

I'm lucky enough to still have a copy of the start of my dad's memoir – twenty pages or so of carefully handwritten text, written in pencil on lined, loose A4 pages. He'd called it 'Between the Fires', presumably because he was going to talk about his life from the moment he was born, three weeks before the end of the First World War right up to his participation in the Second World War. He didn't get that far, but this early family story is delightful, especially if you grew up in my part in North Wales, a small market town called Holywell. His own father's story begins in what is now a National Trust-owned area of Snowdonia, beautiful Ysbyty Ifan:



(photo: National Trust)

I thought I'd give my dad a guest slot on my blog, to mark the occasion of his 96th birthday, which would have taken place on Friday October 17, 2014. He died when I was ten, but his story lives on, and this is just the start of it. For some reason, he kept the names of his parents the same but changed his (Wilf) to 'Maelor' and his brother, Ronnie, to 'Gareth'. For the purposes of this story I'm going to change them back. Sorry, Dad, but I am an editor after all...

Between the Fires by John Wilfred Edwards

My parents were married on Boxing Day 1917. I was born three weeks before the end of the First World War, in the house of my grandparents, Charlotte and Joshua Jones of Number 5, Tai Cochion, Treffynnon (Holywell).

My father, Johnnie Edwards, a grocer's assistant, was employed at the Post Office-cum-general store at Ysbyty Ifan – a small village astride the River Conway and a few miles from Betws-y-Coed. Being blind in one eye [an accident with a fork] he was considered unfit to join his three brothers to serve in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers, so he was posted to Ysbyty Ifan to fill a vacancy created by the absence, on war service, of the grocer's son. One of [Johnnie's] brothers, Will, was killed on the morning of Armistice Day, and another, Joe, died as a result of being gassed.

Dad stayed with Tom Roberts and his family, in the end-house of a row facing the church. It is thirty-six miles from there to Holywell. My father naturally wished to visit his wife, Dilys Myfanwy, and his first born son, Wilfred, there as often as possible. He finished work at 8pm on Saturdays and restarted at 8am on Mondays. There was no public transport to meet these times – he couldn't afford it weekly anyhow – so he purchased, by the grace of a generous period of instalments, a second-hand bicycle, with an acetylene lamp thrown in. It was called a carbide lamp. Its base contained a compound on which dripped a regulated flow of water. The result formed a gas which was fed through a burner. The brightness of the flame was amplified by a polished reflector. One had to keep a constant eye on the lamp. If too much water was introduced the flames would envelop it. Unfortunately the light was so poor it served, primarily, to warn other road users of your presence. It illuminated only a few yards in front of the bike. One can imagine, therefore, the journey home in the dark – a climb up to the main road and several miles across the lovely, bleak, undulating Denbigh Moors. There was a six-mile run down into Denbigh but for want of a decent light, Dad had to restrict his speed to a crawl, lest he hit a large stone or perhaps a rabbit, and became unseated.

The journey took at least four hours, and longer in inclement weather. But when it snowed: well – I will leave that to your imagination. My parents had no home [of their own] then, and Dad had to sleep on a couch downstairs at Number 5. Mum cooked his breakfast at 3am on Monday mornings so that he could get away to work. He must have had a lot of grit in him to do this weekly journey without complaint.

Tom Roberts and he were chatting over a glass of beer one night and Tom said, "Johnnie, you cannot carry on any longer with this bike ride to Holywell. Duw Annwyl! [Good grief!] It must be a nightmare! I am going to try and arrange for Dilys and the child to come and live in the village." My father was delighted with the prospect. True to his word, Tom, a gamekeeper incidentally, called at the Post Office the next day and said to Dad, "Johnnie, I have fixed it! I have persuaded old Mrs Jones, three doors away from us, to take them in for a while. As you know she is living alone and it will be company for her." Dad replied, "Thank you, Tom, you are a good friend to me. I am a bit worried, though, about the baby! Mrs Jones may not like such a disturbance." "Don't be silly, Johnnie bach," countered Tom, "Dilys will keep the little imp quiet somehow."

Dad wrote to Mam that night, and a reply came by return of post. Mam was delighted with the prospect and so arrangements were made. Taid and Nain [grandad and grandma – Dilys' parents] scrounged a couple of suitcases and a carpet bag and together with Dilys and child, met the bus at the stop by Holywell Town Hall. Taid was quite upset at the parting but Nain – dear Nain – bundled her daughter and child on the bus with a brave smile. It was for the best, she thought, Dilys and baby joining her husband; just as it should be!

As the bus pulled out, she could hear the child crying in protest at the strange environment; at the inborn knowledge of the estrangement from loved ones, and the fear of the unknown. Dilys, pensive and tearful, waved her goodbyes, cuddled her child, sharing its apprehension, and yet happy at the thought of joining her husband.

In the meantime Johnnie asked Caradoc, a friend of Tom, if he could help. Caradoc had a small vehicle (and what would now be considered a vintage car) at his disposal. And could Caradoc pick up his family of two at the bus stop at Pentre Voelas at 3 o'clock? "For two shillings, yes," Caradoc demanded. Costly business for a two-mile journey, thought Dad, but he had no choice. Anyhow he had saved a little for this sort of eventuality.

Mrs Roberts the Shop gave Johnnie an hour off that afternoon and despite a considerable amount of coaxing to get the car ticking over Caradoc finally chugged out of the village with Johnnie beside him. They met the bus on time.

