

'A Journey through a Life'.

This is a brief account of the memories of Norman Knapp, born 1934

When I was born my parents lived in Viceroy Street, Seaham Harbour in the County of Durham.

But the actual birth took place at my Maternal Grandparents home which was in Swinebank Cottages, Dawdon, Seaham Harbour.

These cottages have long since been demolished, however, examples of them may be seen at Beamish Open Air Museum. They consisted of only two rooms, an all purpose living-room and a bedroom. There was no bathroom. The tin bath hung on a nail outside in the backyard and on bath-night it was brought into the living-room, placed in front of the open coal fire and filled with hot water which had first to be heated in large pans and kettles on the open fire.

To one side of the fireplace was a wooden bench-seat, which was fixed to the wall and according to my Mother it was on this bench-seat and lying in a wicker basket that I was placed as a small baby while my Mother assisted my Grandmother with the weekly wash. My Father, also called Norman, was at his work as a Fitter & Turner at the local Seaham Harbour Dock Company.

Our family home in Viceroy Street was what was known as a tenement house, which meant that while we lived downstairs, someone else lived upstairs. (For a time, that someone was my Uncle Billy & Aunt Mary together with some of their children, 'young Billy, Ronald and Jean, there were 2 others yet to be born after they moved elsewhere.) It was also an end house and Maria St. ran at right angles to it which meant there was a very large back-yard which was shared by the two tenants of Viceroy St. and 3 of the houses in Maria St.

There was no running water in any of the houses and we all shared a 'standpipe tap' in the backyard. The toilets, at least we had a W.C., were also in the backyard. There was more than one, but I can't remember if we enjoyed the luxury of one for each household or not.

Also in the backyard was a communal wash-house and there was a strict rota as to when you did your washing. In the corner of the wash-house stood the set-pot or boiler, under which was an open fire. This fire had to be lit before you could start your washing by carrying a shovelful of burning coals from the fireplace in your own house to start the fire under the set-pot. You would then proceed to heat the water in the set-pot and ladle some of it into the poss-tub. You would then place your clothes into the tub and give them a good passing. This consisted of 'bashing' the clothes with a stick, a little like a broomstick, which had a cross piece at one end for you to hold and a large stumpy piece of wood at the other to 'bash' the clothes. You may have seen pictures of ladies doing washing at a Riverbank and beating the clothes with stones, if you have, this was just the 'modern' method' of the Victorian era and early 20th Century.

The house itself consisted of 3 rooms, a living-room, a bedroom and a scullery. The scullery was used as a larder and not much else for I recall my Mother saying it was very damp. The living-room was quite large with very high ceilings, much higher that you will see in normal houses of today. The bedroom too was large but was shared by Father, Mother and myself, I had a single bed in one corner of the room. Above my bed was a gas bracket with a 'fish-tail' burner and I remember this being left lit when I was put to bed. It cast very little light and created flickering shadows, 'spooky'.

The living-room was also lit by gas, there was a large pendant fitting hanging from the ceiling and it had 3 mantles.

Food was, for the most part cooked on the open fire or the oven built into the side of the fireplace, but Mother did also use a gas-ring which was in the scullery.

As a small child I used to play with the other children in the backyard or in the back street. It was very safe playing in the street, you rarely saw a motor vehicle and if you did it usually belonged to a visiting Doctor, no 'ordinary folks' could afford cars in those days. My very first memory of the cinema, or 'pictures' as they were know then, was being taken, at the age of 3 years old, by two older girls of about 9 (the Ramshaw girls who lived in Maria St.), to see a silent picture show of 'Laurel & Hardy' in the hall of the local chapel; admission charge was 2 jam jars, which had to be 'washed-out'.

I had one particular childhood friend of the same age called Kenneth Green, he lived at the other side of our back-street in Frederick St..

Kenneth and I started school together after the Easter Holidays in 1939, only some 5 months before the outbreak of World War II.

