

I remember our frequent family excursions to the beach at Stokes Bay on the shores of the Solent, the stretch of water between Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. It is a shingle beach, no sand, only pebbles, so very hard on the feet when going to the water's edge for a swim. To get there we would catch a tram to town, then a bus to the beach.



1929

That was an outing in itself, much of the journey being through pleasant countryside. I recall distinctly the mode of dress for the adults. Dad, like all the menfolk, wore his second best suit, complete with waistcoat, starched collar and tie and boots, the womenfolk in 'sensible' skirts and blouses, topped by huge hats. On arrival at the beach, Dad and Mum rented deck chairs whilst we kids sat on towels.

In warm weather Dad would take off his jacket, collar and tie and his boots, knot a handkerchief at each corner and put it on his head. That was his beach attire for the day. Sometimes we could persuade him to have a paddle, when he would roll up his trouser legs to his knees, hobble over the shingle to the water and just stand

there in blissful contemplation of the sea. Mum would not demean herself by being seen removing her stockings in public, so she would not paddle.

It was an exciting place, a good spot to see the trans-Atlantic liners sailing to or arriving from USA. By the time they had reached our vantage point they had built up a good speed with the result that a steep swell had been generated. That swell reached our beach some 10 to 15 minutes later, but we were ready for it. Deck chairs and picnic baskets had been moved well up the beach out of reach of the waves, whilst we swimmers were in the water waiting for what we now know as a good surf. For a few minutes we enjoyed a surf equal to that experienced at many Australian beaches, without of course, the advantage of surfboards. I did however, learn the art of body surfing at a very early age.

I learned too, the names, nationality, lengths and tonnages of all those huge ships. *Mauretania*, *Aquitania*, *Bremen*, *Europa*, *Il de France* and many others whose names I have forgotten. Also causing interest and excitement were the big 'J' class yachts, racing from Cowes on the Isle of Wight. I knew even more about those, the names and records of *Britannia*, *Astra*, *Candida*, *Valsbede*, *Westward*, the Americas Cup challengers *Shamrock V*, *Endeavour I* and *Endeavour II* and others.

Many of these were built at Gosport and crewed by local men so we were able to bask in their reflected glory, like today's boys with their favourite football teams and Formula 1 drivers. We could watch the early naval planes dropping practice torpedoes, the flying boats from the RAF seaplane base at nearby Calshot and the naval ships entering and leaving Portsmouth harbour. Most spectacular of all, was the Coronation Naval Revue and Fireworks display in 1937.

I remember that particularly well as I, with a lot of other boys, spent all day walking the beach selling Smiths potato crisps at two pence a bag, other boys were selling bottles of cordial. We 'crispsers' got the better of the deal, tins of crisps being much lighter to carry than crates of cordial.

Not far from home was a place known locally as the 'Bunny.' It was a tract of land owned by the Admiralty. In the nineteenth century, a large number of walnut trees had been planted there, to provide wood for musket stocks. It was a paradise for small boys. Plenty of walnuts and blackberries in season, rabbit warrens, birds' nests to seek out. Of course, it was a 'no go' area but accessible to the adventurous at low tide along the foreshore. Mum forbade me to go 'round the Bunny,' but I went nevertheless. It was well worth the caning I got every time I was found out.

Discipline was enforced by Mum sometimes with a cane that always hung by the fireplace in the kitchen. Caning never worried me. I learned many years later that I had a high pain threshold. It was Dad's punishments that I hated. Long term punishments, like not being allowed out for play for days on end, sometimes weeks. Bicycle locked away, no Saturday afternoon pictures, no pocket money. Never once did he lay a hand on me. Probably just as well, he was a burly man and very strong.

There was one punishment that I feared but never experienced. Our local policeman, P.C. Wren⁴, lived close by and did a lot to keep us unruly urchins on

⁴ Although Gosport was a large town with a population at that time of about 30,000, there was only one police station. Police constables homes were in the various districts of the town in 'police houses' from which they patrolled their particular beat. Those houses being regarded as local police stations were treated by us wayward urchins with some awe and trepidation. We'd invariably cross to the other side of the road when passing one.

Aunt Fanny

Eric wrote this short memoir of his Aunt Fanny in the present tense, as if he were diarising an incident at the time it occurred. It would be about 1929, when he was eight years old.

They have put my clothes in a suitcase. That means that I have to stay at Aunt Fanny's until Mummy gets well again. She is very ill and can't look after me.

I hate going to Aunt Fanny's. That old dark house always smelling of polish and with the blind shutting out the light gives me the creeps. I reckon it is haunted, it creaks at night. In my room a big picture of Queen Victoria hangs opposite my bed, her eyes following me when I move around the room. When in bed, looking at it by candlelight, I can see her lips moving. Last time I stayed there I got into trouble 'cos I hung a towel over it. Auntie was very angry.

