

## Childhood Recollections....

My childhood was spent in Haslemere, a smaller version of Farnham about a dozen miles away. In 1950 I was nine, so my most complete memories were of that decade, though I have many earlier ones as vivid.

We lived in a cul-de-sac half a mile out of town, surrounded by five other houses at a suitably discreet distance. Every time a car came down the road, we rushed to the gate to see who it was and speculate as to what they might be up to. One time it would be Mr Mills the baker, with his huge flat basket or perhaps it could have been the sweep, with his little three-wheeler van, whose brushes duly bristled out of the top of our chimneys; his face and clothes were covered in soot and I told my younger brother he was the bogeyman.

On other occasions, it was Violet Barker, dramatically back from distant, erotic America, or Mrs Townend, whose chickens we occasionally fed in return for eggs, or Phil Brown noisily reversing out beyond our hedge. We always had twelve or fourteen to Christmas lunch - never thirteen because Dad was superstitious - and Phil, with her loud, barking voice and eye-popping elastic stockings ending somewhere tantalising above the knees, was one of them. In return she used to take us to Cowdray to polo and Andy and I played our own version in our sloping garden with cricket stumps and a tennis ball, when we weren't swinging in the hammock or hide-and-seeking in the cobwebbed old trunks in the big old shed at the back.

On Coronation Day, June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1953, we watched the ceremony on television with friends of my parents - he had been responsible for the acoustics in the newly opened Royal Festival Hall. In the afternoon I went to a street party, dressed as a clown, with a black top hat and a white costume with black musical notes and a placard saying "a noted person." These were days before au pairs and we had a nanny who stayed with us for years, not least because my sister Audie had a lot of health problems; she was rushed to Great Ormond Street when she was nine, which saved her life. Nan used to stay up all hours in our big nursery, cutting out patterns on the floor and using the old Singer sewing machine. Besides making me a "notable", I remember a wonderful St George costume for me and a Robin Hood one for Andy.

In many ways it was a household that would have been recognisable to readers of William books, which we used to read and have read to us avidly. That's not to say our lives alas were as colourful and dramatic as William's and his outlaws. Rather the reverse; after all these weren't dramatic times, they were the 50s. The dramas lay more in the underlying tensions between the regular unruffled daily round and fiercer undercurrents with a stronger beat, the more turbulent for being unspoken and unacknowledged.

The even tenor of that home counties backwater was never allowed to fragment or lose its course. One summer day, when I was six, Dad took me out for the day to Horsham. Later, I was playing in the garden, when he called me in and said, "Have you had a nice day?" "Not really," I blurted out, direct and uncompromised. He was hurt and said, "You'd better go up and have your bath." Minutes later up came Mum, carrying Audie and said something like, "Think before you hurt people's feelings."

What I took her to say was: "Don't say what you think." The pebble dropped in that pool sent out ripples through many years to come.

And I remember trying to coax up something dangerous from that world beyond the cocoon, without burning my fingers. The chance came one day when Mum was washing up in the kitchen. I felt safe to ask her because she had her back to me. I said, "What does suicide mean?" and she replied it means killing yourself; emboldened, I asked what homicide meant, and felt completely deflated when she said she didn't know. The taboo word I should have asked about, misheard by me as it was furtively savoured by my peers, was "homosexual" and my question was unanswered.

And so the currents flowed on and so we lived in our backwater, where a single divorce was a cataclysm and the arrival of the first consumer goods blanded out the darker challenges of growing up. And so it came about that an eleven year old boy didn't find out as naturally as the times would have permitted something that wasn't talked about because no one even allowed themselves to think about it; and didn't find out about something essential about himself until much too late for his own good.

David Wylde

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