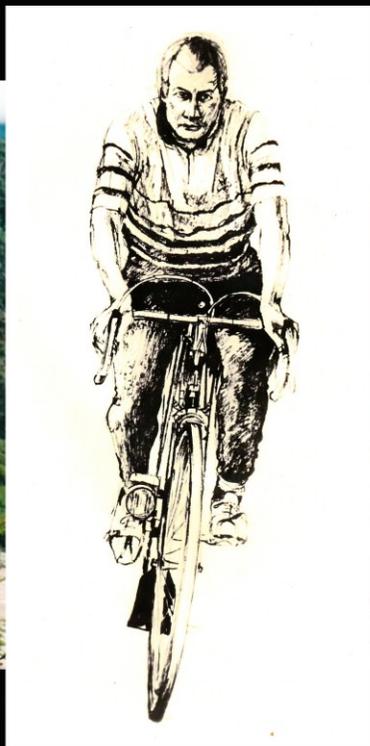


‘NO GUTS NO STORY’



Bob the Bike
(Travels on a Pushbike)

Robert Winstanley - Linda Swinford

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PREVIEW

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Robert Winstanley
Linda Swinford

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Publisher's Note

After hearing from the locals about 'Bob the Bike' and requested by Linda Swinford to publish his book, I first met Robert Winstanley one Friday evening on May 8th 2015 in Bromyard's local public house, The King's Arms. Bob was sat with a familiar acquaintance, Bob Craddock, who was the one who first put me on the track and privilege of finally publishing Bob the Bike's many accounts of his cycling world travels. We shook hands vigorously and talked over a few drinks. The rugged and healthy looking eighty year old man had clearly the story of his travels written on his face as lines of experience. I asked when he had arrived in the UK. He replied:

'Today, from Birmingham Airport (a distance of over 50 miles).'

'How? I asked,

'By bike,' was his reply.

'And your luggage?

'In my bike's pannier bags.

Bernard Paul Badham

Ark Publishing UK

Foreword by Linda Swinford

An old-ish man propped a pushbike against the window of the Tourist Office in Bromyard, Herefordshire and came in for a chat and some leaflets. I was doing a stint behind the counter and that's how I met Robert Winstanley, 'Bob the Bike.'

He said he liked the town; he often made it the starting point of his long-distance cycling holidays. I said he should write this down because Bromyard people would enjoy reading it in our local magazine. Bob didn't fancy the idea, he said he hadn't the education. So I told him not to worry, I'd type it up for him. I found a handwritten piece shoved under the door next morning and I began helping Bob to tell his story. The words are all his, just the full stops and capital letters are mine.

I kept on typing because I liked his style of writing and his story, funny, touching, modest, true. When the amazing travel section ended I got him to write an autobiographical prequel about the lad from Stetchford, Birmingham, who loved long-distance cycling all his life and decided in his sixties to go thousands of miles alone with just a map.

This book follows Bob's journeys through many countries in Asia and South America. Sheer slog, plus narrow escapes, interesting encounters, heroism, thefts and romances, mixed with humour and thoughtfulness.

As Bob says, 'No guts, no story.'

Linda Swinford

‘Bob the Bike’ Introduction

Bob Winstanley was born and brought up in Stetchford, Birmingham during the 1930’s and ‘40s. At that time a lovely country lane ran through Chelmsley Woods to Coleshill and on to Maxstoke, where Bob and his gang rode every day in the long summer holidays to play on the disused railway track or in the river catching sticklebacks in old wine bottles lifted empty from the local off-license.

At eleven years old and very small, he had got hold of a Hercules Roadster wreck with 28’ wheels, which he rode with his legs through the triangle. On his first journey to school a pedal fell off and try as he might, he couldn’t screw it back on. A passing stranger explained about the left-hand thread.

His love of long-distance cycling began around 1950 when a friend suggested they cycle to Wales. Scraping every penny together to make 25 shillings, the two teenagers set off with emergency ration coupons for their big adventure. In a week, they went 500 miles to Pwllheli and back and amazed at the distance they had covered, a passion was born.

Bob bought a bright blue Hercules Falcon with the six shillings a week he earned delivering papers through Britain’s worst winter in 1947. Later, on two years military service in Germany he drew a bike from stores on his first day, setting out to explore with the other guys shouting, ‘You must be mad! The Germans will kill you!’ When he returned they clapped him on the back and said how brave he was.

Back in Civvy Street he met the girl he was to spend 38 years with, and although he rode a bike every day to work he withdrew from the longer rides. One day he realized how much he missed them and he told his wife he must cycle again. She was in agreement, but soon found he planned to be away for several weeks at a time in Spain and Portugal!

Bob bought a Claud Butler bike and later a Dawes Super Galaxy. He continued his cycling pastime until tragedy came along when after a terrible illness his wife died at only 57. It took him two years to pull himself together and decide to have a crack at the world. He was then sixty-two years old.

In the next four years he rode 40,000 miles through 32 countries, completely alone. No back-up vehicles, no computers or telephones, he travelled through every country in Central America, Mexico, Peru, Paraguay, Brazil and Bolivia. Then India, Nepal, Bangladesh and more... Armed with a tent he slept free anywhere.

Reaching Thailand he became aware that at sixty-four he didn't want to grow old alone. He met and married Sirima and is now based in Thailand, returning to England yearly to visit family and friends. England is an ideal place after all to start his current cycling trips, such as touring through Spain, as he did this summer. He was ending this tour when he met up with Solihull Cycling Club members.

At home in Thailand he leads a group of ex-pat Sunday cyclists and regularly goes out for a ride of eighty miles or more. Bob is now an incredible seventy-eight year old.

Bob's whole story at time of writing is currently being edited and put together for possible publication. It makes amazing reading.