I don't hate Aunt Fanny, she is good to me, but strict. *Watch your table manners boy; be polite; always stand up when a lady enters the room.* She calls me her 'little gentleman'. No, I don't hate her, but she frightens me, but then she frightens everyone: the milkman, the butcher, the baker, the curate, poor little Bridget her maid who flutters around like a frightened bird. Even my Dad, Auntie's younger brother is a bit scared of her. Uncle Will¹ must be frightened too 'cos he's hardly ever there, always away at sea.

1 William Blakeway, Eric's uncle, married Fanny Amelia Mutton in 1883. He died in 1937.

the straight and narrow. Rumour had it that he had a room at the back of his house containing an assortment of canes where he flogged wayward urchins. A threat from Mum or Dad that I would be taken to P.C. Wren was always sufficient to make me toe the line. All us kids feared 'Wrenny' as we called him, each of us telling of dire punishments dealt out in that back room, but as far as I can recall, no-one had ever seen it.

Wrenny once caught me scrumping⁵ apples and his punishment swift. He made me eat pockets full of apples, one after another. Then marched me home, told Mum what I had been up to and said that as I had been made to eat

5 'Scrumping' – stealing fruit from a garden or orchard. A time honoured pastime for small boys.

Bridget calls me 'Master Eric'. I like her, she is kind and slips me little goodies from the pantry when *Madame* isn't looking. Aunty gives me books to read, always by Charles Dickens. *Much better for you than Biggles and those awful William books*, she says. I think that man Uriah Heep (ever so 'umble) must have met Aunt Fanny.

I hope Mummy gets better soon so that I can come home again.

20 Years Later²...

I visit Aunt Fanny whenever I go home on leave. A dear old soul: still the same terrifyingly correct lady, living in her gloomy Victorian style home with its chintz and antimacassar, but I love her.

Bridget is still with her, now an extremely capable housekeeper and as in the past, still calling me 'Master Eric'. Queen Victoria's portrait hangs there yet, the gilt frame now tarnished. Uncle Will has gone. Died in China of some exotic disease and was buried at sea. (I never cease to wonder how that timid man could be a ship's captain.)

No, the Aunt Fannys of this world will never change nor will they be forgotten.

² Eric's memories here are slightly incorrect with regards timing. Fanny died in May 1939 and Eric wasn't called up for active service until November of the same year. He therefore could not have visited 'whenever I go home on leave.' From January 1938 he was apprenticed to a boatbuilder in Gosport and it was probably during this period that he visited Aunt Fanny.

all my loot, a good dose of Castor Oil and a couple of days confined indoors would be sufficient punishment. He never caught me scrumping again. It is a pity that such treatment is not permitted today, I think the world would be a much better place.

As I write this I recall some of the characters in the district at this time who were targets of us urchins. 'Sally' Withers was the local 'rag-and-bone-lady.' She was a little woman always dressed in a black dress reaching down to her feet. She would walk the streets pushing an old perambulator, calling out raucously, 'Rag bone, rag bone, any ol' rags, bones or bottles.' Walking behind was her husband, a tall thin individual who, because of his long neck we named 'Rubberneck.' He was never heard to speak and was the constant

recipient of abuse from ‘Sally.’ His job was to carry the overflow from the perambulator in a sack.

We kids would follow these two mimicking them and waiting for her to relieve herself which she did frequently. Standing over the gutter with her legs apart then moving on leaving a puddle for all to see. That was our cue to give her a hard time with our ribald comments. We would be rewarded with a tirade of most foul abuse directed not only at us but also to poor old ‘Rubberneck.’ Then off she’d go again with her ‘Rag-bone, rag-bone, any ol’ rags.’

Mum was horrified and forbade me to even witness such goings-on so I made sure that I was elsewhere when they were near our house. Then there was Fred Watts who operated a boatyard at the end of the road. I played down there a lot because his son Herbie was my age and we used to go to school together.

Fred was a real rough diamond, given to constant swearing, which as you may guess offended my mum’s sensibilities. My instructions were not to play with Herbie Watts. They were a rough family and were always swearing. I told Herbie what she had said and of course he told his dad. One day he saw me playing in his yard and called me over. ‘Ginger,’ he said, ‘you tell that bloody goody-goody mum of yours that we don’t bloody well swear down ‘ere, we just use strong bloody language.’ Not long after that episode we moved to another district where there were ‘nicer’ neighbours.

Another one who comes to mind was ‘Staggy,’ a carter who worked in the sand yard down the road. We boys used to play there when nobody was about. One day ‘Staggy’ caught me happily building a sandcastle. ‘Get out of it,’ he yelled, ‘If I catch yer ‘ere again I’ll cut yer ‘ead off and stick a cabbage in its place.’ I was only about four or five at the time and Mum couldn’t understand why for a couple of weeks I stayed home playing in the garden instead of out in the street.

