

Reflections on the Memoir as a literary genre and on the production of my memoir, including the musical component

Academic Essay to accompany the M.Phil.

Memoir text

Robin Thomas June 2016

University of Salford

Contents	Page
1. Introduction	3
2. Introductory Essay on the Memoir Literary Genre	10
2.1. Creative Non-Fiction and Life Writing	10
2.2. Autobiography	13
2.3. Biography	14
2.4. Memoirs	16
2.5. The memoir	16
2.6. Examples of the Memoir	23
2.7. Conclusions	49
3. The Approach to this memoir	51
4. Writing the Memoir	55
5. The Musical Component	56
5.1. Solo Jazz Piano	56
5.2. Introduction to Music Portfolio	59
5.3. The Music Portfolio	62
6. Conclusions	69
7. Bibliography	70

1. Introduction

The aim of this academic essay is to provide some kind of context for the memoir which forms the basis of this M.Phil. submission. I offer some definitions of the memoir and later some thoughts on life writing and creative non-fiction, so that my approach to my memoir becomes clearer. Vivian Gornick, in *The Situation and the Story* (2002) states that:

A memoir is a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life, a tale that will shape experience, transform events and deliver wisdom.

Gornick, 2002: 91

Gornick's work will be referred to later in this essay, but her definition has been placed up front because it is judged to be especially appropriate and can therefore form the basis of a valuable mantra for my memoir, although it does set challenging objectives, including 'lifting a tale from the raw material of life' which will aim to 'transform events and deliver wisdom'. These would be lofty claims for any memoir and I will do well to match some of them.

William Zinsser, in *Inventing the Truth* (1998), suggests that:

Memoir is how we try to make sense of who we are, who we once were and what values and heritage shaped us. If the writer is seriously embarking on a quest, readers will be nourished by the journey, bringing along many associations with questions of their own.

Zinsser's words also go to the heart of my memoir, because, as is explained in this essay, I am writing primarily for my four grandchildren who live abroad. When they come to read this memoir I hope they will be nourished by the journey and I am sure they will bring along many associations of their own and connections they will want to make. Much of the detail will be new to them, but they will be able to make connections with things which will have been said by their parents and grandparents.

This useful definition can be found on the Literary Devices website (2015):

A literary memoir is usually about a special theme or about a part of someone's life, as it is a story with the narrative shape, focus and subject matter, involving reflection on some particular places or events.

To clarify my own thoughts on these definitions, I have taken the view that a literary memoir as a genre as opposed to any other memoir, should have a degree of literary merit and, of course, defining literary merit is highly subjective. Many memoirs have been produced in recent years and it is no criticism to say that some of them do not aspire to great literary merit but appeal solely because of the dramatic story, quite often dealing with misfortune, cruelty or neglect. Other memoirs are in the category of celebrities or sportsmen, where quite often the content has been ghosted by a professional journalist.

The position becomes a little clearer when one tries to justify the statement that the rise of the literary memoir has been a significant feature in the writing world in recent years. James Atlas, writing in the *New York Times Magazine* argues that

'it began like any revolution, almost imperceptibly' and he suggests it might have started with William Styron's *Darkness Visible* (1990), Suzanne Kayson's *Girl Interrupted* (1999) or Mary Karr's *The Liars Club* (1995), but he goes on to say: 'If the moment of inception is hard to locate, the triumph of the memoir is now established fact. This is a statement he made in 1996, which he justifies by the sheer volume of memoirs being published at that time.

It can be argued that the memoir now takes its place alongside the novel as a frequent visitor to the top table of popular reading choice and critical acclaim, and Helen McDonald's *H is for Hawk* (2015), which is discussed later, is a powerful contemporary example of this phenomenon. In addition to McDonald, a selection of recent memoirs are examined as exemplars later in this essay. As for the decision to complete an M.Phil. in Creative Writing, this is the culmination of many years of producing pieces of verse and prose in various contexts and the current postgraduate degree brings an element of focus and goal-setting into the process.

Creative Writing has been a strong, long term, interest of mine, but only recently has it become a compelling activity, driven by my need to tell this particular story to our newest generation, by which I mean my four young grandchildren who are growing up in Hong Kong. As will be shown in the memoir itself, I wrote articles and a poem for school magazines, produced a couple of articles about jazz whilst at University and delivered a supply of supposedly amusing poems to mark events such as birthdays and people leaving work. Indeed, most of my working life has been dominated by some form of writing, although not necessarily creative. My ideas about writing became a bit more focused in my middle years, when I attended some creative writing classes organised by Merseyside poet and writer, Gladys Mary Coles, and two of my poems appeared in anthologies she published. When I

reached retirement, I attended a number of workshops, including regular sessions with Gaia Holmes, a published poet based in West Yorkshire, and also a part-time lecturer at the University of Huddersfield. Three of my poems were published in an anthology produced by the group.

This has been an enjoyable, although modest period of creativity, but I was beginning to feel that I could do more, that I could pull together a number of experiences, coupled with a desire for some kind of family record. I have a similar feeling about my music, because as the memoir will outline, music especially jazz has been a powerful feature in my life, more geared to enjoyment than any aspirations towards a professional career and, as will be described in this essay, the whole project has allowed me to raise my compositional and jazz playing skills to a higher level, and the music will accompany and reflect themes of the memoir.

Once a writer starts to place work in the public domain, either through publication or via submission for a higher degree, it becomes less of an indulgence and more a challenge to attempt to match the best work in the genre of the literary memoir. It should be more than a dry account of what took place and needs to be novelistic in approach, with structure, narrative and characterisation, plus reflection on one's life and on the events going on at the time. After due consideration, the memoir was selected as the appropriate vehicle for this piece of creative non-fiction. A powerful reason, as outlined in the memoir itself is the compelling desire to communicate the family story to the next generation, but there is also a link with my own creative make-up. I feel a strong motivation to make sense of my life so far, rather than build up a fantasy world which might form the basis of a novel. In addition, I have always found verse to be a rewarding medium in which to work and the flexibility of the

memoir format allows me to include pieces of verse and indeed, prose composed at various stages of my life, to provide a trigger for how I felt at the time.

As will be explored in this essay, a memoir is different from an autobiography and is not the same as the plural version, 'memoirs', which often emerge after the retirement of a politician or an actor. In some of the most memorable examples of a memoir, a particular phase in the writer's life is described and brought to life, often adopting the feel of a novel, with a clear story and some sense of drama. In my case, a potential publisher might find that aspects of my life do not have the drama or the significance to warrant the effort. However, other examples of the genre show how aspects of a relatively ordinary life can become the basis of a worthwhile memoir. Andrew Collins produced a well-received memoir on the basis of 'growing up normal' in the 1970s. Karl Ove Knausgaard has been extraordinarily successful both commercially and critically with his memoirs and yet many of the episodes are completely mundane, indeed the very appeal of such sections is that he makes them compelling through his attention to what might seem to be trivial details. Both these works are referred to later in this essay. The challenge seems to be to take a life's episodes and to make them meaningful and relevant to the reader. The reader in the case of this project would be, initially, my assessors and, later, interested members of my family.

A variety of sources have been used for this memoir, primarily my own memory, but also discussions with relatives and a reference to a large body of documents, photographs and other materials. Pieces of original work have been included in the text where they illuminate experiences and feelings referred to in the memoir, so there is an element of anthology about the work. In addition, as a departure from

conventional memoirs, it includes a portfolio of original jazz tunes, performed and recorded by myself, which will reflect themes in the memoir.

The idea of music being used to paint a particular picture, to reflect a specific emotion or a person, is well-established right across the musical field. In the case of this memoir, I have identified twelve chapter headings and within each of those headings, I have singled out a more specific theme or incident to provide the basis for the musical inspiration. I have tried to use musical techniques and ideas to bring out the theme described in each chapter, so at a simple level, a slow paced tune in a minor key, with longish flowing phrases would immediately suggest a theme of sadness, while a more jaunty piece in a major key with shorter, more rhythmic phrases would be more appropriate for a chapter where the mood is essentially optimistic. The relationship between the text and the music is therefore a feature in this M.Phil. project.

Other sources will include personal appointments diaries, a wide range of documents built up over the years as hard copy or on a computer, discussions, and contacts with family, friends and colleagues, plus general library and online research. It is worth making the point at this stage, that I have used Dragon Naturally Speaking, a piece of speech recognition software to create this memoir. I discuss later the potential impact of this method, as opposed to writing or personally typing it into the computer. I have mentioned photographs in this memoir and they have proved to be an important source of ideas and inspiration, and I have made the decision to include a small selection of key images in the text. My view is that the inclusion of a small photographic section will add to the reading experience.

Looking back on the process, it has been a form of reconstruction and re-creation of aspects of my life, using the bare bones of memory to create a

framework, gradually delving into my own mind and through research with materials and other people. This is non-fiction but it is a life and a set of experiences and relationships viewed through my own lens which by definition is highly subjective. The creativeness has come from decisions to include or exclude certain aspects and in the way in which the story is put together. A surprising aspect of this process has been that having started to start to look into a particular topic, additional memories began to fly back to populate the story. This means there is far more in this memoir than I could have possibly anticipated at first sight and I have learned something about the very process of memory and how the past is recreated.

2. Introductory Essay on the Memoir Literary Genre

2.1 Creative Non-Fiction and Life Writing

In this section, I will offer a range of sub genres in which I will locate my own piece of work. If we take the world of writing in its broadest sense, it is a massive subject, which embraces personal letters, diaries, emails, business reports, academic essays, copy writing, journalism, plays, verse, song lyrics, the novel (fiction) and various branches of non-fiction, which in turn will cover some of the categories already mentioned. In terms of works intended for publication, non-fiction covers a wide range of topics, including factual books on food, travel, hobbies, and almost any subject under the sun, but the category most relevant to this essay is that of 'Life Writing'.

A useful introduction to this topic is provided by a blog from the City University New York. It quotes Patti Miller, who states that life writing is: 'Non-fiction writing on subjects of personal experience and observation; it includes autobiography, biography, memoirs, personal essay and travel and sojourn writing'. Miller then refers to Kada (1992) who describes life writing as 'a genre of documents or fragments of documents written out of life, or unabashedly out of personal experience of the writer' (29). The website then talks about contemporary trends which include political autobiographies, celebrities' biography and survivor memoir. The website also quotes psychologist Ira Progoff who had noticed the positive effect of life writing such as journal writing, since it can enhance personal growth and learning. The point is made that life writing enables family information as well as emotions and feelings about history to be remembered. For example, through life

writing we are given opportunity to pass down our family traditions and culture. This can also be the reason that people are becoming more interested in life writing.

Within the category of non-fiction, a separate and distinct category of *Creative Non Fiction* can be identified. In one sense, this term seems to imply a contradiction in terms, because we assume non-fiction to be just that, not made up, not invented and essentially true. However, as will be outlined, many areas of non-fiction involve imaginative re-creation of events. On the other hand, many novels are quite autobiographical, so there can be considerable overlap between the genres. Examples of novels with a strong autobiographical flavour would be the work of Charles Dickens, Laurence Sterne's *The Adventures of Tristram Shandy* (1759), *Maybe the Moon* (1992) by Armistead Maupin and Stan Barstow's *A Kind of Loving* (1962), where the hero, Vic Brown, is a draughtsman in an engineering company in West Yorkshire, exactly mirroring Barstow's own life.

Given the body of life writing which exists right across society, it is no surprise that there should be an academic interest in this material, from which social historians in particular can clearly derive great value. The social historian could well use the life of my family to explore what was going on in families in the 1950s and 60s, so that to take a specific example, my family's involvement in the 1951 Festival of Britain could add additional colour to what was already a significant historical event.

The website of Wolfson College (2015) dedicated to Life Writing makes the following point:

It is not only a literary or historical specialization, but it is relevant across the arts and sciences, and can involve philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, ethnographers and anthropologists.

The Wolfson website talks about the relevance of life writing across the arts and sciences and in my memoir it seems natural to comment not only on my musical development but also on the music that I was listening to. I have also attempted to examine psychological aspects of what was going on in our family. So to that extent, the established wisdom on life writing is in tune with the way I have approached the task.

In reflecting on the process which has led to this memoir, I started off with a blank canvas but very quickly started to identify the main themes and to create a narrative. In first draft form it emerged as a series of stories: we were evacuated to the countryside, my middle brother would take me to school, I passed the 11+, and my mother's brother joined the Navy and so on. As the story evolved, I started to ask myself questions: what sort of influence did my mother have on the development of her family? How did my oldest brother handle his homosexuality at a time when it was illegal? Why did my middle brother keep certain things quiet about his family? Could I indeed make any sense of these events? The whole point about the memoir is that I had to try to put the story into a sensible framework and reflect upon it. The process of writing the memoir has also been one of making decisions, to include or to exclude. How much personal detail should I include? How much can I say about a situation when I lack the real evidence? Whether I have done justice to these questions can be debatable, but I believe that my memoir does try to describe my Mother's influence on her family. I have made some observations on my eldest

brother's homosexuality, but detail was difficult because of the passage of time. I certainly tried to understand my middle brother's need to keep certain things quiet, but as he never talked about it, it has been a matter of conjecture. The very process of writing the memoir, assembling information and talking to relatives has stimulated some answers to the above questions.

2.2. Autobiography

Autobiography is a recognized genre where an individual, normally a person of some position in the public eye, writes the story of their life. Margaret Drabble defines autobiography as 'writing that purposefully and self-consciously provides an account of the author's life and incorporates feeling and introspection as well as empirical detail' (2000: 53). Drabble states that autobiographies are infrequent in English much before 1800 and identifies personal narratives of a largely new kind from 1800 onwards. They are 'characterised by a self-scrutiny and vivid sentiment that produced what is now referred to as.... autobiography' (ibid: 53). Drabble mentions Wordsworth's *Prelude* as 'a sustained reflection upon the circumstances of him himself being the subject of his own work' (ibid: 53). Drabble supplies other examples and in particular, mentions Vera Britain's *Testament of Youth* (1933), a major work on the conduct of the First World War.

In terms of literary value, which is ultimately subjective, the autobiography can be a work of high quality or it might just be an enjoyable romp through the life (so far) of a celebrity, quite often a footballer or a star of popular music. The role of the ghost writer looms large in this latter group and some variations exist, which could be interesting to explore further. So, for example, the footballer Steven Gerrard's

autobiography, though ghost-written, adopts the typical vocabulary and phraseology of the player, which, in my judgement, gives it a rather artificial flavour. One could argue that there is absolutely nothing wrong with this way of producing an autobiography, and indeed the book has been very successful. The point I am making is that the word autobiography covers a wide range of approaches and that distinctions can be drawn between different types of autobiographies.

Within the same general area, we are faced with autobiographies produced when the 'writer' is barely on the threshold of life. At the more serious end of this category, there have been a number of autobiographies which historically have been seen to be works of high literary value whilst at the same time, casting light on key periods and personalities in history. Again the question of literary value is subjective and it is necessary to look at the critical acclaim given to certain pieces of work in this field. Particular examples would be the works of Roy Jenkins, Tony Benn and Bill Clinton, all of which were well received critically and because of their contribution to our understanding of political events.

Whilst large parts of my memoir can easily be described as autobiographical, it also leaves out whole sections of my life, so it cannot be described as an autobiography.

2.3. Biography

Whilst only one writer, apart from the ghost writer, can produce an autobiography, biography, being written about a person, but not *by* that person, involves a much wider choice of writer and typically those who write biographies have a background in an appropriate knowledge and skills set such as creative writing, academia and

journalism, or all three. They need to bring wide-ranging qualities to the role, plus enthusiasm for the subject, but also a keen critical faculty, the skills of the historian in researching the subject, the ability to evaluate and analyse behaviour against the historical and personal backcloth and essentially, writing skills of a high order.

Examples of acclaimed biographers would include A.S. Byatt and Claire Tomalin.

Drabble devotes a significant section of her *Companion to English Literature* (2000) to biography as a literary genre and she states that in the last 40 years it has achieved a golden age and has found a favoured, if controversial, place in literary and intellectual life. It has risen to power as a virtually new genre, challenging the novel in its ability to depict character and explore ideas through narrative, with some 3,500 new subjects appearing each year.

Drabble takes us briefly through the history of the biography and in particular discusses the literary biography which is producing a large body of work. She mentions Richard Ellman's scholarly Irish trilogy, covering the lives of Yeats, Joyce and Wilde, and Michael Holroyd's flamboyant and socially expansive portraits of Lytton Strachey. She also mentions a renewed interest in lives of women in response to feminism, mentioning notable works by Hilary Spurling on the life of Ivy Compton Burnett, Victoria Glendinning on the life of Vita Sackville-West, and Claire Tomalin on Mary Wollstonecraft. There is also increasing interest in the lives of scientists such as Humphrey Davy, Newton, Freud and Einstein (102-106).

Parts of my memoir can be described as biography, especially those sections which deal with the lives of my parents and siblings. However, as biography, they would be incomplete and selective, only covering topics which tie in with the overall concept of the memoir.

2.4. Memoirs

Memoirs (plural) applies to a type of writing where a prominent person, perhaps a politician, a military person or a theatrical name will produce a series of observations and descriptions on key aspects of their life, especially their achievements. These should not be confused with autobiographies, which can be written by the same people, in that an autobiography, as discussed above, is intended to take the reader through the whole life of the subject, with no key areas excluded, hence the importance of dealing with background, birth, education and early life before the onset of fame. When a politician writes 'his memoirs', there is often an overlap with diaries, and Alistair Campbell's *The Blair Years* (2007) is subtitled as '*diaries*'. It would be beyond the scope of this essay to analyse a range of political and military memoirs and I have preferred to follow pieces of work clearly signposted as 'memoir' by authors such as Helen McDonald, Lorna Sage and Jackie Kay, all reviewed in this essay.

2.5. The Memoir

The rise in the importance of the memoir has been a major feature in recent book history and to some extent the genre has come of age with the award of the 2014 Samuel Johnson and the Costa prizes to *H is for Hawk* (2014), by Helen Armstrong. It is perhaps worth mentioning at this stage the popularity of what might be called the 'misery memoir'. These are stories of terrible experiences, often in childhood, where the writer was abused or neglected by parents or neighbours. These books have proved popular with readers and in some cases have drawn attention to serious

social issues. However, I believe that such memoirs, valuable though they may be, should be outside the general scope of this review. One has to be guided through the jungle of literature by contemporary literary opinion and I was immediately attracted to writers such as those mentioned above by the endorsement of other writers. I was not attracted to 'the misery memoir' by the relentless focus on abuse and neglect and by comments in some cases doubting the authenticity of such books.

The memoir is therefore at the heart of this project, in that the major work being put forward is a personal and family memoir, based on significant aspects of my life and reflecting on family relationships. It will have autobiographical aspects, but is not an autobiography, in that it will not cover the whole my life.

Roorbach (2008) provides a balanced introduction to the memoir in *Writing Life Stories*. In the preface he states that 'memoir as a popular genre has moved past most of its early controversies, and enjoys new standing in the world of letters and in the University' (13). For a definition he proposes, 'memoir is a true story, a work of narrative built directly from the memory of the writer, with an added element of creative research' (14). Roorbach makes the point that we are talking about memoir singular, and not memoirs, plural, which are typically by politicians, popular music stars, TV personalities and actors.

Roorbach then quotes Annie Dillard from her introduction to the *Anthology of Modern American memoirs*. 'The chief danger memoirists face is starring in their own stories and becoming fascinated' (17). This suggests that the writer of the memoir should avoid over-estimation of his or her contribution to the drama.

Dillard makes the point that most good memoir turns out not to be about the memorised at all and mentions Primo Levi's book about survival in Auschwitz, which is not primarily about Levi, but more about the situation in a concentration camp. This has been a challenge for me because my memoir is clearly conceived from a personal standpoint, but I hope I have said interesting things about my family and about contemporary events and situations. In addition, I have tried to use my writing skills to make the memoir readable but I have also used my wider knowledge of all the topics covered in the memoir, including employment, education, music and sport to give weight to my observations.

Vivian Gornick in *The Situation and the Story* (2001) makes many useful and perceptive comments relevant to writing a memoir. Her book is suggested as a guide to the art of personal narrative and she starts with a description of a most effective eulogy she observed which had a dramatic build-up, a texture and the presence of the one doing the remembering. More particularly, Gornick states 'the better the speaker imagined herself, the more vividly she brought the dead doctor to life' (5). Gornick continues: 'The unconsolidated narrator has the monumental task of transforming low-level self-interest into the kind of detached empathy required of a piece of writing that is to be of value to the disinterested reader' (7). This ties in with Dillard's point about not over-estimating one's personal contribution to the drama. The conclusion we can draw from this early chapter in Gornick, is that the memoir writer has an especially difficult task in making the material interesting and memorable for the reader. Why should the reader be interested in aspects of some fairly ordinary lives?

The task is to make the memoir extraordinary. To attempt to achieve the extraordinary in my memoir I have tried to create a dramatic narrative which

maintains the reader's interests, whilst at the same time using language and imagery to create pictures for the reader. The structure of the memoir will be important so that there is a logic about the way the story unfolds. It is also crucial in a family memoir to highlight quirky characteristics, dramatic moments, personal growth and development of participants, all set against the context and environment, which will include the time, the location and relationships. However, there may be ethical issues to do with the sensitivities of surviving family members and other people mentioned in a memoir. The Norwegian writer, Karl Ove Knausgaard upset family members with his frank exposure of family issues, but in my case, the main actors are no longer alive. The other factor is that my memoir is not intended for publication and will not be made available to those who might be offended.

Later on in her book she looks more closely at the memoir and Gornick states that: 'Thirty years ago people who thought they had a story to tell sat down to write a novel. Today they sit down to write a memoir' (89). She discusses the limitations of the novel and identifies a desire for authenticity and truth amongst readers. Gornick continues:

Truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happens to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the largest sense that the writer is able to make of what happened.

Gornick, 2002: 90

The message I draw from this statement is that the retrospective process therefore takes priority. She quotes VS Pritchett who once said of this genre: 'it's all in the art. You get no credit for living' (91).

Another key text for understanding of the memoir is *Inventing the Truth* (ed. William Zinsser, 1998), in which Zinsser invites a number of prominent memoir writers to comment on their approach to the genre. In his introduction, he makes this statement: 'This is the age of the memoir. Never have personal narratives gushed so profusely from the American soil in the closing decade of the 20th century. Everybody has a story to tell, and everyone is telling it' (3). Frank McCourt, whose *Angela's Ashes* helped to create the interest in the memoir and whose work *Tis* is discussed later, describes in Zinsser how he had always enjoyed writing but it was only in 1994, at the age of 64, that he started writing the book which made his name. He says, 'I began by writing in the past tense about my parents meeting in New York and having me. Then, suddenly – on page 19 of the book – I wrote a sentence in the present tense that says: "I'm in a playground on Classon Avenue in Brooklyn with my brother Malachy. He's two, I'm three. We're on the seesaw"' (78) He then describes how he continues the book in the present tense, with a great lack of punctuation and with simple sentences and simple vocabulary. The book has sold many copies, received critical acclaim and was turned into a successful film. So there is much that the prospective memoir writer can learn from McCourt, including the sense of energy and immediacy generated by the use of the present tense and the degree of informality in the writing.

Zinsser also invited the American writer Ian Frazier to contribute to this volume and he describes his approach to his memoir, *Family* (2002). He stresses the importance of research which took two and a half years for this project and he makes

the point that ‘there comes a time when you have to stop the research and start writing’ (171). What Frazier proposes sounds eminently sensible, but not all writers are in a position to spend this amount of time on research before putting pen to paper. Given the constraints of a two-year, part-time degree, I have to regard the 73 years leading up to signing up with the University of Salford as the research phase and the writing had to start early on in the programme in order to receive the support that is necessary and to complete the exercise by the deadline. This has meant committing ideas to print which have then needed editing and improving. The situation for each writer is unique and whilst in-depth research before writing may be the ideal scenario that is not always possible.

In considering his approach to research, Frazier recalls:

My method in writing this memoir was to look for artefacts that suggested narrative. If you are going to go through letters, for example, the first thing you do is to date all the letters and put them in chronological order. That is your plot right there.

In Zinsser, 1998: 168

He goes on to add that narrative is also suggested by physical objects ‘like congratulatory telegrams. My mother saved them all’ (168).

The part of Frazier’s advice which chimes most closely with my own experience, has been his use of artefacts and here a tendency to hoard, whilst not contributing to good housekeeping, has been a bonus for preparing my own memoir. Photographs are commented on elsewhere and I imagine will be valuable for any memoir writer, but in addition I have kept examples of my own written work over the years, including

humorous pieces of verse written for workmates leaving for other jobs or retiring. School magazines have been delved into and pieces of university journalism dragged out of dusty boxes to spice up the memoir.

My memoir is essentially a family memoir and a recent article in *The Guardian* by novelist Tim Lott (2015) has some interesting comments on the way we view families. He states:

It is customary in our culture when we talk about family to be talking exclusively about people who are alive. However, in this we may be the exception rather than the rule. Many cultures practice ancestor worship, and still more give a great deal of time honouring the departed members of their kin. But we burn them, bury them and forget them fairly quickly in comparison.

Lott, 2015:2

Lott then describes his emotional response to visiting the grave of his late father. The feeling gave him great satisfaction and he paid tribute with a handful of wild flowers. The writer then describes his motivation for writing his own family memoir, *The Scent of Dried Roses* (1997), which traces his own family back to the beginnings of the last century. He explains, 'the sensible reason was an enquiry into the hereditary and sociological reasons for my mother's suicide. But perhaps a deeper reason was that I wanted to feel part of something larger than myself' (2015: 3).

He talks about dead relatives, or ancestors, being part of:

the project in elevating us from anonymity and our own fates as soon to be dead relatives... They help locate us and raise us above the scabbling, mortal primates we are. They are part of the story in a web of stories, but they are a part that many of us have forgotten to honour.

Lott, 2015:3

I find myself relating very closely to Tim Lott's analysis. I am not into ancestor worship nor obsessed with our early family history. However, I am part of a continuum and I think it is important that my grandchildren can at least span a century or so in exploring their origins.

2.6. Examples of Memoir

Jackie Kay's *Red Dust Road* (2010) is the story of her adoption. She is the daughter of a Nigerian father and a white Scottish mother and was adopted at birth. As an established adult, she set off to locate her mother and her father and the book takes us through this process with a great deal of warmth and humour. Kay is a respected novelist and academic and she brings those skills to this acclaimed text. She uses time very flexibly so that the incident described in Chapter One actually takes place later on in the story but is such a dramatic incident that it draws you into the book. This is where Jackie meets her father Jonathan in a hotel in Nigeria but it turns out that Jonathan is dominated by religion and he introduces the topic into the proceedings almost before anything else:

Jonathan is moving about from foot to foot, shifting his weight from side to side, like a man who is about to say something life changing. He begins: 'Before we can proceed with this meeting, I would like to pray for you and to welcome you to Nigeria.'

Kay, 2010: 3-4

A first impression of *Red Dust Road* is that it reads like a novel and this extract takes us straight into real action, so that the reader is inspired to go further. Asking the question, 'what will happen next?' As Zinsser states:

Good memoirs are careful act of construction. We like to think that an interesting life will simply fall into place on the page. It won't... Memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half remembered events.

Zinsser, 1998: 6

Kay has effectively turned this episode of her life into something of a novel, where she has been able to impose narrative order on a wide-ranging series of events. She communicates a strong sense of theatre because this whole episode is dramatic. There is a sense of place which ranges from Scotland to Nigeria and Kay is excellent in describing each location and conveying the mood and feel of the place. Kay also uses dialogue with verve and this raises one of the issues in any memoir because it is unlikely that exact dialogue can be remembered and so there is a need for imaginative creation of conversations, which helps to respond to the classic advice 'show not tell'. Kay uses dialogue right from the early stages of her life where any

form of recording of such dialogue would not have been possible, but as an experienced novelist she is able to use dialogue in a very realistic way which contributes to the pace and variety of the memoir.

Another recent example of the memoir is *Bluebird* (Vesna Maric: 2009). This is her personal account of leaving Bosnia Herzegovina when she was 16 and coming to Britain to escape the war. When the Bosnian war started, Maric was a typical 16-year-old and as school broke up, shelling began and snipers appeared in the cities. An opportunity arose for her to travel to Britain with the help of a charity which assisted people to escape the war and her memoir, which was written a few years later, provides a compelling account of the sadness, the tragedy and the humour which she was able to observe. After arriving in England, Maric was provided with accommodation in the Lake District and ended up living in Kendal. Here Maric describes a number of amusing incidents including a visit from the Jehovah's Witnesses. At one point Maric says:

'I'm not interested in your religion I'm sorry,' I tried to sound as polite as possible; 'You see I'm an atheist. I don't like religion. It just causes trouble in the world...' We agreed that Marlon Brando was the most handsome actor ever. Apart from maybe Johnny Depp but in a different way.

Maric, *Bluebird*, 2009: 200

There is a degree of authenticity about this conversation, with a seemingly surreal mention of Johnny Depp. She has a good eye for detail and for picking up aspects of

her new environment. In one example, she is having scones and butter in the Lake District. An English host asks Maric to interpret and she announces that:

In this country we very much appreciate if people say 'please' when they're asking for something and respond with a 'thank you' when something is given to them. I translated. We have noticed that you Bosnians don't usually say these words, so please can you make an effort from now on... The old man who appeared to be enjoying his scones and jam said: 'Thank you please!' and everybody roared with laughter.

Maric, *Bluebird*, 2009: 66

What makes this memoir so effective is that it is a foreigner's view of England at a particular time, which creates a distinctive perspective.

A contrasting example of the memoir can be seen in *Falling Leaves* (1997) by Adeline Yen Mah, which became an international best-seller. The author was born in 1937 in an affluent Chinese family which enjoyed privileges during a time of cultural upheaval. She suffered appalling emotional abuse at the hands of her cruel stepmother, but recovered her fortunes and put her life together. The book not only covers key episodes in the life of Adeline, but also chronicles the massive changes going on in mainland China at the time. It is written in a very clear and quite unemotional style which from time to time introduces elements of Chinese philosophy. The underlying theme is the strong personality and determination of the main character to survive an almost unbelievable range of misfortunes and to end up as a successful academic in the USA.

Given that my memoir is dedicated to my four grandchildren who live in Hong Kong, I often read about China and Hong Kong if only to widen my knowledge when I am there. Apart from informing me about Chinese history, I found that the writer was able to deal with detail and background information without losing my interest. Her attention to detail enhances the work and although there is a great deal to cover it creates a sense of pace which enhances readability.

Having moved to Hong Kong, Adeline Yen Mah describes an industrial dispute:

These were the months immediately preceding the Cultural Revolution which was shortly to convulse China. The chaos on the mainland eventually spilled over into Hong Kong and Portuguese Macau. Left-wing circles mounted full-scale riots against the police. Anti-colonial slogans were plastered everywhere. Loudspeakers blared forth pro-Communist propaganda. Bombs were found in the streets.

Yen Mah, 1997: 180

In this way, Yen Mah allows aspects of current historical events to provide a backcloth to the memoir, of special interest to me in view of my frequent visits to Hong Kong.

A memoir with a similarly moving theme is Mark Sanderson's *Wrong Rooms* (2002) in which he describes his relationship with a new boyfriend, Drew, who turns out to be a potential partner for life. The first part of the book is an intricate description of the way their relationship develops, and it paints a vivid picture of both their life in London and also Sanderson's work environment, which included contact

with a number of media personalities. The mood of optimism continues until the first black cloud appears on the horizon in the form of serious illness. The memoir then takes us through the progress of the illness and the ultimate death of Drew and no details are spared. Towards the end of the memoir, Sanderson describes how he honours a pledge to end the life of Drew when the pain and stress of living becomes intolerable. This information, plus descriptions of some sexual encounters and family issues, shows a degree of personal disclosure which goes beyond the previous memoir examples quoted. This honesty is an appealing characteristic in the context of this memoir, but it may well not be a path that other memoir writers will want to follow. They may be concerned about the very personal disclosure of intimate details and the potential impact on, for example, parents, other family members and friends. On the other hand, people who do not wish to disclose any personal information are unlikely to be motivated to write a memoir. Ultimately, it is a matter of balance. The whole question of disclosure of personal information is one which every memoir writer has to consider. The openness displayed by Sanderson did not offend me and is highly appropriate to the memoir. In the case of my memoir I have chosen to limit the amount of self-disclosure, because the memoir is not just about me. I need to protect the sensibilities of some members of the family but as some of the characters mentioned in the memoir are no longer alive, I believe I have a degree of licence.

Joan Didion's *Blue Nights* (2011), focuses on the life and subsequent tragic death of her daughter Quintana. Of all the memoirs studied for this exercise, *Blue Nights* is the most unconventional and much of it has a stream of consciousness feel about it. Describing a piece of work as 'unconventional' is clearly a subjective judgement and my basis for comparison are memoirs that I have examined where most of them have had a structure similar to a traditional novel, but Didion creates

her own structure. Some chapters are two pages long, some three, some as long as ten pages. She also moves away from conventional paragraphing so that we are moving more into the area of poetry or where she has decided that the layout of the page is visibly important. This can be a way of introducing a list of actions: After a bout of sickness affecting Didion herself, she reports a number of actions as follows, laid out like this:

I got released from Lenox Hill.

My own doctor got back from St Petersburg.

After further days of unproductive cardiac monitoring the cardiac hypothesis was abandoned.

An appointment was made with yet another new neurologist, this one at New York Cornell.

Didion, 2011: 147

A conventional approach would have assembled all the above sentences in one paragraph and by breaking it up as Didion has done, it does inject a degree of drama and immediacy as well as creating some white space on the page, giving each statement a certain impact.

Later on in the book, Didion reflects on the death of her daughter, Quintana. She finds a book given to her by her daughter called *Baby Animals and their Mothers* and her mind ranges over a number of memories and images. This is in chapter twenty-eight (page 159 and beyond), and a short quotation cannot represent the feel of this chapter.

Sometimes, Didion's innovative style works well in that it captures the moment and the particular feelings of a mother faced with the imminent death of her adopted daughter, but at other times, to this reader it can appear disjointed and key details can be lost. The message is that there is no one way of writing a memoir. There is an opportunity for innovation and originality. After all, by definition, a memoir is personal and it can be said that there are no rules. But if the writer, by steering clear of some of the conventions of creative writing, such as a narrative to which the reader can relate, manages to confuse the reader, then the innovation may be wasted. In contrast, one can argue that Didion, an experienced and highly acclaimed author, has deliberately created an atmosphere which reflects her own sense of despair and disorientation.

Perhaps the most prominent memoir writer in recent years is the Irish-American, Frank McCourt whose *Angela's Ashes* (1996) based on his poverty-stricken family upbringing in Ireland, was a best seller and was also turned into a well-received film. McCourt is thought to have pioneered the current preponderance of 'misery memoirs' which has taken over whole sections of our bookshops. However, I believe this is an unfair connection which is being made. Whilst *Angela's Ashes* undoubtedly deals with extreme poverty and degradation, McCourt's writing skills lift him well above the popular army of misery memoir writers. He has a great feel for dialogue and humour in the Irish context, a good example being his description of his first communion and confession: 'There is heavy breathing. The priest has his hand over his mouth and he is making choking sounds as talking to himself, Mother o' God' (140-1).

Whilst the humour is everywhere, McCourt is able to capture episodes of his life with a colourful directness, as with the occasion he and his brother go down to the St

Vincent De Paul Society to try to get something for their Christmas dinner: “No goose,’ says Butcher, ‘no ham. No fancy items when you bring the docket from the St. Vincent DePaul. What you can have now, missus, is black pudding and tripe or a sheep’s head or a nice pig’s head”’ (105).

The follow-up, *Tis* (1999) focuses on his later life in New York and it effectively captures the atmosphere of that city and the wider issues affecting America at the time, including the war in Vietnam. *Tis* scores well on literary quality with a typical sense of Irish energy and flow in many of its pages. It is also stacked with humorous episodes, many of which show the author in an unfavourable light. There are moments when a stream of energy seems to jump off the page as McCourt, for example, describes some of his experiences in the world of education. His first day of teaching in New York is something of a nightmare:

What am I supposed to do with this class, the first in my own teaching career, students of Economic Citizenship, pelting each other with chalk, erasers, bologna sandwiches? When I walk in and place my books on the teacher’s desk they will surely stop throwing things. But they don’t. They ignore me and I don’t know what to do till the words come out of my mouth, the first words I utter.

McCourt, 1999: 301

In addition, *Tis* acts as a commentary on contemporary events, encompassing wars, uprisings, assassinations and the development of modern jazz. My own extended memoir goes into contemporary jazz in some detail (not submitted here), and includes experiences in New York, so McCourt’s observations are interesting

and relevant in that respect. McCourt is honest about his mistakes and there is no sense of a huge ego lurking within the lines, attempting to justify his actions. This raises the whole question in a memoir about the construction of self. McCourt is honest about his weaknesses and does not try to project a false image of himself. I have tried to present myself in my memoir as a person who is believable and honest.

An approach which allows the style of writing to reflect his age at the time of the story is Damian Barr's *Maggie and Me* (2013), which won a BBC Radio Four Book of the Week Award. This memoir focuses on the effect of Margaret Thatcher's period of power on Barr, his family and his community. The early description of his family life, seen through his eight-year-old eyes, is touching and effective. It takes time to enter into his vernacular, but after a while the rich story-telling draws you in. He creates an atmosphere similar to that of Stan Barstow's *Joby* (1971), although pushed forward a few decades. As Barr grows up, so the style of writing starts to reflect his increasing maturity and he is particularly skilful in recreating the world of a young boy in extremely trying circumstances. It seems impossible that Barr could remember in detail his escapades and encounters and of course he may be demonstrating the memoir writer's skill in imaginative recreation. It may also be the case that Barr has been able to consult some of his contemporaries, which is far harder for me as I have lost touch with many of them, although I have been able to check details with some people.

Barr is writing this whilst still a relatively young man. My ability to recall after a much longer gap has been tested and I have had to devise techniques to deal with such memory gaps, by wider reading and by internet searches. Barr frequently refers to actions and words by Margaret Thatcher, including the closure of the Ravenscraig Steelworks. Despite the rich humour which emerges as Barr enters his adolescent

years, a picture is created of the grim reality of his life in his poverty-stricken and highly dysfunctional family. Later on, the writer gives a touching but amusing account of his gradual awareness that he is gay, including an irrational fear that he might catch or might have caught AIDS. There is a strong streak of honesty in the way Barr deals with his life and it demonstrates how the memoir writer needs to be aware of the whole question of disclosure and its possible consequences. Barr's openness fits in with the change in attitudes which has been seen in the last thirty years or so, and by the time his book was published, he was already in the public eye and was not on his own in writing about these subjects.

Finally, a few years after the main actions described, Barr reflects on the ousting of Thatcher from office and on the pathos of the diminished picture of Thatcher as she struggles with old age and a declining mind. Barr reflects how he was able to emerge from his horrific background to create a successful career, criticising many aspects of the Thatcher legacy but also recognising in an ironic way that his drive and ambition owes something to the example set by her.

A widely recognised and applauded example of the memoir genre is that of *Bad Blood* by Lorna Sage (2000), an account by this now deceased English Literature professor of her childhood in post-war Britain in the village of Hammer in North Wales, not far from Whitchurch in Shropshire. This is another dysfunctional family, and she mixes comedy with the pain of some broken relationships in her family. The memoir captures the feel of a childhood in an isolated area and from a technique angle, demonstrates the importance of place, detail and a contemporary feel in a memoir:

Sometimes we'd go to the cinema in Wrexham or Shrewsbury but at others we'd go to Chester to walk on the Roman walls in fine weather, or in the Rows when it rained, or visit the cathedral and struggle along the gloomy side aisles hung with tattered, bloodstained regimental colours, or to the museum to look at Roman remains, Egyptian mummies, stuffed animals, armour, weapons, old costumes...

Sage, 2000: 124

At a personal level, I know Chester well and Sage has captured its atmosphere with great accuracy. Sage later reflects the excitement of the emerging rock 'n' roll scene to her as a teenager. This book won the Whitbread Prize for Biography, although the author, who had been professor of English at the University of East Anglia, died shortly after the publication of her memoir. My judgement is that *Bad Blood* sets standards which will be hard to emulate but it also points in a direction of value to the aspiring memoirist. She makes the mundane memorable, she is not afraid to discuss intimate family issues and she brings alive a quiet corner of Britain. The message is not to discard information until you have concluded that it will not add to the memoir. She even makes something interesting out of illnesses, discussing the effects of sinus infections.

The memoir writer can learn from all the samples studied so far. Sage is unusual in not including much in the way of dialogue, whereas many of the other works considered in this essay use dialogue extensively. We have to ask the question why she chose not to use dialogue and I have no easy answers, except that she manages to paint a very vivid picture without it. From reading other memoirs, there is no doubt that dialogue helps to move the story along and provides rich dramatic

moments. My challenge has been to use dialogue where I have felt able to, but also to attempt to emulate Sage's rich description and reflection to provide balance. In addition, she writes in a very direct manner, but allows herself flights of creative description. At one point, Sage describes riding on a tractor and reflecting on the changes in rural life by reference to some verse by Thomas Hardy. Later, Sage considers her parents' choice of her name, 'Lorna', inspired by Lorna Doone. Sage enjoyed this book as a child and creates a dream of herself being a character in the book and as you would expect from a leading literature academic, the memoir is peppered with appropriate references, indicating her growing appreciation of literature as she grew up.

This leads into a long discussion on the novel and how family life drove her to her books and school work with a passion. She is also excellent at relating the action to the contemporary political and economic scene, which is one of the objectives of my own piece of work. As a coincidence, Sage uses part of her memoir to describe the town of Whitchurch. I say coincidence because my birthplace was the very same town, indeed, the same nursing home, and she tells me more about the place than I could ever know, on the basis that although I was born there, I moved back to Merseyside as a very young baby and therefore with no memories of the place. Overall Sage draws you into the memoir because you share her emotions about the people she encounters. The reader is instinctively supportive of Sage in the way that she overcomes disadvantages to achieve success. She has a freshness and original style with humour mixed with hard-hitting directness. After she becomes pregnant at 17, she describes what has been planned for her:

My parents' plan was that I should go to a Church Home for Unmarried Mothers, where you repented on your knees (scrubbed floors, said prayers), had your baby (which was promptly adopted by proper married people) and returned home humble and hollow eyed.

Sage, 2000: 237

In this short paragraph, Sage has summarised the action planned for her and has made some comments about a hypocritical society at that time. It is interesting that it is a church home that is being used for her and at the time of her writing the memoir, contemporary attitudes had changed. People living through the 1950s and 60s, including myself will have been aware of girls who became pregnant and were forced to have their child adopted, often causing a lifetime of pain. Sage highlights the incredibly cruel situation at the time and the fact that quite often religious institutions played their part in this cruelty. In the event, her child was not adopted.

Bad Blood was very well received by critics when published in 2001 as being 'impossible to lay aside' (Jonathan Raban), and 'the book of the year' (Margaret Drabble). Other endorsements are from Clive James, Doris Lessing and Claire Tomalin. My own experience reflects the views of these distinguished observers and I rate the memoir as being the most profound and insightful of the limited sample I explored.

