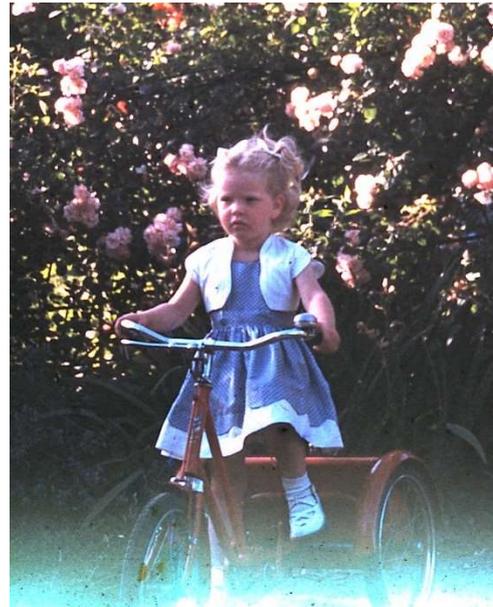


Childhood memories

One of my earliest memories is of riding my prized maroon Gresham Flyer tricycle in Victoria Park past the roses on tall wooden pergolas that lined the entrance path and led to the playground. The Flyer had a metal boot with a chrome handle just like a car bonnet. In the photo I am wearing my favourite dress, made by my mum – she told me that she often used to have to wash, dry, starch and iron it overnight as I insisted on wearing it every day that summer!



But my parents have told me about even earlier events in my life: I was born in 'Mary Ward' Ward at the nursing home opposite Whitestone pond at the top of Heath Street in Hampstead. That was a big coincidence, because of course my mother's name was Mary Ward (though the hospital ward was named after the famous social reformer). I was born in the middle of one of the coldest winters in living memory – on 5th February 1947. Finchley

and Hampstead were covered in deep snow for much of that February, and in the morning of the 5th, my mother had walked to the hospital for a check up (and walked home again – a distance of 3.7 miles each way according to Google maps, which also estimates a walking time of one hour 18 minutes for the one way journey). Shortly after arriving back home, Mum went into labour, and with



the roads blocked had no option but to walk back again. I reckon she needed the ten-day bed rest that was deemed necessary at that time, though she hated not being allowed out of bed. So, perhaps it isn't surprising that I am an only child ... every Christmas I used to plead for a baby brother or sister and they patiently explained that they had both grown up in large families with parents who struggled to provide enough food, let alone luxuries like toys. They wanted to be able to give me the sort of life neither of them ever had. And indeed, they succeeded ... Christmases were full of joy (my dad making most of the toys on the tree which appeared like magic every year on Christmas morning).

We lived in a two bedroom flat, which I had to remember to call a 'maisonette', in Grosvenor Road in Finchley. My parents had rented the flat in about 1940 shortly after they were married.

We were upstairs and Mr and Mrs T. lived downstairs. Mrs T. hated noise of any kind (my mother explained that it "offended

her sensibilities") and so I grew up tiptoeing around in fear of making a floorboard creak. The only time I recall Mrs T. talking to my mother was when she reminded my mum it was her turn to scrub the shared outside drain! They were a very self-contained couple and I was fascinated by a large portrait of Christopher (her husband?) which was visible through their lounge window, where he was depicted as the baby Jesus, complete with halo. I can still move around our Edwardian house silently, having memorised every loose floorboard. Apparently my parents had fallen out with the T.s in their first years of living there (before I was born) after Mrs T. knocked on the door to tell my father to stop whistling, as "he sounded like a Nazi" – this being 1940 that was a pretty shocking accusation to make. We always knew when they were going on holiday, as they used to air their suitcase in the back garden every day for about a week beforehand.



There were four blocks of maisonettes (with two upstairs and two downstairs in each block), each with their own front door, arranged around a U-shaped drive off Grosvenor Road. In the centre was a grassed area – but when I was little I was never allowed to play out there with the other children. My father was one of the few tenants who owned a car, but as the drive was narrow, he had to park it in the street. We had our own tiny little garden which my mother planted with *primula denticulata* (I had to memorise the latin names), London Pride and rose bushes, and when I was about four my father built a wooden frame with a swing across the entrance to the garden. There was a shed (for my bike, the lawnmower and my father's many tools and pieces of 'useful' wood offcuts) and a coal bunker at the top of the narrow path, which my mother used to spread with cinders from the Ideal Boiler in the kitchen. There was a coal fire in the living room (I can just about remember my mum bathing me in a tin bath in front of the fire in winter) and a gas fire on the wall in my parents' bedroom, which I don't recall ever being used. Apart from the kitchen boiler, the only other form of heating was a smelly paraffin stove which my dad used to bring in from the shed on particularly cold nights and leave in the bathroom to stop the pipes freezing. At the top of the garden we had two coal bunkers, and the coalman used to deliver sacks of coal (for the fire) and coke (for the kitchen boiler) on a horse and cart. It was my job to sit on the doorstep and keep count of the number of sacks he carried up the path and emptied in the bunkers. (The step was also where I sat shelling peas that my dad grew on his allotment down the road).



