

Dodging the 'Copper Stick'

GROWING UP IN WIGSTON DURING THE 1950s AND 60s



Steve Marquis

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Arriving in Leicester in the 'never had it so good' 1950s, was not a bad place to make an entrance. Certainly, a more promising birthplace than, say, Syria or Somalia. A City and its satellite villages like Wigston that were booming, with rising wages and no unemployment, you could swap your job almost on a weekly basis – which my wife's twin sister did regularly. In 1962, Leicester was even declared to be the second wealthiest place in Europe. An economy based on three main industries, Hosiery, Boot & Shoe and small-scale engineering, had made Leicester relatively prosperous for a century. Census returns shows my ancestors working in all three.

Born in 1950, a 'baby boomer', one of that lucky generation who would enjoy a lifestyle my forebears could only dream of. 'The first in a thousand generations', as Neil Kinnock would say later, to go to university, get a degree and take on a non-manual occupation – in my case the second, my Uncle John became a cub-reporter in the early 1960s, beginning a very successful career in journalism.

As far as I know, none of my predecessors ever owned their own home, went on a foreign holiday, or experienced anything but material insecurity and hardship. I grew up with tales of extreme poverty suffered during the Thirties by my father's family of Scottish economic migrants. My grandfather was perhaps the first Marquis since 1818 not to become a fisherman in Tarbert (Loch Fyne, Scotland), instead, undertaking an engineering apprenticeship in the shipyards on the 'Red Clyde' around 1915. Having met my grandmother – a domestic servant from the age of fourteen – in Glasgow, they decided to journey south to England in search of employment, ending up in Leicester through her family connections in 1925.

My mother's family, Pickerings and Smiths, were Leicester natives, since at least the late 1800s, all working in a multitude of local factories. Grandfather Smith had a job as some sort of salesman, resulting in that rare thing in the 1930s: owning a car. They even went on holiday every year to the east coast – high rollers indeed.

From this distance, the 1950s appear somewhat monochrome, staid, conformist, even a little anal. Yet those who had just endured the Great Depression, War, and ten years of Austerity must have felt things could only get better. A grim situation for most households in 1950, with rationing not

finally ending until 1954, was greatly transformed for the majority by the decade's end. By 1959 we had our first TV, our first washing machine, our first car and soon we would have our first fridge, and more importantly for me: a tape recorder. In fact, the first television I ever saw belonged to my best mate, Baz Swift, it had a nine-inch screen. I can even remember the programme that was on: a dramatisation of *The Sliver Sword*. My Dad bought a tape recorder rather than the wished-for record player because he said we'd be able to get more music cheaper – good idea spoilt by poor quality recordings. A week's annual leave had turned into the 'Leicester fortnight', invariably spent in one of the resorts between Skegness and Great Yarmouth.

Early Years

After surviving a near-death experience with whopping cough as a baby, my conscious life began at the age of two. In fact, my earliest dim memories date from a month before my second birthday and relate to what must have been a fairly traumatic experience for a two-year-old. I'd been separated from my mother for the first-time when she went into hospital to have my brother and I went to stay with Grandparents Smith in Braunstone. Mothers-to-be, then spent two weeks in hospital – an eternity of emotional insecurity for one so young and probably the reason for having such an unusually early memory. I vaguely remember being in a cot and looking up at my grandparents, who were probably trying to console a confused and fretful child. I also have another tentative recollection of me being on the floor in front of a fireplace in between them both sitting on hard wooden chairs. The photo of me looking all forlorn and uncertain sitting on a donkey next to my grandmother in Skegness, must have been taken at this time. These are my only faint memories of Grandad Smith. A stretcher-bearer during WW1, he was gassed on the Western Front and never fully recovered. He died in 1953, barely sixty-years-old.



Skegness, 1952



Grandad Smith

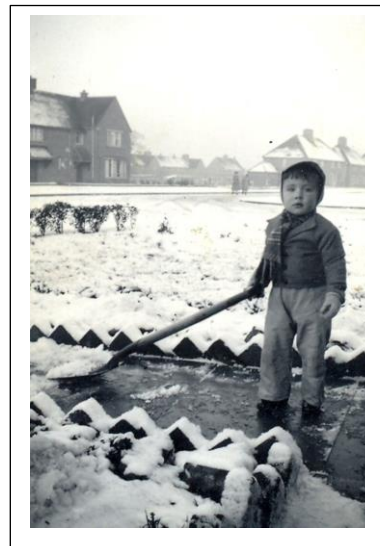
Talking of traumatic experiences for a two-year-old, my earliest memory of my other grandad was of being nearly scared to death when entering his bedroom and being confronted with a wide toothless grin – an image still imprinted on my brain to this day. Another early remembrance was of sitting on a small metal seat on the door of the lorry moving us from my grandparents' council house in Holmden Avenue – where I'd spent my first two years – to our new council house in Wiltshire Road, about five minutes away.

A year later I was back in Holmden Avenue for what must have been the Coronation street party. I can remember for the next few years waiting for it to happen again – it has turned out to be a very long wait. 74 Holmden Avenue was my second home, a refuge from the times I was in trouble with my parents and the inconvenience of having too many brothers.



**Me, Nana Marquis
and uncle John.**

74 Holmden Avenue



I also recall, at about this time, visiting the railway shunting-shed where my father worked and being allowed to ride on the trains as they moved in and out the shed. The only job my father ever had outside the hosiery trade.



Wigston's Railway Shunting-shed

I've been told that aged three or four, I spent a lot of time across the street as a guest of builders completing the houses opposite, which I have some vague recollection of with pictures in my mind's eye of the site and sharing their lunch. Innocently, and to the consternation of my parents, I would then repeat to all and sundry the new words I'd acquired whilst in their company. What an age of 'innocence' the Fifties were – a small child allowed to spend unsupervised time on a building site with men at work! Two other memories from my Wiltshire Road days: first, hiding behind our gate every time a one-legged man walked by on his crutches, an innocent sight which, for some unfathomable reason, terrified me. Second, on my brother's third or fourth birthday when I got up first and opened all his presents and couldn't understand why this upset everyone.