Johnnie held Wilfred on his knee, on the return journey; his wife squashed on the back seat of the car with all the luggage. However at 20 miles an hour it didn't take long to arrive at the village.

Dilys was introduced to Mrs Jones. Fortunately there was a mutual liking between them, but Mrs Jones looked a little concerned about the child. Wilfred must have known something was going on as he laid on his best smile. "My! But you have a nice little baby, there, Mrs Edwards." Please call me Dilys, Mrs Jones," said mother, smiling, "I hope Wilfred will be a good boy. He has taken to you already."

Dilys settled in very nicely. The baby gave little trouble, and anyhow he had become a great favourite with Tom Roberts and his wife, Olwen. They had a little baby girl named Menna, and both children played together.

Ysbyty Ifan was a delightful village. The River Conway flows through the centre of it. The narrow bridge across the river attracted many visitors. Children paddled in the water. It was a happy community and I think the environment there had a great influence, not only on my life but my parents as well.

However, all good things come to an end. The Postmaster's son returned from the War and we returned to Holywell. Dad managed to get a job at Edwards and Lloyd's grocery shop and our first home. A two-up, two-down at Number 8, Brynford Terrace.



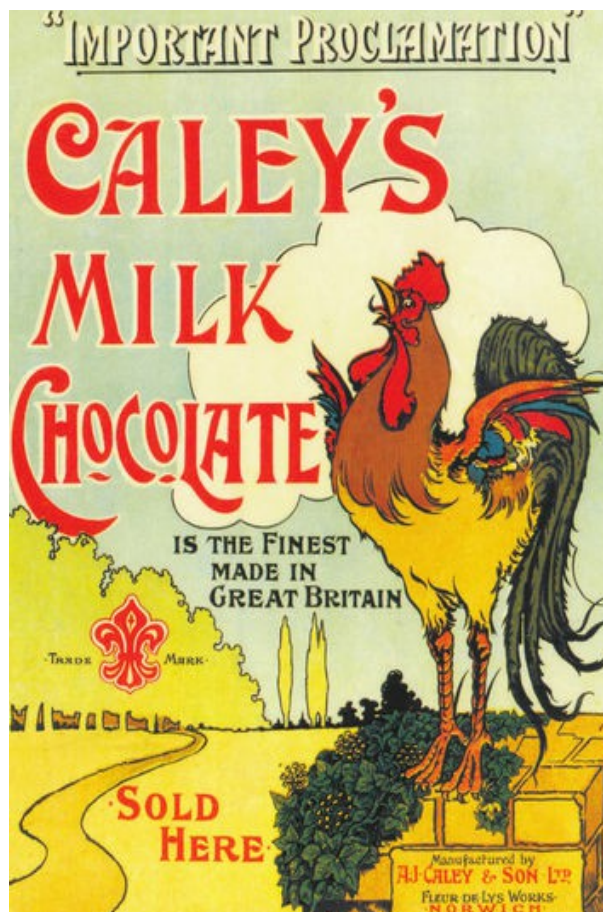
(Wilf Edwards as a toddler. Photo belongs to Lisa Edwards)

I started school at the age of three: Spring Gardens it was called. Miss Parry and the other teachers were wonderful people, and I was very happy there. We were taught our times tables at a very early stage in our education. The ability to read and spell correctly were also considered important.

In later life I was grateful for this good grounding – it stood me in good stead and I hoped this basic training would always retain its place in education. Sadly it has not!

When I was five my brother, Ronnie, was born. Till then Mam was very strict with me as to my appearance and who I played with. I was not allowed to go and play by myself in the street at the end of the terrace. Mrs Jones lived next door to Lunt's shop in the street and a few days after Ronnie joined the family she remarked, "Good heavens, there is Wilfred, playing in the gutter and looking as if he could do with a good wash. I have never seen that before. The new baby has certainly put Wilfred's nose out of joint!" That didn't last for long. Mam soon had me sorted out again.

Our holidays were nearly always spent in what we considered to be our second home – Ysbyty Ifan. A few incidents are vivid in my mind – I was about seven then. Mrs Davies, from Ty Mawr farm had some cows and I offered to take them to the field to graze. I was terrified of them actually, but Mrs Davies gave me a stick and told me to get on with it, and not to forget to close the gate. What I didn't know was the cows knew their way to the field anyhow, and the gate was always left open for them to enter. I was showing off in front of Menna, waving my stick and shouting, at the top of my voice, "Hup! Hup!" to hurry the cows along. I made sure, however, that there was a safe distance between us. After I had 'guided' them into the field I closed the gate and turned to Menna with what must have been a smug expression on my face. Menna looked scornfully at me, "You silly boy," said she, "no one ever brings the cows. They find their own way. I usually just close the gate after they have all gone into the field." I just burst into tears, threw my authoritative baton away, and ran home as fast as I could. I thought Menna was so cruel and I avoided her. Anyhow the next day she made up for it by giving me a penny bar of Caley's Milk Chocolate. She knew it was my favourite sweet.