Linda Swinford

MEMORIES

I first rode a bike with no wheels

My very first contraption was an old Hercules with a 28-inch frame and 28-inch wheels, a roadster, the type that big, solid policeman used to ride. Not long back from the war, my father worked as a dustman and he brought this wreck of a bike home. It had many parts missing but over a few months he found bits and pieces that people had cast out, and we codged a bike together.

I was only eleven years old and very small – I had to ride with my legs through the triangle. On my first day riding the bike to school a pedal came off, and try as I might I couldn't screw it back on. I didn't know that one pedal has a left hand thread. Those were the days when the school bike-sheds were full of bikes, the places where the boys sneaked a cigarette and learned about sex. Now they just watch television to learn about sex.

From where I lived in Stetchford, Birmingham, there was a lovely country lane that ran through Chelmsley Woods to Coleshill and then on to Maxstoke. Now it is covered in massive housing estates. It was further on then to Maxstoke, because now the roads have been straightened out and fresh short cuts added. My local gang and I used to ride there every day in the long summer holidays and play in the river or on the disused railway track, occasionally sleeping in abandoned railway wagons. We had no money; we took a bottle of water each and a sandwich if we were lucky.

We caught sticklebacks by breaking a hole in the bottom of a wine bottle, the type with a funnel in the base, lifted empty from our local off-license. Then, tying a length of string round the neck and putting a few breadcrumbs inside, we threw the bottle in the river. The fish swam in through the hole in the centre of the base but when they tried to swim out they were trapped against the sides of the bottle. Many times I walked home alone with flat tyres – we had no equipment, but they were the happiest days of my childhood.

Came the time when I was old enough to deliver newspapers (well, not quite, but nobody was counting). I was paid six shillings a week and saved every penny, trudging through Britain's worst ever winter in 1947. I bought a bright blue Hercules Falcon with the six shillings a week and that bike brought me the pleasure I still enjoy today. It was the bike that first introduced me to long distance cycling and it was mine after fifty payments.

Military service came along, and I served two years in Germany, starting in 1953. None of us lads had ever been abroad before and this was the first time I encountered people's fear of being in another country. On the first day there, I had to explore, so I drew a bicycle out of the store – a sit up and beg Raleigh, rod brakes, no gears and olive drab green army colours. I set off with all the guys shouting, 'You must be mad! The Germans will kill you!' When I returned they clapped me on the back and said how brave I was. During my two years I used this bike time after time.

Returning to Civvy Street I gradually withdrew from the long rides. Girls had entered my life and I met the girl that I was to spend 38 years with. I still rode a long distance to work every day for years – sometimes to Worcester and back and so I remained very fit.

Many times I reflected on the pleasures I used to enjoy and finally I told my wife that I must cycle again. She was in agreement but thought it might be just an hour or two at the weekend. She wasn't pleased when I set off for a week at a time in England, and then as time went by for several weeks in Spain or Portugal.

I bought a Claud Butler; they used to be considered the Rolls Royce of bicycles and then a Dawes Super Galaxy. Expensive bikes, but they were both stolen from my garage at the top of the garden.

I bought another Galaxy and continued my cycling pastime, but tragedy came along and after a terrible illness my wife died at the age of only fifty-seven. It took me two years to pull myself together and I decided to have a crack at the world. For the marathon ride that I managed I used only two bicycles. I would have used only one except that my Galaxy was stolen in the deserts of Peru.

I replaced it with a Thorn Nomad road bike. This is an excellent machine and it's the one I still have although all that remains of the original is the frame, the spokes and the hubs. Everything else has been replaced, some several times, handlebars, mudguards, pedal chains at least four times, chain set, rear block and hangers several times, saddle three times, pump twice, brake levers and brake blocks many times, tyres and inner tubes dozens of times. The wheels have been rebuilt at least four times, but the spokes and hubs don't wear out. The punishment these two bikes coped with was colossal.

I never used to package my bike although I was told at Birmingham Airport in 2012 that it must now be boxed or bubble wrapped. Of course there's a fancy charge for doing this plus a charge for carrying the bicycle.

I don't ever recall being asked to pay airfare for my bicycle. It was regarded as my luggage. I let the tyres down as instructed, removed the pedals and turned the handlebars parallel with the frame. Sometimes I wrapped the chain. One time when I couldn't release the handlebars and so I needed a hammer to give the bolt a tap. The nearest thing to a hammer was a policeman's revolver but he refused to lend it to me.

As for equipment and clothing for my adventures, I carried a minimum, reasoning that it would be cheap to buy new as I went along. So I had three shirts, one pullover, spare shoes, three pairs of underpants and socks, long trousers, a waterproof jacket, a towel, a tent and a sleeping bag. I had a small stove with little blocks of fuel, a small saucepan and a bag of oats to make porridge to get me going in the morning. I kept one of my water bottles filled with toffees.

I had spare inner tubes, two spare tyres that I kept coiled and fixed to my front pannier rack, a spare chain, chain rings, spokes, brake blocks and spanners including a link remover, all sorts of useful bric-a-brac. I learned early to keep it all in plastic bags so that it kept dry and I could see it straight away. When you want something you have to search through bag after bag to find it and it's always in the last bag, so I purchased some strong sizeable plastic bags. Of course I carried loads of maps. Armed with maps I just set off. I made no plans. It amuses me how people spend two years preparing, especially wimps on motorbikes. So I still ride the Thorn Nomad. When my wife Sirima has time we ride together. I also have two excellent Dahon folding bikes that we take in the car when we tour. How great to park up and ride a bike.

The Prequel

A sharp slap, a voice says, 'It's a boy,' and here I am.

I already have a brother and a sister and following on from me my mother produces another six. It is June 1935. I am born in Lancashire. When I am nine months old my father takes us to Birmingham in search of work. Depressions are not a new thing.