Bringing the current interest in memoirs right up to date is the startling phenomenon of the Norwegian writer, Karl Ove Knausgaard who has achieved world-wide interest and massive sales for his highly detailed and slow-paced *A Death in the Family* (2009), part of his 'My Struggle' series. This work has the advantage of being highly readable and yet in no way is it superficial. After a

complex opening about death, with some quite technical observations about the process of dying, the writer takes you into his world in a seductive way so that the process of reading it becomes almost addictive. The whole question of the boundary between the memoir and the novel comes into sharp focus in this work and yet every detail has an authentic feel about it. In my judgement, this work is undoubtedly a memoir, but it has the feel of a novel because of the authenticity of part of his life when he was very young. It seems as if the writer has a photographic memory because he remembers and recounts the minute detail of his life from his mid-teens. The fact that it is a translation from the Norwegian does not seem to reduce the intensity of the work. This memoir is perhaps more revealing than many other memoirs and it is known that the writer had problems in terms of the way certain people, still living, were portrayed. The memoir is very strong on reflective skills and from time to time, he departs from the narrative to analyse his feelings at the time and the implications of his feelings. During my own reading, I found the balance between plot and reflection most acceptable. The author has effectively moved the reader into a position where details of his inner-most thoughts are greeted with the same anticipation as the more action oriented passages.

Later in the memoir, after his father's death, the writer goes into minute detail in describing his arrival at the airport and his entry to the plane. These are the kind of details that most readers will be very familiar with and yet it has a certain intensity and power especially when interspersed with flashbacks of experiences with his father. Elsewhere in the memoir, Knausgaard makes the important point about how a child interprets things at the time and how an adult does looking back:

The whole world lay between the trademarks of then and now, and as I thought about them, their sounds and tastes and smells reappeared, utterly irresistible, as indeed everything you have lost, everything that has gone, always does. The smell of short freshly watered grass when you're sitting on a football pitch one summer afternoon after training, the long shadows of motionless trees, the screams and laughs of children swimming in the lake on the other side of the road, the sharp yet sweet taste of the energy drink XL I9.

Knausgaard, 2009: 401-2

Knausgaard continues in this vein for a number of lines and then makes the point that: 'the sole difference, which is the differences in a child's reality and an adult's, was that they were no longer laden with meaning' (402). The same idea is clarified a few lines later: 'The world was still the same, yet it wasn't, for its meaning had been displaced, and was still being displaced, approaching closer to meaningless' (403).

The lesson from this section is that of reflective analysis and comparisons between the perspectives of a child and those of an adult. This is a difficult balance to achieve and it has been one of my aims in my memoir. I have tried to achieve this balance by endeavouring to enter into my world as a child and refrain from adult-like reflections at that stage. I have attempted to recreate the innocence and magic of childhood, which I can then reflect upon later in the memoir.

Don Walker's *Shots* (2009), by one of Australia's leading songwriters, is a quirky and evocative reflection on his early life in Australia and of his exciting experiences on the road as a musician. The edgy prose he deploys is almost poetic, with long sentences showing a stream of consciousness influence which reflects Bob Dylan

and Joni Mitchell and connects with his role as a musician and songwriter. Walker realises the importance of instruments in the development of popular music and provides specific description of the guitars he used. This is an approach which will influence my own style, especially in dealing with musical topics. It is well accepted that styles of instruments used to indicate a feel for a particular period, so that for example people writing in the 1950s and 60s, can mention instruments like the Fender Stratocaster and the Gibson Les Paul and immediately that period is captured. I am encouraged to borrow some of his ideas for my extended memoir, because in my own case the development of new instruments through technology has been an important part of my musical development. There is also the point that styles in instruments used in popular music can be very reflective of particular times to supplement the fact that the music, for many people operates as part of the soundtrack of their lives.

Walker's description of other musicians and bands is very evocative and has encouraged me to talk about some of my musical experiences in terms of the individuals and the collective identity of the band. Walker also has an original take on description, ranging from open air scenes to cities and live rock music:

There was another creek before this one, far to the north, a place of catacombs, cathedral floors of tired black water and silence save the dipping of the oars, the quiet splick of the paddle sending folds of lead rolling into the dark, black carapace and claws watching back from the dawn or twilight of the world.

Walker, 2009: 14

Walker paints evocative pictures of his environment and of his youthful activities, but his quirky approach to language creates difficulties in developing a fluent narrative and leads to incomplete character development in my view. Ultimately to me, the memoir is unsatisfactory and slightly irritating, but there are enough imaginative leaps to stimulate some thoughts for my own piece of work. The fact that Walker is a songwriter and musician has clearly shaped his approach to language, both from a stream of consciousness angle, as indicated in the introduction to this section and also in terms of the rhythms of popular music creating a kind of rapid rifle fire delivery, in the way that a rock drummer might punctuate a break.

Mary Karr's *The Liars Club* (1995) is widely regarded as a ground-breaking work which may have helped to initiate the growth of the genre. She writes about growing up in a swampy East Texas refinery town in a dysfunctional family with an alcoholic, multi-married mother. Throughout the memoir, she writes in a raw and direct style. In this example, she describes a visit to the beach:

Then that shadow (her mother) was climbing the weathered steps of a beer joint called The Breeze Inn. It was a little screened in shack, really, high on spindly stilts. More than one storm had blown it over, but they kept propping it back up. Inside was a bar for the shrimpers and for fellows needing a bump of something to help them get through their family picnics. There was also a pinball machine usually played by sunburnt kids looking pissed off and waiting for the daddies to finish the last swallow and comeback to swimming or cooking hot dogs.

Karr, 1995: 109

These details help to bring the memoir alive, not just in the sense of the personalities but also in the environment of Texas at the time. Later she describes the build up to a storm: 'For two days before the storm came inland, folks had been getting ready. Weather reports got scarier. Windows were boarded up with sheets of plywood. Bags were packed. The supermarket had runs on batteries and candles and canned beans' (82-83).

The short sentences create a mood of urgency. 'Scarier' has a strong USA feel to it and the runs on batteries, candles and tinned goods suggest an impending feeling of doom. Karr keeps this energy and attack throughout the memoir. The club referred to in the title is an informal group of men who congregate over some drinks to tell tall stories and these episodes generate some good lines, but the real story is Mary Karr's and how she and her sister managed to survive their disturbed childhood to make successes of their lives. In chapter seven, Karr provides a vivid portrayal of a breakdown, and although my mother never got close to such a thing, she had her moments which I will describe as her 'Hell Dogs' phase in my memoir.

In the course of the research conducted for this essay, the phrase 'creative non-fiction' starts to increase in resonance and with it the idea that the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are frequently blurred, in both categories. Many novels have a strong autobiographical flavour about them, something which is quite understandable and natural given that writers are advised to write about areas with which they are familiar. By the same token, apart from those with photographic memories, many of the details in memoirs have to be recreated and very few writers would claim total accuracy in recall. So in looking at books in this area, a certain flexibility of the genre begins to stand out, in particular in Geoff Dyer's *But Beautiful*

(1991), in which he imagines himself travelling with Duke Ellington, seeing Bud Powell in considerable distress and conversing with Thelonious Monk. Given that my memoir includes a music portfolio and commentary on jazz, Dyer's work is of special relevance and he admits in his preface:

As I invented dialogue and action, so what was emerging became more and more to resemble fiction. At the same time, though, these scenes were still intended as commentary either on a piece of music or on the particular qualities of a musician what follows, then, is as much *imaginative criticism* as fiction.

Dyer, 1991: ix

Dyer has really created a new genre, which has some qualities of a memoir but can also be seen as a piece of social history, so the boundaries really have been removed. Dyer's example will encourage me to broaden the scope of the aspects of my memoir which cover music, so for example I have tried to reflect the spirit of New York and the role that jazz plays in the city, using my own experiences and knowledge of the music. This is in a chapter not included for the M.Phil. version.

Dyer also stresses the importance of photographs in his work and he says 'photographs sometimes work on you strangely and simply: at first glance you see things you subsequently discover are not there. Or rather when you look again you notice things you initially didn't realize were there' (xi). Much of *But Beautiful* has been inspired by photographs and of course there is a very strong tradition of excellent photography in jazz (William Claxton and others). Dyer's inspiration through photography suggests the potential of such a medium for developing ideas.

If Dyer's work is not strictly a memoir, it certainly encourages the budding memoir writer to stretch the imagination and to bend the rules. Dyer is not alone in being inspired by photographs and I certainly used old snapshots and family groups to trigger ideas for my own memoir, and, as stated earlier, some have been included in the text.

A most successful memoir, if 'memoir' is the right word, is Caitlin Moran's *How to be a Woman* (2011), which has become a best-seller by a writer who has already established a reputation as a lively and witty journalist working for *The Times* newspaper. The work has many elements of a memoir, especially a detailed account of her childhood and adolescence and her journey into womanhood, where members of her family, especially her sister feature strongly in what is recalled. It can be argued that this book is much more than a memoir because at suitable moments Moran launches herself into an astonishing flow of invective about fairly intimate issues to do with a woman's body and the pressures from society on women to conform. All this is done with a wicked sense of humour and a torrent of energetic prose using hyperbole with reckless abandon as in this account of a bra:

The bra is perhaps the rudest item of women's clothing. If you do not doubt this, try this simple test: throw a bra at a nine-year-old boy. He will react as if he has had a live rat wanged at his head. He will run, screaming, away from you – like that Vietnamese kid covered in napalm. He cannot handle the rudeness of bras.

Moran, 2011: 99

It could be argued that *How to Be a Woman* is a mixture of autobiography and rant.

With chapter headings like 'I Become Furry!', 'I am a Feminist', and 'I am Fat', there is a great deal of room for Moran's powerful views on hardships created for women by the society in which they live, but there are also powerful memoir moments which capture the era.

Moran's book is a vastly entertaining romp through her early life, with many opportunities to go off on a tangent on her pet topics, all done with energy and flair with humorous highlights on every page. This is quite different from many of the memoirs discussed earlier in this essay and this may not be the moment to pass judgement on its literary merit but there can be no doubt that Moran's work sits comfortably within the broad canon of creative non-fiction that we are discussing.

Given that my memoir covers aspects of my childhood, it is helpful to examine *Where did it all Go Right* (2003) by Andrew Collins. This memoir describes the young Collins who uses the phrase 'growing up normal in the 1970s' as an additional title on the dust cover, as perhaps an antidote to the wave of so-called misery memoirs which have appeared in recent years. The book has been well received, with both critical and popular acclaim. Greatly assisted by his diary which he kept from the age of six, the memoir provides a rich and detailed picture of growing up in the 70s in an ordinary household, but what makes it compelling is the energy and detail of the descriptions, plus the humour and a great sense of period he achieves. However, while the diary extracts clearly provided Collins with key source material, I found that they were not all that compelling to read and I preferred the memoir. Inevitably, the diary entries, written as a child, came across as being sketchy and abbreviated, whereas to me, the memoir sections written by the mature Collins had more flow about them and communicated more.

The reader is gently eased into the context with details of the family intermingled with an awareness of Northampton the place:

Conservative enough to have engendered a modest Goth community in the 80s tolerant enough to allow us to occupy the bar of the Bernie Inn with our big hair. Even the ugly place names stir my bones: Lumbertubs, Lings, Jimmy's End, Moulton Park, Billing, Ecton, Harpole, Weedon, and Bracmill's. I still love everything about this place.

Collins, 2003: 44

Collins even uses footnotes to add additional information and he makes the point on this page by explaining that Northampton's place names are not all ugly and gives example of attractive ones such as Weston Favell, Briar Hill and Blackthorn.

Then we start to get into the mind of a child and this is one of the strengths of the book in that although written as an adult in the year 2003, Collins is able to look at life through the eyes of his youthful self, in particular the general vagueness which children had about their parents' jobs This section shows how well Collins can re-create the atmosphere of being a child and in particular the fascination of water to children, again a theme I try to highlight in my own memoir:

Simon and I knew every inch of the stream that ran through the field.

We never physically mapped it but it was all in our in heads: where the easiest jumps were, where the current ran fast enough to be called- ha!-

rapids, where the soil beneath turned to treacherous slippery clay,
where the mythic rat had been spotted.

51

Collins is especially effective when dealing with food, at a time when people were starting to be much more adventurous with food and the humorous and evocative way in which Collins treats the topic has given me some ideas for my memoir, because no account of childhood would be complete without some reference to food. Collins presents a picture of a likeable young man with all the doubts which go with youth plus a willingness to recognise his faults. There is an energy in the writing, especially shown when discussing his enthusiasm for holidays in Wales: 'We were in love with Wales. The hills, the crashing waves, the tell-tale snags of wool on wire fences, the treacle toffee, a bottle of Coke and a packet of crisps on the wall in the gardens of the Victoria Inn, the Welsh words for gents and ladies...' (157). And so it goes on almost to the bottom of the page, demonstrating the effectiveness of lists in this type of writing.

This is perhaps the right place to reference *Toast* by Nigel Slater (2003). He is known mainly as a food writer and journalist, but in this book, Slater has produced an insightful memoir of growing up, with foods providing the backcloth to family life. Sunday Roast will be a key memory in the lives of many and Slater describes his father's determination to carve the joint:

He has a thing about carving the roast. It is like he imagines he clubbed the animal to death and dragged it home through the snow like

a mammoth. Not to carve the Sunday joint would be an admission to not being quite a man.

Slater, 2003: 50

Even before encountering Slater's memoir, I had recognised the significance of food in family life and Slater's description of his mother burning the toast sets the scene for the memoir. Later on, after his mother's death, he describes his father's version of cheese on toast. All these themes resonate with my own memoir, except that Slater brings his deep knowledge of food to the table, whilst at the same time chronicling the passage of time in his family. My mother, as described in my memoir, was fond of featuring toast on our family menu.

As mentioned earlier, Helen McDonald's *H is for Hawk* has been a literary sensation in 2014/15, and has placed the idea of a memoir in front of a very wide audience, probably for the first time. It is easy to understand why this work has been received so favourably. The underlying storyline is strong and people can empathise with a person dealing with grief by throwing themselves into an all-consuming activity. In addition to her sadness and sense of loss which is vividly portrayed in the book, it is also a detailed account of how she purchased and trained a Goshawk. Interwoven into the text, effectively is an account of the life of the novelist TH White, author of *The Once and Future King*, who also trained a Goshawk, but who also had deep personal problems. The interest in the Hawk becomes something of an obsession for McDonald and this work would be of value to somebody with a similar interest as it quotes various pieces of advice from other writers. The language is poetic and focused, and evocative of experiences in the open air. If there is a criticism, it is that the tone is fairly gloomy and there is an absence of humour, which

makes other memoirs perhaps more readable. There is also the question of the reader's sympathy with her particular interest and my interest in ornithology does not extend to the capture and training of raptors, so I have to express something of a bias against the subject matter. Having said that, it is impossible not to admire the power and urgency of her prose, especially her first encounter with the Hawk which she ultimately buys:

And with the last bow pulled free, he reached inside, and amidst a whirring, chaotic clatter of wings and feet and talons the high-pitched twittering and it's all happening at once, the man pulls an enormous, enormous Hawk out-of-the-box and in a strange coincidence of world and deed, a great flood of sunlight drenches us and everything is brilliance and fury.

McDonald, 2014: 53

McDonald uses a wide array of techniques to achieve her dramatic portrayal of this event, the short sentences, indeed a one-word sentence, italics, and the use of repetition, all of which contribute to the atmosphere of excitement at this key moment in the text. The breakthrough comes when Mabel, the Hawk, starts to fly independently.

H is for Hawk has been so lauded with critical acclaim, that a negative reaction to some parts of it might seem churlish, but in what is essentially a personal reaction, I found that the role of her father seemed underplayed, until towards the end of the account, where the details of the memorial service provides much greater insight.

Up to that point, the character of her father never really comes alive and the eulogies which fill out these details, only appear towards the end of the book.

McDonald's enthusiasm for TH White, his obsessions and his personal traits, could be seen as being something of an acquired taste but it does place her current predicament in some kind of historical context. Like many memoirs, the strong confessional tone of this book, is perhaps its greatest asset and the writer's feelings about grief, nature and herself are done with a great sense of poetry and focus, using all the weapons available for her in terms of language, vocabulary and sentence construction.

2.7. General Conclusions on the Literary Memoir

The choice of memoirs for study in this section has been, like the title of my memoir, somewhat random. I picked out one or two examples which have been emphasised by other scholars, but certain others on the basis of their availability or recent reviews. Any evaluation of this literature is bound to be subjective, but when there is a build-up of critical acclaim, as with other literature, the student of this genre is bound to be influenced. Some of the texts have been chosen because they have been recommended on reading lists and others have suggested themselves from reviews. There is a preponderance of UK based writers, but also some international aspects. There is also a reasonable gender balance.

The works of Jackie Kay, Mary Karr and Lorna Sage can be said to stand out as strong examples of the genre, although they impress in different ways. Kay's use of dialogue is immensely powerful and sounds as if these words were spoken just yesterday. Karr's rugged Texas-based style is raw and invigorating and accentuates

many humorous episodes. Sage uses less dialogue but is able to apply a sense of psychological understanding to the events going on in her family.

Even in this short sample of memoirs, it is possible to see a wide variety of styles and approaches, some focusing on excellent dialogue and some using a more descriptive approach. Humour features very strongly in a number of memoirs as does pathos. Whilst it is tempting to try to emulate some of these most impressive qualities, the whole point of the memoir is that it is personal and individual and it is a question of expressing one's own experiences and thoughts in a way which is true and valid, reflecting one's own personality. My task has been to use suitable lightness of language to draw out the humour, with appropriate mood and tone to treat the more sombre events with due respect.

3. The Approach to this Memoir

The idea of writing a memoir developed slowly and it is not possible to determine exactly when the thought occurred. Having retired in 2007, the idea of completing a jazz-based MA took a few years to materialize and I eventually completed it at the University of Huddersfield between 2011 and 2013. When that excitement had died down, I looked around for another challenge and the idea of a memoir started to emerge, partly because we have four grandchildren living in Hong Kong. They are aged between 4 and 9 and during recent visits, the degree of communication with them has expanded rapidly as they develop their speaking skills and as we, the grandparents, learn to communicate with them. Without becoming excessively morbid, you begin to realise that at 70 plus, one is not immortal and thoughts start to stray in the direction of one's heritage. Does it really matter what people think of you after you've gone? An obvious point is that people can forget you pretty quickly, and that may be in the nature of things. However, with grandchildren living abroad, they are going to miss some of the details of our family. So one strong idea behind my memoir is to make sure that my grandchildren, and indeed my children can have a look at some of the details of my life and of my family, which may be new to them.

My mother never had the opportunity of meeting her great-grandchildren because she died before they were born. But my feeling is that when they grow up, my grandchildren will be interested in the past. They will see some photographs of the woman who was their great-grandmother, but in reading this memoir they will have a better sense of their family background. In this way, I am encouraging some sense of custodianship and transmission of our family history. Desire for knowledge of one's family background seems to be a fairly common human characteristic all

over the globe, so I am hoping that my grandchildren will appreciate this attempt to fill in some gaps inevitably caused by their living abroad.

I decided, however, to take the link with my grandchildren one stage further and to incorporate them in the narrative, so that sections of the memoir will comment on how my grandchildren might interpret a particular incident or episode, so in effect the memoir becomes a message to my grandchildren. It also gives them the opportunity to reflect on their lives in Hong Kong and contrasts the atmosphere of the Far East with the atmosphere of provincial England.

Having made the decision to produce a memoir, the second idea which accompanied this first idea was to do it as part of a Master's degree. The plan was for the degree to provide a fixed target and to give a high degree of motivation to complete the project. In addition, the degree would involve the expert support of a supervisor with experience in the memoir genre. As I started to have discussions with various universities, the idea of producing a CD of jazz music to support the memoir developed.

Originally I was going to select a number of themes to describe and comment upon, but could not escape the fact that within our family there was a series of events which took place just over ten years ago which could form the emotional heart of the memoir, and that is the way it has developed. I was then able to put down some sort of outline plan. From that, the project has evolved almost on a daily basis and additional ideas have been noted down and researched. My plan then was to write a first draft very quickly to get the bones of the memoir down on paper. At the same time, I would be reading and reviewing good examples of the memoir and would also be checking details of the story from various sources. Having developed

the structure, it was then a question of completing each section and responding to suggestions from my supervisor.

Much of the initial content of this memoir is literally from memory and I have discovered that the more you write about your past, the more you remember and it has been pointed out to me that chemical changes take place in the brain as part of this process, allowing otherwise hidden memories to return. However, there are many other sources of information which I have acquired over the years, not necessarily in order to produce a memoir but because of a subconscious feeling that these artefacts are important. Whilst I have never kept a diary in the sense of a detailed account of my activities and feelings at the time, I have kept a number of work diaries which would have helped me with the chronology. I also have old copies of my school magazine at Wallasey Grammar School, plus a number of university materials.

Although photography was nowhere near as widespread in my youth as it is today with the ubiquity of the digital camera, there are some photographs which have great significance because of the time they were taken, with black-and-white and sepia adding to the historical effect. These have helped me to fill in some of the details that have escaped my memory. As a technique, I have looked at photographs and dictated at the same time, physically describing people and scenes and using them to trigger further comments.

I have also interviewed members of the family and I should thank them for their contributions and these proposals were submitted to the university as part of the ethical approval process. I have also used other resources including history books, other memoirs and the Internet to fill in details. I have also produced a family tree, a

timeline, and a portfolio of key photographs which are included in the memoir, especially to assist my grandchildren in piecing the whole thing together.

This memoir does not cover the activities of my children and grandchildren and does not generally touch on current relationships. While some published memoirs are very revealing about this aspect of life, my feeling is that dealing with such topics could be unnecessarily personal and in any case, the key theme I have chosen is that of the influence of a strong-minded mother on her three sons.

In dealing with the various threads of the memoir, I have benefited from studying some of the major writers in the areas of my memoir. In writing about my musical experiences and tastes, I have drawn on some of the major writers in the field of jazz appreciation and biography, such as Gene Lees and Peter Pettinger. In sport, I have looked at the writings of Frank Keating in *The Guardian* and John Arlott. As regards the countryside, there are so many writers who have provided inspiration, starting off with Wordsworth, but also looking at other writers, such as Wainwright or the regular contributors to *The Guardian's* Countryside Diary. My treatment of education has been influenced by a number of campus writers and the world of work has been influenced by the work of some contemporary and 20th-century novelists, such as Howard Jacobson and Stan Barstow.

4. Writing the Memoir

At the beginning of the process, it was a question of just getting started and using a chronological approach to collect memories and refer to various documents to develop some kind of story. Through my background reading, I have tried to connect my work with the body of work that already exists. Writers such as Sage, Karr and McDonald have set a very high standard but I have tried to reflect some of their characteristics. Sage for example concentrates on the complexity of family relationships, Karr brings out the humour of childhood and McDonald uses her knowledge of wildlife to create a certain feeling and an atmosphere.

In terms of the physical creation in the memoir, I have used speech recognition software because my own typing skills are fairly limited and I have been able to improvise the first draft from my head, and later from various sources and from notes. This has been an effective strategy in developing the main thrust of the memoir and as a technique it does depend on the individual's capacity to dictate. Having said that it is then necessary to edit and further refine in order to create a readable piece and to lift it from being a mundane account to being something which would be readable and of appropriate quality.

As the memoir developed, it became clear that the word count was going to exceed the limits specified for the M.Phil., so rather than producing a précis, I decided to select and submit certain chapters. The longer version covers areas of interest outside the main narrative thrust and these will appear in the full version to be given to my grandchildren.

5. The Musical Component

The aim of the music portfolio is to identify musical ideas to form the basis of individual tone poems, reflecting aspects of the memoir. These were developed via experimentation on the piano, subject to advice and feedback from my music supervisor.

5.1. Solo Jazz Piano

My introduction to the piano began during my childhood where we always had a decent piano which was regularly played by my mother and my eldest brother Neil, both of whom feature strongly in the memoir. There was something about a piano chord which appealed to me, in the same way that I enjoyed harmony singing. Chords seemed to be able to convey feelings and could create moods. In particular, I found that listening to my brother Neil playing the piano downstairs when I was in bed upstairs was able to calm me down and allow me to fall asleep. Having a couple of years of piano tuition helped me create a small foundation of technique, but at the age of eleven or so, I was not moved by my brief journey into Beethoven sonatas. It was only when I played my father's 78 RPM records of Duke Ellington and Count Basie that I began to understand how expressive a piano could be and how certain gifted players could create a specific mood.

My journey through jazz piano was not chronological and was influenced by what I heard and by what I could attempt to play by ear. Like many would-be pianists, I experimented with boogie-woogie as my father had a 78 of Meade Lux Lewis, one of the more prominent players from the boogie-woogie era and the rhythmic pattern in

the left hand was clearly reminiscent of the sound of a train. However, rather than developing a traditional style based on stride piano, with a strong rhythmic left-hand pattern I jumped a few generations by listening to George Shearing and Dave Brubeck. The bebop revolution had happened in the late 1940s and 50s and I was able to keep up to date by listening to The American Forces Network in Germany programme on the radio.

Without going into the history of jazz, it is worth making the point that the piano has been a significant instrument in jazz from its early days, although it could never be part of the marching band tradition when jazz evolved in New Orleans. However, fairly soon, pianists began to realise just how effective the instrument could be in the jazz context. It could provide a richer harmonic backing than banjos or guitars and could also offer strong rhythmic support. It was recognised that as an instrument, the piano was one of the few which could work on its own, so purely in terms of the economics, the use of pianos in places where music was played could make sound economic sense. The early players also realised that the piano could be like an orchestra but with one person operating it.

Jazz piano swiftly moved on from those beginnings and in the big band era a degree of sophistication came into jazz, through musicians like Count Basie, Duke Ellington and others and it is no surprise given the potential of the piano, that pianists were often the chief composers and arrangers for big bands, notable examples being Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn.

Small-group jazz was showing the value of skilled piano players and Teddy Wilson was a key player in the early Benny Goodman small groups. In addition, at this time, the sheer potential of the piano was demonstrated by the virtuosic Art Tatum and for many people, his achievements as a solo jazz pianist have never

really been exceeded, because he was able to display an awesome technique and a highly imaginative, creative and rhythmic approach.

With the development of bebop and modern jazz from the 1950s onwards, the role of the piano grew rapidly in terms of harmonic sophistication and many of the leading players also operated as solo pianists. However, with the emergence of modern rhythm sections, with the greater complexity of drummers and the richer harmonic approach of bass players, the main context for jazz piano was the jazz trio, notably with Oscar Peterson and more especially with Bill Evans, who effectively re-defined the role of the piano jazz trio for many years to come. Despite being known for his trio, with a number of legendary bass players including Scott La Faro, Evans enjoyed operating as soloist and issued a couple of ground-breaking solo records. A few years later, Keith Jarrett redefined the role of the jazz piano soloist at the famous Koln concert, where he improvised without interruption for 25 minutes or so.

Fred Hersch has also been developing the genre of solo jazz piano in recent years, and his 2014 CD 'Solo' which was recorded live, brings the listener up to date with his work. A number of features can be observed, especially the use of long introductions, designed to set the scene for the piece whilst slyly concealing the actual song, until the introductory section morphs into a recognisable melody. This is especially the case on Joni Mitchell's 'Both Sides Now', an interesting choice for Hersch, but one which supplies excellent opportunities for reharmonising. A further characteristic of good solo piano jazz is the need to create a more orchestral sound, given the lack of additional rhythm and melody instruments. So the use of an arpeggio approach is evident on a number tracks, including the haunting Jobim tune, 'Olha Maria' and his version of 'Pastorale' by Robert Schuman, which provides a more solid texture. Another approach is to use a bass pattern with the left hand,

replacing the role of the double bass. This can be heard on 'In Walked Bud'. All these attributes were considered in the preparation and performance of the portfolio of material to support the memoir.

The field of solo jazz piano is a rich and varied one and a number of pianists now present solo piano as part of what they offer. It will be beyond the scope of this paper to cover the topic in greater depth, but a number of players are worthy of closer examination. These would include Marc Copeland, Brad Mehldau, Gwilym Simcock, John Taylor and others.

5.2. Introduction to Music Portfolio

The aim of the music portfolio is to reflect on individual sections of the memoir and to produce jazz-based compositions, with each section as a kind of tone poem or musical portrait, representing a theme or an individual. This will be done as a series of jazz piano solos.

The idea of mixing different genres in a creative project is widely acceptable these days. One key point in any form of artistic expression is to make some observations about the human condition, by using profound thoughts or maybe humorous observations. A specialist writer would use words and indeed most memoirs fall into that category, but a writer who is also a graphic artist might want to support the manuscript with some visual ideas. In my case having an interest in writing and music, it seems quite natural to produce a portfolio of music to support the memoir.

The memoir would need to stand alone as a piece of written work and although it is not intended for publication, it should set out to achieve the standards required for

publication. Similarly, the portfolio of songs should at least stand up against the kind of songs that might be produced by a professional jazz musician. Clearly as a non-professional, it would be hard to achieve the sort of results which a professional player might produce. Nevertheless, in terms of the originality of the material and the relevance of the songs to aspects of the memoir, a highly critical standard has been set by myself.

At this point some, discussion on the production of music to link with a specific theme needs to take place. The most obvious area of linking music to specific events is in film music where the music is quite often an integral part of the whole exercise and without the music specifically written for the film, the dramatic impact would be greatly reduced. Hollywood has used the talents of gifted composers over the years to provide the appropriate music for great films. Eric Korngold was a respected composer in his own right and, in writing film music, did not lower his standards but clearly there was a different requirement for, say, the aims of a classical composer producing a symphony or a concerto. Andre Previn, as part of a very varied career, was a prolific composer for Hollywood films, in addition to his other achievements as a classical pianist, a jazz pianist, a classical composer and a world class symphonic conductor. Directors of space movies, such as *Star Wars* and indeed *Star Trek* would be lost without the great skill of composers like John Williams.

In the classical world, the idea of linking a piece of music to a specific theme is well-established. Debussy's 'La Mer' is very much an evocative tone poem about the sea which even the casual listener would recognise. The work of Vaughan Williams is highly evocative about the English countryside, especially his famous piece 'The Lark Ascending', which in music very accurately reflects to dramatic climb and call of the Skylark, which is one of the sights and sounds of nature. Vaughan Williams uses

high violin and flute notes to create this impression, elements of tonal variety of texture not immediately available from solo piano.

Even jazz, as a relatively new art form, swiftly moved into the idea of developing music to reflect a particular mood or theme. 'In a Mist' is an iconic piece of piano jazz composed and played by a man primarily known as a key trumpeter from the Chicago period of jazz development, Bix Biederbeck. The piece uses chordal harmonies well in advance of the jazz of that period and reflects the fact that Beiderbecke will have been familiar with the work of Ravel and Debussy. Duke Ellington took the world of jazz composition into new areas with various suites designed to reflect particular themes, especially his tribute to Shakespeare, 'Such Sweet Thunder'. More recently, arranger and composer Gill Evans collaborated with Miles Davis in the creation of the album *Sketches of Spain* which invokes the music, dance and atmosphere of Spain.

Mention of Miles Davis then immediately links to the whole idea of using improvised jazz as film music, because the French film, Louis Malle's *Lift to the Scaffold* (1958) used a group of musicians led by Miles Davis to create and improvise the sound track.

Using solo piano to create specific incidents and moods has proved difficult and some of the most effective jazz tone poems have used a rich array of instruments to create moods, a good recent example being Matt Owen's CD, *The Aviators' Ball* (2014). He uses a standard jazz trio (piano, bass and drums) to establish the jazz feel, then features a wind quintet with an extremely diverse palette of sounds, and rounds it off with a string quartet to provide lyricism and harmonic depth. Owens, a gifted bass player, composer and arranger, covers a wide range of moods reflected in the track titles, 'Raindrops on our Rooftop', 'Mouse Song' and 'The Peanut Train'.

In the case of my portfolio, I follow the structure of the memoir, which is broken down into 12 chapters each with a specific theme and I have produced piano pieces to reflect aspects of each chapter. In some cases, it is a broad approach in which the music reflects the overall theme of the chapter, but in other cases I have tried to highlight a specific event or person. In terms of the jazz music produced, I have used a mix of approaches, sometimes just emphasising the theme, sometimes improvising on a theme. For certain of the pieces, I have used a form of free improvisation as appropriate to the mood of the chapter. I have tried to avoid the danger of sounding like a pianist at a silent movie, rattling up and down the notes of the piano as the two drunken cowboys swap punches in a Wild West saloon.

5.3. The Music Portfolio

Track	Headings & Themes	Aims and Description
1	A Family in Crisis, A Sudden Suicide	<p>'Surrounded by Photographs'</p> <p>Foreboding introduction, using full keyboard, ripples of notes and mini-arpeggio to establish sombre mood.</p> <p>Melancholy tune, suggesting sense of chaos and despair, not completely lacking in hope. Middle section has note of optimism, additional space into melody, creating a degree of uncertainty.</p> <p>Short patch of improvisation then back</p>

		to the theme, Slow ending to underpin the theme of sadness.
2	Prelude Overview of my life, Whitchurch. VJ Day, Early history High hopes	'Post-War Dreams' Optimistic serene melody with slight element of worries about the future, some sense of energy Free style introduction, feeling of countryside, then breaks into rhythm, to represent movement, things happening after the war, Ends with free passage, again representing uncertain hopes about the future. Block chord towards ending, giving the future a solid feel. Essentially optimistic
3	Family Grandparents, Parents, Aunts & Uncles. Christmas day at Netherfield	'Family Harmony' Introduction, flurries of notes to suggest typical confusion in a family, with different agendas. Hopeful melody, showing various strands of the family. Improvised middle section, reflecting my degree of freedom as a child. Moves to out of temp passage,

		<p>feelings of peace and security within the family framework</p> <p>Finish on extended chord and flourish to end on a peaceful and optimistic note.</p>
4	The Thomas side of the Family	<p>'Ron's Tune'</p> <p>Lively piece to reflect the 1920s, when my father was in his 20s in the 1920s.</p> <p>Left hand bass line to suggest a jazzy rhythm.</p> <p>during the jazz age</p> <p>Lyrical statement of theme using arpeggios and flourishes, then settling into a regular beat to indicate energy and hope after the first world war, ending with a bit of bluesy jazz improvisation.</p>
5	<p>Siblings</p> <p>Growing Up</p> <p>Alan & Neil</p> <p>At Home at 31 Lyndhurst Rd</p>	<p>'Brothers'</p> <p>Jaunty introduction designed to show the energy and perkiness of children.</p> <p>Melodic reflecting lively personalities of my brothers. Essentially optimistic.</p> <p>Attempt to reflect the energy of a growing family, allowing the tune to bounce along in a carefree way.</p>

		<p>Busy tune reflecting a busy family with lots of comings and goings.</p>
6	<p>Early Friendships</p>	<p>'Learning the Steps'</p> <p>Slightly free intro to show the chaos of childhood friendships. Then into the waltz theme, using a melodic approach, reflecting the innocence of childhood. Attempt to create a fairy-tale feel, given that as young children we had no worries.</p> <p>Peaceful and optimistic feel.</p>
7	<p>Education-Early Years primary school, Wallasey Grammar school</p>	<p>'Schooldays Bounce'</p> <p>Bouncy introduction, trying to create the energy of childhood.</p> <p>Jaunty optimistic tune, covering the excitement of school and the pleasure of friendship.</p> <p>Jaunty, cheeky piece, positive, reflection on happy times.</p> <p>Free, jazzy ending.</p>
8	<p>Music-Early Years choir, orchestra, The Haunt, skiffle, music with Neil and Alan</p>	<p>'Musical Merry-Go-Round'</p> <p>Gradual build up to the main tune, showing the way my musical tastes have come together.</p> <p>Slow lyrical piece, showing the importance of harmony and chord sequences in my feel for music</p>

		<p>Attempt to create interesting intervals.</p> <p>Free ending, designed to demonstrate possibilities offered by music, includes a bit of free improvisation in it, to indicate the way I have gone about making music. Slight hymn like section to include reference to church music in my musical development.</p> <p>Final repeat of theme to bring piece to a close.</p>
9	<p>Sport</p> <p>Father and football, Alan and rugby, football results, rowing at school,</p>	<p>'Bewdley Bash'</p> <p>Block chord introduction shows the pent-up energy at the beginning of a sporting event.</p> <p>This piece will reflect my interest in sport but in particular my enjoyment of the sport of rowing and part of it will reflect the excitement of winning my first rowing event whilst at school.</p> <p>The piece is intended to portray speed and energy and movement, of a particular rowing event at Bewdley, when my crew won.</p> <p>Block chord section to reflect the muscular strength needed in a rowing crew.</p> <p>The short ending is intended to reflect</p>

		the sudden end of a sporting event, win or lose.
10	<p>Period of Turmoil</p> <p>Death of parents, Val's suicide, Alan's death,</p>	<p>'Death of a Brother'</p> <p>Uncertain introduction, out of tempo, designed to create a sad and reflective piece.</p> <p>Slightly melancholy tune, but with a thread of hope.</p> <p>Complex emotions being expressed</p> <p>Ends on rich textured chord sequence.</p>
11	<p>An Unexpected Arrival</p> <p>Arrival of Katherine</p> <p>Deaths of Neil</p>	<p>'Hope Walks In'</p> <p>Tune goes straight into a rhythm and an optimistic tune to reflect the instant affection felt for the new family member.</p> <p>A piece with a number of chord changes to reflect a series of sudden changes.</p> <p>Optimistic feel.</p> <p>Slightly churchy feel to later section to reflect additional family issues.</p>
12	<p>Reflective Conclusion</p> <p>Reflections on the story so far</p>	<p>'Reflections'</p> <p>Lyrical statement of theme, using arpeggios and flourishes. Then into the regular beat to reflect the</p>

		continuing energy of my life after it settled down after the sequence of illness and death. Peaceful and reflective ending.
--	--	--

6. Conclusions

The existence of the memoir as a key literary genre is already well established, especially in the USA, but also in Britain. The challenge in my memoir has been to attempt to reach the standards set by some of the major writers listed in this essay. It can also be said, that whilst many memoirs involve a number of highly dramatic events, it is still possible to produce a readable and valuable memoir from an unexceptional life, because no lives are the same and most lives have some dramas, as I believe this memoir demonstrates. There is also a skill in dealing with more mundane matters in a way which is insightful and distinctive and that has presented an additional challenge. The additional challenge in this M.Phil. project has been to produce a music CD in keeping with the moods of the memoir.

Bibliography

- Atlas, James (1996), 'Confessing for Voyeurs: The Age of the Literary Memoir is Now', *New York Times Magazine*, 12 May 1996,
www.nytimes.com/1996/05/12/magazine, accessed March 2015
- Barr, Damian (2013) *Maggie and Me* Bloomsbury, London
- Collins, Andrew (2003) *Where did it all Go Right?* Ebury Press, London
- Deraniyagala, Sonali (2013) *Wave*, Virago, London.
- Didion, Joan, (2011), *Blue Nights*, Fourth Estates, London.
- Drabble, M (2000) *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Dyer, Geoff (1991), *But Beautiful*, Abacus, London.
- Gornick, Vivian (2001) *The Situation and the Story*, FSG New York.
- Karda, Marlene (1992) *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Karr, Mary (1995) *The Liars' Club*, Picador, London.
- Literary Devices Website, 'Memoir Definition', 2015, <http://literarydevices.net/memoir>
Accessed March 2015.
- Kay, Jackie, (2010) *Red Dust Road*, Picador, London
- Knausgaard, Karl Ove, (2009) *A Death in the Family, (My Struggle)*, Vintage, London
- Lott, Tim (2015) 'We've lost Interest in our dead relatives, on the whole', *The Guardian* 13 June 2015, Review p 2.
- McCourt, Frank (1996), *Angela's Ashes*, Flamingo, London.
- McCourt, Frank, (1999), *Tis*, Flamingo, London.
- McDonald, Helen (2014), *H is for Hawk*, Jonathan Cape, London.

Maric, Vesna (2009), *Bluebird: A Memoir*, Granta, London.

Miller, Patti, (2010), *Life Writing*, City University New York blog,
Maivish058.qwriting.qc.cuni,

Moran Caitlin (2011), *How to be a Woman*, Ebury Press, London.

Roorbach, B (2008) *Writing Life Stories*, Writer's Digest Books.

Progoff, Ira (1975) quoted on CUNY website, origin not quoted.

Sage, Lorna, 2000, *Bad Blood*, Fourth Estate. London.

Sanderson, Mark (2002) *Wrong Rooms*, Scribner, London.

Slater, Nigel (2003) *Toast; The Story of a Boy's Hunger*, Fourth Estate, London)

Walker, Don (2009) *Shots Black Inc.*, Melbourne.

Wolfson College, Oxford (2015) *What is Life Writing?* <https://wolfson.ox.ac.uk>.
Accessed March 2015

Yen Mah, Adeline (1997) *Falling Leaves*, Penguin, London.

Zinsser, William (ed.), 1998, *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*,
Mariner, New York

CDs

Solo Fred Hersch (2015) Palmetto Records

The Aviators' Ball, Matt Owens (2014) All Made Up Records.

RANDOM CHORDS: A FAMILY MEMOIR

Robin Thomas June 2016 University of Salford

(This memoir forms the key submission piece for an M. Phil degree, together with an academic analysis of the memoir literary genre plus a portfolio of jazz pieces designed to reflect aspects of the memoir.)

Table of Contents	Page
Abstract	3
Introduction	5
Message from England	8
Chapter 1 – A Family in Crisis	11
Chapter 2 – Prelude	24
Chapter 3 – Family Background	29
Chapter 4 – The Thomas Side of the Family	48
Chapter 5 – Siblings	54
Chapter 6 – Early Friendships	72
Chapter 7 – Education: Shaping My Skills	95
Chapter 8 – Strange Harmonies: Early Years	115
Chapter 9 – Sport	136
Chapter 10 – Period of Turmoil	152
Chapter 11 – An Unexpected Arrival	165
Chapter 12 – Reflective Conclusion / Epilogue	181
Appendices	191

Abstract

University of Salford

School of Arts & Media

Title: *Random Chords*

This project involves the creation of a memoir to capture the history of a family, with particular emphasis on the role of a strong mother and her influence on the achievements of her three sons. It also focuses on an especially dramatic period which covered a suicide, two deaths from cancer and the discovery of a hidden niece. As part of the submission, an academic essay has been prepared, which discusses the memoir as a literary genre, through analysis, description and the examination of a number of examples.

A further component of the project is a portfolio of twelve jazz piano pieces, composed in a contemporary jazz style and performed to reflect the varying moods of the chapters.

The written work presented for the M. Phil consists of a selection of chapters from the full memoir so as to conform to word count regulations. The chapters retained contain the central narrative, while the additional chapters deal with the wider interests of the characters portrayed in the memoir.

The memoir contains a selection of photographs, a family tree and a timeline. In addition, examples of creative writing, produced by the writer at various stages of his life have been included, to reflect his feelings at the time and to highlight particular events in the story.

The motivation for writing the memoir is to ensure that four grandchildren being brought up in Hong Kong learn about their family history and feel some sense of continuity with their antecedents. The memoir may be of interest to a wider readership, as it tries to reflect some contemporary social and historical issues from the perspective of this family.

Introduction

The rise of the literary memoir has been a significant feature in the writing world in recent years and this will be outlined in the introductory academic essay, which accompanies this memoir as part of the M. Phil submission.

As for the decision to complete an M. Phil in Creative Writing, this is the culmination of many years of producing pieces of verse and prose in various contexts and this postgraduate degree brings an element of focus and goal-setting into the process. I had this very strong feeling that I needed to bring my writing to some sort of peak by producing a more comprehensive piece of work. I then considered the idea of producing a family memoir, in view of certain family events, which took place, and because there is a ready but small audience for such a piece of work in the shape of my Hong Kong-based grandchildren and future generations.

