the cavernous entry, patrons queued to buy their tickets at the ticket booth inside the foyer (lobby). Depending on price, seats were available in the stalls (downstairs), balcony and boxes (upstairs). Smoking was only permitted in the balcony and boxes. For the children's *matinée* only the stall seats were occupied. Inside the foyer was the refreshment stand (concession) where ice cream, soft drinks, popcorn and sweets (candies) were sold. In the aisles during the intermission, usherettes with trays sold ice cream tubs or bricks, soft drinks and popcorn.



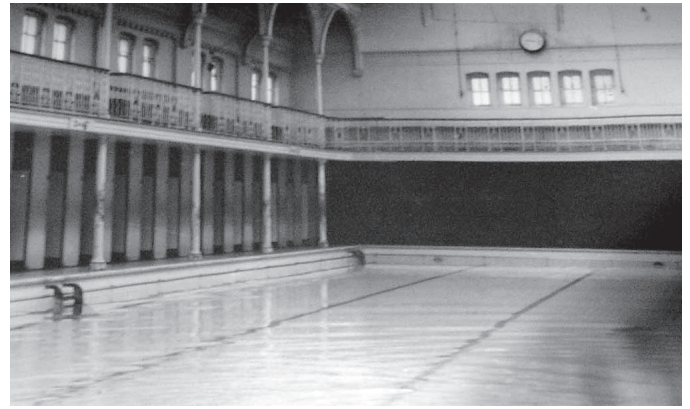
Peabody Trust Estate, Greenman Street



Highbury Picture Theatre



Highbury Fields Paddling Pool



Interior of the 'Tibby Baths'



Boys Playing Conkers in the 1950s



Typical Boys at Laycock J.M. School in the 1950s



Boys and Girls at the Saturday Morning Pictures



Clissold Park Municipal Swings Installation



Guy Fawkes Night Bonfire



Highbury Station Road Showing the Brick Wall and Railway Embankment. Pictures Taken in 1972



Liverpool Buildings Street Party in the 'Bottom Avenue' – Queen Elizabeth II Coronation, 1953

Following the picture show, all the cinema doors would be opened to clear the auditorium as quickly as possible. There were rear emergency doors that opened onto Highbury Crescent and I used to exit there, because on the opposite side of the road were the Highbury Fields recreational facilities of the paddling pool and the swings. On a hot day, the paddling pool was an ideal place for mothers to bring young children where they could cool down in the shallow water. It was very popular, and I often watched the tots enjoying themselves. The swings, however, were a greater attraction. This yard contained several pieces of play-ground equipment, including: rocking horses, roundabout, climbing frame, slide, umbrella or ‘witch’s hat’, swing sets and a sand pit. There were also toilets (washrooms) and a supervisor’s office.

Each device had its own thrill. Many kids tried to swing as high as possible; others revolved the roundabout as fast as possible. General boisterousness was tolerated by the supervisor—a stout woman who suffered no nonsense from troublemakers. She was also there to administer minor first aid, as grazes and scratches were bound to occur. The sand pit was out-of-bounds to me. Mum viewed the sand pit as a place rife with diseases and totally unsanitary. She warned me off by saying, “Little boys pee in the sand.” However, there was always some enticement to romp in the pit. No matter how careful I was after returning home, Mum would always find some evidence that I had played in the sand. She would berate me in no uncertain terms, usually ending the conversation with the phrase, “You’ll always be found out.”

In those carefree days of overlooking safety, significant risks were taken—sometimes as a dare, sometimes as a goal. Climbing objects, whether they were trees, walls, or in extreme cases, scaffolding, posed a challenge. I attempted all three and sustained injuries on a few occasions. Once, my upper right arm became impaled on a metal fence in the Samuel Lewis Trust Buildings. The two-inch (5 cm) scar is still visible. A frightening experience was when the palm of my right hand was pierced by a rusty nail head. The wound became poisoned, necessitating a hospital visit and tetanus (lockjaw) inoculation. Playing in the Highbury Quadrant housing construction site involved scaling the scaffolding of multi-storied flats being built, which was not only fraught with danger, but I had shown total disregard for trespassing. While there I accidentally dropped a prize water piston down an open manhole. My distraught cries attracted a man, who rescued the toy for me, and I was extremely relieved with its return.