My first real recollection is of sitting on the top stair crying for my mother who for some reason is in the back bedroom with a nurse. A baby cries. Shortly afterwards midwife Shakespeare places my three year-old self beside my mother. I don't know where that little pink face called Edith has come from.

As I get older I become used to midwife Shakespeare visiting our house and leaving a baby behind. On the back of her bicycle is a black rectangular box. Mom tells me she brings the babies in that box. Many times I try to pluck up courage to raise the lid and see for myself. Three of the babies die. Roy and David, had pneumonia and diphtheria respectively; Vera? I don't know. It's a blessing, still six children and two adults to feed; on not much more than pennies.

I grew up during the Second World War. I don't remember feeling fear; too young to understand. I just thought, 'This is life.' Mom's daily parting words to us going to school were, 'Don't forget your gas masks.' The policeman crossing us over the road wore a gun in a white holster, in case some German had been forced to parachute.

At times, if the air raid warning was early enough, we threw the youngest in the pram and joined hundreds of others in the headlong rush through blacked-out streets seeking the comparative safety of a communal shelter. Stetchford swimming baths now stand on the site that was our nearest public shelter. Close by was an underground command post (After the war these places were sealed up, but we Bash Street kids soon got in and made them our dens. The command post still had equipment inside, including an air conditioning system. In the darkness we played kiss-catch. I recall the girls didn't run very fast.)

Other times in the air raids we would crawl into the corrugated iron Anderson shelter that the government supplied. One such night I slipped and gashed my face on the front fascia. The corrugated iron penetrated my cheek. I suppose I should have claimed a pension for a war wound. We crouched in the entrance and watched the searchlights trying to pinpoint the German aircraft for the anti-aircraft guns. We listened to the whistle that the bombs made as they fell.

On the way to school we sometimes saw people working frantically, searching through rubble for trapped victims. Sheila, the little girl who shared my desk, didn't turn up one day. I had passed the ruins of her house. She never turned up again. An incendiary bomb fell through the school roof and the damage meant serious loss of education. Children were being evacuated, but it's the old story, only those with money. The government paid two-thirds of the cost, the parents' one-third. Our family could not afford this. None of the families in our road could afford it.

I have no good memories of my Dad. He always had money for beer and cigarettes while we kids had no shoes. He was called up and for eleven weeks Mom received no allowance. With the help of a more worldly-wise neighbour, who contacted the authorities, she finally got monthly payments from a Dad who couldn't be bothered to fill in a form.

When I got older I discovered that he spent his home leaves back in Lancashire getting drunk with his brother. He was sent away to fight in Egypt, Italy and Germany and it was years before I saw him again.

As the war came to a close a day arrived when I was travelling on a tram from the Bull Ring and a soldier sat in front of me. We alighted at the same stop and I walked behind him. Only when he opened the gate to my house I realized he was my father. He died at the age of forty-nine. By this time I was in uniform myself. His funeral cost £40 and I had to borrow the money from a neighbour to pay for it. There was a lighter note to a sombre occasion. I had been writing to a girl who worked in the flower shop and a note came with the wreaths. So my two weeks compassionate leave turned into two weeks passionate leave.

Childhood

In our road most families were large. You were a sissy if you had fewer than three siblings. Most of us grew up poor, but I don't recall being envious. Once again I just thought this was life.

My house was in a road near Stetchford railway station. Many Lancashire people had disembarked there and they became our neighbours. The rent was fifteen shillings a week. In some of the houses two families shared to halve the cost. I remember coming home from school one day to find Mom and Dad jubilant because a distant uncle of Mom's that she couldn't even remember had died and she had received a share of his will, £11. That would have paid a lot of weeks' rent, but Dad had a better use for it and Mom never saw a penny.

Mom's twin sister had married and remained in Lancashire. She only produced one child. With her husband she opened a fish and chip shop in Liverpool. To us they were rich people. As her son grew out of his clothes Auntie Sarah would post them to Mom. They all smelt strongly of fish and chips. My teacher looked round the class and shouted, 'Who has brought fish and chips to school?' and my classmates pointed at me.

My mother broke her false teeth and Auntie Sarah sent one of her old sets. I shouldn't really have said it but I did, 'Mom, you look like a horse.'

A humiliation I experienced many times at school still scars me. At times an outing was arranged, maybe to the zoo or Cheddar Gorge. Each child paid a few shillings for the trip, but I couldn't do that. Placed in another class for the day I suffered the mocking of the kids there. More still when my classmates returned.

On arrival in Stetchford Dad secured a job at Parkinson's, opposite the railway station. They made gas cookers, water heaters, fires and so on. With the coming of war they had to produce arms and so became a target for German bombers. The worst bombing raid Birmingham suffered destroyed the water mains. If the Germans had come again the next night Birmingham would have burnt to the ground, no water to douse the fires. It was a long time before water was restored to our houses and we either walked a few miles to fill buckets from the River Cole or queued at the emergency tankers.

To the delight of many women the Americans arrived. Neighbours gathered at the gate or leaned on the garden wall, all dressed in turbans and wraparound pinnies and talked about Mrs So-and-So and Mrs Thingummybob. I couldn't see anything wrong with inviting a Yankee soldier in for a cup of tea.

We kids ran like mad behind the troop carriers shouting, 'Give us some gum, chum,' and the Yanks threw chewing gum into the road. German and Italian prisoners of war were allowed to work on the roads and farms. They wore jackets with POW stencilled on the back. They were also invited in for a cup of tea. Everything was rationed and in short supply. Our family had plenty of ration coupons, but no money. The rich people had the money, but they were short of coupons, so we sold them our coupons or exchanged them for goods. My mother sent me to the butcher's with a load of clothing coupons and he asked, 'Do you want meat or money?'

