

A Willingham Newsletter

1939 to 1955

Introduction

I was born on the first day of Spring, 1939 in Dr Cane's maternity suite in Long Lane. The house faced down Newington which was very convenient since that was where my parents lived.

My father had built the house himself, complete with bathroom (but alas no plumbing) and a 50 yard asparagus bed. We lived next door to 'Uncle' Donny (Don Barton) who grew tons of the most delicious tomatoes. How sad I was to see both properties looking so dilapidated when I visited in 1998.

My early years were fairly uneventful. I had my tonsils out at the age of five and I left my bike in the middle of the road where it was run-over by a lorry. The two events are not connected.

I do recall two memories of the war. One was seeing a doodlebug doodling across the evening sky as my mother carried me up to bed. The other was seeing the orange glow in the sky looking over the garden wall at my grandfathers house. That was London burning.

My parents separated when I was seven and we ended up at Kildare, High Street in a house owned by my Great Aunt Edith. This house was dead opposite my Grandfather's house (Tommy Langan) which is now 'Willingham Auctions'.

My Grandfather was a force to be reckoned with. He was Chairman of the Parish Council and a Justice of the Peace. He was 4 foot 11 inches short and frightened of nothing other than the Tax Tribunals. He was an ardent Pacifist (and Socialist) and confiscated my pop-gun in case it should corrupt me. However, this did not stop him from possessing his own .22 rifle which he used to defend his orchards from the thieving hands of the gypsy fruit pickers he employed.

My father was in the family Carpentry and Undertaking business. They made wheels and coffins amongst other things. My father eventually ran the business on his own some years later until he began burying his friends (that is, his dead friends) when he retired and Fred Cook took over. The 'Chapel of Rest' was in Church Street, nearly opposite Long Lane. I remember my paternal Grandmother's lemon curd tarts and my maternal Grandmother's rabbit pie. The rabbits had been shot by my pacifist Grandfather.

I went to the Infants school (Ivy Jeeps and Mrs Day taught then) and had free milk and afternoon naps on the camp beds. This gave me a liking for afternoon naps and a hatred for milk. I progressed to the Senior school next door where Mr Capel was the headmaster. It was only a short stay, however, for my mother enlisted me into the Choir School of St. John's College where I received the princely sum of £12 every term for the use of my beautiful voice. I say "I" but it was my mother who kept the money. My sister, Patricia, also had a 'beautiful' voice and in later years obtained her letters from the Royal Academy.

Thanks to the intensive tutoring by my Aunt Muriel (my mother's sister) I went to the County Grammar School and became involved in the Black Market for sweet coupons. I eventually left with 6 O' Levels and a scarred backside for falsifying my school report. This taught me a valuable lesson in life – not to go in for embezzlement unless it's on a large-scale and not to get caught.

I proceeded to the Royal Radar Establishment, Malvern at the age of sixteen where I learnt to hold my liquor and pick up an HNC to equip me for a living. That's enough about education.

The Tabernacle (Tab)

Religion was a major influence on my life. My maternal grandparents were ardent Baptists (indeed, the whole family was). My father, on the other hand was C of E and since I also took part as a choir boy in C of E services (see Introduction) between nine to eleven I became confused as to the true God.

I sympathise with the troubles in Ireland – we should all stick to the one (ah..but which one?, you say).

The Baptists won. Rev. Blackerby (spelling?) was a Scholar and was fluent in both Latin and Greek. Indeed, I think he spoke it most Sundays for nobody seemed to understand his sermons. They were noted for their length rather than their interest. We all had family pews. Ours' was upstairs where you could nod-off in relative obscurity.