A brick wall ran the entire length of Highbury Station Road, punctuated only by *The Cock at Highbury* public house at the Upper Street end and the railway workers’ cottages opposite the Laycock Secondary Boys School. The wall separated the pavement (sidewalk) and road on one side from the railway property on the other. There were two minor bends in the road that accommodated part of the station platform and the workers’ cottages. At intervals along the wall an extra thickness of brick showed where the Second World War communal air raid shelters were located. Any missing brick provided a toehold and it didn’t take much effort to scale the wall and sneak over onto the weed covered embankment.

Of course, not only was this downright trespassing onto railway property, but there was always the possibility of electrocution on the ‘live’ train tracks. However, the lure of discovering anything interesting was the main motive of this recklessness. Rummaging through the undergrowth sometimes brought about a ‘find’, and one object I distinctly remember proved lucrative. It was spherical in shape and made of a heavy metal, possibly lead or probably zinc. The hollow metallic ball was covered with small knobs, and although

I had no idea what it was, it seemed to be worth something. So after rescaling the wall, I took it to a scrap merchant on Bride Street not far away and exchanged it for the princely sum of a half-crown (2/6d).

Unoccupied houses were not immune to inquisitive children. I was with a few neighbourhood kids who found an unlocked door to a deserted house in Crane Grove. We explored every room, but found nothing of any value except a few old keys. There was definitely an air of mystery in our actions, possibly emulating the novelette adventures of fictitious schoolboy groups, such as *The Five ...* and others.

I had grown up with the annual ritual of Guy Fawkes Night. The festival was always celebrated on November 5th—the anniversary of the attempt to blow up King James I and the Houses of Parliament in 1605 by religious fanatics (known as The Gunpowder Plot). One of the terrorists, Guy Fawkes, was discovered at the scene and arrested. The others were rounded up, and all were executed. Stuffed effigies of Guy Fawkes were used by children for soliciting money to buy fireworks, and enterprising kids staked themselves outside Underground stations to panhandle their proverbial “Penny for the guy.” My mother completely discouraged me from doing this; sternly warning that such a practice was nothing but begging, and if seen holding my hand out for loose change it would be considered a stain on the family’s reputation.

In the days leading up to November 5th, mounds of timber, discarded mattresses and old furniture started to appear in the streets or on bomb sites. Children brought scraps of wood and anything flammable to add to the growing pile in anticipation of a worthy bonfire. Fireworks of all kinds—some with names like, *Volcano*, *Roman Candle*, *Catherine Wheel* and *Jumping Jack*—kindled our imagination. They were sold in box sets or, as with ‘penny bangers’, individually. The best known brands were *Brocks*, *Standard* and *Astra*.

It was an exciting time, and one that involved the entire family. As soon as it was dusk, Dad, Mum and I would dress warmly and head up to the flat roof. Together with the small collection of fireworks, we would take the essential items of milk bottle, large nail and matches. The milk bottle (always a long neck sterilised milk bottle) was used to launch the popular ‘rockets’; the large nail anchored the rotating *Catherine Wheel*, and the all-important matches ignited the fireworks’ fuse. We watched the scene in the street below as neighbours and a flock of children milled around the bonfire pile, and in the distance an occasional rocket lit the darkening sky. Somebody decided it was time to light the bonfire and soon flames started to lick through the pile of debris. A Guy Fawkes effigy had been placed on top—awaiting its fate. The sounds of excited children drifted up from the street, as sundry fireworks exploded in a shower of bright lights or ‘penny bangers’ detonated. A column of sparks and smoke soon developed and the fire raged to everyone’s delight.