I remember warming my feet on the kitchen boiler when I came home from school, and being told off because I would get chilblains – my mum also disapproved of me putting lumps of plasticene on the top of the boiler when it was too hard, which made a terrible smell. (The photo on the left is the nearest I could find online to the boiler in our kitchen). The flats had been built with the very latest in 'built in' kitchens: there was a larder in the corner and under the sink there was a gas-powered fridge (only big enough for one or two small bottles of milk and perhaps a piece of meat), and an electric cooker. There was also a built in unit comprising a dresser (with the shelves covered with a drop down flap that you could use as a table), and various cupboards, one of which housed a fold-out ironing board. My mum was a brilliant cook and must have been delighted to have such a 'modern' kitchen to work in after the old fashioned range her own mother had used.



I was also told that I was a very active baby – I walked at ten months, much to the disgust of some friends whose daughter was practically the same age as me – and on one occasion when I was only a year old, my mother was hanging out the washing down in the garden and looked up to see me standing on the kitchen window sill waving to her out of the open window (my dad had to fit chains on all the windows that night). I also managed to climb up and put my arm through the electric mangle fixed to the top of the GEC washing machine – although it had a safety mechanism that should have sprung open, it didn't do so until it reached my rolled up cardigan sleeve. I still have a dent in my left arm today. The washing machine was my mum's pride and joy, and when they retired to Cornwall 25 years later the GEC went too!

Washing days were very memorable – the machine was filled with buckets of water which was automatically heated to the right temperature. Then the washing powder was added and the machine was switched on which made the central paddle twist round and back with a lovely swishing noise. Meanwhile all the washing was spread out on the floor and sorted into different colours. Whilst the water was at its hottest (and cleanest!) we would wash the white linen and towels, then rinse them in cold water in the sink while the pale coloureds, then dark coloureds were washing. Then there were the endless journeys up and down the stairs (quietly!) to hang out all the washing on the lines which stretched across the garden. Sometimes our other next-door neighbours would let us hang our washing on their line – I think because my mother used to look help after their garden too, which was

much bigger than ours and had apple trees. Bedlinen and tablecloths, as well as some of my summer frocks, also had to be starched before drying: I enjoyed that particular job because the starchy water left my hands and arms all soft. In exchange for letting us use their washing line, my mother used to iron all Mr S.'s 'office shirts'. Every week there would be five identical white shirts, which arrived clean and folded with every button neatly fastened – used to irritate my mum no end, having to undo all the buttons first then do them all up after she ironed them! Mrs S. had very basic facilities for washing – a tub with a 'dolly' to swirl around and a washboard.



The S.s shared our front gate and path and they lived in the downstairs flat in the block next door and also the R. family who lived above the S.s (they had a daughter Vicky who was a similar age to me). But when I was still quite small, the R.s moved away and were replaced by an Indian family – this would have been during the first wave of Asian immigration in the 1950s. They had a little boy and all the family spoke perfect English, but his mother was very protective and would not let him play in the garden with me (which was a shame because in their garden they had a concrete air raid shelter which I used to play in with Vicky). The boy's father used to go off to work every day with a brief case and in the evening he would bring home the shopping, as the mother never left the house. On the few occasions my mum managed to have a conversation with her, she discovered that they had left a large house in India with servants, and she didn't know how to cook or clean, or even how to look after the little boy, who seemed to spend a lot of time crying. The poor woman must have been very isolated in a strange country, and my mum told me she wished they could have been friends, but the neighbour seemed terrified to leave the house. But after a time, some of their relatives arrived in England and they moved to a large house in Mill Hill.

Lesley D. lived with her brother Peter and their parents in another upstairs flat across the U-shaped court. We were great friends, and at one stage we had a 'telephone' system rigged up from my bedroom to Lesley's, made of string and tin cans with a bell hanging at each end which tinkled when one of us shook the taut string to get the other's attention. We also used to camp out overnight in a little tent in our garden and when we were older we were allowed to go and play in the grounds of Rocklands, a deserted old house in Gordon Road near the golf club, with some of the other local children – Jennifer L. and Enfys W. are two names I remember, but there were quite a few of us from the surrounding flats and houses who used to build camps and hang ropes from the trees to swing across the brook. In the summer (when it was always warm and sunny in my memory) we would spend all day playing down by the brook, coming home soaking wet and muddy most days! Mr D. had something to do with the Royal Festival Hall, and I remember going with my parents to watch my first ballet there.

