

LIFE ON THE ROCKS  
  
BRIAN HESTER

—2009—

## DEDICATION

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**I**n the following chapters I give an account of my early days and subsequent working life. During the course of this life, I met many people of various races and creeds, lived on four continents as well as visited a far wider variety of places than is afforded most people. Given these circumstances, it is reasonable that I dedicate my efforts to everyone who has influenced me in some way along the course of this life, and especially the many whose company I enjoyed. I am grateful for the mentoring many gave of their own free will. I have tried to repay this as I acquired experience. The names of some have faded from memory, others I recall clearly. There are even some who, at the time of our encounter, I would rather not have met, but they in their turn influenced my life so it would not be fair to selectively ignore them here. After all, they did help mould me into the person I am. For these reasons I prefer to avoid specific dedications except of course firstly to the memory of my parents who encouraged me in my early years and later never complained when their only child left home and took to moving about the face of the planet. Secondly I should mention my wife Barbara and family with whom I shared some good times but who tolerated without complaint the uncomfortable and less than pleasant times that I led them into occasionally.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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I would like to acknowledge a few people who have contributed their skills to the creation of this book. Although all the stories are of my own telling and are true, working in collaboration with others has enabled me to bring this work to completion in a presentable format to be enjoyed, critiqued or ‘heaven forbid’, sold in a local rummage sale. Nicole Wright, a social anthropologist, saw the possible interest of the story of a geologist who meandered through many cultures and managed to write about them. She collected some good people and found a way to bring the tale to publication. Her colleague, David Moratto, a desktop publisher, always wanted to design a book where he could embellish a good historical tale into a visually appealing layout — something future generations he hopes will still find compelling. Dr. Zisis Parras, an archaeologist, who realized the importance of historical visual records, photographed the artifacts and ephemera for the book cover. As with most of my life’s work, it is never an independent effort, rather the contributions of others whose expertise adds to the final product.

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# PREFACE



*“We might call it a probability that many improbable things will happen to me” — Agathon.*

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In the following chapters, I try to give a balanced history of my working life prefaced by summary of my early days both before and during WW2 and my university training. The chapters cover well-defined periods and are more or less in chronological order. Some periods seemed to me to call for more words than others so the chapters are not of even length and the one about the Second World War could well have been split into two or even three chapters but I could not see where to make the breaks, so have simply broken the text into blocks divided by asterisks. In some chapters, I have wandered away from my title to cover some point or other that seems important in the context. If that practice strikes you as wrong, put it down to human frailty. I offer no excuse. In the later parts of my life there were sometimes several things going on at once which were not associated in any way except for my involvement. Where this happened, I have written separate chapters and can only hope too much continuity is not lost.

My hope is that perhaps some of my children and grandchildren might one day wonder what I did with my life and what I did in the various countries I visited. They might even be interested to know what conditions were like during my life. Well, here are the answers. I hope there is enough continuity of narrative to maintain the interest of whomever bothers to read it all and that they do not finish up bored and confused. I have tried to reduce what I felt were the boring parts and to describe more fully what I found at the time to be more interesting, or in some cases, humorous. I have also tried to give some background to the more technical aspects of events with which as a geologist, I was concerned. For the most part, I have skipped over the family side of my life because I intend writing about that separately.

Some experiences struck me as comical, either at the time or afterwards. I hope the reader agrees with me and does not find them to be tasteless. At the very least, the reader will come to appreciate whatever sense of humour I have and in any event, the stories are true.

During my life, I have had the good fortune to see a great deal of this world. When told of my travels,

people have often felt prompted to ask which parts I liked the best. To this I can only answer that everywhere has attractive features of one kind or another. Mostly I found this through the people. I have found few in this world who, despite differences in outward appearance, customs and language, are very different from any other in outlook and aspirations. I have met with many kindnesses and can only hope I have succeeded in returning at least equally in kind. I hope that in some small way I have conducted myself to pass on this outlook to others.

My ultimate hope is that I shall be able to illustrate these chapters effectively. Certainly, the technical ability to do so is much improved over former times. As I grow older however, the enthusiasm to complete these ambitions of old age tends to decrease so I beg forgiveness of the reader if I leave some jobs undone.

It is generally supposed that history repeats itself but I doubt the confluence of economic and political affairs that affected much of my life will occur again for a long time. Mankind can certainly do without the wars. Perhaps some basic principles will shine through and prove useful to someone.

