

Chapter One

A Long Time Ago.

all that David Copperfield kind of crap
[J.D. Salinger]

Apart from Frankenstein I don't know of anyone who was just put together as an adult. We have all evolved one way or another into what we are, so I suppose it would be helpful to let you know where I came from and perhaps it may explain why I have become the monster my detractors believe me to be.

Having been described as a sort of belligerent court jester in Martin Boysen's 'Hanging On', I felt some elaboration of my life and times was necessary. My only previous claim to fame in the climbing world had been a brief liaison with Pete Crew's fiancee, The only other time I can recall seeing my name in print was in the mid to late sixties when I regularly appeared in the Salford City Reporter's annual listing of cases for non payment of rates at the Magistrates Court. Two of my strongest characteristics have been impetuosity and the ability to make bad decisions work. So far so good. It can't be an epic tome: nothing major has gone on. It will be just a collection of happenings around a hedonist who did a bit of climbing.

I have always admired stoicism as a quality: be it in a human being or right down the spectrum of life to the humble woodlice

and beyond. Pick up a stone and you may destroy the habitat of hundreds of woodlice and expose them to the immediate danger of any number of predators. They scurry to the safety of concealment first and then look for a new home. They have no means or wish to attack you, they just accept their lot and get on with survival. In the same way that is the lot of peaceful citizens in modern warfare. Like so many others, I was nurtured through six years of war, in my case that was in my first eight years of life. For me it only seems to have had a positive effect; my recollections are largely happy and at times exciting, but for my mother it made what was already a difficult situation, very tough indeed. At times she must have despaired. She was one of tens of thousands, many of whom were much worse off.

1936 was a significant year in the history of Britain: it was the year of the last of the great hunger marches – the Jarrow March – and I was born. The two events had no connection and I have no recollection of either one of them. By 1939 my father was dead and much of the world was at war. Things weren't good but I was oblivious.

My parents came from the North East, my mother from Gateshead and my father from South Shields. We were in Salford because my father was a merchant seaman with the Manchester Liners. I never knew him: he died of cancer when I was eighteen months old. My mother always spoke well of him, she said he was a likeable chap. Faced with bringing up three children on her own with a widow's pension of a few shillings, she moved back to Gateshead so the grandparents were able to help while she went out to work. She worked long hours in the laundry at the Newcastle Royal Infirmary. We lived in a small, gas-lit house in Stevenson Street, which was only about a hundred yards from my grandparents on Saltwell Road.

The misery of war wasn't apparent for me as I was so young. For the family it must have been dire. Two of my mother's brothers, George and Alec were killed on the convoys; Jenny, her younger sister died of tuberculosis when she was only twenty one; I can remember her in the last few days of her young life, lying on the couch at my grandparents house, I thought she was very beautiful. She had flaxen hair and delicate features and as I remember a gentle disposition. I can't recall any complaint from any of the family: no "why us?" no hand wringing about my uncle Bobby, who survived

In His Majesty's High Court of Justice.
The District Probate Registry at *Manchester*
BE IT KNOWN that *George Ernest Grey of 17 Brown*
street Salford 6 second steward
merchant Navy
died ~~on or since~~ on the *20th* day of *November 1942*
On war service
Intestate *a bachelor.*

Letter informing of uncle George's death.


BUCKINGHAM PALACE

The Queen and I offer you
our heartfelt sympathy in your
great sorrow.

We pray that your country's
gratitude for a life so nobly
given in its service may bring
you some measure of consolation.

George R.I.

Letter of condolence from King George VIth.

I'M ALAN HUBBARD, WHO ARE YOU?



Mam and Dorothy at Knutsford St. Salford.

six years on the convoys, they just got on with life as it presented itself.

It's strange thinking back now, not to during the war, but afterwards. I don't recall the sense of grief nowadays displayed every year on Remembrance Sunday and as each significant anniversary of the battles occur. I don't remember us thinking of my uncles George, Alec and Bobby as heroes. In fact my uncle Bobby who survived for many years after the war, couldn't have been more ordinary. He never talked about the war except in an off hand sort of way about mates he had had. It was as if he had just been going out to work like any other person did, instead of running the gauntlet of enemy U boats, battleships and planes. Their names don't appear on war memorials and when I see some of the so called dignitaries presenting wreaths and saluting at the Cenotaph, I can't help thinking they would be glad that they were not being honoured by some of those imposters. Would that the blameless dead could rise up and strike them down.

