

A SUMMER HOLIDAY AT THE ISLE OF THORNS 1951

By Peter Wilcox F IoD

By way of introduction let me just say that my brother Andrew and I were both attending Burleigh Road Junior School in Kentish Town London in 1951. Andrew was ten years old and I was nine.

Burleigh Road School was the archetypal Infants, Juniors and Senior School suited to the greater mass of under achievers from the local slums bound for the scrap heap before their careers had even begun.

Despite being in very close proximity to the North London marshalling yards of the L.M.S. Railway the school survived the war unscathed.

The teachers were for the most part vocational and cared about their charges actually knowing something of the circumstances of those they taught. However few of the pupils escaped the inevitable progression from one school to the next and then on to some trade or shop work.

There were notable exceptions and just one of staggering brilliance (Kenneth Mansell), in my class, which must have raised the spirits of the teachers.

My brother together with a number of his contemporaries, were to make it to the local Central School (Ackland in Fortess Road) and I was one of a very few that ultimately went on to a Grammar School.

I distinctly remember being asked by the oldest son of the ground floor tenant of the house we lived in, who too had followed the inevitable pattern and was attending the senior school at that time (secondary modern), as I exited the junior school gates for the last time how had I done in the eleven plus?

I mumbled that I had passed. His immediate reaction was to call out to all of his mates as they were coming out of school "hey this kid's brighter than all of you lot". I quite expected to be set upon but he just wanted to bathe in the reflected glory of knowing me.

Little did I know that mine was to be a lonely journey being the only boy going in the opposite direction to my former mates when I started at the grammar school in September 1953. However that was as yet in the future.

Mother was widowed in 1947 and was never to re-marry dying a few days short of her 93rd birthday in January of this year (2006). I have only the slightest recollection of my father and of a few particular events that lodge deep in my subconscious.

We lived in three rented rooms in a typical 1860's terrace in Lady Margaret Road and shared one toilet with four other tenants. The boy mentioned above was more fortunate as his family occupied the ground floor and had the exclusive use of the downstairs toilet.

There was no bath as the bathroom, being of substantial size, was also let out.

Part of the house was still lit by gas. The cellar was still used for the storage of coal and was dark and dank. Access was via what can only be described as a ladder given how steep it was, and in such poor condition that the coal man refused to use it. This meant that all deliveries of coal were via a coal hole at the front of the house. After every delivery it was therefore necessary for the particular tenant to shovel their coal into their own allocated stall.

I understand that the cellar was converted about 20 years ago and sold as a garden flat!

In late June 1951 mother sprang a surprise on us saying that we were "to be going away with the school in the summer holidays". Never ever having had a holiday away from home, or been separated from our mother previously, it was a meaningless statement and raised a number of concerns when it became apparent that our mother would not be coming with us. Having lost one parent we were fearful of losing the other.

Unlike my brother I had disliked school from the very first day and the prospect of spending time away with the school when I could have been playing with my mates was not one that appealed. Mother had returned to work in the week following my father's death which meant that I spent a great deal of time with my Grandmother particularly in the holidays. This allowed me to be a free agent but with the added comfort of lots of tea and stale cakes (sixpence a bag full if bought at the end of the day from the local bakery). This freedom contributed to my reluctance to be a team player as I could go off exploring wherever I liked and did. To this day I still have difficulty with authority, however on this occasion there was to be no escaping the inevitable.

The holiday started with a gathering of parents at the school with each child carrying their own small case. We were counted onto the coach by way of a roll call. I remember little of the departure other

than it was quite noisy. I believe my brother and I traveled in separate coaches as we were in different years.

We set off in daylight and after we left the London suburbs to my astonishment our teacher started to sing. He then led us in a selection of songs including, ten green bottles and one man went to mow.

When we were all well into the swing of things our teacher suddenly asked us all to be quiet as we would be passing through a village and it would be impolite to carry on singing until we had passed through it. The journey progressed as before but the edge had been taken off by this restriction.

I have absolutely no recollection of our arrival and can only assume that we were fed and watered and early to bed.

I see from a letter card that I sent to my mother the following day that the first week was to be "work" and the second week play. Please understand that the letter cards had been pre-addressed and stamped by my mother leaving me to scrawl my comments on what would become the inside of a sealed envelope.

It is quite fascinating how one's past can catch up with one and it was only when attending to the affairs of my late mother's estate that I came upon these treasures. Complete with a fulsome list of my many failings. Ah bless.