I doubt generations after mine will have the opportunity to travel so widely at someone else's expense and to experience so many facets of mankind's behaviour. Ever since Ruth Hester, the sister of my great-great grandfather, married Rev. John Hawker and left her home in England in the 1860's with all her children for the mission field in India, successive generations of Hesters have found reason to move around the face of the Earth on business or pleasure. I should not be surprised if many in future generations do the same. I see nothing wrong in what I read somewhere, that parents should give their children both roots and wings. This particular work covers the 'wings' part of my life and I am grateful for my own parents who, like my own wife and family who accompanied me on our several moves, never complained about the wanderings abroad of their only child.

One of man's lasting ambitions is to be remembered after his passing. Leaving a lot of money, or building a huge monument does not serve this purpose. No disease or scientific discovery is likely to be named after me, not even a variety of rock. For most of us, any hope of being remembered beyond one's grandchildren is a dream. Perhaps these chapters will serve to inform some of those in my family what the life of one of their ancestors was all about. May they be inspired to go out and look at the world, and may they learn something from my mistakes and those of my generation rather than be obliged to learn them over again.

## CHAPTER ONE



# EARLY DAYS – MY FIRST DECADE

*“PARTURIENT MONTES, NESCE TUR RIDICULUS MUS – THE MOUNTAINS  
ARE IN LABOUR, A POOR MOUSE IS BORN” — HORACE.*

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THIS CHAPTER CONVENIENTLY COVERS MY FIRST DECADE OF LIFE starting with my birth in a nursing home at 53 Ritherdon Road, Streatham on April 5, 1929, and ending roughly with the outbreak of war on September 3, 1939. My father regarded my arrival, just four hours before the end of the British income tax year, as most propitious so I was off to good start in my relationship with him. Until we moved to 63 Manor Way, Ruislip in the northwest suburbs on June 20, 1932, my mother’s 28th birthday and shortly after my third, we had lived in a ground floor flat, or apartment, at 37 Bonneville Gardens, in Clapham in South London.

Clapham in those days was regarded as a lower–middle class suburb populated by junior civil servants of various Ministries. One eminent jurist had recently defined what the lawyers term the ‘prudent man’ as one riding on the top deck of a double decked bus heading for Clapham. By these definitions, my father was an example of such a person — he was a junior civil servant, lived at Clapham, and smoked a pipe which would have obliged him to ride on the upper deck of the bus, and he was a very prudent man.



BONNEVILLE GARDENS, CLAPHAM IN SOUTH LONDON, WHERE I LIVED FOR MY FIRST TWO YEARS IN A GROUND FLOOR FLAT, BUT CANNOT REMEMBER WHICH ONE. POLLUTION FROM THE MANY COAL FIRES COVERED WHAT WAS ONCE THE ‘WHITE’ STONE TRIM AROUND THE WINDOWS WITH GRIME.

My recollections of life in Clapham consist of scattered, disconnected vignettes, such as, because it hurt, the time I caught my thumb in the roller gears of the mangle my

## EARLY DAYS – MY FIRST DECADE

mother used for squeezing water from wet clothes. Why should these and others stick I wonder? From conversations with people on this subject, I conclude that my recollections of early childhood are better than most people, again why?

I recollect incidents such as seeing an airship, perhaps the ill-fated R-100, and my mother explaining to me that the black, horse drawn coach that passed us one day was to do with dead people. I wondered if the people I could see inside were dead and had been propped up. They were certainly very still.

Transportation interested me as it does most small children. I liked to watch the double-decker trams, or streetcars, trundling along the highway next to Clapham Common where I was often taken for a run. On Sunday afternoons my father would take me the several stops on the underground railway to Tooting Bec' where we could stand in the park between two branches of the main line and see express steam trains rushing by on two sides. On wet Sundays, we simply rode the underground back and forth for a while. My father had a season ticket and I was below the age that required me to have a ticket so it was a cheap form of amusement.



MY PARENTS ON THEIR HONEYMOON AT SCARBOROUGH ON ENGLAND'S EAST COAST IN JULY 1928.



ME AT 3 MONTHS.



When I went back to Clapham many years later, I found the place little changed except for the absence of trams. The vignettes in my memory were still true but they were not connected the way I remembered. When I turned a corner of the road, what I saw was not what I expected — a strange game of the mind.

On one occasion, my grandfather Hester came to visit us and suggested we walk to see 4 Ellison Road in Streatham where he had lived when first married around 1890 and ran his initial watch repair business. My father was born in the house in 1901. We must have walked over with me in a stroller but I remember nothing of the journey only looking at the old shop that was then a bakery. This must have been about 1931. When I returned to look at the place in 2001 it had changed drastically and was hard to imagine it as shown on the post card we have that shows the shop bearing the words "C.E. Hester — watchmaker" over the door. Both house number four and number two that joins it, are incorporated into a builder's yard and the whole painted in a bright colour. The rest of the street must be much as it always was and so must the Railway Inn across the street.



