

About QueenSpark Books

QueenSpark Books was founded in 1972 as part of a campaign to save the historic Royal Spa in Brighton's Queen's Park from being converted to a casino. The campaign was successful and it inspired participants to start collecting memories of people living in Brighton and Hove to preserve for future generations. QueenSpark Books is now the longest-running organisation of its kind in the UK.

More than one hundred books later, as part of our 45th anniversary celebrations, we are making the original texts of many of our out-of-print books available for the first time in many years.

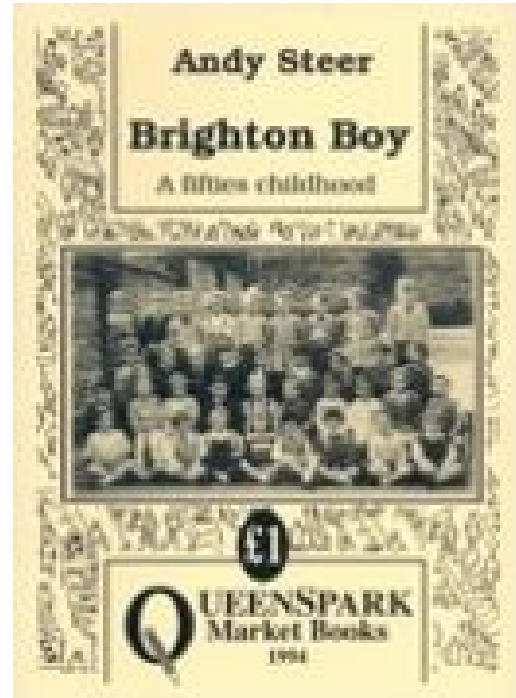
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About this book

This 1994 memoir is a schoolboy's tale of Brighton in the 1950s, seen through the eyes of Andy Steer. He recalls Brighton characters and shops, swimming at Black Rock and with the “Shiverers” Swimming Club at the salt-water King Alfred pool in Hove; Stanford Road School, the now defunct Brighton Cycle Club and playing in Cherry Woods at Withdean.

This vivid child's-eye view paints a picture of post-war Brighton and its long-lost cinemas, ice rink, penny arcade on the Palace Pier and sporting events. There are also the privations of the era such a power cuts and a need to count the household pennies, and memories of the strictness of a fifties school regime.

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BRIGHTON BOY

A fifties child

I never much took to school. It was other things that stick in the mind - all jumbled. Some of my earliest memories are of Arundel Road on the edge of Whitehawk where my parents had a room next to Morgan's the chemists. I was born in 1946.

I recall getting lost in East Brighton Park. I don't know if I lost mum or she lost me but I went round a bush and she wasn't there so I ran all the way to Arundel Road. Here, showering tears of desperation, I was stopped by a P.C. who said, "Where do you think you're going, son?"

"I've lost my mummy!"

I also vividly remember regular sightings of 'The Dirty Man' who always fascinated me. He was the local chimney-sweep who rode a bicycle charged with brushes and whose teeth always seemed very polished - beaming out of a blackened face.

Another memorable character was Prince Monolulu (I've got a horse!) in his huge feather head-dress at the Race Course. He said hello to me but I don't know whether or not he gave me a racing tip. It wouldn't have meant much to me since I barely came up to the horses' knees. All I can recall is thundering hooves and flying turf.

I also have a recollection of trying to be helpful in the neighbourhood bakers by grabbing a brush from the dust-pan behind the door and sweeping dust on to all the cakes. My 'help' was discouraged.

But my earliest memory of all was quite bizarre. I used to be put out in a courtyard behind the chemists in my pram and apparently I delighted in throwing my rattle onto the floor. Before long a shop girl crossing the courtyard to go to the shop store would return my rattle and before she'd taken two steps I'd throw it out again.

This is where it gets very curious because I don't know how long I stayed in the pram before I was able to put one foot in front of the other, but I distinctly remember one occasion when I craned my neck up to look over the side of the pram, and I saw a red-haired shop girl bending down to get something from the bottom of a big box, like a packing case. When she stood up again and turned back towards me, I noticed with some alarm that she had a very red face. I wondered what it could be in that case which was hot enough to make her go that colour. It is a strange memory which has stayed with me as the very first one of my conscious life.