(Caley's advertisement, reproduced by Robert Opie)

There was the time when Mrs Roberts gave me a milk can, some money, and asked me to go to a farm about half a mile away up the fields and buy some butter. I gave the farmer's wife the can and the money and asked for the butter. She returned a few minutes later and handed me the can and the change. I made my way down the field. It was rather warm and the can was heavy. I thought there must be an awful lot of butter in the can for the small amount paid. I decided to sit down under a tree for a rest. I was curious about the contents of the can so I took the lid off and had quite a surprise. The can was full of buttermilk – the butter floating on the top. I learned later that this was the normal custom, especially in the summer, in order to keep the butter fresh – the buttermilk was free. I filled the deep lid with some milk and drank it all. It was delicious. I had satisfied my thirst and lightened the weight of the can.

I was very fond of my grandparents and visited Nain and Taid [in Holywell] nearly every day. The special visit was for Sunday lunch. Nain often made my favourite dish – rabbit pie. The best part was the crust saturated in the lovely gravy. Taid used to give me sixpence to go to Nellie Parry's at Number 1 to buy two bottles of 'nettle pop.' Mrs Parry was well known for this excellent and refreshing drink she made and we all thoroughly enjoyed it. Old Dr Jones advised many people to drink it. He said it was good for the tummy. He bought six bottles every week.

Nain was a good-looking woman, and her complexion flawless. She often cleaned her face with buttermilk! It must be good stuff, that.

One Sunday, on my way to Number 5, resplendent in my new suit, socks and shoes, I passed the site of a new house being built in Cross Roads. There was a square area near the house covered with some white stuff which looked like a form of soft plaster. Two schoolmates dared me to walk through it saying it was only two inches deep. Stupidly I walked across it, and found it was about 6 inches deep in the middle. The stuff was all over my socks and shoes. I tried to wipe it off with some grass, to the accompanying laughter of the lads. My legs were beginning to burn. I ran off as fast as I could to Nain's house. She was so cross with me. Shoes and socks off. I had walked through a lime mixture. Whilst I had a bath Nain washed my socks and cleaned my shoes. She must have had some good ointment because my legs stopped paining after a while. I was severely censured by both grandparents and certainly learned my lesson. Mam never found out about it – had she done so I would have had a good hiding.

I used to attend services at the Welsh Baptist Chapel. At the evening services the children were called upon, in turn, to recite a verse in Welsh. I used to go to Taid's on Sunday afternoon and he would teach me one. He was very religious, a lay preacher for many years at Penymaes. Before the chapel there was built, services were held at the house of our schoolteacher, Miss Parry. Taid was one of the few attending who could read properly so that's how he became a lay preacher.



(Restored Bethel Baptist Chapel, Holywell. Photo: Bethel Baptist Chapel Facebook page)

One Sunday I had forgotten to go for my verse when at about 5pm I remembered. I ran all the way to Number 5 and said, "Taid, I forgot about the verse and I haven't much time to learn it. What shall I do?" He thought for a minute or two, fingering the large Bible, always placed on the table on a Sunday. He said, "I have a short verse for you with much meaning. It is, 'Cofiwch wraig Lot.'" [Remember Lot's Wife]

At Brynford Terrace there were ten houses. Most of the tenants were very proud of their homes, as humble as they were. The houses were kept very clean. Even the door steps were scrubbed and edged with a rubbing stone. The houses were so small we described them as 'one and a half up and down': [they had] a tiny kitchen and small living room and Ronnie and I slept together in a single bed in the very small bedroom, which was only about one foot wider than the bed. There was an old-fashioned coal grate with an oven fitted one side and hot plates and hob on the other. The kettle was suspended over the fire by a chain and all the cooking was done on the fire and in the oven. The grate was kept in immaculate condition by being regularly polished with 'black lead.' Our lighting was a single paraffin lamp and candles.

There were some good neighbours there – real friends they were. I can recall an incident to amplify this. Next door lived Mrs Jones. Although no relation we all called her Aunty Jennie. I often popped in to see her and Uncle Ted. There was always a welcome. One day all the children except me – I cannot remember why – went on a bus trip to Rhyl. This trip was always considered a rare treat. I was upset at being left out of it. Aunty Jennie saw me crying and when she heard the reason she went straight to see my mother. "Dily's," she said adamantly, "please get this lad ready now! I am taking him to Rhyl. He's not going to be left out." I was soon ready and she threw on a coat and with an angry glare at the world in general, she practically dragged me down to the bus stop. How she managed to pay for the ice-cream, the donkey and the bicycle rides for me, plus the fare for us both amazed me.



(Rhyl prom in the 1930s. Photo: www.anglesey.info)

From necessity, wives became culinary geniuses. With very little money at their disposal they had not only to contrive to provide an interesting varied menu but also a balanced diet. They were able to accomplish it, in a measure, without any academic training in domestic science. Tatws Claeth - boiled potatoes dropped in buttermilk. We loved it. Welsh rarebit: not to be confused with the lowly cheese on toast. Pigs trotters, sheep's heads (at no cost) were bisected, and a nutritious broth with vegetables was concocted. A delicacy was the meat left on the cheeks of the sheep's heads. There were 'fat neddies: four-inch squares of a pastry sandwich, filled with an inch-thick mixture which resembled mincemeat. Tasty and filling – and kept hunger away for a few hours. They cost one penny each. Rabbits were only about nine pence each and were obtainable at Davies' fishmongers and other establishments. The poachers sold them for six pence.

