

The 1920s

I was born on St Swithin's Day, 15th July 1921 on an extremely hot day, or so I was told. It was less than three years after the First World War. George V was king. 1921 was not a very historic year, except for the establishment of the Irish Free State and a war between Greece and Turkey nothing much happened apart from my arrival!



Me as a baby

I was named Robert, after my paternal grandfather, Albert, probably after my father's brother who had died a few weeks before my birth, and Lewis after my Dad. My parents were Annie Francis Jones, whose maiden name was Carpenter, and Lewis Jones who had just survived four years of the terrible 1914-1918 war.

My father joined the 2/16 London Regiment The Queen's Westminster Rifles in 1914. After training, his regiment was sent to Ireland in April 1916 to put down the Easter Rising. He then fought on the Western Front until September 1916. They were sent to Greece for a beach landing at Salonica, which was unopposed, and they marched to the northern border to engage the 'Bulgars'. In open warfare they took many casualties and were then withdrawn and sent to Palestine to fight the Turks. Lewis Jones was shot in the head by a sniper and posted

missing believed killed. He was actually cared for by Palestinians and rejoined his regiment, only to be returned to the Western Front. Now a sergeant he won the Military Medal at Messines on 28th September 1918. He was demobilised on 18th March 1919. Dad was in good health after the war, except that he had malaria which occasionally gave him a fever.

I do not know how my parents met, but it was probably during the war. Mum worked in a munitions factory. She was packing parachute flares when one ignited. She was not hurt but suffered severe shock and was excused further war work.

At my birth, Dad was back working at Silver Studios at 3 Haarlem Road, Hammersmith in West London, where he did designs for woven and printed furnishings and dress fabrics, and for wallpapers, borders and friezes. To see where he worked you must look for the corner house on the south side of Haarlem Road at the junction with Augustine Road because the address has been changed.

Dad was registered with the name Lewis, but signed some of his artwork Louis. He is Louis on his marriage certificate. He was, however, always known as Jack. My mother's name was Annie but she was always known as Nance. Mum and Dad married in August 1919 when he was 25 and she was 23.



Dad at Saffron Walden (c1916)



Dad and Mum (c1916)



Dad and Mum (c1923)



Mum (c1925)



Dad & Ethel (Aunt Doll) outside 22 Lowestoft Road, Watford.

I was born at 22 Lowestoft Road, Watford in Hertfordshire, in the house where my father had been born in 1894. Mum, Dad, Aunt Doll (Ethel Marion), Uncle Ralph and my grandparents all lived in that house. Mum and Dad lived in that house from 1919 to 1930. I cannot remember my grandfather, Robert, who died when I was just three years old. I can only remember my uncle as someone who would be annoyed if I didn't keep quiet. Mother's father, John Henry Carpenter, died in 1900. Her mother Hannah Jane (Tucker) lived at Brighton Road in Watford.

The houses in Lowestoft Road, Watford, were first occupied in 1892. Number 22 was slightly larger than the others in the terrace because the upstairs area went over the alley on one side of the house.

Lighting was by coal gas, and quite a good light came from the mantles in glass globes.

The light was controlled by chains from the ceiling fitting. In the scullery the only light was from a naked flame from a 'fish tail' burner. Cooking was done on a coal fired range in the living room and this stove was the main source of heating too, and it seemed to me that it was constantly being cleaned to keep the bright parts burnished and the rest rubbed with Zebo blacking. The front room was always kept clean but only used for when we had visitors. There was no bathroom and the only lavatory was a closet with an entrance from the yard.

The light was controlled by chains from the



In my pedal car

In my first years I did not go short of anything. Money seemed plentiful and I was probably spoilt. I seem to have got everything I wanted except when I cried for the moon, if the story is true that I said 'I want that' when I saw it. I had many toys but the one I remember best was a tin clockwork airship which went around its mooring mast. Like so many toys at that time it was made in Germany as part of war reparations. I also had a pedal car, it was dark blue in colour, with wooden coachwork. It was made by Lines Brothers and was probably quite expensive.

At that time there were still street traders. Milk was delivered from a churn on a handcart, and the milkman filled his customer's jug using a dipper to measure the amount. A cart of red painted wicker was used by the postman. There was still a muffin-man with a handbell, and a man who we called "Old Cods Head" who may have

been a fishmonger, but it is more likely that the “cod’s heads” he shouted about were cat food.

