

# **‘DISGUSTED, TUNBRIDGE WELLS’**

**A personal memoir of my Dad –  
George Thomas Howe 1923-2003  
by his daughter**

**SUE  
CRAMPTON**

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# Young Dad

*I realised when I was about 14 that Dad had more to teach me than Mum. He used to frequently help me with my homework especially with mathematics and algebra. He would work out the problems in his head or with a mysterious slide rule while I would try and solve them by following the methods of my teacher. We would usually share a similar solution and then argue about which method was right.*

We would also watch television together. I remember seeing the first science fiction programme 'A for Andromeda' on our black and white set; and also enjoying the unfolding of yet another 'Dixon of Dock Green'. I remember Jack Warner's melodious voice narrating the episode of the crime he was about to solve and both of us watching the episode and then trying to work out which one was the criminal.

Mum used to be busy in the kitchen or in bed resting her back or her legs, as she suffered from poor health. So it was Dad's company and his influence which began to shape my outlook and ideas.

He would arrive home from his job in London with the Evening Standard newspaper. His Father had been a compositor with the 'Daily Herald' – the working class and Labour Party newspaper started by the union leader Ben Tillett, and then later bought by Odhams Press.

My Dad had followed his Father into printing and had been apprenticed for six years for which the family had to pay. The printing world was where Dad was to make his career and he took exams after the war to become a Cost and Works Accountant and Estimator. So, thinking about it now, I suppose you would categorize his family as skilled working class.

Newspapers and words were in his family's blood and they must have begun to flow in mine. (I studied literature later and also write stories). I

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enjoyed reading his newspaper. I enjoyed the smell of the ink, which left me with grubby fingers.

Dad used to leave pieces of strong smelling Old Holborn tobacco stuck between the pages, but I didn't mind, as I poured over the many stories about the lives of all those living and working in London. I was a 'baby boomer' and it was exciting to be a teenager in the sixties living on the edge of the London metropolis in the town of Bromley Kent.

But what was Dad like as a teenager and what was it like for him growing up as a Londoner in one of the poorest areas? He was born in The Old Kent Road in Bermondsey in 1923 into a family of London Cockneys. It was the place where the Canterbury Pilgrims set off on their journey to the tomb of Thomas a Beckett in Canterbury Cathedral. The inn where they started their journey was called the 'Thomas a Watering' which was by a stream which flowed into the nearby Thames. The road through this densely populated area of south London is a continuation of Watling Street the old Roman Road which continues to Holyhead. It is also the road coincidentally that skirts the town of Telford in Shropshire where both Dad and I lived much later.

There are many references to the Old Kent Road. Shirley Temple sang the famous song

'Wotcher knocked em in the ol' Kent Road', which was an old music hall number and was sung a great deal in the pubs of which there were many when Dad lived there.

The pubs were famous and thriving before the Second World War but have mostly disappeared under the redevelopment schemes after the terrible bombardment this area received from the Nazi planes. They were targeting the docks, of course, but many bombs fell on the tightly packed terraced houses and streets.

In Dad's day the Old Kent Road had a huge variety of shops and stalls. It was a bustling lively area. There were and fortunately still are, the best London street markets in this part of London: Leather Lane, Portobello, the Old Caledonian Antique Market, East Lane, Tower Gate and Bermondsey Markets. Many of the stallholders are still showmen and

women who attract their customers with all sorts of antics. They sing songs and sometimes gave acrobatic and juggling displays. Once a crowd gathers they start their sales pitches. There are still those characters today in the markets and would have been many more in the 20s and 30s. The sounds of a London street market are not so very different as they were 100 years ago. Bernard Shaw wrote about this world in 'Pygmalion' and so did Charles Dickens.

The living conditions in some of the surrounding streets in Dad's youth were still bad. The slums hadn't changed from the 19th century and the families shared toilets and the cold-water tap. The tenement flats were infested with rats and fleas. In the 60s many cockneys were re-housed in tall new apartment blocks. Their living conditions improved but many of them, like in other cities in the UK, were often left bereft of their friends and communities.

There was a film made in 1985 about the cockneys and this part of London, which encapsulates that sense of community before the redevelopment schemes. It has the title 'When we was one'. The grammar is wrong but the meaning is clear. People then spoke about this tremendous feeling of belonging. In the film, a woman with a headscarf speaks of this with the words 'I could walk in 18 houses and could get a meal or a bed for the night whatever I wanted...'

