

HOW COME US OLDIES HAVE SURVIVED THIS LONG ? Roger Hateley.

This was written long before the world was hit with Covid 19 and I am sure many of you readers will have had a very similar up bringing and memories. It was written originally for a much younger audience so I am sure a lot of it will be familiar to some of you.

In the age of double wrapped this, disinfected that, (it's the 0.1% from the other 99.9% of germs that will get you), don't go there, leave that alone, you must wear this, you mustn't eat that, the Health and Safety Executive, cold weather alerts and other risk factor phobias oh how have we been able to survive this long and to have multiplied to vast town and city clogging proportions ?

I was born when there were very few health and safety regulations or advisory leaflets, except, "*dig for Britain*", "*mend and make do*", "*is your journey really necessary ?*" and the like. I was an end of The Second World War baby. Well I say that; if Mom and Dad had, had an omen from Hitler's demise I would have been born earlier. As it was they had to get over the victory celebrations before I was conceived as I was born in April 1946, or more likely I was a result of a victory celebration.

I was brought up in Barrows Road, Sparkbrook, Birmingham in a time of post war austerity but after reading this you might think I was dragged up in some old Brummie dilapidated back to back. It was not a throwaway society as the country was in recovery, money, resources and material possessions were scarce, but everyone had pride and most kept that front doorstep scrubbed daily with the old carbolic and shared what they could with others. We had to put up with a lot of things that today's modern society would find extremely unpleasant even to imagine let alone contemplate having to do. Here are some of those examples.

Families were not armed with vast amounts of costly accoutrements with which to pamper a baby. It was probably dressed in the second-hand clothes of an older sibling, or from an older neighbours' child. Terry towelling nappies were used or old cloth, which then had to be soaked before washing, none of your throw away and block the drains stuff then. The baby was invariably bathed in the kitchen Belfast sink which was also used to prepare food, wash tableware and the rest of the family's clothes, including the nappies, etc, etc. Don't forget that the only water coming out of a tap was cold, so baby risked being scalded by a kettle of hot water or leaping out of the sink when the tap was turned on. It got better as you got older though. As I was the youngest of two brothers I had the privilege of using my brother's now tepid used bath water. The water may have been tepid but as the flat-bottomed tin bath was on the tiled kitchen floor your backside and nether bits were freezing. I didn't like to stand up in the bath, someone may have wanted a cup of tea and a nude quivering me wasn't going to stop them. We had the advantage of an electric copper boiler for large amounts of hot water, many others in the street had to light a fire under a boiler, brick-built in the kitchen corner. When I was older I had the task of dragging the metal bath across the kitchen floor to empty it out through the back door and into the yard. I always got into trouble because I was too vigorous and water would sweep under the fence and onto our neighbours back door carrying copious amounts of soil from our rapidly diminishing narrow flower border. The family across the road from us did not have the "luxury" of a metal bath to hang on a nail on the back garden fence, no, they got on their bikes and tandem and went to the public bath house in

Saltley and then scrubbed someone else's scum off a bath before they could use it, nice. I never knew anybody that had a shower in their house so, everyone would have a bath, on average, once a week and have a daily partial strip wash in the old kitchen Belfast
. phuuwee.

There were no signs telling us to *"now wash your hands"*, *"clean your teeth after every meal"*, *"wet floor"*, *"toxic hazard"*, *"danger moving machinery"*, *"men at work"*, (we didn't need telling there were men at work, you could bloody well see em), *"extremely hot water"*, (unless you were very posh only cold water came out of a tap). In those days people used their common sense, we were not treated like idiots, those that were fell by the wayside. Survival of the fittest, well that hasn't worked has it ? Just look at the modern electronic device dependant people in the world today, who can't work out the simplest of problems like, how to get off a mountain, cure a cough, how to bring up a child, etc. etc. Don't mend it, throw it away into any convenient public open space, probably. Now I've started the Victor Meldrew effect I might as well carry on.

Food was plain and wholesome and very little was wasted even though refrigerators would probably only be found in houses within the upper echelons of Solihull. To keep things cool in our pantry, under the stairs, we had a stone slab for the likes of meat, cheese, margarine or butter- if we were lucky, also lard and dripping. Milk was kept in a bucket of cold water under the kitchen sink. If anything developed mould it was scraped off and eaten, the jam, bread or cheese not the mould. Dripping, the fat and juices left over from a roast, or the frying pan was kept, congealed, in a bowl and used either for cooking or on a sandwich. We used to have other tasty sandwiches like lard with a sprinkling of salt or a luxurious sugar sandwich, I also liked margarine on a Weetabix topped with treacle, yummy. Oh how we lived a life of decadent luxury. Any leftovers we did have were kept for another meal, the only thing thrown away was vegetable trimmings and food that was, very rarely, beyond healthy use. We didn't have a compost bin, so it was my job to take unwanted stuff down the road to the streets communal pig bin. This was collected once a week by a farmer to boil up for pig swill. Using it in the winter was okay but to lift the lid in summer you wished you had 12ft. long arms or no sense of smell. I have seen a few kids stuffed into that stinking old pig bin, oh no,
"clear the kitchen, open the windows and drag that tin bath in from the yard."

