

2 WOOD GREEN

Time being a distinctly questionable aspect of creation, I have anticipated a little in my ramble through antecedents, but in principle these were the circles into which I was inducted on 14 August 1920 and my brother Richard on 2 July 1922.

I had seven happy settled years at 22 Blake Road, Wood Green, in northern London - well recorded visually from the earliest days because my father had acquired a camera, developing, printing, and enlarging the plate photographs himself. He was ahead of the pack in other ways too, removing our gas lighting and himself wiring the house for electric lights in their place. He also built his own radio set, and by 1927 had acquired a car - an open top Morris tourer number ML 2940, which he periodically stripped down to its ultimate components and successfully reassembled. Under no circumstances would he employ anybody to do a job which he could do himself - a trait he has passed on to several of his descendants.

Few of my earliest memories are datable. The earliest I can fix was in 1925, when my mother and I waited anxiously in the big bay window of 22 Blake Road for my father to return very late from school because of expected problems with public transport at the start of the General Strike of that year. I can see him striding purposefully up the hill in the serviceable but tidy suit which teachers wore in those days.

Possibly earlier, I see myself assiduously cleaning out the joints between the newly laid paving slabs of the footpath passing the front of the house. I regarded this as a worthwhile public service and felt greatly put out when, on looking up from my squatting position, my eyes travelled up the extent of a severe and very tall man in a black suit, with (I am convinced) a chunky gold chain and pendant round his neck, who proceeded to reprove me gently but distinctly for interfering with public property. I was impressed, but to this day I remain uncertain of his status.

When I saw it in the 1990s this part of north London certainly did not give a particularly rural impression, but it was a different matter in the first quarter of the Twentieth Century. My parents were the first occupants of their house, built on a road laid into a green field situation - presumably by a speculative builder. At the bottom of the garden my mother had a henhouse from which emerged a useful supply of eggs, and also chicken corpses. Little was said about the latter, but I had a distinct impression that they were a source of unease, and probably the reason why the henhouse was abandoned before we ourselves departed in 1927

The gap between the henhouse and the back fence of the garden was a convenient meeting place for myself and my chums when we wished to be outwith adult supervision, and it is my fond belief that this secret rendezvous was never discovered.

Behind the back fence was what was then a cornfield, and the road junction just below the house was a cul-de-sac ending in this field. Many of the neighbours helped to gather in the stooks onto a horse drawn cart at harvest time. Blake Road was itself a cul-de-sac with a path leading across the common which lay above the London and North Eastern Railway (LNER) tunnel traversing below the top of the hill.

I had graduated to the common as my principal play area well before we moved away from Blake Road. There were several pleasant secret copses with grassland between, and it was in one of these copses that I organised my first small street gang. My special friend was a boy called Kenneth, living on the other side of Blake Road, who much regretted my departure and whose adulation I graciously accepted - and to a lesser degree returned. I persuaded my parents to call back to see him about a year later, but he was gone.

There was also a girl about a year younger than myself with whom I was very friendly in a way which I later realised was my first boy/girl relationship (not bad going for a six/seven-year old); she was rather sweet and appropriately clinging. There was another girl about five years my senior who informed me at our front gate that one day she would be marrying me. I recollect my surprise at this information. She explained that my mother would not always be around to look after me, and she would then replace her.

One of the events of my childhood in North London was that I managed to catch scarlet fever. This meant being carted off to several weeks in an isolation hospital, fumigation of 22 Blake Road and, worst of all, destruction of Oberon and Titania, my two dolls to whom I was greatly attached. I was feeling extremely red and hot as I was removed on a stretcher to a large forbidding building on the top of a hill, from the windows of which were visible row upon row of identical looking roofs of terrace houses stretching to the horizon. I was assured that Blake Road could be made out "lying" in the far distance. From this angle it certainly looked far from rural. I was impressed by the consideration that the houses were "lying", as if they somehow had a supine quality about them.

This first separation from home was potentially traumatic for a five (probably) year old, and the loss of Oberon and Titania even more so, but I believe I bore up philosophically, having been persuaded by my mother that it was appropriate for big boys to do so. When I was recuperating I was impressed to be informed by a sympathetic nurse with whom I had struck up a friendship that people actually died from scarlet fever, but that my own case had not been unduly severe.

About this time I had another contact with the medical profession, when it was judged necessary to stick an extremely hot needle quite deeply into a minute red spot on the tip of my nose. As one might imagine this proved to be distinctly painful experience and therefore memorable, but on this occasion also, with my mother sitting by my side, I distinguished myself by my fortitude. Because of the reputation established in my own eyes by this incident it became thereafter a matter of honour that no way would I be visibly moved by physical pain such as dentists, for example, are apt to inflict.