Around the age of five, my parents started to send me and my brother Andy – under protest – to Sunday School at the Wigston Congregational Church. Strange, because neither of them had any affiliation with that or any other church for that matter, and on no other occasion showed the slightest interest in our religious education. Only much later did I realise it was to get us out the way so they could go back to bed to for an uninterrupted horizontal pursuit of producing my next sibling.



The Congregational Church, my one and only unwished for dalliance with religion.



The Magna Cinema, almost a second home for those generations between the 1930s and '60s.

As well as being a 'Baby Boomer', I was also a child of the recently created NHS and Welfare State. It seems that healthy children were then a priority. Family allowance, free orange juice and a spoonful a day of something called 'Virol' – later replaced by the cheaper, less tasteful Malt and Barley – which were supposed to have a similar beneficial effect on us as marrowbone jelly was said to have on dogs.

Free dental treatment had also been introduced in 1951, though some NHS practitioners were more 1850s than 1950s. One *Marathon Man* (the Dustin Hoffman and Laurence Olivier film) like visit, of which nightmares are made, occurred because my baby teeth were apparently too strong to allow my adult teeth to emerge properly. The ancient drill contraption standing next to the dentist's chair wasn't very reassuring. It was powered by a foot-pedal that turned a large bicycle-like wheel. It might have been 'safe' for the dentist, it could be sheer terror for his patients! The screams emanating from his surgery were such that my father had to come to my rescue. The dentist had decided to take two teeth out without using any anaesthetic whatsoever.

The Demands of Motherhood

Although my Dad must have earned a decent wage for a manual job at that time, nevertheless, with six lads and my mother only working between pregnancies, making ends meet was still a struggle. Providing clothes and shoes for six growing boys was a particular challenge. The Co-op 'divi' certainly came in handy and was the main source of income for new shoes. Handing things down from one sibling to the next was also essential but being the oldest I never had to suffer that indignity. My mother's ability to make great clothes also helped, she even made a pair of the then fashionable 'hipster-trousers' for my brother, Andy, but unfortunately, being a bit of a beanpole at the time he had no clearly defined hips. The sight of him in those trousers asking: 'Where are my hips?' kept us laughing for weeks.

Self-centred selfishness of youth means you only fully appreciate much later the demands and pressures my mother must have constantly faced in trying to manage on such meagre resources whilst at the same time endeavouring to control a fractious brood of six. Attempts to keep order was failingly maintained by the threat to use the '**copper stick**' – often threatened but never used, at least not seriously. Before we had a washing machine, my mother did the washing in a 'copper', a small tub with a mangle on top. She used a foot-long stick to pull the hot, wet clothes out of the copper, hence, the 'copper stick'.

Sharing a house with so many brothers made us all very competitive and we fought over everything. Arguments would arise over who would get the skin off rice puddings, who would scrape the bottom of jam jars and syrup tins etc. All of us could instantly identify the biggest apple and orange to the last millimetre from about six feet away.

Having so many brothers did help with games of cricket and football on our Sunday afternoon trips. Dad would go to the working men's Club every Sunday lunch, much to the annoyance of my mother. As a punishment, she would insist on going out somewhere knowing that all my Dad wanted to do was go to sleep. Sundays were also 'sweets days', Murray Mints, Chocolate Eclairs, Werther's Original, Birds' liquorish and chocolate toffees, being among the favourites. Most things have improved since the Fifties, but the choice and quality of sweets certainly haven't. As well as having to fight off my brothers for my share, we were also in competition with Grandmother Smith, who would deviously hide them in her apron pocket. Since widowed she spent a lot of time with us, including accompanying us on holidays, yet clearly didn't

get on with my dad, I can't remember them ever having a conversation with each other.

If my mother ever resented the thankless task and perpetual grind involved in providing for endless meals, cleaning, washing etc., whilst usually working in a factory at the same time – those feelings were kept to herself. We only saw a willing and loving provider. Christmas day can only be described as nothing but drudgery for my mother, which she mainly spent preparing meals. It started with a cooked breakfast followed by the usual Christmas dinner. There would then be a tea and later a supper for even greater numbers, as my grandparents and some members of the extended family would turn up. The joy for her seems to have been in the fact we were all there, and she greatly resented it when, years later, new family commitments meant we began to drift away. She responded by insisting on recreating the 'old' Christmas Day on another day and only reluctantly gave it all up in very old age.

One of the great benefits of being a child today, is never knowing what it is to be cold, I mean excruciatingly cold. The Jewry Wall Museum in Leicester was built around the Roman Public Baths, including its impressive hypocaust system, which was also common in most ordinary households at that time. What was normal for Leicester citizens nearly 2000 years ago, was very rare for those living in the 1950s and 60s – central heating for most was still a long way off. I can remember one freezing morning – probably in the endless winter of 62-63 – me and my brothers shivering as we crowded around the fireplace waiting for Mam to get the coal-fire lit. Going to the toilet, having a bath, getting out of a warm bed were purgatory in an age before central heating and double-glazed windows. Of course, so much snow had its fun side. Douglas Wallace and I decided to go on a hike, we had a small stove to provide some warm food. I can remember navigating the impassable roads by walking along the tops of hedgerows – the snow was that high.

An Age of Freedom

The children of the Fifties and Sixties were the last to experience a truly carefree independent childhood. It was completely normal on non-school days for most youngsters from about the age of seven, to hop onto bikes and leave home in the morning, returning at teatime, out again afterwards till dark, with parents neither knowing nor enquiring about where they'd been. Wigston was still surrounded by endless fields which, along with rivers, canals and the local, almost car-free streets, provided our adult-free playgrounds. Childhood

activities seemed a lot more collective then in comparison to today's solitary, parentally supervised and technologically prescriptive entertainments. Large groups would congregate to play football or cricket, with lampposts providing the stumps, as well as the occasional slaughter of imaginary German soldiers or Red Indians. Building treehouses and dens, with food items like spuds being cooked on fires, were other examples of these communal activities.