School meals at Golden Hillock Road, infants, juniors and seniors were great, sometimes!
Golden Hillock, doesn't that sound florally idyllic ? Down the hill from the railway yard, BSA on the left, over the cut, factories on the right, up from the TA barracks, opposite the grotty terraces and not a flower in sight, lovely. Back to those meals, soggy cabbage, greasy meat, under or over cooked spuds, assorted lumpy milk puddings, chocolate concrete, heavy jam sponge smothered in tasteless pink – yes pink custard and many more unmentionable monstrosities. The teachers ate the same meals, that probably accounted for their short tempers or they could have still been suffering from the effects of the war with what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder. In the 50's some teachers could accurately throw black board rubbers at an unruly pupil's head, perhaps they still imagined they were throwing grenades. We had one that completely lost it and threw an open jack knife that stuck into a desk, he was probably an ex-commando. We regularly got the cane, but our history teacher

favoured using the blackboard ruler while the recipient lay across two desks at the front of the class, it was rumoured that he may have been a Rottenführer (Squad Leader) in the SS. The P.E. teacher would show off by clipping slivers of paper off the edge of his desk before he laid in with the cane across the now trembling row of upturned palms, that's hands not trees. He was shorter than most of the all boy pupils so was undoubtedly out to prove something.

On the way home from school, which even from the age of five was a considerable lengthy walk, (no cars blocking all the roads around schools then) we used to play "gutters". Imagine the cobbled gutters which lined each side of a street. Into these were poured the contents of buckets which households did not want down their drains, petrol, oil and diesel which may have leaked from vehicles, open sided dust carts, other dirty vehicles and then we still had horse drawn milk wagons, rag and bone carts, so the contents that leaked from the horses also found its way into the gutter. "Gutters" was an avidly contested game whereby one would roll a glass marble along the gutter; another player would do the same trying to hit an opponent's marble. If this was done the hit marble was pocketed. Sometimes for good luck a marble would be licked or kissed. There was no limit to the number of players in a game, so a successful player could go home with a pocket full of horse shit tainted, inconceivably contaminated marbles. Also, the hands holding those marbles were probably shoving sweets into mouths, we also had to dodge traffic at the same time, not that there was a lot of traffic in those days. So, all in all, a very healthy pursuit! – which we survived. We played many other innocent games. Tying a long rope between two lamp posts across the road and getting as many kids as possible to skip. This was okay until something drove around the corner and you couldn't get the rope down quick enough. We had a few bent gas lamp posts in our road and leaking gas pipes. The most exciting pastime was when about ten of us strapped on metal wheeled roller skates, to noisily hurtle down the long steep hill of Barrows Road, with sparks flying and hoping that no one would come out of their front door, no front gardens in our road, and that any pedestrians would leap out of the way. We held on to each other in snake like fashion and then tried to negotiate the corner at the bottom into Walford Road. Woe betide any unwary pedestrian around the corner and luckily we managed to weave between vehicles if we shot across Walford Road to end up either in a front garden or the corner shop.

Battles were fought across communal rear entries with Fallows Road where we would fill our bicycle pumps from one of the Dad's tanks of muck/compost water and squirt it over the enemy, they did the same to us. I don't remember anyone getting seriously injured or being sick or ill, perhaps we just got on with it. As the 18th century proverb goes, "*you have to eat a peck of dirt before you die*". Our immune system must have been like a thick suit of protective armour, cos we got through a lot of crap as kids.

Talking of crap, we found a vast steel chambered inspection pit in a drainage system under a manhole cover at the top of an entry in Abbotsford Road. If you could stand the smell and hope that nothing heavy was placed over the cover it was great to use in games of hide and seek, you could squat there for hours undetected. Well I say undetected; friends could easily detect where you had been by the odour emanating from our clothes afterwards. Our Moms were not happy bunnies when we eventually came home for tea time.

What is now the Haymills end of the Smallheath bypass used to be a system of criss-crossing open sewers, I shan't tell you what name we gave it, but it was a great place to explore. That was till a gang of Teddy Boys caught you with their ball bearing loaded catapults. You then had the option of putting up with a severe pelting or run fast and hope that your frantic leaps would clear the excretion loaded channels, if not, "get that bath off the nail, put that boiler on and keep the window and back door open."

I will leave this tale of survival for now, but I may be back with more stories of how things used to be, some kill or cure methods and what for those in the 50's and 60's was the accepted norm, without any of today's mod cons. Ta Tar For Now.