The war seemed to have taken Britain by surprise: we had no air raid shelters. I remember sitting under the table, with my two elder brothers Ronnie and Leslie during an air raid, with my mother sat at the table, saying the Lords Prayer, and hearing a whistling bomb coming down. It landed close to my grandparents house killing some of their neighbours, but fortunately, they were unscathed. It was the catalyst for a move back to Salford.

They found what they considered a safe district: next to the railway between Manchester and Liverpool, close to the Manchester Ship Canal and not too far from Trafford Park, which was the biggest industrial estate in Europe - but we did have an air raid shelter. We hadn't lived there long when Lord Haw Haw announced he was going to drop soap bombs on Salford to clean the place up. It was a hell of a show; like being in the midst of a modern day firework spectacular. We were surrounded by almost simultaneous explosions and it was like daylight was being switched on and off. The church adjoining our school was gutted as was St. Johns' on Langworthy Rd., their buttressed walls still stood as if in defiance of an ungodly enemy. A row of shops stretching from St. Johns' Church down to the railway were also destroyed with the exception of the Co-op which remained intact although they boarded it up and it never opened again. Those shops all had cellars

so the crofts which were the aftermath, were about ten feet lower than the pavement making the Co-op into a towering presence for a long time after the war was over. We used to dig into the sides of those craters to make ovens in which we baked potatoes, or rather burnt them because, although they were sophisticated constructions for children, with chimneys, they were lacking in thermostatic controls. A garage at the end of our street went up in flames as well, leaving a secluded space which became the scene of schoolboy fights in later years.

All of this to us kids was very exciting but there was one explosion that surpassed all the others. In an instant the gravity of war was upon us. They didn't have cluster bombs or barrel bombs in those days but they had a terrible weapon which descended by parachute, it was known to us as a landmine. It was designed to explode above its target in order to create blast in every direction, unlike a conventional bomb which had its sideways damage restricted by the walls of the building it had struck. It was massively destructive and it struck a row of terraced houses which ran at right angles to our street. The bang was deafening and it sent a shock wave through the surrounding area like an earthquake. Our supposedly safe haven the Anderson Shelter, seemed to shake like a jelly, but held firm. Apart from all the windows going in, our house was OK. but the stricken terrace was virtually flattened with considerable loss of life. All this within a radius of 150 yards; we were in the eye of a storm. But the whole of Manchester and Salford was in storm that night. There were over 680 people killed and about 2800 injured in those raids over two nights in December 1940. Although bombing carried on throughout the war, we never again experienced anything like that intensity.

Living through the war as a child was a great experience - so long as you survived it unscathed. A common enemy was the catalyst for a great community spirit. That manifestation of what could be achieved by a society working together was a lesson that shouldn't have been forgotten, but alas, it has been. We children were part of the effort without the worry of the consequences of failure.

In so many ways life was much simpler then: everyone had a role to play and aimlessness wasn't a part of everyday life. The only adult I can remember from those war time days who wasn't

employed in some way, was a young man who used to sit on a chair outside his house when the sun was shining. He was always well turned out with a woolly V necked pullover and a tie with his fair hair neatly parted and never out of place: it was probably brylcreemed. His expression was neither happy nor sad, nor was it vacant, he just seemed to be in a world apart. He was, we were told, suffering from shell shock. We would sometimes try to catch his eye but he seemed not to be aware of us. I think at the time, even as children, we somehow knew that his privacy was his only privilege. It is sad now after all these years to think of him and the hell he must have gone through to reach the sanctuary of an occasional sojourn of a seat in the sun in Hodge Lane, in war time Salford.

One eagerly anticipated event was the milk round. It was delivered daily in churns on a horse drawn cart. There was a lot of competition amongst the kids to meet the cart at the end of the street and help the milkman. We used to take the householders' jugs to the cart and he used to fill them with a pint measure that he dipped into the churn. We would do about six houses at a time then the horse would move on a bit and we would do another batch until the end of our street where we had to give way to the kids from the next street. Mr. Gunston who looked after most peoples' gardens – a two or three foot bed of lupins and marigolds and such – kept an eye on the horse to see if it dropped some manure. Nothing was ever wasted in those days. The bonus for the lucky kids who helped was that we got to ride on the cart when the horse made his little journey between stops. Such a simple pleasure yet I remember it with great fondness.