Rev. Blackerby's successor after the Wilderness years was a totally different kettle of loaves and fishes. Rev. Patterson was all fire and brimstone and adored by all the younger female Baptists. Traitor that he was, Rev. Patterson got married and the aftermath was similar to that experienced on the death of Rudolph Valentino. We all had to get Saved every Sunday. I tried many times but never succeeded. It just didn't work for me despite being a 'Young Pioneer'

It was as a 'Young Pioneer' that Rolland (Spook) Lucas and I won the *Snooker All Comers Championship* in 1956 ish and so I established my credit with God in this way. I have to admit that Spook did all the scoring though .

My Aunt Muriel was a Sunday School teacher and my mother was Choir Mistress and assistant murderer of the Organ when Roy Mustell wanted a day off (which luckily wasn't often). It was always a race between my mother and the congregation as to who finished first. We would usually lag behind for the first verse (as it was uncertain as at what precise moment we had actually started) but then overtake her by about verse three. What a fine building the 'Tab' was, and what a courageous decision to pull it down and erect the present premises that I briefly glimpsed on a quick visit two years ago.

Horace Dodd was the Sunday School Superintendent I remember ('e that 'ath 'ears to 'ear let 'im 'ear is just one of his texts that I recall). I mustn't forget Rev. Blackerby's magic lantern shows on Missionary Sundays in earlier years. The Lantern was a formidable oil-driven machine that had a nasty habit of showing slides upside down and occasionally emitting clouds of black smoke. When this happened, a rendering of "On Greenland's icy mountains and India's coral strands" was rapidly convened to cover the general confusion. Happy days! I remember with affection, Bruce Stern, who taught us boys and Stan Dodd who taught me how to smoke like a man. Stan performed valiantly as sole tenor in the choir whilst being bombasted from the right by us trio of basses.

My sister and I were regarded as child prodigy singers and performed at the *Tab* under duress on numerous occasions for which we received no remuneration. This understandably made us something of freaks to our peers and I cannot say that I was exactly popular with most of the village youth.

Friends and acquaintances

This neatly leads me to recall my playmates - a short list:-

John Easy, George Hart, Henry Garner, Leslie Smith, Raymond Few, Jan Few, Rolland (Spook) Lucas, Phillip (Pansy) Few. I hasten to add that 'Pansy' did not have quite the same meaning as it does today.

Most of us worshipped Avis Cattell (of Willingham Mill fame). Alas, she was unattainable. Her sister, Merle, was besotted by the Rev Patterson in a much purer manner.

We built dens in the stacks of my Grandfather's fruit boxes and water features in Mr Hart's sand heap to the considerable annoyance of both parties.

In later teens there was Peter (Clunky) Clausner who introduced me to the evils of drink, Oliver Day, Roy Jones (successive aspirants of my sister's favours). Also my sister's friends (especially Sylvia who was particularly well-blessed and with whom I cheated at Postman's Knock one Christmas)

I remember Tony Mumford – he was real lad! Margaret Bailey who I lusted after. Where are you all now, I wonder?

I joined the tennis club where I broke several rackets. Did John Hazel and Ruth Norman ever marry? Aunt Gertie played bowls next door but bowl players were a race apart.

I notice the surname 'Manning' in the Newsletter. 'Auntie Rose' was a friend of my mother and very kind to us children. We weren't exactly well off and it was a wonderful treat when she invited us on several occasions to watch the telly at her 'Mansion' in Station Road. She was a great organiser and ran (I think) the dances at the school. Incidentally, I saw the name *Paul Ingle* mentioned as organising the Christmas Concert. Surely this can't be the same *Paul Ingle* that used to play for these dances. A few bars of *Dark Town Struttin' Ball* would settle the matter.

Although hardly a friend or acquaintance, I have to mention Dickie Jeeps – Willingham's most famous son. He captained the England Rugby team for many years. His father, Francis Jeeps, was Chairman of the County Council I believe.

Incidentally, I was excused games and had a note from my mother. This also did not endear me to my peers who were mainly football crazy.

However, I did once score a goal when enforced to play for the 'Young Pioneers' against other 'Young Pioneers'. This was a complete accident caused by a ricochet from my boot but for a while I was hero of the hour.