## CHAPTER ONE



SUMMER 1931.  
ON MY FIRST ROCK OUTCROP.

The depression was well under way. Dad's brother Ray and his wife Mildred had worked on rubber plantations first in Java and then Sumatra for years. Their sister Winnie and her husband Frank had worked in the same industry near Kwantan in Malaysia. In the poor economy, the price of rubber fell to impossible lows. Both Ray and Frank were laid off and they returned with their families to England. I remember going to the London docks to meet each family. It was quite an event. We took two cars. One was a two door Swift. Who owned it is lost to my memory. On one such trip, Win (my father's sister) and Frank arrived

with sons Harold and Dennis. Dennis was just beginning to talk and when asked would pronounce in a deep voice every ship in sight from the deck to be an "oil tanker" much to everyone's amusement. When Ray (Dad's brother) arrived with his wife Mildred and son Derrick everyone was greatly amazed that he spoke no English, he had spent most of his waking moments with a native nurse with whom he apparently communicated very well. We all withdrew to the home of an aunt I had never met and whom I suppose was one of my grandmother Hester's sisters. Derrick was not too well behaved and his parents had a hard time with him as they stumbled away trying to talk to him in Bahasa Malay. We have a number of photographs from this time but I remember only one of them being taken. This is one of my mother's brother Les and me playing with a ball in a park somewhere, probably Newcastle. I look to be about two years old. From about the same time I recall my father rushing over to retrieve me from a group of old men who were playing chess on a row of fold-up card tables on Clapham Common. I am sure my departure was welcomed.



When it came time to move to Ruislip, I greatly envied my father who rode in the moving van while my mother and I travelled by train. We arrived first and had to wait.

Those were hard times. There was no money about but my father had a "survival" job with the Geological Survey of Great Britain that at least provided the security of a civil service salary. We always had enough to eat and to buy a few clothes which was more than many enjoyed. My parents had aspired to move into a house soon after I was born but they had insufficient capital for a down payment. Eventually news came of the death of dad's uncle, Tom Newstead. He had been a bachelor and thoughtfully left his accumulated wealth to be divided among his many nieces and nephews. My father was paid £50 that, when combined with the £50 he had saved, yielded the down payment sum. I do not know why he elected to live in Ruislip but it might possibly have been that it had excellent rail connections with London, where he worked, and, at that time, a rail line that connected Ruislip with

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the market town of Thame (pronounced "Tame") in Oxfordshire where his parents and eldest brother lived. The house he settled for had been on the market for over a year during which time the builder became bankrupt so the original asking price of £1000 was reduced to one of £850. Dad took out a mortgage for £750 at 3½% and we moved in. How proud I was of my father as he climbed out of the moving van and began giving instructions to the men. I had never seen him in such a role before. From the day we moved, when I was a few months passed my third birthday, I recall

events very clearly. This is probably because we lived very quietly and could not afford to do otherwise. It was a sheltered life. The road that passed our house was still of gravel and I remember hay carts passing by on their way to the Manor Farm. All this was to change rapidly as street after street of suburbia was unrolled around us. My father would work from ten until five thirty so did not arrive home for another hour. In summer months when it was still light at that hour I was allowed to watch for him from the front gate and when I saw him, with my mother's permission, I was allowed to run to the nearest corner to meet him. Mother would busy herself getting his meal ready. She and I would have eaten much earlier. On Saturdays, my father worked until one so did not get home until after two for a late lunch. This continued until after the war.

Michael Gooding lived right across the street and was the same age as me. Our parents having decided we occupied the same social stratum, allowed us to play together. We remained firm friends until he moved away in 1938 and eventually emigrated to New Zealand where I believe he settled in Christchurch on South Island.

Provided the man of the family worked for the civil service in some sort of professional capacity, there was no guess work involved in establishing where he stood in the pecking order. All you had to do was consult the copy of the Civil Service List that was available in the reference section of the public library. From this informative work, the reader was able to determine grade and salary range of each individual. This book served the role of social register in my mother's social world.



63 MANOR WAY, RUISLIP. MY PARENTS LIVED HERE FROM 1932 UNTIL 1981 WHEN THIS PICTURE WAS TAKEN. I LIVED HERE FROM 1932 UNTIL 1950. IN 1941, A BOMB FELL ACROSS THE STREET AND BLEW OUT ALL THE WINDOWS DOWNSTAIRS. THE UPSTAIRS ONES WERE LEFT INTACT.



HERE I AM AT THREE.