Pictures on the television of war zones today show that little has changed in human nature. Why would it? But scenes of utter devastation with children running around seemingly carefree don't convey the reality. They are the resilient ones; it is the adults, who have lost their past and fear for the future who suffer the most, and yet manage to shield their children from the worst. Our wartime in Britain though, tough as it may have been, wasn't anything to compare with what is happening in a modern war zone. Gaza for instance, one of the most densely populated areas on earth, suffered weeks of devastating bombardment, without shelter, from what was and still is a powerful and indiscriminating enemy, who targeted what they considered terrorists, regardless of the proximity of

hundreds of civilians. How they suffer and struggle to survive is beyond most peoples' comprehension. They have been displaced from their land by a ruthless people who should know better from the experience of their immediate ancestors, forced to live in a very confined space which has systematically been reduced by the policy of the settlements, starved of supplies from friendly nations on the pretext that the supply routes were conduits for weapons. Some accusation from a country with the most powerful army in the middle east, which is continuously equipped by America and has it's own nuclear capacity!

Since writing this we have had Aleppo and Yemen. Depravity is infinite. Where is the moral high ground? For that matter, where is the intelligence of the perpetrators of these crimes? Can they not see that in every society there are those whose indomitable spirit will prevail? You can only subdue a people for so long: there will always remain some in whom the yearning for independence and freedom and indeed justice, will continue to burn, not just for a while, but through generations. After a forest fire the land will regenerate life: some seeds will survive no matter how intense the heat.

The absence of toys forced you to play outside in communal games. A ball, a tin can and four sticks of firewood provided a game called cannon. There were two teams, one had to knock down the can with the four sticks mounted on top of it with the ball. It was usually played in the narrows of a back entry between the rows of terraced houses so you dispersed in two directions. The objective was to re-erect the can and the four sticks. The other team had to hit you with the ball which put you out of the game. It brought in clever strategies which involved using decoys and having the best throwers on the outreaches so the ball could be quickly delivered to the centre whenever someone got near enough to the can. It's hard to imagine today's kids getting involved in such things; perhaps another war would suffice.

Most of the kids had bogies which were simple constructions of a plank with two sets of pram wheels, one at either end. We used to have races on these, one sitting and steering and one pushing with the aid of a broom handle braced against a horizontal piece of wood nailed on the back. We used them to fetch bags of coke home from the local gasworks as coal deliveries were hard to get.

The queue at the gasworks could be over a hundred yards long and a two hour wait wasn't unusual, but a marvellous spirit prevailed and we thought we were doing our bit. Another contribution us kids made was salvage collection. We went round to each house at weekends with a big hessian sack to collect waste paper and tin cans. We were given a badge and felt very important, as indeed we were.

The war came to an end, leaving us with a multitude of crofts to play on. I don't remember ever thinking about what those crofts had not so long before been - homes to families, some of whom I had vaguely known. The biggest of them was where the landmine had struck killing so many people. It was now our sports facility: a football pitch in winter and a cricket ground in summer. Later on, when we got our own bicycles, we lined out a speedway track from the plentiful supply of bricks left from the demolition, which we raced each other round. They were dangerous events, much more so than the bogey races we had when we were young, our legs and arms would be covered in scraped skin.

Buile Hill Park was a great facility: it had a large pond with a few swans on it, a lovely glass house, a small but fine museum and a splendid wrought iron bandstand where local brass bands used to play on Sundays. We would be entrusted to take babies in prams for a walk in the park on Sundays but this was stopped when one of the prams got out of control during a pram race and careered down a long set of steps before tipping over and spilling the baby out of the pram. Fortunately it came to no harm but the parents didn't take any chances again. The bandstand is no more; it survived the war but not the vandals. First there were the yobbos who kept daubing it with paint. Then, to teach them a lesson, the council decided to show them what real vandals could do and pulled it down.

To mark the end of the war we had wonderful street parties: banquets of Mothers Pride bread, spam and corned beef. A huge bonfire was lit on one of the crofts next to the Co-op on Langworthy road. This brought several neighbourhoods together and my abiding memory of it was the singalong. Everyone seemed to know all the words and one song in particular resonates with me to this day - 'Keep the Home Fires Burning'. Gradually life returned to normal, the armed forces came home with their demob suits, prefabs went up, comics became available, sweets were in

the shops, albeit strictly rationed, and I remember seeing my first yellow bananas: my uncle Bobby had brought us some black ones from America on one of the convoys. Entrepreneurs sprang up everywhere - including one in our street who used to charge us a penny for a ride round the block on his bike. My friend had a bike of his own and was going on a big ride the next day. I told him to wait for me in the back entry, paid my penny for a ride round the block, and went with him. It got me banned from the bike owner's birthday party but otherwise no harm was done.