I recall the men who worked for my Grandfather. Mr Wolfe, Mr Tibbett and especially Ron Elsom who was so kind to my aunt in her later years. She eventually sold 'The Limes' to Raymond Munns who founded 'Willingham Auctions' and had a house built just down the road, 'Westlands' on the site of what was once a Bicycle shop .

Willingham Feast

Now that was the highlight of the year. Those magical Saturday night concerts in the Tab by the Salvation Army Band from Stowmarket (I think). The Sunday afternoon service on the Green when the fair would surreptitiously arrive and queue in an orderly manner until we were finished.

The Sunday night service at Stocks Corner when the Band would play a favourite of my Grandfather for a slipped fiver. My Grandfather had been a Salvationist himself and played the cornet I believe.

The fair was on Monday/Tuesday nights. Those were the days when you could enjoy yourself without fear of any violence. The Swing Boats, the Dodgems, the Roundabout - a fortune could be made on the 'Roll a Penny' stall, or so I thought. The Goldfish didn't last long but at least there was something to show for bankrupting yourself.

Weather

We've had some bad floods this autumn but who remembers '47? The water came up to the Rec. and there was skating for months. There were contests with the Dutch, I remember. Peter Barton (Uncle Donny's son) was a champion skater. With nothing between us and the Arctic Circle, that north wind was a killer. Good for my father's business though!

It was as a boy that I saw my only display of the Northern Lights and those glorious Fen sunsets I can still picture.

And now something for our younger readers

I thought I'd end with some comments on Willingham life when I was a boy.

There was no bathroom, inside toilet, hot water or central heating – things we all take for granted today.

You had to be desperate to grope your way down the garden in the middle of the night to the outside loo.

Known as an 'Elsen', it had to be emptied every month by carrying the bucket down the garden to bury the contents in some consecrated plot. As a result, our vegetables grew to a prodigious size.

Toilet paper was produced by halving the pages of last week's 'Radio Times'. This was made of superior paper and of the right size. It also gave one something to read whilst in residence.

My paternal Grandfather actually had a three-seater! The mind boggles.

The 'bathroom' was a zinc bath placed down in the garage and filled with hot water from the copper boiler, a fire having been lit some hours previous. The entire family would use the same bath-water so by the time us kids got home from school it was not a pretty sight, being of a mid-grey hue with various debris floating on the surface. In fact, I do not recollect having a bath between the ages of twelve and sixteen.

Heating was from the coal fire in the living room and various oil-driven incendiary devices around the house. The Front Room was only used on Sundays and Bank Holidays when we had the luxury of an additional coal fire.

There were few carpets, mainly polished lino and the aptly named slip mats. These were placed in doorways and would often propel one into the room faster than intended.

In those days nearly everything was delivered or home-grown. There were two bakeries, 'Olivers' and 'Days' (both in Church Street-Stocks Corner end), Mr Rendell delivered milk from his handcart, dispensed by the jug, and meat came from the butchers in Over.

A 200 yard trip was made twice a week to Raven's corner shop in Over Road, otherwise the Coop delivered to your door.

My Grandfather supplied us with all the fruit and eggs we could eat and we grew most of our own vegetables. My mother's apple puddings were superb and if I was lucky I got the top off the milk which was the nearest to cream that we had. By the age of fourteen I was egg-bound.

Nostalgia 'aint what it used to be

It was seeing Mike's site and Newsletters on the Web that triggered this off, bringing back memories of my boyhood as it did. I've left it to him as to what he does with this missive (if anything) but it would be rather nice if there was anyone still around who remembers me. alan.robinson18@btinternet.com will find me. The rest of the family are in Willingham cemetery and incommunicado.

Well done 'Willingham News Letter', it's good to see to see that there's still plenty of life in the village judging by what I read.
And to you all, as us Willinghamites would say.... "W't ba!"

Alan Robinson
alan.robinson18@btinternet.com