

Roy's Growing Up Years.

My first recollection was starting school aged 5 in 1938 at Spondon Village Infants in Chapel Street (now a Bridge Club) I remember hand in hand with my Mum walking towards the head mistress in the main hall and quite terrified.

I was 6 when the War started and during the next 6 years there was always the threat of aerial bombing it was therefore essential that all house lights were protected from overhead visibility. All street lights were switched off, any cars on the roads had a special headlight deflector to shine a short distance in front, householders were instructed to blank all windows. I remember my Dad made some shutters to place against the windows with a toggle catch to keep them in place; many others had black curtains to pull across at night because there were wardens patrolling the streets who would knock on your door and shout 'put those lights out' for any infringement of the laws. In these times of hostilities families were encouraged to erect protective shelters although the authorities did have large substantial shelters but too far away, so I remember my Dad built an Air Raid shelter down the garden, I believe it came in kit form (Anderson) presumably on request: which was built half underground, it could take the 3 of us with spare space but had very little use except in a real emergency, fortunately our area was never a high risk for bombing, I recall he grew a large marrow on the top presumably another food source. The fear of gas being dropped was always a threat so all children had the daily ritual of carrying a gas mask to school; we also had the occasional test to quickly put them on should they be needed. When the sirens went as a warning of enemy aircraft approaching we all hid behind the strongest wall in the house in case of bomb blasts close by, no defensive shelters would have given any protection against direct hits. We could hear the bombers overhead and adults would cock an ear skywards to distinguish their unique sounds, often saying 'is that one of ours' fortunately (for us) they were en-route to more strategic targets in Birmingham, Coventry or Liverpool. We did have an anti-aircraft gun and search light battery close by: you could see the search light scanning the sky for an aircraft and when locked on the Ack-Ack guns would blast away, it was exciting stuff for a young lad. The following morning we would tour around the streets looking for shrapnel segments from the exploding shells, I know I kept many pieces in my bed room as souvenirs. I remember a solid chicane structure at the bottom of Cherrytree Hill allowing one vehicle at a time to pass and sufficient time for the army personnel to check everyone's ID.

I suppose you could call it 40s re-cycling, because milk was always delivered in pint glass bottles with a aluminium foil top, these were carefully removed washed and kept with other discarded silver foil objects as a national collection scheme. Another national community activity in season was to collect rose hips from around the hedge rows supposedly as base ingredient for rose hip syrup to be distributed at baby clinics. Our toilet was just outside the back door and very cold in the winter months and a bit spooky for a young lad in the dark so you didn't linger long.

I remember going to the Saturday afternoon pictures in the Village there was always some boy's adventure film showing, think we called it the sixpenny rush after buying a few penny worth of sweets from the little shop next door I know we were always disruptive and noisy, often the usherette would appear shining her torch on the guilty, but everyone was quiet when the film came on.

I had been diagnosed by the Doctor with throat problems, I must have been about 9 or 10 and was encouraged by my Mum and Dad to go with them on a shopping trip to town, and I should have been suspicious because Dad never went shopping. The bottom line is we arrived at the Children's Hospital in North Street and booked me in

for a tonsils and adenoids operation. The cruel thing was they never pre warned me and off they went leaving me with a box of chocs as some sort of guilt complex compensation for their actions. I always remember my Mother always held Doctor's in very high esteem because when one was due to call mum used to say 'must clean the step, Doctors coming'.

Another play area was the current A52 road thru Spondon, pre 1939 this was just a roughly excavated shape of a road which was halted due to the outbreak of war, the manholes were in-situ and were great hiding places and I recall it was very muddy with clay so on returning home parents knew exactly where we had been.

We had open fires throughout the house, 2 downstairs and a small one in the front bedroom, coal was the fuel of choice although wet slack mixed with potato peelings and tea leaves helped to eke out the swift burning or if we went out the fire was banked down heavily in the hope it would remain alight on our return, it also fired the back boiler for hot water, rumblings in the airing cupboard tank meant that the water was excessively hot so needed to be drained off to reduce the temperature. The oven over the fire was intended as a cooking instrument, rarely used but ideal for drying sticks for the morning ritual of fire lighting. The oven to me was ideal as a drying cabinet for raspberry leaves and as an inquisitive junior I thought if mixed with old tea leaves they were a substitute for tobacco leaves to emulate all the adult smokers. To smoke this substance I needed something like a pipe which I decided to make in my Dads well stocked tool shed, I felt you could make anything in there: the bowl was easiest with a flat bottomed drill, the wooden stem I made using the longest and smallest diameter drill I could find, this was a .125 dia drill and 3inch long I was unaware what a dangerous bit of kit I was making because on my first draw of the mixture I inhaled almost neat flames, fortunately it was sidelined for safety reasons before I cauterized my inside.