Two entrepreneurs who made a big impression on me were performing artists who used the bomb sites as their theatre. I saw them on Market Street in Manchester. Stripped to the waist under a hot sun, pouring in sweat, muscular bodies, strong but not athletic: strength gained by years of toil rather than honed from training routines. Their props were a sledge hammer and flagstones left by the demolition teams after the bombings. One picked up a huge flagstone – a feat in itself – which he clasped to his chest. The other smashed at it with the sledge hammer. Each blow caused the man with the stone to stagger back a pace. They were good quality stones and it took quite a few blows to split them but the man clasping the stone never let it drop until it yielded. It was a hard and dangerous way to earn the few pence that were dropped into their caps laid at the edge of the pavement. I would have been about nine years old at the time and I was literally awestruck. Shopping trips to Manchester with my mother and grandmother were rare. It was a big event for them and for us children; it took in dinner at the UCP restaurant on Market Street – quite an expense in those days – so it was a few weeks before we went back. I could hardly wait to see the bomb site show again. As we approached the croft I could see there was no crowd and when we got there the croft was bare, only the black grit with the red brick foundations poking through remained; it was a devastating disappointment. The memory of those Herculean artists remains with me. I can still see the face of the man who clasped the stone to his chest, the other one had his back to us during the dramatic action and I can't recall his face at all. Although it is the face of the man with the stone who stood unflinchingly before the onslaught that abides, the other was no less brave: the consequence of error would have been terrible.

When I came to leave Salford, which wasn't until the 1980s,

it was those early years that made it so difficult. That was the era that shaped my life. Those were the years when your roots were put down. It was a 'dirty old town' as Ewan McColl's song said, but it had a soul. Cobbled streets of terraced houses where people lived cheek by jowl, knowing most of each others' business, but not their secrets. Landmarks, like the gasworks with its towering framework supporting the massive bell that moved up and down creating the pressure that sent the gas round the city for lighting and cooking. The railways which went through the heart of the city, with stations almost every mile: Cross Lane, Seedley, Weaste, Eccles and Patricroft. That was the southern line, the northern line was, to us, more in the country than the city. As such it didn't play a significant role in most peoples' lives, but to us kids, who were almost all, trainspotters, it was just as important. We all knew the timetables when the long distance trains would be going through and made every effort to be there: they would usually be pulled by the 'namers', prize spots all of them. Everywhere was used as a playground, even the railway bridges where we climbed the wall so we could lean over the top as the great locomotives passed beneath us, belching black smoke into our faces. When the sun shone, it would melt the pitch that protected the earth between the cobbles, we made balls of it to throw at each other and at targets such as a tin can.

Collecting 'namers' in those days was quite adventurous. We would sometimes jump on a train to Crewe which was a big junction where several main lines passed through. We would spend the day there, getting up to little mischiefs and then jump on to the London train back to Manchester, where, if we were lucky, a particular en train cook would feed us from the kitchen when the paying passengers had left. All for the price of a platform ticket, which if my memory serves me well, was a penny. There were also the engine sheds scattered about that we could get to by local buses. They were the homes where the engines used to go for maintenance and although they were strictly off limits there were no real security checks and a six foot wall was no deterrent to an active young chancer. Once inside, if there were no bosses about, most of the workmen were very friendly and a bit proud to show the magnificent engines to us. I can still remember the thrill of it all. The freedom we had then was a privilege not given to today's children. I

think it prepared us well for life; it made us more resilient, perhaps a little less in awe of the law.

During the war years and for a few years after, we lived in Brown Street which, although it was terraced, was more modern and had a small garden back and front. It was adjacent to rows and rows of conventional terraces but being more modern had a slightly wider back entry. This made it more amenable as a playground and lots of the games played outdoors took place there. During the vicious winter of 1947/48 we built a snow wall at each end that was allowed to remain for weeks. We divided into two gangs and regularly stormed each others' fortress. There were never any fatalities but some pretty severe cuts and bruises were taken home after a days battling.