The school was the Viceroy Street Infants School and from the address you will realise we didn't have far to go to school. My cousin, John Edward Jones, being 6 months younger than I, started a little later. He lived just two streets away from the school in Adolphus St. West and he pops in and out of my life at different times, nevertheless, playing an important role.

We were too young at the very beginning of the War to understand the real gravity of the situation, however, we were soon to be 'thrown in at the deep-end' and learn very quickly that it was far more serious than a game of 'Cowboys and Indians' in the back-street.

Air-raid shelters were built in the school-yard, which consisted of a long tube-like structure which were half buried in the ground and the excavated soil placed on top as further protection. The drainage, if any, was poor and there being no lighting it was like being in a dank and dark tunnel, with the only light been provided by teachers' large, box-shaped torch. For small children it was quite frightening to have to stay in there during an Air-raid. They say you tend to remember the good things and forget the bad, so it's perhaps not surprising that I/we did not remember just how many raids there actually were. It was brought home to us just how frequent the air-raids were, when John and I paid a visit to County Hall at Durham in early spring of 2003 to examine our old school records. As we turned the pages of the Head-teachers' log-book, many of them began with the following words ' School closed for the morning due to all-night air-raid or x-number of pupils absent due to air-raids'.

It is also documented that County Durham and Seaham in particular was one of the most frequently bombed areas in the North East. This was of course due to the close proximity of 3 coal mines, the harbour and the connecting railways.

One evening in 1941, I was in the backyard when the air-raid warning sounded and my Mother came to collect me and take me indoors. The warning had sounded late and a German Bomber Plane had 'sneaked in'. While we were still in the yard we saw the bomber coming towards us and Mother rushed me into the house. There was a terrific explosion and all our windows were blown out, the bomb, missing the mark, the nearby Docks only 150 yards away, fell on Frederick St. Three houses opposite us were completely destroyed and while there were a number of casualties there was only one fatality, my little school friend, Kenneth Green.

After leaving Swinebank Cottages, my Maternal Grandparents had moved to North Railway St, Seaham. Grandfather, who only had one leg due to an accident at the New Seaham Coal Mine (Or 'The Nack' as it was known locally.) when my Mother was only 4 years old, was finding the stairs too much of a strain. In addition, I was now 7 and getting a little too old to be sharing a bedroom with my parents, so it was decided that there would be an exchange of houses. My Grandparents moved into Viceroy St. which was all on the flat and we moved into North Railway St and gained my own little bedroom and an indoor toilet and a bathroom with hot and cold running water and ALL INSIDE THE HOUSE – WOW!!

Our house was the last house in the street and running at right angles was Henry St which starting at No.1 was just on the other side of a pedestrian walkway which ran between the two houses. No.1 Henry St was occupied by the Williams family, consisting of Mr. Silas Williams who I recall used to make and sell socks, using a small round primitive knitting machine. (Gosh, the things one remembers.) His wife was recalled to teaching at the National School during the War due to all the 'fit' male teachers been taken into the services. Next came the elder son Alwyn, who was much older than us and had gone into the merchant navy as a wireless operator. Finally there was Warren, the same age as myself and also in our class right through our school years. We became good friends and spent quite a bit of our childhood together.

There were quite a number of children in the surrounding streets with whom I attended school and/or had as playmates but I will only name a few, those whom I was to meet-up with in later years. There was John Jones of course and George Meek and Alex Robinson, the latter two I

met up with after an absence of almost 55 years. Also to be included in this group is Sheila Appleby, who lived a few doors from me in Henry St and who contacted me in March of 2003 by Email all the way from Australia where she had emigrated with her husband, Mat Jackson, in 1969. I had last seen Sheila in 1955.