I can argue that many years involved in creative writing groups and writing as a hobby have developed some of the skills required in a memoir but the whole point of the postgraduate degree is not just the piece of work itself; it is more a process of improvement facilitated by the university, via supervisory sessions, contact with fellow students and access to the university's bank of learning resources.

As will be explored in the accompanying essay, a memoir differs from an autobiography and is not the same as the plural version, 'memoirs,' which often emerge after the retirement of a politician or an actor. In some of the most memorable examples of a memoir, a particular phase in the writer's life is described and brought to life, often adopting the feel of a novel, with a clear story and some sense of drama. In my case, a potential publisher might find that my life does not

have the drama or the significance to warrant the effort. However, other examples of the genre show how aspects of a relatively ordinary life can become the basis of a worthwhile memoir. The challenge seems to be to take that life and its episodes and to make it meaningful and relevant to the reader via the craft of writing. The reader, in the case of this project, would be initially my assessors and later, perhaps, interested members of my family. The possibility of publication is remote, but the aim is to achieve publication standard.

Some examples of my own pieces of verse and prose have been included in the text, so there will be an element of anthology about the memoir. In addition, as a departure from conventional memoirs, I have included a portfolio of original jazz songs, performed and recorded by myself, which will reflect themes in the memoir.

Sources will include appointments diaries in my possession, a wide range of documents built up over the years as hard copy or on a computer, family photographs, interviews and contacts with family, friends and colleagues, plus general library and online research.

It should be explained that the full memoir is an extended version of what is being submitted for the M. Phil. To ensure a degree of continuity, I explain where the additional sections fit in. However, the main narrative remains in the M. Phil version, as the excluded chapters can be described as diversions from the main story.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks are due to my academic supervisors, Dr Ursula Hurley and Dr Robin Dewhurst, for their constant critical support and encouragement, and to various members of my family for access to key aspects of family history.

Message to my Grandchildren

To: Felix, Tallulah, Noah and Neve

Hello from England!

This book was completed in 2016 and formed the basis of my submission for a postgraduate degree at the University of Salford in Manchester, England. This degree is called a Master of Philosophy or M. Phil for short. By postgraduate, it means it is the sort of degree that you do after a first degree. It also means in my case, that it was not a question of attending loads of lectures and taking an examination, it was more to do with producing a piece of work, like a book, which is what this one is. In addition, it does not mean that I know anything about philosophy, it is just the way that such things are titled.

This exercise was completed within the Creative Writing section of the University, which means that although the memoir is true as far as I am concerned, I have had to be creative in planning it, in terms of what to include and what to leave out and I have had to be imaginative in the language I have used to make it readable.

I am hoping that you will be having a look at this book, probably sometime in your mid- teens and I really do hope that you read it, because it contains some key family history, which I am sure you will find quite interesting.

Let me start off by telling you why I have written this book. I wanted to make sure that at some time you would be able to check out your family history on the Thomas side - that is, through Richard and Judy - given that you were all born in Hong Kong and are spending your young lives in the city, although after that who

knows, you could be anywhere. However, by living in Hong Kong, you will not have picked up the general background information of living in England which our family has experienced, so although you will know the broad facts from your parents, there will obviously be gaps in that knowledge.

For example if you had been living in England, you would have learned from television programmes and documentaries, for example about the Second World War, about the Festival of Britain, or England winning the World Cup in 1966. My aim therefore is to tell you the story of certain aspects of our family, not the full detail, but something about the history of our side of the family, and in particular a series of events which affected my brothers and myself in the period between 1998 and 2004.

This is a *memoir*, not an autobiography, so there are many aspects of my life which are not included, but those are some of the more recent aspects which you can always ask your parents about.

I have also produced some music to go with this story and if you've heard me occasionally play the piano in Hong Kong or England, you may recognise a jazzy style of music. Essentially, I have tried to come up with tunes that reflect some of the themes and dramas in the memoir.

I hope you enjoy reading it. Oh, and by the way, you might want to start keeping some kind of diary, just in case you want to write something like this in the years to come.

Best wishes

Grandpa

The Memoir

Chapter 1 – A Family Breakdown

The phone rang in our riverside house and, as I walked into the hall to answer, I noticed that we would need to do some repair work on the Edwardian mosaic black and white floor as the age-old crack in the tiles seemed to be widening. We'd been settling down to watch 'Coronation Street', a regular routine, and I wondered who might be wishing to make contact at this time. Could it be a last minute musical assignment?

'Hello,' I said as I picked up the phone.

At the other end of the line, a voice was trying to speak, but nothing was coming out, just some emotional noises. There was a pause. The line crackled with anticipation.

'Alan?' I asked, suddenly aware that it was my brother.

Although we did not often talk on the phone, there would normally have been a bit of a joke and a laugh, before getting onto the actual purpose of the call: 'Good to catch you in before you've disappeared off to the 'Mags' (my local pub), or: 'Have you got rid of that rust heap of a car yet?' So what was behind this agonized call? My pulse began to race, fearing bad news.

'God, what's happened?' I asked.

'It's all my fault,' he managed to say.

From what Alan told me later, this is what happened.

Alan, by now in his mid-50s, combined his roles as a husband, veteran rugby player, and local councillor, alongside his day-job as a lecturer. He'd worked through what seemed to be a normal day at the local College of Further Education. The students

were their normal selves, dipping into Alan's knowledge of information technology to help them pursue their projects.

'My computer seems to have gone to sleep,' one of them commented.

'You'll have to re-boot it,' said Alan. 'You've got one of the older machines. I'm afraid the college finances won't stretch to the latest models. I'd love to use my political powers to get more cash for better computers, but colleges like this don't come under local authority control any more. You have to remember that I grew up with computers when they were extremely large and mostly unreliable. You guys have it easy.'

'Are we going to hear about how you single-handedly invented the mainframe computer, back in the days of English Electric?' one of the students asked.

'Of course, if you'd like a history of the computer industry, but perhaps not today,' Alan replied.

Alan tried to maintain his usual easy-going persona with the students, but inside he was buzzing with apprehension and guilt. It didn't help when his boss, John Carroll, stopped him in the corridor to remind him of a strategy paper that he was supposed to have finished a week or two ago.

'Yes of course, I'll get that moving,' ventured Alan, hoping that his face did not betray the fact that he'd forgotten about it completely. He had other things on his mind.

'You better had get it organised,' said Carroll. 'Maybe you've been too busy working on your council papers.'

Alan resisted the urge to say something sarcastic in response. Now was not the time to complicate his professional life as well. 'Smarmy bastard,' he muttered, *sotto voce*, to himself as he left the room en route to the last class of the day, stopping

only to call in at the college office, to collect some papers from Eileen, the loyal clerical assistant who had been there as long as the college it seemed.

‘How’s Val?’ asked Eileen.

‘Oh, fine,’ Alan replied, not entirely convincingly. He glanced through the window of the secretarial training room and caught a glimpse of a female colleague, who acknowledged his fleeting presence with a warm smile.

Alan hurried to his class and watched the classroom clock drag the minute hand around. He needed to be out there, to move on with his decision. To make things happen. But at the same time, he willed the clock to slow, to hold him there in the happy buzz of young people, their whole, uncomplicated lives ahead of them, their only concern a slow hard drive.

The last practical session finished at 3 o’clock, and Alan was able to switch off his computer, make some attempt to tidy his desk and close the door on the neat logic of computers. He stepped out into the chaos of real life.

It was raining. Alan hurried across the car park to his maroon Renault convertible. As he slid into the seat and shook the rain from his head, he heard, as he always did, the echoes of disapproval. *Mid-life crisis. Self-indulgent. Should have spent it on the family. Who does he think he is?* A man about to be brave, he thought in response. A man about to change his life. There was little enough chance to show off in a convertible in this climate and, on his journey home, he kept the hood intact, as a steady stream of rain invaded the late afternoon, throwing up a constant spray from the road.

After sustaining a steady sixty miles an hour on the dual carriageway to Congleton, Alan turned into a minor road on the estate where he had bought a house some twenty years ago and slowly approached his home. The first thing that struck

him was that Valerie's blue Mazda was not in the drive. Perhaps she had gone shopping. He hoped she had. Cheer herself up. He turned into the drive and switched off the Renault's engine. He paused, puzzled. He turned the ignition on again, just to check—a dull click. Yes, the engine was dead but the noise of a car running close by could still be heard. He got out, heedless of the rain, listening. The noise was coming from the garage.

'Surely not,' he said to himself as he rushed over to the garage door. He fumbled with the catch and peeled the door open to glimpse what was inside. The world fell away. There was just the noise of an engine and the blue shape filling the dark, fume-choked space of the garage. The smell was overwhelming: the acrid stench of petrol and exhaust gasses. Valerie was sitting on the front seat, motionless.

As in a dream, he wrenched open the garage door and then the car door. Valerie then flopped all over the front seat. Alan desperately tried to check whether she was breathing, whether there was a pulse. He could find neither signs of life in her. His whole body was now shaking with terror as he realised what had happened.

He was a man capable of making big decisions on council matters, but in the face of this he was tiny, helpless. He didn't know what to do. It was too late. Rushing into the house, he fumbled for the phone and jabbed in the three nines as though his fingers belonged to someone else. He almost cried with gratitude as the kind female voice took charge.

The paramedics arrived first. They quickly assessed the scene and said to Alan:

'I'm afraid she's gone. Is that your wife?'

'Yes,' Alan's voice made a strange noise. 'Valerie.'

The paramedic tried to be helpful. 'You look as if you could do with a cup of tea. Is it okay for me to go in and make you one?'

‘Why should she take such a step?’ asked Alan, to no-one in particular.

The paramedic shook his head, ‘We can’t do much now until the police arrive.’

‘Oh God, and there is a first grandchild on the way. This is so tragic.’ He was speaking clichés, platitudes, because that was all there was. Language could do nothing else.

‘I’m afraid the lady is dead,’ the paramedic said to the policeman. ‘Mr. Thomas here is in a state of shock and I am making a cup of tea for him.’

Tea and sympathy was all anyone could offer. Alan sat down in the front room in a complete panic. The walls spun. Photographs of him and Valerie, mocked him from the walls and mantelpiece. All gone. All destroyed. He sipped at the hot tea and tried to collect his thoughts.

The constable sat awkwardly on the sofa; his frame too big and solid for Alan’s collapsing reality.

‘We will have to examine the scene of this incident and then we will need to have a chat with you, is that all right?’

Alan nodded vaguely. The tea scalded his tongue, but he didn’t care. He sipped mechanically, barely processing the fact that the police thought he might have been involved in Valerie’s death.

‘This may be painful,’ the constable pushed on, ‘but I have to go through this process. So, first of all; can you account for your movements today?’

Alan stared at him as though he were speaking a foreign language. Then he blinked and from somewhere, a matter-of-fact voice said, ‘I’ve been at work -- I lecture in Information Technology at Wilmslow College. I set off for work this morning at around eight and left there around four, after a day’s teaching. You can verify this

with my college.’ Part of his mind found a moment to be grateful for the sneering exchange with Carroll.

‘Was anything about your wife’s demeanour this morning unusual?’ The officer blundered on, fixing his eyes on his notepad to avoid looking at Alan’s devastated face.

Reluctantly and painfully, Alan admitted that he had been too obsessed with his own unusual demeanour that morning to pay too much attention to Valerie’s.

‘I’d decided to leave. I told her this morning. I thought she would be okay.’ As the words left his lips, Alan realized how self-absorbed that sounded. ‘I have found living here to be very difficult and now that my children have grown up....’ He listened to himself as though to a stranger. *I have found it difficult. My children.* The words echoed back at him, a reflection of his own self-absorption. What about ‘we’? What about ‘our’ children? How separately they had lived. How lonely she must have been.

‘Things have not been good for years and I think she’d been depressed.’

The officer scribbled furiously into his notepad. Then he looked up at Alan, and found that Alan couldn’t leave his gaze. Eventually, the police were content to accept that Valerie’s death was due to suicide and left a distraught Alan to break the news to his children and siblings. That’s when he phoned me.

On his way to the funeral, Alan’s Renault convertible suffered a puncture. We had to go and pick him up, leaving the maroon car slumped at the side of the road with a flat tyre in the centre of Stoke, its pathetic angle summing up the despondency of the day.

Valerie's funeral is a bit of a blur. I knew very little of her religious affiliations and I think the decision to use a local church was probably one of convenience and convention. I recall that the person officiating was in a very difficult position and could not be seen to be commenting on the background to the suicide. There were a number of Valerie's relatives there of whom I had a vague recollection of meeting at some point, probably at their wedding or at a christening. I remember that Valerie came from Gainsborough in Lincolnshire, and that after their wedding I am not sure that the newly wedded couple had much contact with their relatives in that part of the world.

There is usually something positive which can be drawn from a funeral, such as living to a ripe old age or fighting hard against an illness, but suicide seems so pointless and negative. I'm afraid that my harsh feelings at the time were that Valerie could have made the best of a bad situation, to live for her future grandson, but my thoughts have mellowed through the passage of time and I've come to understand that in severe depression, rationality can fly out of the window.

I have to admit that my feelings about Valerie during the time I knew her, were largely neutral or even negative. As a very quiet and withdrawn person, she was the last person that I would have expected Alan, a confident extrovert and a live wire, to settle down with. She never seemed to be able to enter into the spirit of family occasions, and I recall having one or two quite bitter arguments with her, one about my decision not to join the trade union at work and her point that I was quite happy to take the pay rise negotiated by the union. Even on occasional holidays with Alan's family, I would join Alan and his two grown-up children in the local pub for a few pints of real ale, while Valerie would stay in the cottage and watch television.

Whilst I was extremely shocked that she had taken her own life, I was also rather selfishly disappointed that she had taken this action in my mother's former car. Alan was so distressed to have the vehicle around that he asked our sister, Rosemary, to drive it away, to be sold cheaply to some dealer. It may sound cruel and disrespectful of me to say so at this time of tragedy, but if she had no need for the car, I would have liked to have it back. I chose to take some cash at the time of my mother's will rather than the car, because it seemed more sensible to do that when I was short of funds. That car really was my mother's pride and joy and I have many happy memories taking her to Kwik Save, her local cheap grocer, before the days of Aldi and Lidl, and driving in the Yorkshire Dales, especially over Swaledale. The Swaledale trip was especially memorable because I had driven both my parents to a holiday cottage in the remote hamlet of Ivelet up in the Dales, on what was to be my father's last holiday. The car was the latest thing in luxury to me, as most of my cars were rusty bangers. The Mazda had an automatic gearbox, a sun roof and a really good radio, and although my mother never gave up driving, she generally asked me to drive when I was with her. In a way, the car symbolized my closeness to her in the later years and I should have taken it when the opportunity arose.

What added to the poignancy of the whole episode was that as Valerie lay slumped in the front seat of the car, she had scattered an assortment of family photographs and mementos inside the car. It is not difficult to imagine how she spent her last moments, leafing through old snapshots, pictures of Alan and their children, perhaps favourite scenes in the Yorkshire Dales, maybe their wedding photograph or even a famous shot of Alan with his leg in plaster after a mistimed rugby tackle, then slowly lapsing into unconsciousness as the carbon monoxide and the pills took their toll.

We all went back to Alan and Valerie's house after the funeral and the Thomas side of the family mixed uneasily with Valerie's side, the Clarks, who had come over from Lincolnshire and other parts of the country. Although I had probably met some of them in the past, we were not in regular contact. After a few, 'It's really awful, what's happened,' comments, it was a question of searching for some common ground to talk about, before diving into a sandwich for relief from the tension and of the hunger which inevitably builds up after standing in a cold church and later in an even colder crematorium, where meaningless words are uttered as the coffin magically slides into oblivion.

After cup of tea and the obligatory cakes and sandwiches, Alan stood up to address a group of mainly Valerie's relatives.

'Thank you so much for coming over here today to give us support. It's been an incredibly difficult period and I feel an overwhelming sense of guilt at what has happened. I completely underestimated the effect that my decision to leave would have on Valerie and looking back, there are so many things I could have done differently.'

Some sympathetic noises came from the audience, but something in the collective body language suggested a degree of disapproval in the way that Alan had handled things. The sort of links between the two families involved in this marriage had never really come together, so the assembly lacked warmth, although it is difficult to come up with precise evidence. It was just a feeling that I had about the event, a funeral wake which had no positive qualities.

Comparing the figure standing in front of me with the confident politician I knew Alan to be, was extremely painful and although I tried to be as supportive as possible, I could see that he was at a low ebb. His normally optimistic smile had

disappeared, to be replaced by a downcast Alan, his face notably paler than normal and his eyes showing the strain of sleepless nights. All three of his siblings tried to be positive, clearing plates and cups to the kitchen, offering to undertake any necessary tasks and trying to look to the future. Ours was never a greatly tactile family and, indeed, we grew up in an era when people were not very demonstrative. Ironically, Alan was more tactile than the rest of us, no doubt nurtured in the high degree of physical contact of his beloved game of Rugby. I may have failed to give him the necessary degree of physical support on this occasion.

At that time, there was no admission from Alan that another woman was involved, but his heartfelt apology spoke volumes about the guilt he felt. Although the relatives were sympathetic, it was easy to detect their feeling that Alan had let Valerie down, by not being aware of her state of mind and by announcing his decision to leave her so abruptly. In retrospect he could have raised the subject with greater subtlety, but he always had a direct style about him which in most situations was refreshing. Indeed, it is impossible to state how she would have responded if his approach had been more gradual.

It was a stressful experience for all of us and inevitably there was criticism of Alan's approach. It emerged later that he did have a relationship with someone at work and the real problem seems to be that he had not recognised that his wife was probably suffering from depression and that he perhaps needed to have raised the issue of his separation more gradually. It later emerged that Valerie had, indeed, suffered this condition for many years and was on medication, but she had not mentioned it to Alan, although he may have been aware of some issues.

I felt complete support for Alan at this difficult time and it reflected our closeness over the years, an aspect which should become clearer as this memoir unfolds. In childhood we played well together and enjoyed family holidays. After he moved away from the family home to attend university and set up his own family home, our relationship was always cordial and light hearted. When he came over to Wallasey for Sunday lunch with my parents, we would often go down to the beach at Harrison Drive and walk along the shore, or we would take part in the weird management-type games that our eldest brother, Neil used to devise at his famous Christmas parties. Alan's non-musical exploits with the violin were always a source of ribbing, which I explore in the chapters on music. He would never take offence and was happy to insult me in return, frequently asking how many rusty cars I had bought that week.

I suppose that Alan is not the first husband not to notice his wife was depressed and, indeed, there will be many wives who have been similarly blind to what was taking place, probably because events which are going on under one's nose can be, at the same time, out of view. It is not for me to judge Alan for failing to observe that Valerie was becoming more withdrawn. He was so involved in local affairs and engaged with lively people in the council and in the rugby club, that whilst he had some idea of Valerie's state of mind, he clearly felt that she would quickly come to terms with the breakdown of their marriage after so many years and would move on.

War baby

*Something about your childhood, she said go
find some nuggets in the stream.*

I hate to disappoint and accordingly drift back through the decades.

*I'm in a pram, there's a cake with three candles, ancient
aunties all around.*

*A silver sliver of a plane against a blue expanse
or the bonfire which ended a Pacific war.*

*Cascades, Catherine wheels and blazing timbers
on a bomb-site just down the road from us.*

Grandpa's Sunday visit with his ration of sweets.

*Memory blank for a year or so, then a new woman
in my life, first day at school, posting letters, playing in the sand pit.*

Moving house admiring the new-laid timber floor.

*The next few years a blur of schooling, friends in the street,
sports days, marionettes and Tizer.*

The chronology is haywire until 1951.

The great celebration of recovery and achievement.

I am there on the South Bank.

Lights embedded in the concrete walkway.

Finding my way in the Dome of Discovery.

Cricking my neck at the Skylon,

A fat, metallic cigar suspended on steel ropes.

Lunch in the Festival Hall, first sight of black-jacketed waiters who called you

'sir' and the bizarre disappearing funnel.

(How else would a dredger squeeze

under Waterloo Bridge?)

Back home and the age of detail kicks in,

unlimited memory stick and a built-in search engine.

Ready to jump on events with pin-sharp detail.

Chapter 2 - Prelude

A German bomb had been dropped on Vyner Road Wallasey, further down on the same side where we live. Two houses had been flattened and completely destroyed by this high-powered bomb being a direct hit. A young couple had been tragically killed, the wife being several months pregnant, like myself, and they found baby clothes amongst the rubble. The occupant of the adjoining house was saved as she had gone into her neighbour's air raid shelter when the warning siren was heard.

From 'Swings of Fortune' (1989) Edith Thomas (My Mother)

Being close to the port of Liverpool, a major strategic target for the Luftwaffe, the town of Wallasey suffered a fair amount of damage during the Second World War and my parents had a theory that unused bombs were randomly off-loaded on Wallasey as the planes made their way back to Germany after a raid. My mother's self-published book of verse and short stories, from which the above quotation was taken provides a useful insight into my early years

Bits of kindling wood had been collected to get things going and in the place of two smart, late thirties semis, a roaring blaze was celebrating the surrender of the Japanese following the dispatch of the two atomic bombs to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At the time, and this was my first memory, I had no awareness of these world-shattering events, it was just a bonfire and my pram had been taken there for me to enjoy the flames, the biscuits, cakes and cups of tea. This was 15 August, 1945, and a two-day holiday had been declared in England. I would have been three

years and eleven months at the time, perhaps a bit old to have a first memory. This was a different war from the one that had been fought in Europe and the locals were celebrating V-J Day, Victory over Japan Day. As Prime Minister, Clement Atlee put it: 'The last of our enemies is laid low.'

(To my Hong Kong readers, you may have read something about the entry of the Japanese into World War II at Pearl Harbour, because Hong Kong, then under the control of the British, was invaded by the Japanese and it was a very difficult time for the residents of Hong Kong. The point about the bonfire is that British people were extremely relieved that the war had finally come to an end, but as far as I was concerned it was just a bonfire.)

I have described the V-J Day bonfire as the starting point of this memoir, because it represents my first real memory. One of the quirky aspects of childhood is that we generally do not remember the first couple of years of life, probably because at that age we do not have the language to put the experiences into recognisable concepts. Of course, our parents tell us about those times, often recalling humorous escapades which we have no means of refuting. However, the bonfire does not represent the start of those experiences, as I was nearly four at the time.

Before our return to Wallasey, our family had been evacuated to Whitchurch in Shropshire, to escape the kind of bombs which killed the pregnant mother in Vyner Road, so to get the picture straight, I will quote more from my mother's book about my early life there. My mother recalled:

The following week Robin was christened at the church and later on they held the Harvest Festival (1941). We all went and received generous gifts of lovely fruit and vegetables, including a very large

pumpkin-which we really didn't want but didn't like to refuse.

However, I remembered the matron of the Whitchurch nursing home, where Robin had been born a few weeks earlier. She was a South African woman from Cape Town. So we visited the nursing home with the enormous pumpkin on the pram, being careful that it didn't swallow the new baby. The matron was delighted to see us again and gladly accepted the pumpkin. She said that she would make pumpkin pie for the staff, as this was a traditional South African dish.

And finally a potentially near-death experience for the new arrival. My mother continues:

Alan, my second son, was a mischievous child and was a little bit jealous of the new baby Robin. Robin was sleeping in his pram above the rockery, when Alan released the brake and the pram went rolling down the steps and overturned at the bottom of the rockery. Isobel and I rushed to the pram with our hearts in our mouths. When we looked at the pram, Robin was strapped in, unharmed and was laughing.

I wonder whether this was an early indication of my calm demeanour but it would be immodest to claim too much at this early stage in my life.

I have always known that I was born at a nursing home at Whitchurch, Shropshire, but only by studying my birth certificate did I discover that it was Clifton

Nursing Home in the Doddington area of Whitchurch. A strange coincidence is that Lorna Sage, an important memoirist, and at one time a professor of English Literature, whose *Bad Blood* is analysed in my academic essay, was born at the same nursing home a few years later, 13 January, 1943. The same building, dating from the eighteenth century, and a Grade II listed building, is now a care home for the elderly, called Western House. However, while Sage's memoir paints a vivid picture of that part of Shropshire, I have no memory of the area because I was just too young. Sage captures the atmosphere of the town:

Meanwhile, Whitchurch was a self-satisfied little Shropshire market town that took its character from retailing and auctioneering and accounting. The cattle market was on Fridays and half-day closing (religiously observed) was on Wednesdays. Whitchurch had missed out long ago on the great local events of the Industrial Revolution that had created Ironbridge, although there was Smith's Foundry still and Joyce's Clock Factory (the wartime voice of Lord Haw Haw, a.k.a William Joyce was a cousin) and a stagnant wharf where a disused branch of the Shropshire Union Canal came to a quiet end. This cul-de-sac stood conveniently for the town's position.

p. 144-145

When we were evacuated in Whitchurch, we all lived in a rented bungalow, my mother, eldest brother Neil, sister Rosemary and 'middle brother' Alan, plus my mother's sister, Isobel, and their son, John. Rosemary and Neil attended school in Whitchurch, and Isobel had an elderly aunt, Aunt Emma, living just up the road, not

far from the Shropshire Union Canal. I have no further information about life as evacuees but, compared with lurid stories about children being ill-treated, all the indications are that our life was idyllic. In spite of Lorna Sage's view, Whitchurch is actually quite an attractive market town and the Shropshire countryside is picturesque and unspoiled.

After Whitchurch, our family lived for a short time at a bungalow near Ruthin in North Wales, which had been built by my grandfather, John Henry Lindley, as a holiday cottage.

There may have been other early memories from around the same time, but they are hard to pin down. I seem to remember lying in a pram in our back garden in Vyner Road, seeing the silver flash of a plane flying above, and a birthday party, maybe my fourth with the cousins, some cakes and one of my aunts, probably in her thirties who appeared to be a very old person already.

Chapter 3 – Family Background

I was the youngest child of the four children born to Ronald and Edith Thomas, both born in 1906. Neil was born in 1934, sister Rosemary in 1937, 'middle brother' Alan in 1939, and I arrived in September 1941. If I do not mention Rosemary to any extent in the memoir, that should not be taken as in any way neglecting her, but she does not fit in closely with the narrative path I have chosen, partly because she spent much of her adult life in Germany. She is also, at the time of writing, very much alive and it would be difficult and probably unfair to include her in this memoir. Having said that, she has been very helpful in the preparation of this memoir, partly because she has managed to acquire the bulk of the photographic records of my parents and of my brother Neil and sifting through these photographs has given me some useful pointers in this memoir.

My mother, born Edith Lindley in West Yorkshire in 1906, features strongly in this memoir as a major influence on the lives of her children. Perhaps that can be said of many families, but there were particular factors which made our family, perhaps a little different. Her father, known to me as Grandpa Lindley, was a strong and self-willed character who had progressed from working as a joiner in Yorkshire to setting up his own successful house building business in Wallasey, on the Wirral. It took a great deal of courage to move his wife and four daughters from a pleasant part of West Yorkshire, just south of Huddersfield, to the emerging urban development which was Wallasey. This town grew rapidly in the nineteenth century on the back of the expansion of Liverpool as a major port. I mention this later on in a section on transport, but growing up in Wallasey in the 1940s and 50s, one was always conscious of the river, the port and the ships.

For the early part of the twentieth century, Liverpool was the biggest port in the country and had a massive Atlantic trade. That is why Grandpa Lindley came to Wallasey and built the sort of houses which allowed the town to offer attractive accommodation for the white-collar workers in the shipping industry. He developed a considerable number of roads in Wallasey and named them after places in Yorkshire or after famous English public schools. So there is Beverley Road, Saltburn Road, Radley Road, Wharfedale Road, Rugby Road and Harrow Road, to be seen today in Wallasey as tangible memorials to his work; indeed, I have included some photographic evidence in this memoir.

Grandpa Lindley was a difficult character for me to relate to as a child, as he had been stone deaf since his youth and this clearly impaired communication. His achievement in building up a successful construction company is even more remarkable in the light of this disability. From observing my own father's work as a builder, one is struck by the high degree of inter-personal communication needed between boss and bricklayer to make progress on a daily basis. Grandpa Lindley, whilst being stone deaf, was quite capable of talking and in the work ethos of the time, would have been able to make his instructions clear to his men, without necessarily being able to ask for their views. Looking at some of the employees who worked for my father's company after Grandpa Lindley withdrew from operational involvement, it is clear that he knew how to select workers on their skills, which meant a smaller degree of day to day supervision.

He always came across to me as perpetually grumpy, a favourite phrase being: 'Eee by Gum, I care for naught.' I remember he had a very primitive deaf aid, which consisted of an old BBC style microphone and a small valve amplifier, into which he had a pair of headphones plugged. His preferred mode was to have the microphone

near the black-and-white television set so that he could hear the audio on programmes like 'What's my Line.' Years later I used the amplifier as a very primitive guitar amplifier when I took up electric guitar. It didn't really deliver much in the way of volume, but it was a start.

Watching 'What's My Line' was one of Grandpa Lindley's little pleasures at this stage of his life and he firmly believed that the characters on the programme were communicating with him. The panel included Gilbert Harding, David Nixon and Lady Barnet, early examples of TV personalities. The programme was introduced by the well-known broadcaster Eammon Andrews. He would say in his time-honoured way and lilting Irish accent: 'Will our next contestant sign in, please?' The contestant would walk in and sign on a kind of blackboard, in a way a completely pointless exercise, as none of the names would be remembered. Guests were then invited to perform a short piece of mime to demonstrate their occupation and the panellists had to guess the occupation. By today's standards this would not be exactly riveting television, but people loved it. David Nixon was on the programme because he was one of the first television magicians and he had a smooth and chatty manner which people liked. Lady Barnet had been a magistrate and went down well with television because she was confident and articulate. Later on, when she was older and may have been slightly confused, she was arrested for shoplifting and her reputation disappeared overnight, although a contemporary jury would have probably exercised some mercy in her case, as she was not short of money and probably intended to pay for the items and forgot.

Gilbert Harding presented himself as a somewhat curmudgeonly character and yet was known later to have deep personal issues which were explored by a man who established a reputation for a probing interview style. That was John Freeman,

on a programme called, surprisingly enough, 'Face-to-Face.' John Freeman's face, however, was never seen, only the face of the interviewee, and on this particular interview with Gilbert Harding, he was able to dig into some personal stuff which resulted in tears, live on television. It is worth remembering that apart from previously made commercial films, all TV was live, so there was no facility to edit out unsuitable material or tears.

To go back to Grandpa Lindley, he generally felt there was a dialogue between these celebrities and himself and it was much easier to watch the programme and to enter into this quaint world of guessing people's occupations, than to engage in conversation with those around him. This overall picture of Grandpa Lindley was probably a little unfair because he had a kindly side which is shown in a photograph which I have unearthed which conveys a rather different impression. It shows my eldest brother Neil, aged about seven, with his smiling Grandpa, sitting on top of a sundial in the back garden of his large family house in Wallasey. There are so few photographs around from that era that this one has helped to redress the balance.

When he had made some money in Wallasey, John Henry Lindley built his own large family house, which he called 'Netherfield,' after his previous house in Yorkshire, and this is where his four daughters grew up. One influence on my mother was that the other three daughters all seemed to have some problems and to my eyes my mother, Edith, was the only sane one of them.

Nellie, or Auntie Nellie, was very religious and spent much of her time playing hymns on the piano. I know that she went to teacher training college and worked for some time as a schoolteacher, and I understand that she was quite fond of writing, including hymns. However, there was no real dialogue between her and the Thomas children and this was not made any easier by the fact that her only son was regarded

by the rest of us as a bit of a sissy and was accordingly treated badly by the Thomas brothers, not so much myself, you must understand, because I was very small but I know that Alan and Neil and our cousin John Caley gave him a hard time. They would make him cry and then he would go whimpering to his mother.

When I was older, it was a source of amusement that Nellie had married a man named Gordon Bennett (Uncle Gordon). At the time, that name meant nothing to me, but after exposure to the television series 'Till Death Us Do Part' his name took on a whole new meaning. Gordon did not live all that long and memories of him are very slight, but like Nellie, he was not into relating to young people, but that was to some extent a feature of the times. Older people did their own thing and children went off to play. The modern focus on greater involvement of parents, uncles and aunts with children's activities seems to be a relatively recent and welcome phenomenon. Having said that, I have no complaints about the way my parents interacted with me through music, sport, and the sheer gregarious atmosphere of being brought up with three siblings, making a total of six round the dining table, quite a little debating society in its way.

My mother's younger sister, Mary, was a very nervous person with a quavery voice who took the cares of the world on her shoulders and spent much of her time being fairly depressed about what was happening in different parts of the globe. Like the other sisters, she was a member of Claremont Road Methodist Church which she attended on a regular basis. The Methodist Church was enthusiastic about missionaries working abroad and quite often the sermon would be given by someone who had worked in 'darkest Africa' who described extreme poverty and people dying of leprosy. The congregation was then urged to put money on the plate to support the missionary activity and Mary constantly worried about these issues and it

contributed to her general anxiety about most things. For some reason or other, some people would put money in a separate envelope and then put the envelope in the plate. This may have been a form of covenant, whereby people promised and gave regular amounts, quite a feature in some religions. Uncle Stanley, mentioned later, was a Senior Steward at the church and one of his jobs was to assist in the collection while the organist played a voluntary, in effect, background music while the collection was going on. From a musical point of view, rather like jazz pianists, church organists have to be able to improvise and keep the tune going, especially during weddings, when the bride might be late in arriving while the traditionally nervous groom wonders if he is going to be dumped at the church, very much the staple of TV soaps.

To return to our extended family. Auntie Mary was married to a shortish, stocky man without much hair, Roland Chapman, who had a job in Oldham, Lancashire. He travelled, on a daily basis, possibly fifty miles or more by train, as he did not drive, at a time when people tended not to commute long distances. I think he was already working in Oldham when he met Mary and was happy to move into the family house, even though it was shared with his father-in law, Grandpa Lindley. Within a few years, the couple had one daughter, Dorothy.

With her nervous disposition, Mary lacked the confidence to run the household and Grandpa Lindley wisely took on a helper, a formidable woman, Cissie from Birkenhead (a town adjacent to Wallasey with a tough reputation), who was largely responsible for bringing up Dorothy. It was Dorothy who taught me the meaning of the word 'tantrum' because when she was quite young, if she could not get her way, she would collapse on the floor screaming and yelling, kicking her feet in the air and not worrying if anybody was observing. It was my mother who explained that Dorothy

was having a tantrum, which thankfully she grew out of and actually lived quite a normal life, despite an unusual background of having a mother who was a nervous wreck and a strong powerful woman from Birkenhead running the household. The presence of her stone-deaf grandfather would not have helped to bring normality to her upbringing and Dorothy did well to overcome those issues and lead a successful life as a school teacher, sadly shortened by serious illness in her fifties.

Isobel, the younger of the sisters, always rather frightened me because she had a shrill voice and was quite happy to criticise other children, apart from her own, in the family. I remember her as being very intolerant of people and being a bit of a local town gossip. At this point you need to know that my father Ron set up a building company with his partner Stan, who was married to Isobel. He was referred to (by my father) as 'a saint,' in view of the way he coped with Isobel.

Indeed, Stan was a most admirable character, able to enjoy himself by having a pint of Guinness at the Nelson pub after the evening church service. He worked hard for the church, often organising visits to old people in the area, whilst at the same time enjoying a pint now and then and having a wicked sense of humour. He would always offer me a big bottle of Newcastle Brown Ale when, in later life, I used to call round to discuss the family property business, even though as a senior member of Claremount Methodist Church, he would have been expected to be teetotal and sign the pledge (not to drink alcohol). He remained married to Isobel until his death in his eighties, and surely now will be receiving his rewards in heaven for his saintly behaviour on earth.

To create some clarity of understanding where these characters fit into the family structure, I have included a simplified family tree in the central section of the memoir, next to the photographs.

During that period of my childhood, we spent most of our Christmas days at Netherfield, where under Cissie's generalship, and support from my mother, a roast turkey dinner was served to around a dozen people. Afterwards, we would play charades. Somebody would play the piano and we would all sing carols round the piano. It all sounds rather Victorian and in one sense it was, because the atmosphere of the house, plus the paintings, decor and ornaments all had a ring of the late Victorian period, even though the house was built in the 20th century. The sideboard in the music room always had an array of photographs, many of them weddings or people graduating, because our family members, at least my mother's side of it, were quite well educated. This was unusual for the time, but there was quite a strong tradition of education from the Lindley side of the family, and I remember dressing up in an academic gown which had belonged to a deceased great aunt, a school teacher with a degree. It made a very good ghost outfit or even a cloak for Captain Marvel. I even used it in one of my early teaching jobs, at Toxteth Technical High School where staff wore gowns. I quite enjoyed wearing mine because, as a young, fairly green teacher, I felt that the gown gave me presence, status and authority. It also kept chalk off your clothes.

If I have painted a picture of a dysfunctional extended family, I have probably been a little unfair. None of us starved, we lived in attractive houses and there was no drunkenness or violence. The issues were trivial in comparison with many families, but I have found it interesting to reflect on these relationships from the distance and perspective of age and experience.

Leaving aside these wider family topics, as I grew up I became more and more aware of my mother's energy and wish to contribute to society. She became involved in local political circles and worked hard for the Liberal group in Wallasey. She

organised the Women Liberals' group and she was co-opted onto a number of council committees. One of her major areas of interest was that of child care and she visited a number of children's homes which at that time were run by the local council. Back home at lunch, she would describe some of the situations which had required council intervention and these were mainly linked to poverty, neglect and poor housing. My mother realised that she had received a very privileged upbringing, despite some of the family idiosyncrasies and she understood that her current situation, in bringing up four children, was very favourable, arising from a secure income and a supportive family.

She did try to become elected as a local councillor but without success, mainly because the Liberal Party was at an especially low ebb at that time. With her high profile locally, she was invited to become a magistrate, also known as JP (Justice of the Peace) and she operated on the main bench and on the matrimonial bench for many years. She also followed my father in taking up golf, and although only an ordinary player, she became involved in the running of the women's section of the golf club and spent a happy year as captain, which generated a special photograph.

One could argue that these were not exceptional activities, especially for a woman who was not working, as indeed was often the case in those days, because women, once married were expected to give up employment. This gradually changed in the post-war years, as more women were needed in the work place. With only a limited period of work experience between graduation and marriage, when she worked in the Children's Department of Liverpool Council, she used all her experiences plus her own educational background to encourage her children to do their best at school and to get involved in constructive activities. One aim in this memoir is to demonstrate how her vision affected and motivated her family.

Right from the start, my mother had big ideas for her children. The three boys were given the name 'Lindley,' my mother's maiden name, as our middle names. This was always a cause of some embarrassment at school when you had to give out your full name in front of the class. So Neil became Neil Ronald Lindley Thomas, Alan had to make do with three initials, Alan Lindley Thomas, and, of course, I have the full set: Robin Henry Lindley Thomas. Why did she do this? She used to say, 'one day you may well be famous and Thomas is a rather common name. So you will be free to call yourself Lindley-Thomas.' This never became necessary, but you knew what she was thinking about.

Where did my mother's vision come from? She would quote the achievements of successful members of the family, including her father JH Lindley who started out as a joiner and built a successful business. It may also come from her Yorkshire background where there is a tradition of hard work and graft. She also used to talk about her brilliant cousin, Bobby, who achieved a first-class degree at Oxford and then was called up to fight in the war against Japan only to lose his life on the Burma Railway. On the musical side, from quite an early age, she would quote the example of Dr Charles Wood, a third or fourth cousin of ours who ended up as Professor of Music at Cambridge University, and wrote a number of important pieces of church music.

My father also wanted us to do well, but he did not articulate the vision in the way that my mother was able to do so, undoubtedly as a result of her own university education. Her philosophy on life would have been modified by her stint at Liverpool University. The early feminist pioneer Eleanor Rathbone, who had associations with the University, would have influenced her, as indeed would have her friendships with their peers, including the lady we later called Auntie Hilda. With these examples in

mind, plus her admiration for Jo Grimond, who was then leader of the very small bunch of Liberal MPs, she constantly stressed to her children that they should not waste their talents and that they should contribute to society, so my two brothers followed closely in her steps in getting involved in local politics and going beyond her achievements by standing for Parliament. I am not sure whether she saw me as a potential Prime Minister, but she knew that with a bit of hard work I could do well in exams and she also spotted my musical ability and encouraged me with lessons and instruments.

Looking at three photographs as part of my research, I was struck by how much could be learned from them; the earlier the shot, the greater the rarity value and hence the information to be gleaned in this way. A photograph of the four Lindley sisters, taken in the 1920s, is especially revealing. From the carefree, jazz-infused 1920s to the post-war reconstruction and austerity of the 1950s, we see the evolution of an innocent young woman already standing apart from her odd sisterhood, to a mature woman in her prime, ready to tackle a municipal election. Assembling the four sisters for this attractive but slightly staged picture would have been a tough task for the embryonic photographer trying to capture the personalities of these young women. The tentative one on the left, later to succumb to a major nervous breakdown, the impish one with a streak of potential nastiness and the taller, earnest looking one who would later devote her life to hymn singing, all standing, in my subjective judgement, alongside the saner one.

She is on the threshold of a rare undergraduate education, with some thoughts of a career and the standard hope of a husband and family, perhaps not contemplating as many as four children, certainly not envisaging another destructive world conflict within the next twenty years. Aged six at the onset of the First World War and thirty

three at the beginning of the Second, she lived through a degree of fear and uncertainty totally unknown to the present generation.

We fast-forward over 30 years to see the official municipal election photograph prepared for a political leaflet for the local Liberal party. My mother displays an unusually well-groomed head of hair and the hint of a smile, showing a mixture of warmth and business-like efficiency. This is a human being who gets things done, a woman in a largely man's world, capable of contributing to the welfare of children and improving the position of women. The professional handiwork of the hairdresser, her smoothly surfaced complexion, her warm but focused eyes, the 1950s style of lipstick, the sensible dark dress and the restrained brooch -- all this is designed to obtain votes to propel this confident and compassionate woman to a position of political influence in the local area, which unfortunately, she was never able to achieve. This was not through any absence of effort on her part.

Being a member of the Liberal Party in the 1950s was a lonely experience and it was only later, in the 1980s and 90s, that Liberals, later called the Liberal Democrats, started to gain representation at local and national level. At one time there was a standard joke that all the Liberal Party MPs could be driven round in one taxi, or could be fitted into a telephone box. The current phrase, after their near annihilation in the 2015 election, is that they could now all fit into a people carrier.

There were several women in politics at the time, notably the formidably combative Labour MP, Bessie Braddock, who represented a very deprived area of Liverpool at the time. If my mother had chosen to represent a mainstream party, such as the Conservatives or Labour, my guess is that she would have become a councillor, but she felt wedded to the ethos of the Liberal Party.

Moving forward another 20 years or so, I have a photograph which was prepared when my mother became Captain of the Ladies' Golf Club in Wallasey. Taken by a professional, she has a neat and not too pronounced permed hair-do and her skin is not wrinkled. Her eyes look lively and there is a gentle smile on our face. She is wearing a necklace of three sets of pearls with a lightish coloured dress. So these snapshots can tell us a great deal about that woman, my mother, who features so strongly as the central plank of my family memoir, but what do I recall about my relationship with her, as a child?