I also remember old Mrs Roxbrough at number 65, who kept chickens in her back garden and also made vinegar (?) – I often used to pop over to her flat with an empty jug for some vinegar when my mother was making pickled onions or chutney. In return, my mother often did bits of shopping for her. Mrs R. had a grownup son called Alex, who only stayed there occasionally – he always seemed to be on holidays in Madeira and Spain and other exotic sounding places, and he sometimes brought me back presents of dolls dressed in national costumes. After Mrs R died Alex gave my parents a pretty wooden book case with leaded glass in the doors, which I in turn inherited, and which still sits in our hall!

When I was four I started school in the Kindergarten class at Manor House Convent, in East End Road in Finchley. My mother chose it because the girls wore a smart uniform and because she hoped I would be taught needlework and domestic science! Even though it was run by a Catholic order of nuns – the Sisters of Marie Auxiliatrice – they accepted non-Catholic girls. My first teacher

was called Miss Golden, and from day one I adored her with all my heart. My mother became quite upset when I constantly told her 'Miss Golden says this' and 'Miss Golden says that'. Luckily the wonderful Miss Golden allowed me to sleep for most of the afternoon with my head on the desk, because I found the whole experience of school totally exhausting after my strict Truby King routine of afternoon naps and early nights!



The school was unusual in that it was both a primary and a secondary school – there were little boys accepted up to the age of eight but it was really a girls' school, and there were a handful of boarders. We wore navy blue tunics and blazers with a special navy beret that had a sort of peak with the school badge on in the winter and a panama hat in the summer, along with white gloves. And if any of the girls were caught minus their hats and gloves in the street, it was announced at Assembly! As for being found eating sweets on the way to or from school, or not giving up one's seat on the bus, well they were also punishable offences.

I loved school, and was a real goody-goody, at least up until the age of about fourteen. My 'Conduct Books' were always

full of 10 out of 10s for deportment, conduct, courtesy, elocution, etc, and I was always near the top of the class (though Lynn D. and Teresa B. generally took the top two places). In the early years my very best friend was Wendy B., and as well as going to dancing classes together, Wendy's family and mine used to go on holiday together to a little thatched cottage near Arundel (owned by some friends the Hobdells) and spend our days on the beach at Climping.

I started ballet classes at the Marjorie Calkin School of Dancing (held in Victoria Hall) when I was only about three – and Wendy and I were the youngest stars of the annual show, performing our little song and dance routines. '*Horsey, horsey don't you trot*', '*Burlington Bertie*' and '*Surrey with the fringe on top*' spring to mind. Our mothers made us beautiful costumes and we both loved the make-up, dressing up, and generally showing off.



My mother had always made practically all my clothes as well as her own – knitting jumpers and sewing frocks on her sewing machine (originally this was a Singer with a wooden case which stood on a special stand with a big treadle, but she soon got an electric model). Mum also made all the household furnishings – curtains, furniture covers, table cloths etc – and we even had a rug that she and my father had made by hand while they were courting. My dad was in charge of all the painting and decoration and built some of the furniture too ... but I remember a very rare argument when my mum decided to paint the kitchen chairs while he was at work, and my dad told her she hadn't sanded down between the layers of paint so he insisted doing it all over again. She was furious! When I started being in dancing shows, she was fully occupied making the costumes – so our trips to 'Sybil and Norman's' fabric emporium in Wembley became even more frequent.



We used to go for lots of walks at weekends – often down Lovers Lane to the golf course, and also across Hampstead Heath extension to visit my grandparents in Back Lane. One Sunday we walked to North Finchley and much to my delight we went to the cinema to see 'White Christmas' ... my first ever film.

My father loved Bing Crosby and had pretty much all his records (on heavy vinyl of course) which he played (quietly!) on our gramophone player. He also bought lots of dance music records, because he was the MC at many of the dances that the staff used to hold at the Medical Research Institute where he worked in Mill Hill – we still have a fair number of these in our loft but have no machine to play them on. Most have been inscribed 'quickstep'. 'foxtrot' etc.

My mum was super cook – she shopped for fresh ingredients every day, walking up to Ballards Lane in Finchley with her two shopping baskets, and buying everything at separate shops – the greengrocer ('Johns'), the fishmonger, butcher, the baker – she went to Williams Brothers the grocer for bacon and tea but favoured the new J Sainsbury for other groceries. At all these shops there was personal service – no supermarket style 'help yourself'. So at every shop she would chat with the shop assistants behind the counter as they weighed each item and wrapped it up in brown paper – and also with all the other people in the queue. As a result, shopping took HOURS! and of course I would be tagging along too. But as a result, I always chat to people in shops and on buses too (to the horror of my own children).