'Mom told me to ask for a pound of whale meat and leave the head on for the cat.'

Petrol was reserved mainly for commercial vehicles. Only a small allowance was given for the few private cars. Fuel for commercial vehicles was pink, so when the police stopped private vehicles and inspected the petrol they knew if it was pink it was stolen or black market.

One day my school received a parcel of sweets from America. What a treat! Shared out we got one each.

Everyone had an open fire, that's if you had money for coal. Many a time we all huddled in the kitchen seeking warmth from a gas ring and praying the penny wouldn't run out. Out of desperation my older brother and I went out in the dead of night with the pram. He scaled the wall of Parkinson's and filled a bucket with coke. I emptied it into the pram and we ran hell for leather back home through blacked-out streets.

Gas lamps lined the road. The bigger boys shinned up them to impress the girls by lighting a cigarette from the pilot light. The ornamental lamp tops were removed to be stored until the bombing finished, so we lived in the dark for a long time.

To make a little pocket money we searched everywhere for pop bottles, even knocking on doors, to collect the few pennies deposit. We climbed over a large gate at the back of Cox's Off-Licence to help ourselves from the crates of empty beer bottles. Then we returned the bottles to the off-licence to put a few coppers in our pockets. We bought an orange box for four pence and broke it up to make two buckets of firewood, sold them for four pence each and repeated the exercise. With a little money we could go to the pictures and see Flash Gordon and the Clay Men, Dagwood Bumstead and later, Ma and Pa Kettle. No sweets in the shops so we bought a packet of sweetened cocoa each and sat in the stalls dipping a wet finger into the box and transferring the cocoa to our mouths. We emerged from the cinema looking like Al Jolson. Two films were shown and between the films the Home Guard appeared on stage and demonstrated their drill capabilities. We kept our gas masks with us all the time. Toddlers' gas masks looked like Mickey Mouse and for babes in arms they resembled oxygen tents. Children could get into the cinema for more adult films only if accompanied by an adult. Scores of kids gathered on the forecourt pleading, 'Will you take one in, mister?' usually successfully.

My young sister Margaret injured her foot while paddling in the River Cole and needed to visit the doctor. We were all brought up to be frightened of the doctor, because before 1948 you had to pay, impossible for Mother to do. If any of us was ill she would threaten, 'If you don't get better you'll have to go to the doctor's.' This forceful statement put us in fear of what the doctor might do, to this day I fear the doctor. Mom nursed us herself, but an injury was different. The doctor refused to believe there was anything wrong with Margaret, saying she was malingering to avoid school. She suffered two weeks of agony until a shard of glass passed through her foot and emerged on top. Then, 'Bless my soul,' said the doctor.

The whole population was urged to dig for victory. Along with growing vegetables people bred chickens and even pigs. People disposed of what few scraps were left over by putting them in bins placed in the streets and council workers collected the contents to help feed pigs on farms. In our road two men sent home from the war suffered badly from shell shock. They wandered aimlessly around the streets and scavenged the slops in the bins. Not understanding, we kids used to tease Bodger and Todger, as we called them. Many times in the night the clang awoke me of the bin lid hitting the road and from my window I could see local men stealing the pig food to give to their own pigs. These were not the only opportunists. Horses and carts delivered most things, like bread, milk and coal. The horses twigged there was food to be had and they soon learned to nudge the lid off the pig bin.

The Richmond pub in Stetchford let people shelter in the cellars during air raids. It turned out lucky for those living in the semi-detached houses next door. They were flattened by a direct hit. These council houses were rebuilt after the war to match the houses still standing, except that the roofs were tiled with different tiles. On house roofs in the road now called the Meadway, which leaves Station Road next to the police station and shortly reaches the crossroads at Queen's Road, are large patches of different coloured tiles. I remember going to look at the gaping holes caused when a bomb landed at the crossroads and blasted off parts of the roofs. In a daylight raid, shoppers at Glebe Farm, a short distance away, were machine gunned by a German plane.

With the end of the war came huge celebrations, triumphant marches round the streets carrying effigies of Hitler, Goering and Goebbels. After the parade people hanged the effigies on pre-erected gallows and burned them to oblivion on huge bonfires. Fences ripped up the whole length of the road provided fuel for the fires. We each received two tickets, one for a drink and one for a cake or an ice-cream. My eldest sister Nora won a hundred yards race and was presented with a hairbrush. I was so proud of her.

Dad came home. His health was gone, but he still managed to sire the ninth baby, Edward. I have often wondered how many the family would have numbered if there hadn't been a war, there was a six year gap between Margaret and Edward and only a couple of years between the rest of us. In the eight years he had left to live, Dad had several jobs. One was as a carpenter's mate. He came home one evening with a Yale lock, which he fitted to the front door. But back at work somebody had squealed and he was told, 'Return that lock or else.' He returned the lock, so now we had a 1¼ inch hole in the front door at shoulder height. Nobody who knocked the door could resist looking through that hole. Responding to a caller meant walking along the hall with an eye staring at you. Nora and I had a contest guessing whose eye it was.

Goods must have become more available, but I hardly noticed. We still couldn't buy fish and chips unless we had our own newspaper to wrap them in, we had to use treacle to sweeten our tea and we cut out pieces of cardboard to fit over the holes in our shoes. Anderson shelters were in big demand, re-erected as workshops and garages. The kids in the road assembled in one of these door-less structures, a sort of gang hut. One day Margaret Plimmer, a big girl, jumped up and held onto a hanging piece of corrugated iron. The whole garage collapsed trapping ten of us inside. Nobody was seriously injured, and I was the last brought out, with a gash in my leg. As the blood ran into my shoe I thought, 'Oh well, it'll run out of the hole in the sole.'