The regular sing song in the pubs and the cockney cheerfulness are well known as well as the pearly kings and queens. It had been and is a custom to bedeck a couple in clothes with pearl buttons. Maybe, this, in a way, is an attempt to create their own royal family. I know my Dad was always contemptuous of the British Royal family and I did come across a little more about this and I write about it later.

So in Dad's youth everyone knew and recognized each other in this area of London. A woman interviewed in that 1985 film speaks of the sense of equality where all were treated the same. As they had to live so close together and knew what was going on they all 'civilized' themselves it seems. So that if there was a thief or scoundrel amongst them they sorted it

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out. I remember my Dad telling me a number of times that you made sure you didn't get the 'strap' from school. If you did, everyone would tell your Mum or Dad and your Aunts or Uncles, and they would punish you again.

Bermondsey's main employers were the dockyards and markets. The markets are still there and thriving but the docks have been redeveloped into wharf-side apartments and office blocks. There were horses and carts in the streets in the 20s and 30s as well as motorized buses and lorries. What is strange to us when seeing old film of this time is that all the men, and boys wore cloth caps and the women longish coats and dresses with 'pudding basin' hats. There isn't any variety in their clothes, nothing stylish of course but it is almost as if their clothes are coverings and that no one wants to stand out from the crowd. My Dad always wore a cap throughout his life and never jeans or anything modern. They had ice cream vendors even in those days with horse drawn carts and large copper or brass tubs of ice cream. The vendors would yell out 'Oke! Oke!' as they went round the streets. Seventy-five years later – I can remember Dad running out of his bungalow where he lived for the last sixteen years of his life and showing a child's delight in buying a cornet from the Mr Whippy van. Now I know why it made him happy. I am sure it was something he did in his childhood, although he never said so.

Hatton Garden Jewellery Quarter was nearby and was and is still famous. There had been waves of immigration into the area throughout the 19th century. So there were many different nationalities and religions living side by side. It is still the same today, although there are now Somalian, Asian and African immigrants whereas before the immigrants were European. There were also small 'sweat shops' which had been established many years before and where the newly arrived immigrants found and find employment. There were factories like Peak Freans' biscuits which also provided work mostly for women and my Nan (my Dad's mum) worked there for a while. There was also Sarson's Vinegar factory and pickling firms. There had always been and still were leather and hide importers which Dickens knew and wrote about.



The London to Greenwich Railway was set up in the 19th century and in 1836 London Bridge Station had opened nearby. This was a very important link for the cockney families. They couldn't afford a holiday so every September many would go hop picking into Kent. They would wait for the milk train on London Bridge station and travel down to places like Paddock Wood in Kent. Here they would stay in wooden huts. They would take all their bedding and cooking equipment, sleep on straw mattresses that they made up (trying to avoid the fleas) and be paid a little money for their work. That way they got to have a holiday and to see all their friends. I don't know if my Dad ever did this but I know my Mum, who also came from Bermondsey did this a few times. Some of the older residents in the film continued to have a holiday this way, even when they could afford to go on 'proper' holidays. Again it was the sense of community and fun that they enjoyed and which was an important part of their life.

The photos of Dad before he married are of a slightly built short, fair-haired young man. In his army uniform at the age of 16, he looks extremely young and still 'baby-faced'. Earlier photos of him with his dog Floss and his three sisters are of a 'normal' family. They moved in the late 30s away from Bermondsey to a large Victorian four storey house in Baring Road Lee Green about 5 miles further south into the suburbs which were starting to grow. Number 31 is still there and hasn't changed much externally. It has a basement which my Granddad turned into a flat and which he rented out to an Irish family for a number of years. Before that they had my great grandparents and then my Aunt's family living there. My Dad had a small bedroom overlooking the front garden. The house had a longish back garden with a series of sheds at the bottom which was where Granddad had his work tools.

Nanny was Emily Smith and her address at the time she was married was 46 Rollin St. Old Kent Road and that is where she was living when she first married Granddad who came from Barnstead Road Nunhead not far away.