Later if I saw him with his horse and cart coming down the street I would hurriedly take off and hide. Many years later I had a girlfriend, one Betty Staggy. One night I took her home after dancing at the local church hall and who should open the door when we knocked was ‘Staggy.’ No, he didn’t recognise me.

In 1929 we moved to a different part of town. With family growing up, there were still four of us at home, we needed a larger house. I think Dad must have been more prosperous then as I remember talk of a ‘mortgage’ whereas previously the rent man used to call every week. I missed the water at the end of the road but there were other interesting places to explore. I had

freedom too. We lived nearer to the harbour entrance and the army barracks was close by.

Our new home, 134 Avenue Road, was a three bedroom, two story brick, semi-detached house on the junction with Spring Garden Lane⁶. (What a lovely name for a suburban street!) Wonder of wonders, we had electric lighting in all rooms so no more going to bed by candle light. Again an outside toilet and no bathroom. Friday was still bath night when the bathtub was brought into the kitchen from the backyard.

Before moving in my brother Bert had papered and painted it throughout using what Mum called 'serviceable' colours, dark brown and cream. All the woodwork was brown, the only relief being the door panels picked out in cream. The wallpaper was the heavy floral pattern of the period with a wainscoting in the entrance hall and up the stairs of embossed wallpaper called Lincrusta. With small windows it made the house rather gloomy but still much better than our former home.

Avenue Road was typical of that period with long rows of terrace houses sharing a common roof. The front doors opened directly onto the road, no front gardens. The road surface was concrete and with light traffic, mostly horse-drawn, it was an ideal playground for the many children there. We could, with complete safety roller skate, play with hoops, whips and tops and the numerous ball games. We boys disdained playing with the girls, they kept to themselves at the end of the road with their dolls and skipping ropes.

Our next-door neighbours, the Barrows, were a lovely family with three children. The youngest, Peter was my age and we remained friends for many years. His sister, Myrtle, known as Myrt was a year or so older. I mention her because I think that she was my first love. At the tender age of nine or 10 I didn't know what love was but whenever I saw her in the garden I was out there in a flash. It was noticeable too, her elder brother Ron and my sisters teased me by saying loudly, 'Look, Eric's in love.' I hated them.

Across the road our neighbours were not so friendly in fact all the time that we lived there, they never spoke to us. They were strict Plymouth Brethren, never consorting with anyone not of their faith. I mention them because they had a daughter of about my age. She was never allowed out to play, in fact the only time that she was seen out was with a parent and that was only when she was taken to school and on Sundays when they all went to their church or chapel or whatever.

⁶ Modern maps show 134 Avenue Road at the corner of Grove Avenue which, travelling east, joins Spring Garden Lane.

I never knew her name, nor found out which school she went to. Often she was seen at the window watching us out playing. She always looked so sad. When her mother saw this she would pull her away from the window, glare at us then pull the blind down. I remember hearing my Mum saying to Dad one wash day, ‘That woman across the road never hangs underwear out with her washing, she must dry it all indoors.’ I believe Dad made a remark like ‘Perhaps Plymouth Rocks don’t wear any.’ Mum was not amused.

Although our address was Avenue Road, the bulk of our house with the front door and garden was in Spring Garden Lane. It stretched about two kilometres to the main road. Next to us was a Council Primary School beyond that there were rather attractive newer houses each with well kept front gardens. Opposite were a few similar houses then a large imposing building that housed a private school for boys.

Obviously in that school the emphasis was on education because, to the best of my knowledge although they were entered into the town’s sporting activities, be they football, cricket or athletics, they never won anything. Beyond that was a stretch of well maintained private land adjoining a large house that I believe was the home of a high ranking naval officer. Nearby too was the railway station and goods yard. Usually a ‘no-go’ area, except during the pigeon racing season.

It was a favourite spot for starting races to the north of England, two or three hundred miles away. We local kids were roped in to release the birds. We were each allocated a stack of baskets and at a given signal pulled the strings to open them. It was a spectacular sight to see thousands of pigeons swarming out, circling once or twice and then heading north.

Our reward was that we were allowed to keep any eggs left in the baskets. They of course, were always fresh and very welcome to Mum who used them in her cooking. In that period I joined the Boy Scouts, also the St John Ambulance Brigade Cadets. The scouts were great, plenty of camping trips. I loved the outdoor life. I believe that Mum was beginning to admit that I was not as delicate as she thought. I wasn’t all that keen on the St John Ambulance Brigade, too many drills but I did like the fancy uniform especially when I could show off in it when attending sporting fixtures and formal occasions.

Mabs

A young lady choosing a career as a nanny must possess exceptional qualities. First and foremost she must love children, be dedicated to the wellbeing and character forming of her charges, be loyal to her employer and