I was born in Haven Street, which was just across Langworthy Road from Brown Street, it was a street with cellars. As I would have been two years old at the time, it seems absurd to have any recall of life there, but a memory sticks in my mind. In the cellar of those houses was a boiler with a fire grate which heated up the water to do the washing in. They were havens for cockroaches. My memory is of my mother killing dozens of them while I stood by. If its an accurate recollection, and it was the only house we lived in during my childhood with a cellar, it would be my earliest memory.

Although almost all of those terraces were rented accommodation, they were, in the main, well looked after by the tenants. Decorating was almost a national sport: people were always changing this and painting that. Wallpaper was relatively cheap but sadly there was no polycell or other such adhesives so flour and water was used; a bit of a delicacy for the ubiquitous cockroach, and, enterprising creatures that they are, they would find a way to get under the paper. In some areas people and cockroaches had to get along with each other; hard to imagine nowadays.

It wasn't all grime, there were the parks: Buile Hill, Chimney Pot, Light Oaks and the biggest of them all Heaton Park, which had a boating lake where we used to hire a boat for about sixpence, row out into the middle of the lake and re-enact a naval battle until we were hauled back in by the keepers. There was Peel Park which housed the art gallery and it's host of L.S. Lowry paintings. It was there that my love for his work grew.

Like most big cities Salford was built on a river, the Irwell, which in those days was a foul, smelly artery of industrial waste flowing through the slums, the well kept houses and the oases that were the parks built by the philanthropic Victorian mill owners. It was always a catch 22 situation: the river was the reason for the city in the first place, but it was the growth of the city that threatened to destroy the river. Up to the early nineteenth century it was a much used fishing venue for the rich, then came the Manchester Ship Canal, a gateway to the sea and thence the major ports of the world. The river fed the canal, so industries like cotton, tanneries and chemicals which were already there, became even more prolific along virtually its whole length. Legislation against pollution wasn't really in existence and industry did what it liked. As a facility for leisure and a habitat for wild life it was finished: the last salmon was caught in the 1850s. It wasn't until the 1950s that efforts were made to redeem it. Now, thanks in part to the collapse of the major industries, some determined politicians, most notable of them Anthony Greenwood – Labour member for Rossendale, who raised awareness of the hapless state of the river in the House in 1950, and massive investment from property developments and, fair to say, United Utilities, it is once more a joy. There is still room for improvement but hopefully there will be no going back to the bad old days.

My cousin Ralph came home from the war; he had served in the RAF mainly in Ceylon. He was very enterprising - into everything. He made us cats whisker radio sets and when he could get his hands on sugar, made slabs of fudge. I don't suppose we would eat it nowadays but then it was a real treat, as were his dried egg pancakes, or maybe it was the HP sauce. He was very sociable and inclusive. Although he was much older than me he took me everywhere - to the pictures, boxing matches on Sundays, playing snooker - there used to be plenty of snooker halls in those days. Whatever he thought I might enjoy, he took me along. He was a good singer; a crooner like Bing Crosby, and he used to sing in the local pubs and later, Working Men's clubs, particularly the Labour club; he was an ardent socialist and spent much of his working life as a clerk with the Transport and General Workers Union. One day Hughie Green came to town; he was a broadcaster who ran talent shows, rather like today's Pop Idol etc. Ralph asked me to go along

with him for support. There were dozens of contestants and Ralph got into the last few who were asked to perform again but sadly wasn't the one chosen; that was a young girl who sang a Jewish folk song. I didn't think she was as good as Ralph but I think Hughie Green was looking for something unusual. When I look back, he was a bit of a father figure to me. He died a few years ago, but his children Pat and Elaine survive him and they are chips off the old block. Joyce, his wife predeceased him by a good few years. She wasn't as dogmatic as him; she just got on with things in a quiet sort of way, but she had a good sense of fun and a sharp intelligence and was a great foil to him. Pat told me at his funeral that she had been to visit the grave a few days earlier to warn her mother that Ralph would be joining her. She said, "I don't know how you feel about it, but there's nowhere else for him to go." Without realising it at the time, I think he made a big contribution to my early years.