I don't think the above photo of an early branch of J Sainsbury is actually the one at Finchley, but every branch had a similar layout and all had the same beautiful green and yellow glazed tiles, and I certainly remember the chairs which were strategically placed next to the counter for more elderly customers. What a considerate thought!



Every Sunday, we would have a delicious roast dinner – and in fact for years after Tony and I were married we would descend on Granny and Grandad practically every week for Sunday lunch with our growing family. (Perhaps they only moved to Cornwall when they retired to escape us??). She usually bought beef or lamb – chicken was a luxury in those days! She must have bought huge joints of meat because my dad used to have his Sunday lunch served up on a big oval meat plate (and often have 'seconds') but there was always plenty left: on Mondays, the remains of the joint were served cold with chipped potatoes and pickle; on Tuesdays the final remnants would be recreated as shepherd's pie.

Have you ever asked your grandparents about how they played as children?

I was watching some children in our local park playing in the recently refurbished play area .. and I was struck by how much they seemed to need their parents to HELP them to play.

I first explored my own memories of play when I joined a one-year 'Playgroup Leaders Foundation Course'¹ at a local Adult Education Centre (having been persuaded by two of my 'mummy' friends, Sally and Jackie, who had already enrolled but been told that unless the numbers grew by three or four the class could not run). So two more of us joined up and the course went ahead. I didn't have any real interest in the topic to be honest, but at the very first session our tutor (Glenys Atkinson) encouraged us to close our eyes and remember playing as children. When we discussed our memories we realised that our own children had nothing like the freedom that we had all experienced – building dams in muddy brooks, swinging from trees on home made rope swings, etc. The noticeable similarity between ALL our memories was that every recollection took place in the open air.

That first session had me hooked and I revised my whole concept about what pre-school provision should really be about ... not teaching children to read and write in compliance with pushy parents'

¹ run by the Pre-school Playgroups Association – now the Preschool Learning Alliance

expectations, but to let them play freely and choose for themselves whether to sit quietly on their own under the table covered with a blanket, or dress up, or listen to a story in the book corner or do some finger-painting. Evidence from Scandinavia showed that this sort of pre-school experience worked magnificently (especially if much of it took place in the open air) and then, when their children eventually started school at six, they were ready to learn and raring to go.



Image from 'Lark Rise to Candleford' showing playtime at the village school

I am now in my seventies and the first course described above took place in about 1979 – when our youngest daughter was about 2 ½ - so today's young mothers' children are two or even three generations removed from my experience. We subsequently completed this course and full of enthusiasm, two of us opened first a Parent & Toddler Group in our local church hall, which then grew into a parent-managed Playgroup for 3-5 year olds. I was then recruited by the national Playgroups organisation to go off and do a 'Tutor/Fieldworker Course' so that I could teach playgroup courses myself. I repeated Glenys's first session at every course – and each time I could see the light dawning on these new groups of young mums as they realised that their children have lost any sort of

freedom to play naturally, largely as a result of today's concerns about 'health and safety' and 'stranger danger'. Amongst the short passages I remember reading to these young mums to encourage them to think back to their own childhood and to earlier childhoods, were extracts from 'Lark Rise to Candleford'², 'Cider with Rosie'³ and one of Bill Bryson's novels⁴ (can't remember which one). These three examples painted excellent pictures in the reader's mind about how 'play' had changed over the centuries since Flora Thompson was a child in the late 19th century – the thing they all had in common was that all three authors grew up in rural areas. I now wonder how even earlier generations of children played (if indeed they ever got the opportunity to play as even very young children often had to work to help the family on the farm or in the coal mines or cotton mills). Interestingly, one of my grandsons' reception class at the local primary school has a 'mud kitchen' just outside the classroom door – an area of about 12ft square which is beautifully squelchy with buckets, spades and old car tyres alongside saucepans and a sink with a hose delivering water on demand!! (and a rack of 20 pairs of wellie boots alongside). His teacher obviously values messy play as part of the learning experience!



to be continued

² 'Lark Rise to Candleford' Flora Thompson (1877-1947), Oxford University Press, 1939

³ 'Cider with Rosie', Laurie Lee (1914-1997), Hogarth Press, 1959

⁴ Bill Bryson (1951- living) I have read quite a few of his novels, but I think it was probably 'The Lost Continent' Secker, London, 1989