

A Child's Christmas in Earl Shilton circa 1955

I'm 9 years old ... and now almost 60 years later, as I flick through these few old photographs, it's almost unbelievable to see myself as I was then ; short back and sides, short trousers, a great gob of a smile and eyes as wide as teapots and to remember and sense the spirit that fixed and fired meit's almost palpable.

You can see it in the photographs. It leaps out. The energy, the thirst for life, the passion, the joy and beauty running through my soul.

Everything was possible back then in 55.

I'd be 9 and Mrs. Reynolds, our headmistress, had just clubbed her way through the potential new choir victims relegating the unworthy to a life of failed musicality and elevating the rest of us to a life sentence at St. Simon and St. Jude.

God were we naïve ?

Lined up and queuing down the side entrance to Earl Shilton's ancient but charming Junior school in Almey's Lane, we sensed the firing squad as she lifted her recorder and took aim. As each child passed by, she blew a note and we were required to match it vocally. A successful pitching rid us, practically overnight, of our wondrously free and easy childhood and relegated us to a sort of ecclesiastical hell in which the demands of the church choir consumed 9/10ths of our lives in an avalanche of matins, evensong, choir practice, Sunday school, weddings, harvest suppers, treats and sermons. Couple that with my new job as a milk round boy at Mr. Easton's dairy on High Street on Saturday and Sunday mornings and my life from Wednesdays onwards became a blur of gold tops, fresh cream, cracked eggs and St. Simon and St. Soddin' Jude.

But I was young and full of heart and promise. Undaunted. Anything was possible and so in huge strides, I took it all on, gobbled it all down, ate it all up, swallowed it whole and, looking back, despite the enormity of this schedule, these years become a soft glow of golden memory, of friends and family, of psalms and singing, of laughter and joy, of music and of dancing and of people doing things together. I was drowning in a sea of tea and orange, besieged by cake, mince pies and egg and cress sandwiches, conveyed upon an eternity of green crockery heaped in tumbling skyscraper piles in the kitchen at Earl Shilton church hall and interspersed with the breath of vespers, the surging tide of crazy psalms, the swishing of the cassock, the sing song mumbo jumbo of communion and bursts of uncontrollable laughter as we choir boys tried to stifle our hysteria under the vicious glare of the reverend Jaeger.

Summers too, no doubt also daubed in the slant of memory, glowed with the gold of corn and green and luscious pastures rolled endlessly across the acres of my childhood caught for eternity in the golden glare of a huge and orb-like sun.

Autumns splashed their sad and dying colours on my heart and drenched me in their torrents of eternal wind and rain but could not douse my fire within. The more they railed the more my mad and raging soul leapt up to meet their challenge. Cosy by my fire and looking out through streaming windows, I gorged myself upon the savagery of these elementals screaming an insolent laughter at their rage.

Then Winter, Winter, Winter, oh the blessed Winter with its gales and raging storms, its blizzards and its wanton prayer of snow that carpeted us in a silence deeper than the breath of God, its icy fingers poking through our panes and windows, painting wondrous hieroglyphs of frost. Writings from some other world. A vampire seeking out our souls and scraping nails of frost along an agony of leaded glass and window pane. Barred but always poking through the portals in our homes it formed a barbed wire filigree of forest upon our windows and our doors.

A shed of ancient lasts from Eatough's withdrawn stock though fed our fires and held these icy nails at bay. Each morning we would riddle through the embers clearing out the nest of bolts and tangled soles then feed it with more lasts and soft combustible coal and await the bursting, flickering flames. Huddling up we'd scorch our backsides and our thighs and beat our hands around our freezing bodies and shiver in the chill morning air.

Always it snowed and snowed and snowed. Huge mountainous drifts of it bound us in until we tunnelled out onto a sparkling wonderland of ice and snow and glistening frost. A miracle of white lay soft as velvet on Earl Shilton covering her poverty and her grime, cushioning the footstep, the occasional car, the barking dog and transforming everywhere into a fairytale of fantasy and indescribable beauty.

Mum kneels at the foot of the bed almost angelic in her white nightie, her back straight, her hands tipped in prayer mouthing the Our Father and giving thanks to God for all his grace and mercy and for all the gifts that he bestows upon our household and which she in turn in all her wondrous gentleness then bestows on us.