We would visit Granddad and Nanny on a Sunday and have Sunday tea. The markets of course were where they did their shopping. We nearly

always had fresh crab salads, cockles and winkles and blancmange for pudding. After the food there was plenty of hot sweet tea and full cream milk. Then, we would sometimes be shown Granddad's latest acquisition from one of his trips. He was a great collector of antiques which he purchased from junk shops and the markets. There were glass covered clocks, walnut and carved wooden tables, stuffed animals again under glass, and all sorts of china and fragile ornaments. It was an eclectic collection and we would stand and gaze from the doorway at them. I held my breath on those occasions. I knew I would have a severe telling off if I caused one of the items to get broken, so I never ventured in. But the family must have been proud of all these possessions. I could never really see the point then of having one whole room of a house, which was the best room, taken up with these items. But my Dad did explain that when the family needed some extra money (and it was in the days before the National Health system of course.), then some of the items would be taken by Granddad to an antique market to be sold to cover the unforeseen expenses. So I understood then that these possessions were better than money in the bank. I also was told that you must save up for things you wanted and then go and find the best bargain.

I remember a trip to the Old Caledonian antique market with Granddad one day. He took along a cloth bag full of little bits and pieces. There were lead soldiers and tiny scent bottles I seem to remember. He asked to share a stall with one of the stallholders. The dealers descended as soon as he unpacked his little bag. They were like vultures and at one point I was told to quote prices. I must have been about 10 or 11 and hadn't a clue about each object's value.

Great Granddad was sometimes there in the Baring Road house with Great Nanny and he was a little bit of a curiosity. He had a wooden leg which we were told he had lost when a train ran over it. I later discovered quite a bundle of these legs in the attics with decaying rubber straps. He had been a railway worker for some part of his life. When I recently visited the Museum of Steam at Swindon I was fascinated to discover that the wooden pattern makers employed for the railway also made prosthesis legs

and arms for those who had had accidents while working. There were many who lost limbs as the jobs on the railway were dangerous and accidents were frequent. If they did lose a limb then they didn't receive compensation but were given a job for life. This really amounted to a pension for them. I expect my Great Granddad was amongst these who had lost a limb while working.

I know that my Great Great Granddad was blind for most of his later life and went to Southend to live with his daughter. I have a photo of him with a large, white, bushy beard and was told the story that his sightlessness was not an obstacle to life. He had built himself a garden shed more or less single-handed.

The family stories (as in all families) are important. The choice of stories to pass on to the next generation is interesting. I am sure many other stories get filtered out or just forgotten. Some, of course, are deliberately suppressed or too taboo to speak about at the time. You learn about really important things much later when probably you are considered 'old' enough to be able to understand. But this little anecdote was harmless and the family was obviously proud of having such a character. I think that the blind Great Great Granddad was on my Nanny Smith's side.

Another story but one which is substantiated by a fading newspaper cutting is the story of Granddad rescuing a drowning woman. The story was on the front page of the newspaper (Daily Sketch 1920 or thereabouts, see page 48), My Granddad saw a woman throw herself off Victoria Embankment while he was traveling on the top of a London tramcar. He then ran down the stairs and dived into the water to try and save her. He had difficulty and they both had to be hauled to the side. In the newspaper cutting he is named as George Howe from Nunhead and described as having served in the 6th Buffs Regiment in France and who had been wounded. So bravery and courage as well as hard work were the values I picked up from these stories. They were considered worth recounting and handing on.

Both Granddad and Dad were fairly good swimmers and frequented the indoor swimming pools nearby. They also enjoyed swimming in the sea and would take as many grandchildren as they could to Herne Bay by train.

I remember Granddad then wearing his woollen swimming costume with straps and a bib at the front. He sometimes took my cousin and me to Hastings to fish off the pier. He enjoyed his sea fishing and told tales of catching very large sea bass.

The Baring Road house had quite a large back garden and Granddad grew vegetables there. He did night work and so would use some of his days to go and potter in his garden or his shed. None of the family drank. My Dad hated the taste of beer he said and Granddad also never had anything but some sherry at Christmas. This, on reflection, was probably not usual. The pubs were the centres of working class life and there were so many before the Second World War and so many of course, on the Old Kent Road. But the no drinking and the thrifty ways were handed down to me as more family values.

Dad was never mean and never worshipped money, but he did keep records of his daily expenditure. He was content with a modest life style, loved a bargain and always looked after his things so that they would last. When he later acquired his first car he taught himself car maintenance so that he could do his own servicing. He had a Morris Traveller at one point which he kept immaculate and which he could have sold for a high price, but he didn't, as he gave it to one of my uncles.