We now decided it was time for our own fireworks display. Dad would take command by choosing the pyrotechnics, placing them in safe positions, and according to the instructions—‘Light the blue touch paper and retire immediately.’ A succession of pops, bangs and brightly coloured lights erupted from the *Volcano* and *Roman Candle*, an endless waterfall of sparks from the *Golden Rain*, and once the large nail was anchored to the roof access door, the *Catherine Wheel* would rotate under its own power as the ignited gunpowder forced the firework to spin and emit a spiral of coloured sparks. Sometimes Dad would sneakily place a *Jumping Jack* near Mum’s feet, and the ensuing quick and unpredictable movement of the firework startled her. Much to my amusement she would playfully berate my father. Handheld *Sparklers* were used to

write our names in the air. Launching rockets required some extra safety. The long, wooden launching stick was placed in the milk bottle and the launching area had to be clear. The touch paper was slow burning, but as soon as the main gunpowder charge ignited, a huge shower of sparks and audible “whoosh” accompanied the successful launch. We would follow the trail of sparks travelling through the sky in an arc, and thoughts of the radio programme, *Journey into Space*, immediately came into my imagination.

The evening seemed interminably long, as we looked across the northern reaches of the city at the occasional rocket heading for the stratosphere and the numerous glows from other bonfires. Sometimes the sound of Fire Brigade (Fire Department) truck bells were heard, as certain bonfires were deemed unsafe and had to be extinguished. I recall it happening once in my street—much to the extreme disappointment of the children.

The following day had its own peculiar smell—that of lingering woodsmoke and smouldering material. A sad pile of ashes denoted where the bonfire was in the street. Of the discarded mattresses, only a few rusty springs remained. Now it was time for the corporation workers to dispose of the fire’s remnants.

The street party, which is very much a part of London’s cultural fabric, seemed to magically happen. Once the word spread around, neighbours got together and pooled their resources mainly with the children as the focus. Flags and strings of bunting, decorations of all kinds including plaques and Royal portraits materialised, and the street became festooned with colourful, waving pennants. On the day marking the actual special occasion, the street was blocked off to traffic and residents manoeuvred trestle tables into position along the centre of the road followed by chairs of all sorts and sizes. A crew made sure the tables were covered and there were adequate plates and cutlery. Children, many in fancy dress and with at least a funny hat, took their places at the tables and eagerly awaited the treats of sandwiches and jelly and ice cream. Somewhere came the sounds of a honky-tonk piano, and there followed a succession of well known sing-along songs as the adults entered the spirit of the ‘knees up’ party.

In June 1953, several street parties took place in the community to recognise the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. The most immediate one for me was held in the ‘bottom avenue’ of Liverpool Buildings. It seemed that the entire block of flats had pushed the boat out to celebrate the occasion. Apart from the huge amount of food and drink, the children were entertained by a magician, and they all received a commemorative china cup and saucer. It was a wonderful experience at a time when the nation was still recovering from the ravages of war, and everyone was trying to improve their lot.

Ten years or so after the end of the Second World War, London’s battered façade was changing and new buildings were springing up from the bomb sites. A good way to follow this progress was to embark on miscellaneous wanderings through the streets. I was naturally curious, and on Sundays I used to walk without a fixed route from Islington to the City of London, observing the various landmarks along the way. With little traffic and pedestrians it was relatively safe just to meander through the maze of ancient streets. This way I learned much about the City’s geography (something that became useful later when I worked as a messenger boy). I visited St. Paul’s Cathedral and its legendary ‘whispering gallery’, and climbed to the top of the Monument for a bird’s eye view of the City (my legs turned to jelly as I stood on the narrow parapet).

Of the many pastimes attributed to boyhood, one that stands out is the fishing activity at Clissold Park, Stoke Newington. At home we had a goldfish bowl, and I wanted to add different fish to this aquarium. Knowing that the New River flowed through Clissold Park, I considered it fertile fishing ground and within easy walking distance. My basic equipment was simple—a small fishing net attached to a length of bamboo rod, and a jam jar with a string handle. Clissold Park was an extensive recreational area with a boating pond, paddling pool and swings. The New River flowed in a natural setting of reeds and trees, and was bridged at various places. From these bridges it was easy to reach over and dip the fishing net into the water. Some of the small fish that inhabited were minnows and sticklebacks. I considered it would be nice to return home with a few specimens. So after filling the jam jar with river water, I waited patiently in readiness to scoop up an unsuspecting fish. Noticing a movement, I dragged the net through the underwater weeds and captured not one, but two mature three-spined sticklebacks. Into the jam jar they went, and I walked home feeling quite pleased with myself.

