

### 3 HERTFORDSHIRE

My father was promoted to the position of Headmaster in 1927. This promotion was preceded by more than one effort, each of which involved several sets of interviews - first for preparation of a short-list and then for final selection. My father was never exactly grunted by this procedure as he was entirely convinced that the appointments were rigged in favour of the pals of board members. However, he invariably prepared himself well by means of regular tablespoonfulls of some horrible milky brown liquid taken for several weeks in advance of each interview and administered by my mother. Whether the liquid was intended to build up the strength of my father or calm his nerves I do not know, but it had a memorable smell which I encountered only on these occasions. The smell being as it was, I rather wondered about its taste, but the same ceremony was to continue throughout much of my father's working life, because once he obtained his headship he started applying for more senior headships in the complicated hierarchical structure of the London County Council schools system in those days.

To return to his first headship. I quote from the Islington Gazette of 18 February 1927:

#### **PRESENTATIONS TO MR EDEN**

*An interesting ceremony took place at the Barnsbury Central School on Friday last on the occasion of presentations to Mr Eden on his promotion to the headteachership of Sebbon-Street School. Mr Eden has served for a period of six years at the Central School, first as science master and afterwards as a specialist in mathematics. During this period he has materially assisted in the educational results which the school has achieved. He has won the esteem of the boys and girls by his general bearing, his interest in them, and his tact. Mr Eden has also taken active part in the sports of the North London Central Schools, and for some time acted in the capacity of secretary.*

*The staff showed their appreciation and goodwill by presenting him with a handsome clock. The boys and girls of his own form gave a smoker's companion, whilst the boys of his own house presented him with a silver pencil case.*

*The presentations were made by Alderman Cooksey, L.C.C., who, after congratulating Mr Eden on his appointment, expressed the hope that in his new sphere he would be as happy as in the old.*

*The headmaster, Mr H Court, B.Sc., spoke in eulogistic terms of the services which Mr Eden had rendered during his tenure of work at the Barnsbury Central School. That work had always been earnest, zealous and effective, and he felt that Mr Eden had those qualities which would fit him well for the post he had been called upon to fill.*

*Mr Eden thanked Mr Cooksey, the staff and the scholars, for their warm tribute which they had paid him, and expressed his regret at leaving the school to which he had become dearly attached.*

Let me say in passing that the sentiments expressed in this cutting were, although fulsome, not unduly exaggerated. Much later I had chances to see my father with some of his pupils and staff, and it was quite apparent that although firm he had an

outstandingly good rapport with them. A few of the pupils remained loyal to him for many years after they left school, returning to let him know how they were getting on - and he was genuinely interested to hear. And some of the staff too.

Anyhow, my father's appointment to a headship was no doubt linked to our move in 1927 to 17 The Valley Green, Welwyn Garden City. His job was of course in London, but he commuted daily. Our new house had been standing empty, having been built some three years before by the Welwyn Garden City Company. As in the case of 22 Blake Road, we were its first occupants. 1924 was only four years after the founding of the town, and hence the house was one of its earlier buildings, but its style was in advance of its time and I think of it still as essentially a modern building (albeit a bit pseudo-Georgian, but this was the style of WGC).

In these early days WGC was not so much a 'New Town' as an experiment in living, and it attracted people rather more outgoing than the norm. One result was an active community life, despite quite a small population at that time, plus a location deep in rural Hertfordshire. The rural location together with the availability of good urban facilities and access to London made it an idyllic place in which to live and grow up. In the crowded millennium years such places are difficult to find, particularly in a land now widely blighted by agrochemistry.

There were intellectuals such as Mr Hughes, who led many a naturalists' ramble, and Dr Block, an elderly Pole who taught me to recognise dozens of edible fungi - when I was in my mid teens we went on lengthy fungus forays together. Green conservationists were present in WGC long before the name had been invented; a 'Save the Woods Society' (it was concerned with Sherrards Wood) was going strong in the 1930s. (This society, of which I was a member, did succeed in stopping a road being driven clean through the centre of the woods as initially planned, although - partly because of the distraction caused by War II - it could not prevent the edges being seriously nibbled). Dr Block was an enthusiastic organic gardener, vigorously advocating placing humus on top of the ground and not digging it in, in order to preserve the organic structure of the soil - at the time it struck me as a slightly unrewarding procedure on the local boulder clay, but I could see he was an innovative thinker.

