

GROWING UP IN THE 1940's AND 1950's

The advance of technology since the War has brought about a much faster, if not frenetic, pace of life. What was a lifetime of physical effort can now be accomplished in hours, if not minutes. Global communication takes seconds, travel is fast and reliable and almost every human need can be satisfied with the click of a button. Yet whilst the standard of living has increased, arguably the standard of life has diminished. People struggle to keep abreast of information overload, are phased by myriad choices, are threatened by cyber bullying and struggle with the competitive demands on limited time. There is ever increasing stress and pressure to keep up and to fend off unwanted communication. Children too are not immune. Their world has in many ways become a screen as they too are seduced by the cyber world. Their lives are increasingly competitive as they measure themselves against a plethora of world-wide images and role models.

By comparison the lives of post-war children were innocent and naive. In a pre-television age their knowledge of life and the world was parochial and based upon experience with the family and life within the local area. Knowledge of the outside world was largely something in books – remote and distant where far off countries were described in almost mythical terms. With the exception of Comics, Newspapers and an increasing number of American films there was little they could measure their lives against. Similarly, they were not bombarded by a ceaseless avalanche of advertisements. Knowledge of new products and new toys emerged from people in the local area who had acquired them, and that was viewed through the prism of class structure and whether it was achievable within their own family. With the further constraints of austerity and rationing, children had little aspiration. They knew what was possible and were content with their lot. It was quite normal to go without sweets, crisps, biscuits and fizzy drinks and there was little evidence of jealousy or desire for luxuries. What you didn't have, you didn't miss. Children were certainly not over-indulged and there was no bribing into good behaviour with treats. There was altogether a more disciplined ethos to life where the boundaries were clear. Breaches were dealt with swiftly by smacking or caning. Life was more understandable, more black and white and more simplistic. Life was controlled more by the natural world than the technological one and that's where life lessons were chiefly learned.

For the young there was freedom to roam. In towns and cities' the streets and bomb sites were the places to play. There were few cars and they were considered safe places for children to play unsupervised. In the country there was freedom to go anywhere. There was no fear of molestation and a much more paternalistic attitude of neighbouring adults to children who would set them straight if they were seen to cross the line and make sure parents became aware of their indiscretions. There was then no such thing as Health and Safety. Most children were encouraged to be adventurous. Kids got dirty, fell out of trees grazed their knees and cut themselves. It was expected. New games were made up using anything that came to hand. Bits of old wood, rope, chalk, sticks, rags – just about anything which could be re-imagined into swords, guns etc. or refashioned into boats, planes or any

number of things. Boys would act out their Cowboy and Indian stories or play at pirates, soldiers, Robin Hood or enact war games. They also gathered sundry items to build dens, entirely private, hidden places where they could develop secret societies complete with passwords and plot their next moves. Girls were excluded. They tended to be more cosseted and protected, groomed by their mothers to stay clean and be more lady-like in their games. They preferred dressing up and acting out more domestic and maternal imaginings with dolls and other household paraphernalia or play at Doctors and Nurses at or near home. Their collective endeavours were more concerned with skipping, playing with balls or hoops or simply playing house. The sexes were therefore firmly segregated for play, echoing the situation in society at large.

In the pre television age education, amusement and entertainment at home was centred upon a few toys, a lot of imagination and the traditional crafts and games, punctuated with the few radio programmes designed for young listeners. In the immediate post-war period toys were in short supply and tended to be basic and unsophisticated. For boys the pinnacle was a Hornby Train Set and a Meccano Construction Kit. Beyond this cast-metal Dinky cars, soldiers, and farm animals were popular, not to mention toy guns with caps. Construction kits for model boats and aeroplanes using Balsa wood along with a few wind-up mechanical toys were also available. Girls, once again, were guided towards all things maternal and domestic. Dolls, Dolls Houses and clothes, toy prams and pushchairs, soft toys, especially teddy bears and golliwogs, dressing up costumes, knitting and embroidery sets were central to their world of play. There were also many universal toys and playthings valued by both sexes. Bricks, paints, crayons, colouring books and pencils, plasticine, scrap books, cut and paste books along with picture books, story books, comic books, and Annuals, jigsaws, marbles and skipping ropes were as essential then as they are today. For the very lucky bicycles, pedal cars and trikes were also available.