Her laughter bubbles round us, her warmth sends Jack Frost packing yet despite the winsiette, we shiver and our teeth chatter. One last time we seek the sanctuary of the front room fire then tear back up the stairs and, diving into bed (our socked feet fondling the earthenware hot water bottle), we wriggle warmth into the sheets and cup our hands between our legs and try to trap the warm air in and keep the cold air out, our faces blanched and icy, our hair freezing and the air smoking with our breath.

Upstairs, the damp has pulled huge bulges of wallpaper away from the walls and the few books we have ekea white stain across their spines and covers and none of this will change until a week of fires has dried it out. If visitors come then we must keep the home fires burning or our front room will drip damp and streams will slither down the leaded bay, the walls will seep and again our books will stew and sag. Arthur Mee's encyclopaedias from which I devour Aesop's fables when I am ill or the anthology of Longfellow from which I spout the miracle of Hiawatha or last but not least Peoples of the World with its photographs of Africans their necks elongated in a wodge of beads, their mouths distended with slabs of ebony inserted beneath the bottom lip or their noses pierced through with needles or their faces a mass of tattooed flesh. Wicked !

At school we pray for snow and by afternoon our prayers are answered. We gather at the field and roll our snowballs into the vast and swollen torso of a snowman. Great tracks it gouges out and gathers stone and debris as it swallows up the snow and ice. Then onto his torso we heave another snowball for his head then raid the hedgerow for his features...coke for eyes...a stick his nose and mouth...then stones for buttons ...some leaves do for his hair. Our hands are ice and hot aches wrack us as the blood returns to frozen fingers. Our toes are frozen too.. our socks soaked through. None of us has proper winter clothes and it's not unusual for the girls to come to school with altered underskirts as frocks and old high heels or boys to wobble in to class in hand me down boots that swamp their feet and gape at the toe. Our socks are Wolsey, grey and rough and gartered at the knee and itch the hell out of the calf. In agony and ecstasy we scratch ourselves daft, drawing blood to ease the crazy itch. Then like muggers we don the balaclava and trounce each others snowmen in our gangs. The snowballs fly and mixed with ice become a deadly missile. My glasses smash and knife-like spears of glass hang precariously on my frame and dangle on a welter of tortoiseshell-wound wire that anchors round the ear holes. The NHS hooky bits always cushioned with a wodge of pink plaster.

Back home we build the sledge and race down Belle Vue Road that's now a sheet of ice and slush and freezing like a lake. Down Carr's hill we gather in the fields above Mount Pleasant . Our home made sledges far too hefty and slung too low plough into the drifts and fail to slide but Terence Mee and Michael Holt arrive bringing with them better fare. Huge high sleds with metal runners that cavort like tanks and hurtle down the slope flying over mounds and holes and ditches careering wildly out of control and tipping just before they hit the hedgerow or the bridge. Bemused and frozen through we haul them back a hundred times to re-enact the thrill 'til night time cloaks us in and moonshine sparkles in a zillion diamonds on the frost.

We head for home exhilarated and exhausted soaked to the skin and freezing cold. No hot baths though nor steaming showers nor heated towels await us. Perhaps a bowl of steaming water for our feet if we are lucky but nothing more.

Only Fridays are for baths and these we share poured into the tin bath by the fire in the back room our covered bits slightly warm, our fronts warmed by the fire our backs freezing. On other days we gather by the sink and flannel down our nether bits with cold water then flee back to the fire.

This year my Dad has bought a car. An old black Ford Anglia from the police house at the top of Shilton Road just round the corner from Cedar Motors and near to where the Saddingtons live.

FJU 701 .Its registration number never seems to want to leave this otherwise flawed and failing memory of mine. Just like the divvy number from the Coop that also seems to have taken root. Forty five forty is etched upon my memory as readily as it used to etch itself upon the crumpled carbon strips through which they copied it at the Coop down Belle Vue Road.

Anyway, we have our first ever car and Dad takes me out so he can develop his driving skills, never having driven since the war. He takes me out to Groby Pool and there, with hundreds of others, we walk upon the frozen lake and reach the Island in the middle. All around us people sled and skate in complete confidence on this huge and mighty edifice of ice that must have frozen almost to its core. The air is ice, the cold immense and bone numbing, the wind chill alarming as we seek our destination then rush back frantic for the sanctuary of our mighty Ford whose only comfort is its shell. No heated seats, no heaters, no rear window heaters there to stave off the enormity of this winter freeze.