My Dad when he was born, as was usual then, had been given the same name as his own Father – George Thomas. My Mum always called him Tom, but at work he was always known as George. His three sisters were Doris (the eldest who continued to live and work in London and Greenwich all her life), Violet who later married my Dad's army friend, and his favourite younger sister – my Auntie Joan. She got married to an Air Force Navigator who continued in the Air Force and she lived in many different countries with him. The story goes that my Nanny asked Dad to name the new baby sister and my Dad named her after the nurse Joan who must have been at the home delivery.

Dad's family were, I suppose, upwardly mobile. They moved away from the Old Kent Road in the thirties perhaps and although they rented the Baring Road house for a while, at some point they decided to purchase the

freehold. This may have been after the war when my Dad returned and started back in 'civvy street'. He also was able to purchase his own house when he got married to Mum at this time.

I must have inherited the attitude to money from Dad's family. So I have saved and had very little to do with credit schemes. I am sure that many of the families in Bermondsey were frequent customers of the pawnshops, as in other cities. But Dad was fortunate to be born into a family which worked hard, and had a skilled wage earner who also had the protection of one of the strongest unions of the time of course, the printing union.

Granddad like my Dad, liked learning things and teaching his grandchildren a little bit about London when we were growing up. He took us to visit London museums and parks. He took us to visit the Cutty Sark at Greenwich and knew the back streets and that area of London very well.

I remember he was strict with us and that if we didn't do as we were told he would make sure we knew he was cross. If we walked on the grass in the parks which was in an area prohibited we would get smacked legs. We accepted it. We knew he wasn't bad tempered but fair. We knew he was kind and we would have lots of ice creams and treats. Nanny was the same. She was a wonderful knitter and 'homemaker'. We had lots of jumpers and hats and scarves knitted for us. We all remember the 'Punch and Judy' mitten sets with the bell on Punch's head which dangled as we ran. She never used a knitting pattern and made the most wonderful homemade soups with always a ham bone sticking out of the pot.

She stored her music records at the end of their very large dining table in the back lounge which was the room kept for the family. At the other end of the table Granddad had a selection of tools and bits and pieces which he was repairing or sorting through. Nanny was surprisingly modern with her 45 record collection and enjoyed Elvis Presley. She also loved photography so that with her brownie box camera we have a very good record of the family. She used to love taking photos whenever she could of all her grandchildren sat neatly arranged on the grass in the back garden.

My Mum's family was not so interesting or colourful. My other Nan was depressing and a little self obsessed so that we weren't as happy as kids or

had such an interesting time when we visited her. My Mum's Dad had died before I was born so again that side of the family wasn't so important or so influential to me. We spent far more time with Dad's family, enjoyed it more and had some happy times.

Sometimes when we visited Nanny she would have a snooze on her shiny green settee. We would creep round and watch fascinated as her leg twitched. We would then sit and read our comics in front of the coal fire. We were given Rowntrees fruit gums and pastels every time we visited the Baring Road house. We were also given many comics of the time 'Dandy', 'Beano', 'The Girl', and 'The Eagle' to read. We were always welcomed and thought about so that these little treats made our times with them very happy and memorable. My daughter is named after her.

I was shown the place of the Anderson shelter in the back garden where Granddad and Nanny had taken refuge with Great Nanny and Granddad. Great Nanny apparently use to chant each time a bomber came over in the Blitz 'It's our house! It's our house!' over and over again. Fortunately it was never their house although the primary school opposite was hit. Their house is still standing as I write this. It must be well over 130 years old and is an example of solid late Victorian building. It has survived although it is divided into flats where four families probably live instead of one extended family, as in Dad's time.

Great Nanny also had a morbid fascination with death and funerals, which continued after the war. It had been common to have black curtains in your windows if you had a death in the family. You would wear a black armband and black tie. This would be for many months and the funerals could be lavish affairs with black plumed horses pulling the hearse. There would also be 'laying out' ceremonies where you kissed the corpse in the funeral parlour before the top was secured. Then there would be the actual service in a plot within the family grave at the church cemetery.