Prior to the advent of insecticides, etc, there was an abundance of mushrooms (and beautiful butterflies) in the season. A man who knew a great deal about nature, Dick Trueman, used to take me out with him early in the mornings to collect them. We went on two rickety old bikes. He knew where to go, alright. I am sure he had a sixth sense of their whereabouts. He was also good at rabbiting and was a good shot. One day, however, I did not enjoy but I shall never forget it. The farmer asked him if Dick could clear rabbits from a warren situated on a bank down the field. He had two ferrets and I carried some nets. He examined the rabbit holes and was able to tell, somehow, which were in current use.

He covered these with the nets and when satisfied with the job, he released the ferrets into a burrow. He then put his ear to the ground and invited me to do the same. He said, "Tell me if you hear a thumping sound." I did and said so. Dick said, "Right - wait for it." I can see him now, standing there, his arms outstretched. I asked him about the thumping sound. He said it was the rabbits stomping their feet in terror at the meanness of the ferrets. Suddenly rabbits starting popping out into the nets. Dick stripped the nets off them, broke their necks and threw them over his shoulder and hurriedly replaced the nets. I was sickened to see these rabbits flopping about on his back. He asked me to help but I just couldn't. Afterwards he put his arm around me and said, "Don't worry. They weren't in any pain. The flopping about was a nervous reaction."

During the Depression in the '30s my Uncle Will was on the dole and so were four of his friends. They were invited to our house for supper nearly every Saturday night. Mam used to send me for 11 pennyworth of chips – a big bowl full – and four fish. This was shared by us all, with homemade bread and farm butter. Afterwards, I would play the piano and all would join in, singing, 'Sospan fach' [Little Saucepan] and other Welsh songs. In the warm summer evenings we would, instead, sit outside singing 'Home on the Range', etc, to the accompaniment of a guitar. Some of the neighbours would join in. What pleasant evenings they were.

Christmas was always a happy time. No turkeys for us. Too dear! Mam used to get two 'fowl' as she called them. That meant four wings and four legs which Ronnie and I used to fight over.

In the evening Nain arrived plus other members of the family and Uncle Will and his four 'dole pals'. Dad produced a bottle of port and some homemade ginger wine. Some of the men played cards or enjoyed themselves on the ring board dad had set up on the kitchen door.

Later I was given an enamel bucket and was sent to get it filled with ale. I went to the back door of the pub and knocked. The bucket was duly filled and I struggled with it up the Terrace 'yard' (as we called it). Out came the cups, mugs, etc, and Taid doled it out with a ladle to the men. The women had port and we had to be content with the ginger wine. Then it was me on the piano again and the singing started. Tom Nuttall would insist on singing 'The Old Rustic Bridge by the Mill' and Joe Gallagher 'Speak to me Thora' (or 'Fora', as he called her). How we all managed to find a seat I don't know. Some sat on the stairs, on the floor and even on the table.

Uncle Tom was a good tap dancer and he could also play the spoons. He did his little bit. One Christmas, Ronnie took our little dog upstairs. He came back down and placed it on the table. It stood there with a little hat on, and sporting a pair of Ronnie's pants with a comb sticking out of

the back pocket. The poor dog had such a 'hang-dog' expression that Mam, taking one look at its face and seeing the comb sticking up, just shrieked with laughter. We all naturally joined in and just couldn't stop for ages.

Yes, we made our own fun in those days.

After Christmas it was 'Clenig' time. We children, with small baskets or bags, toured all the sweet shops hoping to receive a small gift of a few sweets. We would present our baskets, hoping that in the traditional festive spirit the shopkeeper would oblige. We would wish him, in Welsh, a Happy New Year: "Blwyddyn newydd dda i chi!" If the baskets showed a reasonable bounty, we emptied some of the sweets in our pockets, ensuring that the contents of the baskets remained pathetically small.

Dad changed his job and started work in E.B. Jones' grocer's shop. Friday night it was open 'til 9pm and Saturday at least 10pm. Mrs Edwards of New Road, who made glorious treacle toffee – people came for miles around to buy her various homemade sweets – arrived at the shop at about 9pm on Saturdays. She insisted that Dad served her. You see he was the provision man – capable of boning a shank to perfection, curing bacon, etc. To be a provision man in those days was important. The key man in the shop, where the preparation and carving of meats of any kind sold was a specialist job.

By the time Mrs Edwards had completed her order it was about 9.30pm. Then Dad had to help her carry the goods 300 yards down the road. He arrived home at about 10pm. Overtime? Not on your life! It was part of the job. But, you see, this was accepted. People then had no particular desire to 'keep up with the Joneses'. Cars were owned only by doctors, solicitors and other professional men – they needed them, didn't they? We were quite content to use the bus service. Why not? Fares were cheap and services frequent. The deterioration in this service was consequent upon many families owning a car. Even those on social security benefits. In the early days of the car, many factory workers did, in fact, illegally supply a taxi service, taking men to work in their cars for a backhand for petrol. A half-empty bus cannot hope to pay its way with cheap fares. Ironically the poor and the aged suffer.

But, you know, poverty did not, in any way, suppress happiness. Far from it. We enjoyed the simple things of life. For children there was a time for whip-and-top, a time for pitching cigarette cards (all kinds of series' of cricketers, footballers, etc), a time for conkers, yo-yos, hoops, etc. In fairness, the roads were completely devoid of traffic and we were free to exercise these pursuits on the roads.