Another very useful amenity available for kids during the fifties, even into the sixties, were disused air-raid shelters. All the good things in life were first experienced in those shelters: the first drink of alcohol, first fag, first kiss with a girl – if you were lucky, even more than that.

An age of freedom, yes, but also an age of petty violence, especially when compared with today. Playground fights, gang fights, punch-ups on a Friday and Saturday nights were all a lot more common than today. Especially in South Wigston, where the squaddies from the Glen Parva Barracks and the village lads would battle it out for local girls. It certainly appeared that way to me later as a teacher, schools seemed a lot less violent, particularly the teachers. The scale of today's violence is probably less prevalent, though perhaps, more gratuitous and deadlier. Of course, there were virtually no illicit drugs (so-called pep-pills only began to appear in the mid-sixties) or related crime that has such a devastating impact today. Kids then didn't often kill each other with knives or throw acid over people in order to steel their mopeds!

One activity, the Saturday Morning Matinee at the Magna Cinema, was almost universally observed, though with the level of noise generated, they might as well have shown old silent movies. The cinema scene in the film *Hope and Glory*, provides some idea, if exaggerated, of the chaos that occurred in the dark. 'Scrumping' was another regular, if now totally extinct escapade we often got involved in. Even the very term has disappeared from the current lexicon. When I mentioned the practice to my granddaughters, they just gave me a blank look. Thus, generational experiences disappear into the mists of time.

From the age of eleven I was a member of the Scouts for three years until dishonourably discharged for gross misconduct. Problems arose on a camping weekend, which my younger brother also attended. He was a member the scout master's son's patrol. The rule was that you always had to wear shorts in camp, unfortunately, my brother suffered from eczema and the back of his

knees were really tormenting him in the hot weather and long grass. So, he asked his Patrol Leader if he could wear his long trousers. Being a bit of a pedant, like his father, he refused, thus my brother was forced to struggle on in extreme discomfort. When I found out, the scout master's son got a bit of a hiding. Like Captain Dreyfus ¹ I was summoned before the whole company. All my proficiency badges were ripped from my uniform, even my woggle was forcibly removed (only kidding). To lose one's 'woggle' at such a tender age is no laughing matter. I left the scouts in disgrace, but with family honour intact.



Actually, until this incident, things had gone quite well. I gained a lot of badges and ended up Leader of the Lion Patrol. A year after joining I went on another camp which, apart from one small embarrassment, I really enjoyed. On the first night, I was given the task of making the tea for our whole troop. Not sure what to do I just threw everything, water, tea, milk, sugar, into a very large billycan and let it boil. The thick brown soup I served up didn't go down too well. At least they never asked me to make the tea again.

School Days

By the time it was necessary for me to start school, my mother was in the process of producing a third brother. With my father working shifts, getting me to and from school posed a logistical nightmare. Fortunately, a bus passed both our house and school. So, aged five I was put on the bus by my mother and the conductor would see me off at the school stop. Because I determinedly refused to eat any of the school dinners, I was soon making the return trip twice a day. Parents would serve time if they attempted such a thing today. I can remember being very tearful on the first occasion my mother left me alone in the classroom, while a teacher tried to distract me with some old broken lead toy farm or zoo animals. Bell Street Primary School remains a bleak and forbidding place in my memory. I'm sure there must have been some good teachers there, but I can only remember Mrs Cane, a very large and stern woman who, sitting at her desk, would turn miscreants around, then thumb their backs as an encouragement to mend their ways. I can vividly recall the six-year-old me being terrified of her. My next school, Long Street Junior, was a less fearful experience. I cannot remember my teacher, Mr Widdowson, ever using any form of violence against his pupils – a very affable person.



Baz Swift and me (third and fourth right on second row from top) in this class photo while at Long Street, aged around eight or nine. Miss Allsop's class.



Bell St. Board School



Long Street Junior School



Teachers of Long Street Junior School, 1957, Mr Widdowson, third from left on the backrow.



The National School, Long Street, a slum by the time I was there for a year in 1959.



The shop in the right foreground, known locally as the 'Joke Shop' (1959), was very popular with the pupils of Long Street Junior School (opposite). I used it every day to buy 'thrupence' worth of sweets, mainly Herbal Tablets, Black Jacks or Aniseed Balls.

To be honest, most of my school career was pretty bleak, mainly because I wasn't very good at anything schools prized in their students, especially the secondary schools I attended. The frequent casual use of violence didn't encourage a more positive attitude. Bits of chalk often flew past my head – even a board rubber on at least one occasion! The threat of being caned, slipped or slapped perpetually hung, like the 'Sword of Damocles', over our heads.

One particularly intimidating maths teacher had a nasty habit of gripping your hair around the temple then twisting. Very painful! In those days, schools enthusiastically adhered to the Christian tenet: 'Suffer the little children ...' No point in trying to gain any sympathy or support from your parents because they'd always side with the teacher and say you must have deserved it. Later as a teacher, I sometimes wished that custom had been maintained.

Apart from an emerging interest in History and Geography, all other subjects provided nothing but endless struggle and boredom. During my time at Bushloe High School, the only event that stands out in my mind was coming second out of the whole Year 9 in a Geography exam. Apparently, this caused quite a stir because someone from such a low streamed class wasn't expected to do so well. I would later return to do a teaching practice supervised by that geography teacher.