I am sure that the expense and lack of space, as well as the disappearance of regular church going led to the demise of all these customs. Even those of course, who were not churchgoers, would want a funeral or a proper wedding and christening then. My Great Nanny involved herself with the

customs of death but neither Granddad nor Nanny mentioned or had much to do with religion or church going. Religion was never a subject of conversation. They had their morals and standards but organised religion wasn't important. It was the same for Dad. My younger brother and I went to Sunday School each Sunday and I was confirmed in our local Church of England in Bromley Common where we later went to live. Dad went along with Mum in this respect. He didn't see any harm in us going along to learn the stories in the Bible and attending Sunday school, but he made it clear that he didn't believe in God as such.

Apart from Granddad's time in the First World War where he had been gassed and his retirement on the Isle of Wight, he never travelled very much. Travel abroad during his time was expensive. He was quieter, more reserved and although he had a little joke from time to time, he was never the practical joker that my Dad became or the type of person who held strong opinions and would argue for them to be heard.

But Granddad wasn't so fond of Dad and 'favoured' the girls or so I was told. Consequently, probably Dad felt closer to Nanny and that is usually the way. I think she must have spoilt him a little. Dad and Mum emigrated to South Africa when they were both in their forties. I think it was then as Granddad had retired, that my Grandparents also decided to move away from Baring Road. They decided to go to live on the Isle of Wight – following their daughter Violet who lived there with her family. Previously Dad had only been a short bus ride away from his Mum and Dad. Their decision to move away from their roots may have been influenced also by my Dad deciding to leave the UK. It must have been a very big decision. Granddad enjoyed sea fishing in his retirement near their new house in Ryde. I only visited once but I had the feeling that they weren't quite as happy as before and Granddad, I know, missed the markets and would return to London quite frequently.

The only time my Dad was critical of his parents was when he spoke about his schooling and education. This is the one point that I remember as unjust and something which may have influenced his attitude to my education. My Dad had passed to go to the Blue Coats School. It must have

been a scholarship which was offered then at the age of 11. He remembers going with a few other pupils to have special classes with his junior schoolteacher and then being put in for the exam. Although he passed, he wasn't allowed to go as he was told that it would make him too posh. So the class system which operated kept him within his class, as in fact, it often still does. I was sad to hear a young teenager in one of my classes in Wolverhampton in the nineties repeat the same reasons for not continuing her 'A' Levels. Her parents had told her it would be better for her to get a job. It may be of course, that the family were thinking of the extra income they would have.

Dad was sensible and intelligent enough to see this later and there were never any restrictions or barriers put up when I passed to go to a Technical High School and then when I wanted to go to University and study English and History. I knew that Mum thought that it would be better if I could get a job in the city.

Most of my fellow school pupils found employment as secretaries in an office. I knew that I never wanted to do this. The very thought of it made me feel stifled and trapped. I knew that suburban Bromley life was something I wanted to get as far away from as possible. When I read that David Bowie (who went to school and lived in nearby Beckenham) had described his desire to leave as soon as he could, I understood it immediately. My best friend from school has lived all her life in the same house and never moved around at all. Well at the last count I have lived in 35 different places and have had the equivalent of the same number of jobs. 'Itchy feet' must be my middle name. Even when I am living in one place I am always planning the next trip or holiday.



# Army Dad

My Dad was apprenticed into the printing trade before the Second World War. He learnt all the skills of the trade – from book – binding and marbling to type setting and stationary requirements. When the war arrived he joined up. He was 16 in 1939. I have a photo of him in his army uniform but I think it was for the Territorial Army where he must have received training before he was sent abroad two years later.

He befriended another young man at that time called Jack Woods and he took him home to Baring Road. It was there that Jack met my Dad's elder sister Violet whom he later married. They both stayed in touch all their lives helped of course by the family connection. Their first son John was Granddad and Nanny's first Grandchild and their second son, Peter, became my friend as he was the closest to me in age. Both my cousin and I have a photo of our two fathers in army uniform. They are surrounded by others, but I know somehow that later Dad was sent to the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers and became the only cockney amongst the Geordies. Just recently I found out more information and the real explanation as to why they were put together in the first place.

Cousin Peter showed me a photo of his father and on the back was the date of Uncle Jack's birth 16<sup>th</sup> May 1923. That night I went to bed and it was only in the morning I realized that it was also the day of my Dad's birthday. We then talked about this and put together our story of them both. Probably they went to join the Territorial Army at the age of 16 and then went to be trained. We have evidence that they were in a signaller's course at Beavers Lane Camp and that photo was probably taken there. I also have a photo of Dad standing alone and on the back he has written the name of that camp and 1943. So he might have met Jack there. Uncle Jack's name was Jack Woods and he enlisted on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1941. It was the home also of the Middlesex Regiment in which he continued to serve. From a recent visit I was given another photo of Dad which had written on the reverse 'St George's Day 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1945 Greece and the Second

Battalion Royal Northumberland Fusiliers. (I knew then that Dad was in Greece in 1945).