Today we are asked to provide leisure activities for children! What can we do for them to replace these simple, cheap and happy vocations, amidst the hurly burly of the modern world, of traffic, chaos, pressures, excessive noise and heart disease? We see people today driving around in big cars, their initials forming part of the number plate, towing caravans and boats, enjoying holidays abroad, and despite it all, not looking particularly happy with life in general.

It was Uncle Ted's (next door) habit to buy a jug of beer from the Cross Foxes, the cosy little pub at the end of the terrace. He preferred to drink it at home. The hosts were Mr and Mrs Edwards – this seems to be a good name. One evening Uncle Ted put his jug of beer on the table and went to the outside toilet. Ronnie, a big favourite with him, sat on a chair in his pyjamas awaiting his nightcap story. He was about four years of age. Uncle Ted returned, after chatting to a neighbour, some ten minutes later. There was no sign of Ronnie or the jug! Ted heard a gentle snoring from under the table. There was Ronnie, flat on his back, with the empty beer jug at his side! Imagine Mam's disgust to have to deposit one drunken child in his bed. Ronnie never lost his taste for that good stuff!

I referred earlier to good friends and neighbours. Dad certainly gave his contribution. A little train operated between Holywell town and the junction at Greenfield, a couple of miles away. From there one could get on to the Cob – a sandy area on the edge of the estuary of the River Dee and now occupied by the massive Courtauld's factory, which employs so many local people.

Despite the long hours at work, Dad often forfeited his cherished half day on Wednesday to take the terrace children to the Cob. We all went on the little train – a penny return. Dad paid for us all, took us on the Cob, where we played games and competitions, for sweet prizes. It was lovely. He probably enjoyed it as much as we did.

During the winter the communal tap near Number 6 at the Terrace froze up. Mam used to gather some snow, place it in a saucepan and bring it to the boil. She poured it over the tap until eventually water came through. We also had a barrel near the down spout. But sometimes it froze over, and we had to break the ice to obtain water for washing – a chilly process.

At eight years of age my parents decided I had a musical inclination. Mam took in washing for six families in order to purchase a new piano. It cost £40 then! At the end of our small garden Dad had built a small hut which served, amongst other things, as a centre for Mam's washing business. And old-fashioned mangle at the end with a candle fixed on the top. My father's father – Ned-y-glo (Ned the Coal) converted an old outside toilet into a boiler and it was a great help to Mam, burning old shoes and pieces of wood, etc, to heat the water for her washing.

Imagine it! Especially in the winter. Mam standing in the snow stirring the clothes in the boiler, rinsing them in a bath and carrying the clothes into the hut for mangling with the aid of a glittering candle for light. I can see the miserable, soul-destroying, primitive scene. Poor Mam! What stamina and fortitude. I knew the end product was to earn money to pay for the piano. I loved her dearly even just for this great sacrifice.

I started to learn to play the instrument. The beginning was boring, scales and simple pieces. When I came home from school I had my tea and then straight on the piano for half an hour. One day I thought Mam was too busy in the shed to notice, so, feeling a little fed up, I did not play properly, making mistakes. I also stopped playing for five minutes. I started again but did not apply myself properly to the music. Suddenly Mam came in and slapped me across the face with a wet dishcloth. Gosh! That was painful. Why had I deserved such punishment? Mam warned me never ever to mess about again and ordered me to practise for an extra half hour each day for a week, as further punishment. I had difficulty reading the music, for that period, through my tears. I just couldn't stop crying, but I was old enough to realise the reason behind Mam's outburst and anger. I resolved never again to let her down.

A short time later I tried the piano solo in the local Eisteddfod and came second. Aunty Jennie took me there and she was so proud to bring me home with the certificate. I can see now the look in my mother's eyes as they shone at me after looking at the certificate. She put down the frying pan, in which she was cooking sausages for tea, and took me in her arms. I was so happy and felt I had redeemed myself.

Not long after this I came home from school one day and sat at the piano to start my daily practice. I ran my fingers over the keys and there was no sound of music, just the clanking of the keys. I was bewildered and turned to Mam. She took one look at me and burst into tears. It was a while before I could get her to calm down and explain what had happened. After she had recovered her composure she said, "Since your father has been ill we have had to try and manage on the dole. I haven't been able to keep up the weekly payments and this afternoon two men came from the piano firm and took out the inside of the piano. There were sorry but they had orders to do it. I haven't told Dad yet. What are we going to do? I don't want you to miss your lessons, and what will your teacher say?"

A week later Dad recovered and went to see Elford Roberts, a solicitor, about the trouble. He knew him well. The solicitor asked to see the copy of the agreement and the paying-in book, etc. Later he told my father he was taking the piano firm to court. In the meantime the first thing I did when I came home from school was to open the piano lid and try the keys. I thought the piano people were horrible to do such a thing.

The solicitor discovered that, in fact, our payments were not in arrears as Mam had, unwittingly, been paying two shillings a week more than she needed to have done. After the case, the solicitor came to the house. "Everything's alright, Johnnie," he said, jubilantly. "The magistrate remonstrated with the firm's representative and ordered them to restore the piano to working order within twenty-four hours." My father asked Mr Roberts how much he owed him. "Nothing at all, Johnnie, it was a pleasure to see such a mercenary firm being put in their place."