I was always full of curiosity, and that was almost my downfall, because one day, when I was about four, I stood upon a chair to see into the frying pan. Fat spat into both my eyes and, although there was no serious damage, I refused to open them until I was persuaded to by a neighbour’s daughter, Doris Parsley, who pounded the piano keyboard and I just had to see how that was done!

Some evenings, Mum would take me to Watford Junction railway station to meet dad returning from work. I would stand with my hands gripped to the sooty railings, alongside the Bridle Path, and through them I would watch the trains. After dark the express locomotives would roar by, trailing a shower of burning cinders and with the glare of the firebox lighting up the smoke and steam.

Unemployed ex-servicemen, many of them crippled in the recent war, ‘sold’ matches in the streets. On one occasion I was given money to hand to one such man and I took a box of matches from his tray. I didn’t know that the matches were just for show and I was very embarrassed when people laughed at me. Many years later, the story of those days was told on the radio, and the broadcaster said that as everyone gave many times the value of the matches to take a box was to give the ‘seller’ some dignity.

I can remember no more of my pre-school years. I now know that during this period Adolf Hitler had formed the Nazi party in Germany, Lenin had died in Soviet Russia, and the Labour government of 1924 was its first and rather brief time in power.



Me with Mum



Me with Dad



Me with Gran



A young me on the beach

I started school in September 1926 at Callow Land Mixed Infants School in Leavesden Road, Watford. It was between Lowestoft Road and St Albans Road, just a short walk from home. All I can remember of the school is the assembly hall with, at one end, a large carved wooden rocking horse. There I learned to read and write. My arithmetic was rather basic, and consisted mainly of learning the 'times table' by rote.

One event at the school I remember was one bright 24th of May, Empire Day, when full of patriotism I took a large Union Flag to carry during the parade in the playground. The long pole had a pointed end and, accidentally, I almost dislodged a lady who was sitting on the school wall, and she was not pleased! On another occasion I collided with one of the many war wounded men when I was running to school. He cursed and swore at me and I was terrified. Remembering these events makes me think that I was 'happenstruck' even in those days (a word that some say I invented).



Me beside the chicken run at 22 Lowestoft Road

The Jones family's link with our rural past was broken when my grandfather died. No longer did we have the horse and trap (Nobbler, an unbroken stallion would end his days in a field at Warlingham) and gone was the small holding in North Watford. But at 22 Lowestoft Road there were chickens to be fed and eggs collected, and I called the fan-tailed pigeons mine and ate their eggs.

Unlike most of my school friends, I was able to holiday at the seaside. We went to the Isle of Wight, which meant a journey to Waterloo station by Bakerloo tube, and a steam train to Portsmouth Docks, to board a paddle steamer to Ryde Pier station. From the pierhead a little steam train wheezed its way to Newport. We stayed at 109 Hunny Hill, Newport, with Uncle Joe and Aunt Mabel Cooper. Joe Cooper's brother Fred had married my mother's sister Nellie. They had met in the war when Fred, who was in the Isle of Wight Rifles, was stationed in Watford. 109 Hunny Hill was a little cottage next to a small chapel. Aunt Mabel used to clean and look after the chapel.

A broad track from Hunny Hill gave access to the cottage and to the small holdings beyond, where there was an abundance of vegetables and fruit. There were also pigs and piglets to see. Also, there was a large shed where Uncle Joe kept his car, a bull-nosed Morris. Much later the shed would house the Ford truck he used for his coal delivery business, and the generator which supplied electric light to the cottage, which replaced the gas-vapour lamp of earlier years.

We went to the beaches at Ryde, Sandown, Shanklin, Ventnor and Freshwater by the Isle of Wight railway, which my cousins Leslie and Percy Cooper told me was mentioned in the Bible, it being one of the 'creeping things' in Genesis! On other days we had picnics on the bank of the River Medina. To get there we went "down Dodn'r", Dodnor Lane went past fields of meadow flowers and through swarms of butterflies. Our holidays were always taken in the first two weeks of August, and on the last night of the Cowes Regatta I would join the local kids who would throw paper streamers to form a flimsy barrier to cars making their way to the celebrations. Later we would watch the fireworks which were always "better than last year"!