The word I would use is pragmatic, because the focus was on getting on with our lives, with practical problem solving as opposed to powerful expressions of emotion. We were not a particularly tactile family and I was comfortable with that. As a very young child, I certainly recall a goodnight cuddle from both my parents, but as our large family took shape, I remember it more as being a busy environment, with our house as a kind of constantly revolving door, with people rushing off for football matches, scout meetings and political activities. We did not feel unloved and we were glad to be active and busy. We probably took our degree of material comfort for granted and the four children would have been uncomfortable with too many expressions of affection. I remember especially shying away from elderly aunts with slobbery lips, smelling of Yardley's Lavender and wanting to give me a kiss.

Looking at photographs can be an addictive process and a swift trawl through some colour snapshots produced a fascinating image of a very active mother, and by the time these photographs were taken, a grandmother. She is seen with a gang of us at a station on the North Yorkshire Moors Railway, as part of a series of holidays in Yorkshire in my mother's last decade. Everything seemed fine here, with my brother Alan with his wife Valerie apparently in good spirits. There was another shot

of my mother down on the promenade at New Brighton, wearing some very bright, turquoise trousers, because although my mother's dress sense was not amazingly good, she liked to dress up in bright colours as part of her optimistic nature.

Switch to one of my brother Neil's parties and I am pictured wearing a rather smart sports jacket, unusual for me, and playing the family violin. Who is accompanying me? It is my mother and I suspect we were playing a famous Scottish piece the title of which eludes me at present. Another shot in Yorkshire, this time outside the building which stood as the vet's house as featured in James Herriot's books, which were best-sellers. Herriot was the pen name of a vet who operated in North Yorkshire for many years and then wrote a series of novels about his experiences, including *All Creatures Great and Small* (1972) and *All Things Bright and Beautiful* (1974). My mother loved these books, and especially the television adaptations which were enacted against the backcloth of the striking scenery of the Yorkshire Dales, so seeing the actual locations gave her particular pleasure. There is a section of a mountain road just above Swaledale, where the river crosses the road and on one of our holidays, with my mother in her eighties, we drove through 'the water spout' which features in one of the books and television adaptations. Here is a slice of Herriot's prose:

At times it seemed unfair that I should be paid for my work; for driving out in the early morning with the fields glittering under the first pale sunshine and the wisps of mist still hanging on the high tops.

James Herriot, *All Creatures Great and Small* (1972)

This extract encapsulates what my mother liked about Herriot, his optimism and his appreciation of the sheer beauty of the Dales. Having been born in Yorkshire, she always enjoyed aspects of that county, its literature, its scenery and indeed, its puddings.

Another photograph is quite an intimate shot outside the Magazine pub (The Mags), in New Brighton, with my brother Neil, dressed in a smart suit and me in a leather jacket which has the look of having been around a long time, and my mother. She was never that keen on pubs, having been brought up in the temperance tradition of Methodism and did not really drink much alcohol. However, in later life, she recognised that pubs were often quite enjoyable places to go for lunch and with the Mags being the local watering hole for both Neil and myself, she enjoyed coming along for a meal with us from time to time.

There exist so many shots with members of the family of various age groups. Does that make her any different from other mothers? Probably not, but what strikes me about the photographs is the sheer diversity of the company. There is one where a French visitor staying with us is having a picnic with my mother, another one with another French visitor, and many shots taken at my brother's annual Christmas party, where the scene portrays a general feeling of harmony with various wings of the family assembled for the event. If I have marginally criticised my mother's dress sense, then the photographs show me being a far bigger culprit, in particular one taken in Winscombe in Somerset where my aunts Marjorie and Mary lived in their retirement, and I am wearing a garish red shirt together with similarly striking red shoes, which must have been purchased at a sale. I have frequently been attracted to sales items, where a massive saving has been offered, even if the item is patently

unsuitable. Later on, some bright blue boots only appeared in public on a couple of occasions until driven by derision into disposal at the nearest charity shop.

Staying with the topic of shoes and fashion, I am reminded of the fact that my mother's feet were damaged by the wearing of unsuitable shoes in the 1920s, when many young women stuffed their feet into tight shoes with wobbling heels to dance the Charleston. In middle age, she paid the price and developed a hammer toe. It meant that she had to purchase special hand-made shoes produced by the shoe company Sir Herbert Barker. These were quite expensive and rather conservative in design, in green suede with neat laces. Barker was a foot surgeon who favoured a method of dealing with foot problems mainly via manipulation. He also co-operated with a London shoe company to produce these distinctive shoes which so greatly assisted my mother. Modern users of six inch stiletto heels may wish to take note.

Medical technology was catching up with the problem and sometime in her later middle years, she had an operation which corrected the toe. This meant that she walked confidently well into her eighties and was able to walk around eighteen golf holes, but this time wearing specialist golfing shoes with studs. I have a phrase running through my mind along the lines of that if you can keep walking, you can carry on living, which may well be untrue and unfair to people who cannot walk, but in my mother's case, her high level of mobility through to old age, on her feet and behind the wheel of her much loved Mazda car, helped to accentuate and prolong her independence and enthusiasm.

One lesson I think we all learned from my mother was the value of friendship, because throughout her life she cultivated good friends and supported them. Some were most admirable but one or two others were, shall we say, a little bit strange. But my mother was consistent with them all, indeed she seemed to adopt people to

become part of her circle. Her friend at university, Hilda, became Auntie Hilda and throughout our childhood, we received Christmas presents and cards from her. Later, when she had retired, we visited her up in Giggleswick, in the Yorkshire Dales. In addition, my mother took her on a couple of family holidays in Yorkshire. They were both at Liverpool University together, at a time when very few women went to University.

The university has confirmed that my mother graduated 7 July 1928 with a B.Com (Bachelor of Commerce). Although it was relatively rare for women to undertake degrees, they were starting to increase their numbers. On the B.Com course the ratios were as follows: 1926-7, seven men, one woman; 1927-28, five men, two women; 1928-29, five men, six women; and 1929-30, seven men, six women.

The total of undergraduates at Liverpool University was around two thousand. Men dominated medicine, law, and engineering, while women were increasingly being represented on arts courses and the Diploma of Education. From the above figures, it is reasonable to assume that Hilda and my mother were the only two women on that course in 1928.

At the current time, it is estimated that a figure of between 30% and or 40% of the population in the UK go to university. This compares with around 5% when I studied at Reading University, and a much lower figure when my mother was at Liverpool. The increase in participation in higher education has been dramatic and it represents the growing need for advanced societies to prepare well-qualified people for the kind of jobs emerging in a technological society.

It is possible to speculate that my mother could have easily established a relationship with a fellow undergraduate and that none of the incidents described in

this memoir would have taken place. In the event, she stayed with a local non-graduate, my father, although I have no information about when their friendship started. There is no evidence that her advanced education was a source of friction, as my father, although he did not go into higher education, did attend a grammar school and had strong cultural interests including music and film. Indeed, my father used to enjoy telling us about the time he gave a lift to Ralph Richardson, later Sir Ralph, the distinguished film and stage actor, on his way to the Merseyside Film Institute. This did not lead to a walk-on part in any of Sir Ralph's films.

My parents both played tennis at Claremount Tennis club in Wallasey and that is where they might have met. They certainly played together in competitions and somewhere in a box of mementoes, there is a small silver-plated cup, marking their winning of a mixed doubles handicap event.

In addition to her university friend, Hilda, I need to mention another of her friends, Lorna, who relocated to Wallasey, having lived through the Blitz in London. My mother roped her into the Women Liberals and Lorna became a great friend of our family, and quite an interesting contrast to my mother. Lorna had experienced the wider world of London and industry, and was able to broaden my mother's experience and liberalise her thinking by the odd friendly jibe. My mother certainly would have heard some risqué jokes from Lorna, and this broadened her mind in preparation for her future role as a magistrate, when her eyes would have been opened further by court details, especially on the matrimonial bench which dealt with marital breakdown and children's issues. It is perhaps ironic to note that her own family set-up was not exactly a paragon of harmony, given that my father had a thirty year or so affair with 'Auntie Bell' mentioned in the next chapter, which focuses on my father and his side of the family.

My recollection is that most magistrate appointments came from the middle classes and that effectively people with these backgrounds were generally pontificating and passing sentences on people largely from working class backgrounds. However, I am aware that over a period of time, JP representation started to extend to wider reaches of society, including trade union officials. As for wider ethnic groups, this did not happen in Wallasey for the simple reason that there was no history of widespread settlement on the Wirral by such groups. Even today, a black face is a relative rarity in this area.

Understandably, I have stressed the role of my mother and her family in this saga, so the next chapter introduces some information about my father and his side of the family.

Chapter 4 – The Thomas Side of the Family

I need to bring my father and his background into the memoir at this stage and a wedding photograph in the central photographic section symbolises the match which led to the arrival of the children, who are key to the whole narrative. This photograph is perhaps typical of many from that era, in terms of dress, appearance and general tone but it is a way of introducing the Thomas side of the equation to balance the key role played by my mother around which this memoir is built.

I know far less about my father's family and background than my mother's, and reflecting on this, it was partly because all the aunts and uncles on the Lindley side lived round the corner. Grandpa Lindley's large house, Netherfield, was a regular meeting place for Mary, Nellie, Isobel and my mother, plus their spouses and children. In contrast, my father's sisters lived further away; Marjorie, near Reading in Berkshire, and Kath, in Leeds.

My parents told me that my Great Grandfather was a Baptist minister, possibly in Lancashire, but there, the trail stops. In this age of ancestor hunting, a search could be made, but that will be for others. A UK television series, 'Who do you think you are?' has encouraged many families to search their heritage on the back of digital technology, so if my own descendants wish to follow that route, it will always be available.

Within the same general topic of heritage, an interesting side-line on our family history is provided by a book in my possession, which has been in the family for generations, the title is: 'A Mixture of Scholastic Divinity with Practical.' This was written by Henry Jeanes, Minister of God's word at Chedzoy, in Somersetshire, and it was published in 1656, at Oxford. The preface explains that:

Some of the most difficult knots in divinity are untied, many dark places of Scripture cleared, sundry heresies and errors refuted.

With nearly four hundred pages of closely printed analysis of the Bible and other religious literature, it is not something that I have bothered to read. What is more interesting is handwritten at the end of the book and it reads 'Thomas Mapes his book 1724.' We always felt that the use of the word Thomas suggested a family link, but it could just have been the person's Christian name. Nevertheless, I have to ask myself why this book has been in our family for such a long time and who owned it? I can only guess that the original owner was an ancestor who was a member of the clergy.

The reader will forgive me for failing to analyse this lengthy tome in detail, because it is very heavy in theological discussion. At one point, a previous reader, possibly a relative has written 'Mark' in the margin, meaning, I think, 'take note of'; rather than a reference to St Mark. There are other handwritten comments, but they are too faded to read.

What will happen to this book, this family heirloom? At one point, I considered selling in the hope of raising some serious money, but on finding that there are a few copies around, fetching only small sums, this book will stay in our family and may well find its way into being owned by one of my grandchildren.

Moving forward to my grandfather, Harold Atchley Thomas, I know that he ran a men's outfitting shop in Liverpool, in North John Street (Thomas and Atkinson). He was also prominent in the local Labour Party in Wallasey and was elected as a

Councillor. He became an Alderman, like a senior councillor, a position which has now disappeared in local government. He used to visit us during my childhood, normally on a Sunday afternoon, to give us sweets, including Liquorice Allsorts, Rowntree's Fruit Gums and Cadbury's Milk Chocolate. This was a post-war period of rationing and sweets were very rare, so he used his rations to buy treats for his grandchildren. My recollection is that he was a pleasant likeable person, quite tall and completely bald, but I do not recall that we, as grandchildren, in any way became close to him, but that was typical of the times. The only picture I have of Grandpa Thomas shows him taking part in what looks to be the annual Mayor's Parade in Wallasey, and he is shown wearing a top hat and a top coat walking ahead of a group which includes the mace holder preceding the Mayor, an elderly Rolls-Royce and a number of what looked like gangsters' cars, but they were probably American limousines. Such was the degree of interest shown in such events in those days, that there are a number of people watching the procession including some small children. One would guess that the picture would have been taken in the 1950s and I recognise one other person in the picture, Alderman Cyril Dingle whom I came across later as a governor of Wallasey Grammar School (attended by my father and his three sons).

We never knew either of our grandmothers, and Grandpa Thomas's wife actually committed suicide, which is a recurrent theme in this memoir. I recall that most of the time I knew him, Grandpa Thomas lived in a hotel. This was not uncommon at that time and he was not the only person connected with our family who lived in a hotel, no doubt in scenes reminiscent of Terence Rattigan's 'Separate Tables'. I know that in later life he had a long-term relationship with a Mrs Granger, Ivy, and towards the end of his life, suffering from cancer, he moved down to his daughter's place just

outside Reading, where he died. Later on, the daughter, Marjorie took her own life after becoming worried about the effect her deteriorating health might have on her partner, Mary.

Indeed, there is an interesting potential story line covering Marjorie and Mary, who ran a successful boarding kennels business for many years. Marjorie's suicide followed a period of depression, although given her very positive approach to life, her passing in this way surprised our family. Does it mean that there is a suicide gene in this family, given that Marjorie's mother herself took her own life? This is not something that I am qualified to speculate upon. Current research supports the view that a family history of mental disorder and suicide are risk factors. Researchers found that the offspring of depressed people had structural differences in their brains. The conclusion is that suicide does run in families, although the odds are against it happening to another relative. So my paternal grandmother took her own life, and my aunt Marjorie had the same fate. Valerie, Alan's wife, suffered from depression and committed suicide; although she was not a blood relative. Perhaps we should monitor any relatives with genetic links to any of the suicide victims mentioned in this memoir.

My father (Henry) Ronald Thomas, was born in Wallasey and attended Poulton Primary school and Wallasey Grammar School. He was a successful sportsman, representing his school at football, cricket and rowing. My recollection is that he performed quite well academically, but like most of his generation, did not contemplate higher education. He started a motor vehicle apprenticeship with Voss Motors in Liverpool and later moved into the building industry, when he met my mother, so effectively his father-in-law gave him a job. The same thing happened to his business partner, Stan. They both married into the family firm. It gave them an

introduction to the building industry and a secure salary, but it also brought tensions in taking orders from their rather grumpy, stone-deaf father-in-law. By the mid-1930s, Stan and Ron had broken away from J H Lindley to set up Thomas & Caley, although continuing to work with J H Lindley.

In the period before the war, Ron and Stan moved their operation down to Surbiton, near Kingston, London, where they built some houses. Back on Merseyside, during the war, the company specialised in bomb shelters, and whilst Stan joined the RAF and was posted to a remote island in the Indian Ocean, my father was deemed to be part of a 'reserved occupation,' that is, needed for key jobs at home rather than being called up. Instead, he joined the Home Guard, the institution affectionately portrayed in the legendary BBC TV series 'Dad's Army'. The local Home Guard used to watch for bombers targeting Merseyside and I gather that there was an attempt to bring such a plane down, but the target was missed. Could my father have volunteered for the army? He probably could have done, but he might not have returned from the war and this memoir might never have had cause to be written. Historically, it is hard to find any resentment for those on reserved occupations. It was done to avoid the situation during the First World War, when so many key personnel fought in the war in Europe that the war effort and the general organisation of society at home suffered.

And so, after the Second World War, the family returned to Wallasey, ready to rebuild the nation, a task taken literally by my father and Stan. They progressed with Thomas and Caley whilst continuing to provide maintenance for a number of houses owned by father-in-law, John Henry Lindley. My guess is that Ron and Stan, very close friends as well as brothers-in-law and business partners, coped with Lindley by

joking about him whilst playing golf or during a half of Guinness in the Golf Club bar, known locally, and universally, as 'the 19th hole'.

As I have tried to explain, the major focus on my mother in this memoir has something to do with her vision. This is in no way a criticism of my father, who, in many respects, was a high quality parent, influencing all the children in a positive way, through music, sport, literature, wit, and constant support. My father, who in many ways performed his role well, nevertheless had a private life, which had a negative effect on our family. For many years he carried on having a relationship with a woman we were asked to refer to as 'Auntie Belle,' the sister of one of his work associates. He used to go for a walk 'to get some fresh air' at around 10pm, returning an hour or so later. I think my mother knew about it, but in those days, staying together for the sake of family unity was taken very seriously. However, his long extra-marital relationship with 'Auntie Belle' did cast a shadow on our family.

My mother, as mentioned later, was very tolerant, but must have been hurt. I have discussed this with my sister and her conclusion is that Belle probably made a fuss of my father in a way which my more pragmatic mother did not. He was possibly flattered by her attention, even though it seemed clear to my siblings, that Belle was a woman of patchy education, lacking in real opinions on things, and compared with my mother, a rather superficial and inconsequential person. These were before the days of easy divorce and I am certain that my parents never considered such an option.

Despite the emphasis on my mother, my father lived an interesting and fulfilling life, running the building business with Uncle Stan, coaching youth football, going to symphony concerts and operas, enjoying family holidays and supporting my siblings as we grew up.

Chapter 5 – Siblings

Early on in this exercise, I downloaded some family tree software and fed in some information lovingly assembled by a distant cousin in Canada, plus a family tree put together by my mother, which I found in her copy of 'The New English Bible', now in my possession. However, the software family tree produced around a dozen pages, too many for this project, so a simplified family tree appears in the central photographic section of the memoir, which should help to establish where these various characters fit in.

The problem I face is that, inevitably, early memories cannot be said to be always reliable. However, as I delve into my history, rare nuggets of information are unearthed by some strange process of rediscovery, which could also be part of a process of creative reimagining. Have I remembered in full technicolour detail? Certainly not. Have I partly reimagined events, perhaps aided by other sources of information, such as books, pictures and media programmes? Undoubtedly.

So, when I arrived on the scene in Whitchurch, there were already three siblings around (Neil, Rosemary and Alan). I was the last to arrive. Indeed, although given all the love and support that I needed, I cannot believe that my arrival was planned. Who would wish to have a baby at the lowest point in a World War? Alan was born in December 1939, three months after the outbreak of the war. Even so, Europe would have been a very uncertain place when his birth was planned but, in my case, nobody in their right minds would have tried for a fourth baby around Christmas 1940; after Dunkirk, after the Battle of Britain and round about the time when heavy bombing was severely damaging places like Liverpool and Coventry. So, was I a mistake? This accusation was never made and I never had the feeling that I might

have been one. I was certainly not the result of an illicit liaison, as pictures of my father compared with current shots of myself will confirm beyond doubt.

The theme of evacuation during the Second World War has been dealt with comprehensively in literature and drama, in particular to celebrate the major anniversaries of that war, and it would be romantic to say that I had gone through those experiences, with a label showing my name attached to my coat whilst carrying a small brown suitcase. *Carrie's War* is a children's novel, made into a film, which features Carrie and her brother being evacuated from London to Wales at the onset of World War Two. There is a scene of the children boarding a train, complete with small suitcases and luggage labels attached to their coats. Similarly, *Goodnight Mister Tom* deals with the theme of evacuation, where a boy who has been abused at home moves to a rural area where he is looked after by an elderly recluse, Mister Tom (played by John Thaw in the film). Both characters change as a result, and the boy experiences loving care for the first time.

The trauma of travelling by train to a strange destination, with a label attached, therefore did not happen and my mother would have travelled to Whitchurch by car, with a warm welcome from relatives. My experience will have been straightforward compared with many families who have experienced evacuation, and it has been suggested to me that even the food shortages experienced by others, would not have been shared by our family because we had contacts in the farming world and a ready supply of fresh food.

As a baby in Whitchurch, I would have had some awareness of my siblings. Once we returned to Wallasey, I do start to remember them, especially Alan, as we went to the same school and played with the same children in the road. Without wishing to sound romantically nostalgic, we were able to play in the road without too

many worries about traffic. The road in question, Vyner Road, named after a wealthy landowner in the district, was unusual in having no connecting roads and so the traffic was more predictable and observable, but even so the amount of traffic was much lighter in those post-war years. Our parents could easily throw us out into the streets and forget about us when we played. I am sure they did not forget about us, but I would think it was a fairly stress-free environment at the time.

I like to think that we learned how to be sociable and how to look after ourselves. I am also conscious that being the youngest in a family of four, quite often the person looking after me was my immediate brother Alan, but in these contemporary times of child protection and health and safety, along with smaller families, that practice may well have begun to die out. The current emphasis on safety is probably sensible with the increase in perceived threats to children, especially traffic, but something of the freedom and adventure experienced by children of my generation may have been lost. In the modern age, the idea of letting your children play unsupervised in the street, with a seven year-old keeping an eye on a five year old, would be seen as irresponsible.

Our address, 17 Vyner Road, was an unexceptional three-bedroom semi-detached house, built sometime in the 1930s by my grandfather's company, JH Lindley. Although my memories of the house are sketchy, it was certainly before the age of the fitted kitchen. The kitchen would have had a sink, cooker, a small table and a wooden cupboard, which would have been constructed by the joiner employed by JH Lindley. There was a smallish rectangular garden at the rear of which my only memories are lying in a pram, or later, playing games.

With four children, the house was too small for us, although at that age I have no recollection of any overcrowding. One advantage of the location was that we were quite close to the local cottage hospital. I used to enjoy running around unsupervised with a cane stick and one day I managed to injure a point just above my eye. My mother was able to put me in the pram and push me the five minutes to the hospital, where they realised that I had not been damaged. A well-placed Elastoplast and a few kind words would probably sort me out. Even today, I intervene when I see our grandchildren running around with sticks, even using Star Wars lightsabers! My sister Rosemary also had a fall at this time and gashed her hand on the wall. She was also unceremoniously pushed up the hospital and she still has the scar, which she can be persuaded to show to interested parties.

My impression of health care at the time is generally positive, at a time when the NHS had not even started. The system, certainly in terms of our family visits to the local hospital, seemed informal and friendly, and I do not recall delays in treatment. The whole atmosphere of Accident and Emergency departments has clearly changed, with greater numbers, computerised records, and specialisation as medical knowledge has advanced. I might be looking at our family health experiences in a warm glow of nostalgia, but the system worked effectively for us. It should be added that, as a middle class family, we enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle, with food on the table, a roof over our heads and plenty of exercise. There was no junk food, apart from the occasional treat from the fish and chip shop; yes, actually wrapped up in yesterday's Liverpool Echo.

So, our family did not make massive demands on the health service, but clearly major changes have been brought in through the advancement of medical knowledge and greater longevity. A commonly held view is that the NHS in the UK is

currently in crisis, with long waiting times for appointments and treatment. However, different families have differing experiences, and for our family, the service from the NHS has generally been excellent.

There was one occasion at Lyndhurst road, when we all seemed to acquire the typical childhood illnesses at round about the same time. It was probably chickenpox - I remember the doctor visiting our house, coming into the back garden and diagnosing at least a couple of us with chickenpox - but it could have been mumps. The idea of children mixing together when these illnesses were around was seen as being sensible. We could experience these diseases as children, rather than risk having them as adults, when the consequences can be more serious.

My parents arranged some formal family photographs when I was a baby. Shot at a local studio, it shows a rather formal line-up of the family. Alan is on the left with a fairly dull expression on his face. Then there is my father, who also looks ill-at-ease in a smart tweed sports jacket, a dark tie and a centre parting. Why does he look so expressionless - has he been pushed into this exercise against his will? As I look about eighteen months old, the photograph must have been taken during the war. Did my parents feel that some kind of record was necessary because of the uncertainty of the war? Perhaps it was taken in Whitchurch where we were evacuated. Did my father travel over from Wallasey, where he was building air raid shelters, for the photograph?

My sister, Rosemary is looking very sweet with a flower in her hair and wearing a necklace. My mother is also in the shot, looking slightly formal, the trace of a smile on her face and a neat, conventional hairstyle. She is supporting me as I appear to stand in front of her and probably would have fallen down without her. I have a

horrendous pudding-basin haircut and what looks to be rather bulky pants no doubt enclosing a weighty nappy. To the right of the picture is Neil, his hands clasped together in front of him, with what looks like a grey jacket with a collar and tie, possibly a school uniform. Did Neil feel slightly detached from the whole exercise, because even at that time he had some feeling that a 'normal' family life would not be his long term choice? Photographers who can achieve a natural look with these family portraits are a rare breed. However, this picture is a useful and revealing portrayal of our family and indeed is the only one from that period. For all the above reasons, I have selected this photograph for the cover of this memoir.

Our move to 31 Lyndhurst Road was a major step up in the world, to a more up-market area, and to a large five bedroom semi-detached house. It also had a big attic on the second floor and fairly early on, my parents bought a table tennis table, so the room was ideal for family activities and for having friends round. Throughout our time at 31 Lyndhurst Road, the table tennis room was a great source of activity and sociability. We also used the room to play with a range of toys, including puppets, cars, wind-up trains and Lego. It was a good place to escape from adults. We also had a room on the top floor, known as 'the dark room' because it had no windows. We used to enjoy going in there to play as ghosts.

When my father bought the house he was able to replace the dining room floor with a high-quality wooden floor, even though in those post-war years there was a shortage of material. However, as a builder, he had access to these things. The floor paid off later when we held parties, and in those days of ballroom dancing, having a high-quality floor was a key part of the experience. Over the years, my parents upgraded their house to a point where it was warm and comfortable although from a stylistic point of view, it was never going to be leading edge.

The front room, where we had to sit through performances of my father's classical records, had a typical 1930s fireplace and the overall theme was green: green carpet, green chairs and some shades of green to go with yellows in the curtains.

My father had broad tastes in music, including jazz, which helped to develop my interest in that kind of music. He had a big collection of what we called '78s' and these were the vinyl records running at 78 RPM (revolutions per minute), which had to be played on the gramophone with a needle. By today's standards of hi-fi, they were a bit scratchy, but enough to get me interested in Duke Ellington, Count Basie, 'Fats' Waller and the Andrews sisters.

As will be discussed in a later chapter on music, my interest in playing musical instruments originated from around this time. My mother started me with piano lessons at the age of about 11, followed by violin lessons; I also mention my developing skill as a boy soprano. But what really got me going was the jazz I heard at home and I knew, that with a bit of skill, I could play tunes by ear. In particular, I liked the music of Duke Ellington, especially 'Mood Indigo', and something about his piano style struck a chord with me, in every sense of the word. There was something unusual and edgy about the way he played the piano, and I used to try to replicate those sounds on our piano.

In later life, however, my father was more interested in classical music, especially Richard Strauss, Mahler, and Wagner. He had particular fondness for the voice of Kathleen Ferrier, a 'local lass' from Blackburn, Lancashire who was discovered to have a wonderful contralto voice and, without much of a musical education, was thrust to the forefront of classical music on a world scale. She also died quite young from cancer, so it was not just a question of an immensely talented singer, but there

was the back story of early tragedy which lent greater poignancy to her recorded work.

Kathleen and the Fire

On the green patterned carpet

in the front room.

we listen to Kathleen Ferrier.

But I'm watching the little spurts of blue flame

as the fire explores the strange chemistry of coal

reacting in the 1930s tiled fireplace.

My father's devotion to the Lancashire contralto

inspires a family ritual as we sit silently.

She sings 'Blow the Wind Southerly.'

It means little to me

as my mind escapes to the rugged hills.

Waiting up all night for the dawn chorus.

Why sleep? We might miss the avian celebration.

No, we nourish the camp fire with birch bark,

twigs and random timber.

Burning the sausages.

Feeling the security of the fire

protecting us from evil spirits.

The flames devouring the wood

with hyperactive flares sinking into crimson embers.

The song never blew my mind,

but the fire lingers on in my heart.

My father would say, 'just listen to the wonderful Kathleen Ferrier. You won't find a greater purity of voice.' We were expected to sit quietly and not interrupt her unaccompanied version of the old folk song 'Blow the Wind Southerly' but as indicated above, my mind was elsewhere.

An electric clock stood on the mantelpiece making a low buzzing noise. Perhaps the most distinctive item in the room was a Japanese screen which we used to close off any draught coming in from the door. This provided great fun during childhood for playing drama-based games and hiding behind a screen. This was later given mistakenly to a college drama department. It appeared in 'She Stoops to Conquer' and for all I know possibly some other productions, although by this time no doubt it will have fallen apart. When I say mistakenly, it was more a question of complete apathy on my part, because as a member of staff at a college of further education, I was invited to play the part of Young Marlow in the above play. I lent the screen to the College for use in that production and kind of left it there.

The large back kitchen was a significant feature in our life at 31 Lyndhurst Road, casting a culinary glow over my subsequent experiences of kitchens. This was the all-new kitchen developed by my parents after they moved into this five bedroom house just after the war. My mother liked the idea of size and space, and this was achieved by knocking a wall down so as to include the old washhouse. Delivery of meals was facilitated by having a hatch through to our morning room, where most

meals were eaten and where television was watched. Everyone seemed to have hatches in those days, but they now seem to have fallen out of fashion.

The sheer space allowed my mother to have a double gas oven. With four children, and a pleasure in entertaining people, cooking space was crucial. We also had an old electric cooker alongside the new gas cooker, which created extra capacity especially for one of our family specialities - 'cheese on plate' - of which, more later. Away from the cooking area, in the old washhouse, my mother had installed, not personally, a massive Bendix washing machine, a monster of a machine, probably the first in the neighbourhood, built like a tank and finished in pale cream. Opposite the Bendix was a gas central heating boiler, again arguably one of the first in the area, at a time when gas central heating was still in its infancy.

The old sink remained in the corner of the room, adjacent to the washing machine, useful for my father to soak eleven football shirts muddied from Saturday's football match. After a lengthy spell in the sink, the navy blue shirts, complete with orange and blue 'Old Wallaseyans' badges, would be transferred to the Bendix for a powerful process of wash and spin, before being put to dry on the clothes maiden suspended from the ceiling, a regular feature in homes of that era.

The idea was that the kitchen would be used for breakfasts, to allow swift turnover of meals for those rushing off to school. We had a red Formica table and four red plastic chairs and in a regular early morning ritual, my father would cook me a bacon and tomato breakfast, with an occasional fried egg thrown in. Even though I am no longer a meat eater, there is something about the smell of bacon frying which for me and indeed for many people, is extremely evocative. In the same way, the typical smells from a roast meal, especially the intermingling of lamb with mint sauce, takes one back straight away to typical Thomas Sunday lunch occasions.

The table and chairs could have sold well as 1950s memorabilia, but they were eventually given to a school drama society and have appeared in Shakespeare and a couple of musicals. The ability of directors to place their dramas in different historical settings has given this red furniture a new lease of life. So the oriental screens from our lounge, and the red table and chairs, have developed stage careers after their domestic functional roles. This arises from a strong family connection with teaching, including the teaching of drama. Some of my pewter rowing tankards have also featured in Shakespearian productions, overflowing with imitation ale.

What used to be a kind of back kitchen was converted into a morning room. This rearrangement coincided with the impact of television on our household. My parents were late adopters in the area of television, which probably helped me to concentrate during my O-Levels, but later on interfered with my preparation for A-Levels, as we sat round the table in that room, watching television. The highlight was the iconic 'Forsyte Saga.' We would never miss any episodes. The significance of this epic production may be lost on long-term Hong Kong residents, but this twenty one episode adaptation of John Galsworthy's story of an English family, covering a number of generations at a time of great change and uncertainty, made television history and was compulsive viewing. At a time when there were only two or three channels, watching a programme like The Forsyte Saga became a massive collective experience, with possibly more than twenty million people watching the same programme at the same time. Such experiences would dominate workplace conversations on Monday mornings, after the Sunday night showings.

The morning room contained a solid fuel stove, an attractive blue carpet and some very comfortable Parker Knoll chairs, a popular brand in the fifties and sixties.

Our family felt very fortunate at this time, having a spacious home, a sparkling 'new' room and at last, after almost every other family in the road, a television set in the corner of the room, ready to exert its influence on a growing family. The country was recovering from the war and the economy was picking up.

With our plates collected from the hatch, we became an early version of TV-influenced couch potatoes, as we watched the News and the Tonight programme, hosted by Cliff Michelmore, complete with folk music and calypsos, respectively from Noel Harrison and Cy Grant. The 'instant calypso' may seem a bit old-hat these days, but it was a popular feature on the Tonight programme. Both singers would write up-to-date songs about some, usually light-hearted, current event. There is a strong tradition of using a calypso in parts of the West Indies to spread a particular piece of news, and Grant would often sing about cricket, the tunes being similar to 'Cricket, Lovely Cricket'.

Watching television whilst eating has become somewhat frowned upon in the general area of etiquette but I feel that the collective experience, not complicated by additional channels, provided a strong element of family continuity. I believe we had access to ITV by this time, but my mother was disinclined to watch what was on offer from this pioneer in the area of commercial TV. I think my mother would have used the phrase 'dumbed down' if she had come across the term. We would sit around the oval-shaped table, with a key seat affording the view of the television set always allocated to my father while the rest of us had to fight for a position. To be fair, my mother was always given a seat which afforded a decent view, because I feel as late adopters, we approached television with something of the zeal of new converts. Quite often, I was the one with my back to the screen so it was a question of picking up snippets of the story by looking round and then generally listening to the

soundtrack. Typically, a teatime meal would consist of a simple savoury dish to start with, such as scrambled egg on toast, tomatoes on toast or beans on toast. You will see that toast featured quite strongly in my mother's repertoire of meals, but to be fair to her, this type of evening meal was based on the fact that all of us would have had a good mid-day meal, including my father who always came home for lunch. The existence of Nigel Slater's family and food memoir, *Toast*, was drawn to my attention as this project unfolded and I have referred to it in the accompanying essay, but it demonstrates that many families relied on toast to beef up a meal at a time when the varieties of food we take for granted today were not around. How do you make an egg interesting? Poach it on toast. My mother did.

As for conversation, typically my father would tell us about some incident at work.

'Did you know that George Varley was seventy-five today, and he's still working in the joiners' shop? We had a special celebratory cup of tea for him.'

'He's a grand character,' said my mother. 'George worked for Grandpa Lindley for many years and never had a day off. I had an interesting day at court today, and we had to fine some parents for neglect.'

I would settle into my place, with my back to the newly-acquired, tiny by today's standards, television set and let the conversation flow over my head, as Alan Whicker, with his trademark pencil moustache, blazer and horn-rimmed glasses would report in from some millionaires' paradise in the south of France.

'Pass the jam, Alan,' I would request, and would smear strawberry jam on a couple of pieces of white bread, having first plastered down a layer of Stork. Filling up with bread and jam was a way of completing the meal and there were always plenty of apples, bananas and oranges, so overall, we ate a well-balanced diet.

My memories of Alan are completely positive. He was a good all-rounder, academically quite sound and an accomplished sportsman. Growing up alongside him in Wallasey, my memories are of a person who was very supportive, who protected me from older children and fully involved me in his activities. He helped me to organise the sporting events in the summer, which I mention later. My main memory of that time is one of tremendous energy, chasing round the place, fighting with me, playing football or having rows with Neil, who as a teenager went through a phase of feeling rather superior to his two younger siblings.

Physically, Alan differed considerably from Neil and me, in that he had sandy coloured hair, freckled skin and what we called a lazy eye, although that condition improved as he became older. Neil and I both had dark hair, and in particular I was thought to resemble my father, who had a longish face. Neil had a more rounded face and in this way took after my mother, as he did in other aspects of his life, such as his drive, determination and political affiliations.

Compared with today's obsession with digital photography and the need to record all of life's experiences, the number of photographs available from my childhood is quite small, but the very scarcity invests them with great value and interest. Most families have organised official photographic sessions from professionals from time to time as a record for posterity, but you only have to look in the windows of photographers to realise that many of these exercises are very artificial and meaningless. One such photo shoot organised by my parents looked very stilted, but one from a firm called Priestly was very effective, especially for my brother Alan and myself. There is one shot with the two of us, when I was about six and Alan would have been about eight. I am a picture of complete innocence with my hair neatly brushed sideways, wearing a grey shirt and a dark tie. Alan has his sandy

hair also brushed sideways with a lighter coloured tie. Whilst my smile is somewhat shy, Alan's is more natural, with his mouth slightly open displaying two prominent front teeth, a physical characteristic which appeared to decline as he grew older.

My parents organised an additional photo shoot when I would have been about eleven or twelve and the photographs show my parents, both very smartly dressed. My father is wearing a suit and tie and a very small pencil moustache. My mother is wearing a grey suit with a string of pearls round her neck. In my early years, I would have had no particular thoughts about the quality of their relationship, they were always there, they always looked after me and we had a happy family atmosphere. It is only later that I realised there was a certain amount of conflict within that relationship, not helped by my father's long-term affair with 'Auntie Belle'.

As I grew older and more aware of these things, I could see the tension in some of the remarks made by my father and the obvious lack of any physical contact and shows of affection between my two parents. Having said that, they always worked together to make sure that the atmosphere of the family was generally peaceful and supportive, and, indeed, good fun. So, we are not talking here about a dysfunctional family with massively painful skeletons in the cupboard, just a few dusty bones. Returning to the photograph, in the background is my father's desk with some silverware on it, a mix of Neil's rowing tankards and a couple of tennis trophies my parents won. The other photographs show the four children and these look particularly stilted. Neil would have been eighteen or nineteen and he appears slightly like a spiv, with his hair Brylcreemed and brushed back. He is wearing a smart suit with a Scout badge on its lapel. Both Alan and I appear in the school uniform for Wallasey Grammar School. My smile looks particularly forced and is

probably because I had a mouth ulcer, a condition which affected me frequently at that age.

Impressions of early childhood are of necessity sketchy and, in the course of this memoir, certain areas previously thought to be forgotten have re-emerged, such as the role of religion. We were taught to say prayers last thing at night and my prayers were always protective about our family. 'God bless Mummy, Daddy, Neil, Rosemary, Alan and myself,' seems to stick in my memory, showing sensible concern for my own destiny at the same time as requesting divine protection for the rest of the family. At this time, the reality of the Cold War was beginning to emerge and I remember having great fears about the Russians landing in Moreton, a coastal area near Wallasey with a gentle sloping embankment, ideal for enemy landing craft. I worried also about nuclear war. I was clearly far too young to appreciate the significance of the West's victory over Japan, which was celebrated at the bonfire which forms one of my earliest memories but as I grew up in my first decade, I realised there were things happening in the world which meant that the nuclear threat was very real.

After the war, Soviet Russia consolidated control over its area of influence, through the creation of the Iron Curtain, and before long it became clear that the Russians had nuclear weapons and the means of delivering them. Rather than the Atom Bomb, the talk was of the Hydrogen Bomb, which was many times more powerful. The aggressive behaviour of Russia in relation to places like Hungary and Czechoslovakia, plus the building of the Berlin Wall all helped create an atmosphere of fear, which as a young child I took seriously. Hence, the nightmare of motor torpedo boats landing at Moreton, with alien soldiers rapidly taking control of the Wirral peninsular, setting up check points and terrorising local residents. It never

happened of course, except in the strange, confused world of my juvenile nightmares.

My mother was a keen member of Claremont Road Methodist Church and I have a photograph from the late 1940s, I would guess of some sort of gathering at the church with a large number of children of primary school age and below, plus their mothers. All the women seem to be wearing what look like tweed sports jackets or woolly coats. Some interesting hats are in evidence including a couple of wide brimmed ones. My mother is there and in front of her is Alan, plus some cousins and a number of children whose faces I recognise. I am not in the picture and I must have been involved in something else on that day. All the Lindley sisters are in the picture, my mother, Mary, Isobel and Nellie.

We were sent to Sunday school, which I probably enjoyed mainly for social reasons. Later I attended evening church services, but mainly as an excuse to see girls afterwards and I reached a point in my early teens when I began to doubt the whole mechanism of religion and gradually drifted away. Although we were forced to attend Sunday school, the decision to go to church in the evening as a teenager was a personal one. Two or three friends of mine decided to go, so I went along with them and after the service we would try to meet up with some girls that we wanted to get to know. There was an area of woodland opposite the church and we would go there and try to chat them up. This was a fairly unsophisticated exercise and never really led anywhere, but it was a start.

As for the religion, I began to find it very hard going. I was reasonably happy with the hymns, because I quite liked singing and I would generally improvise harmony, but the prayers and sermons I found quite painful. In the Methodist Church, rather

than kneel, we would remain seated and lean forward, supposedly with one's eyes closed but I found it more interesting to steal a glance at the congregation. What was one actually supposed to do during these periods of silent prayer? It was usually a matter of thinking about poor starving Africans suffering from leprosy. But what practical value would arise from my prayers?

The other thing I remember particularly about church, which is there to this day, is a stained glass window showing scenes from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. There are about seven scenes, including the one I remember, where Pilgrim, the main character in the story, goes through the 'Slough of Despond', which is something I always think about when I visit Slough in Buckinghamshire. *Pilgrim's Progress* is effectively an imaginative story which shows the stages one goes through in life (according to a religious view of existence), before reaching paradise. As for Slough, it is a fairly industrial town in Buckinghamshire, quite prosperous but with no real architectural merit. The famous poet, John Betjeman, wrote a piece of verse imploring 'bombs to rain over Slough' and the English comedian Ricky Gervais located his iconic series about the modern work environment, 'The Office', in the same town. All this is a trifle unfair on the proud residents of Slough, but whenever I see that stained window, which, sadly, family funerals have facilitated, I think not of 'The Slough of Despond', but the 'Despondency of Slough'.

Chapter 6 – Early Friendships

Highlights of my play activities included our own version of ‘the Secret Seven’, where we took over a shed attached to our house and laid it out as a supposedly secret hiding place. Each person had a special seat in the shed and we would sit in there and eat sandwiches and crisps. I would guess that millions of children steeped in Enid Blyton will have developed their own secret sevens, but ours was important to us. We did not have a dog, nor did we spend time on a desert island, these being regular features in the wildly popular Enid Blyton stories. But we went on cycle rides and organised sporting activities in some local fields, ‘The Derries’. This may come to be seen as an early example of the television programme ‘Superstars’, because we competed in a number of athletic activities, including running, long jump and high jump. Afterwards, we would eat our sandwiches in our ex-army tent, which also gave us an opportunity to huddle into our shelter should a sudden thunderstorm blow in from the sea and threaten to upset our afternoon. To create some kind of picnic for these occasions, we would call in at the local grocer’s, Irwins.

‘Could we have a bag of broken biscuits, please?’

‘There you are,’ the white-coated shop assistant would say, ‘that will be thruppence to you.’ Or he might have said: ‘We haven’t got any broken biscuits today.’

And we would always say: ‘Well break some, please,’ and then run out of the shop. This meant that on the right day, for a few pence we had a big bag of biscuits to share with the group whilst out on our sports day.

In terms of our reading materials, Alan and I used to read the *Lion* comic. This first appeared in 1952, and I am fairly certain that Alan, at that time aged around thirteen, bought the first edition and on a regular basis for a couple of years. It was published in competition with *Eagle* comic, with its famous Dan Dare spaceman character, while *Lion* had its own Captain Condor's weekly adventures in outer galaxies. I always regarded *Eagle* as a bit 'goody goody', with a faintly Christian message embodied in its stories, whereas *Lion* was a bit more down-to-earth, printed on ordinary newspaper as opposed to the glossy paper used in *Eagle*. Later on, we would read comics without pictures, including *Hotspur*. My move away from picture-based comics was final, because even today I never feel inclined to read strip cartoons, even though graphic novels of various kinds seem to be very popular, for all age groups. Once I got into 'proper' stories, I developed my own pictures of the characters and environment, and felt distracted by any pictures, even the cover of the book.