**First year at Bushloe, I think the teacher was called Miss Laws,
but I couldn't swear to it.**

At fourteen I moved to Guthlaxton, a new comprehensive college, recently converted from a traditional grammar school – a very reluctant convert, especially when having to accept the likes of me as a pupil. Leicestershire had been one of the earliest education authorities to introduce comprehensive education, a slight paradox in that the County was always run by the Conservatives, whereas, Leicester's Labour Authority fought tooth and nail to keep its grammar schools, only succumbing to Government pressure when the Wilson Administration made it compulsory for all schools to be part of a comprehensive system. It was said that the Leicestershire Tories weren't too exercised about what went on in state education, as most of their children went to private schools. The main argument in favour of comprehensive education was that it did away with the 11+ Exam, which was said to fail too many children at such a young age. It was also claimed that it unfairly penalised kids from working-class backgrounds. My Uncle John was one of those victims and was thus prevented from going to Guthlaxton in 1954. The transition to a comprehensive school in 1958, gave him a second chance. I'll let him say in his own words what this meant:

"I spent the last two years (1958-60) of my school life there, and they were by far the best years of my school career, such as it was. I was particularly grateful to Guthlaxton because my short time there enabled me to get seven GCE O'levels, which was considered unusual for a former secondary modern school yobbo. I got five first go but retook two subjects after leaving. Guthlaxton saved many an 11-plus 'failure' from oblivion. I was one of them".

He later became an award winning journalist, newspaper editor and author.

Year 10 was tellingly streamed from A to M, I ended up amongst the no-hopers in Class 10J (how absolutely soul-destroying it must have felt to be in 10M). Because the number of students were too many to all fit in the main hall for daily assemblies, Classes J to M were exiled next door into the foyer, where, for the next two years, I spent assemblies looking at a wall, on which hung a picture of a tiger and Blake's poem:

*In what distant deeps or skies,
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?*

*On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?*

An extract from William Blake's poem *The Tyger*

Ironically, that picture was still there, when, forty-five years later, I ended my teaching career at my old alma mater.

Only a couple of teachers stand out. The first, was my form tutor in Years 10 and 11, Michael Minchin, a newly qualified biology teacher, expected to earn his stripes by undertaking missionary work amongst the heathen plebs. He also had the dubious honour of teaching his students the 'facts of life'. I would meet him again years later at NUT meetings after qualifying as a teacher, when I would jokingly accuse him of personally failing me in that crucial task. A larger than life character, it was a terrible shock when he suffered the heart attack that snuffed out his life in his early forties. Hundreds of teachers and ex-students crammed into Countesthorpe Church for one of the most poignant and saddest funerals I've ever attended.

The second, was my Physics teacher. He introduced me to the pleasures of sailing, taking the school sailing club onto the water every Sunday morning. It was this teacher who took me to my first political event, he had organised a school trip during the 1964 General Election to a Labour Party Rally addressed by Harold Wilson at the De Montfort Hall. Not sure a teacher would be allowed to take their students to a political rally today? Unless of course, they were Eton pupils being taken to a Tory Party Conference for family reunions.



**In my new Guthlaxton
uniform, 1964**



Me on the water, aged 14

The single highlight of my stay at Guthlaxton was going abroad for the first-time on a school trip to Switzerland. The trip leader, a religious zealot, with a penchant for attacking his students' arses with an exceptionally large plimsole; its previous owner must have been the mythical Sasquatch (Bigfoot). He would soon be swinging it with his usual self-righteous enthusiasm. A strict prohibition on drinking alcohol, backed up by bloodcurdling threats, was never going to hold up and deter fifteen-year-old reprobates being presented with an easy first-time opportunity to openly buy booze. A few of us sneaked out after lights-out, heading to the nearest bar. In a typical example of young Brits abroad, and to our eternal shame, on leaving the bar after a couple of beers, we gratuitously vandalised the outside by throwing all the table and chairs into a nearby stream. We would soon be visited by Divine Retribution. The chewing gum, taken in a vain attempt to take the smell of alcohol from our breaths, failed to save us – the inevitable rendezvous with the Bigfoot's footwear followed.

Much to the surprise of most of my teachers, I managed to leave school with two O'levels, in History and Geography. My brief career in the hosiery industry was about to begin.

Holidays

Though relatively economically deprived by today's standards, we did always enjoy an annual holiday and during the Leicester 'fortnight' decamped on mass with the rest of the village and City to one of the east coast resorts. Even the *Leicester Mercury* accompanied its readers to the seaside. The first holidays I can recall were at Butlins, Skegness, in 1955 and '56, during the peak of its 'Hi Di Hi' heyday. An old Wild West style stagecoach seems to have fascinated me the most – I can remember wanting to play on it all the time.



Me and my brother Andy

The one occasion we ventured further afield was in 1961, when we visited our ancestral home, Tarbert, in Scotland. Such a daunting journey by car meant we camped out overnight on the way. Our rudimentary camping equipment resulted in a very long and uncomfortable night.

My grandfather had left Tarbert during WW1 to start an apprenticeship in the River Clyde shipyards. He later moved to Leicester in 1925 with his future wife, Mary Jordan, whose family had moved to Scotland from the village of Groby – presumably the reason in choosing Leicester as their destination. They later moved into a slum in Manor Street, Wigston, during the 1930s, after, according to my dad, several ‘midnight flits’ because of an inability to pay the rent. A single-entrance ‘two-up two-down’, the front room so damp it could only be used as a part-time playroom. Apparently, their house was at the end of a terrace of seven, and had its own separate outside toilet, whereas the other six had to share just one – what luxury and privilege!

A few relatives still lived in Tarbert at that time, with all the men maintaining the Marquis (before the 19th century my family name was McMharcuis) tradition of going to sea as fishermen. A cousin was a trawler skipper and he invited my Dad and me to go on a night’s fishing (my other brothers being deemed too young to accompany us). I don’t remember much, falling asleep on a bunk fairly soon after leaving port, although I do recall seeing a mass of rapidly moving silver flashes as the herring shot under the boat in response to the loud noise from the anchor being deliberately struck – the traditional way of locating the fish, even though by then they also had sonar. In January 2018, a tragic accident occurred in the sinking of a trawler in which two men drowned, one was a cousin and the last fisherman on Loch Fyne with a family connection to the Marquises – thus ended two hundred years of my family fishing out of Tarbert.