My pal Billy Gittins, one of ten children, came home to find his mother resting her head on a cushion. She was lying on the kitchen floor and her head was in the gas oven. The family was re-housed but a few years later, Mr Gittins full of remorse chose the same way out. My mother and Mrs Gittins used to help each other out. If we had tea and no margarine, I would be sent with half a packet of tea to swap for half a packet of margarine, and so on.

By this time I was at senior school. I assembled a bicycle with bits my Dad brought home from his job as dustman at the time. A boy was killed in a road accident. I didn't know him, in fact I doubt if many people knew him. His funeral cortege drove past our school and all the children stood along the pavement to pay our respects. Afterwards we went back to our classes. These days somebody would insist we all needed counselling. The large Co-Operative shop was the site of one of our pranks. They used to spread sawdust over the floor, sweeping up the dirty sawdust at the end of the day and replacing it for the morning. The mischief we got up to was to hold up the letterbox flap (very carefully, strong spring) and aiming with the other hand to see who could pee the furthest mark in the sawdust. Johnny Plimmer always won. He had a couple of inches start on the rest of us.

We still played cowboys and Indians, pretending to gallop horses round the streets, slapping our rumps and shooting cap pistols that we acquired from Woolworth's one way or another. It was getting dark one night and outside my house I could hear my pals. Grabbing my cap gun I rushed out to join what must be a cowboy game. What a disappointment! Several lads clustered next to a tall overgrown privet hedge in a dark corner of our cul-de-sac. They were taking it in turns to fumble with Dorothy Ollerenshaw and Peggy and Annie Schofield. I went home.

They never wanted to play cowboys again.

Schooldays

‘Why weren’t you at school yesterday?’ asked the teacher.
‘I had no shoes, sir,’ I replied.

Mom and I had spent most of the day before in an enormous queue at Steelhouse Lane police station where clothing and footwear were being distributed courtesy of the Daily Mail. I received a pair of Daily Mail boots, easily recognisable, which made me the subject of much taunting. In my house we didn’t go to bed until most of us were home, because with only the odd blanket we needed everybody’s coat on the two beds that six of us shared. In my final year at junior school my teacher Miss Evans had told me I had top marks in most subjects.

‘You would pass for the grammar school,’ she said.

But Dad had spoken. ‘Who do you think you are? We can’t afford uniforms and we can’t afford you spending extra years at school. Grammar school is for posh kids. Remember your place. You’ll have to get to work as soon as possible.’

A black boy from Jamaica joined our school. He amazed us, the first black person we had ever seen in the flesh. We made him very welcome and everybody wanted to be his friend. Most of our sports heroes were black, such as Joe Louis the heavyweight boxer and McDonald Bailey the runner, so we expected this boy to be able to run like the wind and swim like a dolphin. But of course, he was just like the rest of us. My oldest sister Nora and her best friend Jean Lewis had started going to dances, and Jean used to come to our house to get ready. She made Marilyn Monroe look like a man and she used to tease me unmercifully, smothering my twelve-year old face with kisses and leaving it as red as her lipstick. She was in the Land Army and I can see her now in her jodhpurs, riding a bike with her blonde hair streaming behind her.

The two girls sent me to the park to gather a small bag of sand. They wetted their legs before rubbing the sand all over. They pencilled a thin black line down the backs of their legs so that without close inspection they looked as if they could afford nylons.

When Nora finally met the man who became her husband it was winter and she was wearing the only shoes she possessed, a pair of ankle-length fur boots. Spring and summer came and she still had to turn up on dates wearing those boots. Years later I lost several girlfriends because I turned up in appalling weather with no overcoat. They thought there wasn't much prospect with this guy.

A group of us was heading for the park to play football when Jean's sister Pauline emerged from the house. She didn't have Jean's looks but the material of her blouse was at breaking point.

'Austin,' she called to a lad she had a fancy for, 'there's nobody in.' 'I'm going to play football,' was the reply he stunned me with. Pauline dragged her blouse open to reveal an amazing super-structure. 'There's nobody in,' she repeated.

We all went to play football, including Austin, but I couldn't keep my mind on the game.

Following the fatal road accident our lessons included road safety, eventually leading to a test. Michael Peach and I were the only pupils who produced the correct answer to every question. We each received a road safety certificate and a ticket to Billy Smart's circus. That's the only certificate I've ever had on my wall.

With the shortage of labour the government allowed boys over thirteen to work on the farms. We piled into the open lorries that transported us to the fruit or potato picking. It meant loss of education, but it also meant earning ten pence an hour (five pence in today's money). I handed the money over to Mom. During lunch breaks we rolled around in the hay stored in a barn. One of the lads set fire to the hay while smoking a cigarette. The barn burned down and the farmer was not pleased.

Weekends and holidays a little gang of us pedalled off into the countryside beyond Coleshill, about twelve miles east of Birmingham. A super-highway has now replaced the winding country lanes. I rode a huge sit-up-and-beg bike that my father had stolen from outside a pub only a mile from home. I had to ride with my legs through the triangle because if I sat on the saddle I couldn't reach the pedals. We took a bottle of water and a sandwich if we were lucky, and we played on a disused railway track. I started a paper round. I lied about my age as I was only twelve, but the newsagent wasn't much bothered. Twice a day, for six days and Sunday mornings, six shillings a week. Mom let me keep the money and for six shillings a week I bought a bright blue Hercules dropped handlebar road bike. Now the real cycling began. Every chance I got I was off.

My school was in two parts, one for boys and the other for girls. Girls left ten minutes before boys so that they wouldn't be pestered. The headmaster got it the wrong way round.

I learned to swim at Green Lane Baths. There had been two pools, first and second class, but first class got bombed so it was girls one day and boys the next in second class. The reason was that there were no changing cubicles, only a shelf fixed round the walls.