What I distinctly remember were the huts in which we slept. Other than sleeping on the underground platform during war time air raids this was my only other experience of community living in close proximity. I should point out that following my father's death I enjoyed the benefit of my own room, which had previously been the kitchen, for four years and was therefore far luckier than many.

My brother tells me that he actually won a prize for the best kept hut having spent much of his time sweeping it clean. He also remembers the tin plates, military style.

I cannot call to mind any aspect of the first week's so called work and assume it was more enjoyable than school or I had possibly drifted off into my own little world as I frequently did.

At the end of the first week our teacher decided that we would all do a landscape drawing and the best in his opinion would be rewarded with sixpence and taken to the local shop (post office) to spend it.

We were all sat us round the edge of the swimming pool for this project and asked to capture the backdrop of the trees in the distance.

The teacher was undecided between the two he considered to be the best and so asked the others to vote for an outright winner. I won. I still occasionally do the odd painting but my arthritis is a bit of a downer.

We trooped off to the local shop where I purchased a three-penny Walls briquette offering the change back to the teacher. Mother had brought us up properly; we were grateful, polite and not greedy. The teacher refused the money saying it was mine to spend so I bought another ice cream and gave it to either my best friend or possibly the runner up. As I say I was never a team player but I would now like to think the runner up was the beneficiary.

The following weekend the parents arrived by coach for a short visit bearing gifts in response to requests for money, comics and fizzy drinks.

Our attention was on the contents of the parcels whilst theirs was on the wellbeing of their offspring.

I was to learn about bullying at first hand a few days later when I was set upon by two children from another class, who systematically took all that had been brought by my mother for me, I said and did nothing and was thoroughly miserable for several days. They even complained days later that what they had stolen was not very good and demanded money from me. I had none to give them and ran away. This was the last time I was ever to give in to bullies.

My step grandfather was an ex guardsman and sometime silent movie extra and it was he who broke Victor McClaglen's nose in a brawl. He sensed that all was not well on my return and weeded it out of me. He taught me to be fearless and some years later I came upon one of the aforementioned quite by chance and beat the crap out of him.

I do remember that later in the second week whilst off on one of my solo explorations I came across my first sighting of a dragonfly and was amazed at its sheer size and vivid colours. Being totally absorbed in my own private world I ran after it until I ended up with one foot in the swamp.

My plimsoll was covered in a thick black gunge as was my foot to just above the ankle. Nothing daunted I went back to the bathhouse removed my plimsoll and sock, washed them as well as my foot

under the outside cold tap. When clean to my eye I rung the sock out and shook the plimsoll vigorously before putting them back on again.

Returning to the scene I observed that there was a distinct line separating hard and soft ground defined by a lush growth principally of reeds. A thought occurred for some amusement. I ran back to round up some friends and tell them about the dragonflies. As we raced back to the spot Where I had sunk into the swamp I allowed myself to be overtaken with the inevitable result that some of them also sunk into the mire.

There is an old adage that goes "considering enthusiasm moves the world it's a pity so few enthusiasts speak the truth". At least my exploit was just a boyish prank with no long term harm intended.

As mentioned earlier our house was devoid of a bath and for much of the week we had a lick and a promise with the occasional bath (tin) in front of the fire on a Sunday with each of us following the other in turn. So when it came to Friday night at the camp my brother and I were not the least bit phased when asked to share a bath with one at each end. There was no emptying of water and the whole process was more of a sheep dip than a cleansing and relaxing experience with pair after pair of boys immersed in an ever-darkening slurry.

I distinctly remember taking some clothes back home that had not been worn, to my mother's utter shame and disgust. At that time, although we generally had a clean shirt each day, underwear was only changed once per week.

I read *The World According to Clarkson* (Jeremy of Top Gear) at Christmas and interestingly enough, traveling as much as he does, he has evolved a system to allow for the minimum of baggage in order to avoid the need for a suitcase and the consequent delays and difficulties that can and do arise when flying. By adopting the following procedure he can go on an eight-day trip with just two pairs of pants one pair of which he is wearing when setting off, I kid you not.

The first day the pants are worn correctly. The second day they are worn back to front. The third day they are worn the right way round but inside out. The fourth day they are worn inside out and back to front.

In summary the whole experience was truly wonderful and being a bit of a dreamer I was often in my element. My mother must have been overjoyed to have two weeks of freedom from two constantly bickering boys and the first bit of real respite since the death of her husband.

I feel that I actually grew up as a consequence of both good and bad experiences and am deeply appreciative of the opportunity I was given and am grateful to all those that made it possible.