While in Tarbert, an extremely disturbing sight was to witness the terrible effect of an inherited genetic disorder (Cerebral Ataxia) that affected several members in one branch of the Marquis family. Similar to Huntington's Chorea, the devastating symptoms could be seen manifesting themselves through the decades. You saw the victims in its various stages of development on the quayside. Quite normal until their twenties or even thirties, wheelchair bound by the end of their forties, dead by sixty. When I visited one affected family on another visit twenty years later, the mother was in a wheelchair virtually unable to speak and a younger daughter had just started to show the dreaded features of this certain death sentence. This cruellest of afflictions has resulted in over thirty early deaths within the wider family over the last century and is still travelling down the generations. Fortunately for us, those killer genes hadn't moved over into our family-line.

My father did decide once on a different type of east coast holiday: a week on a hired boat on the Norfolk Broads – a decision my mother would never forgive him for. It was in 1964, the first time all six brothers were around to go on holiday together, two still in nappies. Six lads, two parents, crammed into a small boat, permanently surrounded by water and the two youngest unable to swim. The inevitable happened when the second youngest, Glenn, fell into

the water between the riverbank and the boat, fortunately, brother number three, Niall, saw him fall in and somehow managed to drag him out of the water – a close call! Another disastrous event for my Dad – but a very funny one for the rest of us, though we daren't be seen laughing – occurred as we entered the main marina in Great Yarmouth. In the middle of a very busy channel, the boat's rudder suddenly broke and we just went around and around in uncontrollable circles, 'ooh aah bird' like, causing absolute chaos. I can still see my Dad's bright beetroot coloured face now. How my father imagined this holiday would be a good idea in those circumstances is very difficult to fathom. For me, though, it was a great time and we even had a small sailing dingy I could use my recently acquired sailing skills on. I also had great success in catching fish.



See the old nappies in the background. No disposable versions then.



Another example of the evidently easy-going attitude to risk that seems to have prevailed at that time, was revealed by the means of transport to our holiday destinations. My father's car was a Ford Consul, which had a single three-person seat in the front as well as the back. Eight, or even nine, of us would be squeezed in, all without seatbelts, for the perilous journey. I would sit in the front between my parents, my mother would have the youngest child on her knee, the other brothers in the back with Grandmother Smith. Talk about taking your own life into your own hands! The last family holiday I went on with my five brothers was again to Butlins, in 1965.



If you look closely, you can see my brother, Niall, is wearing the same jumper I've got on in the scout photo above. In fact, nearly of us are wearing Mother's knitted jumpers. Butlin's, 1965

Problems with Girls

I received my first bike at the age of seven, which was very useful, making it much easier to visit my girlfriend, who lived about a ten-minute bike ride away. Sadly, it couldn't last – posh 'Juliet' lived in a posh house which her parents were buying, and they heartily disapproved of a council house 'Romeo' from the wrong-side of the tracks.

My second adventure didn't go any better. At the age of eleven I'd arranged to meet Sandra at a local park. On the fateful day, disaster struck as my mother had just washed my only pair of jeans. For today's eleven-year-olds, the most essential item is a mobile phone. For a boy aged eleven in 1961, it was long trousers. There was nothing more humiliating than having to wear short pants after your tenth birthday. Turning up to my romantic liaison in the said short trousers ended all hope of a second date.

Another girlfriend from this period would meet a very tragic end only a few years later. We used to go on bike rides in fields next to her house behind All Saints Church. At the age fifteen she got involved with an older Irish builder working on the construction site of the new swimming baths next door to Guthlaxton. The next time I made her acquaintance was on the front page of the *Leicester Mercury*. A fifteen-year-old girl was found abandoned, left alone in a dingy room to bleed to death from a backstreet abortion gone wrong. That was in 1965, two years before the Abortion Act.

Child Labour

Being the oldest of what would eventually be sixth brothers, I was expected to earn my own pocket money. I entered the workforce around the age of five. Every Saturday morning, I would collect my Holmden Avenue grandmother's shopping from nearby shops – receiving the tidy sum of sixpence.

I didn't embark on a real occupation until the grand old age of twelve. During one of the worst winters of the century, I followed my Uncle John into gainful employment – which he had recently vacated – on Sid Longden's smallholding of chickens and pigs overlooking Kilby Bridge. Endlessly clearing snow to access the animals, breaking thick ice so they could drink – it proved a hard baptism. For the next three years, every Saturday, some Sunday mornings and school holidays, I would cycle the five miles and start what would soon become a man's day's work for the pittance of a child's pocket money.

This slight resentment only came at the end – most of my time down on the farm was a great and beneficial experience, although one incident during the early days now looks distinctly dodgy. The 'Kingpin' of the smallholding was an old boar coming to the end of his productive service. We managed to manoeuvre a very reluctant boar into the breeding-pen where a young eager sow waited. He was completely uninterested and decided he wanted to return to the open field. Unfortunately, the only thing stopping him was a very worried little me holding a small piece of wood, with Sid encouraging me to stand firm. The old boar slowly sauntered up to me, paused for a moment, after giving me look of utter contempt he headbutted me about five feet into the air, then strode nonchalantly on his way. Boars are cantankerous and very powerful animals with huge tusks, that could seriously gore, or even kill you. The then casual attitude to child health and safety is disturbing, it's a wonder any of us survived!

Rats were a serious problem, so there were always plenty of cats and dogs around – in the case of cats, too many. One of my first tasks was to search for kittens and drown them, in a forlorn attempt to keep their numbers under control. Cats are very good at hiding their brood so finding the den was quite difficult. Drowning older kittens was unpleasant, so I decided on a rather gruesome game where if the mother cat succeeded in hiding her kittens from

me until their eyes opened (which wasn't often), I'd let them live and only drowned those I found with eyes still closed. Thus, the 'Dr Mengele' of the cat-world showed some compassion.