We delighted, when we went to some sporting events as spectators, to get the old Smith's crisps with salt packs of blue paper. It was a challenge to see whose packet contained the most. The machines were fallible and sometimes you'd get no salt -

sometimes four packets, which was my record, I think.

It was an atmosphere of making do and grinning and bearing it which I was later to associate with the Guinness advert: "What the Situation Demands", with its wheel for putting the shoulder to, bold face for putting on and belt for tightening. Thank heavens for school milk and 3d to 6d a week pocket money.

It took me until the age of eleven to save up £7. 10s. 0d. for a second-hand bicycle from Brownjohn's, under the Beaconsfield Road viaduct. It was an ancient, rusty Raleigh roadster with Sturmey Archer dyno-hub, sit-up-and-beg handlebars, oil-bath - the whole caboodle. What child nowadays would buy a working man's beast of burden at the age of eleven? But I was so proud of my old Raleigh I shone it up fit to knock your eyes out. It was a very practical machine in its way. I remember the police were similarly equipped because I used to see them running their bikes down beside the old Hove Town Hall after duty.

My brother and I waited there for a bus up to Dyke Road after swimming with Shiverers Club at the Old King Alfred. By this time, we'd moved to Withdean. Sometimes the President of the club would chauffeur me and my brother if our dad was too ill to come with us. We dared him once to show us how fast his huge Austin Princess would go (we must have been eight or nine at the time). We were amazed when he hit 100 mph down Nunnery Hill (The Upper Drive). I remember he took the Naval Reserve Station history of the swimming pool very seriously. We had to parade the ensign round the poolside and lower it before each gala (As a cub, I had to do the same with the troop banner, entering the church in Air Street on Sunday).

There was a lot of swimming I remember from my childhood. The fun swimming was at Black Rock (now Brighton Marina), where there was an outdoor swimming pool with boards and outdoor table-tennis and you could go down to a 'private beach' and there were rock-pools and ice-creams. It was like being in Butlin's for a day. Anyhow, I had been a habitué of the seafront since my first winter of 1946-47 when we lived by Morgan's the chemists in Arundel Road. Here my mum got round the electricity cuts by boiling-up water on the gas-ring, putting hot-water bottles in my pram and running up and down the seafront. That way she kept herself warm as well. I got the feeling that Black Rock served mainly that end of town. People did not leap into cars and travel miles from Hove for their pleasures. They did not have cars and outings like Black Rock were memorable because they were exceptional.

Apart from the fun swimming there was the serious stuff - daily training. Those of us who swam for the club had a free pass to the King Alfred through Shiverers and a further free pass, through school in Brighton, to the North Road Pool, so we would quite often swim at North Road at lunchtimes and at the King Alfred on club nights (Tuesdays, Fridays, Saturdays) and all the holidays.

The entrance that we used to the North Road still exists near the bottom of North Road.

When we went swimming with the school we passed under an archway and lined up alongside a low wall which stopped short of the pool door. Meanwhile, the teacher went to the head of the queue and when they had got the nod from the pool attendant we would be ushered in at the deep end. I do remember that there only seemed to be one pool attendant who also served as a swimming teacher, ticket collector, lifeguard and cleaner. Anyway, once inside, the girls' cubicles were on the left, the boys' on the right with a gallery round three sides. The fourth side was the shallow end and was where the shower rooms and extra cubicles were found.

The glass roof made the building look like a conservatory out of Kew Gardens, it was rather beautiful with amazing Victorian brick work. However, depending on the weather conditions the glass could cause a tremendous build-up of humidity. Sometimes a mist blanketed the pool making it impossible to see from side to side, let alone from end to end. The pool was about forty yards by twelve yards with a seven-foot depth at the deep-end where there was about a five-metre board. Once I actually went off the balcony of the gallery for a dare and got a slap on the wrist for it. I hit my head on the bottom but it was not enough to break my neck.