Inside the screen and side windows have frozen up and the leather seats seep another icy chill into our nether regions and so we huddle in our icy clothes and slap and flap ourselves daft to stave off hypothermia and, oh so very very slowly, we warm our frozen bodies up.

But what a day we've had. Our first outing in the car, to Groby Pool, braving the winter chill in our mighty Ford, walking on the lake. It takes forever to get home as ice invades our windows and our screen and we must stop frequently and scratch and clean it off but at last we're home. Fantastic.

Next morning Mum gets me up at 6 a.m. for Easton's dairy. During the night more snow has fallen and the wind has doubled its ferocity. Mounted on my trusty Coventry Eagle I sail through Earl Shilton. Up Doctor's Fields I fly then skate and slither down the hill past Eatoughs and Bluebird briefly glimpsing the virgin white frozen fields out past Kirby Mallory and Peckleton.

It is truly inspirational and no winter wind or gale can blow me away nor run me down. I am wild and invincible. Mine are the first tracks and I fight the cold back huddling in my winter layers of clothes, pullovers, gloves, scarf and balaclava skating through the hollow.

At last I'm in the dairy clanging crates out of Mr Easton's Tardis like ice shed, loading up his cream Morris shooting brake and setting out on the first Sunday morning run round Almeys Lane, Church Street and Alexander Avenue, trundling through the snow knee deep and freezing but relishing the thought of the Sunday breakfast only minutes away.

Eggs and bacon, fried bread, sausages and mushrooms then toast and this divine Roses lime honey that I'd die for.

In fact, it's the best part of the job and the bit I look forward to most. Its taste has somehow become synonymous with the round. Rather like when I had scarlet fever and the taste of toast and jam now always takes me hurtling back to Sunnyside, the isolation hospital, (near Jackie Powers' corner on the Ashby Road) this honey, whenever I get it now releases acres of memories of those milk round days.

I shove it down with as much butter as I can possibly ladle onto my toast. I am always famished by this part of the day and the family look on with awe as I devour the contents of their table always wanting more and swilling it down with buckets of tea. Heaven !

And then its Christmas Eve and the annual carol singing jaunt around Earl Shilton with the church choir and it's always always, yes, always snowing.

There's about 15 of us I'd say.

Memory inserts a hanging lantern washing a golden glow onto our cherub-like faces but no, I'm romanticising. They were just torches. Great big silver things rammed with batteries and bursting with light. Huge great globes that cast arching beams across the snowy landscape and kitted up with a sliding switch that let you do a bit of morse code.

Well there's Mr. Payne the choirmaster, all teeth and belly and on this occasion no longer wearing his organ playing black patent leather shoes with the winkle picker toes for pressing the bass pedals

on the organ. He's well turned out though in his black Crombie and trilby hat as are all the menfolk as they know they'll soon be rubbing shoulders with the hoipoloi of Earl Shilton .

I know there's privilege and place but I don't yet understand it though I accept it unconditionally as do all our kind. We're too young to get it but we oblige and assume our lesser needs and position in the world not quite tugging our forelocks but close. I see the pews set aside for the likes of the doctors Cook and Wood and those for the manufacturers : the Eatoughs and the Cottons and woe betide anyone who encroaches on their territory or attempts to cross that particular divide.

Well first stop's Eatoughs and the class divide is immediately apparent. As we enter their substantial grounds and wander down their snow cleared drive towards their vast and grandiose mansion, the men issue their hushed warnings to us boys to 'Keep it down', 'Behave yourselves', 'Remember your manners', 'Keep together' and so on.

Their anxiety is palpable, the distance between them and their masters huge and shoving it on to us.

We gather by their back door, a huge and castle-like thing that is part of their kitchen back porch entrance [bigger than our house]. Lights come on and the door is opened and a gathering of the great and good spill out onto the steps. Mr Payne breaks the silence.

'Give us a G Robert' and we are off on O Come All Ye Faithfull with Mr Payne conducting and yawping out the tune and words with as much sensitivity as a sergeant major berating his new recruits. The men surround us groaning out their bass and tenors and we boys soar effortlessly over their foundation rising to the occasion for such an esteemed audience. A couple more in full swing then we draw to a quick close with We Wish You A Merry Christmas as we are freezing and most of our distinguished audience have sensibly retreated to the belly of the kitchen and its steaming warmth.

Then in we go as well, hunting the fire.