Three of us went shoplifting in Woolworth's. Two staged a fight, wrestling on the floor. While shoppers crowded round the third grabbed torches, marbles, fountain pens, water pistols and so on to sell at school. Honesty was a luxury we couldn't afford.

At fourteen years old I was the only boy in the fourth year wearing short trousers. When my older brother Eric joined the army I had the trousers he left behind. The thigh of the right leg had a small hole where he had burned it with a cigarette. Mother darned it but the place was still visible. I developed the habit of holding my hand over the patch, and I did this for so long that even when I acquired patch-free trousers I still stood or walked with my hand covering my thigh. I couldn't conceal the patch all the time. My tormentors soon spotted it.

Work and the Army

1947 – the worst British weather on record. Thirteen weeks of snow and ice. People had primitive heating methods; most only heated the living room. The same winter would seem nowhere near as bad now. Everybody has central heating, open the door of any shop and heat pours out. Snowploughs are abundant and we can cope better.

As a paperboy I struggled through drifts of snow taller than me. The ‘Mail’ must go through. Most of the other lads didn’t turn up, but I needed the six shillings for my Hercules bike.

With the snow gone we had a glorious summer and I happily delivered my papers over a large area still blessed at that time with fields and farms. I passed Blakesley Hall, boarded up after bomb damage but restored later. I used to dream about how nice it would be to build a bungalow here, silly dreams for a young boy, but I looked at various sites and carried on dreaming. Gradually the city spread and the land got taken up, but for some reason one plot was fenced round and left untouched.

For years and years I checked on this plot. When I got married I bought a new terraced house on mortgage for the staggering amount of £2,000. I was earning £11 a week and I paid £11 a month mortgage for thirty years. Thirty years after dreaming of buying the plot I realised that with the equity on my little house it was actually a possibility. The council informed me that they owned the plot and had completely overlooked it. So I bought it and built a bungalow. I called the bungalow ‘My Way.’

My sister Nora worked at Southall’s Alum Rock. Many women in our road worked there. The factory produced women’s sanitary goods. The materials came to the factory in muslin sacks and the women brought the sacks home to use as net curtains. The sacks had black stencils every few inches and my mother boiled and boiled the muslin to remove the brand before dyeing and hanging them. Nobody else bothered, they just hung them up. To walk down our road was to see primitive net curtains branded with the name Southall’s.

When I left school Dad got me a job painting lamp-posts. I refused the job and started with a small building and decorating firm. War damage work was priority, and permits to buy materials were issued for it. This didn't affect the rich people, who claimed that work needed doing on their business premises and then used the materials to spruce up their elegant houses.

One of my first jobs was in Small Heath, replacing slates that were full of shrapnel holes.

I was doing more cycling. Not only did I find it enjoyable, and still do, but it was also an affordable pastime. Geoffrey Colman suggested we spend a week's holiday riding in Wales. After some persuasion I was hooked. I spent a year saving every penny I could get, resorting once again to selling firewood and collecting bottles. My wages were seven pence an hour, or £1-5s-0d a week. I handed them over to Mom and she gave me back 3s-6d a week for myself.

That first serious cycle ride hooked me for life. We covered five hundred miles in one week. We stayed at youth hostels and had to obtain emergency ration cards to buy meat. We had a tremendous time.

For the next three years I rode out a good distance every fourth weekend, I couldn't afford to do it every week. I was usually alone because Geoff played rugby for Dunlop's. In 1953 we set out together to ride to Land's End. We got there on Coronation Day and saw countless people enjoying street parties despite the rain. I didn't think then that I would be riding round sixty years later enjoying the street celebrations laid on for the Queen's Jubilee, in the pouring rain again.

I was at Hartington Hall in Dovedale Valley when the announcement came on the radio saying that men my age must register for National Service. The announcements were made fortnightly. I presented myself with hundreds of other men at Oozells Street for documentation and a thorough medical examination.

A nurse took details and told me to join a very long queue. 'To save time,' she suggested, 'remove your clothing. If you have no underpants you can leave your trousers on.' I put my clothes on a shelf and stood in line. Many more men were wearing trousers than underpants. My first ever underpants were Army issue. Description: Drawers, cellular, green.

After a touch your toes examination the doctor pronounced me Grade One fit. He added, 'You're a small fellow.' He wasn't referring to my height. Over the years being a small fellow has never given me any big problems. Rephrase that, has never given me any small problems.

Every two weeks the call-up gave you a three-month wait before you actually enlisted. Teddy Tudor had a religious mother and declared himself a conscientious objector. He went into the medical corps. Roy Howarth worked at the Rover car plant. He was imprisoned for raping a girl in the park. The newspaper headlines said about him, 'Nineteen pounds a week at age nineteen.' This was a colossal wage then. I was earning £7 a week, £5 for Mom and £2 for me.

Hughie Megetigan died very young from a heart attack. Colin Nicholls failed his medical, to the huge disappointment of his father, who had been my own dad's sergeant major and had lived for the day his son would be in uniform. Eventually Colin was accepted into the police force and became a motorbike cop. His dad was over the moon, but three months later Colin crashed into a telegraph pole. He was buried in uniform.

Gideon Williams' mother took him back to Wales. She didn't want him in the army, too dangerous. If you worked down the mines you were exempt from military service. Gideon was crushed between two coal trucks and he lived, but

I got to know Jack Ferdinando, an older man who had been a professional soldier. Shortly after the outbreak of war his entire unit was captured and spent the whole war in captivity. Jack was the Regimental Sergeant in charge of discipline. 'As long as we behaved there were no problems,' he told me. 'Could have done with more food but we had enough.'

Under supervision they worked on farms and in factories, content to wait the war out. 'We'll be free soon.' Over such a long period of time they formed friendships with guards and exchanged family news. They wept in each other's arms when they heard about the bombing of their respective towns.