So it was at some point in the army that they met. I remembered vaguely that Dad would telephone Jack on his birthday and they would both wish each other many happy returns.

Uncle Jack was kind and placid. He was practical and started his own business on the Isle of Wight. My cousin continues to live there.

At some time I began to realize that my Dad was 'bolshy'. I don't know when this characteristic began to assert itself. Maybe it was during his first time away from home when he joined up. His own father had 'towed the line' so to speak, and was always loyal to the Labour Party. (I had never heard Granddad make a controversial remark or speak about politics like Dad often did.). My explanation (I am only guessing), is that very early on Dad must have shown himself averse to authority and control. He told me himself that there was an army Sergeant who, in Dad's opinion, was a sadist. This Sergeant must have overreached himself somehow with the drilling, training and squaddie bashing. But Dad wasn't going to be 'bashed'. So Dad was sent to the guardroom. It probably wasn't the first time either. On reading through his letters recently for the purpose of this memoir he refers to a Sergeant giving him a split lip, so there must have been actual physical punishment from that Sergeant, and there may have been others! It probably wasn't an unusual experience for that Sergeant as he tried to whip his new recruits into shape. But it was a typical reaction of my Dad. He wasn't inherently difficult or anti authority, but he believed in standing up for himself and for others, if he thought there was something unfair. Dad was sent to the Geordie regiment and there befriended Lance. They laid communication lines, crawling around on their bellies in North Africa, Italy and Greece.

When the Allies were moving into North Africa, Dad was stationed in Algeria in Bizerte and remembers seeing and admiring Montgomery as he addressed the troops before they were sent to Sicily and Italy. It was difficult and dangerous times as the Nazis were not about to give up easily. I am sure

Dad found himself in dangerous situations. But although afraid for his life I think he was brave and never hung back if there was a job to be done. He never ever seemed afraid of anything while I was growing up but then that's because a child often thinks that about their Father. A child wants to believe they are fearless, and sees them often as a superman. My Dad seemed so to me then and remained so as I grew older. His spirit was never broken although I am sure he experienced difficult times like everybody does. We lost Mum early to breast cancer. Dad lived alone afterwards for twenty years. But he never in my experience lost his optimistic and fearless appetite for life.

He did say that Lance his army mate, would always 'let' him go first as they crawled on their stomachs. He realized Lance was a bit of a scaredy-cat. Dad was definitely not a boaster, so I believe this to be just a matter of fact. I never had any examples of Dad stepping down if there was a battle or fight to be fought of whatever kind. He preferred later to use his pen and to fight with words.

I had an Uncle whom my Dad detested (my mum's brother in law). He would always boast about his cars and houses. He was a salesman, a boaster and a 'bull shitter' as the more popular expression is these days. One day my Uncle had an accident and broke both legs. He was probably driving too fast in the latest model car which is another thing he liked to brag about. Needless to say we never had a car at the time. Anyway, somehow or other Dad found out that while Uncle was away the company hadn't replaced him with another salesman. It wasn't long afterwards that Uncle told us he had another job. He didn't tell us of course that he had got the sack from his old job. They had found out that he wasn't doing very much and his absence had shown this to be true.

Dad thought this was amusing. Dad had seen through him and didn't like how Uncle behaved. He became quite cross about it at one time. Dad never changed his opinion about Uncle and this influenced me. Boasting, bull shitting and adhering to materialistic values weren't my values. I copied my Dad and knew that they were superficial values and belonged to money-orientated people. I had another Uncle who was the complete

opposite of that one. Dad stayed friendly with him throughout his life and always stayed in touch. He knew who the better person was. I was lucky enough to speak to this Uncle as he was dying and to thank him for money and help he had given me.