The kitchen is huge and a vast chess board of black and white tiles engulfs us as we hunt for the mince pies.

Orange for the boys sherry for the men.

By now the men have become mute in the company of such as these and can only grunt and mumble gratification to their betters and almost bow as we are eventually released into the world of mere mortals where our comfortableness returns.

The men resume their former status and we boys soak up their pent-up fury which of course we cannot really understand. This scene is now repeated twice or thrice as we tramp, ever snowbound, to and from the homes of these elite and gradually move down the social scale to the less worthy mortals who are a lot more endearing and appreciative. Tensions disappear.

We hit the Royal Oak and everybody's merry and joining in and it's all so much more fun. By the time the men have had a drink, they're almost human. We move on to the Working Men's club where the class system seems to work the other way round and we get the feeling this is a bit beneath us as we spot the local troublemakers and drunks in their natural habitat.

So it's off we go to our last port of call, The Constitutional in Station Road, where my folks have been celebrating Christmas Eve at the Free 'N Easy and will be waiting to take me home.

The constitutional club is still here to this day. I know, I played a gig there a few months ago with my daughter Nikki. Unlike the Working Men's club which the council somehow allowed to be demolished and turned into those vacuous looking flats and apartments that seem to proliferate wherever there was once some semblance of real life and community. With it went its huge and splendid bar and ballroom and stage which hosted many a free 'n easy and where local bands like the Commancheros and the Matadors as well as bigger names like Johnny Kidd and the Pirates or Screaming Lord Sutch appeared, Lord Sutch wearing a lavatory seat round his neck as I fondly recall.

It was also familiar territory for the Leicester Townies and the Nuneaton teddy boys and many a brothel-creeper and duck's arse wended their merry way into the working men's club for a bit of bovver in the wee small hours of a Saturday morning during the late 50's.

The constitutional never stooped to this level, feeling itself ever so slightly superior. I remember it being a very grandiose sort of building, slightly set back from the road and therefore easily missed despite its size. As I look back, I remember it seemed to ooze a sort of warmth and cosiness. It seemed to glow through its stained glass doors and windows and there was a huge staircase sweeping down into the lower bars which were separated off and there was wainscoting everywhere surrounding the walls giving it a sort of Lord of the manorish look and portraits of the monarchy and Churchill dominating the stair wells and giving you the creeps. Quintessentially British y'know, very patriarchal and conservative [with a capital 'C']. Not a harbinger of sex drugs and rock n roll like the working men's club, God forbid.

Upstairs was the ballroom and, as you entered, the stage was immediately on your right. I particularly remember this as I was coerced into singing a carol solo thereupon for some Christmas party and would have fled had it not been for the gentle ministrations of my mother's friend Alice Barker who supported me through this debacle and prompted me liberally as I wailed my way through Gentle Jesus do not Stir which always made me think of Jesus making a Christmas pudding and being admonished for too much activity with his spoon.

That was where the choir at the tail end of the carol singing ended up for their last performance and what an end to the festivities it always was.

Onto the stage we clamber, men and boys having supped and gobbled liberally and generally warmed up a bit. Now everybody gathers around the stage and joins in with us. The dancing is temporarily halted and the assembled throng wallop out a fantastic rendition of O Come All Ye Faithful letting the ladies do the quiet bit then belting out the ending in a crescendo fit to lift the roof as the lights dance off the chandeliers and the mirrored globes and send particles of shimmering light across the whole room.

It's a miracle to behold.

The atmosphere is full of love and joy and friendliness and warmth and, of course, booze but it's not Asda 6 packs, T.V. and zombie movies : it's real and so are the people and they're determined to have a great time.

Then suddenly The Wilf Bown Trio strikes up with the Samba and amidst a confetti of trimmings and balloons and those trumpety things that get you like a thrusting unfurling lizard's tongue the whole lot of us peel off and dance a mad jig round the room, down the stairs then outside and God knows where, stopping frequently in the vicinity of the mistletoe sprigs that seem to be everywhere.

Well then its time for the choir to disappear but not me

There's a bevvvy of beauties passing me from stockinged knee to stockinged knee and pampering me rotten, clutching me to their ample bosoms. I am overwhelmed with happiness singing in the choir seduced by snow and wind and gales in the company of these garrulous and warmhearted women, drowning me in mince pies and Vimto and close by my Mum and Dad, the source of all my joy, are waltzing into Christmas day. Heaven!