Moving to a slightly less intellectual topic, I also remember at that time, that I became quite interested in making stink bombs. This activity did not involve Alan and it may have marked a time when we were moving into different friendship groups, and no doubt Alan would have disapproved and would have demonstrated some leadership in preventing it. First of all you needed an empty jam jar and a stick to stir up the concoction. A good starting point was oil as my father always kept one or two cans of oil for lubricating the car or some of his building equipment. We usually had a bit of sulphur around which we also used for attempting to make fireworks. Then some coal dust would be added and possibly some soil and, indeed, anything else we could find to make a really awful smell. And that was it really, we did not really do

anything with it; it was just enjoyable and made a big smell and some of them were particularly unpleasant and probably extremely toxic.

The fireworks were a bit easier because we could get hold of sulphur from the chemist and also saltpetre, from the same source. All you had to do was to mix them together, wrap it up in a piece of newspaper and set fire to it. It would then fizz and sparkle for a few seconds. As they say on television, do not try this at home!

Fortunately, this phase of making stink bombs and fireworks passed quickly without any premature deaths, and I developed a number of more positive activities and interests which kept me busy. These included collecting photographs of passenger liners and freighters, usually acquired by visiting the shipping offices in Liverpool. Why would I want pictures of ships? Remember that our family grew up in Wallasey, on the corner of the Wirral Peninsula facing Liverpool, and we enjoyed going down to the promenade at New Brighton (the resort part of Wallasey) to look at the ships entering the port or leaving, hence the famous folk song 'The Leaving of Liverpool'. So there was something about ships and the sea which appealed to me as a child. Liverpool, whilst still a very important port during my childhood, was the largest port in the world in the late nineteenth century and through the first part of the twentieth century, so all the major shipping companies had offices in Liverpool. They proved to be a good source of postcards and brochures, including Cunard, The Blue Funnel Line and Elder Dempster.

We were lucky in that in our road, the father of one of my friends operated a semi-professional marionette stage and he would entertain us with some interesting characters. I remember his two ballet dancers performing the Dance of Sugar Plum Fairy (from Tchaikovsky's Nutcracker Suite) and an elderly agricultural character who mimed a piece by Bernard Miles (a well-known character actor from the last

century). The story concerned a farmer who parked his tractor in front of a woman's house which led to an argument, all this delivered in a broad West Country accent. The boy's father later gave me a basic marionette, and all I had to do was to find some clothes for it, which were put together from some old curtain material - shades of the 'Sound of Music' film, where Julie Andrews makes theatrical dresses from curtains for the children's entertainment. However, my career as a puppeteer did not go beyond one show we presented for local children in our attic playroom. Unless you can manipulate the puppet in a flexible way via the complicated arrangement of strings, it is hard to develop any kind of meaningful action. You also need a story, which is why the Bernard Miles sketch worked well. The idea of any kind of sound track would have been beyond me at the time. In contrast to today's CGI inspired cartoons, early television used marionettes, notably BBC's 'Muffin the Mule', where children were happy to see the strings attached to the characters.

This particular friend with the marionette-operating father was Michael Colebourne and it is a sign of the times that his aunt, Nancy, spent many months in a sanatorium, recovering from Tuberculosis (TB). We do not hear so much about that illness today, but in the 1950s, and up to that point, it was very prevalent and many people suffered and had to spend the time in sanatoria. That is, quarantined hospitals, to recover their strength. In the early years of the twentieth century, TB was viewed as one the most urgent health problems in the UK. This led to campaigns to discourage you from spitting in public, which contributed to the spread of the illness, as TB is highly contagious. Our Hong Kong readers may permit themselves a wry smile at this point, as spitting in public in China, and to some extent in Hong Kong, is still culturally acceptable in certain quarters. In the event, his aunt returned to good health. The introduction of a successful vaccine in the 1950s

had the effect of almost eliminating TB in the western world, but in recent years, a number of drug-resistant strains of TB have appeared, so it remains a serious health issue, especially in the Third World, but potentially nearer home.

There was a good atmosphere in Lyndhurst Road with substantial support from Michael Colebourne's parents and from another couple, Ken Sale and his wife, who had six or seven children. Mrs Sale always seemed to be having babies, which seemed to come from nowhere as I had no understanding about the idea of pregnancy at the time.

For a time I was friendly with our immediate neighbours whose son, Peter Sellman, was a year or two younger than I was. Initially, I enjoyed playing with Peter as he had plenty of toys, his mother was generous with drinks and biscuits and I enjoyed the general family atmosphere, especially the contribution made by Binks, his older sister. After a few weeks of friendship, Peter's behaviour changed and he seemed to delight in hitting me, without much force, but later to the point where he used to hurt me. From that moment on, I withdrew from contact with him and stopped seeing him. Nobody likes to be punched. Perhaps it would have been better if I hit him back, but physical violence has never really been my thing.

By the time of my middle teens, Neil was out of the house, either doing his National Service in Hong Kong or at Cambridge University, so inevitably I spent more time with Alan within the family, but we were naturally creating our own circle of friends, and at that age, even twenty months' difference is significant. I am reminded that, because I was around at the time, I had to be invited to one or two teenage parties which he held at our house. This was at a time when rock 'n' roll had not really hit the Wirral Peninsular and the music for dancing was influenced by the fact that my generation learned to ballroom dance. So, the 78 RPM vinyl records which

we played featured people like the Joe Loss Orchestra with 'How High the Moon', and 'When the Saints go Marching In' by the Dutch Swing College band.

A popular game at the time to create opportunities for boy/girl interaction, was 'Postman's Knock' and I remember finding myself with a couple of Alan's female friends, two or three years older than me, trying to make something of the opportunity and failing miserably. What happened was that Alan was allowed to have a party but one condition was that I could also take part. The problem was that Alan and his contemporaries, a couple of years older than me, were really interested in girls at that time, whereas I did not have that degree of interest. One girl would go into another room and the 'postman' was selected by picking a playing card. On at least one occasion, I ended up as the selected boy and had to go and pretend to kiss and cuddle a girl a couple of years older than me, which, at that stage of life, is a lifetime. I think the girl was called Avril Wensley and she was a good sport and did not make me feel like a complete idiot. I had no idea what one was supposed to do, and indeed, took quite a long time to find out. I suspect that twenty first century teenagers would find 'Postman's Knock' rather tame, even quaint, although it seemed quite adventurous at the time.

My expertise in ballroom dancing developed during my teenage years and a group of us used to attend a class held by a Mrs Bleasedale at a building called 'The Grange' in Wallasey. There was no rock 'n' roll at the time and learning to ballroom dance gave young men the opportunity to meet and interact with young females. Probably as a result of my interest in music and jazz, I made good progress, especially with the waltz and the quickstep, with slightly less expertise at the fox trot and the various Latin American dances that we tried. Ma Bleasedale would come up

to a bashful boy (me) and say 'Miss Bunny Smith would like to have this dance with you.'

'Of course,' I would splutter and would go onto the floor while Ma Bleasedale would put a Victor Sylvester record on the Dansette Record Player.

'Are you okay with the quickstep?' I would ask.

'I'll be fine if you don't tread on my toes,' was Bunny's reply.

We would then start a tortuous circuit of the room, with me trying hard to steer her in the right direction, like Sterling Moss negotiating the Nürburgring (German Grand Prix Circuit). In the event, I managed to get things together and the skill came in handy at university. That is, at least for the first year, after which rock 'n' roll hit the campus. Within the space of two or three years, that universal interest in ballroom dancing had disappeared to be replaced by jiving and other forms of modern dance, where the general idea was to make it up as you went along. Ballroom dancing had a sort of 'olde world' charm about it, especially the convention of asking for the pleasure of the next dance, although it did not always end up as such. However, it was the musical revolution which changed the dancing.

The big band era of the thirties and forties fitted in well with ballroom dancing, and the trend continued into the post war years. Bandleaders such as Victor Sylvester produced music ideally suited to the genre with, for example, exact tempos for particular dances, hence the term 'strict tempo'. However, to my ears, geared up to the energy of jazz-inspired big bands, Victor Sylvester's music was rather lame. To the bulk of teenagers, 'strict tempo' music had no appeal at all and the raw energy of rock 'n' roll inspired a much freer style of dancing, more linked to the jitterbug era, hence jiving. Pleasantries, like asking permission to dance, were dispensed with. Typically, girls would jive in pairs, until two marauding males would

creep up alongside and break them up, while they were effectively dancing round their hand bags, kept near them on the floor for security reasons.

So what was Neil up to at this time? Seven years older than me, it is inevitable that my recollections of him during my early childhood are somewhat vague. I do know from photographic evidence and from general chats in the family, that before we went to Whitchurch for evacuation during the war, the women folk were also evacuated to Yorkshire to stay with relatives in the area where my mother had been brought up. There is a photograph of Neil aged about five or six as a page boy at a relative's wedding, dressed up in military uniform.

Like many first-born sons, Neil was quite independent and motivated, building some strong interests quite early on in his life, especially scouting and rowing. Even at this stage, it would have been possible to see the influence of my mother on Neil. She always encouraged him to do well and work hard and get involved in activities and he will have been influenced by her words, but also by her actions. He knew that my mother was active on the local political scene when we were quite young and as both my parents were interested in local politics and national events, he will have picked up quite a few ideas around the dinner table.

From a very early age, Neil was willing to take on responsibility and knew how to look after himself, so my recollection is that he was given a great deal of freedom. He was out of the house frequently, mainly at the local branch of the Sea Scouts or practising in a whaler down at the West Float, a large dock in Birkenhead which later provided the facility for our rowing adventures. He was used to seeing people doing useful things and keeping active, my father coaching football or playing golf on a regular basis, and my mother attending a children's committee or working as a magistrate.

We all bought into this atmosphere of activity and because of relaxed attitudes towards the safety of children in those post-war years, there was not the same fear the children would be abducted or abused. I am sure it did happen at the time, but in our comfortable middle class area it did not seem to enter the minds of ourselves or our parents. Clearly, modern parents do face a much wider range of threats than we faced as children, especially the sheer volume of traffic. Today's young cyclist, clad in a colourful helmet, would have looked like a creature from outer space to our generation. It can be argued that our parents were too laissez faire in their caring responsibilities, but I believe that our generation benefitted from that freedom to spend all day in the countryside or cycling through The Wirral. For a young person, growing up in high rise Honk Kong, such freedom just would not work, so other ways have to be found to encourage self-reliance.

My parents were active internationalists and from an early age we had contact with people from various parts of the world. If anything, I was the least influenced by this aspect, as Alan and Neil, and especially Rosemary, took up this banner from an early age. As a very young child, I remember that we had a kind of au pair girl working in our house, looking after us when my mother was at political meetings. I know one was Greek and one was French (Francois), one was Swedish (Anna Karin), and at a certain stage we had a rather elderly lady living with us who was of Viennese origin. That would be Mrs Markl, who probably had a first name, but it was not one we knew about. She needed some accommodation and my mother was quite happy to offer her a small room in our house, where she lived for a year or so. I remember in particular, the room always reeked of smoke, as Mrs Markl had a strong smoking habit. In those days, the idea of throwing an old lady out in the cold

and wet to have a smoke would have been unheard of. She always called me 'Ducky' and, for the time she was with us, she brought a novel perspective to our middle class lives, especially when she told us harrowing stories about the Nazis in Austria.

An example of our family being concerned about other parts of the world takes us back to 1956, when the newspapers were full of the situation in Hungary as Russian tanks rolled into Budapest, shooting people and adding Hungary to the Soviet bloc. The history is that, although Britain and the USA regarded Russia as an ally in defeating Germany, with Russian troops coming in from the East, the post-war situation changed dramatically. Russia managed to create a massive power bloc, including countries like Poland, East Germany, Hungary, and Romania, held together behind what became known as 'The Iron Curtain'. The invasion of Hungary was an attempt to stifle attempts at self-determination.

We knew that thousands of people were fleeing Hungary and the question was asked: 'What were we going to do about it?' The topic came up, typically during Sunday lunch, with the rich smell of roast lamb and distinctive sharpness of mint sauce enhancing our already lively appetites. Neil made the first suggestion.

'We ought to be doing something about the Hungarian refugees, say, raising some money to help people out.'

'That's a good idea,' said my mother, dishing out the meat, the roast potatoes, the carrots and the gravy, 'what do you suggest?'

'Maybe some kind of party?' ventured Alan. 'We could charge entrance and sell draw tickets.'

We could hear in the background a slight snatch of music from the Billy Cotton Band Show on the radio, which was on most of the time.

‘We could have dressing up,’ I suggested, but the response was typical of older family to its youngest member.

‘Daft idea,’ they said in unison. Then Neil said in his usual masterful and authoritative tone:

‘We need to invite all our friends, charge entrance, provide food and drink, and maybe ask for additional donations.’

‘Sensible suggestion,’ said my mother. ‘I’ll involve the Women Liberals and Neil can tell the Sea Scouts.’

The party went ahead, raised some money and we gave it all to the Hungarian relief fund. The event ended with a bit of a sing-song round the piano, led by Neil.

Back to normal living at 31 Lyndhurst Road. I have strong recollections of my mother’s regular daily routines, especially during school holidays when I would be part of a team doing jobs round the house. This would involve running errands and tidying my bedroom, while the Burrells would be at work in the garden (Cecil) and in the house (Elsie). It only needs the mention of cakes, scones or rock cakes to transport me back to one of my Mother’s favourite rituals.

Halfway through churning out a family memoir, it is inevitable that even the thought of cake, thoughtfully provided by our lecturer in creative writing to stimulate the imagination, would transport me instantly to family experiences involving the taste and texture of cake. Chocolate flavoured, with a light consistency, a generous slice carved out of a circular cake took me back to frequent occasions when my mother would bake an array of scones, rock cakes and other varieties, and in particular when she made a cup of tea for her workforce. This made it sound like a major corporation, but we are only talking about Mr and Mrs Burrell, who helped

within our household. They were my mother's friends from the church, Cecil fixing the garden, and Elsie helping with the household chores. They were both beyond retirement age and received little in the way of cash rewards from my mother, but they liked her and enjoyed helping out. The highlight of the morning was the tea and cake break and, as a schoolboy, I joined in the ritual during the holidays. As for chocolate cake, that was one of the rare treats and my mother's preference was for a series of small circular cakes -- I suppose we would call them cupcakes. A chocolate cake would have been gradually more available as food rationing declined in the 1950s, so the experience was even more appreciated.

Advertising agencies trawl through the lexicon to use words to describe chocolate, but to my untutored taste buds, I mainly have recollections of a certain sweetness, a lightness of texture and a pleasant chewy consistency. On special occasions, my mother would top these with a blob of icing or a dusting of those decorations known as 'hundreds and thousands.' So the feel and taste was augmented by the explosion of sweetness in the icing, which I recall as often being pink in contrast to the dark brown of the cake -- even today pink and brown seem to be a good match.

So the cup of tea, the cake and the break from domestic toil became a daily ritual and I recollect that my mother did most of the talking, but then she was happy to share her experiences with the homely pair. She would talk about cases she had judged as a magistrate, or domestic situations she had come across as a member of the children's committee. The Burrells were keen Liberals, like my mother, so some ideas about how Liberal policies could help the country would have been on the agenda. The last cake is devoured, the teacups are drained and they are all back to work.

Mrs Burrell, as I called her rather than 'Elsie', was a highly skilled knitter, and I remember being the proud wearer of a pink and brown sweater she knitted for me. The colour choice was mine, so even in those early days, awareness of co-ordinated colours was not my strong point, except in relation to cakes. Young people do not wear knitted sweaters these days and prefer to buy sweatshirts or sponsored football shirts, but I think they are missing something.

In the warm glow of nostalgia it would be easy to create the impression of a near-perfect childhood and copybook family, but that would be an incomplete picture. I know that my mother went through a period of stress at around our teens, which could be connected with the spectre of Auntie Belle, mentioned earlier. I am not sure that we, as the children, helped a great deal, and on a couple of occasions when she was serving Sunday lunch and when one of us had misbehaved or had been rude to her, she would say to us:

'You're all Hell Dogs,' whilst placing the carving knife near her throat.

We would say: 'Go on, do it then,' whilst laughing our heads off.

Fortunately, she seemed to recover her composure and after a couple of such exhibitions, it was never repeated.

I felt that in some ways my father did not appreciate the qualities of my mother and he could be very off-hand. Whilst acknowledging that my mother was not the most adventurous of cooks, she nevertheless looked after us well but frequently my father would criticise the meal that was placed in front of him.

'What's this?' he would say, pushing the plate away. I felt very uncomfortable when he talked like that and fortunately it was not that common that he behaved in that way but the whole experience left me with a very strong feeling that if someone

is prepared to cook your meal, you should always show your appreciation, whatever the quality.

In general, we ate a sensible and healthy diet, but there were some quirks which probably reflect the time. Compared with many people, our family was reasonably comfortably off and no one ever had to go hungry. But in the early part of my life there was rationing and there was a shortage of certain types of food. One of the popular meals in our household was a dish imaginatively known as 'cheese on plate', and it was just that: slices of cheddar cheese on a plate, with slices of tomato and a small amount of milk. This would be placed on a Pyrex glass plate and put under the grill for a few minutes. As a light snack for a kind of high tea, it was perfectly acceptable, and the same dish could also be served with a piece of toast.

This subject has reminded me of some other food idiosyncrasies from my childhood. One of these was a dessert usually provided on Christmas Day or at a family party, not just by my mother but by our aunts as well. This was called 'fluff' or 'angel food'. Essentially, it consisted of a blackcurrant jelly which was allowed to set, then condensed milk was added and the result was whisked to point where the final product rather resembled snow. One of the mothers would shout out:

'Who wants fluff?'

'Me, please,' would be the orchestrated reply from the children. However, I soon graduated to the stodgy mass of Christmas pudding as being a bit more substantial than the will o' the wisp fluff and there my loyalty has remained. However, plum duff is a ready source of heartburn, and common sense, and family health history, would suggest that avoidance of this heavy pudding might make good sense.

Fluff, however, was extremely popular in our family at a time when special treats were greatly appreciated because of their rarity. This idea of an additional treat was

taken further by my mother, who would serve a dish of tinned fruit, such as peaches or mandarin oranges with what we called 'top off'. This is from the days in which the top inch or so of a pint of milk formed as a kind of cream, not the full cream which is now widely available, but slightly thicker milk. In these days of skimmed milk, 'top off' seems to have disappeared. My son has reminded me of some of these topics as part of my informal consultations with him over this memoir because his grandmother, my mother, kept alive some of those traditions with her grandchildren, which they fondly remember.

Mention of food and Christmas has reminded me of my experiences of that time of year in my childhood. I certainly remember the excitement of a Christmas stocking, whilst being aware from the fairly early age that somehow my parents had something to do with the appearance of the stocking on my bed on Christmas morning. Irrespective of my belief in Father Christmas, it was always an exciting time and I am reminded of it, whenever I need to get up early in the morning when it is dark and have to put the lights on. In our case, my brother Alan and I shared a room and would both get up pretty early on Christmas morning to see what had arrived. Typically each stocking contained some toys and books, but also for amusement maybe a piece of coal, plus an orange and apple.

'What have you got?' I would ask, having started to unpack my own stocking.

'Meccano set. Just what I wanted. And a box of Liquorice Allsorts.'

'What have you got?' asked Alan.

'It's a Dinky Dust Cart, and some plasticine, plus a lump of coal.' Then, all the toys would spill out over the bed, to be played with until there was a call for breakfast.

'Boiled or Fried Egg?' would ring out from the kitchen as there was a family tradition of having a substantial breakfast on Christmas Day, with a full fried breakfast and plenty of Kellogg's Corn Flakes and toast with marmalade, even though we would be devouring a gigantic plate of turkey, roast potatoes, sprouts and cauliflower within a few hours.

As all this was going on in my busy young life, with Alan being a close part of it in view of the small age difference, what was Neil up to? There are, in fact, huge gaps in my knowledge because he was really in a different world, very much doing his own thing and not associated with his younger brothers at that point. And who can blame him? Given the way his life evolved subsequently, as a single man with no children, it is not likely that he would have been all that interested in looking after his younger brothers. As I entered primary school at the age of five, Neil would already have been a pupil at Wallasey Grammar School, and that was a different sphere from my play-dominated activity.

I became aware of his Scouting activity, as he had joined a local Sea Scout group, which involved going down to the Birkenhead Docks and taking various craft on to the less than salubrious water of the West Float, where tankers would spew out their waste directly into the dock. At the time, the dock at Birkenhead was a major part of the whole Merseyside dock system, and most of my recollections of the dock at that time involved a fair amount of pollution. Neil took to Sea Scouting with great enthusiasm and within a short space of time seemed to be organising the whole outfit. Later on, I was aware that he had taken up rowing, continuing the link with water and that he was achieving success in this activity.

It would be wrong of me at this stage to fail to mention the existence of one sister in this trio of brothers. Born three years after Neil, Rosemary is my one and only

sister but, in a way, her story is outside the main thrust of this memoir. As she is alive and fit at the time of writing, she will probably be relieved to find out that her life does not feature strongly in this account. As I have tried to show the effect of my mother on the three brothers it would not fit into the main narrative to feature Rosemary, and one of my strategies in this memoir has been to mainly incorporate people who are no longer alive. This removes many of the problems of offending people which the memoir writer faces, which has been the experience of Norwegian memoirist, Karl Ove Knausgard. However, another reason is that as a girl, she was generally outside the main range of activities affecting the brothers, with the exception of music and some sport, but more importantly, she emigrated to Germany when she was about twenty, and she stayed there until late middle age, indeed almost up to retirement. So with total respect and affection, she will be only mentioned in passing in this memoir. However, from the point of view of providing me with information and research, she has proved invaluable.

As the lives of the three sons developed, so, perhaps inevitably, the focus moved away from my parents, but they continued to encourage us to achieve in our own different ways and provided a foundation and the home which we could visit frequently, even after we had left home. My mother was a great one for big Sunday lunches, where a huge leg of lamb, a joint of beef, a fresh chicken or a piece of pork, would act as the centrepiece of the meal along with loads of vegetables, followed normally by apple pie. The policy was one of 'open house' and over the years various friends and relatives joined us on these occasions. These were normal family rituals repeated over thousands of homes in Britain, but they were special to us and provided a framework for our lives. My parents continued to do interesting things, playing golf, visiting my sister in Germany, supporting the Women Liberals, going to

concerts and towards the end of her life, as mentioned earlier, my mother produced a short booklet of poems and short stories with additional contributions by my father and myself.

My mother was a strong royalist and many years ago she asked me to write a poem about the wedding of Princess Anne and Captain Mark Phillips. It was published in *The Wallasey News*, 22 December 1973, and the article mentioned that 'the poem was written for the occasion by Robin Thomas and read by his mother.'

*A friendly word, a growing attachment
enabled the equine Olympian Mark
to melt away the Royal detachment,
and so ignite the vital spark.*

*Their secrets survived the prying eyes,
Warm, halcyon days were spent in bliss.
two rode together, with mounting surprise,
as their love unfolded with each stolen kiss.*

*But now this match is public possession,
as they walk the boards of a global stage.*

*She arrives at the Abbey in resplendent procession
Lady Sarah the bridesmaid, Prince Edward the page.
The world looks on as the words are spoken.
Their voices ring through the sacred space.*

*For these are the vows which cannot be broken,
while the union is blessed by the Archbishop's grace.*

So while the world suffers in torment and sorrow

This moving event inspires hope for tomorrow.

Influenced by my literary efforts, my mother later wrote a poem about the wedding of Charles and Diana. Far be it for me to criticise my mother's literary skills, but she had quite a quaint style, for example:

*Charles, Prince of Wales has taken a wife,
the Lady Diana to share married life.
The Princess is younger but sweet and fair
Our nation adores this royal pair.*

She also wrote one about the wedding of Princess Andrew and Sarah Ferguson

*July 23, a famous day to wed,
Prince Andrew marries Sarah his dazzling redhead.
Our second Royal Prince to choose a lovely bride.
In Westminster Abbey, they stood there side-by-side.*

Collectively our poems on royal weddings must have had something of the jinx about them, the kiss of death, because all three marriages failed. However, getting something published in the *Wallasey News* could be viewed as the continuation of a process of minor press publicity, starting with the *Melody Maker* (1964. Wins Beatle Guitar), and culminating in: *The Independent Engineering Supplement*, both of which are mentioned in later chapters. This was not national or global fame, but for me, even these minor aspects of recognition are to be cherished. The dizzy heights of

having a couple of poems published in an anthology were to be achieved a few years later.

Given that the three brothers developed their own interests as they grew older, it can be noted, and this is probably a sign of the times, that all three of us became interested in the Scouting movement. Neil rapidly took over in running the local Sea Scouts group and this helped to develop his interest in water. He was selected to represent Wallasey Scouts at a World Jamboree in Austria, and later on became the Commissioner for Scouting in Wallasey. Alan and I attended the Scouts and Cubs run by the local Methodist church where my mother was a member. I achieved the impressively senior role of being Sixer in the Cubs (in charge of six cubs), and I eventually graduated through to the Scouts.

A recent visit to Wallasey Village reminded me of a favourite activity, which took place after the Wolf cub or Scout meeting, in that a number of us would walk down the hill from the church to the local chippy. Older people are fond of reminding younger folk how cheap things were in those days, but I can certainly recollect that my regular order was for three pen'eth of chips, plus salt and vinegar, with the occasional treat of a bottle of Cream Soda, Tizer or Dandelion and Burdock. We would consume the chips in public outside the chippy, before going home. Three pennies in old, pre-decimal currency in the UK, would be equivalent to one and a quarter new pence. Of course at that time, a house could be purchased for under £1000, so you have to keep things in proportion.

At the age of about eleven or twelve, I attended a Scouting holiday in Germany, or West Germany as it then was, and I have some pictures of some tourist attractions in the Rhine Valley, including the Nürburgring racetrack which we visited. This was my first and only experience of cigarettes, because on the boat we all

bought packets of cheap fags and smoked them on the train to Germany. They had no effect on me, positive or negative and it never occurred to me later to take up smoking.

In terms of our interests in scouting, Alan was much more motivated than I was, and he was selected to attend a World Jamboree, this time in Toronto, Canada. By way of explanation, 'Jamboree' sounds in modern parlance like an excuse to over-eat and over-drink but in scouting terminology it refers to a regular international get-together of scouting people, usually at a major camp site and with a range of social and athletic activities. The first ever international jamboree was held by the Scout movement in Arrowe Park on the Wirral, so the North West has a major part in the history of the movement, which of course is still going strongly today. On the day he travelled to Canada, Alan was pictured outside our house with the Scoutmaster, a very tall and earnest young man, Alf Watts, plus my parents. There was another woman there I do not recognise but it could have been the mother of Watts. Both scouts look resplendent in their uniforms, and in particular Alf who is wearing what looks to be an enormous pair of shorts with long socks and special flashes of material attached to garter tabs, no doubt with some quasi-military significance.

Despite some of the problems faced by Scout groups in the area of child abuse, our collective experience was totally positive and I think a certain amount of self-reliance was learned, as well as having some great camps and fun activities. On St. George's Day, we would march through the town with a Boy Scout band and at no time did it occur to me that this had something of a military flavour about it; it was just a chance to get out and about and show off our uniforms.

There is a link between scouting activities and music because I appeared in a Gang Show, very much a scouting tradition at the time, and was part of a chorus

singing 'We're Riding Along on the Crest of the Waves.' This was an action song which went something like this. During the first line, we would wave our hands in front of us simulating the movement of the sea. Then: 'The sun is in the sky,' and, in a highly imaginative gesture, we would point to the sky. 'All our eyes on the distant horizon,' would involve your hand appearing to shade your eyes, followed by: 'Look out for passers-by. We'll do the hailing, while other ships would do the sailing,' required us to cup our hands to simulate a microphone, with the hand waving movement to indicate boats on the sea. The song finishes: 'We're riding along on the crest of the waves and the world is ours.' I am ashamed to say that to this day, I remember the words of the song and the actions and if politely requested, could perform the song at any time, complete with all the actions.

I also enjoyed the occasional camp fire sing song and one song particularly springs to mind: 'Ging gang gooly watcha, ging gang goo, ging gang goo,' which I believe could have been a Zulu song. Do not ask me to explain what the song is about, except it was good fun to sing, particularly at the end of the song when the final line is repeated and gradually becomes quieter until the echo of the song fades into the surrounding forests. At least, that was the general aim of the song, even if performed in a church hall.

As I have indicated, our family was not wealthy, but against the standards of other people at the time, we were comfortable. My father's income from his building business was supplemented by an allowance received by my mother from her father's business, JH Lindley which no longer built, but owned a number of houses, so the rental income helped Lindley's four daughters, and obviously his grandchildren benefited from this. One advantage was the fact that we had plenty of holidays and outings. We had a week in Salcombe in Devon; we spent time in

Anglesey; in Llanbedrog, in North Wales; and at Aberdovey, in West Wales. We also went on numerous day trips and I have a photograph showing me, aged around seven, when we had pitched a small tent and were having a picnic. Half shown in the photograph is the Triumph Mayflower car which is mentioned later in this memoir. The photograph shows my mother and father, and Alan and myself. On the back of the photograph, my mother has written 'Thomases on holiday in Cumbria' and in an interesting way the photograph ties together some of the themes which I have dealt with: my parents, my brother, the open air and the family car. Another holiday I have cause to remember was to Pembrokeshire where I was pictured on the roof of St. David's Cathedral, resplendent in school blazer and grey shorts. This was a location which allowed me to pursue my interest in bird watching and an incident is recorded in the appropriate chapter.

Our modern readers will have accepted airports, departure lounges and in-flight movies as the norm from an early age, but for our generation, there was very little in the way of continental holidays, except for the wealthy. We did not even think about cheap flights to Barcelona, so we completely enjoyed our trips to North Wales and Devon, and indeed, compared to some families, this was luxury living, especially driving in a Standard Vanguard, or a Triumph Mayflower.

Chapter 7 – Education: Shaping my Skills

Within a year or so of Victory over Japan Day, I was being taken up to the local infants' school by my older brother, and so began a series of educational experiences which have shaped my personality and development right through to this day. Of course, by the time I started at St. George's Road Infants' School (Wallasey), my two brothers were already well into their educational journeys. Neil started in Whitchurch, Shropshire, when the family was evacuated, but I have no further information on that experience. It is only when Neil passed his eleven plus exam to enter secondary education that I had some inkling of what he was up to.

Academically, Neil performed competently at Wallasey Grammar School, and achieved respectable grades across the board for his O-levels. He played a full part in the life of Wallasey Grammar School, as a soloist in the choir, reputed to have a voice almost as good as mine (but no recordings exist to confirm that point) and he played violin in the school orchestra. His appointment as a School Prefect came on the back of being a successful Captain of the Boat Club. Although his time at the school did not coincide with my own, I can easily image Neil as being very responsible and mature for his years, in many ways a model schoolboy.

He achieved reasonable, but not impressive grades at A-level, but I think he was coming to the conclusion that he might have made a mistake in pursuing science-based as opposed to arts subjects. However, this was a great period of encouraging people to get involved in science to help Britain's industry recover from the war. He was carried along with this enthusiasm to the point where he applied for Cambridge University. This was a period of time when the interview was an important criterion for selection, especially for the universities of Oxford and Cambridge and our school,

a grammar school with a strong sense of tradition, encouraged boys to try for 'Oxbridge'. Neil would have been pointed in that direction by his teachers. His natural confidence and ability with words impressed the interviewers at Jesus College, Cambridge, and he was offered a place. He then chose to do his National Service before going to Cambridge, and it is typical that he derived the maximum benefit from a period of enforced military service. Academic difficulties at Cambridge suggest that he might have been better off going straight to Cambridge and avoiding a break in study.

Through his Sea Scout background, he was able to secure a place in the Royal Navy and he successfully applied for a commission (promotion to officer grade), unusual for those doing national service, and within months he was out on a troopship to Hong Kong. It is possible to speculate that Neil, as an 18-year-old school leaver, would have found the voyage to Hong Kong quite an experience. We had no knowledge of Neil's homosexuality at the time and indeed the word would not have meant much to me, but undoubtedly Neil would have had contact with other gay people on the troopship and in Hong Kong. There is no information about that experience, but Neil would have managed it discreetly in order not to compromise his position in the Royal Navy.

While he was in Hong Kong, Neil corresponded regularly with my parents and we all saw the letters. As a competent keyboard player, he was invited in to play organ at the Naval Chapel in Hong Kong and he recounted in one of his letters how he had to play at the funeral of a Canadian serviceman and how he improvised on the theme of 'Maple Leaf Forever' a patriotic song often used as a kind of national anthem, as the coffin was brought into the chapel. He also mentioned that he had taken part in the annual swim across Hong Kong harbour and that he had cut

himself on a piece of wood and had to retire and find his way back to his clothes. For those reading this memoir in Hong Kong in the twenty first century, it is worth noting that Neil was posted to Hong Kong well before the massive changes to the skyline and those old photographs of Hong Kong, which we have all seen, constituted the environment of his stay in Hong Kong in the 1950s. Neil's experience in Hong Kong meant that when we started visiting Hong Kong to see our family, I felt a certain kinship with the place based on Neil's life in Hong Kong so many years earlier. Returning from the Navy, Neil struggled academically at University as he felt that he had been rather pushed into science subjects. In retrospect, he felt that he should have studied economics, because his real strengths were in analysis and communication, rather than in university level mathematics and science. His first-year exams were marginal and when he failed his second-year exams, he had to leave the University. He always felt sensitive about leaving without a degree and on one particular occasion, during a row in the Mags pub, fired up by one or two pints of draught Bass, I blurted out:

'Well at least I got a degree.'

'That's a fucking unfair thing to say,' he shouted and left the pub. My own degree at the time was fairly undistinguished, and so my remark was completely out of place.

Let us also bring Alan up-to-date, at this point. Being nearly two years older than me, Alan started at Wallasey Grammar School a couple of years ahead and fairly early on made a reputation as a sportsman. The two areas of excellence were Rugby Union and Athletics, but right from the start of his grammar school career, he also demonstrated strong academic ability and managed to move himself into a year

above his age group. I am not sure how this happened, and I think it would be unlikely to happen in a modern school, but he spent the first five or six years of his school life with a slightly older group of pupils. He had particular skills in mathematics and managed to do very well across the board with his O-levels, but somehow he failed to keep up the momentum at A-level, something which affected all three brothers. It is one of the conundrums of education that, at precisely the age when young people should be geared to achieve excellent A-levels and gain university places, they are also going through great physical and emotional changes which means that their priorities are well away from the field of education. That will do quite well as my excuse.

Alan ended up taking his A-levels on three occasions and finally managed to obtain university qualification and went off to Hull University; famous for the poet Philip Larkin, who spent many years there as librarian, writing verse or jazz criticism when he was not stamping return dates on undergraduates' library books. Staying on in the sixth form for an extra couple of years meant that Alan was eventually appointed as school prefect. I think in his first couple of years in the sixth form he associated with a rather unruly bunch of boys but as he matured, so he obtained school colours for rugby and athletics and was granted the right to wear the distinctive short gown which was the prefect's uniform. One of his associates at that time was a Ron Vipond, a thick-set boy with an acne-cratered face, a ruddy complexion, and a heavily Brylcreamed quiff. He chewed gum incessantly and always seem to have plenty of money for alcohol and cigarettes. I think Alan's friends were attracted by the swagger, confidence and notoriety of Vipond, and were led astray for a while. On one occasion Alan was reported for being in a pub underage and this got back to the school and to his parents. As a group, these boys would

listen to Dave Brubeck and Gerry Mulligan jazz records and quietly slope off to the back of the cricket pavilion for a couple of Woodbines. By today's standards, this was unexceptional behaviour, but it is clear that Alan went through a slightly rebellious phase, but did not self-destruct.

Alan studied Maths at Hull University and performed well, ending up with a respectable degree. He played some rugby and soccer, but I have no information about whether he played for university teams. A summer vacation was spent as a packer at a local frozen pea factory near Hull, and I remember seeing a photograph of him having some fun with some female pea packers. At around this time he met Valerie, who was training to be a teacher and, by the time he left Hull for his job in the fledgling computer industry, it is clear that he had decided to settle down.

There is a photograph of him taken at the school's Speech Day, along with a number of prefects, the Headmaster, F L Allan, the guest of honour, and Alderman Cyril Dingle, Chairman of the Governors, who also appears on a photograph with my grandfather at a mayoral parade many years before.

And what of my launch into the formal education process?

'Hello Robin, welcome to St George's Infants. Come over to our post-box and post the letters in the box, ready for the postman to collect.' With these words from veteran reception teacher, Miss Henderson, my formal education began.

I remember being reluctant to leave my mother on that day, but as my elder brother, Alan, was in the same school, I was just about comfortable with going there. The rest of my stay in the infants section is a bit of a blur and I remember something which looked as if I was being kept down a year. Could this have been my first setback? Or did I misunderstand the whole thing? Perhaps, with a birthday in

September, I had started school in the wrong year and needed to be kept back, so as to be in the same group as my peers. I remember nobody explaining it to me, not even my parents. Perhaps they did not know about it, and yet they were experienced in the way the education system worked. I suppose being confused, and not quite sure what is going on, is the hallmark of being a child. But you did not question things, you just got on with life.

In an experience which would be perhaps foreign to today's switched on, hip hop generation of children, I remember enjoying country dancing. In the absence of physical evidence, I am guessing at 'The Dashing White Sergeant' and 'The Gay Gordons.' It would probably be uncool to profess such a view these days, but I looked forward to those sessions, perhaps encouraged by an early awareness that girls could be fun and were not unattractive to my young eyes. In a small way, the experience opened the door to an interest in folk music, country traditions and the open air, later developed via youth hostelling, folk clubs and traditional real ale.

I moved reasonably seamlessly through the years at what was then called junior school; a well-behaved and sociable child, with a developing treble singing voice and an only average skill at sport. Winters seemed colder then, and the bitter 1947 winter would have kicked off a month or so after I started school. This is before the days of being driven to school by an indulgent mother in a 4x4 Sports Utility Vehicle, and we had to walk. I recall having a period of bad sore throats edging into tonsillitis and the greatest discomfort was the intake of frozen air and the effect on the back of my throat, a rather weird sensation. A little later than that, having played with snowballs in the school yard, I came back into the classroom with frozen fingers. I foolishly tried to warm my hands on the radiator and found it made them far worse and the pain in my fingers brought to tears to my eyes. I remember a particularly kind teacher, Mr

Grey, sympathising with me and putting his arm round me. In those days that sort of gesture seemed quite natural and, indeed, made me feel better.

The subject of school dinners is perhaps part of the staple diet of memoir writers, but all generations will have a distinctive slant on the subject. Looking at today's cafeteria-style school restaurants, with choices and the availability of chips, even Jamie Oliver inspired healthy fodder, my own experience in the 1950s was much more primitive. The food was not cooked on-site and was delivered by lorries in large vats and dished out to the children. There was no choice and you had to eat what was placed in front of you. Popular dishes included square portions of steak and kidney pie in gravy, cut out from a large dish. Influenced by the 'Dandy' comic and Desperate Dan, a key cowboy character, this became 'Cow Pie' and a favourite desert was a similar square of pastry full of currants, drowned in custard and, of course, this was 'Fly Cemetery', not to mention 'Frog Spawn' (Sago Pudding).

I cannot allow waves of nostalgia to conclude that the food was excellent and tasty. It tended to be fairly stodgy and uninteresting, but it was not unhealthy. There were plenty of green vegetables and a complete absence of chips. As an aside it is worth making the point that I was not generally conscious of children being overweight, in fact there was only one boy in the junior school in my class who was known as Fatty (Philip Bradshaw). He was a bit plump, even rotund, but not excessively so by today's standards, but he was sufficiently unusual to earn the nickname. So many of today's children are obese that singling out one child for such a nickname would be impossible, as well as being offensive. In the tough, insensitive 1950s, it probably was unacceptable to call Bradshaw 'Fatty,' but we did not know any better.

Thinking about 'Fatty,' has reminded me of an early exposure to what today would be called a special needs child. We would have probably used the word 'backward.' Tony Wilkinson was a warm-hearted and somewhat strange little boy who could not keep his hands still. They used to shake around like a junior version of Parkinson's disease, as he spoke. He would constantly run round the playground and was clearly different from the rest of us. In the way that people with special needs sometimes shine in a particular area, he was absolutely brilliant at spelling. We would go up to him and ask him to spell tuberculosis or pneumonia, at a time when probably none of us could spell the words or even knew what they meant. He could do so consistently, never making a mistake. I imagine that Tony would have gone to a special school once he left junior school. I always felt sympathy for him and made some attempt to befriend him.

A photograph of my school form in 1952, aged around eleven, offers, literally, an interesting snapshot of school life at the time. The form teacher was Mr Trapnell, who was wearing a sports jacket and a pair of flannel trousers. The photograph demonstrates the immense power of memory from that period, because I can almost remember all the names. David Fletcher, mentioned later, is there, and David Greetham, now a Distinguished Professor at City University New York, and well-known expert on textual studies. I know that some of the people on the photograph, one for certain, will not be around anymore, which is somewhat sobering. Although most in the class were wearing school uniform, a number were not, which suggests a more laid-back approach than in some contemporary schools. What is reassuring, is that the general look of children at around this age has not changed very much and I suppose it is the sense of innocence and promise which is most appealing about the photograph.

I have one strong memory of being caned on the hand at around the age of ten. The offence did not remain in my memory and I can only assume it was for something trivial, like talking after the class had been told to keep quiet. I do not believe that I would have been capable of any significantly bad behaviour. It left me with a distaste for corporal punishment which has remained with me. I even dreamed of chasing up this particular teacher, Mr Trapnell, and seeking some kind of revenge, as I felt the humiliation deeply, but I did not pursue the idea. An early lesson was that resentment was not a helpful emotion; far better to move on.

At around that time I was involved in a spot of bullying and I am ashamed to admit that I was helping to administer the bullying. Indeed, the victim was a boy who could have been described as my best friend. He lived in Rugby Road, one of the roads named after famous public schools built by my grandfather, and we would often call in after school for a drink and a biscuit. We both started collecting ship postcards by going over on the Mersey Ferry to call in at shipping companies. The episode of bullying just seemed to crop up very suddenly and David became the centre of some unpleasant activity and although he was my friend, I chose to join in with the group in a certain amount of baiting and scoffing.

Betrayal

*Best friend, David, so often back to
his mum's for a drink and a scone.*

Bike rides to the wild fields, chats in the playground.

*Table tennis and puppets in our attic,
an attempt at a clown, but no jokes
or summersaults.*

*Collecting ships' photographs, knocking on the door
of Cunard in Liverpool, telling a cock and bull story
about a geographical project, riding the ferry,
passing the Blue Funnel liners steaming out to the Far East.*

*Exports to the colonies, rubber and palm oil on the return trip.
Suddenly, an eruption of nastiness in the heart of all of us.*

Away from the school gate and out of sight.

We don't wish to be seen.

*Turn on him as a group, a marauding gang
which to my shame includes me.*

The ultimate betrayal of a best friend.

We circle around him like a scene from a Western.

Arrogant brigands swaggering in empty bravado

Col, Franks, Wrighty, Mick Lewis, all there

mocking, imitating his stammer,

pointing at the slight scar on his reddened face,

as his tears begin to fall.