Our dustbins of the day were heavy metal corrugated ones emptied once per week and they contained everything including discarded food, ash from the fire yes everything, cannot visualize how those poor dustmen managed to lift them on to their shoulders prior walking them up the path to the cart to tip them in and returning them back into their original place.

Potato picking was another activity for older boys, recruitment I believe was at schools asking for volunteers and I know I put my hand up, think we were paid but very little. Transport was in a trailer behind a tractor a bit uncomfortable and bumpy but effective. The process in the field was to follow the tractor and spinner along the rows picking up the spuds that were now scattered on the surface then filling sack bags. An offshoot of this was to fill your pockets with the very small ones and on the way home thru villages bob your head above the trailer sides and discharge little potatoes at passing pedestrians who were puzzled as to where the missiles came from, not a clever thing I now know.

When my Dad had a bonfire we used to place potatoes in the middle to cook, retrieval was after the fire died down and we could rake them out, majority of the times they were burnt to a cinder, nevertheless we still split them open to retrieve the small amount of potato that was still edible.

Some of my Dad's brothers were farmers in Ambaston and Thulston and always enjoyed visiting with parents on our bikes, these visits led to helping with harvesting crops etc. On one visit we were haymaking and travelling back to the farm on the tractor I used to jump off to open the gates then back on until the next gate. Being inexperienced on one occasion when I jumped back on the tractor I grabbed hold of the hot exhaust pipe to pull me on, I screamed because my hand was badly burnt and

into the shape of the pipe, you can imagine the pain, I still feel it today. The bonus of having relatives in the farming business was access to additional rations: I remember we acquired half a pig, now this was very much a criminal activity in those days to obtain food products above the ration book allocation, I remember Dad made a pulley system above the stairs enabling my Mother to gain access to carve away sufficient slices and push it away out of sight for another time but always from prying eyes. Another activity was to glean wheat from the fields for our chickens, one area is now occupied by houses and before that was the multi story flats in Arnham Terrace, we also managed to get extra wheat from farms, Mum used to boil small or damaged potatoes as a treat for the chicks, nothing went to waste: Mums gained skills in economic management and how to make good nourishing meals from very little. Another adventure we did as young boys was to roam over the fields and over towards Ockbrook, we would spend hours away from home without parental consent but always returned home when hungry and prior to dusk, with the set question from parents, "where have you been all day".

There was a large fallen tree over a brook that we called it our Lancaster bomber, we rushed to climb aboard for our imaginary bombing mission over Germany, favourite position was being Capt at the front then bomb aimer and rear gunner. We applied all the noises of engines at takeoff and once airborne and over Germany the gun fights and even bombs exploding had our sound effects applied, fortunately we were never shot down returning home safely. We called ourselves the Wellington Gang not from the aircraft but due to wet grass we all wore Wellingtons. Catapults were also our favoured weapon, a little destructive at times, I am ashamed to say now but we thought Newts, now a protected species were a free target when bobbing their heads up for air in ponds, fortunately hits were rare.

We also did street football by putting two coats down as goals, there was very little traffic so no disruption, we did get a little agro when continually retrieving the ball from adjacent gardens I remember one lady who had no children was very angry towards us. We also played marbles in the street and conkers was a very popular pastime but seasonal, Dad used to drill a central hole for the string and we used to brag about how many of the opposition we had smashed. Kite flying was also a good boys hobby, Dad made my first kite, this was hexagonal shape made with thin canes covered with a light strong paper and great fun when the wind was strong letting out the string to gain a great height, I quickly gained the manufacturing experience to make many more.

Walking to school was approx one mile each way and was extended by myself to four journeys per day, this was brought about by the poor quality of school dinners when I found a full sized caterpillar between cabbage leaves (I can still see it now) the distance didn't feel unnecessarily difficult or tiring it's just something you did without thinking. When I went up to the middle school of Springfield in West Road I cycled there and parked my bike at the Alms houses in West Road. My bike was an own made assortment of various makes put together by my Dad but I was very proud of it and being envied by the lads who were less fortunate.

Another hobby or activity we would pursue was collecting train numbers, we would send away for an Ian Allen book containing details of all UK trains. We would perch ourselves on the crossing gates and tick off the train numbers as they passed, a great roar would erupt when a 'namer' came past because these were the fast express London trains and sought after as collectors.