At the rear of both North Railway St and Henry St was a small green on which we used to play, this was put to another use when we took delivery of an Anderson Air-Raid Shelter. Dad dug a deep hole in the green just outside our house and having erected the shelter, he then half buried it in the ground. The soil removed from the hole was placed on top to provide extra protection from any falling bombs. The shelter would be only 6 feet x 6 feet in size and you entered it through the doorway after descending two or three steps. On either side of a narrow central aisle was a bunk-bed made of wood with thin metal straps. There was neither lighting or heating in the shelter and it had been necessary to dig a small well hole in the centre to collect the surface water that drained into the shelter. This well had to be frequently emptied with buckets or the water would start to lap around your feet. This was especially true in wet weather and/or winter.

Mother and I spent quite a lot of nights in there during the war years on our own as Dad, while not in the 'Forces' due to being an engineer and therefore assigned to essential war-work was frequently away working at different Airfields in various parts of the country. When the Air-Raid siren sounded during the night we would take blankets into the shelter and make our beds up there. Mother told me later, that as a child I had such a strong belief in the invulnerability of the shelter. I would immediately go off to sleep regardless of any bombing or anti-aircraft gun noise, while she would lie awake, shivering with fear in the weak candlelight. (One of the questionable benefits of age and wisdom?)

In the first few years of the war, I, like all the other young children were not allowed to stray far from home because of the danger of being caught in the open if an Air-Raid occurred, and of course as soon as it got dusk we were all called indoors. Being an only child I remember I used to envy those with brothers or sisters, particularly on dark winter nights when you were brought indoors at tea-time and not allowed out till next day. The evenings were long and with no one to play with it left just reading or listening to the wireless to pass the time.. Like most other children I enjoyed Children's Hour with 'Uncle Mac' and programmes like "Toy Town" and as I grew older, 'Norman & Henry Bones Boy Detectives'. 'Tales of Billy Bunter' and serial stories such as John Masefield's 'Box of Delights'.. Then there was the 'Light Programme' and the 'Home Service' where we used to get shows such as 'Dick Barton Special Agent' and another famous detective of that era, 'Paul Temple'. For comedy there was ITMA with Tommy Handley, (ITMA stands for 'It's that man again') The 'Hippodrome' was another comedy show and I think everyone used to listen to 'The Man in Black' with Valentine Dyal, which featured on 'Monday Night at Eight' along with 'Ronnie Waldmans Puzzle Corner'. Then if my memory serves me correctly, there was the fore-runner of the 'Panorama' type programme called 'In Town Tonight'.

Finally there was the sinister side of Radio during the War, with the programme broadcast from Germany, which opened with an ominous voice stating "Germany calling, Germany calling" then you would hear the voice of William Joyce, a traitorous Briton, who claimed Nazi status and was know to all as 'Lord Haw Haw'. Each night he would spread propaganda by saying we were losing the War, or a particular battle, or lots of our 'planes' had been shot down, attempting to demoralise the British public. After the war I understood he was captured and imprisoned for a time in the 'Tower of London' before being hung as a traitor.

One of the major effects of the War years on the general public was, of course, the food rationing, not only for the limited amount that each person was allowed, but for the difficulty in finding it in the shops to be able to purchase it in the first place. Shops had depleted counters and if a shop received a supply of any foodstuffs the word was passed from mouth to mouth and in no time at all there would be a large queue. In the queue, people would ask "What have they got?" and from the head of the queue would come an answer of "Bread" or "Butter" or "Flour" or whatever it was. It didn't really matter what it was, because we where just pleased to be able to buy something to eat. Sometimes, a more thoughtful shopkeeper would come out and say "There is only enough for the first 50 of you" or whatever numbers his stock

could supply based on a rationed allowance for each person. Others would allow you to stand sometimes for hours, then pop their head out and say "That's it, all gone" and the unlucky ones would just have to go empty-handed. What about sweets you may ask? Well, you were only allowed 2 ounces (55 grams) per week, that is if you could find any to buy!!! There was no choosing what you liked either, it was 2 ounces of whatever they had or nothing!!!! I, like lots of other children no doubt, experienced vitamin deficiency, due not only to the lack of quantity, but mainly due to the unavailability of fruit like oranges etc, and had to be given vitamin tablets because I was having trouble with my teeth.