*A look in my direction which says
'You let me down, I thought you were my best mate.'
We let him run off, whimpering like a spanked dog.
I start to feel a stomach-churning guilt.
Carried away by the gang,
seduced by the need to be a member.
The victim off sick for a few days.
Hear from his mother of nightmares,
screams, retching up his dinner and night sweats.
His friendship remained as a tribute to his forbearance;
an episode I wish I had been able
to forget.*

I learned later that he had become quite ill as a result of this treatment and I am not proud of the fact that I did not support him. But the experience perhaps tells us something of the way bullying works. The nonsense was that David and I were very good friends, going over to Liverpool on the Ferry, travelling on the Overhead Railway, 'The Dockers' Umbrella', and going back to his house after school to play with Dinky Toys, so why did I get carried along with the mob?

The subject was never really discussed and we did not receive long lectures at school assemblies about the need to stamp out bullying. The topic is much more out in the open today and bullying is widely condemned. However, the development of social networking and mobile phones has granted anonymity to some offenders, so the problem remains, but in a different and possibly more sinister form.

The final year, the eleven plus year, was a time when I began to make progress intellectually and socially. Although I now disagree with the idea of selection, it is fair to argue that I thrived in the relatively high pressure atmosphere of the top set heading for the big exam, especially under the guiding hand of Miss Merrick, our charismatic eleven plus teacher who had a near hundred per cent record in obtaining grammar school places for her children, over a period of over thirty years. Partly because she had taught my siblings and knew my family, Miss Merrick used to ask me, and some others of us, to address the class on a Monday morning on what we had done the previous weekend. I did not feel nerves and found I could string together a few sentences and crack the odd joke, so even then, as an eleven year old, I had some feelings about the kind of career I might have. It would probably involve talking and writing, but probably nothing connected with arithmetic, although I was competent enough to pass the exam.

I know that one weekend, Miss Merrick had seen me out cycling with one of the girls in my class (Gillian Lewis - how does one continue to remember these names?) and she used that knowledge to tease me (and the girl). So, from an early age I learned how to deal with gentle ribbing; although I had already gained a degree of resilience through being the youngest of four children. The fact that my two brothers, in particular, were adept at ganging up on their baby brother was a toughening experience, which has proved helpful. Miss Merrick said:

‘Robin will now tell you all about his cycling expedition at the weekend. Were you with anyone Robin?’ she added, trying to embarrass me in front of the class.

‘I had a very interesting cycle ride over the weekend through parts of the Wirral and over to Hoylake, where we had a great view of the River. I was with a friend,’ I replied.

‘I have a feeling that we might know the name of your friend,’ she added ‘and that this person would have been riding a girl’s bike.’

I do not remember how this particular conversation ended, but it was all done with a light touch and in a way which caused amusement without humiliation. Readers who are hoping that a great romance emerged from this cycle trip will be disappointed. After all, we were eleven at the time and contacts with girls, though starting to become interesting, were fairly innocent, with perhaps a couple of boys going to see Gillian to have a drink of pop and a biscuit. A very sweet and pretty girl called Hilary Crowther was the object of most of the boys’ affections at the time, but I never got close to her. Too much competition.

The scene moves forward now several years to Wallasey Grammar School, where I was starting to make some kind of mark. The all-boy school, whilst in the state sector, had a public school feel about it, with staff and prefects wearing academic gowns. F L Allan (Fred the Head), a World War Two hero, would walk onto the school stage each morning. Having removed his mortarboard (academic hat), he would then commence the daily assembly, with a prayer, a hymn; Charlie Canon playing the massive Hammond electric organ and a prefect reading a lesson from the bible. In a rather stilted delivery he would say:

‘I have to announce that the following boys have been made school prefects, David Peers and John Banks.’

‘It has been drawn to my attention that some boys have been found smoking behind the cricket pavilion. Let me make it quite clear that such behaviour is totally unacceptable and that boys found smoking will be removed from this school.’

Friday morning was classical music day and the full assembly had to sit quietly, while a 78 record of, say, Fingal's Cave by Mendelssohn was played on the school gramophone.

I was starting to enjoy arts subjects and in most years I received a prize or two. These were for English, History, Geography and Music. Prize winners had to go over to a bookshop in Liverpool, Philip, Son and Nephew, to order our books, which were then presented at the annual Speech Day by the guest speaker, quite often a local bigwig. In typical hoarding fashion, I still own those books and confess that some of them I have never bothered to read. These were before the days of Harry Potter, and as a teenager there were no particular writers that all teenagers had to follow. Taking some of the books at random, there is *The Collins Pocket Guide to British Birds*, *The Earth's Crust* (geography book) by L Dudley Stamp, and *The Natural History of Man in Britain* by HJ Fleure, and the one most greatly valued by me today which was my first ever jazz book, *Hear Me talking to Ya*, a compilation of comments by leading jazz musicians from Louis Armstrong to Dave Brubeck. I remember the chief guest at the prize-giving being quite bemused by the title.

This book was published in 1955, and I received it at the school speech day in October 1957 as I started in the Sixth Form. At that time, the iconic Miles Davis was at an early stage in his career and his inexperience is commented on by the singer Billy Eckstine, who employed Davis:

When I first heard him, he was working in St Louis, which is Miles' home. He used to ask to sit in with the band. I'd let him so as not to hurt his feelings, because then Miles was awful. He sounded terrible; he couldn't play at all. But by the time we got to California,

he had blossomed out. He'd been going to Juilliard and playing with Bird, so he came in and took over the same book, the solo book, which was originally Dizzy's.

By 1959, Miles Davis had recorded Kind of Blue, the best-selling jazz album of all times. 'Bird' is the innovative saxophonist Charlie Parker, and Dizzy is Dizzy Gillespie, the trumpeter who, with Parker and others, helped to develop Modern Jazz. Juilliard refers to the Juilliard School of Music associated with a number of leading jazz players. At the age of sixteen or so, I was already reading about jazz and thinking about how to play it.

I started to enjoy writing essays, often inspired by my love of the open air and a developing interest in bird watching, and exposure to Wordsworth and the Romantic poets. At the age of about eleven or twelve, I had joined the school Natural History Society, by today's standards an unusual group in that it did not involve any members of staff and was run by a very dedicated senior boy, David Hawkins, aged about seventeen at the time. This sparked off my interest in ornithology, which will be dealt with in more detail in the section devoted to the open air.

Outside the grammar school environment, and as I entered my teens, my social life started developing, and in particular I remember the attraction of having a swim at one of Wallasey's two open-air swimming pools. Although its features as a seaside resort were starting to fade by the 1950s, the town did have the advantage of having excellent swimming facilities. The seaward part of Wallasey was called 'New Brighton' as an attempted copy of Brighton, a much more famous and successful seaside resort.

One boy at Wallasey Grammar School, Neil McKechnie, took part in the Olympic Games and established a number of national swimming records. Understandably, the school was pretty keen on swimming, although my achievements were fairly minor. Living on the coast, there was great encouragement to learn to swim to avoid getting drowned and free lessons were provided. I mastered a fairly basic kind of breast stroke, enough to keep me afloat and after we finished our O-levels, a gang of friends from the school would go down to the Derby Pool, unfortunately no longer in existence; although a pub restaurant has been built, copying the architecture of the Derby and known as 'the Derby Pool.'

This was a favourite time for showing off to a group of schoolgirls who had also finished their exams, and this included jumping off the top board and generally posing. My diving ability was fairly basic and any attempt to dive off the top board would have resulted in a broken neck. However, it was fun to jump and slightly nerve-wracking, but I finally ending up making a big splash. After climbing the ladder to the summit of the diving board, I was able to look over the gleaming, rippling pool, but also across the Mersey estuary to the port of Liverpool, even catching a glimpse of the famous Liver Birds at the top of the Liver Buildings on the water front. Looking down at the blue waters below me, I was momentarily frozen to inaction by the thought of the fall, but buoyed up by the desire not to be seen as a wimp in front of a group of teenage girls, I jumped and hit the water at speed, rapidly sinking below the surface, but bouncing back to gulps of fresh air.

I had my first crack at writing something for the school magazine, this one inspired by the Eighteenth Century poet, Alexander Pope. The reader will need to be tolerant of my youthful naivety and lack of polish - something which it can be argued has

remained with me - but it is worth quoting to obtain some kind of picture of the seventeen year old who wrote it.

The New Dunciad

*I rise before my spirits rested are.
The ride is hard, the distance is too far.
The jarring bell to duty calls the crowd,
The master greets, his voice is harsh and loud.
My quest for knowledge is a painful task;
Why should it hide behind so cruel a mask?
O Muse, is this thy learning's subtle treat,
That draws deep slumber to my wooden seat?
To scenes of pastoral charms my spirit flies,
On river bank and moorland heath it lies.
My inattention pricks the master's pride;
A deadly calm, my eyes now open wide.
He speaks, his visage darkened by a frown-
Imprisonment my day of toil will crown.
My stretch completed, freedom now is mine;
My journey home is full of thoughts divine.
The evening promises enjoyment rare,
To walk entwined and breathe the twilight air.
But soft! A dreadful thought invades my hope.
Two essays call--on Charles 1 and Pope. (1959)*

This piece of work was published in the school magazine and drew some approving comments from the editor, Mr Geoffrey Gibbons, also one of my English teachers. The reference to Pope reflected an interesting first year A-Level English Literature course, which involved a wide-ranging review of literature, from Chaucer to D H Lawrence. Most contemporary courses concentrate on the list of set books during the two year period. My 'Cook's Tour' of the world of literature perhaps did not help me achieve an outstanding mark but, perhaps more importantly, opened the door to a wide range of authors.

I was also starting to become interested in writing as an activity in itself, and as secretary of the school Boat Club, I wrote the articles for the school magazine. In July 1959, there was a printing strike and the school published its own magazine at the school press, and I still have the copy of that magazine. It was a very professional production and it included my report on the summer term's rowing.

Here's an excerpt:

'After Easter, the Eight began to practice in 'Margaret' a fine (lighter, shell finish) boat which has undoubtedly seen better days. Nevertheless it has been good practice to row in a boat half full of water, and the necessary woodwork operations performed by the crew will have enriched their experience.'

And later, in describing a summer regatta, it reads:

'The climax of our season, Marlow regatta, saw the first Wallasey Grammar School crew ever to row in the Public Schools Eights event. In the first round on the Friday night, the eighth defeated Emanuel School by half a length, after a hectic race. In the semi-final, the school was defeated by Eton third crew, in the fastest time in the event. Eton won the event. The crew dined that night at 'The Compleat Angler'

and for this memorable experience they were indebted to the kindness of Major Collins, (a school benefactor). The visit to Marlow was enjoyable and has given grounds for confidence in the future. Next year, the school hopes to return with more than satisfied palates.'

Going down to Marlow regatta was quite a culture shock for a young boy brought up on the Wirral. It was my first contact with the Thames Valley, with famous public schools taking part in the regatta. In addition, I became aware of a general sense of money, in the sumptuously large houses on the banks of the River Thames and from the gleaming Bentley and Jaguar cars parked by the river and in Marlow. 'The Compleat Angler' is a historic Inn, with associations with Isaac Newton who wrote a book of the same name. For some of us, that evening meal after our race in the regatta was probably the first experience of a formal meal in a restaurant. Major Collins was an old boy of the school and a keen supporter of the rowing crews. The trip also gave me my first sight of the River Thames and a lifelong affection for the river which, between Oxford and London, flows through some lush and attractive countryside, with picture-postcard villages and expensive houses with willowy gardens all very much in evidence.

These were innocent days when the pressure to obtain maximum grades to enter a top flight university was not as compelling as it seems to be today. The idea of life being competitive was, to me, a far distant concept in those golden times. From early years, my parents, but especially my mother, had assured her children that they would succeed in education and in life. As our background was comfortably middle-class, there was none of the useful toughening which some children acquire from being brought up in difficult circumstances. There was encouragement and support,

but perhaps a slight lack of realism. As I demonstrate later, I was not taught, as a child, that life could be quite tough out there in 'the real world.'

(In the extended version of the memoir, the reader is taken through the university experiences of the brothers, including my own mix of in-service and post-graduate experiences, the most recent of which you are now reading.)

Chapter 8 – Strange Harmonies: Early Years

From my very early childhood, music was as much about performance as listening. Having the luxury of a mother who was around to look after me, at a time when many mothers did not go out to work as compared with today, gave me the priceless background of encouragement to sing, play and listen. She would sing nursery rhymes to me and play the piano and I was encouraged to join in. She also played a couple of pieces by Chopin and I said to her, 'Mummy, don't play the sad tunes.' By way of explanation, the pieces by Chopin which she played were mainly in minor keys, and even then to my then untutored ears, minor chords had a sad feel about them and I did not like the feeling of being sad. This was a genuine 'Listen with Mother', the real thing, in advance of the BBC's version. It was a formative experience, which helped to develop my awareness of music. Having said that, my later taste gradually extended to tunes with a melancholy feel, notably jazz and blues tunes in a minor key, and listening to such music did not depress me, rather it uplifted my moods.

I was beginning to enjoy music and I learned from an early age, that listening whilst I was in bed, trying to get to sleep, would put me in a relaxed frame of mind and on a fast journey to the land of nod. This was not a question of switching on the radio but listening to Neil playing the piano in the downstairs dining room. He was a versatile player and mixed classical tunes with jazzed up tunes.

Recollection of music at primary school is somewhat vague, but there were assemblies with a teacher playing the piano, together with a gradual familiarisation with hymns at the local Methodist Sunday School. Such exposure to religion and church music has had an ambivalent impact on my life, in that from the age of

around twelve I started to doubt the whole religious edifice that had been created in my mind by preachers and teachers. And yet, the core elements of devotional music must have got through to my mind, perhaps my soul, and helped to release an inbuilt sense of melody and harmony. This quality was identified by a young Sunday school teacher, Miss Heighway, an accomplished musician, who after asking the children to test out their voices, picked me out to sing a solo at the forthcoming Church Anniversary Service.

This was a Methodist Church in a middle class area of Wallasey, and all my siblings were encouraged to join in church-based activities by my mother, who had developed her allegiance to Methodism from her early years in Yorkshire. It was decided that I would sing a Christmas-flavoured hymn - 'From out of a Wood a Cuckoo Did Fly' - at the Church Anniversary service, a celebration of the years since the founding of this church. Together with Miss Heighway, we rehearsed the song to a point where I was able to sing it competently. The word 'cuckoo' was repeated after each line, and the final line of each verse had a refrain of 'Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo,' so remembering the words would not have been the major concern. The problem was one of nerves, so that when my moment came in the church service, I just could not face the congregation. I was asked to stand on the pew and face the congregation. There would have been familiar faces in front of me, but after attempting a couple of starting notes, I dissolved into tears and sat down, now not facing the dreaded audience.

Although this was an embarrassing event, I was able to overcome it and later sang a number of solo roles at Wallasey Grammar School. There is no doubt that my involvement with singing and with playing violin in the school orchestra, not to mention my couple of years of violin and piano lessons, all helped to create a

framework of musical experience which stood me in good stead for when, inevitably as it seems, I moved into the more informal world of jazz.

A particular musical memory from this time was a combined schools concert at the Tower Ballroom in New Brighton. Although the famous New Brighton Tower, the tallest in England at the time, had been dismantled in the 1920s, the ballroom continued until the 1970s, as a concert venue and, as the name suggests, as a location for ballroom dancing. Famously, the Beatles and other Liverpool groups appeared there in the early 1960s. My schools concert was part of a large number of Festival of Britain celebrations and it involved singing with the Black Dyke Mills brass band, conducted by Sir Harry Mortimer, or plain Harry Mortimer as he then was. I remember one of the songs was 'I Vow to the Country' and I have a feeling there were others songs with a patriotic theme.

A constant theme throughout this memoir is that I can have no complaints about the support I received from my parents in all aspects of my life. If we take music, my mother arranged piano lessons round about the time I went to Wallasey Grammar School, maybe a year or two before that. My teacher, Miss Revell, was a fairly straight-laced traditional type of teacher and to be fair to her, the brief was to teach me to play classical piano and not boogie woogie. With a certain amount of innate musical talent, I was able to make rapid progress in the first couple of years and entered one or two music festivals and received some positive comments from the adjudicators. However, I found practising Beethoven to be hard work and I preferred to experiment with my own tunes.

'Why haven't you been practising your Beethoven sonata?' she would say, at the beginning of a lesson.

'Well, I've been playing my own little tunes.'

‘That’s a complete waste of time. You won’t get anywhere unless you practise these pieces.’

In the event, after discussions with my mother, I stopped having the lessons. Miss Revell was right to a point and formal learning of the piano, complete with the ability to read music and an understanding of musical theory, would have been very useful. But she failed to realise that I had some musical ability and she could have encouraged me to play my own tunes, whilst at the same time, trying gently to motivate me to practice the more formal material.

I was starting to listen to jazz at around the same time, playing a number of my father’s 78 RPM records. His collection introduced me to the work of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, ‘Fats’ Waller, and a number of other musicians. At this time, I also became interested in the idea of entertaining people with whatever skills I could muster.

As mentioned earlier, with my childhood friends in the road, we set up our own puppet stage and invited other children to come and see the shows. One of Norman Colebourne’s shows used the music from ‘The Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy’, with a cleverly manipulated ballerina marionette. That piece was part of my early experience of music, and although my contemporary taste does not extend to what one might call ‘popular classics’, my enjoyment of this tuneful and evocative piece, helped to develop my appreciation of melody and harmony.

At about the same time, I remember putting a dance together with a close friend of mine, Peter Daniel. We selected a Duke Ellington record from my father’s collection of 78s and worked out a routine using walking sticks and hats. This, not surprisingly, did not lead to a career in this field, but it all helped to develop an interest in music and communicating to people.

My musical and cultural development was starting to take place at home. I guess my father was reasonably ahead of the field of audio-visual technology, by getting hold of two picture books which told a story accompanied by music provided on a record. One was *The Happy Prince*, a fairy tale by Hans Christian Anderson, the other being *The First Christmas Morning*. We would sit and listen to the 78 RPM record whilst looking at the glossy pictures in the book and turning the page at the appropriate time. During *The Happy Prince*, the listener was asked to turn the page by the narrator, in this case the plummy voice of Frank Phillips, the famous BBC radio news reader. On the Christmas record, one turned the page when a loud bell was rung. The Christmas record, even to my young years, seemed a little over the top and the music was pretty heavy. But *The Happy Prince* was an excellent production, with wonderful illustrations, a very polished voice-over and some attractive and atmospheric music. I was beginning to see the link between music and emotion, as the music on the *Happy Prince* record helped to accentuate the sadness of the story and quite often as a young boy, it reduced me to tears, especially when the swallow dies of starvation in the freezing winter. *The Happy Prince* has now been transported to Hong Kong, where I am hoping it has been experienced by my grandchildren.

Having finished the lessons with Miss Revell, I proceeded to develop my own jazz piano style by experimentation and by listening to other players. By this time, I had discovered the work of George Shearing and Dave Brubeck, through records bought by Neil. I was also taught a couple of jazzy chords by the then boyfriend of my sister, Rosemary, John Crosby.

Without getting too technical, this involves putting a note, in this case A, into a straightforward chord of C, i.e. adding A to the four notes, C (root), E, G, and C. If

you were to play this chord as part of a serious piece, for example a hymn, it would sound 'jazzy', and I liked that. That was enough to get me going; the chord played in the right hand against a left-hand boogie-woogie pattern sounded good to me. I experimented with the chord, tried different notes, and devised slightly more complex harmonies.

I found also that I liked playing tunes in a minor key, for example 'Summertime' from Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. By changing the chord slightly, I could alter the mood of the song. I spent many hours practising these tunes and ideas on my mother's piano, quite often in a darkened room. I think my parents were fairly tolerant of the strange noises emerging from the dining room and probably thought that I would get over it at some time. I never did.

My first entry into the world of orchestral violin playing came with our monumental music teacher Charlie Cannon. He was a skilled pianist, organist and choirmaster, but he wanted a school orchestra. His strategy was to teach himself violin and then teach pupils at the school to play, when he was only really a couple of pages ahead of them. It worked and within a year or so, he had a school orchestra. In the meantime, I also started private lessons on violin with a local teacher, Miss Flora Cann, so that, by the time I moved into the orchestra, I was creating an acceptable sound. Flora lived in a rambling house not far from the banks of the River Mersey and it was like walking into Victorian Britain, with dark rosewood furniture, a couple of chaise lounges, and pictures of ships and scenery in gilt frames on the wall. If Flora appeared old to me, her elderly mother, whose name escapes me, seemed positively prehistoric. Flora, who was also a Girl Guide leader in Wallasey, was a good violin teacher, pushing me hard and acquainting me with some

interesting pieces, including a sonata by Vivaldi, which is one of the few things I have in common with Nigel Kennedy.

Miss Cann also gave me some singing lessons to complement the work being done at school and I was entered for some festivals locally. Such events remain popular in the UK, especially in verse speaking, drama and music; generations of children have suffered excessive nerves whilst standing in front of a small audience and, of course, the adjudicator. Thus experience is a necessary rite of passage for any aspiring performer. There always seemed to be one person in the group destined for higher things who completely outshone the bulk of the participants. I remember singing *The Skye Boat Song* (traditional) and forgetting the words of the second verse. With my later acquired jazz skills, I should have improvised some words, although I'm not sure that 'dooby doo' would have gone down too well. Handel is a popular choice for festivals and I sang two famous songs, 'Silent Worship' and 'Where'er you walk.' Comments on my singing from adjudicators were always positive, but I was not offered a recording contract.

It is noteworthy that another member of the school orchestra with jazz inclinations, Robin Tankard, used to take part with me in little improvisation sessions, jazzing up tunes on our violins, before we started the proper rehearsal. He ended up as a qualified architect but also as the bass player in a famous local traditional jazz band, the Mississippi Jazz band. So both of us rather turned our backs on formal music and preferred to be in a situation where we were making things up.

This developing interest in a freer type of music coincided with the arrival of Lonnie Donegan on the UK musical scene and very soon everybody was singing 'The Rock Island Line', a song from the deep south of the USA about a freight train fiddling the system of taxing cargoes. When I say singing, it was more a question of

young men learning the long rambling spoken introduction and then performing it in pubs, at school, and anywhere where people would listen, using a mock American accent in the style of Donegan, who actually was not American.

The effect on me was to motivate me to learn guitar. As it happens, there was a guitar in our house. My father had bought it many years ago, planning to learn, but he never got round to it. I rescued the guitar, sorted out some pegs and strings and learned two or three chords. That was enough to get started and within a short space of time I had, with Alan, formed a Skiffle Group. We were not alone in this venture, as thousands of skiffle groups were formed up and down the country, including a group which contained a couple of Beatles. The sound of well-known skiffle songs could be heard everywhere.

Our group, 'The Hi-Hats', I will contend, would have been amongst the more sophisticated groups, in that we had a *real* drummer. A new boy, Tony Crofts, turned up one day at Wallasey Grammar School, who not only had a full drum kit, but could actually *play*, having been taught by his father. This was a big plus, together with an ex-choir boy who played ukulele (Neil Monroe), and my brother Alan, roped in to play a home-made tea-chest bass. We were in business.

Somebody took a black and white snapshot of the group at a gig in the local church hall. Tony Crofts is seen behind his drum kit and an especially large bass drum with 'TC' stuck on with some tape. Alan is seen playing a home-made tea chest bass with the word the 'Hi-Hats' displayed, using stick-on letters. A tea chest bass was literally made from a tea chest, a large cube-shaped wooden box, used at the time for transporting tea from India to the rest of the world. A broom handle is then inserted into the corner of the box and from the top, a piece of string is attached to the centre of the box. As the string is tightened by pulling the brush handle, so a

musical, thumping bass note can be produced by plucking at the string in the manner of a double bass player. It is difficult to achieve a specific note, but the thumping noise adds to the general rhythmic effect of the music.

In the middle is Neil Munro singing sweetly and playing a ukulele and to the right I am seen, playing the new guitar which my mother bought me to replace the old one I had started with. From a style point of view, this is before the era of jeans, so the three pairs of trousers that are visible are baggy flannels.

This is how the Beatles started, but it has to be said that they took things much further than we did. The high spot for the Hi-Hats was a series of performances at the Scout Hut, where Neil, now Scout Leader, used to organise live music sessions for young people. They could spend their pocket money on Cream Soda and Smith's Crisps, whilst enjoying our music and opening up the little blue packets of salt to spread on their plain, that is, potato flavoured, crisps, there being no alternative exotic flavours in those primitive days.

I realised that from an early age, I become restless if I have to sit still and listen to music. I was happy to sing or play music, but in terms of listening I found I preferred to be in a relaxed atmosphere, such as a jazz club, a pub or a dance hall. My father had a deep love of classical music and he used to visit the Glyndebourne Opera House in deepest Sussex every year, and even took me down one year when I was at Reading University. However, I remember it more as a social occasion and having a picnic in the grounds during the interval, rather than a great musical experience, although I have no doubt that the performance of 'Pelléas and Mélisande' by Debussy was of a really high standard. Like my rowing at Henley Royal regatta, it brought me into a world of money, style and aristocracy, so it was interesting in itself as a way of seeing the ruling classes at play.

In spite of my lack of engagement with the previously mentioned rich contralto voice of Kathleen Ferrier, I valued the period of time between eleven and fourteen, when my own treble voice featured strongly in the number of musical events at Wallasey Grammar School. In a major loss to posterity, my voice was never recorded but it is reported that old ladies had tears in their eyes when hearing me sing solo. Charlie Cannon, mentioned earlier as the creator of an instant orchestra, picked out four boys who would handle the solo roles in a number of ambitious musical works that he produced, with the help of the local symphony orchestra and some adult male soloists. The most successful piece of work was Rossini's 'Stabat Mater', sung in Latin. Robin Tankard and I shared the soprano part and two other boys sang the alto or contralto line. This performance was very well received, but possibly my most poignant performance was at the annual school service. My role, at the beginning of the service, was to sing unaccompanied the first line of an introit. I was given a single note from the organ, and had to launch my voice into the reverberating acoustic of the darkened school hall. Having overcome my nerves from my earliest solo experience, I was able to enjoy the sense of occasion, and the effect I was able to have on the congregation. In my entire musical career, I doubt if I have ever had that effect on an audience, so in one sense after the age of thirteen or fourteen, when my voice broke, it was all downhill.

An additional musical performance is recorded in the school magazine of September 1955, when it mentions a concert given in the school hall: *'the programme included two Christmas cantatas, one by Scarlatti and another by Armstrong Gibbs in which the soloists were R Thomas, D Fletcher and R. Tankard.'* In the way that these things work out, those two other boys also feature elsewhere in this memoir.

At round about the same time in my late teens, whilst still at school, I started to demonstrate further unconventional initiatives with my music. I bought myself a Hohner chromatic harmonica, a clever little machine which, through the operation of a sliding key, moves the basic note from C to C sharp. This enables complete tunes to be played, which of course generally need sharps and flats. The basic harmonica, as used by blues musicians, will only really play in one key, which is why you see such musicians on stage with a box full of mouth organs. In my case I teamed up with another pupil, Phil Kenzie and we learnt a couple of tunes, including 'Hernando's Hideaway', quite a tricky piece with a number of sharps and flats and some intricate breathing required. I recently bought myself a more sophisticated, state-of-the-art harmonica, and am still trying to remember how I played that tune. That same boy, Phil Kenzie, later took up the saxophone and played with a local group with which I have some associations, 'The Pressmen', but he was ambitious and by the mid-seventies was playing with the Rod Stewart band! He is now based in Nashville as a freelance sax player and his distinctive, forceful sound has appeared on a number of hit records, including 'The Year of the Cat' (Al Stewart).

Another trend which I managed to involve myself in at that time whilst still at school was jazz poetry, a hybrid of jazz and verse which was quite popular in the 1950s. In this exercise, I worked with the drummer from my skiffle days, Tony Crofts, with Robin Tankard on bass, and an excellent actor at school, well-versed in literature, David Greetham. We picked a couple of pieces by T S Eliot and D H Lawrence and improvised some jazz music to go with it. These we recorded on my father's 1950s tape recorder, and at the time of writing I am still trying to find a way of playing those tapes, in the knowledge that they may well have deteriorated beyond use. Jazz poetry never really took off, and I think it was seen as being a bit

trendy and superficial, but as different genres of music and art come together, the association between jazz and poetry may well have further mileage artistically. In some way, this genre anticipated the arrival of Rap.

Another significant development at this time was our creation of a music club, in the cellar of one of my school friends in the school rowing club. His parents had escaped from Latvia during the Second World War, in the light of a potential Russian invasion, and also survived being bombed in Dresden, arriving penniless on Merseyside. The father was able to create a successful shipping company from scratch. His two children attended local schools; the boy, Juris, being at my school, Wallasey Grammar School, and his sister, Baiba, being at what was then called Wallasey High School. The members of our informal band at school, myself, Robin Tankard, Tony Crofts and Phil Kenzie, suggested to Juris that the cellar could be easily turned into a really attractive jazz club. He persuaded his parents that it would be a good idea and during the summer holiday we cleaned it out. Robin Tankard, a gifted artist, about to embark on an architectural course, completed a mural, portraying the Liverpool skyline. With the addition of Richie Prescott and his repertoire of Dwayne Eddie guitar tunes, we were able to operate in different combinations to play skiffle, pop, jazz and folk music. Listening to the music, our members sipped orange juice in the bar we had constructed, while others, suitably paired off, would relax on a couple of armchairs in a secluded corner of the club, no doubt getting to know each other better. We attracted around twenty guests on a good night.

One member, Bill Hughes, started to become abusive to people, so it was decided to ban him. A week later, he arrived with a gang of lads wearing crash helmets, trying to force their way into the club. I then found myself along with Juris,

Robin Tankard and others, trying to stop Hughes and his gang from entering the club. I remember sustaining a punch in the face as part of the experience. Our club rather faded after that incident and folded soon after. Sadly, Hughes had continuing personality problems throughout his life and eventually committed suicide in his forties. But for our gang, running the club was a valuable experience, incorporating some good training for our future careers. The name we gave to the club was perhaps not very imaginative, but I still have a 'Haunt' membership card to remind us of our entrepreneurial spirit.

A photograph from 1959 reminds me of a venture into traditional jazz, which I experienced whilst still at school. This was the 'Twin River Jazz Band', the group named after the presence of two rivers, the Mersey and the Dee which make the Wirral into a peninsular. Tony Crofts was on drums, Robin Tankard was on trumpet this time (an instrument he never really mastered), and Dave Antrobus on piano. I am seen playing the clarinet although not to very high standard. I became obsessed with the music of American clarinettist Benny Goodman at around this time. Having seen the film 'The Benny Goodman Story', I persuaded my parents to buy me a clarinet. This clarinet cost about nine pounds from a local second hand shop. I proceeded to teach myself, using a tutor book, and was able to perform with this schoolboy jazz band after a few months. Thankfully, we have no tapes of the group and whatever was achieved musically has been lost to posterity. 'Trad Jazz' entered a stage of great popularity at around this time, through the work of Chris Barber, Kenny Ball and Acker Bilk, so you could not accuse us of being out of touch.

Ritchie Prescott, from our 'Haunt' days, was my link with the burgeoning Liverpool scene in the 1960s. His group 'The Pressmen' was one of the minor groups at that time, although they never had a hit record. Being away at Reading

University, I was not really aware of what was going on, until bands like the Beatles and Gerry and the Pacemakers suddenly occupied the top echelons of the chart.

After University, it was a question of picking up the jazz contacts. The trio consisting of Tony Crofts and Dave Roberts, from the Pressmen, undertook a three night a week residency at the Latin Quarter club, in central Liverpool. This was largely a question of playing into the small hours of the morning, and watching overweight, inebriated, middle-aged men trying to engage with young females on the dance floor, notable for multi-coloured lights under the glass floor.

As a still fairly naive young man, playing these long hours at the Latin Quarter provided quite a learning experience. I found it quite difficult to stay awake, even on the stand and on a couple of occasions, actually fell asleep whilst playing my keyboard. One of the problems was that we did not have a big enough repertoire, and playing the same tunes every night became very boring for us, as well as, no doubt, the punters.

We used to go into the kitchen to scrounge food from the chef and on one occasion I saw him spill a couple of beef burgers on the floor, whereupon he dusted them down, put them back on the plate and sent them into the club. Key lesson: do not order food in nightclubs!

Given that our love of music was a constant theme binding together my siblings and my parents, I should give some account of the musical lives of my two brothers. Of the three brothers, I have to concede that Neil had the best musical education and demonstrated the widest range of skill. He had piano lessons for a number of years and took some of the higher grade exams. He was also an excellent choral singer as a young boy, although I am not aware that he did much singing after his voice broke,

except possibly during drunken sessions after rowing events in pubs all over the world. He found that he could play by ear, and this became a useful social skill in various situations.

Like me, he would spend hours on the piano at our home in Lyndhurst Road, in his case playing a mixture of classical pieces and popular songs. He even composed a tune which he called 'Tea-Time at the Thomas's' which was intended to reflect the chaos of the family of four children. The song may well have been permanently lost to posterity because it was never recorded. I was told by Dame Di Ellis (Honorary President of British Rowing), who succeeded Neil as lead person in what used to be The Amateur Rowing Association, that Neil had used these skills to break the ice at a number of international rowing events, where rowers from all the rivers of the world were able to join in, singing well-known songs drunkenly round the piano.

The most regular opportunities for music with Neil took place at his spacious Victorian house on the banks of the River Mersey. He had remained at home with my parents until around the age of forty. My mother made a number of attempts to fix him up with a girlfriend, sometimes by attending the annual Liberal Ball and inviting a particular young woman along as part of the group. My mother had it in mind that he was probably a 'confirmed bachelor', and I am reasonably confident that the idea that he was gay did not enter her mind.

There is one story about Neil, to do with music, which this section of the memoir has brought to mind. Neil used to listen to classical music late at night through headphones and at one particular point, no doubt at a key moment in a Beethoven Symphony, Neil suddenly started to sing along with the music, of course forgetting that nobody else could hear the orchestra in his headphones. My mother thought he had been taken seriously ill and rushed into his room.

When he eventually decided to leave home, Neil looked at houses on the banks of the River Mersey in New Brighton and he eventually purchased a substantial terraced house with a fine view of the river. Neil, at that time in a reasonably well-paid job as a sales manager with Greenings, the Warrington-based wire manufacturer, then spent thousands of pounds modernising it, although the Victorian feel remained throughout. He turned the cellar into a gym and sauna, complete with the latest rowing machine

One of the first items that Neil installed in his house was a baby grand piano and he started a tradition of having a major family party sometime around Christmas. Typically, Neil would kick the music off with a classical piece, which he would perform with great energy and élan, with one or two mistakes thrown in to reflect the fact that his busy life prevented him from practising. However, he knew how to perform the piece and communicate the emotion, compared with one of our cousins who could read the notes correctly, and could play them in the right order, but with no real feeling.

After his one nod in the direction of his classical background, Neil would then swing into a number of tunes played by ear, including Christmas carols, popular songs and well-known sing-along tunes. Alan and I would then attempt to join him on violins. Whilst my playing was fairly basic, I had at least developed some concept of tone from my lessons, but Alan's playing was of the rough and ready variety. Like Neil and me, Alan had learned violin at school and did play in the school orchestra. Once he had left school, he would have only have picked up the violin on occasions at family parties. There is a photograph of him, probably in the 1980s, being accompanied by Neil on the piano, an eager look on his face and his mouth slightly open; his stance is that of a lumberjack sawing a log in half. This sounds like a fairly

unkind comment, in that my own playing is not exactly on a par with Nigel Kennedy, but is more a tribute to Alan's get-up-and-go spirit, which he applied to every aspect of his life.

But this was not an example of a Victorian musical evening, or even perhaps the musical events that my sister Rosemary would have attended in Germany, as she was very much into Bach and Mozart. It was about having fun, and Neil knew how to create an evening which was amusing, enjoyable and which involved all the generations at the party. My parents took a full part in these parties and in a photograph from, I would guess the 1980s, I am seen playing the violin with my mother accompanying me at the piano. We only generally played one tune and this was a Scottish piece, reputedly a favourite of the then Queen Mother, which had previously been played by my mother's old friend, Tom Haig.

The violin in that picture was given to me when I was about twelve by my Auntie May, from Elland in West Yorkshire, or as it was then known, the West Riding. The violin had belonged to her late husband who was the choirmaster in the local Methodist church. I remember bringing the violin back home on the train, as we steamed past remote farms and solitary sheep over the Pennines, from Huddersfield to Liverpool. I still have the violin to this day, quite a good quality old Italian model, which I still play from time to time.

The music has to be seen in the context of the party, and Neil was ahead of this time in using management type games, by which I mean slightly crazy versions of the kind of exercises that executives do on 'away day' leadership training courses – you know the sort of thing, where the group is split into teams and given tasks to do. The idea is doing these tasks as exercises in an artificial environment prepares for the real thing. Neil's games often involved a mini-recital, for those with or without

musical skills. Typically, guests were split into multi-generational teams and they were given a quarter of an hour to prepare some kind of dramatic presentation, using props and clothing found anywhere in the house. This could have involved telling a story in the style of an opera, using music and words made up on the spot. This suited most of the people attending the event and was in many ways an excuse to show off. The older relatives would normally just watch but some were persuaded to take part.

One photograph from that era sums up the style of humour developed through Neil's group exercises at his parties. Neil was happy to let people search through his house to find suitable props for any dramatic representation required, and our picture shows my Uncle Stanley who would have been in his eighties, dressed up in a blanket, with a scarf round his head that made him look like an Old Testament prophet. Alan, seen to his left, had acquired a blanket as well, and something that looked like a copper coloured wig. On the left is a face I do not recognise, again wrapped up in a blanket, but holding a lighted candle.

This party was not a one-off and Neil ran them over a period of over twenty years, each year coming up with some suitably daft ideas. Another photograph from that era is more revealing in what it says about Alan's wife, Valerie. Alan and his son Stephen are playing a duet on the piano, with Alan contributing a large number of wrong notes. In the background is Valerie sitting at one of the tables, looking completely bored.

I still have the notes I made for one of Neil's party games and my presentation brief said:

'Ladies and Gentlemen, we would like to present from the Key Stage 1 history course, a really dramatic version of the French Revolution and what happened

afterwards. Please take pity on the cast. They are all out of work, untalented has-beens. In case it is not obvious, you should hear a rap or two, a modern ballet and a pop song from the 60s.'

One of my contributions was the rap, part of which went something like this:

'Let me tell you about revolution.

Problem in France, they wanted a solution.

Marie Antoinette said 'Let them have cake,'

They wanted bread, she made a mistake.

So they cut off her head, spilled a lot of blood,

Lots of death and violence, the scene wasn't good.'

Somehow or other we had to tie up the rap, perform a ballet, with me improvising something on the piano and finally bursting into the ABBA song 'Waterloo', so yes, there was a connection. It may seem a little self-indulgent to take you through this total claptrap, but it does give you some insight into Neil's weird and wonderful games, and the amazing atmosphere he was able to create on these big family occasions. After a buffet and a few more drinks, older relatives would drift off home and the younger ones would repair to the Mags, frequently patronised by Neil and myself over the years.

Alan's interest in music did not match that of Neil and me, but he was prepared to give it a go, which was a good example of his positive approach to life. Like the rest of us he had piano lessons, in his case from Miss Frizzell, who had also taught Neil, and he got about as far as knocking out some rough versions of simple Beethoven sonatas. But he did not take it further and in later life could only

remember one piece, indeed something by Beethoven. Alan also learned violin from Charlie Cannon, at Wallasey Grammar School, but his interest in sport meant that his violin progress was limited. However, as a significant move in terms of my own musical tastes, Alan acquired an interest in modern jazz, partly because the school, perhaps unusually for a school at that time, had a jazz club, where boys used to gather together to listen to records. The report in the school magazine of that year says:

We have had a successful year: the initial surprise with which we were received has given way to an unquestioning acceptance of our existence. We regard this as just recognition of our position as the devotees of a serious art form.

Colin Smith, a friend of Alan's, was very much a traditional jazz fan, at the time of the revival of this form of music in Britain. Another official in the jazz club, Dave Jarrett, helped to introduce Alan to the music of Dave Brubeck and Gerry Mulligan, and this, in turn, influenced me, on the basis that what an elder brother does often has a major impact on the developing tastes of a younger brother. In the same way, although Neil retained his strong interest in classical music, he also enjoyed jazz piano music, notably George Shearing and Dave Brubeck, and this also helped to develop my taste for this sort of music. The fact that we had 78 RPM records of this music and a record player in the house all helped to push me in this direction. Although, as mentioned earlier, it was my father's collection of Duke Ellington records which really made me aware of the possibilities of jazz.

As I have already mentioned, perhaps Alan's most memorable musical contribution was on a tea chest bass with our 1950s Skiffle group, The Hi Hats. As for his musical tastes, I think they were fairly broad, and I know that he named his first house 'Karelia' after a piece of music by Sibelius. I have always suspected that he used that music as a backcloth to his early romantic activities with Valerie.

(In the extended memoir, the next chapter explores my wider interest in music, especially jazz. I also discuss my musical development in later life and offer some thoughts on appreciation of my kind of music.)

Chapter 9 – Sport.

It all started with football, but that sport, for which I had very little talent, has not dominated my sporting life; although it continues as an interest shared with family and others, which one can dip into every now and then. Spending much of my time on Merseyside, it has always been useful to keep up to date with the local football scene, if only to establish common ground with the people one meets at work or in society at large. It has enabled me to discuss the relative merits of local sides, especially Liverpool F.C., with my grandsons who, as I write, are often to be seen clad in the Anfield strip. Whilst I have never been a tribal football follower and have only seen a handful of first-class matches, nevertheless, I have no problem in understanding the zeal for football in a place like Merseyside.

One of my abiding family memories is going with my father to organise and watch the 'old boys' football team. This refers to the old boys of what was then Wallasey Grammar School - an institution which had a strong impact on our family as my father, my two brothers, and I, all attended this school. My father's job was to take the ball and the shirts down to the pitch where the players changed in a rusty corrugated iron hut. We then watched the game, often played in a damp twilight afternoon as the days shortened in the run up to Christmas. There is something about the smell of male sweat, muddy boots and the tang of leather and dubbin, which always draws me back to those times. Dubbin is a smelly and greasy concoction which you smear on your football boots to make them completely waterproof. This was especially useful for my father's teams because they played at Moreton, an area which was basically marshland, if not actual sea, until a few centuries ago.

Wallasey, where we lived, had an original name of 'Wealas-ey' or island of Welshmen or strangers, because, at high tide, Wallasey was cut off from the rest of the Wirral by the sea. Residents of this area were regarded with fear by people at the time, a feeling which may still remain to this day, especially around throwing out time in Wallasey Village.

The other routine, which I fondly remember, was going home on the Saturday afternoon after the football match to sit by the fire, drinking tea and having a piece of hot buttered toast, whilst listening to the football results on the radio. Even now, when I hear the football results from whatever source, quite often from a television set these days, it is easy to lurch back decades to that comfortable feeling sitting in our morning room in front of a blazing fire.

BBC Sports Announcer:

Liverpool 3 Portsmouth 4

Port Vale 7 Chester 4

And the famous Scottish result:

Forfar 4 East Fyfe 5

In the days before Sky Television, all football fixtures took place at 3pm on a Saturday afternoon, so the league table was bang up to date and not influenced by other fixtures on the Sunday or Monday.

I have some recollection of playing football at my primary school and as the school had no pitches, we walked down Leasowe Road in Wallasey, to the corporation's school football facility, where we lunged about in the mud in our

attempts to kick the ball somewhere near the goal. I also played for our Wolf Cub team. We had two teams and I was predictably in the B team which used to be beaten quite often by double figures, especially by the A Team, in which Alan played.