Games were a much more prominent feature of family interaction B.T. (Before Television) Card games like Snap, Old maid, Rummy, Whist and Pontoon were central to many family evenings as were Board games like Snakes and Ladders, Ludo, Helma, Monopoly and many others including Bagatelle. Other favourites included Charades, Housy-Housy, Dominoes, Draughts, Chess, Battleships, Tiddlywinks and the all-time family favourites like Hide and Seek and Hunt the Thimble. There were, of course, other games more child centred played between friends like conkers, Cat's Cradle, 5 Stones, Hopscotch, Marbles, Leap Frog, Skipping, Knock about Football and Cricket and Hula hoops etc. It was a world of more creative and vigorous fun and socialisation.

Beyond the street and playground there were more organised opportunities for children to develop their skills which parents often cajoled their children into taking part. Some emphasised possible career aspiration, all seduced children with the promise of adventure. There were well-attended Army, Navy and Airforce Cadet groups, Boy Scout, Girl Guide, Cub and Brownie Packs and Boys Clubs – all encouraging group games, hobbies and subsistence training. Parents were then keen to encourage their off-spring into the development of life skills especially in music and the arts. Many squeezed the family budget to finance piano lessons, ballet classes, and even elocution. In towns and cities better leisure facilities provided

a different spectrum of opportunity particularly across the sports, the cinema and more specialised clubs and disciplines.

Post-war children did not travel far from home. Outings relied upon public transport. Whilst buses and coaches were ideal for local excursions they were not so practical for longer journeys. The narrow road system did not accommodate large vehicles easily and progress was limited to not much more than 25 per hour. The train was therefore the preferred means of transport for longer trips and the new British Railways were not slow to take advantage by offering Seaside, Holiday or Football Specials at reduced fares. These provided exciting outings for children even though, for most, they remained infrequent events. The chief excitement in children's lives then, as now, was Christmas, Birthdays and some high days like Easter and Bonfire Night. The only change has been the level of expectation.

As the 1950's progressed and in the wake of the 'youthquake' attitudes towards children changed. The move towards teenage independence and the development of a new, optimistic and vigorous culture prompted a rethink. The repressive attitudes towards youth were elbowed aside. It was clear that the opportunities of the new age could not be impeded. There was therefore a noticeable relaxation of the strictures. There was more freedom to stay out, especially in the evening, and more freedom to mix and spend. Youth Clubs blossomed along with the teenage 'Hop' and disco. A new and lucrative industry developed to feed the ever growing needs of the teenage population. As family wealth grew the indulgence was slowly extended to younger children who were not slow to ask for more. A new age for youth beckoned.

The one constant in children's lives was School. This changed appreciably after the publication on the 1944 'Butler' Education Act. Prior to the war whilst the notion of Secondary education for all was mooted, the majority of pupils were taught in all-age Schools up to the school leaving age of 14. It was only selected pupils that moved into Grammar Schools by paying fees or winning scholarships. Adopting the ideas of the Spens report of 1938 Butler passed into law compulsory Secondary education for all to the age of 15 within a 3 tier Tripartite system. This created 3 types of Secondary School:

1. The Traditional Grammar School for the academically gifted .
2. Secondary Technical Schools for those with a more practical bent providing training in craft, mechanical and scientific / technological skills
3. Secondary Modern Schools for the rest, where the emphasis was to be upon training pupils in the practical skills necessary to equip them for less skilled jobs and home management.

Placement in each school was to be determined by 11+ selection.

Whilst the distinction between Grammar and Secondary Modern was clearly understood the role of Technical Schools was less clear. Some saw them as a training ground for highly academic studies in the Sciences, Engineering and Technology providing engineers and technicians, others saw them as being more craft orientated providing plumbers, electricians and builders etc. There were also problems with age range and selection procedures since 11 was clearly inappropriate. The result was that each Education Authority came through with

its own plans and some didn't bother, so that the envisaged 3-tier system became 2-tier and very few children were afforded any kind of technical education. Less than 8% of pupils made it to Technical School, 20 – 25% to Grammar and around 70% to Secondary Moderns.

One lucky youngster was Keith, the second son of Reg and Winnie Upson and it is to his School life that we now turn. He describes in detail his passage through each of the 4 tiers of schooling. It is a highly personalised account of his journey through a village Primary School, a country Secondary Modern School, a city Technical School and a traditional Grammar. As such it provides a unique glimpse into life in schools during the 1940's and 1950's.