It was more serious on Saturday nights at the King Alfred with special training sessions where the President, Carl Wooton, Britain's coach for the Rome Olympics, would devise an infinite variety of tortures for his "acorns", i.e. young swimmers intended to grow into oaks like Johnny Weissmuller (the original Tarzan). In fact some of the prominent heroes of those days were the Conrad kids and Dawn Frazer who were all Australian swimmers. I think Dawn Frazer was the first woman to break the one minute for 100 yds. There were also Adrian Black and Anita Lonsbrough, now the Telegraph swimming correspondent. The tortures we underwent would involve such things as swimming four lengths of the minor pool underwater with your legs tied together. I exaggerate, but the training methods were bizarre in that day and age.

Carl would also get the stars to do demonstrations during Gala Nights and train with us in special intensive sessions. Even non-swimmers got roped in. I recall the late-lamented Gordon Pirie being invited to run around the pool a few times barefoot. He hit a puddle, slipped and nearly brought the curtain down on his career there and then. It seemed to us, in our innocence, that the minor pool was kept open exclusively for the benefit of Carl Wooton and his budding stars.

The passing of the old King Alfred will not be mourned by many. The rheumatism-sufferers used to swear by the greater buoyancy of the salt-water there over the fresh water at North Road but it had constant problems with its filtration. It did not seem to matter how many times the boom was trailed up and down it first thing in the morning - the early swimmers had the involuntary chore of clearing it further by swallowing hosts of large, black, dead flies as they swam from end to end.

School I remember mostly for the games - the inevitable football in winter and cricket in summer but other things cropped up like hand-tennis, where the technique to cultivate

seemed to be a chop of the hand to produce the slice serve. It cost nothing and my brother Al and I got so keen on it that we chalked out courts on the carpark at Withdean Stadium to get in extra practice.

Then as now, prowess in any game equalled status among school children. Doing well in class was frowned on so the expert marble player, crack hand-tennis player or cigarette-card flicker would all have their periodic glory. Such games, I recall, were just crazes that gripped the childish mind suddenly. At the time, they absorbed us totally and, when the obsession cooled, were dropped just as suddenly because something else had come along - paper darts, cotton-reel-and-candle tank battles, water-bombs - the list was endless.

The cotton-reel tank was simple to produce. It needed a wooden cotton-reel with rims notched and a short length of candle with a hole through the middle. An elastic band was then passed through the reel and candle and twisted tight, this was held in place by matchsticks. When the non-candle end was wound up it would unwind slowly, driving the tank at enemy contraptions. This made an effective toy.

In contrast to the later hula-hoops, pogo-sticks, skateboards and so on, these absorbing activities of ours were essentially non-commercial since they involved the minimal use of "props" and I suppose, in times of austerity, were, in this way, democratic. You did not even have to have a dad who smoked to get cigarette cards. You would find a few well-thumbed and dilapidated ones lying around and win more by flicking them against a wall to fall on top of your opponent's cards. The acquisition of complete sets seemed to matter less than the total number in your possession, perhaps because collecting them by way of the game was a reward for skill. Coins of course were used in the same way, although they were far less plentiful in the hands of yesterday's children.

A classmate of mine who lived in a basement facing The Good Companions at The Seven Dials used to flick coins with me. One day an old penny of his, black with age, struck the flint wall at school and sprang open as it rebounded. It must have contained a tiny, invisible spring-catch. Inside was a beautifully painted portrait of Queen Victoria. His dad had it valued at the museum in Church Street and sold it for a fiver. He spent the best part of the following week on a Brighton pub crawl, emerging ruddy-faced from the garden of The King and Queen to embarrass his son when we were returning to Stanford Road from a class swim at North Road. He wanted to know where his offspring had obtained money for Brylcreem from the dispensing machine at the pool (these were teddy-boy times). The father's intervention wrought havoc on the orderly crocodile file in which schoolchildren always walked in those days.

It is outings (from school or not) that stick in the memory. One big day out from Stanford Road school in the fifties was to a pleasure park near the Jack and Jill wind-mills where the woods were carpeted with blue-bells and a stream yielded jam jars of tadpoles. We had fun as we swung on ropes from the trees and floated paper boats down the river. School sports days were also memorable with the embarrassment of three-legged, egg and spoon and, worst of all, sack races. They were held in Dyke Road Park and the

inter-schools at Preston Park cycle track, with cub athletics at the Preston Barracks ground in Lewes Road. This ended with community singing round the camp-fire. I always felt it was more like Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill* than Baden-Powell's *Scouting for Boys*.