At home we now had a radio. 'Wireless', as it was then known, was new, and 2LO was the first regular broadcasting station in 1922. Although radio had been invented in 1895, it was not until the 1920s that parts were available for amateurs, like Dad, to construct wireless sets. To buy radios was out of the question for most people because of the cost. I remember 'helping' Dad to cut and drill ebonite, an early black plastic-like sheet, to take control switches and dials. Dad constructed them for friends and relatives. A large wooden frame, wound with wire, took up a lot of space in a bedroom of an already crowded house, and I didn't know why we didn't have an aerial to a tall pole in the garden as neighbours had – Dad would know why the loop aerial was better, but I didn't. Power was a problem. 'High tension' was a box of many flat 4½ volt torch batteries wired together. 'Low tension' was two accumulators, one in use and one 'on charge' at a local shop.

I went to Christ's Church Sunday School for a few Sundays but I was far from happy there, and I was glad that Dad was sympathetic, and I was not forced or even encouraged to continue going.



My classroom at Callowland School. I'm the boy pointed to by the arrow.

I progressed from 'Mixed Infants' and started at Callowland Boys School, which was also in Leavesden Road and still only a short walking distance from home. It was between Shakespeare Street and Acme Road. I did fairly well in most subjects and enjoyed art and woodwork. Woodwork classes were held in a large wooden building in

the school yard. The teacher, a Mr Ruffet, who was I believe a relative, told me that I should be better at carpentry than the other boys because of the family history in the trade. In my imagination I can still smell the odour of hoof and horn glue, which was kept hot in a double boiler on the stove. The heady whiff of French polish I remember too.

School days for me were not the happiest and even today the noise of children playing happily in a school playground fills me with alarm. I was useless at all sports, having neither the strength nor skill needed. I never cease to be amazed that I never suffered from bullying.

Sometimes we would visit our relatives. It was only a short walk to Brighton Road where Mum's mother lived. She was always unwell and I have no memories of her. Aunt Alice and Uncle Harry Jones lived in Aldenham. They had a daughter Ida who was about six years older than me. People would call at Uncle Harry's house in 'Round Bush' and he would fill their cars with petrol from a hand-cranked pump.



Cousin Joyce, aunt Win, cousin Vera, Pip the dog, uncle Alf, me and Mum at the Harebrakes allotment.

I was always happy to go to Aunt Win and Uncle Alf's (Alf King) house in Franklin Road, Watford. Their daughters Joyce and Vera were about my age and they taught me how to stew apples and make custard on a small spirit stove. We could also go to Cassiobury Park and take their dog Pip, a white smooth haired terrier, with us. Once when we were there, Pip chased a polecat and the smell lasted for days! Uncle Alf had a plot next to Dad's on the Harebreaks allotment, and both families would often be there together. In my memory it was 'always Spring'; Joyce, Vera and I usually lit a bonfire and there always seemed to be redcurrants, raw baby carrots or peas to eat, and we drank cold tea which we took in beer bottles.



Me and Charlie

In 1929 we moved to a new house. 74 Bushey Mill Crescent, Watford, had just been built and cost us a little over £700. For the first time we had electric light in our home, and by putting an adaptor into the bulb socket Mum could now have an electric iron. Connected the same way was a transformer, called an ECKO Eliminator, which replaced the high tension battery for the wireless. This house also had a bath with a gas geyser to heat the water. We also had the luxury of an inside lavatory. School was now further away, and 3/4 mile seemed a great distance to walk, but it was more fun because my cousin Charlie lived nearby in Sandringham Road and we could go together.

Charlie didn't know his father. His mother Aunt Ada (Wright) had married Douglas Clay who was cruel to Charlie. I know that he burned Charlie's hands with a lighted cigarette when he misbehaved. When my Dad found out, he had to be stopped by

Mum from going and "teaching Doug a lesson!". I believe that Mum told Aunt Ada that she wouldn't stop Dad if it happened again. Charlie was often in trouble but always happy. At school the repeated punishment with a cane from teachers he looked upon more as a challenge than as a correction, and he joked about the preparations he rubbed into his hands and the padding in his pants as protection.

Together Charlie and I were never in trouble, but I learned a lot from him. We explored all the alleyways between the houses, and he showed me where the rods could be slid in the iron railings which would otherwise have ended our short cuts. The rods were always replaced because it was our secret. I couldn't teach Charlie a lot and I failed even to get him to believe that 'E-lite' was not the correct pronunciation of the name Elite, which was a privately owned Watford bus company.

My first ten years came to an end. I had seen cars, aeroplanes and radio develop. The first Mickey Mouse film was in the cinemas. The future looked very interesting.

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