Apart from a week in Blackpool with my aunt Mona, who was my uncle Bobbie's wife, and cousin Muriel, the only holiday I can remember from my childhood days was near Rhyl in North Wales. My mother hired a chalet for a week, god knows where she found it. It was a dump, even by our low expectations at that time. I got lost and had to be retrieved from the police station, one of my brothers, Leslie, got diphtheria and that was that, we were back home within a few days. Throughout all of this my eldest brother Ronnie was a star. He is six years older than me and took on a role almost as a father to us. It must have been particularly hard for him as he would have been about eight when my dad died and very much aware of the loss.

In spite of all the bad times it was a happy household. I don't think we were too badly off when my dad was alive. Although afterwards we had very little money, we had books and a piano. My mother could play all the latest pop songs and entertained us most weekends. Her only extravagance was buying sheet music for the piano. My granddad had a nice voice and he used to sit in his armchair singing along. His favourite was I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen, and it remains one of mine to this day.

When I was about eight or nine years old I got Scarlet Fever. It was a very serious disease and required you to stay in hospital, without visitors for a month. My mother used to come to the end of the ward and wave to me, it was a very strange experience but

I remember the nurses were really kind. I sometimes wonder how that was paid for; my mother certainly couldn't have afforded it. When I came home Ronnie had made me a fort out of bits of scrap wood; it was worth being ill for.

We had a great dog in those days, Mickey. You could never throw a ball too high for him. He would keep his eye trained on it and about two feet from the ground he would snatch it out of the air. If we could have trained him to give it back to us on demand he would have been a brilliant fielder at cricket. He was loved by all the kids in the street and I think it was my first taste of real tragedy when he died of distemper, which was a scourge in those days. I remember our local PDSA doing their best to save him. Another pet we had was a budgie, a terrific character. It would do its best to throw everything off the mantelpiece. We used to put a penny on there and it would pick it up and run along while we tried to catch it. It would pretend to be dropping it then dart to the side to evade us. It sometimes had it in for Ronnie. When he went into the kitchen it would settle itself on top of the door and wait for his return then it would latch on to his ear; hilarious for me and Leslie but painful for Ronnie.

I passed the eleven plus and went to the Grammar School. I hated it: there were a lot of lads like myself but somehow, I had a feeling of not belonging: I distinctly remember not telling my mother about the parent teachers meetings because I thought she would have been ill at ease. The posh area of Salford at that time was Lancaster Road and their local school had almost a hundred per cent pass rate for the eleven plus. It must have been obvious to the authorities that they were being trained, especially as when they entered the second year many of them were in the lower stream. Another advantage they had was the size of their classes – around thirty pupils as opposed to the normal mid forties. None of this was the fault of the children; they were just pawns in the games played by their parents, some of whom were ambitious for their children and others who just accepted the status quo without questioning the morality of it. This showed what a mockery the system was: like the public schools, privileged people were being given access to higher education at the expense of others more able than themselves. Year on year, about thirty grammar school places were being denied to children from schools in the poorer area of Salford. I am sure

this was a situation repeated all over the country. When they were forced to abandon the eleven plus exam criteria, for a few years, Salford employed a quota system. This was determined by taking the previous records of the schools and roughly awarding them the same number of places. I always thought of this as a betrayal by a council that was always Labour-controlled. In fact it was the first stirrings of my mistrust in politicians at all levels. To get elected in Salford they would have had to present themselves as socialists but once in office they kowtowed to the 'establishment'. Until the comprehensive system came into being this injustice prevailed. Of course they have messed that up by making the schools too big with not enough teachers. No nation should skimp on its investment in the education of its children: in them lies its future.

Ever since my teens I have been opposed to divisive education systems; whether it be the Grammar Schools or the so called Public Schools and nowadays the Free schools and the Faith schools. What could be more stupid than Faith schools? At a time when we should be thinking of better ways to have a more integrated society, we starve an already cash strapped education department of money in order to drive wedges between different faiths? Childhood is a time when values and ethics are established within you. There is no substitute for experience; children from different backgrounds should develop together; that way we all have some idea of the problems faced by our fellow beings. There is no perfect system but at least if we share the same classrooms and playgrounds there is a chance that we will have more sympathy with each others problems and I would hope, an appreciation of each others' merits. I'm not religious but I am tolerant of religion and have no problem with it being taught in schools. I just feel it should be treated more as history than a mantra for life; those who wish to follow a particular faith can do so outside the school.