In those races, designed as much to be fair to all as to maximise our embarrassment, we felt like exhibits in a monkeys' tea-party in the menagerie at Withdean Stadium. Another big treat at the stadium was to get tickets for a Brighton Boys' football match played under flood-lights. It was magical - as good as an Albion game because you identified more with the players and you did not have to get on your dad's shoulders to see the action. These memories have outlasted even those of the spectacular pantomimes on ice in West Street and flood-lit show jumping - also at the stadium. I remember going to see *Puss-in-Boots* and in West Street. Today the tradition of ice extravaganzas continues at The Brighton Centre.

The West Street ice stadium was the place to go in the fifties. It was formerly the S.S. Brighton, popularly known as the Lido, a swimming pool with nautical features such as rafts. The pool was about fifty by thirty yards and so it was big enough to be turned into an ice rink. Here the Brighton Tigers played ice hockey which was a real spectacle. Because it was not an English sport it was seen as exotic. The game was very fast which meant that you needed to concentrate extremely hard on the small puck travelling at great velocity. At the same time, I remember hefty players colliding at speed. This all added to the thrills and spills of ice hockey.

Perhaps even more dramatic was a multiple pile-up on the cinder-track at Preston Park in the course of a Devil-take-the-Hindmost, a race surely designed for this eventuality. It began after a struggle to get a lot of riders on the narrow, inadequately-banked Preston Park track. There were probably about thirty riders which meant that they lined up in rows, making the beginning of the race even more precarious. Then as the riders approached the line every six-hundred-yard lap, the object was to avoid being the last over it as the final rider would be eliminated each time. This meant that in the scramble for the line crashes invariably happened, especially in a schoolboy race when they used a mixture of fixed-wheel track irons and derailleur-equipped road-race machines. The fixed-wheel track irons were a different set-up from road machines because there was no need for gears or brakes, which meant they were a lot safer on the track.

After a crash and while the riders extricated themselves from the pile of twisted metal and limbs, or so it appeared to the child spectator, the St. John's Ambulance lads and lassies charged forward and dusted the grit out of the scarred legs with brushes before they remounted. Did I really see that?

Even Dad, an old cyclist with Excelsior cycle club, (or was it Brighton Mitre?) got het-up over the racing and howled "Allez, allez, allez, " like one demented. Had he taken leave of his senses? That he had was confirmed by the sequel. Four of the senior riders cycled round the high side of the track, holding the corners of an army blanket, dipped

in the middle by the contributions to the St. John's fund. Instead of going down to the front row, Dad, from the back of the west stand which was chock-a-block with spectators, dredged up from the bottom of his pocket a fistful of coins and hurled them in the general direction of the blanket. The coins - they were those heavy old pennies - falling on the heads of the people at the front brought forth howls of consternation. Heads craned round to identify the culprit but Dad, with a histrionic aplomb I would not have thought him capable of, had his hand back in his pocket and a look of angelic innocence on his face. The incident passed off with no serious repercussions and I knew Dad better than to say anything about it.

We followed road-racing too and would be out in the early mornings on the A23 to see the club riders hurtle by on a time trial or to witness the sprint finish of a Newick 25 or Berwick 50 or whatever it was. The Clayton hill-climb looked murderous and there was even a 25-mile which, if my memory serves, began with an ascent of Ditchling Beacon and then finished again at the top of those gruelling heights - an excess of cruelty I always thought, emphasising the masochism of the road-race fraternity, particularly as the road-surface in those days was nothing like what it is now.

My brother and I, being touring riders, were on the fringes of the thriving Brighton cycling community which was a developed one and generous with its friendships. We must have been a sore disappointment to Dad who had trained by doing London and back on a Saturday afternoon, negotiating slippery tram lines in the wet on an 86-ratio fixed wheel and wood rims. But we got a lot of fun and cherished memories out of our riding.

We haunted the cycle shops - Strudwick in Oxford Street (still there in 1994), Cook in Red Cross Street. These workshops like Cook's could be found in the little back streets on the other side of London Road from the Open Market. You could get anything under the sun repaired on the spot for a few pennies in that heart of old Brighton. Now these streets are occupied by office blocks and car parks but then they were full of workshops which were little more elaborate than allotment huts, but which repaired bikes and electrical items as well as housing blacksmiths, whitesmiths, cobblers and cheap barbers.

