*[Private client, October 2020 – copy-editing]*

I came into this world on 26th May 1932, to find my sister Margaret had been born three and a half years earlier. Eighteen months later, my other sister, Heather arrived. I was born in a small nursing home in Southampton and we lived on Kellet Road.

My father was the branch manager of the White Cross Insurance Company in Southampton. His father had been a linesman on the railway; this involved walking the length of line for which he was responsible every day and knocking in any loose timber wedges. Unfortunately, he died when my father was only eight years old, and his mother had to bring up the whole family on her own. Today they would be considered a working-class family, and the result of their circumstances was that my father went to work at fourteen; he got a job as a post boy in an insurance company, where his main work was to lick the stamps for the outgoing mail.

In 1914, the Great War broke out and my father, like so many young men, immediately volunteered, becoming a rifleman in the First Battalion Queen’s Westminster Rifles. On 1st July 1916, he went over the top as part of a diversion at Gommecourt. His battalion reached the German lines, but the no-man’s land behind them was being heavily shelled by the Germans, cutting them off from reinforcements and more ammunition, so they retreated back to their own lines. Little did my father realise that this was actually his lucky day, despite the fact that he was wounded in the face – 19,240 British troops were killed on that day alone. As he was from Kent, he was sent back to convalesce near Glasgow. Only the army could do that!

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Whilst they were convalescing, he and the other wounded soldiers were visited by some young Glaswegian ladies. Ten years later, in 1926, he married one of these ladies. Her father was a tailor named Orr who was horrified that his daughter would marry a Sassenach. We can wonder how on earth two young people would have kept in touch in those days.

Meanwhile, my father was sent back to fight, this time in Palestine against the Turks. As the army had run out of young men, anyone with fighting experience had a good chance of being made a junior officer. My father was made a subaltern in the Machine Gun Corps and served under Captain Harding, who stayed on to become Field Marshall Lord Harding, Chief of the Imperial General Staff. It was as an officer that my father learnt about gentlemanly manners.

Some years later, I went on a holiday called ‘Somme Walks’ which was led by Prof. Sir Richard Holmes. This consisted of starting behind the British lines and walking across what had been no-man’s land to the German lines. We therefore saw the casualty clearing-area behind the lines, along with the cemeteries, as many of the wounded had died there. One of the walks was where Dad went over the top, hence I was able to get the photo shown in Plate 1. Most of the woods are in exactly the same place as a hundred years ago, so one could understand the problems that were faced by the infantry back then.

When I was about four years old, we moved to a large three-storey house on a corner plot surrounded by huge pine trees. One day, my Dad took me to join him when he went to insure a man called R.J. Mitchell. This turned out to be at the Supermarine airfield, where I was introduced to Mitchell, the famous designer of the Spitfire. The prototype was there, with four big corks in each wing which, he informed us, were very secret but which were where the machine guns would go. Nearby was a strange machine with two propellers, one to lift the machine vertically and the other to send it forwards; it was called an autogiro, and was superseded by the helicopter.

Then my father got a promotion to Manchester and, as war was approaching, he picked a house in a village well away from Manchester or Liverpool. In March 1939, we headed north, along with Rikki the mongrel dog. It was a long journey but we eventually arrived in Ainsdale, a village just south of Southport. My father went to work by catching the electric train to Southport, then the steam train to Manchester, taking about an hour. He would continue eating breakfast until he heard the train coming, then would run to the station to be welcomed by the porter, who would hold the train if necessary. My father developed his career and eventually became an FCII, a Fellow of the Chartered Insurance Institute. Good going for a boy who started by licking stamps! My mother, though, was always in pain and limped with what she called her ‘gammy leg’; she had injured her knee when she was young, playing golf.

SCHOOL DAYS

Meanwhile, I was sent to the local primary school and then to Winterdyne, a private prep school. At eleven years old, after I had failed the 11 plus, my father sent me to Merchant Taylors’ School in Crosby, which I travelled to each day on the electric train. My sister Margaret went to Merchant Taylors’ Girls’ School, my younger sister Heather later joining her there. Having failed the 11 plus, I was put in the lowest of three streams; as it was war time, we were taught either by male teachers who had been deemed unfit for service or by women.

