

SOME CHILDHOOD MEMORIES – 1913 to 1932 by Leslie Jagers

Born on the 10th October 1913 (*at home; 9 Rensburg Road, Walthamstow*), naturally I have no memories of the time before the outbreak of the Great War, nor of my Father who as a Regular Soldier had already served his time by the conclusion of the Boer War in 1902 at the age of 31. Remaining as a Reservist, he was recalled for service again in the autumn of 1914 (not an “Old Contemptible”). Family legend has it that he was injured by being blown up in 1917, and although apparently not found for three days could not have been badly wounded. My Mother was bitterly upset that after recovery from his injuries, despite his age (46) Father was returned to ‘Front Line’ duty, remaining in France until the end of the War before ultimately coming home and being demobilised in the spring of 1919. So far as I was ever aware he never had any home leave from being recalled in 1914 until demobilisation.

Of the War years I remember very little; being in hospital, which I hated, was my first real memory, at the age of about 3 years. Why was I so unhappy? Firstly because Mother on leaving me at the hospital said she would be back to take me home that evening, and secondly because of the strict regime pertaining those days in hospitals. No matter what I did I seemed to get into trouble. In hospital for the removal of a growth on my left shoulder blade, probably not more than two weeks, the relief felt when it was time to go home lives with me even to this day. Two other very minor things I recall concerned apparently being able to predict air raids (Zeppelin) and Herrings for Christmas Dinner. I also suffered the occasional mild epileptic fit as a youngster.

Vague memories exist of my first day at school (Coppermill Lane Infants), then of progressing (adequately I suppose) through this and the Junior School likewise, up to the main Boys School at around 10 years of age. I remember joining Mr Banks’ class. He was a strict disciplinarian but rarely used the cane. We tried our utmost to see if we could force him to do so but no success, and our year became just as well disciplined as our predecessors (and those of subsequent years). Undoubtedly the best and well respected, indeed much liked, teacher at Coppermill Lane School.

Like most pupils I had a dislike of one master in particular, he used to rap our knuckles with a wooden ruler if he suspected we were not concentrating on our work. As can be imagined, the more he did it, the more we played up, and his class was always the most unruly, a cause of concern to the very well liked and above all respected headmaster, Mr. Morris. The art master was another who maintained discipline by the use of the cane, but never maliciously. Painting was by water-colours, and a bucket of water presumably for washing out brushes was placed at the front of the class. For some misdemeanour I did on one occasion get called out to receive two strokes of the cane, one on each hand. Punishment administered, on the way back to my desk probably with a smirk on my face I plunged my hands into the cold water bucket, thus relieving the pain immediately. Observing this, the master called me back, told me to bend over, and caned me four times on my bottom; he then suggested I might like to sit in the bucket if I wished. Touché! – a sore bottom but no hard feelings.

At the age of 10 plus I sat the Grammar School entrance examination and failed! No matter that sister Grace was already attending High School and there was no way our Parents could afford that anybody else should do so.

The school motto was “Play up and play the game”. We were very proud of our school. Of course, the occasional fights occurred but these always took place well away from school, in what was called “Sandy Lane, between the reservoirs. Bare-knuckle of course, but nobody ever suffered real hurt. I was the subject of some bullying and in order to stop it had no alternative but to challenge the somewhat bigger lad to a fight. A big crowd turned up to watch and I expected a good beating, but probably because I faced up to him the bully never turned up, and thereafter he never bothered me again.

For serious indiscipline a “punishment book” was kept in the assembly hall in which the serious offences were recorded together with the punishment administered, which was carried out by the headmaster in front of the whole school assembled. I was once caned (4 strokes) in front of the whole school and my name entered into the “punishment book”. I only remember how unjust the punishment seemed, as I was in no way involved in whatever the mischief was. Despite appeals made by me and others on my behalf – some teachers included – the real culprit (I had no idea who it was) never owned up. Despite that blot on my character I became a school prefect, and left with a glowing reference shortly after my fourteenth birthday.

At school I was very keen on soccer, but money was tight and Dad could not afford to buy me a pair of football boots. He did however promise me he would do so if I became a member of the school first eleven. In the meantime, I adapted my ordinary school boots by putting papier-mâché in the toes to harden them, and studs in the soles. He kept his word, and how proud I was when eventually I got the proper boots; I looked after them lovingly. As well as the organised school football activities, we played whenever possible in the street; often using a tennis ball if this was all we had. All the youngsters did this then and at one stage around 1925 it was so popular there was even an unofficial street “league” comprising teams from Rensburg Road and the nearby streets York Road and Chester Road. Once when my Aunt Lou (Dad’s sister) was staying at home, she rounded the corner from Coppermill Lane and being by then quite a little old lady was nearly bowled over by our group of very unruly street urchins.

While at school I was also a member of the school tug-of-war team, acting as anchorman at the annual Walthamstow schools’ sports day. We lost in the final, largely because I was wearing the wrong footwear and kept slipping. I should have had plimsolls, but my only pair was so badly worn they probably would have been useless anyway.