Then there was Hall's of New England Hill. Long after decimalisation of the currency in the early seventies, with which Bill Hall hesitated to comply, he had a calcium-carbide look-a-like front cycle lamp in his window for 7s 6d. I bought a 1940s Rudge Pathfinder with bent chain stays in there once. I think someone had brought it in for repairs some twenty years previously and Bill had finally despaired of their ever coming back for it.

Whenever he went to the pub opposite, the New England Inn, now The Cobbler's Thumb, for a chat with his old mate in the back lounge bar reserved for family and friends, they sat, shod in carpet slippers, in arm-chairs, surrounded by cats and cobwebs and anybody coming in for service would get a dusty answer. In the meantime Bill's shop door would carry the sign "Gone for a pedal" and "Back in 10 mins" to keep

company to the notice which read "No repairs until further notice". Although he had known me since I was about ten, Bill was not too happy to let me have the Rudge until he had experimented with suspending an oil can above the chainring designed to feed one drop of oil onto the mechanism precisely once every fifty miles cycled. I told him I would find a way around that one and he let me have the bike at a knock-down price. It was stolen within the year anyway.

Amidst all the apparent chaos in that shop, Bill could invariably put his hand on just the part you needed for a bike or, even more incredible, when he knew you were a schoolboy and short of cash, he had the back-up of a compatible second-hand part at half the price. If it was not quite compatible, he would patiently explain any necessary modifications. He exuded the biker's enthusiasm for the hobby and his enthusiasm was infectious. He even seemed amused by our silly kids' biking stories.

One that made him laugh was that after an evening lapping the Preston Park track, one of our schoolboy groups would propose "The Challenge". This was to see who could get the furthest up The Drove (Preston Drove, which to us was the steepest hill in the world) on our track bikes - fixed wheels, ratios in the 80's and 90's and with front brakes only so that we could ride them on the road. We would charge the hill with howls of manic glee and fight our way up. As the lesser mortals fell by the wayside (literally, if they did not get out of their clips and straps fast enough), the triumphal two or three would be battling it out near the top.

That is when it turned into a real dare because even with honking (standing) and ankling (dropping the heels), "top-dead-centre" would get you in the end and when you started going backwards you had to remember not to apply the brake because the blocks would leave the shoes by the backdoor. Nowadays you cannot even buy blocks, you have to buy block and shoe - EEC regulations? As David Coleman the sports commentator might say: "If Bill Hall were alive today, he would turn in his grave".

Cycling was not the only sport - swimming continued (always the big two in Brighton and still true today). The Inter-Schools Junior Swimming Gala at North Road was a high point, except for the year when I got pipped at the post (actually it was a trough at the deep end) for The Boys' Championship. The teacher responsible for shouldering the burden of Stanford Road's swimming reputation called me into a spare cubicle alongside the pool and gave me a dressing-down about the performance. Mr S. failed to take into account that I had competed in about six previous events in succession, running from the deep-end to the shallow to line up in time for the next off. In those days, they entered their "stars" in a disproportionate number of events under the pseudonym of A.N. Other. It was not exactly cheating, just bending the rules a bit. The result was that I was getting distinctly ragged.

Now he was standing me there, dripping and cold, while he thundered at me about the honour of the school and consulted his stop-watch which gave irrefutable evidence that I had been two seconds outside my best time in the premier event of the evening (I could have been getting into my tracksuit and warming up for the relays). The upshot of

all this was that he had performed a heroic feat of mental arithmetic and informed me that if I did not take the school to victory in the free-style relay - so bringing us out top - the skies would fall. All the while he was prodding me in the chest with a bony finger to emphasise his points.

While this was going on I was glancing past him to watch a little girl who could barely swim, slowly drowning. Fortunately, one of the spectators - they sat along the edge of the pool then (most unhygienic but nobody seemed to mind) - had the presence of mind to throw her an opened umbrella in place of a life-belt.