I gradually progressed to the fifth form, and when I was fifteen, in 1947, won the under-sixteens cross-country race. I was also kicked out of singing: our instructor spotted me, stopping the singing of all 400 boys, pointed at me, and said, ‘You there!’ ‘Who, sir?’ I replied. ‘Yes sir, you sir – OUT!’ was his response, and so ended my singing career. However, I found that I could play fives whilst the others were singing, and eventually became captain of the school fives team. The only other sports in the school were rugby and cricket; the latter bored me so I played more fives instead.

Sometime after the war, our masters returned and changed the school completely. The Army Cadet Force became the Combined Cadet Force, and a degree of discipline was installed by Captain Gribble and Major Bowman. Major Bowman organised a skiing trip to Austria, I think in 1948 or ’49; we went via Harwich to the Hook of Holland, and then on by troop train to Klagenfurt in Austria, where we were joined with the First Battalion West Yorkshire Regiment. The destruction we saw in Germany as we travelled was terrible: Cologne Cathedral was undamaged but the whole of the surrounding area was flattened. When we got to Austria, we did lots of skiing with huge long skis and no safety bindings. Despite our age, we were treated as soldiers and got NAAFI rations; this meant we were allocated cigarettes, but we dared not smoke them, so we sold them back over the bar to the German barman. This was the only holiday when we came back with more money than when we went out!

When I was sixteen, I sat the School Certificate and gained six credits and three distinctions, the third best result out of a hundred boys. The other two had much better memories than me, so did better in languages and got an extra distinction. Owing to my bad memory, I knew I could not become a doctor or a lawyer as I had wanted, so I settled for the sciences – then I could put everything I needed to know on one sheet which I could manage to memorise. My brain was sufficiently agile that I could derive anything I needed from that sheet in the time available in the exams. I won the Brock Memorial Prize for science and was awarded a Harrison Scholarship, which meant I could stay on in the sixth form without my father paying fees.

In due course I was made a monitor and as such wore a half-length gown. I joined the Science Society, where we had lectures on subjects of scientific interest as well as visits to a 1000-foot-deep coal mine and also to Johnsons Cleaners, where they compressed all the dirt from the clothes into briquettes and sold them as firelighters. A visit to Metropolitan-Vickers convinced me that I did not want to be a mechanical or electrical engineer as the place was filthy and like Dante’s inferno.

I went on to get a scholarship based on the results of my Higher School Certificate. Unfortunately, this was subject to means testing, so was worthless. My younger sister Heather, who was much brighter than me, sat these exams a year behind me and also got a state scholarship, also means tested. My father could not afford to pay for two of us to go to university, so she had to settle for nursing, a career at which she succeeded and was very happy. This compromise broke my mother’s and father’s hearts, though, as my father felt he had worked so hard to be successful after starting from nothing.

At this stage, it is necessary to talk politics to understand its effect on our family. There was a general election in July 1945 which caused great excitement, even in school, as the results gave Labour a landslide victory. The NHS was created, which was essential; before the war, many people could not afford a doctor and died as a result. However, many other things were taken under state control to be run by civil servants, people who do not have a clue about how to run a business. Costs soared and taxes went up. People like my mum and dad were considered rich and were heavily taxed, which was the reason why my father could not afford to send Heather to university, despite her scholarship. Gradually over the years, most of the industries have been de-nationalised; the only ones left are health and education.

OUT OF SCHOOL

I joined the Cubs when I was about nine, and at age eleven went up to the Scouts where, in due course, I gained First Class rank, then King’s Scout, and became the Patrol Leader of the Swifts. We had wonderful adults to help us, although in Cubs I found Akela rather fierce, but Baloo and later Skip in Scouts were outstanding. We were allowed to do many things which today would be forbidden. To get First Class, two of us had to trek for two days, camping overnight and carrying all our gear on our backs. Skip saw us off and then met us two days later on the other side, after we had hiked across the Peak District. No mobile phones or satnavs then; we just had to rely on ourselves, a compass and our maps.