As time went on the bombing got worse and during one very bad Air-Raid a land mine was dropped in the Adolphus St. area which demolished numerous houses completely and damaged many more. There were a number of people killed, including a friend's father (Raymond Bell) who was on duty with the Home Guard. He and another guard, seeing the parachute falling, believed it to be a German airman bailing out; too late they found it to be a mine and their bodies were never found.

In that same explosion the house of my cousin John Jones was so badly damaged, with one of the upstairs occupants killed, that they had to leave and walk, in some cases barefooted and with what little clothing they could rescue, through the blacked-out streets and through mounds of rubble to a hastily set-up rescue centre to spend what remained of the night and wait for the rescue services to make some sense out of the resulting chaos. This was to be the first of a number of events that caused John and I to part company as his temporary new home (Staying with his Aunt) meant he went to another school for a time.

The Viceroy St Infants School which we had gone to was badly damaged and had the Raid occurred during the day it could have been much worse. However, we had already left that school sometime before and were now at the Church St National School, which was still close enough to sustain some damage to two class-rooms, one of which was ours. This resulted in the pupils of those two class-rooms having to assemble in the schoolyard each morning at 9 am and then our teachers marched us about a mile to the Ropery Walk School where we had temporary classrooms in their school hall. It was a very difficult time, because the two classes shared the hall and the two teachers were attempting to keep the attention of their particular class just a few feet from each other. At the end of each afternoon, we were marched back to our 'own' school and then dismissed; this went on for some weeks, until our classrooms were repaired.

At that time, understandably, lots of our games were involving the war, pretending to be pilots or in submarines or commandoes. Quite a bit of time was spending scrambling over the rubble of bombed houses, searching for shrapnel to see who could find the largest piece of an exploded bomb.

As the war progressed and 'our' forces had invaded Europe, together with the RAF gradually gaining supremacy of the skies, the Air-Raids gradually started to diminish, which allowed us to play a little further a-field. A magical playground to most of the local children was called 'The Burn'; it was a narrow steep and wooded valley with a small stream running through it's length. It could be 'anything or anywhere' we wished it to be and we spent many happy hours there. It was also an ideal winter playground when snow had fallen, giving many slopes suitable for sledging.

At last the War came to an end with much celebration, huge bonfires were built on the local green and effigies of Hitler were placed on top. We used to collect wood and drag it for what appeared to be miles to ensure our bonfire was bigger than a neighbour's; which of course led to 'raiding parties' to pinch wood from their pile to make ours bigger. Of course this was a game two could play, so we had to take turns to guard our wood pile. We also used to cover potatoes with mud and roast them in the embers of the fire and scorching our hands and burning our tongues while eating them, but it was all great fun and EVERYONE WAS HAPPY!!!!

Shortly after the end of the War the local beach was cleared of mines and was declared safe to use. After some 6 years of freedom from humans the various shellfish and crabs were in abundance among the rock-pools and for some little time after the beach was first opened it

was possible to collect seafood by hand. One day I found a lobster in a rock-pool, which I managed to capture and took it home for Mother to cook. It didn't take long for the 'sea-life' to get the message that the humans were back and it quickly got more and more difficult to find them. Any fine week-end would find the beach black with people and it was difficult to find a space to sit.

We could also start thinking of holidays again, not the luxurious overseas holidays of today, but little excursions into the country or a neighbouring Spa. My Mother had relations some 30 miles inland at a place called Crook and she would take me there to stay with an Aunt for a few days; sometimes Dad would come too, but mostly he had to work. Today, 30 miles is nothing, but then it took 3 buses and as many hours to get there and it seemed to be the other side of the world. I loved it there, deep in the countryside, with a stream just yards away from my Aunts door, where you could sail boats made from plantain leaves and twigs.. There was a children's play park nearby, with swings, slides and a 'teapot-lid' that you went round and around on, till you felt quite sick.