Sid had a dog called Theresa, a fantastic rat catcher. Some hens were housed in blocks of battery cages. Theresa would sit patiently between the blocks looking up, waiting for a rat to leap from one to the other. The sight of her jumping and catching the rat in mid-air is a vivid memory. One strange thing was that on more than one occasion I can recall finding a dead chicken with its insides eaten away by rats whilst it roosted. Apparently, they wouldn't move once they had roosted until it was light again – no matter what!

Another amusing rat story occurred later when I worked in the old dye-house at Atkinsons in South Wigston. We used a lot of flaky soap which was stored in very large wooden boxes. One morning we arrived to find a rat trapped in the bottom of an empty container. A workmate tried to kill it by poking it with a six-foot pole used for emptying the vats when, to his utter surprise and horror, the rat ran up the pole towards his face. His expression of abject terror could only have been matched by Winston Smith in Room 101.

By fifteen, I was capable of fulfilling any task the farm presented: killing and gutting chickens; castrating young pigs; building new animal pens etc. etc. Talking of animal pens, I can remember building new chicken sheds by nailing sheets of asbestos to wooden frames. For the next thirty to forty years, it occasionally occurred to me, that I must have been at some small risk of developing Asbestosis. Perhaps, after fifty years I'm probably safe. Anyway, as I was saying, so capable a farm worker in fact, that Sid was able to take his wife on their first holiday in over twenty years, leaving me in sole charge for a week. Increasingly, feelings of being exploited resulted in me leaving for a Saturday job at Wilkinson's on Long Street. I very nearly made this my first post-school career move, but hostility to the idea from my father led me into the almost hereditary hosiery trade.

Up the Workers

Leaving school on Friday and starting work at Atkinsons, a hosiery factory in South Wigston – where my dad had also started work twenty-four years earlier – on the following Monday, a couple of weeks short of my sixteenth birthday. My first week's wage was £6.50, out of which I gave my Mam £4.00 for board.

I was placed in the newly built dye-house and teamed with two much older men. One was an ex-Tommy, the second a Ukrainian refugee, with a questionable war record. Much to my amusement, the old Tommy would continually denounce his workmate as a 'fascist mass-murderer', the Ukrainian always kept shtum about his past, but would retaliate in other ways, while all the time becoming ever closer friends.

Leicester hosiery companies in the Sixties were still relatively prosperous and fairly confident about future prospects, with substantial investments continuing to be made. I was the third generation of my family to work in the hosiery trade, all of whom had spent their entire working lives tied to one kind of hosiery machine or another. No one had the slightest inkling this was all about to come crashing down, that short-sighted management and cheap imports would soon decimate both the hosiery and boot and shoe industries – though I'd left by then.

My first working Christmas was also the first occasion I got really drunk. On the last day at work before the two-day Christmas break, yes, only two days! The final morning was used to clean up and have a brief factory party before decanting to the pub. By the time we reached the pub I was totally pissed on cherry brandy, the first and only time I've ever drunk the foul stuff. According to witnesses, because I don't remember, when I reached the bar door, it opened and out walked the butcher to be met by me throwing up all over his apron (a good job it was the someone wearing an apron). As I said, I've no memory of this or what happened after. Only becoming aware of who I was and where I was as I staggered up the 'Spion Kop' – not for the last time – on the way home to sleep it off.

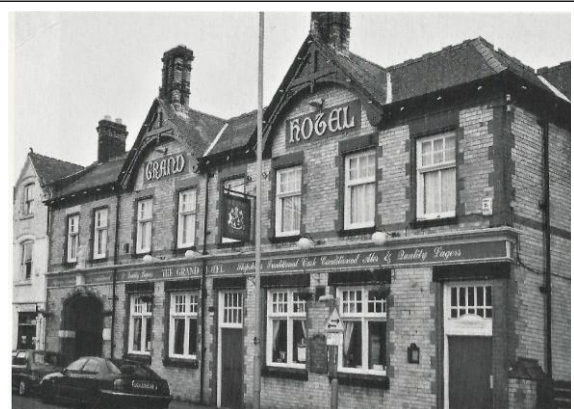
The unpleasant hot and wet conditions of the dye-house were mitigated by the bravado and comradeship of working with a small group of blokes of a similar age. We would start the dye-vats at 8 o'clock, then mosey down to a nearby café for breakfast while they heated up. The café in question was housed in a converted terrace house, run by two middle aged women who clearly didn't like each other, but oh boy, did they make great egg, bacon and tomatoes, and the tea was the best I've ever tasted.

At lunchtime we'd play cards, on paydays for substantial money, occasionally winning or losing a week's wages. We mainly dyed ladies' stockings, tights (new in the late 60s) and knickers, so the temptation to help

yourself was very strong – not to wear yourself I might add, well, that was the case for most of us. Pilfering from factories was an important pastime, the challenge of getting stuff out without being caught helped alleviate the tedium. If this had been in the War, the Yanks would have faced some serious competition. Anyway, Joyce (my future wife) had enough of the said items to last her for years after I'd ceased being a dye-house operative.



Atkinsons Hosiery Factory, Canal St., South Wigston, where I worked for five years.



The Grand Hotel, where I threw-up over an unfortunate butcher.

Working in a factory as an unskilled labourer is unlikely to have ever been described as a fulfilling vocation, though the exploitation was probably less all-encompassing and less intense then, certainly in comparison to those in the today's gig economy such as the Sports Direct and Amazon warehouse workers with their zero-hour contracts and all-pervasive technological monitoring. 'Them' and 'Us' attitudes between bosses and shop-floor reflected the reality of class divisions in the wider society, though of course, we were told then as now, that 'Class' no longer mattered, 'we were all in it together'. The 1959 Film: *I'm Alright Jack* may have been a caricature of those divisions, yet nevertheless, portrayed something approaching reality. Marginal improvements in living standards and a little movement in social mobility had encouraged some to promote the idea that industrial class conflict was a thing of the past. Harold Wilson gave a few 'baubles' to 'working class heroes' like the Beatles and promised that the 'White Heat of Technology' would herald in a new age of prosperity for all. While contemporaneously trying to undermine the position of trade unions with his *In Place of Strife* anti-union legislation so

workers wouldn't get too prosperous. The 1970s, would soon shatter all those delusions.

