

1 HAPPY DAYS

I was born on the 28 April 1928 at 23 Kings Drive Gravesend Kent. My Mum's name was Ada and my Dad's name was Ted. I had an elder sister Jean who was five years older than me and an elder brother Peter who was eighteen months older. The house was semi-detached built in 1923. Three bedrooms, an upstairs bathroom and toilet, a kitchen, dining room and front room down stairs. In the bathroom was a copper for boiling the water that the clothes were washed in. Afterwards it was time for our bath and the hot soapy water was put in the bath and then it was our turn for a bath.

One of one of my early memories is of sitting on the copper wrapped in a towel being dried after a bath looking out of the window watching the R101, Britain's last airship, flying down the river on its way to India. It was the last airship I ever saw. It crashed in France later that day and everyone on board was killed.

I can't remember a lot about this part of my life before I started school except that we didn't have any money to spare, and we had a dog called Scamp, and what a Scamp he was, always chewing up things. We only had one pair of good shoes each. One day my Dad had stayed up late repairing the shoes as we wear going to visit Grandma and Granddad Spenceley (Mums Mum and Dad) who lived in London. We were going by ferryboat across the river to Tilbury to catch the train to London. We were all excited about the boat and train ride. Dad got up to let the dog out and to make Mum a cup of tea. Then we came down to breakfast, got dressed went for our shoes! No shoes! We searched all over the house for them but couldn't find them anywhere in the house where the dog was.

When we found him he was in his kennel with all the shoes he had chewed at. Lucky for him no serious damage was done but he still got it in the neck.

Mum and Dad didn't have a lot of money to spare so with three children to buy clothes for we paid into a One Shilling a week club (Five Pence today) to a shop in Manor Road in Gravesend called 'Goodwins'.

To get food for the week Mum used to do her shopping on a Saturday evening just before the Market closed and buy a joint of meat for the week end. She would get it for half the price she would normally pay. There were no refrigerators to keep the meat fresh over the weekend in those days. We used to grow all our vegetables in the garden and on Dad's allotment. We were very lucky Dad had a job and we never went hungry. We always had decent clothes to wear. Not like some of the children we knew who had no shoes or socks wear only plimsolls. Their mothers and fathers cut down clothes to wear and their shirts sticking out of holes in their trousers.

We used to keep chickens and rabbits in hutches in the back garden. I had to make sure they were fed and had water to drink and that the hutches were cleaned out. I would make pets of the rabbits but suddenly they would disappear we would have a lovely stew for dinner and someone would have new pair of fur backed gloves. Poor old rabbit! But the stew was nice.

One day we ran out of milk. So Mum sent me to the corner shop for a pint of milk. She gave me the money, two pence a pint. I went to the shop and bought the milk, and decided to have a drink. When I had had my drink I found that I had drunk nearly half of it. What was I to do? I know I'll fill it up with water; they won't be able to tell the difference. How wrong can you be? Did I get it in the neck?

Dad had served in Royal Navy as a stoker for over 19 years from 1900 to 1919 throughout the First World War 1914 to 1918. and what stories he could tell.

When he got discharged from the Navy he worked at the Imperial Paper Mills, Gravesend. He was secretary of the Children's Treat. This was a sports day and a fancy dress fun fair. Each child was given twelve tokens to spend on the fair, rubber ball, coloured pencils and a colouring book.

We used to meet up with Uncle Bill and Aunt Ethel (he was Dads younger brother.) and all my cousins, Leslie, Irene, Doll, Cyril, Cathy, Charlie, Peggy, and Stanley. We would all have a good time together.

We all went to the fancy dress parade. Jean dressed as an onion girl with a card saying 'I am dancing with tears in my eyes' (the name of a very popular song at the time). Peter sat in a small lorry with reams of paper on the back with I P M stamped on the reams of paper (he liked to mess about with motors even then). I was dressed as traffic lights (I think it was the year that they were first used in Gravesend). I can't remember

wining any prizes, but we all had a great time. After that we all went into a big marquee for tea and a party. Afterwards we all walked home eating fish and chips.