There was one 'fly in the ointment' though, the toilet was an 'Ash-Midden' and the 'Midden-Men' called once a week and cleared it out onto an open cart; it really 'ponged'!!!!

The wooden bench seat had two holes, each covered with a wooden lid. I wondered why there should be two holes, surely it was not for two people to go to the toilet together? My Uncle used to say it was for 'courting couples', however, later, I discovered that the 'second' hole was where you emptied the ashes from your fireplace.

At the age of 13, I joined the YHA, (Youth Hostels Association) and in those times you went there by push-bike or on foot; no driving up in cars.

The first Youth Hostel I visited was at Saltburn, together with a lad called Allan Paxton whose father owned a butcher's shop in Byron Tce.

Saltburn from Seaham, some 50 miles, may not seem very far today, for a generation that are used to driving everywhere in their cars, however, to 13 year old lads, on their first solo week-end away, it seemed a very long way. I can't remember how long it took us, except it was well into the evening when we got there, feeling very tired. We went to 'Reception' and were stunned to learn it was fully booked; it being our first 'hostel' we did not know it was advisable to book in advance and we didn't know what to do. Fortunately, the Warden's wife appeared and learning of our plight and innocence of 'worldly wisdom', suggested we may put two mattresses on the dormitory floor and sleep there. We gratefully accepted and after having had our very first look around Saltburn on the Sunday morning, set off on our 'epic journey' back home. This had also been my first sight of Middlesbrough (and what a 'site' it is!!!) little knowing that it would 'loom large' in my later life. Saltburn was to be the first of a great number of Hostelling Week-ends and in the company of various friends I spent many happy years cycling or hiking.

Having got some miles and 'hostelling' experience under my belt I/we, started to cycle greater distances, with trips to the Lake District and the Scottish Borders. Nearly every trip involved some new friend accompanying me and on a Week-end stay at the Rothbury Youth Hostel, I was with my cousin John Jones and a.n.other, who we always refer to as 'The Third Man' (Shades of Harry Lime'). John believes the mystery man to be George Meek and I, because I can't come up with anything better, am inclined to agree. Fate again intervenes and John and I met to have lunch with George (unearthed by John after 55 years) so who knows, we may be able to put that ghost to rest. (No, the third man wasn't George Meek, so it's still a mystery) Before I started 'hostelling', I like many of the children of our era very rarely went far from our home town or village. Outings were few and far between, a 6 mile trip by bus to Sunderland was marvellous, all those wonderful shops and a visit to the Museum was exciting. On an extremely rare occasion we may even travel the vast 20 miles to Newcastle; if we had thought Sunderland was large and wonderful, then Newcastle was HUGE and FANTASTIC!!!!!!

I was now at senior school, which filled my week-days, however, whenever possible I would be off to some Youth Hostel or other at the week-end. I also used to go camping whenever possible and Hawthorn Towers situated only 2 miles or so south of the Seaham boundary was an easy place to walk to laden down with camping equipment. We, there was always one or more of my friends to accompany me, used to camp on the cliffs above the Bay at Hawthorn,

just outside the boundary walls of Hawthorn Towers. On one occasion the owner of the 'Towers'. I think his name was Colonel Fawcett, a retired gentleman in every sense of the word, stopped by our camp for a friendly word. "Look lads' he said, I've had word about a doubtful character roaming the area, I think it would be best if you followed me, into the 'grounds' and I will allocate you a safe place to camp". We followed him across the private wooden pedestrian bridge, over the main LNER Railway tracks which ran near to the cliff top at that point and into the grounds of the 'Towers'. He showed us into a small paddock, which was well sheltered by some outbuildings on one side and trees on the other. "This should be just the place for you, nice and safe and you can come to the back of the house for water". We thanked him and returned to break-camp and transfer all our equipment to our new and improved site. The area was excellent for camping, on one side there was Hawthorn Dene with lots of trees to climb and play in and it also led down to the sheltered sandy bay at the base of quite large cliffs. Nearby, there was also a Quarry, which was only worked part-time, it too was an excellent place to play and explore, with lots of miniature wild strawberries that tasted so good. The Quarry was also a haven for the 'Small Blue Butterfly', they were beautiful and unfortunately extinct in this area now, or so I believe. This was some 55 years ago and by a quirk of fate my cousin John and I recently went to the Pub in Hawthorn Village for a bar meal. Now that the weather is improving I think I'll see if he's game to walk from the village and down to the site of the old quarry, who knows, we may find some of the strawberries and with luck, the Blue Butterfly?