In the same way, I don't agree with segregating children on a basis of physical, mental and sensory differences. If we all share the same space a natural feeling of respect and friendship can develop; there won't be that attitude that can unwittingly become patronising. However much we try to be understanding about other peoples' misfortunes from birth, there is no better way of gaining empathy than learning and developing together: society will be better served by individuals having mutual respect. We

should never underestimate what we can learn from each other. I understand that logistically there will be problems in the smooth running of such a system, but the benefits to society on a long term basis could be so great that surely it is worth whatever extra effort and money would be required to achieve it.

The iniquities of the public school system are not readily apparent: only 7% of the population go to them yet they have 16% of the teachers. Teacher training is wholly funded by the state, and private schools share the teachers' pension scheme; the wages for teachers in the public schools are much higher than state schools so their take from the pension scheme is much higher. All of this is draining cash from the state schools which is a contributory factor in the cuts that they have suffered for the last seven years or so. Trite expressions like the cream will always come to the top have no place in the real world. The laws of physics don't necessarily apply to humanity. When there is a system of education that favours the privileged to the extent that it does in this country, the better off end up at the top, it is not a meritocracy. It is no coincidence that, as I write, the Lord Mayor of London, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Prime Minister and his deputy and for God's sake the Archbishop of Canterbury, all came from Eton. This elite 7 % of the population who go to private schools take up over 40% of the Oxbridge places. How can this be fair? For too long we have been governed by the educated unintelligent. They take us into wars which we must fight despite having no empathy with their cause, they take us to the brink of financial ruin as a nation because they will not rein in their friends in the market, and still we tolerate them. I despair!

I played truant for a month. and usually went for a walk but one day it was raining and I decided to stay at home. My mother worked in the Co-op laundry which was close enough for her to get home for dinner. No problem, I hid under the bed. I had no idea that when she came home for dinner she whizzed round the house doing a bit of cleaning. I crammed myself against the wall and her brush just missed me. I wasn't worried about being caught but fearful of what the shock might do to her. When I decided that I would have to return to school, I got out an old 'Doctors Book' that we had – a relic from my father, it frightened me to death. I had virtually every disease known to man. I settled on Yellow Jaundice

and spent a few days forging a letter from my mother which the school accepted as genuine, thus saving me from punishment which was the cane and detention every day after school for weeks. That was the fate of a friend, John Gresty, who was a fellow truant at the same time. I don't recall how we got to know about each other but we did and during the last couple of weeks we hung out together getting up to little mischiefs. He rejected my offer of the 'Doctors Book' and paid the consequences.

I rejected the Grammar School in the third year and went back to my Secondary Modern which was more handy, being just round the corner from where I lived. The headmaster was a spiteful bastard who caned me most days for being late; despite having a paper round that started at 6:30 am I rarely made the morning assembly, preferring the nine o'clock news headlines to prayers. I blame him for my subsequent multiple Dupuytren's Contractures – a problem which causes the fingers to close up - but sadly it didn't manifest itself until after his death. The school only had about one eleven plus pass every two years and he frequently told the whole school how I had wasted it. There was an irony that he missed one day: I finished second in the 440 yards. in the inter school sports; I could have won it but I mistimed my finish. He congratulated me at the morning assembly next day; sadly I wasn't there and he caned me five minutes after for being late.

St. Ambrose's wasn't a particularly rough school but it was tougher than the Grammar. I don't remember fights at the Grammar but they were quite frequent at St. Ambrose's. Often they were arranged rather than spontaneous outbursts of violence; they usually took place at dinner time or after school had finished for the day. Everyone seemed to know about them and big crowds would gather for the spectacle. I remember one between Charlie Smith, a big fattish lad, and John Garten who I imagine grew up to be very thick set. They were evenly matched and slugged it out for what seemed a long time. Several times one of them was downed but the other waited for him to regain his feet before wading in again; it was as if they had read the Queensbury rules. In fact there was an ethos of it being a sporting activity rather than serious differences between the combatants. I remember that fight particularly because it went on so long. It took place on the croft that had once been the site of the garage destroyed in the blitz, which was out of sight

of the school and houses and it was only the intervention of adults that usually ended hostilities.

