

Chapter 3

Life in Canterbury (Early days - Mostly School)



***Mum, Dad, Betty & Me
about 1919***

We moved to Canterbury when I was four. It must have been the Autumn because the lodgings we had for a short time had a huge Horse Chestnut tree in the back yard and, when we moved in, the tree was absolutely full of "conkers". This was just after the war ended and I believe that my Father had now rejoined the Army in the Royal Army Pay Corps, obviously as a noncombatant. We soon moved houses to 65 Union Street, a working class area with a curious mixture of people. Here we stayed until the Autumn of 1926 when I was twelve.

The most vivid memory of this time was of all the transport used by the British Army passing our house on its way home. Lorries, tanks, cars, motor cycles, horses, carts and drays were amongst the traffic. This cavalcade went on day in day out for a year. When the last one had passed, Union Street, by now a worn out remnant of its former self, was dug up and remade with concrete. The only memory I have of this was of a workman who used to get the other men on the job to dig, if possible, as quickly as he could. It was a sort of race, presumably to break down the monotony; they tried, but he always won. I remember him looking in our window one day when I was singing at the top of my voice. I was actually playing Patience and when I was winning, I used to sing loudly however when not, I used to produce a sad sounding dirge. I remember the tune but not the name.

I must have been fairly sensitive in those days, particularly where food was concerned. My Father used to mash up my sister's dinner into a mixed up mess and then draw lines across it with the back of a fork. Of course she was virtually a baby but I thought it repugnant. One day my Mother dropped some fat onto our cat; fortunately the cat was not hurt but the look of it turned my stomach and for years, as a consequence, I could not stand people using the word "fat" in conversation.

It was rather unfortunate that one day, whilst at dinner, when I was about five, a TB gland in my neck burst as a result of which I was rushed off to The Kent and Canterbury Hospital where I had an operation to remove the gland. I cannot remember much about my time in the hospital except that, for some reason, I wouldn't have anything to do with my poor Dad and so it was of no use him coming to visit. There were two smashing Rocking Horses and when I was allowed out of bed, I spent some happy hours playing on them. The only other memories of the hospital were of a ball being thrown over the balcony and a poor child with a 'hare lip'. The gland incident had a far reaching effect however. My Mother, who was convinced that, as her mother had died of TB, and because I had a TB gland, I too would develop the same disease. In view of this, I was deemed to be "delicate" and duly marched off to the TB specialist every six months. He stoically maintained that I would become a Grandfather. I was, however, kept away from school for three months over a couple of years. The School Attendance Officer, I recall, questioned this several times, but it was quite official.

As a result of my hospital visit, I didn't start school until I was more than five and a half. I started at the Payne Smith School which, although about a mile away from home, was thought by my Mum to be superior to the Council School nearby. I duly marched off to school with the instruction that if I wanted to pee or go to the lavatory, I was to say "Please can I leave the room", instead of to the closet, the term we used at home. At home, to use the closet meant to go for a shit. Of course, when I want to go, I forgot all the instructions. Fortunately the word closet at school did not mean the same as at home.

I was very fortunate with my first teacher. Miss Brown was lovely and I shall always remember her. Regrettably, she was the last lady teacher that I can recall with pleasure. Miss White, the head teacher, was too sharp and her understudy too sarcastic. I already had a natural talent for drawing and one day the class went to a local church. On returning, we had to draw anything we saw and with loving care, I drew a Cross. This took me a long time so Miss Sarcastic decided that I had been scrounging and made me stay in and draw something else. In five minutes flat, I drew a stained glass window, a typical child's drawing which she said was very good. It wasn't, but I learned that day, very early in life, that teachers did not know everything.

Life in the infant school wasn't too bad though as we had our own part of the playground. Someone had the bright idea of drilling a heavy block of wood with three holes in which to put cricket stumps. Thus, in Summer we were able to play cricket in the playground. At the age of seven, I was moved to Standard One in the senior school. The two classes, Standards One and Two were taught by a formidable married lady who wouldn't let any misdemeanour go unpunished and would call the headmaster in to operate. He was called Jumbo and I would say that he was a sadistic bully. He wielded a cane as if he was beating a horse. I have wondered since if the headmaster or married lady got a vague sexual thrill out of caning some poor little devil. I was lucky and managed to avoid trouble. One little incident, which seemed to represent my subsequent attitude, was connected with Assembly Prayers. At assembly, the headmaster in the main School Hall would call out a hymn number. One boy from Standard Two had to listen for the number and chalk it on the board. Boys invariably wrote in a spidery manner and I always told myself that, if I was ever picked, I would write firmly and clearly. So it turned out and I was very pleased with myself.



***Payne Smith School
Washing Time***



***Payne Smith School
Playtime***



***Payne Smith School
Class 6 - Date Unknown***

When I was about eight years old, the local authorities decided, in their wisdom, that all children should go to school in the area where they lived. This meant that, for me, I should go to the Council School which was a blow to my Mum who foresaw me passing the scholarship exam for the Simon Langton School if I stayed at Payne Smith; there was no hope at the Council School because they never entered anyone. I didn't mind though - I had escaped Jumbo! The only time that I saw him as a human being was when the Payne Smith School beat the Council School at football in the Canterbury Schools Cup final. Popular belief was that he gave our goalkeeper a coin for every goal saved. I can't vouch for the truth of that but it was possible as he was very pleased and excited. The Council School was a piece of cake after Payne Smith and I found myself in Standard Four having missed out on Three. Oddly enough, the teachers were quite good and, despite classes exceeding forty boys, a lot of whom didn't wish to learn anything, did their best to make lessons interesting. They also did their best to maintain standards of cleanliness. All boys were in one of four sections headed under colours. Every morning, marks were awarded for clean boots, nails, neat hair etc. The results were put up on a board on a daily basis. It did help as some of the boys were in a dreadfully poor state. The teacher in Standard Four illustrated all mathematics problems with drawings on the board. From Standard Four, I went to Standard Six where the teacher in charge, Mr Bridgeman, had a wonderful capacity for teaching art and it was from him that I learned the basic principles of perspective, draughtsmanship etc. He taught us to paint using only the three basic colours, red, blue and yellow from which all other colours can be made. He also taught me to shade in pencil. He wouldn't have known it but, thanks to him, I have, over the years, spent many happy hours drawing and painting. At the age of eleven and a half I was moved into Standard Seven along with a friend of mine called Jack Hogan. Here we were among boys of fourteen but fortunately they weren't all that bright and were only interested in leaving. The teacher in charge was a Mr Pepper and, despite the whisky fumes, he was a jolly good mathematics teacher. He was also a disciplinarian but was selective and rooted out the bad 'uns. Play time was remarkable for the football match in which all the school joined in. If you were lucky, you touched the ball (tennis ball) once during the whole half hour; if you touched it twice, it was like winning a gold medal. I was always sorry for the headmaster at the Council School. He was an enlightened man but had a weak personality. Boys being boys, they took advantage; it was such a shame.