From 1927 a main focus of my father's interest became his garden, and of my mother's the WGC Free Church. Each of them rapidly became deeply involved in the social/organisational side of their interests, and Richard and I were to an extent dragged in behind them.

My father started by winning a few prizes in the shows of the WGC Horticultural Society - in the 'New Garden' class, and for flowers and vegetables. One of his achievements was the planting of a rose hedge along the Valley Road side of the garden. Unlikely as it may seem, the WGC company had a veto on the type of hedge planted, and they wanted it to be of privet - to suit the town mood. Correspondence followed, in the course of which my father said that if he could not have a rose hedge he would have one of dandelions, 'and would start by transplanting some of those down by the station.' Irony seems to have won the day, because he got his rose hedge.

He did not, however succeed in preventing the planting of a row of lombardy poplars along the edge of Valley Green itself, just outside his garden boundary. As these

became larger they were a source of much pain and grief on account of their widespread root systems just below the ground surface, plus the shade they cast. Lengthy correspondence with the powers that be and letters to the local paper caused the poplars gradually to disappear, starting with those nearest to the house. A pity, because this row of tall trees was, as intended, in process of becoming the focal point of the area. Unfortunately the council official who planned the feature had omitted to discover that Lombardy poplars are not suitable trees to place within easy root distance of houses and, in particular, of their drains.

The successes in the Horticultural Society shows gradually built up, and finally my father went on to win the 'Aggregate' prize regularly year after year, to the extent that my mother became so ashamed of his monopoly as to terminate it by insisting he stood down and presented a display table instead.

He became the Horticultural Society Secretary, a post he held for many years, then Chairman, then President, then Life President. He must have been active in the Society for nearly 50 years, from around 1927 to around 1977. He was deeply appreciative of the beauty of flowers, but in a solitary sort of way, and he never admitted to being swayed by any emotional aspect of a hobby which graduated to being a way of life.

I was involved in this gardening activity in two ways. Firstly, I was encouraged to have my own little garden and to put entries into the children's classes of the flower shows. Over the years I did this with varying degrees of enthusiasm, but I did manage to win a number of useful prizes against rather minimal opposition. The peak of my career as a competitive gardener came when at age about 13 I was photographed by Lisa, a WGC photographer who was nationally in vogue at the time, modestly standing over my quite respectable collection of vegetables. 'Lisa' was in real life a Mr and Mrs Sherridan, who were able to boast a Royal Warrant and who had the additional distinction of being the parents of Diana Sherridan - later to become a film starlet.

This particular photograph was for free, because it was destined to be the central illustration in a newspaper article concerning children and gardening, in which appeared a fabricated interview quoting me as saying that I intended to use my prize money to buy gardening tools - a thought which had never crossed my mind. This incident provided me with a useful early object lesson not necessarily to believe all written words.

My second involvement in my father's principal hobby was that I was dragooned into helping him dig and double dig his garden and various other bits of land he occasionally rented as allotments. The pressure on me to help with the digging, and my hesitancy in the matter, increased over the years, but I was kept at it by means of emotional blackmail applied by my mother. Her line was that my father was now getting on in years he could no longer manage hard digging so well as in his younger days. He reached the ripe old age of fully 51 years at the beginning of War II, but as he seemed to be vastly older than myself I had no great difficulty in understanding he was not far from senility. My mother would never ever tell a lie, however white, but she was quite willing, no doubt subconsciously, to slant the truth in the required direction.

It was all in a good cause, but when in turn I myself passed (and left behind) the age of 51, I would have been mildly annoyed if a youth were persuaded to assist me with some

job on the basis that I was no longer up to it. This never happened, however, since in the event no persuadable youth was available for such duties.