Another thing we all looked forward to each year was the Gravesend Regatta. This was to raise money for the local hospital. It started off with a carnival through the town to the Prom, to the riverside. There were boat races, and barges races. a greasy pole. This was a flag pole with a five pound in an envelope at the top (this was over a week's wages). The pole was covered grease. The first person to climb the pole kept the money. I don't think anyone has ever managed it yet (they still have the Regatta and greasy pole today 2001). There was the fun fair and tea in the marquee and to finish the day off a firework display and fish and chips on the way home.

One of the first things I can remember is being taken for a walk to the George Inn to watch the Char-a-bangs (motor coaches) exchanging passengers. Sometimes we would go for a walk down Valley Drive across the Warren to Gravesend Airport to watch the planes taking off and landing. If you were rich enough and had Five Shillings you could go for a flight. One day there was a lot of excitement. Amy Johnson, pictured right, was taking off on her long distance flight to Australia. There were very large crowds to see her leave.

Alan Cobham and his Flying Circus held a flying display at the air field each year and if we were lucky we would go up on the Warren and watch it from there. The admission fee would be about one shilling for adults and half price, sixpence, for children. A lot of money in those days when wages were only £2 10 shillings a week. We would take a bottle of homemade lemonade, a jam sandwich and an apple and we would have a great time watching the planes looping the loop, girls walking along the wings and parachute jumping. The RAF would put on a display and we would all be thrilled to bits.

We used to go down onto the Prom quite often to play on the sands with a bucket and spade or to paddle in the river and sail your toy boat. I had petrol driven toy motor boat that my Uncle Tom had made (he was my Mum's younger brother). We used to watch the P & O Liners waiting their turn to enter Tilbury Docks and all the tug boat's fussing around them. When we were halfway home, (it was about two miles from our house to the Prom, along way for a little boy of five to walk) we arrived at the Echo Square where there was a horse trough and a drinking fountain. This was a long tank full of water for horses to drink out of. I placed the boat in the trough. I had a drink from the fountain had a rest then carried on walking the rest of the way home. 'Where is the boat Bob?' 'Peter had it last,' 'No you had it last at the Echo Square horse trough'. A dash back to Echo Square, the boat wasn't there so I got in the neck once again. More tears.

Jean and Peter had bicycles and I only had a fairy cycle (this is a very small bicycle). Mum and Dad had a bicycle made for two called a tandem with a seat on the back for me. Sometimes we would all go out for a bike ride together. I can remember going to see Uncle Ted and Aunt Eve. They lived over the river in a village called Kolverdone in Essex. They lived in a baker's shop so we had plenty of cream cakes.

When Dad had his week's holiday from the IPM, Mum and Dad decided to take us all camping at a place called Minster near Sheerness on the Isle of Sheppey. Dad liked the place as he used to go camping there when he was a boy and Sheerness was his home port when he was in the Navy. Everyone was excited, all the food, clothes and everything we would need for the holiday had to be packed into a large trunk ready for Carter Patterson, to collect and deliver to the camping site at 'The White House' at Minster.

But before we packed the tent away in to the trunk we had to erect the tent in the back garden to see that it was ok and that it was water proof. Peter, I and Scamp slept in it by ourselves telling each other ghost stories. The wind was rustling the tree and the tent was flapping and the dog growling. I don't know who was scared the most Peter or me.

Anyway the great day came, arrangements were made for someone to feed the chickens and rabbits and look after Scamp.

We were off! I was sat on the back of the tandem like King Dick. Poor Jean and Peter had to peddle their bicycles all the way to Minster. It was about 25 miles and I had a free ride. It used to take all day to get there. We used to stop at Aunt Emma's shop in Strood for an ice cream cornet on the way (she was Dad's sister, she looked after Granddad Pat, He was Dads father). Then we had to collect the trunk, erect the tent, get some water, light a fire and have a meal. Then we had to go to the farm for hay to fill our pallet (our bed) with straw. By then it would be quite dark, and we would look out towards Sheerness and see all the lights on the battleships at anchor. Then it was time for bed.

Up at the crack of dawn to go to the 'White House' for the milk for the porridge for breakfast

Then it was off to explore the place. 'Don't go to near the edge of the cliffs or you'll fall over the edge. Jean keep your eye on Bob don't let him wander off alone. Peter you look after the pair of them.'