When at last the allies swept across the country the Germans moved the prisoners deeper into Germany. Jack instructed his men to keep together. 'We'll be free soon. Don't make a break for it just so you can boast you escaped. You'll be shot.'

Gradually the Germans lost interest in the prisoners and began to scatter. The allies surrounded them and set up tables for short interviews. Some of the Germans who could now speak good English tried to pass themselves off as English in the hope of going to England. (Well, the girls are lovelier.)

With RSM Ferdinando at his side the commanding officer set about his task. 'Point out any German who has treated prisoners badly and he will be dispatched immediately.'

Jack told me, 'We didn't need to point out a single one.'

In a Foreign Country

Two years of military service ahead, hundreds of us were herded onto the train like sheep. I was more than a little frightened. The other recruits seemed much more worldly-wise than me, setting up card schools, practically all smoking and every other word an obscenity. When we reached London I couldn't understand why so many young women were standing around. They must have been waiting for a pop star.

In quarters at the barracks I selected a bed from the thirty available. 'Strip to the waist,' was the order and we marched away to collect our uniforms. On return all money had been removed from our jackets. Discipline was brutal, in those days they could get away with it. We had to serve our time like it or not.

We received £1-8s a week. I sent seven shillings a week home to my mother and spent most of the rest on cleaning materials. The floor had to be polished with black boot polish, then it was covered with our bed blankets, nobody must walk on the floor. The pot-bellied stove shone like a full moon, it was never used. Nobody put coal in the coal bucket, but every man spent ten minutes a day polishing the darned thing.

The clothes in our lockers had to be placed in a particular order, showing a one-inch strip to the front. To achieve this effect we inserted pieces of cardboard in the garments. There had to be thirteen studs in our boots. We were issued with a plate and a mug. As we queued in a long column a ponce-up commissioned officer walked up and down the line, demanding here and there to see the crockery. Without fail he smashed it on the floor, shouted 'Filthy! Now pick up the pieces!' and walked on.

I reported that my greatcoat had been stolen. The sergeant gave me a blistering telling-off. 'I'm not your mother. You're in the army now. Just make sure you have a greatcoat at the next inspection.' I had to steal one from another barrack room.

After eight weeks of training I came home on embarkation leave. I was being sent to Germany. ‘What an adventure,’ I thought.

Dad was more or less bedridden. We had a terrible row when he insisted on seeing me off at the station. I thought it would look sissy to be seen off by my Dad. I nearly missed the train because he could hardly walk. He knew he was dying and I didn’t. We shook hands and I boarded the train. That was the last time I saw him alive.

From the barracks in Harwich I was the mug who had to march in front of a column of soldiers with a sign saying ‘Soldiers Marching’. I felt a complete fool. We were on our way to board ship. Many of the lads were very sea sick. We docked at the Hook of Holland. Again crowds of young ladies at the docks, the pop star must have been appearing there as well.

We reached Munchen Gladbach by train and here I spent almost two years. I was so excited at being in a foreign country that I marched up to the guard post to sign out. I got a plastering from the sergeant. Apparently I was a disgrace to my country; the crease in my trousers wasn’t good enough. Back to barracks, trousers pressed, I was allowed out. Months later guys said how brave they thought I was. The majority served their two years frightened to leave the camp. I drew a bicycle from stores and explored the countryside, I went on outings by coach, I just loved to get about.

I lost my virginity in Amsterdam. Regular coach trips took soldiers to Holland and they came back with thought-provoking tales. So there I was with two pals taking in the sights and Lordy, Lordy what sights! Three women took charge of us. We entered the same house and climbed the stairs. We each took a bedroom.

‘You have money for me, darling,’ spoke the maiden.

‘How much?’

‘One pound,’ she said.

I objected. Taffy Hopkins had just told us he paid ten shillings. She shouted down the corridor to check with the other maidens, but my pals must have had money to burn.

‘No,’ she said, ‘they agree to one pound. But I take all my clothes off.’

That clinched it, and I found all was in working order.

I was determined to learn German and I got pretty good. I met Marta and we had some pleasant times together. I got jealous one day when a German youth got too chatty with her and we finished by squaring up outside. I landed some solid punches and was enjoying myself until he started hitting me back. Marta’s brother stepped in and called it off, thank goodness.

I did better with a Scots guy, Jock McQuillan. He was a self-styled tough with a little band of followers. He repeatedly bullied assorted victims and swaggered about, bragging what he and his boys could do. I was working shifts in battery section, no work, just supervising the German workers. I returned from shift and fell asleep in a flash. Our room had ten beds, so it had the most space to congregate in. Jock and his cronies entered, making a hell of a row boasting about how they had just roughed up a couple of blokes from another company.

I was flaming mad at being woken up. ‘Shut up and get out of our room.’ Silence descended. The guys not on shift sat up. Nobody talked like that to Jock McQuillan. Jock found his voice. ‘See if you can shut me up.’

I swung my feet out of bed and put on my shoes. Jock was describing what he was going to do to me. I stepped round the bunch of other Scotsmen and hit Jock in the face as hard as I could. As the blood spread across his face everybody gazed at me in disbelief that somebody had struck hard man McQuillan.

I should have followed it up, but I stood back. He came at me like a battering ram and I backpedalled down the room. I came to a stop with my rump against the card table. I went back on the card table as the Scotsman gripped my hips and held me down. But my hands were free. I punched him insensible and his cronies dragged him away.

‘Get him out of our room and don’t come in here again.’ I didn’t have a mark on me.

A damaged McQuillan stood at attention for muster inspection. Sergeant major said not a word, fights were encouraged. From that day on guys spoke very politely to me.

Army Capers

17 Vehicle Battalion, Ayrshire Barrack was my address. Now the Munchen Gladbach football ground, it had been an airfield during the war. Excellent quarters, the only largish room was battery section. The rest mostly contained two beds so they were easy to keep clean and tidy with your best pal.