My father's second main interest was domestic do-it-yourself, a hobby which probably benefited me more than the gardening in the long run, if only because I was eventually allowed access to his woodworking tools. He was a competent carpenter, although far from up to professional cabinet maker standards, and an excellent painter with the rather inconvenient materials available at the time.

When he was painting a room it was shut and dust sheeted for weeks on end. In no way was my mother permitted to help expedite matters. I recollect in particular the thoroughness of the door painting, when on one occasion three different coloured top coats were successively applied, each being combed so that the underlying colours showed through. The final appearance was pleasantly vari-coloured in fine vertical streaks - I would guess this work was well up to professional standards.

For her part my mother became an elder of the WGC Free Church at a time when lady elders were a rarity. She was a regular church-goer, and ensured that Richard and I escorted her once per Sunday. Whilst we were young this was by unquestioned edict, later it was continued by something comparable to the sort of approach used in the case of the gardening. She had been brought up in a family which seems to have been monolithically and willingly churchgoing, and she could not comprehend why hers should not be as nearly as possible the same.

I quite liked the hymns, which I was initially in the habit of singing loudly and enjoyably, and - I later came to realise - not too tunefully. On one fateful occasion when I was around fourteen my mother diplomatically suggested, however, that I should try to sing rather less enthusiastically. The chagrin thus caused resulted in my ceasing to sing permanently as far as the Free Church was concerned - perhaps no bad thing - although I have been known to indulge myself elsewhere when the gathering has been boisterous enough to mask my own efforts.

I continued, however, to enjoy the hymns and be bored stiff by most of the rest of the church services, despite the fact that I held the minister at the time, Mr Fenn, in high esteem. It has always seemed to me that a preacher has a really serious problem in attempting to address himself simultaneously to persons belonging to a wide range of social, intellectual, conviction and age groupings.

My mother's church activities extended well beyond Sunday. She was involved with - and at times chaired - both the Ladies Sewing Guild and the 'Woman's' equivalent (I fear I am not too sure of the exact names, but I am clear that there were class connotations in the titles). She frequently delivered lectures to church societies, on topics such as literary matters and our holiday experiences. She recited poetry with enthusiasm. I still have some of her lecture notes. She also took part in church drama productions. She had a lively mind, appreciative of good literature, poetry and music, although I personally felt she sometimes rather overdid the emotion and the enunciation when on stage. No doubt my reaction is explained by my genetically determined outlook from a position located somewhere between a demonstrative mother and an undemonstrative father.

In less sexist times my mother could have had a successful academic career, because in addition to having a good intellect she was a conscientious worker, a perfectionist, and with a sympathetic understanding. As it was, much of her energy and dedication was put into raising her family, and she ultimately became inordinately proud of 'the boys'. Academic study was therefore another field in which I became subject to emotional blackmail, to the extent that I became convinced I positively had to succeed in my various examinations in the interests of the well-deserved peace of mind of my parents. This conviction served me quite well, and I am grateful for its consequences. As with the brussels sprouts, in due course I regrettably had rather less success in my efforts to inculcate a comparable attitude in the next generation by analogous methods.

In view of my mother's intellect it never ceased to surprise me that she had a closed mind on all basic aspects of religion, politics and morality. I soon discovered that the only benefit in trying to discuss such topics was the satisfaction of getting her outraged, and ultimately I came to the view that it was kindest not to attempt to disturb a framework of belief which was not only strong but to her satisfaction.

She was, however, never able to explain adequately to me why she considered it desirable to condition her children from their earliest years to her particular set of beliefs rather than allow them to arrive at them by their own logic. It is difficult for parents to isolate children from the cultural climate of the times, but she made a good shot at it. I suppose, though, that perhaps in the end she did succeed in conditioning me to a degree which - had she been able to look at the matter objectively - might have been adjudged not unsatisfactory, at least in some respects.

