

Chapter 6

Teenage beginnings

The latter half of 1958 was not very kind to me. In fact, the life-altering experience that happened set my academic career back considerably. Following the summer break, I moved into the second senior year and graduated to form 2A with the amiable class master, Mr. A.L. Martyn, a pipe smoking teacher of the ‘old school.’ He was also the senior geography master and was well known for his free and easy approach to the subject. We got on well together and shared a number of philosophical moments.

It wasn’t long into the autumn half-term that I was involved in a serious road accident. A little while before, my father had presented me with my first full-size bicycle. It was either a Raleigh or a Hercules, not sure which, but I guarded it jealously and doted on its appearance and roadworthiness. Dad had made sure the three-speed Sturmey-Archer running gear worked and that the tyres, brake blocks and control rods were in tiptop condition. It was black in colour with a chromium plated headlamp and cycle bell. The rear light was powered by a small friction drive generator, and I was able to ‘garage’ the bike in the storage shed at the bottom of our flight of stairs.

One Sunday I decided to go off on a ride around the neighbourhood. Cycling in those days wasn’t as precarious as it is today. In general, the roads weren’t busy and current safety equipment that’s now virtually mandatory was unheard of—helmets, in particular. I hadn’t gone very far—roughly at the corner of Liverpool Road and Ellington Street—when I was stuck from behind by a car. The force of the collision sent me over the handlebar and I landed in the gutter, apparently striking my head on the granite kerbstone. People passing nearby (or perhaps patrons of the *Duchess of Kent* pub) rendered assistance and called for an ambulance. Some witnesses said I was unconscious, but writhing in convulsions and vomiting. I was quickly taken to the Royal Northern Hospital in Holloway Road for stabilisation.

The prognosis wasn’t good. As soon as my parents were told of the accident they visited me in hospital. The surgeon in charge wasn’t optimistic considering the extent of injury that primarily involved a fractured skull and inner ear damage. In fact, the trauma was so great that I was given only four hours to live. My parents must have agonized as they watched over me in the equivalent of Intensive Care. I remained unconscious for several hours, but then regained consciousness and was left to rest and recuperate.

Much of my hospital stay remains a blur, but I remember being sent to a convalescent home at London Colney (near Colney Hatch, the mental asylum) and recovering there; sleeping much of the time as my body healed from the experience. Soon I was allowed home and phased into school work, but I had lost a great deal of ground and had to try and catch up with my studies. Also, because of the danger of physical harm, I was excused any sports or P.T. (PE) exercises. My February, 1959, half-year report reflected a downturn in marks and subsequent position in class: No. 24 out of 34, but this was justified after an absence of 84 days, and the teachers’ remarks showed sympathy in this regard.

The rest of the academic year in the Lower School centred around basic education and some handcraft work, particularly in woodwork. We spent time in the woodwork shop at Alfred Prichard School located in Westbourne Road under the guidance of Mr. Milsom. This was my introduction into the practical crafts that were expanded on at the Camden Road Upper School, which had a complete technical block of workshops for metalwork, woodwork, plumbing and bricklaying, plus a room equipped for engineering drawing.

Before leaving the Lower School there was a steady regaining of confidence and an improved standing in the class: No. 17 out of 34. Strengths and weaknesses were becoming more apparent, with French, history, geography and art at the top of the list of achievements, and the ability to master mathematics being a particular stumbling block (a lifelong impediment regardless of trying; although geometry did pass muster).

This regaining of confidence was also noted by Hewitt, Woollacott & Chown, the firm of solicitors that was representing my compensation case in the courts. The solicitors relied on the judgement of a Harley Street specialist, Mr. Radley Smith, as to the extent of my injuries and the future effects they may have; particularly the inner ear damage. Ultimately, an out of court settlement was agreed upon by all parties, and in December, 1959, the compensated sum of £250/0/0d was put into an investment trust until my twenty-first birthday.

Graduating to teenage

November 25th, 1958, was my thirteenth birthday—the entry into teenage. The following September, I graduated to the Upper School at Camden Road, which was something of a rite of passage. Now I could be considered one of the ‘big boys’ and definitely a ‘young man.’ It felt good to be able to escort my mother and occasional female visitors such as my first cousin, Susan Smith; although a new, sudden loftiness convinced Aunt Marion to have me drop the ‘Aunt’ whenever I was in her company.

However, one significant event that reshaped my studying at Barnsbury was the requirement of wearing eyeglasses. Until I was fourteen it never occurred to me that I had defective eyesight. However, my mother became increasingly concerned at my television (TV) viewing habits. It seemed unnatural to her that I should be constantly screwing up my eyes and sitting so close to the TV screen. The closest optician (optometrist) was a Dolland and Aichison practice in Holloway Road near the Charrington’s coal office. So Mum made an appointment for me to have an eyesight test. Both of us went and I was subjected to the standard examination. The optician then came to the conclusion that I was short-sighted and that corrective lenses should be prescribed. I wasn’t too enamoured with eyeglasses in the first place (perhaps seen as a form of weakness), and my mother was certainly against me wearing the standard National Health ‘wire’ frames. So I chose some frames that were affordable and stylish, but as it turned out not very robust for the rigours of a school environment. The first time I wore them to class started the gossip mill, as necks craned and fingers pointed—“Look, Page is wearing glasses.” When the lesson began, it became clear to me that I must have missed a great deal of my previous teachers’ blackboard messages even when sitting at the front. Now, I was able to comprehend all the chalk scribbles no matter where I sat in the room. A definite quantum leap and realisation of how much knowledge I had missed in all of my formative schooling years, and also part of the secondary education.