I think the ethos of a sporting activity stemmed from a boxing club on Trafford Road near the docks – a lot of the lads went there. One of those lads was very good indeed, in fact he became an ABA champion or runner up, I don't remember which. He was called Walter Baines. Walter was never required to fight at our school. Apart from him being too good to challenge he was also very likeable, but he did have a downside. Due to his deep interest in boxing as a sport he used to arrange fights between us and on several occasions I was called upon to fight. One of my fights was with a good pal of mine, Gordon Page, who used to share his dripping toast with me, and another with a lad called John Calderwood who I had no bad thoughts about, but I suppose for fear of being branded a coward we went through with them. The fight with Gordon took place outside the school gates and was mercifully brought to a halt by a teacher before any lasting rift was opened between us; the second with John took place in a big underground communal air raid shelter which still remained from the war. As a fight I don't suppose it was up to much but as always our survival instinct persuaded us to give everything we had. A big crowd had turned up and it had spilled out on to the croft. Walter had been trying to persuade me to join the boxing club as he thought I had a good style but I don't remember it saving me from John landing a few good punches. The fight was eventually stopped by a woman wielding an umbrella who had broken through the crowd: Salfordian women were fearless in those days. She set about me vigorously with her broolly - I must have been on the offensive at the time. John disappeared into the crowd; he was a lot more afraid of her than of me. I thought afterwards that she was probably his auntie.

The one fight that Walter had wasn't at our school but it was really memorable. We used to share a canteen for school dinners with another school, West Liverpool Street and they had a bully who was known as Horny. He had thumped a few of our lads as well as some of the West Liverpool lot and he was much feared. Walter didn't have school dinners but when we told him about Horny he thought he would try one. The scene was set and the confrontation contrived. The queue for dinners disappeared as

we all went round the back of the canteen and formed a ring. I have never been so heartened as I was by that fight. Coats were discarded and Walter and Horny squared up. I think Horny was confused, he had probably never been confronted so formally before. Walter's stance was that of a boxer and he just waited for Horny to come to him, which he obligingly did. His flailing fists never seemed to land a blow but he was instantly rocked and went reeling backwards from a flurry of blows from Walter. The cheers went up from both sides. Horny was quite literally annihilated; in no time he was pouring blood from his mouth and nose whilst Walter didn't seem to be taking a blow. It was eventually broken up by the teachers but we all thought they let it go on longer than it needed to – Horny, I suspect, had generated universal hate.

When we went back in for dinner, Walter was sat on our bench and one of the West Liverpool Street teachers came over. He addressed Walter personally, "I don't remember you being here before lad, I hope fighting isn't going to happen everyday." He turned to walk away then turned back and with a hint of a smile on his face he said, "For this time, very well done." Horny never bothered us again.

In contrast to the headmaster, the teacher in the top class, Mr. Barker, was inspirational: he instilled proper values into us: 'Is welding a good job sir?' 'Anything is a good job if you do it well.' A profundity which has stayed with me for the last sixty odd years. He used to finish off the day by reading a story; Treasure Island being the most memorable. He had a lovely rich voice and conveyed the atmosphere so well that I couldn't wait for the next instalment so I got a copy from the library and read it for myself. It didn't spoil the pleasure of his reading it to us though. It is still one of my favourite books.

He used to talk to us on many subjects outside the curriculum. I always remember him telling us of a day out walking he had in Northumberland. It was a perfect summers day and he finished off at the coast on a deserted sandy beach; there are lots of those in Northumberland, and he ran for a couple of miles along the beach through the shallows at the waters edge. It evoked a sense of freedom and purity that reached into my soul. I couldn't wait to find those freedoms for myself. However bleak the hour, I have always kept these horizons in view, they are never far away:

a piece of music can inspire a dream. No person has ever given me better values than him, other than my mother. At a time of life when philosophies are beginning to form in your mind, you are lucky to have someone who can show you a path that will give you sanctuary no matter what may befall you along the way.

St. Ambrose was a C of E school so we had a holiday for Ascension Day, Mr. Barker took some of us for a walk in Lyme Park, Disley. It must have been a tricky job as none of us had been to the country much and he was at pains to ensure that we left it as we found it. At the end of the day I was hooked – hiking was for me.

My first climbing experience was during that final year at school, although at the time I didn't think of it as such. Opposite the school was a small park which we called Chimney Pot Park. It had been a reservoir I think in it's previous life so it was surrounded by stout brick walls just off the vertical, they would have been about fifteen feet high and topped off with gritstone capping stones which overhung the walls. The pointing of the brickwork allowed me to get my fingers into the gaps and surmounting the overhanging capping stones was quite exciting. I just thought of it as a quick way into the park and an added bonus was that we were forbidden to do it. My friends couldn't or wouldn't do it, so I found it irresistible.