I had to do the anchor leg in the relay, by which time we were streets behind. I hurled myself into it, driven by fear, and hardly took a breath in the whole forty yards (odd length, wasn't it - they had to put a rope across for the hundred and, if necessary, raise it for lapped swimmers). We won. I expected at least a smile from my tormentor. Not a bit of it. I had done a much faster split time than in the individual, so the recriminations about The Boys' Championship started all over again. You can't win. Anyway, the real prize, dripping with fat, was the fish and chips on the way home. Yes, in newspaper in those good old days.

Half the fun of an evening out was that because we had missed a meal or were later to bed than usual, we stood a fair chance of at least 6d of chips on the way home, except after cubs when we ran all the way so as not to miss *The Goon Show* on the radio. This was the golden age of radio comedy with *Round The Horne* being another classic. We could understand most of *Round the Horne* but the Goons was another thing with its surrealism and amazing funny voices, with Gridpipe Finn, Moriarty, Bloodknock and Neddy.

I am sure the Goons had an effect on children's writing in primary schools, as the tendency in primary schools at the time was against very free creative writing or fantasy stuff. I know that my brother incorporated some of the Goons' ideas in his writing.

I still remember eating chips on the way up New England Hill after our very first film in about 1954 - *Shane* with Alan Ladd at the Duke of Yorks. The tingle of excitement as the little boy looked under the saloon doors at the end of the film, I can still conjure. I can only compare that with the battle scenes in Olivier's *Henry V* at The Continentale (Kemp Town) in a primary school trip and *The Gun* at the Regent, I think, although that was a close-run thing with *The Admirable Crichton* at the Odeon near Hove Station. (The Odeon was later replaced by social security offices, car showrooms, Norman's supermarket and now Hove G.P.O. sorting office). The cartoons and newsreels in North Street did not have the same impact, although *Snow White* at the Embassy is still fresh.

I was born in '46 so I remember the lamplighter zigzagging up the top of Dyke Road on his bicycle, with a pole to pull down the catches on the gas lamps. Perhaps it was because the top of Dyke Road was partly undeveloped in 1950-5 that the gas lights had been left, awaiting a change to electric.

I still have recollections of the trolley buses getting in a twist round the Seven Dials. This happened because of the overhead lines which meant that the arm was often derailed, especially at Seven Dials where the trollies faced many turnings.

I even remember one conductor who showed me a Christmas card he was drawing and crayoning in - apparently, he did it, jingles and all, as a sideline. How he managed on a moving bus I will never know, but seriously, those conductors, both hands free on a moving bus, seemed to us children positively gymnastic. I thought he meant me to keep the card so I was disappointed when he asked for it back. He said "You'll be lucky". It was the first time I had heard the phrase and I took it at face value. I remember my younger brother making the same mistake later over a bow and arrow in a children's game in Cherry Woods (Withdean Stadium). "You think I'm going to give you mine? You'll be lucky."

When I was, I think, five and my brother Al was three, we moved to Wayland Avenue in Withdean which was right next to Cherry Woods and the Sports' Stadium. My father was a building society worker who got interested in architecture, although he never trained for it. It was he who drew up the plans for the house. What worried my father was the post-war scarcity of materials like nails, as there were not enough building materials, so he was concerned about whether the building would stand up.

We practically lived in those woods as children. The big thing was camouflaged tree houses from which you could rain down imaginary boiling oil on the besieging armies and of course we had catapults, spears and bows and arrows. We rediscovered the Stone Age with our arrows - flint-tipped and sparrow-feathered. This must have been about the time of the Davy Crockett coonskin-cap craze. Small things amused us endlessly. One was a criss-cross of balsa, fixed at the centre with a rubber-band which would gyrate in the air and return to your hand. It led us on to all kinds of experiments with boomerang and bolas. We were already adept at the lasso. I do not think we ever used these as weapons but they were nestling there in our tree-houses as deterrents if rival groups dared to encroach on our territory.

There we collected firewood for Nov 5th celebrations and knocked together go-carts with pram-wheels. Whose would go furthest down the slopes of Cherry Woods without hitting a tree-stump and ending its rush ignominiously - wheels spinning in the air? Then, we would play stalking games in the long grass between the woods and Tongdean Lane. Who would get closest to their quarry undetected? A modest swaying in the grasses would give your position away.