## CHAPTER ONE

The Hoy family occupied the house that joined onto ours. Their son Peter was already in grammar school so he and I barely acknowledged each other. He went to King's College in London University where he studied French and German. He had a pile of 78 rpm records that he would use to practice pronunciation. On warm days, when the French doors were open, I could hear him droning away. He became a language teacher and rose to great heights in the world of education. His mother felt alienated from her son who was slowly being educated beyond his parents' understanding. She would warn my mother "do not make the same mistake we did by educating your boy beyond your station in life". Fortunately, for me, my mother paid no heed. For my father, it was not consideration.

The people on the other side were the Taylor family. They had no children. Mrs. Taylor's father lived with them and kept a cage full of canaries tacked onto the back shed. I would watch the old man, who always wore a hat shaped like a gnome's, as he tended the birds but he never deigned to notice me, perhaps because of his deafness.



Even with their abstemious life style, my parents' entire income went on immediate expenses. There was no money for anything extra, like vacations. My father got around this by employing his spare time to adapt the geological knowledge he acquired at work to the making of plaster models to illustrate various geological features. These models were elaborate, work-intensive products that called for a lot of patience, something my father had almost to excess. Each was designed to illustrate some geological feature or other and found a ready but narrow market in museums and universities. The two most popular models were of the Isle of Wight and the London basin. There were several smaller ones. The larger ones came in two pieces so vertical sections could be displayed and were about eight centimetres thick and big enough to cover half of our kitchen table. Dad had first to make moulds for each out of modelling clay, then to cast a negative mould in plaster from which he would cast the positives. These positives would then be carefully sanded and painted. Then a neighbour, Jack Millichip, who was a professional draughtsman, would come one evening to letter the place names and legend. After a coat of varnish, the finished model would be delivered by hand, one piece at a time, to the agent's address in London.

My mother appreciated the extra money the models brought in but the only table on which dad could work was in the kitchen so we had to eat from what space was left at one end until the job was done. In the summers, we would eat in the dining room but for reasons of economy, it was unheated in the winter. Orders for the models would always be announced as soon as my father got home. He and my mother were clearly pleased. I have no idea what the commercial aspects were of model making but the work entailed many hours of meticulous work. The task brought in cash when that commodity was hard to come by.



## EARLY DAYS – MY FIRST DECADE

FOREST HALL, NEWCASTLE-ON-TYNE ABOUT 1934 WITH MY MOTHER'S PARENTS. STANDING LEFT TO RIGHT, MY MOTHER, MY FATHER (POSING WITH PIPE), EVELYN AND SOON TO BE HUSBAND LES (MOTHER'S BROTHER), MOLLIE (MOTHER'S SISTER) AND HER HUSBAND BILL (ALSO POSING WITH PIPE). SEATED, LEFT TO RIGHT, MOTHER'S MOTHER HANNAH WITH MY COUSIN PAT (MOLLIE AND BILL'S DAUGHTER) AND ME WITH MOTHER'S FATHER, WILLIAM AND MY GRANDFATHER. HE DEVELOPED A SERIOUS EYE CONDITION THAT OBLIGED HIM TO WEAR DARK GLASSES OUTSIDE.



For the first few years, our annual holiday consisted of a trip north to Newcastle to visit my mother's parents. They would visit us in turn each year for a week as part of their annual trip south to our place and my grandfather's sister Aggie Houghton, at Beltinge, near Herne Bay in Kent.

At Newcastle, we stayed at my grandparents' home at the suburb of Forest Hall. This was fun as I found that from a point on the staircase I could look out of a window and watch the express trains steaming along the railway embankment opposite. We always travelled around by tramcar; that of course suited me no end. My uncle Bill, by then married to mother's sister Mollie, and uncle Les, my mother's young brother, would take turns reading to me in bed at night. I always enjoyed this but was curious about the smell of cigarettes they brought with them. My father smoked a pipe that smelled very different. My grandfather smoked both a pipe and cigarettes as well as taking snuff.

Les had served five years as an apprentice to become qualified as an engineering draughtsman at Charles Parsons turbine works in Newcastle. After only three or four months work after he qualified, he was laid off with about half the rest of the office and was out of work for over a year. My mother would relate how the head draughtsman had tears in his eyes as he told those for whom he was responsible that only the married men would be kept on. Les was so bitter that he swore never to touch anything to do with engineering again. Ten years later, when he was called up for service during the war, he was told he would be given a commission in an engineering capacity if he chose to take it but he refused and stayed in the ranks as sergeant with the military police branch of the Air Force.

□□□

By the summer of 1936, my father had saved enough money to pay for us to spend two weeks in a boarding house (well back from the sea) at Sandown on the Isle of Wight. To add to the adventure, we went with dad's brother Ray and his son (my cousin) Derrick. This trip was adventure indeed. My aunt Mildred, who was Derrick's mother, had died a year or so earlier from pneumonia at a tragically young age.