Cycles enabled us to explore further a field, on one occasion we were near Bradgate Park in Leicestershire on a deserted back road and stumbled across a row of stout

brown tents, no one about so we entered and found they contained dozens of boxes of military ammunition. It was later established that these isolated areas were not uncommon and intended to disperse the vast bulk of ammunition required for the D-Day landings. The boxes were quickly opened and many explosives and ammunition roughly handled, we were totally unaware of the danger and severity of our actions. Nevertheless we thought a souvenir should be taken home, my choice was a 'hand grenade' together with many fuses and still oblivious to the danger. I was however aware my Dad would not have approved so I was burying it inside a Golden Syrup tin in the garden; I heard a voice behind me saying, 'what are you doing Son'. My furtive adventure exposed resulting in a clip around the ear plus a lecture and that was the last I saw of my Grenade, I assume disposed of in a sensible adult manner.

Spondon Church Boys Club was a great saviour to many young lads whose Dads were away on Military duty, we used to meet twice a week in the Vicarage and play rough indoor games like hockey and football. We always had football every Saturday afternoon; our results were never good so bottom of the league was norm.

T, E, M Barber the Vicar (a great man) ran the club and despite hostilities and restrictions of war time he always managed to organise a two week camping holiday for the boys, usually to a coastal area, and to see the sea was magical for us kids, he did this every year throughout the war and beyond, we had great times..

In 1945 Britain's darkest days were over following surrenders in the European and Far East theatres of war. This was time for great celebration and Street parties were held everywhere, our Street party was in Borrowfield Road, not many Dads about but chairs and tables were brought out, Mums with pinnies dashing about loading the tables with every thing they could spare in the food line, the atmosphere was very jovial after 6 years of uncertainty. There must have been dozens of children from all around the area spreading themselves along the forms and tucking in to everything on offer, a noisy, happy gathering (I still treasure the original photo of that event).

Another shamed activity was when new temporary houses were built to accommodate an increasing population or re-house the unfortunate who were bomb damaged, they were a pre-fabricated metal construction and a target for young boys to gather a handful of stones and run past them discharge the stones on the roof and run like hell into the next street.

My Dad's shed was a great place to make things; I remember trolleys were all the rage so my enthusiasm was drawn to making my own, this was done with old pram wheels and any boarding that was available with a foot or rope steering mechanism, these were all good basic engineering skills.

I remember my cousin Arthur, he was a few years older than me and wise to making explosives for fireworks, this skill intrigued me but he would not divulge the formula; he used to set them off in the fields in heavy duty tubing attached to a stout post in the ground, I thought the enormous bang was exciting (I did eventually get the formula and make my own unbeknown to my Dad).

Sledging was a great activity when the winter snows came, we did local sledge runs but one favourite area we would go was Darley Park, it was steep and longish down towards the river but stopping some distance away, it was a hazardous climb back avoiding the sledges hurtling down, the faster you go the more exciting: almost every winter you could rely on a good snow covering.

The great white freeze of 1947 brought chaos to the Country effecting all forms of transport and sport and a great headache to the authorities: not so to teenagers because the lakes and canals froze allowing us to ice skate. One of our ventures was to skate along the canal to Derby then on to Markeaton Lake where we joined hundreds

skating on the lake before the return journey; we needed to use the towpath near bridges where the ice was thin but a great adventure arriving home prior night fall. I remember my Uncle Arthur used to invite me occasionally to the re-opened Silverstone race track, we could park the car next to the track and watched the races from temporary seating on the roof of his car, this was very exciting for a young lad. My next school was the senior school in Church Street called Spondon House and the exact building which housed the hospital which treated the war wounded from the 1914/18 World War but adapted years ago for classrooms. I was always keen on sports and dare I say preferred that to academic studies. Our annual sports days were a major event in the school curriculum we were allocated 'sports houses' and these were named after explorers like Scott, Raleigh, Drake and Shackleton which was my house name, our colour was green and we wore a green sash to identify ourselves. My disciplines were hurdles and long jump; I remember representing the school at The Trent Valley sports days. We had a guest runner visit the School think he was an Olympian and I thought him a giant of a man being very tall with massive long strides; I suppose teachers thought he would be our mentor for greater achievements. I suppose school days for me were regarded with mixed feelings. It was somewhere you attended on a daily basis and the opportunity was there to absorb as many educational subjects as possible. I think we all wish we had done a little better but very pleased that the thirst for knowledge remained throughout my adult life eventually gaining high status. I was pleased my parents managed to get me into engineering and signed up for an indentured apprenticeship at Crossley Premier Engines, after my Dad and myself signed the official documentation which listed conditions of employment, 44 hour week, starting wage at 15 was 19/11d per week (or 99p) with all subsequent years wages stated. (I still have that documentation) We now put younger life behind us and embark on other interesting chapters of adult life.

Roy Battelle