Although, the youngest of those working in the old dye-house, aged seventeen I became the union shop steward – probably because no one else wanted to take it on. Coming from a family of staunch Labour Party and trade union supporters, perhaps explains why I was prepared to take on the role of a younger 'Fred Kite' (Peter Sellars played shop steward, Fred Kite, in the above mentioned movie, *I'm Alright Jack*).



Fred Kite taking it to the bosses

One of the last memories in my final months working at Atkinsons was to address my first sizable public meeting. In 1971, the Tory Government introduced the anti-union *Industrial Relations Act*, which was met with widespread opposition from the Labour Movement – beginning two decades of industrial conflict and political turmoil. On a national day of action, I helped organise a one-day strike in protest and made my first public address to my fellow workers at a meeting in a large open area between the two dye-houses. I definitely didn't miss working in a factory, but I did miss the comradeship of the blokes I worked with.

Swinging Sixties

The old cliché states that if you can remember anything about the Sixties you weren't really there. But does the axiom 'Swinging Sixties' actually reflect the reality of that decade for most working-class kids? As Thunderclap Newman suggested: there was definitely 'something in the air', although 'the

revolution's here' was perhaps, overstating it. Philip Larkin's aside that "sexual intercourse began in the 1963", certainly did.

I think it's fair to say, that a shift in the collective conformity that emerged from the strains and stresses of economic depression and wartime privation, were beginning to be challenged by a new, yet to be defined, sense of individualism. This amorphous change in attitudes towards the individual over the collective, whilst helping in the emergence of more progressive social attitudes in the 1960s and 70s, by the 1980s, had morphed into the harsh individualism of neo-liberalism and the rise of 'Thatcherism' that set us on the road to food-banks and Grenfell Tower. In 1960, we still had the death penalty, abortion, homosexuality and divorce, apart for the rich, were illegal. By 1970, the death penalty had been abolished, abortion and homosexuality were no longer illegal, and a new divorce law would follow three years later. So clearly, there had been 'something in the air'.

The '50s and '60s were also said to have heralded in the arrival of the 'teenager' and the so-called rebellious 'youth culture'. Manifested first in the spontaneous creation of mainly working-class sub-cultures like the 'Teddy Boys' and later 'Mods' and 'Rockers', encouraged by pop groups that tended to be identified with one group or another. Combined with the emergence of working-class authors of the likes of Shelagh Delaney, Alan Sillitoe and, of course, our very own Joe Orton – even if disavowed by his own birthplace at the time. Together, they generally promoted a kind of radical alternative (if in hindsight, perhaps a little superficial) to the established social conventions of the time. A 'youth culture' that professed to be classless and mainly socially and politically progressive, yet like working-class football later, would soon be perverted by the hedonism of most of the new pop idols and the effective takeover by capitalism in search of new sources of profit – more Richard Branson than John Lennon. Perverted or not, in my view, the decade between 1965 and 1975 produced the best and greatest range of popular music ever recorded.

Paradoxically, a more positive outlook in prospects and opportunities available for talented working-class kids when compared with today. While over forty percent of eighteen-year-olds currently attend university, yet, working-class kids' access to the top careers has become less likely than in the

supposedly more class conscious '60s – now it seems that every up and coming actor, writer or popular musician went to a public school.

We also had '1968' and student revolt, with the massive anti-Vietnam War demonstrations here and in the USA, a Revolution in Paris and political turmoil throughout much of Europe. Even the youth in Communist Eastern Europe began to stir. Although, initially mainly middle class – barely 10% of youngsters went to University in the sixties – it eventually percolated much further down the social scale, moving the greater part of a whole generation, if only temporarily, to the political 'left'. '1968', would eventually have a much greater impact on me than the earlier iconography of 'Carnaby Street'.

In truth, I was more of a bystander watching the 'Swinging Sixties Parade' go by rather than a very active participant. For working-class teenagers in a backwater like Wigston, the Sixties were less 'swinging' and more 'slow moving pendulum', a transitional period between the social and sexual attitudes and mores of the Fifties – in some ways little changed from the Victorian era – to the less hidebound less rigid concepts of gender roles and relationships that would only gradually take a firmer hold during the Seventies – the decade of 'Women's Lib'. A 'bit of a lad' and 'slag' were still general colloquialisms of the day, reflecting the prevailing hypocrisy and double standards towards men's and women's sexuality. If sex before marriage was no longer seen as quite the magnitude of sin it was deemed to have been in the Victorian age of covered table legs, attitudes to having children out of wedlock had hardly progressed at all. 'Living in sin' remained the prerogative for pop and film stars only, in the 1960s. Wigston at that time was still more like the gritty black and white films, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *A Kind of Loving*, rather than the 'Swinging London' of technicoloured, *The Knack ...* and *Blow Up*.

Even though working, most of us didn't process the pecuniary means to be complete 'swingers', though gradually, music and fashion began to have some impact. My first suit was a collarless 'Beatle Suit', worn with high heel 'Cuban' boots. More a Rolling Stones 'Rocker' than Beatles 'Mod', perhaps, a less ardent Ringo 'Mocker'. I did see the Stones live twice in their early days at the then Odeon Cinema, when they had just emerged on the scene, and later at the De Montfort Hall.