The official sport at Wallasey Grammar School was Rugby Union, which I quite enjoyed, but was never more than a competent player. It was always a question of being second choice for the year team, never actually playing for the team, but I was able to have quite an enjoyable run about in the mud. The only other experience at Rugby was an annual game of rugby sevens between the prefects and possibly the staff, because I have lost all recollection of who the opponents were. The photograph shows seven players and the referee, all wearing the prefects' gowns over their rugby shirts and shorts. Standing just to the left of the group but not wearing rugby kit was the captain, Ron Baguley, side-lined through injury.

We also had regular sessions of Gym or PE (physical education). This involved a variety of activities including leaping over horses and doing exercises whilst suspended from the wall bars. It was also a good lesson in losing one's embarrassment about nakedness, because the tough old gym master, Bill Wise, insisted on the boys having to run naked from the changing room to the showers. Some boys were very bashful and found this difficult but after initial reluctance, I was able to join in the fun.

By this time, my father had bought a table tennis table for our attic, and we all took up the game with enthusiasm, including my parents. My Uncle Stan and my Auntie Isobel were both reasonable players, who also played tennis to a good standard. One particular event which I remember, is that we had a family table tennis match against students at the Malaysian Teacher Training College in Kirkby, near Liverpool. The Malaysians completely hammered us, but it was an early example of

the internationalism which my mother espoused and which influenced especially Alan and Neil. At the same time, my mother allowed the Young Liberals to meet in our lounge and they also became interested in table tennis. Apart from some social table tennis at university, and the existence of a rickety table at the Liverpool Victoria boathouse, for use when the water was too rough to launch a rowing boat, I left the sport of table tennis until much later on, when my involvement at the Halifax Table Tennis Centre featured strongly in the early years of my retirement.

Given that we were brought up on the coast in a seaside resort of sorts, New Brighton, invented in the 1920s to mirror the real Brighton in the south of England, swimming has never been far away from any kind of athletic activity for me. However, as a performer in a competitive environment, that has never been my strength, but all three sons learned to swim and I was taught by my school when aged around ten. A few years earlier I had a brief frightening episode at the Guinea Gap Pool in Wallasey, when I used to play in the deep end without being able to swim, supporting myself by holding on to the side. One day I missed my hold and sank to the bottom. They say that if you sink three times, then that is it. On the second disappearance, a very kind swimmer managed to pull me out. This put me off swimming for a short time, but I realised how important it was to be able to swim, so I was quite happy when the school organised some lessons. Gliding for a few feet became almost swimming for a short distance, which was soon followed by the ability to swim a breadth of the pool, unaided. I received a special certificate for this achievement, but I was not happy until I could swim a length of the pool, about twenty five yards. From then on there was no stopping me and I was able to reel off lengths of the pool without difficulty. Endurance has never been a problem with me but speed was not my forte and even now, as a swimming pensioner, I am easily

overtaken by most occupants of the pool, unless of course they are extremely ancient or lacking key limbs. But for swimmers at my end of the spectrum, staying afloat is the main objective, indeed as it has been for other aspects of my life.

Both my brothers were reasonable swimmers but it was not a major activity for them. In the case of Neil, it was particularly important because of his sport of rowing, and although he never had to rescue himself from a sinking boat, he enjoyed a certain amount of social swimming in the rivers of England after being knocked out in the early rounds of rowing events.

The lure of water remained a key theme in my life and I have had dips in Windermere, Derwentwater, Elterwater (in the Lake District), in the River Dee, in the River Thames, in the Rhine, in the Andaman Sea, and also in Lake Geneva. There is something about swimming in natural water which is very appealing, which you do not quite get in a swimming pool, especially one which has been heavily dosed with chlorine.

Returning to football, two events which gave me a special insight were occasions when I met players from both Liverpool and Everton football clubs. As a keen member of Liverpool Victoria Rowing club in the 1960s, I was present when a new boat paid for by a wealthy member of the Holt family (behind the Blue Funnel line), was launched. We decided to call the boat 'Ee Aye Addio' which was and possibly still is a major chant at Liverpool football ground, as in 'Ee Aye Addio, we're going to win the cup,' or something like that. Neil, who was captain of the club at that time, wrote to Bill Shankly, the iconic Liverpool manager and asked if he or some members of the team could come over and help launch the new boat. Shankly did not appear, but the captain, Ron Yeats, the famous forward, Ian St John (later a

sports TV presenter with Jimmy Greaves: 'Saint and Greavsey') and another player, Ian Ross, arrived at the rowing club and helped to launch the new boat.

Yeats, a towering Scottish player, renowned for marshalling the central defence of some world-beating Liverpool sides, commented:

'You guys must have to be very fit to row a boat like this,' as he fingered the spanking new boat sitting on trestles, awaiting the official launch.

'Yes, we train almost every day, with circuit training, oh, and some weight training to build up our muscles,' I replied.

'And alcohol and smoking?' asked Yeats.

'Well, some beer, you understand, for team building,' I added.

'You train a lot harder than we do,' said Yeats.

They were very approachable, and we were surprised to find that their training regime was nowhere near as severe as our own. It was a frequent event in those days for famous footballers to be photographed coming out of clubs in the small hours of the morning, slightly the worse for wear. Things may have changed, but those events still happen. So, meeting these famous players has always given me a certain amount of street credibility amongst football fans. The same happened with Everton Football Club, because our dance band was hired to play at the wedding of the captain, Brian Labone, an England international centre half. Our drummer, Tony Crofts, was friendly with Brian's fiancé, a former beauty queen, so we obtained the gig at the Victoria Hotel, New Brighton, which is now a block of flats. There we met players like Gordon West, a top goalkeeper, plus Brian Harris, Labone himself, and his glamorous new wife. The experiences with these two famous groups of players have put me in a position where, unusually, I tend to support both clubs and there was a time in the sixties when both clubs performed extremely well. However, most

fans in the area, and indeed elsewhere, are fiercely tribal and cannot understand somebody having a balanced view.

After my mediocre performance on the rugby field at my grammar school, I had a similar lack of success with cricket. There was no coaching, so players with no natural ability spent the time fielding on the boundary, or appearing briefly at the crease as a batsman, only to be bowled out straight away. This was no way to spend my Wednesday afternoon, and eventually I overcame a certain reluctance and joined the school boat club. To explain that reluctance, rowing was really Neil's sport, at which he had excelled, and as the youngest member of the family I did not wish to purely follow in his footsteps. However, the logic soon became unassailable. If I carried on playing cricket, I knew I would spend most of my time in the long grass, fielding the occasional ball. I knew that rowing would give me a full afternoon's activities and, of course, I quite liked boats and water anyway. So, after starting in a very heavy boat, known as a tub, I graduated to four-oared rowing, and later to full eights. For someone without a natural gift for the sport, and indeed lacking the sheer bulk for top-level rowing, I enjoyed a relatively successful career as a rower, plus some responsibility in leadership roles, which probably helped in my development as much as any academic achievements.

It was Neil who led the way in the sport of rowing and at the age of fourteen or fifteen, he joined the school boat club, which used to practice on a large area of dock in Birkenhead, the West Float. The school used the facilities of the Liverpool Victoria Rowing Club. Although based in Birkenhead, the founders of the club preferred to put a Liverpool label on the club, so that its location would be known as crews travelled to various regattas in England. Neil rapidly progressed in the rowing world and in his final year at school (1952/3), was made Captain of the Boat club. It was in

1953 that the school four won a very prestigious event at Marlow Regatta, one of the leading regattas in the country. This success was chronicled in Maurice Eggleshaw's *The History of Wallasey Grammar School 1595 to 1995*. He wrote that:

The boat club had another successful season with aplomb in winning the Public Schools' Fours at Marlow Regatta, a success they had been seeking since 1926.

The next page shows the draw of the event, peppered with major public schools. On the way to winning, the crew beat Cheltenham College, Abingdon School, King's School Worcester, and, in the final, Eastbourne College by three feet. The book also shows a photograph taken after Neil's successful year as captain of the school club.

Just in passing, Eggleshaw was Deputy Head of the school during my time there, and seemed to take especial delight in caning me once for a very minor offence. I always had slight doubts about this person. The school has gone through a number of incarnations and no doubt Eggleshaw, wherever he is now, would be less than pleased about its latest title, 'Kingsway Academy,' which is not very exciting for an institution founded in 1595, when it was called The Henry Meoles School. My name appears once in this book as captain of the boat club 1959-60, and Neil's name appears as captain 1952-53. Neil contributed to an official history of the school boat club, by this time called the Henry Meoles School Boat Club, when the school reverted to its original name for a while. He describes the race for the fours event at Marlow Regatta, mentioned by Eggleshaw:

In the final we met Eastbourne and never more than half the length of or even down, we raced with everything we knew, and with the immense sense of vocation and tradition. Crossing the line with 3 feet to spare was pure joy. So was ringing at the headmaster! Not aware of procedures... I awarded full school colours to the whole crew, while still recovering our breath just past the finishing line.'

Neil's decision to award all school colours to his crew, which was not really in his remit, is perhaps typical of the man, never afraid of authority and always willing to make decisions.

Neil's rowing background and his obvious confidence, led to a place at Jesus College, Cambridge, where again he was active in rowing circles, although he lacked the height and sheer physical bulk to represent Cambridge in the Boat Race. After he left university, Neil's sporting career followed two routes. As a rower, Neil performed successfully for the Liverpool Victoria Rowing Club, quite often in the coxless fours, where he won a number of events and also in eights and in pairs. Like myself, Neil did not have the stature to get anywhere near international level, but he performed effectively at provincial level, picking up a number of pots, and by pots I mean the typical pewter tankards which were awarded for winning rowing events at that time. It meant that those same tankards could be christened in the pub or in the beer tent after the regatta, always a memorable and enjoyable experience.

The second route for Neil's interest in rowing was his progress through the ranks of officialdom. He rapidly became Captain of Liverpool Victoria Rowing Club, and ushered in a period of great success, with the club winning many events up and down the country, in eights and fours. He began to make contacts in the rowing

world at senior level, and I remember in the 1980s he invited the Olympic rower, Sir Steve Redgrave, to help launch a boat for the school rowing club.

He was elected as the representative for North West on the Amateur Rowing Association National Council. He qualified as an international umpire, and was a member of a number of committees. He then put himself forward as a candidate for President of the Amateur Rowing Association, in direct opposition to a former international oarsman and old Etonian, whom Neil felt was not pushing rowing in the right direction. After a bit of skulduggery on the council, Neil was elected. He became President of the ARA in 1985 and continued until 1994. It is certain that he helped to modernise the sport to make it fit for its successful period of international competition, and at local level led the project to build a new boathouse for the Victoria.

Of all the siblings, Alan was the one with a degree of natural ability. He was a star footballer in the local Wolf Cub side and played at primary school. On moving to Wallasey Grammar School, he represented all his year groups at rugby and athletics. He won the school half mile championship, and the low hurdles, and represented Cheshire in the national schools championship in the hurdles. I should explain that the low hurdles was a genuine event for young people, which involved a distance of around 200 yards, with a lower level hurdle as opposed to the sprint hurdles which involved the full height of the hurdle. I think those distinctions have disappeared these days.

He won his school colours for rugby and athletics. At Hull University, he played some rugby, and on commencing employment after leaving university, he joined a local club and carried on playing right through to the age of sixty, when events conspired to make him give up the game. Some photographs show Alan playing in a

local Rugby match in his late fifties. When most rugby players will have given up in their thirties or forties, Alan insisted on carrying on and managed to avoid injury. I recall him telling me that the rules were slightly different and that rugby players were not allowed to actually kill each other, but looking at the pictures, there was a great deal of aggressive activity including what looked like a successful tackle, which Alan, as expected, had inflicted on a member of the opposing team.

Even when he was not playing rugby, Alan was extremely energetic, and in 1995, he completed the coast-to-coast walk from St. Bees on the west coast of Cumbria, right across to Robin Hood's Bay on the east coast of Yorkshire, walking from the Irish Sea to the North Sea. A journey of hundred and ninety miles, completed over a nine day period, with overnight stays in pubs and bed-and-breakfast places. I even have a scrapbook of the event, and Alan is shown with a companion, I assume one of his friends from the rugby club. There are various photographs of very attractive parts of the Lake District and the Yorkshire Dales, and major celebrations conducted at Robin Hood's Bay with the North Sea in the background. The final page is typical of Alan's sense of humour because in the scrapbook he has the packaging for a product called 'Blister Relief.'

It would be idle to speculate on Alan's potential if he had pursued sport at a higher level. Having taken part in the English schools national championship as an athlete, that would have been a possible route, but I think he preferred the camaraderie of rugby and, after university, the demands of work and family and an increasing interest in local politics would probably have limited his athletic achievements

Of all the brothers, he was the one with the natural talent, especially as a runner, and also as a ball player. Did he take it as far as he could have done? Probably not,

but he had other priorities. He would have accepted that his interest in sport and politics was encouraged by his mother, and indeed by his father. I know that my mother played hockey at school and later played tennis, sometimes as a doubles partnership with my father. In later life, she took up golf and I know from my own personal experience that she felt that sport was a good thing for all sorts of reasons, for exercise, for health, and for the development of social skills.

Having encouraged her first two sons and her daughter to take part in sport, it was predictable that both my parents would encourage me to become active, and given Neil's success and, indeed, the fact that my father did some rowing at school, they both encouraged me to join the school boat club. Progress is always shaky for new exponents of the sport, but I made reasonable progress and found that I had a degree of natural stamina.

There was something about water which attracted me to this sport and even before I took up rowing, we used to visit the docks to look at ships, another interest of mine, and to have a look at the sort of people who were on the big cargo boats moored in the dock. This was my first contact with people from different cultures and quite often the crews of the freighters moored in the Birkenhead dock were Chinese or Indian. Sometimes members of these crews would go for a walk in the neighbourhood and, again, this was a new experience for people at a time when parts of the North West of England were in no way multicultural. Even now, the Wirral is quite isolated in terms of ethnic groups, whereas Liverpool always had a mix, going back to the well-established Chinese community through to the Afro-Caribbean presence in the Toxteth area. The famous Toxteth riots in the 1980s took place against difficult race relations, exacerbated by poverty, poor housing, and unemployment. Cross-referencing to the section of this memoir on education, I can

remind the reader that I worked for a short time in the Toxteth area, as part of my brief teaching career. It is fair to say that under various regeneration schemes, Toxteth is not the wasteland that it appeared to be in the 1980s.

To return to the sporting arena, or in my case, the West Float, and after a couple of years of rowing, I was in the school first eight. Under a very capable leader and oarsman, David Knowles, we achieved a degree of success, especially in winning the Clinker Pennant, at the North of England Head of the River Race at Chester (a long distance race when crews set off over a four mile course at twenty second intervals and are timed). I should explain that back in the fifties, there were separate categories for a lighter racing craft known as shell boats, and the heavier clinker boats. We did well to win this division and in doing so defeated a number of crews using shell craft. There is an early example of my interest in writing in the school magazine dated March 1959, when I was secretary of the boat club, and with no racing results to talk about at that time I decided to write something a little bit more imaginative and flowing. You could call it an early example of creative non-fiction. I started: *Oarsmen are a tough race -- or is rowing a mild form of insanity?* I then mentioned the tough training regime involving long trips on the River Dee. The article continued:

An excursion to near Farndon¹ over half-term cast further doubts on the sanity of the oarsman, when equipped in the manner of a picnic party, the boat surged up river, breaking the surface of the water into foaming waves and glistening ripples. About three miles above the Iron Bridge, the hungry cries of the crew prevailed upon the

¹ Farndon, an attractive, historic village on the River Dee, seven or eight miles above Chester.

captain's Herculean desire for further mileage, and the boat was beached with the help of one of the oarsman, who leaped nimbly into the mud and skilfully guided the boat to anchorage. After lunch, the crew proceeded upstream to point where the boat was again beached -- this time to empty the water. Here it was decided that Farndon would have to wait for another day, as the eight weary oarsmen began the long row home. It was dusk as the crew thankfully laid the boat to rest on the racks.

The same school first eight, captained by David Knowles, managed to steal a big tin of Frankfurter sausages at a fair in Marlow on Thames. This seemed to present a challenge, as a couple of boys distracted the owner, while another boy managed to hide the can under his stripy school jacket. The sausages were then consumed one by one, when somebody was able to open the can with what could have been a Swiss army knife. My recollection is that the crew was encouraged in this appalling act of theft by a former pupil and top oarsman, who ended up as Vice-Chancellor at a major new university (John Stoddart, first VC of Sheffield Hallam University).

In my final year at school, I was appointed Captain of the School Boat Club, not because I was seen as being amongst the strongest oarsman, but probably because I was viewed as being slightly more responsible than the rest of the gang. School and university sports people do not have a reputation for good behaviour, especially on visits to take part in other events, and I once had to stop some fellow members of the crew from throwing light bulbs out of the train on one of our regular trips to Chester to practice on the River Dee.

In my collection of papers, I have a programme for the Wallasey Grammar School Boat Club Annual Supper 17th of December 1959 which was held in the dining hall. The menu, if you are interested, was Hot Pot, Christmas pudding, and soft drinks. The programme shows that the headmaster, the distinguished Mr FL Alan, would welcome the guests, the teacher in charge of rowing, Mr GG Gibbons, would present his report of the year's activities and the captain, I, would speak on next year's prospects. For the exciting part of the evening, we would then move to the library for a film show, and coffee and cakes. On the back of the programme it states 'printed at the Wallasey Grammar School Press', this being a specialty at the school, where a seemingly elderly teacher, Mr Dugdale, would train up a small group of ink-stained boys to learn about the dark arts of printing. It is doubtful whether any schools today, in the digital age, would have such a facility, but there is no doubt that the school press contributed greatly to the life of the school at that time.

As for my success in the role, I derived great benefit from the work done by my predecessor, and a core of four experienced rowers remained in the crew, supplemented by an additional four new arrivals who had shown great promise in their first year of the sport. We more or less matched the previous year's standards in the winter eight event, we won an event for fours and finished off the season winning a school eights event at Lancaster Regatta.

It would be wrong if I conveyed the impression that rowing was a completely enjoyable experience, because in order to achieve any kind of standard in the summer, one had to train very hard in the winter. There were times when I was rowing at Chester through a snowstorm when I would say to myself 'what am I doing out here, in the middle of winter with frozen fingers and icicles on my nose?' But somehow the icy experience was forgotten after a warm shower and a hot cup of tea

in the boat house afterwards. The right phrase to use would be 'character building', something appreciated as a piece of nostalgia but less so at the time.

The fours event win was at Bewdley Regatta on the River Severn, and this was significant to me because I was able to win my first event at an open regatta, at a level known as 'maidens' at the time, as in maiden voyage. My mother was remarkably supportive with this event and I remember she took the whole crew and the oars (on the roof rack) in our family car, the Triumph Mayflower. We had to win five rounds to pick up the trophy. My mother gradually became more excited on the bank of the river, encouraging us and shouting 'Come on Wallasey', as the crew sweated to victory in each of its races. After a celebratory drink of pop, we drove back to Wallasey, excited and exhausted. For my mother, it reflected all her values and aims for her children, which were that young people should strive for success across the board, academically, culturally and physically

(In the extended memoir, the next chapters explore sporting interests after leaving school, education after leaving school, family career developments in later life, my short spell in China, the family's political activities, the role of transport, especially cars in our family, the open air and some more examples of my written work.)

Chapter 10 – Period of Turmoil

It is a truism to say that death affects all families at some time or other, but when it happens, none of us are really prepared for it. After the deaths of our grandparents, in the 1950s and 60s, our lives continued without obvious interruption, although we lost the odd uncle and distant cousin. I attended one or two funerals, but felt no real emotion. To be fair, the Methodist Church in Wallasey offered a much more personal style than others I have attended, where sometimes the name of the deceased was not even mentioned. I am reminded of the funeral I attended, as a representative of the Lever Brothers Personnel Department, when an important senior shop steward, Jack Jones, had died. The funeral took place in a local Roman Catholic Church during the 1970s and name of the deceased was not mentioned once. It could have been anyone.

Moving into the late eighties, our family seemed to enter a more dramatic period, when our vulnerability as human beings came to the fore. I knew there was something wrong when I received a telephone call from my brother Neil in 1989. I was working at Carlett Park College of Further Education on the Wirral, and was not in the habit of receiving personal telephone calls from family members, this being well before email, mobile phones or texts.

‘It’s Neil,’ he said. ‘I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news for you. Your father has died on the golf course.’

‘Why, what happened?’ I asked.

‘Apparently he collapsed after hitting a very good second shot to the green, and his friends, including Uncle Stan, turned round to applaud him and found that he had

collapsed. They pretty soon realised that he had died and they called an ambulance which drove across the golf course.'

'I'll come home straight away,' I said, remembering that an ambulance had made a similar journey three or so decades earlier, when a non-fatal heart attack had prematurely terminated an enjoyable round for my father.

My father was eighty-three when he died, not too bad when one considers his heart history. I had no classes that afternoon and I joined Neil at my parents' bungalow. I found that my mother, although shocked, was very calm and philosophical.

'I do feel cheated,' she said, 'I thought we had a few more years together.'

I returned to the college for a scheduled evening class and I remember that it proceeded as a normal lecture. Perhaps the truth had not sunk in, or did the whole thing show tremendous calmness after a shock, or even a lack of concern?

From then on, it was a question of Neil and me dealing with all the routine issues following a death. Alan was able to come over from Congleton, in mid-Cheshire, and once we had sorted out the funeral, Rosemary flew in from Germany. The funeral followed a trend which the local Methodist church had been developing, namely having the cremation before the church service. This meant that the really harrowing part of the exercise was dealt with by a small group of relatives, to be followed by the rather more uplifting church service, attended by a larger group of people. My father was not especially religious, so he would not have had strong views on this funeral and the way it was organised would have pleased my mother.

I remember experiencing a very strange sensation at the wake which took place at the Old Wallaseyans' Club, a favourite hunting ground of my father, where he would attend a football meeting, have a game of snooker and possibly down a half a

pint of Guinness. Having downed a pint or two of William Younger's Bitter myself, it suddenly occurred to me that someone who would enjoy this event was missing. I realised who that person was. It was my father and the irony of him not being there for one of the best parties of his life, with all his friends and family, was not lost on me. With all the subsequent funerals that I have attended, the same thought has occurred to me and the idea developed in my mind that really this sort of celebration should take place while the protagonists are still alive.

No one could say that this was an exceptional death. My father was eighty three and had lived a full and active life. The response from the family was one of obvious sadness, but we accepted the situation and pulled together, supporting my mother and dealing with the business of death certificates, funerals and the will. The funeral procession went past the Golf Club en route to the crematorium, and the driver slowed down as he passed the first green. A nice touch, I thought, as I sat in a large, black, leather-seated limousine, driving behind the hearse. My mother came to terms with his death remarkably quickly, not because she was glad to see him go, but more specifically as a product of her very positive nature.

She had been instrumental in persuading my father that they should move into a bungalow, as he would have been quite happy to stay in the original house, knowing that any move would force him to tidy the garage, which contained many years of tools, paint, bricks, screws, and odd plumbing components. In their days as a building business, my father and his partner used to have a building which operated as a joiners' shop, where an eighty year old George Varley used to fashion staircases and roof trusses. They also stored heaps of materials, copper pipes, nails, sacks of cement, pick axes, sheets of plywood, all demonstrating the unwillingness of builders to ditch any item which might have some conceivable value at some time

in the future. When they wound up the business in the 1970s, most of those items seemed to end up in my parents' garage and it was the job of the brothers to dispose of them when the house was sold, and when my parents moved into their attractive bungalow. I am sure my mother had in mind that they would live there for many more years to come, but after only a few years in the bungalow, my father had taken his last swing on the golf course.

My mother carried on living in a very positive way for the next four years. Part of this time coincided with a period when I was effectively unemployed. I became disenchanted with Further Education around 1990, because there was much more emphasis on paperwork, on reaching targets and taking on more duties. The 'golden age' of Further Education was passing and a new super-keen head of department was starting to put pressure on me and I suddenly thought, at my age (around 49), I don't want to be told off by anyone, and without really planning the exercise, I resigned with some vague aim of seeking self-employment as a management consultant.

I had read about very large sums being earned by consultants and felt that I could do the same, dreaming about a gleaming BMW, a Rolex watch and slick Armani suits. I found, however, that consultants in the 'soft skills' areas like human resource management and communications were very thick on the ground. If I could have offered practical and technical skills, such as information technology, or even plumbing, then I believe the work would have been there. I did make some kind of effort to establish myself in this field, and commissioned special designs for my business card, my headed notepaper and my booklet. I even posed in my mid-price suit against the banks of the River Mersey, to try to create a suave and nonchalant look. But despite my so-called expertise in marketing, I shied away from cold calls

and knocking on doors. So my dreams of earning big money as consultant and driving a spanking new BMW rather faded.

There were some assignments, but in general I had plenty of time on my hands, which meant I was able to spend time with my mother. This quite often involved driving her in her blue Mazda to Kwik Save for her shopping, and then having lunch with her, quite often cold meat from the weekend joint or some soup. Sometimes it was a home-made soup, using the chicken carcass or remains of the lamb joint, and at other times she would open a packet of Bachelors 'Cuppa Soup'. This would be served with an obligatory round of toast. Even today, a bowl of soup seems to me incomplete without a piece of toast, demonstrating the enormous nostalgic power of food.

The main room in my mother's bungalow was a large rectangular lounge, complete with settee, dining table, 'Parker Knoll' chairs, my father's old record cabinet, and his 1970s hi-fi. The family piano dominated one of the walls, and my mother was quite happy for me to play some jazz pieces while she was warming the soup. She would occasionally play a piece herself, more often than not some Mendelssohn or Chopin and, again, she kept her hand in, not being willing to slow down in old age.

By this time, my mother's previous retinue of Mr and Mrs Burrell had passed on, and my mother had secured the services of a very ancient and strangely dumpy lady, Mrs Jones. When she needed a home help she always knew where to find them, and I am aware that details of potential home helps were jealously guarded amongst my mother's circle of friends, but could be passed on to the favoured few. Mrs Jones, who was probably about five years older than my mother, seemed to have phenomenal energy and was constantly Hoovering or polishing like a demented

mole, and then my mother would give her a lift home, in the Mazda, to her council flat in Seacombe. Mrs Jones had no real conversation beyond a few grunts, so I developed no insight into her personality, but she could certainly work!

Although it was not planned that way, it was a rewarding period of time because I was able to enjoy my mother's company at a time when she was in excellent health. She enjoyed seeing our children, who at that time were making good progress in terms of their education. These were Richard and Judy, a product of my marriage to Lesley in 1970. As explained earlier, details of my wife and family have deliberately been played down in this memoir, to avoid upsetting anyone, and because they are not part of the main narrative.

In 1992, at the age of eighty five, my mother caught what she thought was a cold and felt quite unwell. I think she had some premonition about the future because she felt that this was not a normal cold and that she felt quite weak. I was round at her bungalow one Sunday afternoon when, having returned to her room from the toilet, I could not get her back into bed; she seemed to have collapsed half in and half out of the bed. I was not quite sure what to do, whether to move her into her bed or to phone the doctor. In the end I phoned the doctor, who came round and announced that she seemed to have some kind of stroke. However, within half an hour, Dr Tanden, my mother's GP for many years, came out into the hall way and said, 'I'm sorry to say that your mother has passed away. I'll phone the hospital for you.'

In a way, I wish I could say that I was shocked into numbness and tears, but I remained calm and in control. Things needed to be done and people needed to be told. My sadness was part of a feeling that, with luck, she could have lived a few years longer, in particular, to enjoy her grandchildren.

After the doctor had left, and before the men from the hospital arrived with a body bag, I walked into my mother's bedroom to say goodbye. I touched her hand briefly and left the room. I cannot say that I felt a great sense of shock or even grief, and that may reflect the weakness in my personality, but given that she had lived to the age of eighty five, having retained all her intellectual faculties, and not having gone through a long drawn-out and painful illness, I suppose I felt some relief. How are you supposed to feel in the circumstances? There is no set of rules and not much in the way of previous experience to draw upon.

I have to say that our family again pulled together in a positive way to deal with the aftermath of her death. Rosemary flew back from Germany, Neil immediately took charge, and Alan contributed his practical and humorous good sense. It may sound a bit prosaic, but under the stress of the occasion people still need to eat, and I was dispatched off to the fish and chip shop for large portions of the same, as we started to plan the funeral and all activities involved in winding up her estate. You can picture the four of us energetically tucking into massive pieces of battered fish and mountains of chips, smothered with Heinz Tomato Ketchup, as we discussed details of the funeral service.

This is something which is done in millions of families every year and I suppose there was nothing exceptional about the process we dealt with, except to highlight the fact that we did enjoy a basic unity in our family group, which might not be the case with every family. Given that our parents had lived happy and healthy lives right through to their eighties, as a family we were able to accept their deaths philosophically. They had not required long-term care and had not suffered any diminution of their intellectual faculties. In the months afterwards, you could almost

hear the sighs of relief that this stage of our lives had passed, sadly but peacefully. But the next few years were to see a major disruption in that sense of peace.

In the opening chapter to this memoir, I tried to describe a key event which had a major influence on all members of the family. The sudden suicide of Alan's wife Valerie effectively changed the dynamic and raised many questions, and it is now time to pick up those issues.

I had never been close to my sister-in-law, Valerie, but I accepted that she had been his choice as a partner and that it was not really my concern. Considering that Alan was a most outward-going person and very active in his community, especially through the Liberal party, Valerie seemed quiet and withdrawn. This was in total contrast to a string of lively and attractive girlfriends he had knocked around with whilst at school and at university, but he had made that choice, they produced two children and had been married for many years.

Over the years, we saw a certain amount of Alan and his family but learnt very little about Valerie. She seemed very ill at ease in our rather lively family environment. Later, we heard that she hated these visits and tried to avoid them. It may well be that she found the whole atmosphere somewhat intimidating, given that the rest of the family were all reasonably confident and outspoken. She must have felt crushed by the experience and, as later events proved, her deep quietness cloaked something more serious.

Within a few months of Valerie's funeral, Alan decided to inform his immediate family that, yes, there was another person involved. After his long career in the computer industry, Alan had retrained in order to teach in a further education establishment. At the end of the one-year course, he was able to secure an

appointment at a local college and this was where he made contact with a female colleague and a relationship developed from there. Neil had pressed Alan on a number of occasions.

‘No, there is no one else,’ Alan replied. ‘Things just became too difficult, and I’m not proud of what happened, but, no, there is no other woman.’

Neil was particularly concerned that Alan had not made this clear from the start but, in my judgement, his decision was quite understandable. It was bad enough dealing with Valerie’s suicide and its aftermath, without throwing in the other information about a long-standing affair. Neil felt that Alan had lied to him, but I was always sympathetic. In my view, the question of ‘another woman’ was irrelevant. I had rather assumed that Alan had already established a relationship while Valerie was still alive, but felt it was not my place to dig into this. For someone used to operating within the promiscuous gay scene, I felt that Neil had no grounds to quiz Alan.

In the event, when we first met Alan’s new partner, a warm relationship was swiftly established. We met for a drink at the Mags pub, in New Brighton, and the ice was broken quickly. After Neil had met her, I think he warmed to her and the issue of Alan’s lying disappeared.

Late in 1999, we were invited to a special celebration at Alan’s house for his sixtieth birthday. I felt that the right opportunity had arisen to inject some of my personal humour into the event. This took the form of a ‘This is Your Life’ type of presentation, although, I did not go so far as to line-up characters to take part, and you will observe a degree of typical sibling mick taking. These were some of, for want of a better word, the highlights of my presentation:

'Tonight we have assembled hundreds of faces from your past to pay tribute to a man whose contrasting hairstyles - very much from the Worzel Gummidge school of hair architecture - have been followed avidly by generations of style slaves, and who was the only boy at Wallasey Grammar School who wore shorts throughout his school career, even during his first week at University.'

I continued:

'Today, we salute the campaigning councillor, the ruthless rugger bugger, the precise programmer, the lyrical lecturer, the jokey jogger, the sophisticated style guru, yes, the sixty-year-old living legend, the man whose brain is even bigger than the memory of a Sinclair Spectrum computer, it's that same old, lovable, frustrating Alan, the worst violin player in the world.'

I commented on Alan's childhood and being evacuated to Shropshire, where, of course I was born, and moving onto his education, I continued:

'Even at five years old, Alan astounded his teachers by building his own computer out of Craven 'A' packets, Swan Vesta matchboxes, a couple of Ovaltine tins, four electric bands, a piece of knicker elastic, a safety pin and a mouse's brain.'

I am afraid there is more of this, and for the sake of brevity, I will jump to his period of teaching:

'His style of teaching was inspirational and students learned to hang onto his memorable words. His key, starting advice to people wanting to get into the complex world of information technology was: 'Plug it in and switch it on!' Students were to remember these words in moments of crisis in the future, recalling the wisdom, the insight and sheer poetry.'

This piece of insulting doggerel went down reasonably well, probably because of the amount of alcohol that had been consumed; the evening seemed to be a

success. However, there was one element of uncertainty, because before the party we had heard that Alan was experiencing difficulty in swallowing and could not stop hiccupping. He had gone to his doctor who had organised some tests, so there was a question mark over his health, but at that time we had no idea what was to come. Rosemary went for a meal with Alan at around this time and there were clearly problems with swallowing and with his digestion.

A week or so later, concern turned into shock as Alan revealed that he was suffering from cancer of the oesophagus. We all knew that it was serious. Research on the internet showed that this cancer has a very low survival rate, and that after five years something like only five percent of patients are still alive. The positive part was that Alan was in good health generally and was physically fit. If you are fit enough to have it, the 'gold standard treatment' at the time for oesophageal cancer was complete removal of the oesophagus, otherwise known as the gullet, effectively the food pipe which takes food from the mouth to the stomach.

It is easy to criticise the health services, but Alan suffered unnecessary distress by an alarming waiting time for this procedure. Delay in dealing with cancer can only make things worse and, eventually, Alan had to use his contacts with the local press, based on his political role in the local council, to draw attention to the delay in achieving this operation. His picture appeared in the local paper and, eventually, an operation was planned. Even then, it had to take place in Liverpool, as opposed to mid-Cheshire where he lived.

The surgery took place at Alder Hey Hospital in Liverpool, and there can be no complaints about the skill of the surgeon and his staff. Quite often, patients with oesophageal cancer are quite elderly and are not able to cope with such a radical operation. For such a patient, the prognosis would be pretty bleak. In Alan's case, I

remember visiting him at Alder Hey Hospital the day after his operation. He was very uncomfortable but was able to communicate with us. The operation itself was a success and Alan swiftly recovered physically from the surgery. He was on his feet within a week, and was soon resuming his normal life. My guess is that he accepted his illness philosophically and just wanted to get into action again as soon as his recovery was in place.

We all hoped that he would be able to continue his energetic pace of life for many years. For the first twelve months he picked up his previous level of activity, as a local Liberal Democratic Councillor, as a sports person, and in terms of his new relationship. He had continental holidays and we saw photographs of him swimming in a lake under a hot French sun. We received a postcard from Cevennes, which read: 'A nice mixture of sun and sea, wine and food, village life and culture. Pompignon (Ann's village) is so laid back, it's just a joy to be here.' Ann owned a cottage in the south of France and the two of them had at least one holiday there; eating well and sampling the local wine. However, it was not to last. Within twelve months, Alan became aware of secondary growths in different parts of his body. At this point medical options had pretty well disappeared and he deteriorated rapidly.

I went to see him on the day he died (18 February 2002). He was suffering from what turned out to be a kind of pneumonia. He was in extreme discomfort but, typically, he was in bed at home, going through mail from his constituents. We were able to have a chat and catch up on things, and I left to go back home. Later that night, we had a phone call from his partner, to say that he had been taken to hospital and had passed away. It all seemed to happen remarkably quickly and it goes without saying that it was a major shock to all of us. In the event it seemed that the pneumonia or possibly an embolism on his lung had proved fatal, rather than the

cancer. However, it is clear that the cancer triggered these conditions. I suppose we have to be thankful that his death was mercifully speedy and that he did not have to go through a long period of decline. However, it all happened at great speed and, whilst I was able to treat the deaths of my parents calmly, Alan's death shocked me deeply. He had been, effectively, my closest friend for our early childhood and, in later years, he was always fun to be with: walks across the Howgills in North Yorkshire, pints in the Farmer's Arms at Muker, Sunday lunch with the full family, the list goes on; for him to be taken away at the age of sixty one made me angry, even resentful, then deeply sad, but with the hope that we would be able to cope, not knowing that the story was not over yet.

Chapter 11 – An Unexpected Arrival

In the lead-up to Alan's funeral, I received a telephone call from my sister,

Rosemary:

'Robin, I have some very startling news about Alan.'

'Go on,' I said, 'what's all this about?'

'You need to know that Alan had a relationship with a work colleague way back in the sixties, and there was a daughter, Katharine. She will be at the funeral. As will her Mother, Angela.'

For once, I was stunned into almost silence. 'That is completely amazing. How and when did you find out?'

Rosemary did not give me the answer at that time, but it later emerged that Alan's partner, Ann, had supplied this key piece of news. 'It's complicated,' Rosemary added. 'Alan has been in touch with her, although he only relatively recently told her that he was her father. She saw him a couple of times just before he died, including at the hospital.'

When I heard this news, my feeling was that events like this did not take place in ordinary families, and were more suited to the novels of Thomas Hardy. The bones of the story are as follows.

Alan had joined the fledgling computer industry after leaving Hull University, with a mathematics degree. Companies in this field were coming together at that time to obtain economies of scale and to pool their technology. Alan joined the conglomeration 'English Electric Leo Marconi Computers', which had its origins in the Lions Café Company and the British electrical engineering industry. This later became ICT-International Computers and Tabulators, with a factory based in mid-

Cheshire. Round about that time he married Valerie, after meeting her at Hull, where she attended a teacher training college, whilst he was at the University. They married shortly after leaving Hull, and they purchased a bungalow in Congleton, Cheshire.

So here we have Alan, newly married and starting to make his name in a big multinational as a computer programmer, and yet, shortly after, he meets a colleague and becomes involved in an intense affair, about which we have very few details. She became pregnant and gave birth to a little girl. This information was kept secret from all corners of Alan's family. His wife, Valerie, as far as we can guess, never found out about the child, although we cannot be certain of that fact.

Round about the time of the birth, Alan accepted an overseas placement with ICT in Venezuela. It is possible to speculate that he engineered such a move to be out of the firing line when the birth took place. In the event, the placement did not work out and Alan and his family returned to the UK.

Even the new daughter only found out about her father towards the end of Alan's life. She knew that her mother had a lifelong 'friend of the family' who called in with birthday and Christmas presents. As a child growing up, she was not given any further information and accepted the 'old friend' explanation. What seems quite strange is that she did not suspect a family connection, because they were physically very similar, something we could see straight away. Katharine, the little girl in question, knew very little about her father when she was a child and she did not pursue the topic with her mother because of a sense that her mother would find it difficult to talk about it. But, from a very early age, Alan was a presence in her life. He had been visiting her from her birth, and when Katharine was old enough to have some understanding of these things, she just knew Alan as a friend of her mother's

from work and somebody who was involved with her in trade union work. He was not continuing his relationship with her mother, Angela, who by this time had another boyfriend. However, Angela never married and did not have any further children. She continued to work in the computer industry and received a great deal of help from her mother, Katharine's grandmother, in looking after the little girl and later when she started school.

I have also learned that Angela used to babysit for Alan and Valerie's children, although, of course, her role in Alan's life was not known to Valerie. In retrospect, this seems to have been a bizarre arrangement, but then Alan was something of a risk taker. I also learned that Angela and Katharine bumped into Valerie, and her two children, in a shop and passed pleasantries with them. This would have been the first encounter between Katharine and her two half-siblings, although she would not have dreamed that they were related.

Given that Alan was a good friend of Angela, and for a long time was a work colleague, it did not seem surprising when he appeared at Christmas time with a present or two. As a child growing up, Katharine liked Alan. He was amusing, he was good with children and, in many ways, he behaved a bit like a dad. Alan was known to be a supporter of CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament - a major protest group at the time) through most of his political life. He recruited Katharine to CND in her late teens and they both took part in marches.

CND used to hire a whole train to take them to where a march was being organised. On one occasion, Alan came into one of those individual compartments and sat between Katharine and her then boyfriend, who found the whole situation rather strange, asking himself who this person was, as he seemed very close to Katharine. It is a wonder that the boyfriend did not spot the physical similarity to her.

What seemed a little bit surprising to Katharine was that Alan made a big effort to keep in touch with her when, as a qualified doctor, she was working in Wolverhampton and he went over to see her there. At lunch, he seemed to be wanting to tell her something but did not manage to get the words out. Later, they went into a pub and got talking to a man who had consumed a couple of pints too many. He said something to Alan along the lines of 'your daughter's really lovely.' At which point, Alan blurted out:

'It is true. She is my daughter.'

Katharine didn't really have time to react, as she had to rush off for a meeting. A couple of days later, Alan showed up at the hospital where she was working. She was very busy, but had time to have a cup of tea in the canteen. From the moment of Alan announcing this news, she had been extremely angry with both Angela and Alan for not putting her in the picture. After all, she was twenty six at the time, and this was 1994. She swore at him. Alan did not make contact for about a year.

He tried again and received the same answer. Alan told Angela that he had spoken to Katharine and had made his position, that of being her father, clear. At around this time, Katharine, with her partner Mehdi, had moved to New Zealand, to work as medics and to travel. There was no contact with Alan during that two year period, but when she returned, she heard about Valerie's suicide. Katharine still had a strong sense of anger about the whole situation and could not understand why they had not been more open with her. However, she softened her approach and was now prepared to open communications.

On their return from New Zealand, Katharine and Mehdi moved to Ivybridge, in Devon, where they secured employment in the local hospital, as part of their project to advance as medical consultants. She had no contact details for Alan, but she

knew he was a councillor in the Stoke area, and was able to establish his telephone number.

When she heard about his cancer, Katharine telephoned Alan, at a point just before his operation and of course, with her medical knowledge, she knew exactly the seriousness of the situation. Later, she was pleased to hear that he had made a rapid recovery from surgery. Unfortunately, later in the year, he developed secondary cancers. Aware that the end might be near, Katharine went over to see him in Wilmslow, Cheshire, where Alan and Ann had set up home.

In a flurry of activity, Alan wanted to give Katharine presents and even money, now acutely aware that his life might be coming to an end. She remembers going to a John Lewis store where Alan bought her some wine glasses, but she did not accept an offer of money. By this time, Alan had told his partner, Ann, about his daughter. On the day Alan died, Katharine was in Sandbach, not far from Wilmslow, for her mother's birthday. Ann phoned Katharine to say that Alan had gone into hospital. Mehdi and Katharine then drove over to the hospital where they saw him sitting in a cubicle in A & E, breathing with difficulty. Mehdi, now a consultant in an allied field, looked at the X-rays and knew that the situation was critical. In a poignant moment, Alan asked Mehdi to look after Katharine.

All these final events happened at what seems to have been breath-taking speed, with Alan, realising that time was running out, trying to at least partly rescue a situation which he was originally responsible for, which was now running out of control. How do you deal with that predicament whilst being terminally ill? It is understandable to think of people putting their affairs in order in these situations, but Alan's situation was impossible.

He died in hospital that night. Ann phoned Katharine to tell her the news. Katharine then went over to Ann's for mutual support. Later, Katharine, with her medical contacts, also managed to speak to the doctor who had treated Alan. His death had been quite sudden, her view was that he may well have suffered an embolism, brought on by the pneumonia and the cancer.