On the far side of the quarry and about 1 mile from our camp, was a small farm and we walked there each day to buy our milk and eggs. On one occasion my companions at the camp were George Meek and Benson Adams; we had many happy days and still have very many happy memories of those times.

The end of the school summer holidays for 1949 saw Brian Whitten, Arthur Williams and I return reluctantly to school. Reluctantly, because we all had jobs to go to, but because our birthdays were 2 days after the end of the holidays we were legally obliged to stay on till Christmas 1949. What a total waste of time it was, the teachers were no longer interested in us, we were no longer 'part of the current class' and on most days we were just told to 'get lost'.

Christmas came at last and on January 2nd. 1950, I started work with the 'Gas Board' which was situated at in North Railway St, a few doors away from our home!!

I may have officially started work on the 2nd January, but I had already being working for them unofficially during all of 1949.

To reach the workshops at the rear of the Gas Showrooms and Offices it was necessary for the workmen to come along the pedestrian walk at the side of our house, turn at our back-gate and enter the rear of the works in North Railway St. which was the location of their workshops.

The workmen, passing our house as they did, many times every day, knew both my parents and I very well indeed and never passed without speaking.

One day while on holiday from school I asked one of the fitters if I may go with him on his work for the day as I was bored. He said I could as he was going to check gas street lighting at Seaton and I could pass items up the ladder to him. I remember that day very well indeed for it was the start of many more. As time went on and I got more and more confidence and they found they could trust my help, they would send me back to the workshops for materials. At first, I would stand outside and wait to catch the eye of one of the fitters to get the items from the stores, but later I moved into the workshops and eventually to the stores-counter itself, even being served by the Works Manager himself. In those times all the fitters and indeed all adults had to be addressed as 'Mr' or 'Sir', no way were you allowed to call them by their Christian names. After some weeks passed of 'helping' the men, they even allowed me to accompany them when doing jobs in peoples homes and taught me how to make and 'wipe' lead joints. So 1949 progressed with me gaining more and more experience of gas fitting and that made up my mind to become a gas fitter when leaving school. (I doubt if the Health & Safety Rules would allow anyone to 'follow in my footsteps' today.)

Unfortunately, my Dad was set against it, saying it was not a 'proper' fitters job and would not help me secure an apprenticeship with them. Mam had her say and tried to win Dad round,

without success. Nevertheless, Dad said he would not help me but, he would not forbid me to apply for a job. So off I went, into the front door of the Gas Board for the first time in my life, to enquire about a job and request an interview.

I opened the showroom door and went in to find the Works Manager, standing in front of a gas fire warming his backside, an occupation he much enjoyed as I was to learn.

Before I could speak, he said, "Now son, I suppose you've come for a job?" "Yes Sir" I replied. "When do you leave school?" "Christmas Sir". "Righty O then, we'll see you here at 7.30.am. sharp on January 2nd."

That was it and in a daze I found myself back outside the front door complete with a job.

What I did not know at the time was that the Manager had observed my keenness over the previous year and had got reports from various fitters regarding my suitability, so in a way, the 'interview' had taken place in my absence and before I ever put my foot through the door.

I served my apprenticeship for only 6 months when the Manager said he was taking me into the stores and office to see that side of the business. After about a month working in the offices I was offered a job as a junior clerk, painting a very rosy picture of the benefits such a position would bring. My parents were all for it and so I officially became a clerk and it took many hard years and disappointments before I saw any of the 'Rosy' side or the benefits.