My sister was born about that time [1931]. She was named Mair Myfanwy. She was very pretty and spoiled by all concerned; including me. We three children had blond curly hair but it seemed to suit her better. One of my jobs after school was to deliver the clean washing for Mam. The clean sheets, shirts, etc, were wrapped in a towel – the cleaning charges for each lot, usually about two shillings, were written on a small piece of paper which was pinned to the towel. I placed these 'parcels' on my sister's pram and delivered them. Baby always enjoyed these trips. Mum organised a clothing club to eke out Dad's meagre earnings and, in addition to delivering the clothes, I collected the weekly payments from her customers, still pushing Mair around in the pram. I was a nursemaid and collector combined.

In those days there were some great characters about. There was Joey Barker, the blind man. He was a water carrier. His vehicle, a barrel on wheels, was pulled along by a donkey. He was the main water supplier in the town. The water pump was situated at the Rofl Tob (where the name emerged is a mystery) on the Bagillt Road. He filled the big barrel up and proceeded on his rounds, selling at a penny a bucket. His 'eyes' were in the shape of a young boy, or sometimes a man. The remarkable thing about it was that if his assistants were not available, Joey could cope. Not only did the donkey know the places of call but it also knew when the barrel was empty and made its way, unguided, back to the pump for a refill, with Joey holding on at the rear of the vehicle.

Joe 'Z' (surname unknown) lived a hermit-like existence in a tiny house. The front door, with a two-inch gap at the top was painted with tar. I had occasion to go into his house once, which I did with trepidation. It was incredibly untidy and there were many glass cases containing stuffed birds and small animals.

We had a barber in the town, who, in the middle of a haircut would excuse himself and go upstairs with his son for a cup of tea. They often entered into a heated discussion, sometimes on religion. So it was not unusual to see a customer sitting in the chair for ten minutes with half a haircut, awaiting the return of the hairdresser.

We had a workhouse in the town called Lluesty (now a fine hospital). It catered inter alia for passing tramps who earned their night stop and breakfast by chopping logs into sticks. These were bound with wire into bundles and a well-known resident there, Jack the Riddle (the Welsh have a passion for nicknames) filled a barrow with the bundles and sold them to a local shop, the money going into the funds of the establishment.



(Lluesty workhouse which became a hospital, now disused. Photo: www.28dayslater.co.uk)

In the grounds of Llesty stood a huge oak tree. It was so old it wobbled a bit, like a loose tooth, in the wind. In order to preserve it, chains had been fitted and staked into the ground to keep it upright. Many years ago a smithy operated beneath its branches. Opposite was the Stamford Toll gate and higher up the road, the Calcot Arms – a haven of rest for the weary traveller, whilst the horse-drawn coach was prepared for the next leg of the journey, possibly to Holyhead.

On their way to Llesty tramps walked up Old Chester Road, passing Tai Cochion. Number 5 was a 'soft touch'. Apparently there was a tramp's special mark on the wall of the house. Nain would never refuse to give a crust and a mug of tea to the odd caller. One rainy day, a tramp called and was made welcome. While Nain was in the kitchen making tea he had taken off his shoes and filthy socks and was drying them by the fire, his equally dirty feet resting on top of the table cloth. Nain came in, took one look at the scene, grabbed her walking stick and brandishing it threateningly at the tramp, ordering him out of the house. He was so alarmed at the extreme change in her that he practically ran out, stumbled down the steps, clutching socks and shoes and disappeared up the road, hobbling in his bare feet on the rough surface.

At school, the importance of the teacher-pupil relationship is, in my experience, paramount. I had been transferred from Spring Gardens infant school [some years earlier], to the Holywell council school. And, except for a small minority, the teachers were fine. We did not appreciate it at the time. We considered them to be cruel, relentless, impassive and inhuman ogres. But by golly, they kept one's nose to the grindstone. If you were late for school you had to stand in the corridor outside the classroom door. You pondered and worried about the extent of the possible punishment. The headmaster, Arthur Llewelyn Evans would stalk down the corridor and almost invariably he caned you for the offence. He was feared but highly respected.

At eleven I was in Standard 4. The teacher, Miss Evans, constantly compared us, in detriment, with her favourite pupil. It served only to undermine our confidence. My report that year was not very good. The following year I was in Standard 5: Ieuan Williams was the teacher. He had no favourites. He was strict but fair. A learned humble man with a remarkable ability to impart knowledge. Within six months I was top of the class. Ieuan sported a miniature silver flower vase in his buttonhole. In it he unfailingly displayed a flower. Sometimes a small rose. Despite his use of the cane for disciplinary reasons, he was a popular master. He certainly impressed his pupils with his favourite subjects – mathematics and geography.

The teacher in the top class was Mr Gomer Williams. I did well there and I was made head boy. My duties included making ink, i.e. mixing a special powder and water in a bucket, filling stone jars with the ink and delivering them to the various classrooms. I also dealt with the ordering and maintenance of stocks of stationery, etc. My weak subject was history and I always tried to find some duty which would excuse me from the lesson. Gomer got wise to this because one day I was in the boiler-room speaking to the caretaker, avoiding the history lesson again, when my friend Eric came rushing in, "Gomer's on the warpath looking for you!" he shouted. I opened a jar of ink, spread some on my hands and arms and dashed off to the washroom. Slowly I proceeded to wash off the ink and in stalked Gomer. "Why are you not at the history lesson?" he demanded. "I have been making ink, Sir," I lied. He ordered me to the classroom warning me never to be absent from history without his express permission. So that was that!