We found that we could push the pulpy material out of the centre of elderberry branches and make pea-shooters. That, and pop-guns with corks in, were the extent of the sophistication of our arms. We did not seem to tire quickly of the simplest things like spinning-tops or yoyos or submarines from corn-flake packets and a magnifying glass gave you the gift of fire.

These magnifying glasses could be found in Weetabix packets and were probably intended for stamp collectors but clearly little boys would use them to start fires. At one time, they probably had to stop children bringing them to school.

I remember standing in line at the end of play at Stanford Road School when I felt a bee-sting on the back of my neck. In fact, the boy behind had focused the sun onto me with a magnifying glass. Another trick perpetuated by these little horrors was itching powder (made from rose hips) tipped down the back of the neck. However, a magnifying glass had a special fascination as it lit up a corner of a newspaper page, discoloured it, made it smoulder and finally set it on fire. The onlookers awaited this occurrence with bated breath.

Generally it was the physical activities which engaged us most. Balloon tennis at home appealed far more than jigsaw puzzles; mud pies were endlessly fascinating and igloos better than snowmen. Mind you, we only got TV at the end of the fifties and about half-an-hour a day was our lot. We did not want to share the fate of other little children who ended up with square eyes. At this time the television was more of a piece of furniture than is the case today. It had a wooden cabinet of a fair size and was often rather rounded whilst in the middle a comparatively tiny screen showed a flickering image.

With only half an hour viewing a day we saw fairly little television but I recall at maybe 6.30 *Welles Fargo* with Dale Robertson. We also saw the classic *Lone Ranger*, with a Zorro-type mask, wonderful signature tune, leaping white horse and silver bullets.

Radio drama probably had more appeal to us as we were used to it. There were wonderful adaptations, I remember, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Sherlock Holmes* stories, *Wind in the Willows* and historical novels like *The Eagle of the 9th* about a Roman legion which disappeared without trace whilst on manoeuvres in Britain. In those days children received a linguistic input from radio and more extended reading than is available to today's children through their videos and computer games.

School was an unwelcome interruption. Other people might have a different view of school just after the war but it seems to me that even in primary with such huge numbers (the baby boom), the individual attention given to us children was minimal.

I had nothing against the teachers personally; in fact, I had fairly little to do with them. Being inveterately naughty I passed most of my time in the corridor. Periodically, along would come Mr P., the Headmaster, and the following dialogue would ensue:

"What are you doing here, boy?"

"Nothing, sir"(on balance, the safest answer).

"I mean, why are you here?"

"I was naughty, sir."

"Well, you're not doing anything useful there, so go down to the Seven Dials and get me a batch of pipe lighters (he had a gas-ring in his office), a packet of pipe-cleaners and an ounce of dark shag. Oh, and I almost forgot, a tube of polos - I'm trying to give up smoking."

Mr P. would often give me a few coppers for my trouble and I would use them in the slot machines on the Pier. My favourite game was dislodging the black cats from the wall with ball-bearings from a pistol. This was one of the wonderful old penny-in-the-slot machines which were moved from the West Pier when it closed in the early seventies and set up in The Penny Machine Museum near the end of the Palace Pier, from whence they were moved to one of the King's Road Arches. My own children loved to play on this machine. One cat had the same nick in the ear I remembered as a child.

There were other interesting exhibits in the museum. One showed the stages in the development of the modern pinball machine from its origins in the game of bagatelle, played on a sloping board dotted with circles of pins of varying point values. Some five years ago, the machines appear to have been removed, presumably into a private collection, or dispersed - a great loss to the town.

Mr P. was always kind to me even when I went up the school wall scrumping apples. What did not appeal to him was scraping holes in the school walls to shine up old pennies with the brick dust. I think he would have minded less if we had only undermined the air-raid shelters. He was not consoled even when we showed him how bright the coins came up. This was a case of "Bend over and take that." We did not mind. It was a fair cop.

On the shopping and other chores I happily spent many days wandering the streets, popping into old-fashioned sweet-shops for liquorice and sherbet, gob-stoppers, candy cigarettes and aniseed balls (for myself) and tobacconists (for the Head) where they weighed out the loose stuff from great jars. I would lean over bridges to watch the trains on turn-tables (New England Hill) and being shunted - much better than sitting in class.