'Here is the path down to the beach, let us go for a paddle. Jean what is this?' 'It is a jelly fish. Don't tread on it or it will sting you.'

'Peter is this crab?' 'Yes.' 'Let us chase Jean with it and put it down her neck.' 'I'll tell Mum if you do' 'MUM look what Bob and Peter have done' 'I'll tell your father about you boy's tormenting Jean.'

Then we would have a picnic on the cliff. After we eaten our lunch we would have a game of Hot Rice on the sands. By this time the tide would have gone out and we would walk right out on the sandbanks to collect some cockles and mussels. Then it was back to the tent for tea when it was dark. Dad took Peter and me looking for eels. What we did was to look into old tin cans that had been placed in the ditches for the eels to gather in. It was very hard to catch them as they were so slippery. Anyway, we managed to catch a few for Mum's supper. She loved them.

The next day we would all go to Sheerness for the day. We would all go on the fun fair, for a ride on the dodgem cars, then for a walk around the shops and then onto the beach to build sand castles and a sail on the 'Melrose', a motor boat, out to see the warships. Afterwards we would all walk along the sea wall back to Minster.

We would go for a walk along the top of the cliff. In the opposite direction to Laysdown Beach there was a caravan camp, shops and a café. We would all have a glass of lemonade each, and then we would go onto the beach and have a paddle. About 7 miles along the cliffs there is a place called Warden Point. They used to be a village here. In the 18th century there was a great storm and the cliff was washed away and the village slipped into the sea. They say if the sea is calm you can hear the church bells ringing. I have never heard them.

Peter and I had fishing net each and we would spend a lot of our time catching sticklebacks. Dad bought two fishing lines one for himself and one for Peter. I wasn't old enough to have one and off they would go to catch some fish. We had a great time, the sun always shining and the days were long.

But all good things come to an end. The holiday was over. Presents to buy for friends at home, the trunk to pack and take to 'The White House' for Carter Patterson to collect to take home for us. Say goodbye to the friends we had made, and then off on the long ride home to Scamp. Calling at Aunt Emma's for an ice cream cornet. Home at last. What a welcome we received from Scamp.

I started at Whitehill Infant's School at Easter 1933, and I didn't like it at all. I kept coming home at playtime but in the end I got used to it. I made friends with a boy called Tony Nash. Peter's friend was called Cyril Ashdown. Jean had a friend called Stella Lingerage who lived next door.

There was an epidemic of scarlet fever and diphtheria. The doctor came to the School and gave everyone a medical examination. We were all ok. We were lucky, a lot of children died with it.

We didn't have the money buy any comics to read. Dad used to bring them from work, out of the Pulp (this was waste paper sent back from printers for remaking into newspaper). I think that the names of the comics were Play Hour, Film Fun; Tiger Tim and Chicks Home.

Christmas came and the presents we received in your stocking were an apple, orange sweets, a toy, comics, a rubber ball (I wonder where they came from?), a scarf or a pair of gloves. I remember receiving a toy fort and some toy soldiers. Peter received a film projector and Jean a new bicycle.

It was King George V Jubilee Year, 25 years as King. Every girl and boy at school received a mug and a pocket knife. There was a party and firework display. Mum and Dad had made a flag out of a large white tablecloth. 'The White Ensign' the flag of the Royal Navy. He flew the flag with pride.

We used to go for a picnic to Shorn Woods. We had to walk across the Warren past Gravesend Airport across Thong Lane through a wood to Shorn Windmill. We would light a fire, boil a kettle of water and make a cup

of tea. There was a sand pit that we used to play in. Mum was always s telling us not to dig any tunnels into the side of the sand pit, as a child had dug one and it collapsed and trapped her. By the time she was dug out it was too late. She was dead her name was Vann (her brother Ron is one of my best friends today but we will get to him later in the story). We would have a good time and then it was the long walk home about four miles. A long way for a little boy to walk, so I used to get carried on a walking stick part of the way home.

One-day Dad and Mum asked us how we would like to live on a farm. We all said we would love to.