Father during this period was employed at Waterlow & Sons in the City working not only very long hours but also a six-day week. We the family saw little of him, the principal memory of those days being of him sitting in his armchair by the fireside contentedly smoking his pipe. On occasions on Saturdays when returning from work he would ‘bump into’ old army comrades leading inevitably to a drink for ‘old times sake’ plus a few more! Arriving home late the worse for drink, not only was his meal spoiled but the next week’s housekeeping somewhat depleted. Mother of course got very upset but the atmosphere was worsened by the vicious condemnation of my eldest sister Gladys. She was by then in employment and I suppose she felt duty bound to help make up the shortfall in the housekeeping. It was about this time, perhaps because I felt sorry for him knowing by then what he had gone through in the war, that I began to know Dad better. He was not averse to taking his belt to us children, particularly Bert and myself, when as we did quite often, squabble with one another. Mind you it was not always possible to catch us and although I suppose he was rather strict nevertheless I always thought him very fair. The day he asked me to clean his uniform buttons and especially his medals was a proud one for me. This task I carried out for many years, every Saturday morning when also it was my job to clean the knives and by doing so keeping them well sharpened

Without realising what was going on, I do remember the day Norman was born (February 1920). I thought my Mother was ill, perhaps even seriously, and was somewhat bewildered by the number of people; neighbours I suppose, milling around and all the activity going on. I imagine I was very much in the way although I doubt I asked any questions; in those days children were expected to be seen but not heard. No memory of Dad being present, probably at work – such things didn’t warrant time off in those days. No telephone communication either and Dad would have had to wait until he got home late in the evening to know all was well. Because of the age difference and with the war years being between us I have no real memories of Norman as a baby.

How things improved at home in the 1920’s; and Mum always said these were the happiest times of her life, with all the family at home. In the summer the sun always seemed to shine,

and there were still plenty of green fields and open spaces quite close to home then .We enjoyed day trips to Southend, and even had a longer holiday there one year.

My elder brother George became a Master Plumber, and I used to watch him “wiping” a lead pipe joint – almost like a sculpture, certainly functional and very decorative. Because of the age difference (8 years) George was my favourite brother. He was a very gentle and kind person, and I was almost sad when he left home to marry Grace – who became a third “Grace” in the family at that time – “George’s Grace”, also my sister and my aunt.

Whilst not fully realising it at the time, my sister Gladys took it upon herself to ensure that whatever else I did, I should attend church (St. James) not only four times every Sunday but also of course Good Friday, Stations of the Cross evenings in Lent, and all festivals. I had no singing voice, but after confirmation I took on various duties starting with carrying banners in processions, then the Crucifix and the incense. Sunday school when young was compulsory in Gladys’ eyes, and again after confirmation as a Sunday school teacher. Eventually I was appointed to altar service, attending mass at 11 am every Sunday and early morning communion every Friday morning. Very much a chore this latter, as I continued for many years doing this and not always getting to work on time – after I was married, it was not a duty I was able to carry out any more.

I never really got on as well with Bert, who like me had to leave school at 14 (in 1923). He was very ambitious and studied hard at evening classes, eventually qualifying as an Incorporated Accountant. The only sport he was interested in was swimming, taught I believe by his future wife Maude Ashenden. His father-in-law held a very senior position in Dunhill’s, the then very well known and long-established tobacco firm. Legend had it that at the time of Bert & Maude’s marriage he was suffering deep depression and was unable to work. When war broke out he became his old self and remained so until the end, only then to relapse and become generally incapable.

Upon leaving school a couple of months after my 14th birthday, my first job was as a junior clerk at a solicitor’s office – mainly copying letters in a press and then delivering them. The firm’s head office was at Walthamstow, but they had a small City office at Cheapside and I was left on my own a lot there. Unfortunately I was made redundant after only some four weeks, in January 1928! On the 1st February, I joined the insurance broker Pickford, Watson & Dawson Brothers as an insurance clerk working at Bevis Marks House, Houndsditch EC3. This fortunately lasted somewhat longer, but I contracted a bad dose of ‘flu over Christmas 1932, and so was not able to go into work on the morning of 27th December. My mother, like many of her generation, was terrified of using the telephone, so my employer was not notified within the prescribed time, and I duly got my cards in the post on the 28th December! I was then unemployed for eight weeks. On the 20th February 1933 I joined Messrs Norman Frizzell & Partners, another insurance broker, at 10 Draper’s Gardens EC2, and was to stay with them in various capacities for many years.

For all of us, Saturday morning work was normal, and we were also expected to attend evening classes several times a week to further our chosen careers. I continued to play football for the “Old Boys” for several years after I left school, also then often playing table tennis in the local church hall under very dim lights, usually until well after midnight. Going initially with some other local lads for moral support, I also attempted dancing at the local “palais” in Walthamstow, which was how I came to meet Connie in 1929 when we were both 16. She inspired me to take proper dancing lessons, as I was evidently greatly in need of improving my technique! It was also about this happy time that I suffered what was to be my last epileptic fit, in of all places the Lloyd’s Room in the City. As the nature of this problem was still not yet understood by many people, I was taken to Guy’s Hospital for examination and treatment. Also about this time, my dancing and football activities were temporarily interrupted by a displaced cartilage, which also required hospital attention; I had to keep my leg strapped up for several weeks.