Nowadays teachers are afraid to leave the room for two seconds in case somebody falls off a chair. In those days it was like a village school where children were cheerfully dispatched on a range of errands off the premises. The same thing would happen later in the upper echelons of secondary school when in a games period, the teacher would say:

"What sport are you doing this afternoon?"

"Swimming, sir."

"Pool or beach?"

"Beach, sir."

"O.K. off you go."

There was, however, back in primary, the little matter of reading and writing. Here is a side-light on the great reading debate in Primary that has been simmering for years. My mother, who had been to the Girls' High School in Montpelier Road (only up to 14, and my father left St. Luke's at the same age) was not happy that by the age of eight or nine I could not read or write.

She wanted to help me at home so she called into Stanford Road School to speak to Miss G. about what reading method she used with me. The old lady (she seemed about a hundred to us) listened patiently to my mother's inquiry and then explained that she used the very same method with the children that she used with her dogs. If they did not understand or chose not to understand, she swiped them across the nose with a rolled-up newspaper.

My mum was quite taken aback, she took this as a sort of "That will teach you not to poke your nose into matters that do not concern you!" Schoolmarms in those days were formidable personalities. But I am sure this particular observation was meant as a nugget of professional wisdom. Even in those days the poor teachers were a much-maligned and misunderstood profession. It is far easier for us to remember instances of teacher obtuseness and blindness to our achievements than those cases where they genuinely understood or helped us.

I started reading when I was ready for it. This is how it happened. When I got really bored sitting in the corridor, I started to read. Then I began to take to it. Soon I was popping into the Church Street library every week. Someone once said it is a mistake to re-read in later life the books you enjoyed in your childhood. I remember the Jennings, William and Biggles books, Robin Hood, Greek legends, King Arthur, Forester, Tarzan and then Poe (tricky) and Sherlock Holmes (thanks for the loan, Mr B.) and Kipling and Father Brown and Moby Dick and on and on.

I was still in the "B" class of course, and not well-placed in that, and primary school was coming to an end. There were two big classes, "A" and "B", and one solemn morning, both had the same question papers on their desks. You were to be examined. Well, my Dad had drilled me in arithmetic, so that was alright; my reading helped with the composition and the "puzzle paper" was strange but quite interesting.

That was the dreaded 11+. Everyone from the "A" class always passed. No-one from the "B" class ever did. The two classes were working along different lines. That year, everyone from the "A" class passed, bar one, and everyone from the "B" class failed, bar one - me. The following year my teacher was promoted to the "A" class.

If I had known what the regime was like at the old Brighton, Hove and Sussex Grammar School for Boys, I would have "taken a fall" in the 11+. Picture the teachers (mostly officers in the war) in their gowns and mortar-boards, sweeping down the long corridors like a lot of vultures, only they were worse than vultures because they went for you even before you were dead. I exaggerate? To have said: "Good morning, Sir," to a teacher individually would have been an unthinkable presumption. They were a different species. Communication with them was not possible. They asked you questions and you answered them. If correctly, you could breathe again. If wrongly - trouble.

I remember Mr B., The Head, in a Monday morning assembly, fishing for information about graffiti on toilet walls. He got himself into grammatical trouble straight away with a double subject but refused to compromise. With slow and deliberate enunciation: "This boy or boys needs or need our help. He or they, is or are sick. Anyone who can give information...".

As he went into this routine he appeared to be staring at one of the paintings on the hall wall, perhaps the one of the archaeologist unearthing a skull on the Downs, but I knew he was an interrogator of great skill and was really reading the assembled faces carefully, even when his eyes appeared to shift to the list of Old Boys who had fallen in the wars. I made a point of staring down in case he might read anything remotely connected with implication in the arrangement of my features.

The boy beside me was not so lucky. He was tickled by the "boy or boys", the "he or they," or maybe it was the patently false, pseudo-sympathetic tone of "These boys are sick. They need our help". We all knew what that "help" would be. Whatever the case, my friend had fatally relaxed and permitted himself the flicker of a smile. When I heard Mr B. call his name I nearly jumped out of my shoes, like a soldier in the trenches when the fellow at his shoulder is hit.

As we went to our first lesson, the sound of the cane was echoing along The Head's corridor.

In my mind this is associated with the end of the sunny and carefree 1950's. It was in fact 1959.

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