## CHAPTER ONE



AT SANDOWN ON THE ISLE OF WIGHT IN 1936 READY TO LEAVE FOR HOME AFTER A GREAT VACATION. I AM AT THE LEFT SPORTING MY NEW POCKET WATCH. MY FATHER, NEXT TO ME HOLDS HIS PIPE AS HE ALWAYS DID WHEN BEING PHOTOGRAPHED, MY MOTHER, COUSIN DERRICK AND HIS FATHER, MY FATHER'S BROTHER, RAY WHOSE WIFE HAD DIED TWO YEARS PREVIOUSLY. THE CAR WAS A RECENT PURCHASE OF RAY'S. WE ALL FELT VERY GRAND TO BE TRAVELING BY CAR RATHER THAN TRAIN. IT WAS CONSIDERED ESSENTIAL TO BE WELL-DRESSED FOR TRAVEL.

We travelled in Ray's car and crossed to the island on a car ferry from Portsmouth. The car model was Wolsey, a brand long since gone from sight. It was distinguished from all other cars by having the brand motif on the radiator made of milky glass so it could be illuminated at night. I felt very grand to be travelling in such a car and wore my new pocket watch for the occasion.

These were the days when transatlantic liners sailed in and out of Southampton so we spent time identifying the various ships as they sailed by. The holiday was a great success so we did it all over again in 1937. My father got to see much of the island that he had modelled so many times in plaster. Each day we spent the mornings on the beach in a little cove we had discovered — I suspect my father had checked maps beforehand, as I was unaware of any sense of discovery among the adults.

Following the daily swim, we would adjourn to a boating pond where Derrick and I would paddle around in canoes for a while before enjoying a fizzy drink. After lunch, we would drive somewhere and in this way explored much of what the island had to offer. What now would seem a rather dull time was full of excitement for Derrick and me.

In 1938, the two brothers and their families went their separate ways. I went with my parents to Feltham, a quiet village near Bognor on the south coast. It was another beach holiday but this year there was no car so we travelled around by bus or on foot.

The most memorable part of the holiday was the train ride from London to Bognor Regis by express electric train. My father took me to the refreshment car, another first. On the way, we passed through the guard's van through the roof of which was a periscope that gave a view of the track ahead — big stuff for a nine year old. In the refreshment car, my father treated me to my first bottle of Schweppes ginger beer while he drank a half pint of bottled beer. He must have had a good year selling models for such a demonstration of affluence.

A beach holiday at Feltham during the thirties when you had little money left me with little memorable to relate. We became friendly with another couple staying in the same boarding house and with

them, shared the price of a beach hut in which the children could store buckets and spades and everyone get changed into bathing costumes for ‘dips’ in the sea. Nobody could swim.

By general assent, I was assigned to change with the ladies. Something embarrassing must have occurred of which I was sublimely ignorant because after a lot of furtive whispering, I was told I was to change with the men from now on. Sex must have reared its ugly head but I do not recall the circumstances.

The other memorable event was when we emerged fully dressed from our hut one noon to find a lady standing self-consciously on the beach nearby wearing slacks! I had never seen a woman in trousers before. As I recall she was also wearing a matching flat-topped peak cap made from tweed such as men have worn for many years. Within two years, the country would be at war and every woman of working age had at least one pair of slacks. The introduction of slacks was a breakthrough in fashion that is now seldom commented upon although I recall saying quite a lot at the time, and being told to “hush up”.



Years later I was to learn that 1937 was a black year for my father. He had worked solidly for the Geological Survey now for over 15 years and got about as far up the tree as he could get without a degree, and the professional staff of the Survey was very conscious about the source and quality of academic degrees. There was an unwritten pecking order by which everyone was ranked in precedence according to university attended and class of degree. My poor father was unqualified yet seems to have done good work in the palaeontological department (fossils). Perhaps there was something else out there that he could do? He scanned the advertisements in the papers. These were still difficult times. He came across an advertisement for the position of curator of a museum in Singapore. He applied and got as far as number two on the list. Number one, who accepted the position, had a degree but this did not help the poor fellow three years later when Singapore was occupied by the Japanese and he spent the next four years in the notorious prison camp at Change (pronounced “Changey”). My father was luckier than he had immediately supposed.

Another disappointment came when he was in the running for a promotion that would have meant a good increase in salary. As he walked to South Kensington station on his way home one evening the man in charge of administration caught up to my father, offered his hand and, in breach of confidentiality, congratulated him on getting the promotion. My father was elated when he arrived home of course, even though I was told nothing of it at the time. When he arrived for work the next morning, fully expecting his boss to summon him to receive formal notice of the promotion, he heard nothing. It seems the phone lines had been a-buzz overnight with the result that a man in the Edinburgh office was given the job.