Our neighbours were 'Auntie' Betty and 'Uncle' Arthur on the downhill side, separated from our garden in part by a low brick wall. Uncle Arthur had on one occasion to iron the back and neck of Auntie Betty with a steam iron because she had sat on a cold wall; the prospect of a similar fate was held out to dissuade me from doing the same.

On the uphill side there were Mr and Mrs Rushton and their son in his early manhood. They later moved to a larger house where we continued to visit them for a number of years. Mr Rushton was something in the City; he had a flourishing moustache and finally came to use an ear trumpet whilst seated in an armchair. The junior Rushton, a

well groomed young man, joined the British Fascist Party as an officer - to the deepest chagrin of his mother. My own mother and I were once secretly and disapprovingly shown his smart black uniform, complete with peaked cap and knee length leather boots, arranged resplendent in the wardrobe of his bedroom.

There were family visitors to 22 Blake Road. Auntie Bine was a sweet elderly lady, my father's maternal aunt, who was sometimes left to baby sit with us, but I think this arrangement ended when it became apparent to me that I could ignore her instructions with impunity. Auntie Maud, an elder sister of my father, lived somewhere in North London, and her visits were notable for the enthusiastic wet kisses I have already mentioned, from which I did my best to disengage myself as gracefully as possible. There were visits, too, from the practical and smiling Ena, eldest daughter of Fred, my mother's brother and a great friend of my parents, also from 'Uncle' Jack, a bachelor friend whose visits were memorable on account of his invariable donation of 2/6 (12.5p) to each of us. He never forgot, and those large solid coins were near fortunes to young children in the twenties. Visits must have taken place to Southampton, but my memories of these have merged with teenage visits, about which more later.

At age five I was sent to primary school at Bounds Green. This was a small building well within walking distance, down Blake Road and to the right, passing along a little crescent called The Drive. I fear my stint there left little impression. My only firm memory was of the occasion when I was called upon to kick a dead dog, an alsatian, which had been run over and dragged into a loose hedge in front of some black railings around a garden area between The Drive and Bounds Green Road. All the boys in our party needed to demonstrate their manhood by delivering a kick. The scene is still fresh in my memory, but when we returned there for a look in the late 70s both the hedge and the railings had sadly disappeared.

Up until the early nineteen-thirties we went every summer to an organised-group holiday camp or hotel. To the best of my knowledge these were mostly under the auspices of the WTA (Workers Travel Association). My understanding was that at this time my parents were Labour Party supporters, although they later vehemently denied ever having been so. At all events they became group hosts at these events. In exchange for their services they received their own holidays free of charge, but had to pay for Richard and myself.

In about 1925 a hatted holiday camp at Hemsby was an early, and probably the first, location, although I am not 100% certain that this one was run by the WTA. Later we were often at an Eastbourne hotel for up to six weeks at a time, in the summer, and there was one WTA Christmas at Sherrards 'Conference' House near Welwyn Garden City.

My parents were always very much in charge on these occasions, and I got used to the idea of being a son of the Top People. On occasion I was an undoubted pest; at one meal-time I held forth to a table full of adults on my speculation that the word 'tomato' was entomologically derived from a historic event when 'Tom ate O'. My parents watched my performance sadly but in dignified silence, and it was not until later that they gave vent to their feelings. I recollect my chagrin that my witty society debut had not been appreciated, and I recollect, too, my resolution that that there would be no further efforts at sociability.

As hosts my parents were not only efficient but popular. My father in particular was subject to the unsought, unremarked and unacknowledged female adulation with which he had been familiar throughout his growing up, and there was a youthful `Auntie` who looked after us a lot at Henley who was said to have a `pash` on my mother. I have a card inscribed in an excellent copper plate hand and dated Feb 22nd 1927, which says:

*"To Mrs Eden. With Appreciation for the jolly time we had on February 18---'27.
From: Mr Eden's "Girls.""*

How come the date was in February I do not know, but there you are - maybe this was a half term event.

One aspect of mealtimes through much of my youth was the need to persuade me to eat the amount and variety considered appropriate, and my mother was always very particular about the variety aspect. If, as often, I was not interested in a particular item, perhaps a sprout or a potato, it was put to me that this poor little object had spent many months growing just for the purpose of being eaten by me and thus contributing to my well-being; by rebuffing it I was denying the whole purpose of its presence on earth.

After a brief pause for reflection this argument invariably appeared philosophically reasonable, and I was duly persuaded. What does one make of a person who can be persuaded to be sorry for a brussel sprout trapped in such unpromising circumstances? I have subsequently many times attempted this approach on my own children and grandchildren in similar circumstances with, so far, a notable lack of success. What do I make of that?