Regardless that the early 1950s witnessed the rise of the ‘affluent society’ with all its freedom and luxuries, certain time-honoured customs continued to linger at home. Two instances that come to mind are the family circle and home entertainment. Bonding within the family was strong, and this was cross-generational where everyone helped each other in times of need. Older folk, who were sick or infirm, were often looked after at home by relatives. Parents tended to interact more with their children, and mine were no exception. For example, both parents and offspring shared the enjoyment of certain toys. Dad and I relished the practicality of a construction kit called *Trix*. This was a set of metal pieces and fasteners similar to the better known *Meccano*. We would spend hours building imaginary structures—the metal pieces of different shapes and sizes being held together by nuts and screws. One masterpiece we made was a tower crane, and the small electric motor supplied with the kit could operate the winch system to actually raise or lower a bucket that dangled from the end of the jib.

Home entertainment included the spontaneous visits of friends, and arranged trips to relatives who lived further away. Mum’s best friend, Doris Felstead (née Randall) with her husband, Joe, and infant daughter, Christine, often turned up for a social evening. Joe was the consummate Cockney with a rugged, yet cheeky complexion, and an accent you could cut with a knife. A London Transport bus driver, who had served in the Royal Navy during the Second World War, Joe was a fount of humorous stories that he expressed only as true Cockneys can tell. He was also a chain smoker of ‘roll-your-own’ cigarettes. Joe would reach into his jacket pocket and bring out a tin of *Gold Flake* tobacco and a packet of *Rizla* cigarette rice paper. Instinctively, while spinning a yarn, he would take a measure of tobacco from the tin and lay it on the rice paper, then expertly roll the paper into a cylinder, lick the gummed edge and produce a perfect ‘roll-your-own’ cigarette. The smoke was quite acrid, but, of course, this was an old navy practice when any type of ‘shag’ tobacco was available.

My grandmother (father’s mother) lived in Cambridge Mansions, Cambridge Road, Battersea, in South-west London. Any visit there was considered an adventure because we had to take the No. 19 bus from Highbury Corner to *The Latchmere Arms* pub, Battersea. At that time, my grandmother lived in a flat on the first floor. The apartment building lobby was big and inviting, and the staircase leading to the various levels had a solid wooden bannister. I loved sliding down this bannister under Dad’s watchful eyes.

Early long distance travels

During the first half of the 1950s there seemed to be a little more disposable income available, and this was used to finance annual holidays that took us further than the mainstay seaside destinations of the late 1940s (see Chapter 1, *Summer holidays*). Touring holidays were new to us as a family, and through his contacts, Dad was able to acquire some type of vehicle for the transportation side of things. We decided that overnight stops would be a combination of semi-camping and guest houses found *en route*.

At that time, the southwest part of England, namely the counties of Somerset, Devon, Dorset and Cornwall, were relatively unspoiled and free of mass tourist traffic. There were popular seaside resorts such as Weymouth, Torquay, Paignton, Falmouth and Penzance on the south coast, and on the north shore, visitors went to St. Ives, Ilfracombe, Minehead and Weston-super-Mare.

However, one of the first Cornish journeys started badly. The Ford Esquire shooting brake (station wagon) was to be used as a means of semi-camping. With several blankets and an eiderdown spread on the folded down rear seats, we could save a little on overnight accommodation costs. For breakfast we had a Primus stove to boil water for making tea and cooking eggs. The main trunk road (A303) took us to Exeter and its notorious ‘traffic bottleneck.’ In the failing light, Dad found an isolated quarry where we decided to bed down for the night. Everything seemed quite magical, and settling down in the car was cramped, but cosy. During the night there was a torrential rainstorm. Somebody stretched out and accidentally kicked the rear door open; followed by the eiderdown slipping off three bodies and landing on the wet ground. None of this allowed for much sleep, and as the day dawned it was apparent that we had parked in a red clay quarry. So we had to contend with an eiderdown coated in red mud, and all the effort required to change into clean clothes whilst avoiding the cloying red clay.