My mother commiserated with my father and they agreed he would cash in a small insurance policy in order to buy a second-hand car from someone at work who made a sideline from buying and selling

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such items after fixing them up. I knew nothing of all this until one day in the spring of 1939 he arrived in his car unannounced to meet me at school. Great excitement! He took a few driving lessons in the evenings and we were mobile.



At this point I must digress a little to give something more about my father that will help in understanding him better, and our relationship. At the end of his time at school, he had passed the Matriculation examinations that were the key to acceptance into university and any professional training. Immediately after leaving school, he started work at Jackson's agricultural machine shop in his hometown of Thame while waiting to join the Royal Flying Corps towards the end of World War 1. An uncle talked him out of agricultural engineering as a career so he began a correspondence course in art with the idea of entering the commercial art field. The war eventually finished without my father being called up. He was still only 17.

One of his mother's many sisters was a neighbour of the Heslewood family the head of which, Willie, was a draughtsman at the Geological Survey. He offered to introduce my father to his department when there was a vacancy. When my father was interviewed for a job, he was offered an immediate position in the palaeontological department that dealt with fossils. He accepted on the understanding that he would transfer eventually to drafting but in the event, he chose to stay where he was. In this way, he had become an assistant to various geologists, some of whom were good mentors and took an interest in explaining the intricacies of geology to him. One or two achieved substantial fame in their speciality. It was a job he could not have imagined, but he enjoyed it.

My father soon found he had a keen eye for fossils and was soon touring the country to help the geologists in their work. His eyesight was actually very bad as the result of measles in childhood, much as mine was to be ruined, but good spectacles can improve things.

This keen eye of my father's generated several stories. For instance, while sitting having his sandwich lunch on a moor in Lancashire somewhere, he glanced down and noticed, sticking out of the soil, the end of a brooch containing a topaz, that from its style must have been lost at least half a century earlier. We still have it.

On another occasion, he was walking along a footpath beside the River Cam in Cambridge along which people must have walked for hundreds of years. His keen eye spotted the end of an iron spearhead that was later dated from the Saxon period one thousand years ago. How many people must have looked at the same spot but seen nothing?

While working in the coalfield near Wigan in Lancashire, the geologist he was with was perplexed by their inability to find the bed of rock containing a diagnostic fossil known to be present below a certain coal seam. The geologist and my father examined the mine workings in detail without success so they went up on surface to look again, without success. Completely frustrated, they climbed a low

hill to sit and eat their lunch and while doing so, my father spotted the elusive shell. They had been looking in the wrong place. As a result, the shaft of the mine was deepened to reach the coal seam the company had always thought they were already mining. This single act of my father's gave work to 400 men for 25 more years. We have a sepia coloured postcard of the coalmine that my father obviously treasured even though he seldom spoke of his achievement.

My father became interested in local geology of the Ruislip area and would make a point of visiting any excavation he could find, including bomb craters during the second war, to see what was exposed. In simple terms, the geology of the London basin is that of a shallow basin of chalk rock overlain with clay. We lived at the NW contact between these two very different types of rock. While all chalk looks much the same, it can be differentiated vertically into zones by the fossils it contains. The one of greatest interest to my father was a sea urchin called *micraster coranguinum*. He and I would spend hours scanning waste piles looking for remains of the beast. I became quite adept at finding it. Dad's interest in finding the little beast was that he reasoned it was impossible to distort a thick, flat bed of chalk into a basin without getting wrinkles and cracks in it. By contouring the positions at which the *micraster* was found, he could delineate domes and basins in the wrinkles. The domes, he reasoned, would be areas where the chalk had been stretched so the cracks, or joints as they are called, would be open and contain the water needed to supply suburban London.

All this experience with local geology was put to use when he did "little jobs" for the Colne Valley Water Company which company's engineer would invite my father initially to tell them why there was no water where they had sunk a well, and later, when faith was established, to tell them where to look. When a well was successful, the company would invite my father to go down the well and along the tunnel to see the water gushing out. He disliked going down because it was always cold and wet and he had inherited a liking for creature comforts from his own father.

I joined my father on one of these expeditions and found it quite fascinating. Water was pouring from several cracks each almost a metre wide. Two men would work at the face of the tunnel using pneumatic picks to break the chalk. When they hit water, they would run for the shaft that often filled right up before pumps could be installed of a size capable of handling the incursion. The only way up the shaft was in a bucket. There were no ladders so everyone had to trust the operator of the hoist and hope he did not wander away. We had water up almost to our waists as we walked along the tunnel. I suspect safety regulations for such operations have been improved since that time.