When we moved to Welwyn Garden City in 1927 Richard and I were first sent to Handside Primary School at the top of Applecroft Road. The headmistress was a tough little square-shaped lady called Miss Coe, with whom I very soon crossed swords. My mother, as an ex-teacher and wife of a headmaster, took my side after one particular session of disgrace in the course of which I had received a very light spanking. The result was a battle royal to which I was not a party, but later my father was treated to a heated description of the sequence of events, and that was my last spanking from Miss Coe.

I believe, however, I may well have deserved physical correction on a number of occasions. One day when I came into possession of a large safety pin I concealed it open in my pocket. I then amused myself in the school playground by surreptitiously sticking it into the backside of the nearest convenient young lady in order to observe the reaction, which was invariably pleasantly traumatic. I got away with this for a while, but finally was surrounded by a mob of objecting infants, and to my chagrin the larger ones relieved me of my pin.

Despite the solitary nature of this particular bit of innovation, my primary school years, spilling into my early secondary years, were also the peak of my gang period. I had my own gang of four plus one girl, of which the behaviour was consciously modelled on that of 'William' and his similar gang. I devoured every one of the William books of Rachael Crompton during visits to the house of Uncle Fred and Auntie Nancy. They had a well preserved complete set which had been the property of cousin Harvey; dangerous books they were for a person of William's age in search of a role model.

My gang comprised myself, my small brother Richard (not a very enthusiastic operator, but he was loyal to his big brother), Hubert Cove, son of a Welsh Labour MP, Donald Anderson, and Joan Bergin who lived next door. That these were happy days is a testimony to the natural nature of gang behaviour in the young human animal.

I will not dwell on the detail of our activities. From the viewpoint of a changed sociobiological status I would not now approve of them - much to the contrary - but they constituted a hands-on experience of how the young animal is. We engaged in a (relatively small) degree of destruction for the very real satisfaction of achieving it, and of irritating suitably susceptible people for the pleasure of watching the reaction. By some later day standards our behaviour was mild, but the motivation was the same, convincing me, if convincing is needed, that disruptive behaviour is not an aberration but a built-in part of the human psyche, which has a discernable place in the scheme of things.

Anti-social behaviour of the child lies at the outer fringes of what in the adult is sometimes still called 'evil', and the latter is characterised by (direct or indirect) pleasure arising from an act which results in an effective attack on the status quo. I have no doubt that status quos benefit from periodical disagreeable prodding. If Eve had not eaten her apple she and Adam would still be bogged down in their garden.

In our case I was the ringleader, perhaps because I was slightly the oldest. We tried to avoid detection of our transgressions and usually failed, when my mother had the task of sorting out the situation. I was not physically punished, but once or twice was put into an emotional Coventry, an effective treatment which eventually caused me to mend my ways as I adolcesced.

My schemes included conquest of the world by a sort of 'Hitler youth' organisation which probably pre-dated that of Hitler. We got so far as to undertake a recruitment campaign by means of public notices with spaces for the details of those who wished to join. Unlike that of the Nazis it was not even a temporary success - we made the mistake of not inventing an enemy to spur us on.

One of our playgrounds was a brickworks which then existed close to the LNER Dunstable branchline and to the east side of the Sherrards Wood. It had a large claypit (since become a landfill site and subsequently an undistingusihed appendage to Roundwood Drive (I hope no houses were built on the landfill!)), together with rows of soft new bricks hardening off under light shelters, and neat stacks of freshly baked bricks awaiting their role in life. In some cases their first role was, in the event, to provide temporary enclosed camp sites for my organisation. All very satisfactory for quite a long time, until we got caught and there followed one of my spells in Coventry.

Whilst on the topic of this clay pit let me note that associated with it was a smallish cutting, possibly for a mineral tramway, which was later occupied by a scout hut. The interest of this cutting, though, was that in it was an in-situ exposure of a bed of Hertfordshire Pudding Stone, a spectacular conglomerate of small but well rounded brown flint pebbles - the name Pudding Stone is particularly appropriate. Such exposures are rare, and this one has no doubt long since disappeared.