A big boy named Eddy took a dislike to me when I became head boy. He teased and taunted me. After all, I was a bit on the skinny side. He did his best to get me to fight with him. I hated violence of any kind but in any case I knew he would beat me up if I gave him the excuse. He made my life a misery for many months and fear of him almost became an obsession. However, one day a crowd of us were in the 'fairground' field, opposite the school, playing on the wet grass (it had rained heavily that morning). He came up to me and insulted me in front of all the lads. Suddenly, I just saw red. I remember hitting him on the nose as hard as I could. He fell backwards into a pool, stood up, his clothes covered with mud. His nose was bleeding and he ran home. The next day his mother reported me to the headmaster. But I was not punished. Mr Evans understood!

Anyhow Eddy never bothered me again.

Mam bought me a pair of clogs. Real wooden ones – black – with steel understrips, just like a horseshoe. Gosh, they were so comfortable – cool in summer, warm in winter. So much cheaper and hard-wearing than shoes. I wish I had a pair now. Although I admit they loudly proclaimed one's arrival I would highly recommend them in preference to the horrible, ugly 'Frankenstein's monster' shoes which young people clomp around in today. They look grotesque, ungainly and completely out of character! Isn't it strange that since the beginning of time young people simply refuse to accept advice from their elders. Perhaps it is their pride that forbids acceptance of the advice offered. What a pity! Advice gained by bitter experience is valuable. But no! Youngsters, including myself, choose to ignore the counsel of parents and prefer to discover life the hard way. Does nature demand this, I wonder? If I had my time over again I know I would have progressed much more quickly and efficiently, without the unnecessary heartache and worry, had I accepted the wisdom and experience of my elders.

At fourteen years of age [1932] I had the great fortune to obtain a position in the Post Office as a boy messenger. Six shillings a week. Hours – 9am to 7.30pm. Monday to Saturday, no half day. But, the job was pensionable. Imagine my pride at that, especially at a time when unemployment was rife. I can remember a long queue of men waiting to sign on the dole – yes – three deep and the queue stretching for a least 300 yards. And there I was, strutting along past them, delivering a telegram, feeling so superior in the knowledge that I was employed by the government in a safe and pensionable job, and uniformed too.

To cool my ardour there was an incident which I shall never forget. One winter's night the phone in the office rang at 7.25pm. Mr R. Roberts, the clerk, answered it. I knew it was a telegram and kept my fingers crossed that it was for a local resident. He handed it to me. It was addressed to a cottage in Mertyn Crewe, Whitford (about five miles away). I pleaded with him to either send it by van or get it delivered by post the next morning. He was adamant that I should take it as I was still on duty. In the first place I didn't know how to get there. It was not only dark but it was also snowing. Fortunately I had a small torch.

I decided to ask my mother's brother, Uncle Will, for help. I walked the mile up to his house and explained the position. His wife, Auntie Phoebe, prepared some sandwiches and a flask of tea and off we went. What a journey. Knocking on doors of cottages en route, we were finally directed down a steep lane to the address. It wasn't very pleasant, with a hawthorn hedge on both sides. We slithered down and eventually arrived at the cottage. There was a light on over the door. I knocked. A woman came to the door, snatched the telegram, read it, said, "Oh! So Tom is coming to see us soon," and without a simple thank you, she slammed the door in my face. Crikey, what a reception! All that terrible journey to deliver what appeared to be a not very important telegram. Crestfallen, we made our way home. I was so grateful to Uncle Will. I would never have made it without him. I wonder if an uncle today would help his nephew to that extent. I doubt it. The journey took four hours and I was paid overtime at the standard rate of 3d per hour. Five pence, in the new money!

Just prior to starting work I was getting on well with my piano lessons. My teacher, Mrs Hughes, was not a good pianist herself yet she was good at theory. She had the ability and patience to impart the rudiments of music in such a pleasant way that most of her pupils did well. I believe that people who have knowledge, but are not in themselves expert at applying it, make better teachers. For instance, a good pianist would have little patience teaching a learner.

I had reached a point where one more exam was between me and a 'cap and gown' (L.R.A.M.) but because my new job meant I worked until 7.30pm my teacher, the daughter of a publican, was unable to teach me after 5pm. I had no option but to discontinue my lessons. I still grieve about that. My ambition was to become a famous church organist or cinema organist. The latter were at their heyday then.

My first introduction to syncopation was when my mother bought me a cop of 'Amy, Wonderful Amy' – this commemorated Amy Johnson's famous solo aeroplane flight. I was intrigued with the left-hand arrangements. Then a friend asked me to come and listen to a record he had bought of a wonderful pianist. He said his name was 'Charlie Coons'. I visualised a honky tonk effort. However, he put on the record and – wow – I was so fascinated with his style that I persuaded him to play it over several times. I noticed on the record that the surname was spelt 'Kunz'. I later developed a style on those lines.



(Wilf playing his beloved piano while his wife, Pam, sings – date unknown)

Before I was fifteen, I met Harry, a drummer. He persuaded me to play for dancing. Our first job together was at the Brynford Institute, starting at 8pm and finishing at 11pm. Payment was half a crown each. We checked on the taxi fare – it was half a crown – so we decided we would have to walk. I carried his bass drum and my music. He had the burden of two heavy cases of drum kit. It's a mile and a half to Brynford, and a steep climb at that. Our dress was patent leather pointed-toe shoes, dark suit and a white silk scarf. Also a plentiful application of Brylcreem in our hair. Imagine climbing the hill in that gear, and with our cases, through two or three inches of snow! On those occasions we arrived, shivering with cold, to a slow hand-clap. We quickly thawed out by the big stove and warmed up on the instruments.