Always the loyal civil servant, my father would refuse any fee but could be persuaded to join the chief engineer for a good lunch when the occasion called for one. In retrospect, I have come to believe these lunches included consumption of more alcohol than my father was used to as he always lay down for a nap the moment he returned home.





## CHAPTER ONE

More relevant to my description of vacations was another incident that demonstrated dad's innate ability to observe. On Saturday afternoon, my father had returned from work as usual at two. (He worked until one but it took an hour to get home). Rather than go with my mother and me on a shopping expedition, he decided to spend what was left of the afternoon digging foundations for the small garden shed he had just bought. The building was delivered with walls, floor and roof fully assembled. All that the owner had to do was put the floor down on a few bricks at each corner and nail the pieces together. We returned home to find only one corner of bricks in place and another corner excavated. My father sat at the kitchen table enjoying a cup of tea and a smoke of his pipe. He said nothing. When my mother inquired, "what is wrong Syd?" he indicated a shiny coin on the table. He explained he had found a half sovereign gold coin from the reign of William IV, in mint condition, just below surface. It was dated 1838. Years later he told me he had often regretted selling the coin but it paid for much of our holiday that year and probably explains his munificence in taking me to the refreshment car for that long-remembered glass of ginger beer.



At that time, the Monday following Whit Sunday (more properly Whitsuntide) was a public holiday so my father was off work for three days in a row. On every one of these occasions, we went to stay with my mother's aunt Aggie (who was a sister of my grandfather Gardner). These weekends were like stepping into another world. Aggie had married a George Houghton shortly after WW1 and soon after losing her first husband (Will Grey) to meningitis in a marriage that lasted only a few years. George was a partner in a small accounting firm in the city where Aggie worked as a bookkeeper during the war. George and Aggie lived a life of opulence beyond my imagination.

Like my father, George arrived at work at 10 each day but he travelled to town by Pullman train meeting three friends on board and playing bridge for 'interesting stakes' until they arrived at Victoria station.

George owned a huge Studebaker car in which he was driven to and from the station each day by the proprietor (who donned a chauffeur's cap for the occasion) of the local garage where the car was kept in a lock-up. George refused to have a garage on the house site because he maintained that it would detract from the appearance. The car was thus available for Aggie to be driven around during the day should she so wish. She did not drive but George did on weekends.

When we visited George and Aggie, we would be taken to various points of interest such as Rye, and Hastings. Once we went to Canterbury to see a film of 'Our Gang' that was then very popular, especially with Uncle George but not obviously with aunt Aggie who sometimes considered her husband's tastes to be 'low brow'. For me, the trip to Canterbury was made especially memorable by the presence of a Cord roadster car outside the cinema. These American cars represent a breakthrough in design and are now highly sought after by collectors.

When outside, George was always attired in a three-piece suit and a hat. Generally, he wore a black or grey homburg hat (or fedora) but in warm weather, George favoured a panama. The couple enjoyed every form of opulence I could imagine — they took cruises in the winter and even had a daily maid called Florence who would be retained for evening work to keep me amused and out of the sitting room where George plied my father with whisky and soda and cigars.

There are several photographs of George and Aggie but the one that I think really epitomises them was taken as they walked along the promenade at Monte Carlo — George impeccable in a white, three piece suit with Aggie complete with gloves and parasol, by his side.

Each year, early in December, Aggie and George would take a room in a London Hotel for a week. During this time my mother would meet Aggie for one day during which I suppose they selected the present Aggie and George would give me. My mother sometimes had difficulty in complying with Aggie's standards of behaviour. She recounted how Aggie reprimanded her on one occasion as they sailed down the steps of the Berners Hotel towards a waiting taxi "Nellie dear, a lady puts her gloves on before she steps outside. Not afterwards." Aggie had come a long way from her roots in a terraced house on a side street of Byker, an industrial part of Newcastle upon Tyne.

While Aggie and George were in London, we would sometimes be invited to spend a Sunday afternoon with them at their hotel and take afternoon tea in the lounge. I recall the boredom these events generally inspired were relieved on one occasion when the waiter tripped over a rug and upended a tray full of cream buns all over the floor. George shared my amusement at the event.



For the greater part of my time, I was of course at school and not on holiday. The school I attended from the age of five was Bishop Winnington Ingram Primary School that lay about five minutes walk down the road on which we lived and required only one crossing to be made. Despite its imposing name, which was that of the then current bishop of London, it was simply an ordinary government run primary school that catered for children aged five to eleven but was in the spiritual care of the local Church of England. The building incorporated a large hall that was designated the parish hall but was also used by the pupils. The old bishop is credited with delivering some very bellicose sermons during the '14-'18 war that I suspect would not be approved in the present age and are best forgotten. On the



MY MOTHER'S AUNT AGGIE WITH HER HUSBAND UNCLE GEORGE HOUGHTON IN FULL REGALIA ENJOYING THE SEA AIR, I SUSPECT, AT MONTE CARLO OR MONACO ABOUT 1937. BOTH WERE VERY KIND TO ME.