The crematorium funeral service (23 February 2002), which is reflected in this piece of verse, was indeed a sombre affair, with the rugby-blazered team mates having much more emotional impact than the traditional black-coated pall- bearers.

The Funeral

This day lives on in odd corners of the house.

Photographs hiding in Grandpa's timber trunk.

Old School Magazines filling odd spaces in the bookshelf.

Special shots framed on the piano.

A simple glance brings it back.

And then you are there in an instant.

The coffin borne by six swarthy rugby giants,

like Viking warriors mourning the loss of their leader in battle.

Smartly pressed trousers, badged blazers and gleaming buttons.

Some element of peace after a horrific sequence.

The shock of the car, a lifeless form

and a scatter of photographs.

The guilt painfully expressed in the speech to relatives.

The anger of the children.

Some time to rebuild and see great things on the horizon.

Then illness strikes, eating away cell by cell.

Radical treatment, bouncing back and a false dawn.

Then the relentless march of death.

So, in one spring morning with a bleak, crisp sun breaking through the mist

The whole saga is presented in a series of images

headed by the grieving pall bearers

a fixture with no winners.

These feelings now live on and resonate in my house.

Preserved in a mosaic of random artefacts.

waiting to be touched to wing back to that day.

In spite of the fact that Alan had no real interest in religion, the service of thanksgiving was held at Wilmslow United Reformed Church. I have always felt that having hymns at a funeral only makes one feel even more depressed, especially if nobody recognises the hymn and nobody sings. The first one was called 'Joyful Joyful We Adore Thee', the second was something about making me a channel, which I failed to understand, and the final hymn, 'The Day Thou Gave As the Lord Is Ended', I think was designed to push mourners over the edge, with tears welling up, faces red and handkerchiefs at the ready. The high spot of this event was a stirring tribute given by Neil, not knowing that he would be following these sad footsteps all too soon.

In contrast to the sadness of the funeral, an event at the wake served to raise family hearts at this dark time. Rosemary had suggested that we did not make contact with Alan's 'new' daughter at the funeral, nor with her mother, Angela, so as

to minimize stress or embarrassment. The question was 'would we recognise her?' The fact is, that when she walked into the church hall for a cup of tea and some sandwiches, the universal wake fare, there could be no doubt that she was his daughter. She had the same sandy-coloured hair and, indeed, had his face, plus his outgoing personality. In an explosion of embraces and hellos, we immediately established a warm sense of familiarity, it was like seeing Alan again and Rosemary's desire for a low key approach was completely shattered the moment Katharine walked in.

And we started, there and then, my wife Lesley, Rosemary, Neil and myself, filling in gaps, commenting on the Hardy-esque elements of the story, promising to keep in touch, and facilitate meetings with our children. Chomping through the tired sandwiches at the wake and downing the endless cups of lukewarm tea, I felt a sense of release from the sadness of the preceding few months, and felt our newly-discovered niece's warmth and vitality overflowing into the room. Having Angela there was a magical experience, as another link to Alan.

Reflecting on the death of Alan and miraculous appearance of his secret daughter, one would need a heart of stone not to appreciate the deep sadness of the whole episode. Some degree of anger felt by a daughter who only knew the identity of her father in her mid-twenties would be understandable. One can speculate that her anger was based on the fact that she had missed out on having a father until her mid-twenties, and the frustration would have been increased when his life ended so soon after she knew this information. Her anger was directed at both their parents for living this lie for so long. Whilst her childhood was a happy one with a devoted mother, she will have reflected on opportunities for closeness which were missed. It needs to be stressed that Katharine, on the face of it, has achieved great success in

her education and has reached a stage in her life, now in her late forties, where she has achieved a position as a highly respected medical consultant, with an equally successful consultant partner, and two highly intelligent children.

Her partner, Mehdi, originally came to England from Iran, having escaped on the back of a horse in his late teens, when his lack of religious commitment threatened to derail his educational plans. He came to England, learned the language, passed his A-levels and commenced, at Birmingham University, to study to be a doctor, where he met Katharine. There is a whole new story there but I will leave it to Mehdi, or his children, to write it.

It would be easy to say, well, things seem to have worked out very well in spite of the bizarre history, but that would be a very superficial judgement. Not only did Katharine miss out on so many moments of closeness which a child would expect from her father, but Alan himself lost hundreds of opportunities to show his affection and express his pride in his daughter. Clearly, Alan was desperately afraid of letting Valerie find out and the effect it would have had on his relationship with his other two children. Perhaps it is easier, in these more tolerant times, to be critical of that decision, but I am left with the opinion that he made the wrong decision for possibly the right reasons. Given that my mother is a key influence in this memoir, I feel very sad that she never had the chance to meet Katharine, and my feeling is that after some reluctance, probably from my father, my mother would have welcomed her with open arms. The key issue would be making sure that Valerie did not find out and that would have been quite difficult.

A very strong feeling coming out of this discussion with Katharine was the great sense of inner turmoil that Alan must have experienced right from the moment that she was born. But as she grew older and into adulthood, with her many

achievements behind her, the pain must have been much greater, with Alan wanting to show her affection, being proud of her achievements and wanting to tell the world about them. When he eventually blurted out the truth, in the pub, he then found that Katharine was extremely angry and kept out of his way for a while. That must have been even more difficult, especially as his marriage with Valerie was steering close to the rocks. The guilt felt by Alan after Valerie committed suicide, plus the additional guilt and frustration caused by his decision not to be open to Katharine from the beginning, must have created an unimaginable conflict in his mind and yet none of it was displayed to his family, to his colleagues, or to his political contacts. I will never understand how he managed to keep up the act.

A strangely surreal scene took place on the occasion of scattering Alan's ashes. This was not something we were particularly looking forward to, but out of respect to Alan's partner, we agreed to go to a well-known park in Wilmslow, for which Alan had campaigned in his role as a councillor. I had no experience of this type of ceremony and I did not know what to expect. It was a gusty day, and as Neil emptied the casket, the ashes blew everywhere, covering coats and faces, which lent a certain ridiculous atmosphere to the event. This was accentuated by the fact that Neil made the decision to produce his camera and asked us all to pose for a photograph to commemorate the event; at the heart of this sombre moment, we all relaxed and saw the funny side.

We were only just beginning to come to terms with Alan's death, when one night in the Mags pub, Neil brought me a pint of Bass Cask bitter to his regular corner and said, 'I'm afraid I'm starting to have some difficulties with keeping food down.'

'Why, what seems to be happening,' I asked, immediately sensing bad news in the light of what has happened to Alan.

‘I’m just not keeping food down,’ he said. ‘I bring up a lot of liquid. Anyway, I discussed it with the doctor and it looks as though I’ll have to go for some tests.’

‘This sounds a bit worrying; I hope it’s going to be okay,’ I commented. Realizing that I’d made a rather obvious statement, I remembered that Neil had a way of ridiculing such statements, but on this occasion he chose not to do that.

A week or two later, I was in the same pub with Neil and, this time, my wife Lesley was present. It was a pleasant summer evening, and we were sitting at a table by the window where we could see the flickering lights of the Liverpool docks across the water and the occasional cargo vessel making its way into the port. Neil brought over two pints of Bass for the two men and a glass of white wine for my wife. I was reluctant to ask the question but Neil did not wish to beat about the bush.

‘I’m afraid I’ve got cancer of the oesophagus,’ he said. ‘Exactly the same as Alan.’

We had both suspected the worst, but the announcement was still shattering.

‘That’s really awful, Neil,’ said Lesley, ‘I’m really sorry. What happens now?’

‘I have to have an operation, which should take place over the next couple of weeks at Arrowe Park Hospital. It’ll be the same as Alan’s, in that they will need to remove the whole oesophagus. I just hope they’ve got it in good time.’

Not one to dwell on things, Neil returned to his gang near the opposite corner, near the entrance to the gents’ loo, and had another pint of Bass.

Rosemary and I went for a meal with Neil round about that time, and Neil again had great difficulty in keeping food down. It was a very distressing experience, especially in the light of Alan’s death, and the realisation that the same cancer was striking again in the same family. We were optimistic when he went for his operation and, true to form, the removal of his oesophagus, a major and radical operation, was

successful and, like Alan, his physical fitness and his relative youth, at sixty eight, allowed him to recover very swiftly from surgery. He was able to resume his normal life, even going out in a boat at his rowing club, the Vics, or Liverpool Victoria Rowing Club. I should add, for those with some knowledge of rowing, that the boat in question would have been what is known as a coxless pair, a boat owned by Neil, where he would go training on a regular basis with another veteran rowing member of the club.

I arranged to meet Neil on Hammersmith Bridge that spring where he was umpiring a big rowing event, the London Head of the River Race, in which around four hundred rowing eights race at ten second intervals from Mortlake to Putney, about four miles. I started off in 'The Dove', a traditional pub at Hammersmith, and watched the leading crews row past while I drank a pint of London Pride. I met up with Neil as he finished his stint umpiring on the bridge, and we walked along the banks of the Thames down to Putney, where we had a couple of pints in the Thames Rowing Club, full of track-suited oarsmen and blazered veterans checking on the provisional results. Neil was in his element in Thames Rowing Club, as he seemed to know most of the people there, and I felt that it had been a good day, reminding me of my own rowing exploits on the Thames. Would Neil be there for future visits?

Despite this optimism, within a year or so of his operation, a familiar pattern began to emerge and it seemed that secondary growths had developed. Despite some radiotherapy, it was deemed that Neil's illness was terminal. We entered a very difficult period where he lost weight and developed multiple health problems.

To fully comprehend the next few pages, the reader needs to know that, after standing down as president of the Amateur Rowing Association, Neil had devoted his time to his role as an international rowing umpire and also to his own club,

Liverpool Victoria rowing club. The main focus locally was the need for a new clubhouse, after the old one had burned down. Even if the old boathouse had not been torched, which is probably what happened to it, a new boathouse was required to meet the needs of this internationally successful sport. New money was coming into the sport from the National Lottery, and Neil was very quick to identify this major source of money.

An initiative, 'Project Oarsome' (a clever bit of Beatle-type spelling to promote it), was geared up to supplying brand new boats to ambitious clubs, and a new clubhouse was needed with good storage facilities, changing rooms, opportunities for weight training, plus a suitable social set-up. Inevitably, Neil chaired the group whose task was to conceive, design and implement the new boathouse on a new site supplied by the dock company, with some permanency of tenure. This work was undertaken throughout the 1990s and reached a point where it was ready to be formally opened at a time when Neil's illness was reaching its climax. A measure of the respect in which Neil was held is evidenced by the presence of the great Olympic oarsman, Sir Steven Redgrave, to open the boathouse. It was quite an emotional moment, not only because of the significance of the event, but because Neil, clearly unwell, was greatly emaciated and we all knew that the end was near.

The new boathouse, now called the Wirral Rowing Centre, was opened on Monday 26 April 2004, with the programme showing Sir Steven Redgrave CBE, Honorary President of the Amateur Rowing Association, as guest of honour. Neil insisted on leading the event and made a powerful speech. With a pipe up his nose, and his shrunken face accentuating his ears, Neil attempted to inspire the younger members of the club to grasp the opportunity presented by the spanking new boathouse and the dazzling array of new boats. He invoked the great sense of

companionship within the rowing world and looked back on some strong friendships, before welcoming Redgrave, who then formally opened the boathouse.

His health continued to deteriorate, and after discussion with his doctors, Neil was transferred to the St. John's Hospice at Clatterbridge Hospital, in the centre of the Wirral. He continued to go downhill in the hospice, where one of his few pleasures was to relax in the hot tub. During the night when he died, Rosemary and her very supportive friend, Bev (Beverley Brunskill, an old school friend), stayed with Neil throughout the night as he drifted in and out of consciousness, and then eventually passed away.

We were living in Brighton at the time. I received the news with a degree of numbness, but also relief that his struggle was over. His enduring feeling, as he neared the end of his life, was that there was so much more that he wanted to achieve, developing the second stage of the boathouse project and training crews to win pots all over the country. He clung on to life and never let go, but ultimately, the system cannot stand such an invasion and his body gave up the fight.

Neil's funeral was held in Claremont Road Methodist Church and attendees included his old rowing friend and, ironically a leading gastroenterologist, Dr John Bennett, plus his successor as president of the Amateur Rowing Association, Dame Di Ellis. Having seen my brother Neil perform so admirably at Alan's funeral, I decided that I had to make a similar contribution for Neil. So, along the lines of trying to celebrate a life, I tried to cover some of the lighter aspects of his life, especially the time when he was coaching the crew at Henley Royal Regatta on a bicycle and slightly lost concentration and cycled into the river, acquiring a painful groin for his pains, as his rickety bike landed in the shallows of Father Thames.

During his lifetime, Neil made substantial funds available to the rowing club, and later left additional monies as part of his will. A few months after his death, my sister Rosemary and I helped to launch some impressive new boats for the Liverpool Victoria Rowing Club, reflecting the major part played by rowing in Neil's life.

And so in the space of four or five years, the relative peace of our family was shattered by a suicide, two consecutive deaths due to cancer, and the arrival of an unsuspected daughter. All families face death from time to time and, depending on the circumstances, people come to terms with these events, or they may never do so. Recent deaths in our family circle and amongst our friendship group have reminded me of the emotions felt during the illness and deaths of Alan and Neil. My mother-in-law, Hilda, died in 2014, at the age of ninety four, from cancer. Treatment using radiotherapy or chemotherapy was not deemed to be appropriate in view of her age. After keeping her alive for many months with a carefully minced diet, she ceased being able to take in food and ultimately was unable to take liquid, and over a three or four-day period she deteriorated rapidly. Already very thin and emaciated due to the cancer, her appearance changed rapidly in the final days, lying there with her jaw open and looking like an Egyptian mummy, basically a bag of bones.

Our close family friend, Ron, died in similar circumstances. His pancreatic cancer had been difficult to diagnose, although he had lost a great deal of weight. He reached a point where the pain and discomfort was so high that, despite being on morphine, he decided to discontinue the other medication and stopped eating. He continued to drink, but then the swallow mechanism began to fail and he too went downhill swiftly. He mercifully died after two or three days in this condition. In the case of my brother, Alan, his death was accelerated by pneumonia so, although he

was not well when I last spoke to him, he looked normal as he died in hospital. Neil also lost weight dramatically and his appearance changed, and the last few days in the hospice were a struggle, where his immensely strong will and heart fought against the gradual breakdown of his other systems.

After the deaths of my brothers, I became involved in a charity which was set up to draw attention to the condition and to raise funds for research. I tried to launch a specific appeal addressed to members of rowing and rugby clubs, and even secured the potential assistance from a couple of top internationals. Unfortunately, I could not get this project off the ground, but current members of the charity are making a big effort to raise awareness and progress is being made. In the flyer I prepared, I made the comment that with over seven thousand deaths annually from this condition, cure rates are very low. It tends to affect more males than females, and targets middle age.

Responding to these events, as an observation, it seems that as a society we need to have a better way of dealing with these slow and painful deaths. An Assisted Dying Bill was recently considered by Parliament, but it was heavily defeated. From a philosophical point of view there seems to be a fine line between preserving life at all costs and easing suffering. This is not a debate which will go away in an ageing society, and may well crop up again at a personal level.

As for my own health, as I am under regular surveillance, there are medical steps which can be taken if there are early signs of cancer in my oesophagus. Neil and Alan did not have the luxury of any kind of advance warning.

Chapter 12 – Reflective Conclusions / Epilogue

Families have their dramatic crises and, sometimes, multiple tragedies, when each issue can cause a gradual descent into dysfunctionality. In our case, we were able to come through these sad events because of our essential stability, but also because one of the outcomes, the discovery of Katharine, was viewed as being so positive. So, in the fifteen or so years since the drama of the previous chapters unfolded, we have not only survived, but we have built on the memories of the deceased, and in our own ways, have developed as individuals and as a family group. From the point of view of this memoir, it has been an exciting time of rebirth and progress, which, at the time of writing, bristles with optimism, especially with four grandchildren growing up in Hong Kong and keeping us fascinated by their progress into distinctive personalities.

In the immediate aftermath of this period of tumult, there were a number of issues which had to be addressed. Taking the premature deaths of Neil and Alan, both from the same form of cancer, a question in my mind was whether there was some kind of family link. After Alan's death but before that of Neil, I raised the issue with my doctor in Brighton, and after fighting for around a year, I was eventually offered an endoscopy. If you have not come across this term, it involves effectively swallowing a camera on the end of a long pipe, which flashes a blue light in a somewhat disconcerting manner. The purpose of the exercise is to examine your oesophagus and to take samples for biopsies. There is a choice of undergoing this exercise under sedation or by having a spray applied to the back of the throat. The pleasant nurse asks you to open your mouth whilst something looking like a WD 40 aerosol with a long proboscis is aimed at the back of your throat, causing an

immediate freezing sensation, coupled with a strangely sweet antiseptic taste. In a somewhat macho way, I have always elected to have the spray rather than the sedation, because with sedation you are out for the count for about a day and need supervision. A brief letter from the hospital after my first endoscopy mentioned that I had a condition called Barrett's Oesophagus, which was news to me. I managed to find out what it was all about by looking at a medical dictionary in WH Smith's, and later by searching the internet. This whole experience led to an interest in the subject, if only for self-preservation, but also an attempt on my part to make some kind of contribution to the whole question of this form of cancer.

If you are not sedated, you can also hear the running commentary by the consultant, effectively a travelogue through your oesophagus. Lying there, with your teeth firmly clamped round a special piece of plastic through which the endoscope enters your throat, after a few gagging reflexes, you can lie back and enjoy the journey, as the consultant talks you through the landmarks of your inside.

'Just entering the upper part of your oesophagus. Oh yes, I can see the patch of Barrett's. There doesn't seem to be any change from last time.'

Without going into the total medical details, for which I do not have the qualifications, it is worth making the point that Oesophageal Cancer is one of the fastest rising cancers in the Western world, which kills over seven thousand people a year, in the UK. It is linked to acid reflux and to obesity. It is also very difficult to treat once it has taken hold. Barrett's Oesophagus is a potential precursor to cancer and is not in itself a life-threatening or uncomfortable condition. Many people have it but do not know about it. If you know about it, you can have an endoscopy every couple of years to see if there has been any change in the condition.

As part of my research to find out about this disease, I made contact with one of the top experts in the field, Doctor, now Professor, Rebecca Fitzgerald at Addenbrooke's Hospital, in Cambridge. She was able to give me a consultation and invited me for regular endoscopies at Cambridge. I also became involved with the Barrett's Oesophagus Foundation, and asked my family to assist with the research. Later on, I helped to set up and chaired a patient group, initially called PROBE and now, under the leadership of Mimi McCord, the group is called Heartburn Cancer UK. It encourages research and provides information on this topic. The latest research suggests that there are potential family clusters of this illness.

Good progress is being made, with better diagnosis and treatment but there remains a task of public information because people who suffer from chronic heartburn should get themselves checked out. In most cases there is no sinister background, but some of these patients will go on to be affected by this cancer.

As many memoirs have pointed out, cancer can be a traumatic experience for its victims and their families, and I would not attempt to place our family situation as being worse than many other cases, especially where a relatively young person dies. I have always tried to draw something positive from these experiences, and I have made some attempts to raise awareness, and of course there are many people involved in this process, raising money and supporting research. It can be said, of course, that the increase in many cancers is a result of people living longer, so to some extent the process is inevitable. On the other hand, there is so much we can learn about causes, diagnosis and treatment, and we must applaud the efforts of those, like Professor Fitzgerald, Professor Laurence Lovatt, of University College London, and others, who are on the front line in this battle.

Another health theme, which might strike the reader as being significant, in our wider family is that of suicide. My paternal grandmother took her own life for reasons unclear to me. My father's sister, Auntie Marjorie, placed a plastic bag over her head, and apparently ended her life because she feared that her health was deteriorating and that she might be a burden to her partner, Mary. Then Alan's wife, Valerie, took her own life in the much loved Mazda car. The first two suicidal tendencies could have been genetically linked, but of course, Valerie was not a blood relative. This relative preponderance of suicide may seem significant but, on the wider question of mental health, I doubt if our family is vastly different from any other. The current message seems to be that greater understanding and empathy is needed, and that if assistance is sought then problems can be solved. Perhaps if Valerie and Alan had been able to talk about these issues, her death could have been avoided. After all, at a rational level, she had much to live for, including grandchildren. The subject of suicide is widely covered in literature, including in the memoir genre and the poet Sylvia Plath's suicide has been covered in numerous feminist writings.

If we attempt to consider the legacy of my two brothers, it is a sad truism that once you have died your name tends to get forgotten, unless you are a major figure or maybe a rock star taken at the height of fame, where there is potential for some kind of canonisation and increased record sales. With Neil, there is continuing respect for his legacy in local rowing circles. At a meeting I arranged recently to coincide with the ten year anniversary of Neil's death, I met Dame Di Ellis, who succeeded Neil at what was then called the Amateur Rowing Association, and she is now Honorary President of British Rowing. I also met Gary Harris, the Vice-Chairman, and I came away reassured that his work had been recognised and that

his contribution to putting rowing on a professional footing was a key precursor to the great international success that rowing now has become.

As a kind of reflection on Neil's memory, I try to get down to the Thames to observe the Head of the River Race, and followed the same routine as I was completing this memoir, even down to retracing my steps from The Dove at Hammersmith, down to Putney, having drunk a pint of London Pride. Seeing the crews fighting their way to the finish reminded me of similar efforts by Neil and myself, sometimes in the same boat. Having another pint in Thames Rowing Club allowed me to mingle with the rowing ghosts of the past, and in my mind, Neil is there with his pink Leander scarf, chatting to young oarsmen and grizzled veterans.

Alan's legacy is harder to gauge. His profile was not as high as Neil's, and I am aware of the great affection in which he was held, but inevitably, in terms of the wider world, memories have faded. For local Liberal Democrat circles in Staffordshire, his name will be remembered for galvanising support in that area and for narrowly missing what would have been a landmark victory against Labour, in a high profile by-election. Away from the political scene, Alan is remembered as a warm-hearted brother, where the breezy exterior masked painful feelings of guilt and regret. But in our family, the continued contact with Katharine is a constant reminder of his positive personality

Moving away from family matters, it seems appropriate at this stage of the memoir to comment on wider issues. This is, of course, a crowded field and there are others with more experience and expertise to draw key conclusions from contemporary observations, but each individual voice has its own perspective. It cannot be proved conclusively, but my feeling is that my generation, that is people growing up in post-

war Britain, may well have had a uniquely favourable environment, compared with those born earlier and those born later. We benefited from the establishment of the National Health Service, where apart from dental and optician fees, most medical care has been free. Despite claims from the politicians that the NHS will continue to be free at the point of service, there are fears that the NHS will not always be able to afford to provide free care.

Similarly, it would seem that my generation had the best deal in terms of education. This not only covered free primary and secondary education in the state sector, but also major financial support for higher education. So, the three boys in our family received state funding for university education, with our parents topping up the amount. A number of qualifications were provided free by my employer, and all my academic courses have been relatively inexpensive. Compare that with the position of the University student of today who could leave with debts of over £30,000.

My generation also benefited in terms of general lifestyle, including diet, exercise, and medical expenses. In a ten to fifteen year period after the war, typical diets were sensible and balanced. Most families used fresh ingredients and cooked meals from scratch, as did my mother. She could not be described as a creative and innovative cook in the language of today's magazine supplements, but she provided simple wholesome food, quite often meat and two vegetables, with a range of excellent deserts. Fizzy drinks were not generally available and we used to drink milk, tea or water. Fast food was not the ubiquitous feature that it is today, except for the occasional treat of Fish and Chips, usually when on holiday.

As I start to try to tie up the loose ends in this memoir, the general question in my mind is: what sort of world has my generation left for my grandchildren to enjoy? Will

they be a favoured generation as mine was or will they start to experience difficulties in terms of education, employment and general lifestyle? Will they be affected by climate change or by terrorism? Will they face issues to do with overpopulation, shortage of water, problems of food production, or diseases such as Ebola?

Fortunately for the reader, this memoir has neither the time nor the space to analyse the above issues. It started out as a family memoir and that is how it will end, with a general reflection that, as far as families go, we have been fortunate in having good strong relationships, and providing mutual support and that goes to our immediate family but also to those families linked by marriage. Our four grandchildren have been born in quite privileged situations in Hong Kong, and they are in the process of receiving a very good education and excellent family support. As a result, they are developing distinctive personalities and clear academic, athletic, and artistic skills. The world is theirs to make the most of and to continue the Thomas tradition.

This memoir has skirted over many details of my life, and was never intended as an autobiography. Some aspects of family life have only been hinted at, if only to protect the privacy of family members. However, the importance of family and the different generations comes across frequently and I have allowed myself some degree of personal indulgence in pulling together this exercise. Fatherhood has been a major influence since my early thirties and the following vignette perhaps needs no further explanation.

'Trotty'

He arrives in our lives.

Sturdy, pink and vocal.

A volcano of energy, spreading mayhem.

Restless and teasing out his new world.

An explorer landing on a tropical beach.

Fearless and fearsome: no challenge too perilous.

Crawling

does not deliver, he has to walk and run.

This latter-day Senna hurls himself into top gear.

A sleek McLaren grappling with the circuit of life.

His galloping action invites pony comparisons.

And a special name: 'Trotty'.

It suited his busy, bustling gait and bursts of speed.

And so it stayed with him, a term of endearment.

remaining with his childhood as the milestones were achieved.

Then quite suddenly a social life evolves and friends visit.

We are back to Richard, a grown-up name,

used with confidence with his new-found circle.

Trotty goes into the cupboard of discarded toys.

*The baby name would not sit well with the business world
of strategic decisions, financial deals and boardroom rows.*

Trotty remains hidden, deep in our hearts,

scampering through our sepia memories.

As a last observation, I have been inspired to pen some final lines to effectively sum up the whole experience of creating this memoir:

On Writing My Memoir

*An intrepid potholer, I probe the depths,
explore dark chasms of memory,
shining a spotlight on those early days.
Visions reappear in sharp colours,
refracted through the prism of time.
Flames devouring timbers from a blitzed house,
a bonfire marking the end of a conflict,
miles from our shores, prisoners press-ganged
into building the gruesome Burma railway,
but our cousin never comes back.
Then a canter through my youth:
school accolades, sporting moments,
the rough and tumble of childhood friendships.
Carefree days in open country, biking for miles,
with no curfew, soaking up the August sun.
Chequered work history, fumbling failures,
Cheap suits and grubby shirts.
Rare high spots, with sheer survival uppermost.
All this against the soundtrack*

of Miles Davis, Joni Mitchell and John Coltrane.

*Throughout the story, explorations of family values,
parental roles and sibling interplay,*

Dark secrets unearthed.

*Strong mother figure holding the show together,
fostering aspiration, with deserved pride in her brood.*

And so I tell the story, nothing special

in the great scheme of things, but it's mine.

Time to reflect on the random chords of my life.

Appendices

Family Timeline

Family Tree

Photographic Portfolio

M.Phil

Memoir Timeline: List of Key Dates relating to the period covered by the memoir

- 1870** Birth of John Henry Lindley (Grandpa Lindley)
- 1900** John Henry Lindley married Edith Midgley
- 1901** birth of Nellie, daughter of JHL
- 1904** birth of Mary, daughter of JH L
- 1906** birth of Edith daughter of JHL (my mother)
Birth of Henry Ronald Thomas, (Ron, my father)
- 1911** birth of Isobel, daughter of JHL
- 1914** Outbreak of First World War
- 1918** End of First World War
- 1925** Mother starts B.Com degree at Liverpool University
- 1928** Mother Graduates with Batchelor of Commerce (B.Com)
- 1932** Wedding of Ronald Thomas and Edith Lindley
- 1934** Birth of Neil (brother)
- 1937** Birth of Rosemary(sister)
- 1939** Outbreak of Second World War, Birth of Alan (brother)
- 1940** Womenfolk in family evacuated to Whitchurch, Shropshire.
- 1941** Birth of Robin (September 15) at Whitchurch, Shropshire.
- 1942** age 1 WW2

1943 age 2 WW2

1944 age 3 WW2

1945 age 4 WW2

End of World War 2 Victory over Europe Day (VE Day)

End of Japanese War, Victory over Japan Day (VJDay) August 15

1946 age 5, starts at St George's Road Junior School, Wallasey
Move house from 17 Vyner Road to 31 Lyndhurst Road, Wallasey.

1947 age 6, St George's Rd Very bad winter

1948 age 7 St George's Rd

1949 age 8 St George's Rd

1950 age 9 St George's Rd

1951 age 10 St George's Rd, Starts at Wallasey Grammar School
Visit Festival of Britain in London

1952 age 11, commences at Wallasey Grammar School, plays Rugby, starts piano lessons. Joins school Natural History Society

1953 age 12 WGS, starts violin lessons

1954 age 13 WGS Singing solo in school choir

1955 age 14 April School Concert: Stabat Mater, Rossini, Robin soloist, along with Robin Tankard, David Fletcher and Jeffrey Price
Robin receives English Prize, Geography Prize and Richardson Prize for Services to School Music

1956 age 15 .

1957 age 16 'O' Levels passes: English Language, English Literature, History, Geography, French, Maths, Physics-with-Chemistry. Fail Latin, but successfully re-take November. Take up Rowing.

1958 age 17 Robin selected for School First Eight. First year of 'A' Level Course
Launch of 'The Haunt' Music Club, First Eight wins Clinker Pennant at North of England Head of River Race.

1959 Robin 18

Captain of Boat Club. 'A' Levels: English Literature, History, Geography, plus 'O' level pass in General Paper.

1960 age 19 Repeat 'A' Levels, (English Literature, History, Geography, General Studies with Spoken English, wins Wribbenhall Challenge Cup for Maiden Fours at Bewdley Regatta. Wins Gracie Essay prize and History prize. Leaves Wallasey Grammar School, Commences first year at Reading University
12 November 1960 Attends Reading University Jubilee Dinner (Great Hall)

1962 aged 21, Secretary of University Boat Club, Member of First Eight

1963 aged 22 Youth Hostelling in Lake District
Finish at Reading. First Job Pilkingtons, St Helens

1964 age 23 Fired by Pilkington: Pilkingtons, St Helens
Start teaching at Morrison School (September)

1965 age 24 Morrison School, Teaching at Toxteth Technical High School, Liverpool, for Autumn term, A and O level History, Geoff Engels, Head of History, Music Trio at Latin Quarter, Dave Roberts, Tony Crofts

1966 age 25 starts at Carlett Park College, Eastham, Assistant Lecturer, Grade 'A' in English & Liberal Studies

1967 age 26 Starts at E. R. Squibb, Moreton as trainee Organisation and Methods Officer, Wins Maiden Sculls at Northwich Regatta

1968 age 27. Leaves Squibb, joins Littlewoods Mail Order Stores, at the Waterloo Buildings., starts Institute of Personnel Management Course at Liverpool College of Commerce., Rowing in Liverpool Victoria Eight, Henley and local events, many wins

1969 age 28, Completes Institute of Personnel Manager, passes all 4 papers. distinction on one paper, leaves Littlewoods, Liverpool Victoria Eight, Henley and other events, start Brunel University, Master of Technology Course (October)

1970 age 29, completes Brunel Course, interview with IBM, get married to Lesley, start at Lever Brothers, Port Sunlight, move into Lindley house in Saltburn Road.

1971 age 30, Levers Move into house in Neston, Birth of Richard (Oct 4)

1972 age 31, Levers, Tennis with Lady Hamilton Club, Music 'Sandalwood' Folk Group with Steve Lowe, Robin Jackson. John Payne. Welsh holiday near Cnicht with Steve & Barbara Lowe.

1973 age 32 Levers, Birth of Judy

1974 age 33 Levers, Retires from Rowing

1975 age 34 Levers holiday in Spain, Water Skiing. Move house to Bromborough

1976 age 35 Levers

1977 age 36 Levers

1978 age 37 Move to LBL, temporary stay in hotel in Esher. Kingston House move to Ashtead, Surrey, Graduate Recruitment 'milk round' visits. Saw 'Close Encounters of the Third Kind' with Colleague, Bill Goodman. Holiday in Spain.

1979 age 38 Levers Kingston, Organisational Development Course, Stratford, saw Antony & Cleopatra, (Glenda Jackson, Alan Howard) Graduate Recruitment, interview at North Cheshire College, resigns from Levers, leaving event

1980 age 39, Move house to Wallasey (Vyner Road, then Dalmorton Road) Start at North Cheshire College, Police course, NEBBS w/e Lytham, Jazz at Spinning Wheel, North Wales,

1981 age 40 North Cheshire College, Police Courses at Bruche, Safeway, Levers, Music Bob Buckle, Granada TV, Mist over Mersey. Radio City, Jazz at Hunts Cross, Don Jump

1982 age 41 North Cheshire College, visit to YKK Plant, US Airbase Course Music, Bob Buckle, Masonics, Holiday to Swaledale with parents.

1983 age 42, North Cheshire College, Various tutorials, Safeway Management Course, various gigs, 4 Bars In (Birkenhead), solo piano, Bob Buckle, Father in hospital, duodenal ulcer

1984 age 43 North Cheshire College, Music, Jo's Boyds, Mike White, start to plan for new house next door to 95 Dalmorton Rd

1985 age 44 North Cheshire College, tutorials, brewery visits, Jo's Boys, Garden Festival with Bob Buckle, Start Certificate in Education Course at North Cheshire College.

1986 age 45 North Cheshire College, Cert Ed course at Warrington, YHA holiday with Judy, Music Steve Burkhill, Jo's Boys, Night Train.

1987 age 46 North Cheshire College, Music Jo's Boys, Camping in Lake District. Cert Ed Course, Bolton.

1988 age 47 Resign from North Cheshire College, YHA holiday with Judy, holiday with parents, Yorkshire Dales, (Ivelet), music with Jo's Boys, Ron McCay,

1989 age 48, Start at Wirral Metropolitan College, Carlett Park, Death of Father on Wallasey Golf Club course (Oct 4) Richard's 18th Birthday. Kenny Wheeler concert with John Marshall, John Taylor at BlueCoat Chambers, Liverpool.

1990 age 49 Employment at Wirral Met College, holiday Yorkshire, Music. Jo's Boys, Resign from Wirral Met

1991 Robin aged 50 Self Employed P/t Teaching, Music with Jo's Boys, Ron McCay, various jazz gigs. Car Datsuns! Holiday Nun Monkton (with Mother), Mallerstang

1992 Robin aged 51 Self-employed, Judy starts at Falmer School , Death of Mother 19 January, Funeral 22 January, Holiday in Dent with Alan's family Burnley Jazz Course, work on promotional tape for self-employment Tall Ships Race Liverpool

1993 age 52 self-employed, Richard graduates at Bristol University, July 6, Run course for Velmore Start M.Phil at Liverpool, Creative Writing Course, Birkenhead, Gladys Mary Coles, Cottage Loaf Jazz with Steve Parry, Richard starts work with M&S, short course at Leeds University. Various gigs, Ron McKay

1994 age 53, Run course for SAB Wabco, various interviews as part of my M.Phil Interview with Business Link, Merseyside, appointed and starts 1 December

1995 aged 54 Business Link Start at Bootle Office

1996 aged 55 Business Link Speke Office

1997 aged 56 Business Link Kirkby Office
Suicide of Valerie (Wife of Alan) February 6, Funeral of Valerie 20 February.

1998 aged 57 Business Link Bootle Office

1999 age 58 Alan's 60th Birthday Event—Newcastle under Lyme
Awarded NVQ 4 in Business Counselling, based on evidence produced whilst at Business Link. Resigns from Business Link

2000 age 59, Robin starts at Liverpool John Moores University in a job encouraging companies to use local graduates and the university in the transfer of technology.
Alan diagnosed with Oesophageal Cancer
Operation successful, but secondaries appear later in year.

2001 age 60 Alan dies (19 Feb, Funeral 23 Feb). Robin still at John Moores University, takes it upon himself to launch a campaign to set up a Liverpool Science Park, based on the two local universities, attended various meetings and sent letters and emails. Funding obtained for feasibility study, leading to establishment of science park. Holidays in Totnes, Paris, Lakes, visit Katherine & Medhi in Devon Fred Hersch workshop.

2002 age 61. Leaves John Moores University job. Judy awarded M.A, Caroline marries Mark, Move to Brighton, Neil's family party. Neil diagnosed with Oesophageal Cancer

2003 age 62 Extended School project with Brighton Council, Ty Goddard, see Neil at Head of River Race, London. Holiday Devon, 2nd project for Ty Goddard, Holiday at Mouray, Grasmere., Swanage

2004 age 63 Death of Neil, Job with City College, Brighton.

2005 age 64 Working for City College, Brighton, Death of Dorothy Chapman (Cousin), Oesophageal Cancer support group activities, Start new job with Bradford Council (April), move into flat in Idle , near Bradford. Neil's boats presented to Liverpool Victoria Rowing Club.

2006 age 65. Working for Bradford Council, Building Schools for the Future, visit to various exemplar schools ,move house to Sowerby Bridge, Probe activities, Christmas in HK,

2007 age 66 Leave Bradford Council, Go to Shenzhen and work for 5 days at Funyuan College! 6 week holiday in Hong Kong, return via one night in Dubai.

2008 Robin aged 67(Retired) Table Tennis, HK, Felix Naming Ceremony, St Patrick's Party, continue with charity activities, HK, Italy

2009 Robin aged 68, Table Tennis, work on Probe, HK,Honda Legend, HK, Shanghai, Sanya.
Various visits to London, meet Richard at Sherlockm Holmes Hotel, Photography Course Ryburn School

2010 Robin aged 69 Table Tennis, HK, Short Story competition, Corfu, Shoreham.

2011 Robin aged 70, Table Tennis, Jag, VB Trio, Holiday HK, Totnes, start M.A at Huddersfield University. Birthday lunch Slaidburn

2012 age 71 Table Tennis, continue MA at Huddersfield University, member of Salford Uni jazz research group, music Valerie Bracken Trio, Death of Dorothy Chapman (Cousin), Funeral Totnes, Jazz Guitar Club, Holiday in New York, Trip to HK, delayed through illness of Lesley. Holiday Bergerac, trip to Alnwick

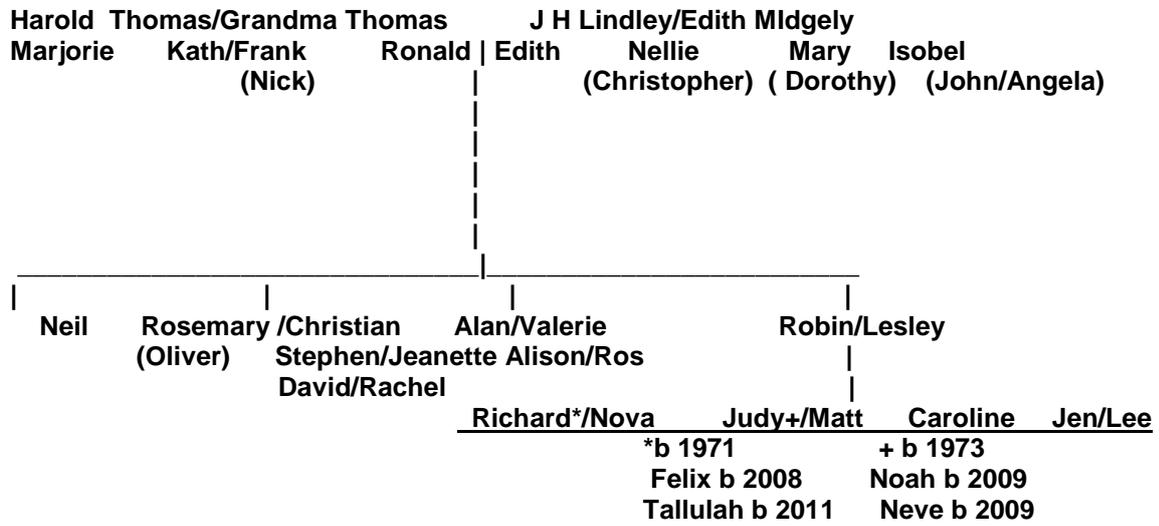
2013 Robin aged 72 Completes M.A at Huddersfield University, Graduation Ceremony, Music with Valerie Bracken Trio, co-operation with Colin Crichton on MA programme, holidays HK, Bergerac, Henley.

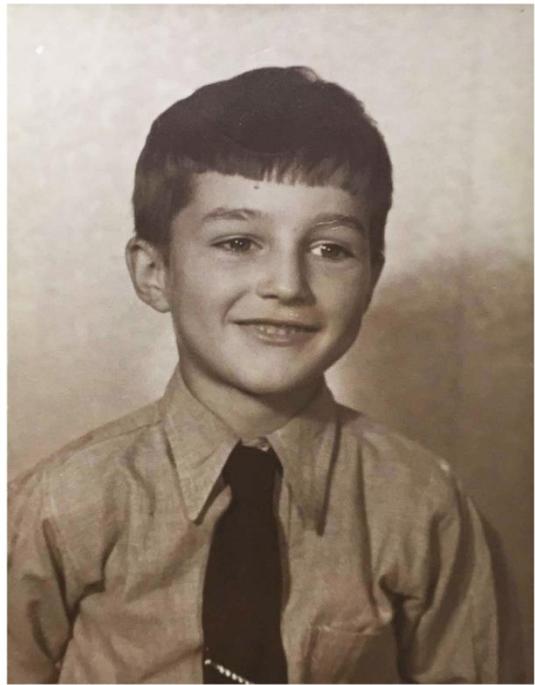
2014 Robin aged 73 Take up Racketball at Bradford, . Move from Sowerby Bridge to Spital, Wirral Holidays France, Penang, HK. Commence M.Phil at Salford University

2015 Robin aged 74, Racketball at the Village, Music with Keith & Sue, Holidays Istanbul. Bergerac, Coledale, (Lake District) HK Thailand. Continues with M'Phil Music with Keith & Sue. Historical activities with Richard 111 Society

2016 Robin aged 75 (September 15), Complete M.Phil (August), Music with Martin, plus Keith and Sue. Holiday in France, Jen's Wedding

THOMAS FAMILY: SIMPLIFIED FAMILY TREE





Top Left: Grandpa Lindley & Neil (1940?)

Top Right: Robin (1948)

Bottom: Mary, Isobel, Nellie, and Mother (Early 1920's)





Top Left: Robin & Alan(1948?)

Top Right: Robin (1950)

Middle Left: Father & Mother's wedding (1932)

Middle Right: Mother's election photo (1950's)

Bottom: Thomas Family (1952?)



Top Left: Father & Mother (1960's)

Top Right: Mother, Golf Captain (1967)

Bottom: Thomas Family (1942?)





Top Left: Thomas family holiday, N. Wales, (1953?)

Top Right: Neil (1990's)

Middle: Robin, first left, Reading University (1963)



Bottom Left: Alan, election photo (1980's)



Bottom Right: Neil (1998)



Top: School Eight, Chester (1959)

Middle: Liverpool Vics, Henley (1968)

Bottom: Trophies (1968)





Top: St. George's Junior School. Robin, 3rd child from right, back row (1950)

Middle Left: Robin in folk group (1970's)

Middle Right: Alan (1990's)

Bottom: Robin in jazz band (1958)





Top: Skiffle Group (1956?)

Bottom: Alan, election photo, with Screaming Lord Sutch & Cyril Smith, M.P.(1980s)