Starting work was also the beginning of growing up. Although my parents were not 'well-off' and we had undergone the privations of the War, living in simple accommodation with few of the luxuries that are considered basic requirements today; our home was always clean and allowing for rationing, had plenty to eat. Working for the Gas Board took me into other peoples homes and this really opened my eyes to the terrible conditions that some people existed in.. There were numerous examples I could quote, however, I will restrict myself to only two. The fitter I worked with and I went to a house to attend to a gas leak. On entering the house via the kitchen we found that room to contain some 6 or 7 children and moving into the living room also found a similar number of children all in the process of having a meal. I can't recall what they had to eat, it certainly wasn't much, but what I did see remains fixed in my minds eye. A very fat woman, in an all black dress, was seated on the remains of a horse-hair sofa from which protruded tufts of horse-hair. In front of her was a small stool on which was placed a small basin and she was in the process of having a (much needed) wash. The children were drinking their tea, the lucky ones had cups or mugs, some without handles and the remainder were drinking from jam-jars. We were told they could smell gas in one of the bedrooms and we entered a room that was strewn with bedclothes that appear to have been used to 'black-lead' the kitchen stove. The stench was appalling, we would have had difficulty locating the gas leak because of the stench had the cause not been visible for all to see. From the bedroom wall there protruded what once had been a straight-arm gas bracket; some of the children must have been swinging on it and had stripped the threads thus causing the leak.. We carried out the necessary repairs in what must have been record time and beat a hasty retreat to the fresh air. We later learnt that the 'lady' in question had 16 (living, there had been others) children, the eldest being 14, who, due to malnutrition and rickets looked to be about 8 years of age.

The second account concerns a well known local figure of that time who went by the name of 'The Weatherman'. Whenever one went down the local main street, Church Street, regardless of the weather, you would invariably see an old blind gentleman, attired in a threadbare black overcoat, done up with safety pins, woollen mittens on his hands, his cap pulled well down on his head and sheltering in a shop doorway. On hearing a person approach he would then recite his weather prediction for that day, hence his name 'The Weatherman'. He was completely harmless, but during my earlier school years I was always a little frightened of him. Some boys used to tease him, albeit very mildly, today no doubt he would be abused and tormented. I knew nothing about him or where he might live until one day shortly after starting work we were called to a house in Frances St to attend to a gas ring. Now Frances St, particularly the bottom end, was very down market to say the least and could definitely be classed as slums. Each house was divided into many one roomed bed-sits and on entering the address we'd been given we were confronted by a scene that would have

made Charles Dickens weep. Lying on a iron framed single bed, totally devoid of any mattress or bed covers was 'The Weatherman', dressed exactly has I've already described above, even down to his cap and boots. The room had one single window which had no curtains of any kind, the floor was all bare boards and the only furniture consisted of two upturned crates on one of which stood the gas ring and a kettle. 'The Weatherman' requested that we excuse him as he was resting and explained the fault with the gas ring, which we soon repaired. There was not another single item of any description to be seen in that bleak room and quietly my Fitter and I checked our pockets and managed to collectively produce about seven shillings and some coppers which we gave to him before we left, accompanied by his profuse thanks. That was my major lesson in absolute poverty.

So for the next two and a half years I continued in my work, learning what I could both there and at Night School. For most of this time a Saturday morning was part of the normal working week, however, sometime in '52 I believe, there was a four hour reduction in the working week and this meant I got every other Saturday off. Most weekends were spent cycling and visiting various Youth Hostels and the same also applied to our annual holidays. In September of '52 I became 18 years old and was summoned to a medical board at Newcastle prior to joining the army in November to commence my two years of National Service.

Many years have passed since that time and sometime I may get round to continuing this saga which my Grandchildren find quite amusing, resulting in questions like "Did you see Queen Victoria" and other such innocent cheek.

Until then I hope you find some memories in this tale to enable you to share in the early part of my life.