To add to the misery, Dad went to a nearby stream and collected water for boiling on the Primus stove. In his half-awake condition he slipped and fell into the stream. All we could hear was a string of curses preceding his appearance from the undergrowth. He lit the stove and we waited for the eggs to cook. And we waited ... and waited. In the end the eggs were still almost raw, so that put paid to that idea. We eventually emerged from the quarry as a bedraggled, hungry trio, and—to add insult to injury—not very far down the road was a farmhouse Bed & Breakfast (B&B). Somehow we could see the funny side of this escapade, and for many years later the tale would crop up as a conversation piece.

Since it was more or less forced on us from now on to find B&Bs, we made sure of locating a suitable establishment sometime during the afternoon. Not far from St. Austell is the fishing village of Mevagissey. In common with many of the Cornish fishing villages located on rocky cliffs, Mevagissey’s steep, narrow, winding roads were not designed for modern cars. Passing another vehicle was impossible. It meant somebody had to reverse into a space to allow the other one to pass. Despite being careful, Dad scraped the Ford along a wall, causing some paint damage that he would have to put right. The B&B was straight out of the days of smuggling (which did happen there); a foreboding house in which the rooms were festooned with spirals of hanging flypaper, as houseflies and bluebottles abounded. After a basic breakfast, we drove away from the picturesque village with its hundreds of seagulls that plastered everywhere with their droppings.

The ultimate destination was Land's End, the most westerly point of mainland England. A tourist attraction is the signpost that has multiple pointers to faraway cities and their distances in miles. The tea stand and souvenir shop are also popular.

St. Ives, the artists' haven, has a wide, golden beach of fine sand. Now, my old Mickey Mouse bucket and spade (see Chapter 1, *Summer holidays*) had been replaced with a sturdier cast aluminium spade, and I considered it a prize possession. The day at St. Ives was sunny and bright, perfect for some playtime on the beach. Building sand castles proved easier with the new spade, and after constructing one near the sea, I decided to place the spade upright in the 'courtyard' of the castle as some kind of marker. My parents were elsewhere on the beach and I wanted them to see my creation. So I left the area to call them over. Little did I know that the tide was racing in. I hailed Mum and Dad, but when I looked around, the breakers had already engulfed my precious sand castle. In doing so, the spade had been dislodged and had collapsed into the raging surf. I was panic-stricken and rushed to where I thought the castle was located. Both Dad and I rummaged around the flowing sea to find my beloved spade, but to no avail—it was lost forever. A disaster of the same proportion as when I lost my prize box kite (see Chapter 1, *A memorable childhood disappointment*).

On a brighter note, the return journey took us through the fertile countryside of Somerset, known for its cider apples, and the moorlands of Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire. A stop in Salisbury enabled us to admire the famous cathedral with its towering spire—reputed to be the tallest in England.

Other touring holidays introduced me to different parts of Great Britain, including trips through Wales, stopping at various beauty spots through the Rhondda Valley, the rugged west coast of Cardigan Bay, historic Harlech Castle, and picturesque Snowdonia. Later still, we ventured into the northern reaches with overnight stops in historic towns like Barnard Castle in County Durham, many of which were a throwback in time—full of character and inhabited by people speaking a strange dialect.

These travels helped to broaden my horizons, and in doing so helped pave a smooth path into the next major phase in my late boyhood at age eleven—the transition to secondary school.



Barry and Dad at one of the Water Reservoirs in the South Wales Valleys, 1953



Barry at Harlech Castle, North Wales, 1953



Barry with his Prized Aluminium Spade on the Beach at St. Ives, Cornwall, 1954



Mum at Salisbury Cathedral, Wiltshire, 1954