There was no trouble in those days – if the local policeman came in it was only to enjoy the proceedings. No bouncers at the door – just an old gentleman to take the money. Tea and cakes at the interval and plenty of good fun. The piano reigned supreme in those days – the guitar merely provided background music. It took many years of practise to become a good pianist. It surprises me, therefore, that by comparison the modern guitarist with a couple of years at the instrument

behind him, can command more reverence. We also played at the Church Hall in the town and at the 'Imps' Club. Great days.

We had an Inspector of Police named Wasley. He was the tops. A big fat man with a formidable stick in his hand. He passed me in the street one day and as I passed he gave me a small whack with his stick, on my bottom. I looked around at him with surprise. He said with a smile, "That's for doing nothing. See what will happen if you do do something wrong."

Shops were open until 9pm on a Saturday and we teenagers used to strut up and down trying to mate up with the girls doing likewise. It often ended up with couples pairing off and kissing and cuddling in the shop doorways. Inspector Wasley would appear about 10pm at the top of the street, and start walking down. The lads knew that if caught, Wasley would whack them with his stick in the presence of their girls, to everyone's considerable embarrassment. Therefore, as soon as he appeared, there was a general dispersal of all concerned. We didn't hate him, or any other policeman for that matter, but we had a great respect for the possibility of summary punishment. No one would dream of damaging a telephone kiosk or breaking a shop window or accosting a person in the street, and the reason was obvious.

During the time Dad worked in E.B. Jones' grocers, he had on occasion to do deliveries on Saturdays with a horse and cart. I looked forward to that but I don't think he did. First he had to bring the horse from the stable and hitch it up to the cart. Then, with help, the cart was loaded with sacks of flour and sugar and all kinds of goods. Our first call was to a small shop at a village named Milwr. This is a Welsh word meaning 'soldier', but I am told that the word is concocted from Roman numerals and refers to the 1049 company, or cohort of Roman soldiers reputed to have been stationed there [Offa's Dyke is nearby].

When we arrived at the shop, Dad pointed to a small door situated near the roof and over the shop front and said, "You will have to help me to put two sacks of flour and one of sugar into that loft." I was so flabbergasted that I looked at him open-mouthed, with eyes like organ stops. "Go and get a ladder from the back of the shop, son, and we can carry them up." He kept a straight face and I really thought he had gone mad. The task was just impossible! I was about to climb off the cart when the loft door opened and an aproned man appeared with a block and tackle. Dad took one look at me and laughed. When Dad explained, the man in the loft thought it a huge joke and we all had a good chortle, as he wound up the bags into the loft.

En route, I was allowed to hold the reins now and again but I suspect the horse realised a sense of diminished discipline when I took over and he slowed down. Dad would then take over, placing the reins between his fingers and sliding them backwards and forwards. This evoked an immediate response from the horse which broke into a trot. I started using this method but Dad warned me only to use it when absolutely necessary. The horse didn't like it at all, apparently.

I suppose there is a knack in everything to make a job easier. I wondered how a small man like Dad could shoulder those heavy sacks, but then draymen and coal men are able to do the same sort of thing, aren't they? I supposed Taid was right when he said, 'where there's a will, there's a way.'

On our rounds we called at a village called Lixwm. This name is also supposed to have originated from Roman times. It would be the encampment of the 59th company. Recently I saw a direction sign altered, obviously by a fervent Welshman, to read LICSWM. A genuine, if illegal, attempt to rectify the spelling, since there is no X in the Welsh language. What would the centurion have thought of that impertinence, not only changing the number of his company without permission, but at the same time making numerical nonsense of it.

At this point, the story ends, and Dad has written the word 'logs' in a circle in the margin –it must have been the next story he was going to tell. Here's what happened next:

1932-1935: Post Office Messenger, Holywell

1935-1938: Sorting Clerk and Telegraphist, Holywell

1938-1939: Postal and Telecommunications Officer, Holywell

1939-1945: Army Service – Royal Auxiliary Ordnance Corps, Egypt



(Wilf, Mair and Ronnie at home in 1945 - the end of the War)

1953-1955: Postmaster, Mombasa, Kenya

1956: Chief Clerk, Tanganyika (now Tanzania)

1957-1959: Investigation Officer, misuse of telephone services in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanganyika



(Playing the piano for 'Grab Me a Gondola', Little Theatre, Dar es Salaam, Tanganyika, 1958)

1960-1961: Regional Investigation Officer; working with Special Branch on embezzlement and fraud cases

1962: Forced retirement due to Kenyan independence; set up in Holywell town as newsagent and stationer

1963: Organised Holywell Christmas illuminations for the first time



(Wilf (left) watching on proudly as the Christmas lights are switched on in Holywell town, 1964)

1972: Founded Holywell Chamber of Commerce and Holywell Town Band. Served as governor of Holywell High School

1973: President of Holywell Rotary Club



(Family gathering – Dilys and Johnnie Edwards (centre); Mair (bottom left); Ronnie, Wilf and Pam (from top right); Pam's mother Marjorie (top centre))