Christmas came along. I bought a chicken and the cookhouse sergeant had it roasted for me complete with roast potatoes and vegetables. The others ridiculed me because I wouldn't have a drink. I blamed the poverty our family endured on my father's drinking and smoking habits, and to this day I have never smoked a cigarette. Later in life I realised there was nothing wrong with having a drink, providing the family came first, and my family wanted for nothing within reason.

I was dead set on not drinking and at age nineteen I still drank orange pop. One night on prowler guard, spruced up and carrying a rifle (no ammunition), it was hot and I slipped into the NAAFI to grab a quick drink. They'd stopped serving soft drinks in the restaurant and I had to enter the bar. A huge cheer went up as my already inebriated comrades pulled me to their table and placed a pint of beer in front of me. After much badgering I drank it, followed by two more. I was taking a risk drinking on guard duty. My mates pushed me outside. I staggered round, found my way back to the guardhouse and with the other guards looking at me in amazement I threw myself on the bed and passed out. I think it was only because I was known as the guy who belted Jock McQuillan that nobody reported me. So I blame the NAAFI for my long time habit of drinking beer instead of sticking to orange pop.

Two years passed very slowly. We weren't allowed to work, only to supervise the German Service Organisation. What a waste of manpower, over a thousand men at our camp and we could have been put to good use clearing bomb damage and rebuilding.

I took a job as a waiter in the sergeants' mess. I thought I looked handsome in my white jacket and black trousers, and some of the sergeants had teenage daughters. Those men who shouted orders at us every day lost any respect I had for them. They got hopelessly drunk every night, but I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, they never counted their change. At the end of the night glasses of drinks were left over. I kept several trays of drinks and sandwiches outside the back door. Sometimes the sergeants complained they hadn't enough sandwiches, but they didn't look outside the back door. Loaded up I returned to my block (several journeys necessary) and woke the lads for their midnight feast.

Coupons were issued to buy cigarettes, a shilling for twenty. I sold mine to the Germans for one shilling and eight pence for twenty. On battery section we had tea and sugar supplied, much more than we used. I sold the surplus.

Bored with doing nothing I applied for protective clothing to work with the Germans among the batteries. I was moved to tyre section. The bonus here was that almost every day a truckload of used tyres got taken miles away to a salvage depot. I supervised the German driver, a huge man being supervised by a little skinny man. He had a girlfriend along the way and I sat helpless in the cab while he sampled some sauerkraut. I got to know him quite well as my German improved, so when he asked me if I'd like to make some money I didn't refuse. It was easy to load a few brand new tyres underneath the worn ones. A glance inside the lorry at the guardhouse showed them nothing and Wolfgang and I drove to a dropping-off point he was well aware of. I suppose the army was lucky I didn't get a job in the armoury, I could have re-armed Germany and started World War Three.

I got involved in all sorts of things that could have caused me serious trouble. One of the escapades was when the lads broke into the NAAFI in the early hours, pushed out a two foot square panel in the suspended ceiling and hid cigarettes, lighters, watches and other attractive goods while the prowler guard was persuaded to prowl elsewhere. The search of barracks that followed was fruitless.

The major trouble I found myself in was eight weeks from demob. It started when two of our lads returned to camp badly beaten by some German youths. They ran round the rooms, assembled a group totalling twenty-eight, and we all set off down town for a revenge attack. At the pub we challenged the youths to come outside and all hell broke loose. Pitched battles erupted as hundreds of Germans poured out of the houses. Paving stones were ripped up and thrown at us or else through the windows of British businesses that had been set up. Snatch squads dragged some of the lads away in cars. Twenty-eight against that mob was useless and we ran in the direction of camp fighting all the way but swamped and badly beaten.

I ran past a man thinking he was one of ours. He tripped me up, he was one of theirs. I laid into him and punched him to the ground, but then I was surrounded. I was on the floor. I saw feet coming in and I entered oblivion.

I came round in a German's house. People were patching up my face and my roommate and best friend Mick Pointon had come back for me. Once I was patched up the Germans pushed us outside. They didn't want repercussions. Outside was still a raging mob. Redcaps roared in with jeeps, lined us up and marched us out between two lines of bloodthirsty people. With all the bravado we could muster we pointed at the sky shouting 'Heil Hitler!' I was under arrest.

Locked Up

We all got locked up. Days of inspection parades began identity parades and interrogations by the Special Investigation Branch. Some of the badly hurt Germans were in hospital. The SIB put it down as an anti-British riot and left us to the mercy of the Regimental Sergeant Major. We were confined to barracks under open arrest, normally not too severe, but the RSM was in a flaming temper. The regimental police had orders to make things as tough as possible, we would be given the worst duties available and marched all over the camp at the double. Army police positioned a hundred yards apart each took over marching us until eventually we dropped to our knees.

One thousand men all wearing the same uniform lined up along the disused airstrip for an identity parade. A group of Germans moved slowly along the line, but I wasn't singled out even with my head heavily bandaged. Any man pointed out was ordered to step forward, but the pub owner pushed him back immediately, 'Nein! Nein'. He didn't want anybody punished. We had always behaved well, even taking presents to his four-year old twin sons. He knew we had been reacting to the behaviour of the German youths.

After yet another parade in front of the commanding officer the RSM blew his top. We had upset his cosy routine because instead of sitting comfortably in the mess nursing a beer he was organising parade after parade. At maybe fifty years of age he still stood out as some strong looking guy. He had fought all over the world during the war and he spelled it out to us.

'So you think you're tough, do you? I'll take each one of you on. Who's going to be first?'

The twenty-eight men included several boxers, one of them Barney Beale, British middleweight champion. But nobody stepped forward.

END OF PREVIEW

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