The Upper School at Camden Road was a modern glass and concrete box with a neutral smell. Far removed from the traditional L.C.C. solid brick halls of learning with their characteristic odour of varnished wood and stale school dinners. It took a while to orient oneself around the campus. The four storeys of the main building were light and airy, and some classrooms, such as the science room (somehow never called the science lab.) and spacious library, were purpose equipped. Adjoining the main building was the modern gymnasium, and along the hallway was the technical block. Outside, the large playground was marked out for various sports, and a car park extended along the entire Camden Road front of the school property.

Commuting to this school, however, was roughly twice the distance from home. Depending on time, weather and inclination, I made the journeys either by public transport or on foot. Rainy days almost guaranteed a trip by bus—usually a No. 609 or No. 611 trolleybus from Highbury Corner to the Camden Road/Holloway Road junction. The return ride meant congregating at the bus stop outside Jones Brothers department store. It was here that we sometimes met girls from the nearby Shelburne School, and friendships were often struck up while waiting. Otherwise it was shank's pony from home along Liverpool Road to Holloway Road near the Northern Polytechnic college (the 'Poly'). Then continuing past the bottom of Eden Grove, under the railway bridge and taking a short cut through the courtyards of the L.C.C. Loraine Estate council flats to emerge at the corner of Camden Road and Caledonian Road, a mere stone's throw from the school.

Being the third formers, we were at the bottom of the totem pole and subjected to all the bullying of the older boys. It was obvious that in the senior years, the requirement to wear the school uniform became more lax. Older boys, who were more fashion conscious, flaunted the rules of decorum and attended school in 'trendy' clothes and footwear. Italian styling was in vogue, so two-piece mohair suits with 'bum-freezer' jackets and tapered trouser bottoms vied with denims and 'sloppy Joe' pullovers. Shoe fashion seemed to change weekly—from short or long 'winkle-pickers' to chisel toes, even diamond toes; Cuban heels; side laces or elasticated slip-ons, and crêpe soled "brothel creepers." Fashion didn't stop at clothes. With more disposable income, fourth, fifth and sixth formers could display the latest in hair styles with blow waves and immaculate trims ('Boston back') that were influenced by current film stars such as Tony Curtis and James Dean. I still dressed the part for school: at least with a school tie and crested blazer, but later these were abandoned in favour of other apparel; although I wasn't affluent enough to sport the latest mode. In fact my parents thoroughly disliked frivolous fashions such as 'shorties'—a type of truncated overcoat—"Like a bloody army blanket", said Dad; even though I was partial to owning one.

Teachers, especially the up and coming, straight out of college types, also seemed to eschew the traditional dark three-piece suit. Casual jackets, cardigans and corduroy trousers were commonplace. Long hair and beards weren't frowned upon, and a casual, almost Bohemian, atmosphere seemed to pervade in the teachers' common room.

I was assigned to form 3A under Mr. D. Leff. Similar to several of the teachers, the boys christened him with a nickname; two in his case—either 'Jeff Leff', or 'The Nose.' The reason for the second being obvious as he sported a sizable schnozzle. Mr. Leff was short, fairly dapper and not inclined to become overexcited. He taught mathematics and was very methodical. His school report notations were favourable to me with such remarks as—... *a good average boy who is obviously working hard.*

My new classmates were the typical amalgam of fourteen-year olds, ranging from the brainy to the dregs. There were extrovert, comic, athletic, effeminate and dozy types. Also leaders and followers. I made and fostered some strong friendships; particularly with Ronald ‘Walt’ Disney, who sat next to me. Others were: Leslie Chatfield; Mike Stewart; Roy Score and, of course, my old mate of many years standing, Phil Davies. As time went by, it was interesting to see the development of strengths and weaknesses; the teachers reacting accordingly by promoting individuals’ skills particularly in the areas of art, sport and science.

Retrospection and the road ahead

In retrospect, being brought up in the post war depression with its austerity measures and other deprivations was a test of survival. There were times when the family endured internal crises; of strife between my parents when they underwent a trial separation, and overt friction between family members. Occasionally, I was rightfully reprimanded when adopting a boorish attitude or spoke out of turn, as echoed in Mum’s stern warning—“He has to learn!” It’s possible, too, that Dad suffered from the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), commonly known as ‘shell shock’ or ‘combat fatigue’, after his wartime and ejection seat injury experiences. Such effects could cause emotional difficulties with relationships. However, as the austerity measures gradually lifted and stability returned, we were able to live the modest, yet comfortable lifestyle described in the previous chapters.

Now the stage was set for the onset of adolescence, complete with moments of euphoria and teenage angst. There would be three more years of intense secondary education. But what career path lay ahead? For those readers who are intrigued, all is revealed in the continuation to this initial autobiography by accessing the following website: <http://barrypagememoirs.weebly.com/>

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Barry outside St. Paul's, 1958/59



Dad and Barry Together in 1958/59 Two Typical Views of Holloway Road en-route to Camden Road, 1958



Barnsbury Secondary School for Boys (Upper School), Camden Road, Islington. Picture Taken in 1965