Still, to return to Dad and the army. I know that his five years of army life were ‘the best of times’. He told me this but never told me why. But I can guess it was the adventure, the travel and the comradeship that appealed to all young men. He was a small, jokey cockney, and bolshy. He was probably a bit of a novelty for the taller Geordie men. There were some stories which he did repeat about the war and were the ones that stayed with Dad and so say something about him. These were often ones where he saw injustice rear its ugly head. He told us that when they were embarking from North Africa for the invasion of Italy. The American troops were with the British and Dad witnessed them discriminate against the Black American troops. The white G.I.s would not have the black G.I.s in the same boat as them and Dad was incensed and repeated this story many times. When we were both watching the riots in the States and Civil Rights movement in the sixties on the television, he repeated his story.

When he was sent into Greece which was on the verge of civil war with a strong Communist presence, he didn’t like it one bit. He didn’t understand the history of the country or the politics but he hated the treachery which he saw. He knew that the Allies couldn’t trust any of the villagers or Greeks. They would hang out the flags of the Allies as they arrived in their village. Then, when they had left, somehow Dad found out that they would also display the Nazi Swastika. Many of the Greeks were uneducated islanders, fearful of what would happen to them, and unaware of the detail of the events of the previous years. Nevertheless, Dad was never impressed by the Greeks and was well aware that the Italians were also ‘dodgy’ and wasn’t so impressed by them either. He must have overcome these feelings as in the case of Italy he and Mum did have holidays in Italy and Dad was proud to be able to speak a few words which he had picked up in his army days. Dad liked to learn things and he taught himself a little German also during that time.

So during his first army leave he took Jack back to meet his family and that is where Jack met my Aunt. I think it must have been during one of those leaves that he and Jack went down to visit his younger sister Joan in Devon. She had been evacuated and I have photos of the three of them in a country setting. Both Dad and Jack are in their army uniforms and leaning on a farm gate.

Dad always had a dog as a pet when he was a boy. I recall that the name of the last one had been 'Floss'. He had a lot of patience and taught Floss to beg and to come when called. He later trained a Labrador which I had and which we had found very playful and destructive. Bobby responded to Dad's 'discipline' and was much easier to control after Dad had visited. Dad did it all in one day with a pocket full of biscuits and lots of patience and repetition.

He told me that Floss was always ready to welcome him when he came home on leave. It must have been during this time that Dad met Mum. Mum was a year younger than Dad and came from a slightly better off family. Her father had been a partner in a haulage firm and her family owned a number of properties which they had bought and rented out in the thirties. She was a sweet, kind, slightly plump girl with lots of chestnut hair and vivid blue eyes. They met during one of his leaves and he carried a photo of her in his pocket. When he arrived in Greece he had asked one of the Greeks who was a pavement artist, to copy the photo. He sketched Mum and this portrait survived until I discovered it fifty years later amongst Dad's possessions and I asked him if I could keep it. I then had it framed and have it in my house now. I find it a little odd that Mum never thought much of it and never treasured it enough to have it framed. Dad bought an oil painting when Mum died which was by an Italian artist and is a still life. Dad later took up painting and sketching himself so he must have been attracted by art a little. He wanted to have something which would be kept in the family when he lost his wife and I have the Italian still life now in the lounge in my house in France. These are family pictures that I treasure. There is a third picture which Dad had given to him later in life and which I mention later on.

My Dad wasn't one of the boys. He never liked the taste of beer and never went to pubs or out for a drink. Tea was his favourite tippie. But like all men who joined the services he received a daily quota of cigarettes and smoked all his life. He loved Old Holborn loose tobacco and had a little cigarette machine for rolling his own. He never used a filter and despite pressure from me never wanted to give up the habit. He fiddled around with petrol lighters most of his life and would often burn his eyelashes.

He never bothered about his health at all. But I can't remember him having a cold or a day off work. He had false teeth early on in his life and loved them. He lost his fair hair in his 20s but regularly went to the barbers to have the sides and back trimmed. In his last days when he was having treatment for prostate cancer he had a light fuzz growing on his bald head and looked rather like a fluffy sheep. His time and habits in the army stayed with him all his life and he always made time for shoe polishing. He was the generation that never wore jeans but flannel trousers held up by braces and in Dad's case also a belt, and socks with suspenders. He also liked to wear a tie and had many of them from his buying trips to charity shops which came to be a substitute for his beloved London markets He also wore stretchy arm bands to keep his cuffs and sleeves getting dirty. This may have been from his days in the printing offices and his work there. I am not sure. As I am not sure of all that took place during those army days. A few memories, stories and photos, that's all.