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occasion of his single visit to the school he arrived dressed in the black gaiters that were de rigeur for bishops at that time.

The school was attached to the Church of England, St. Martin's, so we saw more of the vicar than would normally be the case in a primary school. Religious instruction figured prominently in the curriculum. There were about 400 children spread into eight classes of about 50 each. Children were expected to be in school within one month of achieving their fifth birthday. I joined at the beginning of the summer term so was only in the lowest class, Class 8, for the length of that term. From then on I moved up one class each year except for some unaccountable reason, I skipped class five. This was possibly because there was one class more than the number needed to get you through the school one year at a time and still finish in Class One in the year you achieved your eleventh birthday. This was good in a way as the teachers could move you when they thought it best for you.

The school was supervised by the headmaster, Tom Wilkinson, who only taught when a teacher was absent. A teacher called D'Arcy Beazer and the caretaker, a Mr. Emery, accounted for the rest of the men of staff. The rest of the teachers were women who were of the age that would have seen them married to men who were killed in the 1914–18 War. The teachers had a heavy load with fifty children to a class, no help whatever, and no time off during the day. They worked hard and did a good job.

The lowest three classes, known as “the babies”, were under the supervision of a Miss Booth, a diminutive lady of large girth and pince-nez glasses. She would thump soundly anyone who even looked as if they might step out of line. I could never understand how she kept the glasses pinched onto her nose while shaking and thumping some poor kid.

We did more singing than I cared for. Miss Booth would sit at the piano pounding out the hymns while singing in a falsetto voice and pince-nez glasses wobbling away precariously on her nose. “There is a green hill far away without a city wall...” So what? I had seen many green hills without city walls. “He only could unlock the door of heaven and let us in”. These and other lines left me puzzled. I kept quiet, not wishing to prompt a thumping but the seeds of religious doubt were being planted. What did it all mean?

Another of Miss Booth's duties was when, as frequently happened, we fell and scraped our bare knees while running around in the playground. Again, we would be sent to Miss Booth who would administer a large dollop of iodine onto the wound from a blue bottle she kept for the purpose in her cupboard. Any pain arising from the wound was intensified immediately by a factor of about ten. There were no bandages or plasters. All we got by way of sympathy was “run along now”.

In Class 2, the top but one I was taught by a Miss Dann (Ann Dann!), who wore her red hair in a bun and had freckles all over her face. She wore a two-piece jacket and skirt of ginger coloured tweed that matched her hair. She was a good teacher. In a relaxed moment, she would relate tales of her cruise around the world that I was to learn later was paid for out of an inheritance. During the course of the

and metals. It always seems incongruous to me that anyone can sit in a church warmed by a furnace and believe in creation. After all, geologists had utilized the concepts of evolution to find the coal-oil-natural gas that warmed the congregation.



War had been declared in September 1939 soon after we had returned from what was to be the last summer holiday for some time. We had driven north to my mother's parents in Northumberland where they now lived in the country. The journey was an all-day affair as there were no wide roads. Lorries at that time were restricted to a speed of 20 miles per hour but we finally reached our destination. My grandmother was a little put out as we were twenty minutes or so late for the tea she had prepared. She clearly expected us to arrive on time, just like the trains and buses did.

My mother was very proud to be able to arrive in her own car and to be able to take her parents, with dad driving, on "spins". This was a step up the social ladder for both mother and daughter. On one such trip, we went to Carter Bar high up in the Cheviot Hills on the border with Scotland. I was greatly elated at being able thereafter to boast of having been to Scotland. One Sunday, the whole family as it then was came for the day and we were photographed in the field behind my grandparents' house. This event was the only time we were all together but the photograph is lost.

By the time that we got home and I was into school again, the war had begun.

In the summer term of 1940, we were all ready for the 11 plus exam. To my surprise, I was passed on the basis of my scholastic attainment, as was the detested Jean Weatherly so we finished up at an equal level at the post. We both earned places at the schools we had put at the top of our list of choices. She went to Harrow County School for Girls, while I went to the equivalent boys' school. There was no "county" or "grammar" school in our immediate area. The closest was at least two miles away. My choice was four miles distant so getting there would involve a short ride on the train or bicycle.

With the first decade of my life over, the war begun and me off to a new school, life was about to take a different course.