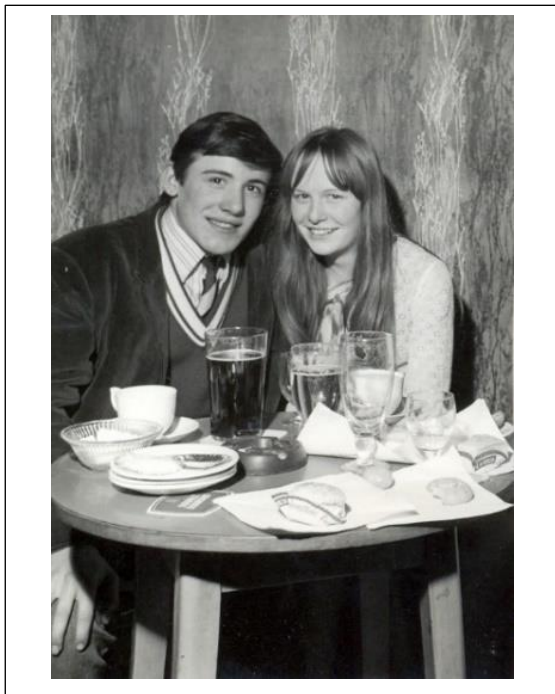
In a more relaxed era as far as serving teenagers alcohol was concerned, I bought my first pint at the age of fifteen and joined the Great Wigston Working Men's Club at seventeen. Opened in 1862 after a group of allotment holders decided they needed somewhere to meet and said to be the second oldest club in the country – it finally closed in 2008. During the '60s clubs were still extremely popular and very difficult to become members of, admission was only acquired through family sponsorship – which is why it would be a long-time before you saw a black or brown face. Women couldn't even become members at all, merely guests and humiliatingly confined to limited areas. Somewhat ironic considering Leicester and its satellite villages, more than any other industrial conurbation, had traditionally employed women in virtually equal numbers as men – if not on equal pay.



Great Wigston Working Men's Club just before its closure in 2008

Saturday nights were for live music and there was a plethora of talented local groups plying their trade, a couple I can remember like the *Family* and *Sounds Incorporated* achieved some later recognition. Of course, the greatest Leicester musical success of the Sixties was Engelbert Humperdink, much to almost every indigenous teenager's shame and chagrin. There was an incredible choice of venues to hear live music, the Clarence and County Arms were the two I frequented most. In 1968, I heard my first American Soul record and became an immediate devotee. I even paid the ridiculous sum of £2.50 for an Otis Reading LP, just weeks before he died, because the only available records of his were American imports.

Working men's Clubs also provided excellent live music, although not until after the bingo, which the young were forced to endure in near-silence. A great comedy act, if unintentionally, was provided by the bingo-caller at the South Wigston Working Men's Club. Covered in bits of tissue to cover shaving-cuts, he'd callout things like "3 and 2, 23", on at least one occasion he refused to accept a winning card because of a missing number that was, in fact, hidden under his thumb. Normally, this level of incompetence wouldn't be tolerated by such fastidious players. Perhaps, they just enjoyed the sheer incongruous hilarity of it all. The thing that sticks out in my mind, even to this day, was how he seemed absolutely oblivious and indifferent to the avalanche of withering abuse that was directed towards him on stage.



Joyce and me at the Wigston Working Men's Club, 1967-68.

An annual 'kids day out' was provided for the children of working men's club members, usually to one of the east coast resorts. Free crisps and soft drinks, even some spending money, were a real treat, especially for many like Joyce, in what was their only holiday experience. Though ostensibly for the kids, adult, especially male, members were determined to make the most of it for themselves. A slow saunter on the outward journey, with at least one long stop at a pub – getting them out was always a challenge. Then around 6 pm, the insistence of a quick getaway (god help anyone who was late) and a rushed dash to get back to the Club as soon as possible.

Apart from three losing appearances for Leicester City in the FA Cup, by far the most significant development during the 1960s was the arrival of increasing numbers of immigrants from the Indian Subcontinent. While this caused considerable social tension in the early years, especially in the early 1970s, when the City and its satellite villages became a battleground with the rise of the fascist National Front who made Leicester their national headquarters. The atmosphere around Leicester became toxic for a while after the National Front made the City its centre of operations. Despite these early stresses, over the following decades Leicester would be transformed from a provisional backwater into a multicultural showpiece. One of my fondest memories after Leicester City's miraculous winning of the Premier League – amongst so many – was the site of members of every ethnic group out on the streets in shared celebration after Spurs had failed to beat Chelsea. 'Champions of England, didn't think I'd ever sing that'.

The greatest gift these new settlers brought in their suitcases, was to rescue us natives from our narrow and extremely bland diet. Restaurants were few and very expensive for ordinary people, whose main experience of eating out was in cheap cafés while on holiday. The only 'takeaway' came from the weekly visit to the local 'chip shop'. A change in eating habits was very slow in coming in my case. The first 'foreign' restaurant I visited was with Joyce to a 'Chinese' on London Road, near the Railway Station. We had no idea what was available on the menu, so we ordered roast chicken and chips with ice cream as a dessert. We went there because we loved the way they did roast chicken.

It would be towards the late '70s, mainly under the auspices of my younger brothers, before I ate 'genuine' Chinese food and even longer before being able to take on the challenge of Indian spices. In fact, my introduction to the delights of Indian cuisine came via *Vesta Beef Curry* – more cardboard than 'Taste of the Orient'.

During the Sixties, intermittent attendance at Filbert Street became a must do activity, either with workmates or brothers. By the end of the decade all six of us would be found on the terraces. In 1969, City reached the FA Cup final for the third time in nine years. Surely, it would be third time lucky! As usual, there were not enough tickets for those who wanted them, so a voucher system was used. Unfortunately, only my younger brother Kev's voucher was drawn

out of the hat. Persuasion and bullying meant that it was eventually deemed only 'fair' that as the oldest I should go. After all, he could go the next time. He still hasn't forgiven me to this day!

¹ Alfred Dreyfus was a French Jewish officer whose trial and conviction in 1894 on charges of treason became one of the most tense political dramas in modern French history. All his insignia and medals were ripped from his uniform in a public display of humiliation. Known today as the 'Dreyfus affair', after he had spent several years on the notorious Devil's Island, Dreyfus was eventually completely exonerated.