During three summer holidays, I went cycling with a friend and stayed at youth hostels, firstly from Southport to the Llangollen valley, then the following year down the Welsh border to Chepstow, and the next year all the way to Land’s End. I doubt that we sent our parents a card, but if we did, it would probably have arrived after we were back home. I had to plan our nights and write to book each hostel.

Another pastime for myself and two pals was to collect old glass bottles; after sorting them, we could return them to the original retailers to collect a penny on each. We became quite rich and would then buy a Dinky Toy car. I also joined Southport & Ainsdale Golf Club as a junior, and had many enjoyable days trying to improve. One of the joys of being a member was to be able to follow the players at the Open, and in those days I could talk to the great players, like Bobby Locke and Norman von Nida. I would not get within fifty yards of them today.

THE WAR YEARS

I was aged seven when the war started. My father knew war was coming, and so made a shelter for us in the half cellar under the house. It was not a proper cellar as it was half above ground, with a window. My father got old railway sleepers to lean up against the window and covered these with sand bags. The ceiling was supported by more sleepers as extra beams and props. There were three sacking bunks for us three children. My parents took us down at the warning siren each night as Jerry attacked Liverpool or Manchester. After the raids, a pal and I would go out on the sandhills near us and look for shrapnel and other remains of the bombing. We quite often found the tail of an incendiary bomb, which we extracted from the sand and could swap at school for other debris.

One night, when my father was out on duty as a special policeman, a land mine fell near us. Fortunately, I had just woken up and had moved over to join my mother and the girls when it went off, blowing in the window which crashed, frame and all, onto my bunk. My father came hurrying home to ensure we were all right. We were evacuated to a friend’s for some weeks, as the back of the house had to be completely rebuilt. As I grew up, I followed the progress of the war in a diary. We had a lieutenant commander billeted on us, as he was in charge of the anti-aircraft gunnery school at the end of our road. He took me along to watch them trying to hit a drogue pulled by an aircraft. It was fascinating to watch the tracer bullets arching round, only to miss completely!

I was up on the landing one day when I heard the unmistakable roar of a Rolls Royce Merlin engine. Everybody knew this roar was a Spitfire and it must be low; as I looked out of the window, a Spitfire flashed past on its wingtip, going up our tree-lined road. The trees were too close for it to fly level. The pilots were very audacious; however, we heard a few days later that one had crashed, so we all went round to look. We found a plane covered in foam where it had crashed close to a house, demolishing the boundary wall. A few minutes later, we were all very saddened as they took the body to an ambulance.

FAMILY

My older sister Margaret, three and a half years older than me, was always called Marg at home, but was known in the village as Bill Roe’s sister. (My middle name is William, and as there was already a Mike in the Scouts, I chose to be called Bill there.) My younger sister Heather was a year younger than me and was called Jesse at home – I never understood why. Dad and Mum were known to their friends by their Christian names, Frank and Evelyn, which was what they always called each other; at some point, we children decided that we wanted to use their names too. We pestered them until eventually they gave in and agreed that we could call them Frank and Evelyn after six o’clock on Sundays. Having won our case, we completely forgot about it; six o’clock came and went, Sunday after Sunday, and we never remembered to call them Frank and Evelyn! They must have gone to bed every Sunday roaring their heads off.

Heather was easily the brightest of us but was quite ignorant about some things, such as not knowing whose side Hitler was on. Early in the war, Mum cut out a picture of Churchill from *Picture Post* and pinned it beside the lounge fireplace with a drawing pin. It remained there throughout the war, gradually getting more and more dog-eared; I don’t know if it was ever removed, certainly not whilst I was at home.

When Mum and Dad played bridge with friends, Jesse and I were allowed to sit behind them and watch whilst we ate our cornflakes in our dressing gowns, ready for bed. When we were older, we tried to play bridge with Mum and Dad but I could always see Jesse’s cards reflected in her glasses.

Dad was always very active, joining the Rotary Club and the Masons; he was a founder of a lodge and also Worshipful Master. He became treasurer of Alderley Edge Golf Club for many years, eventually being made an honorary member. He knew nothing about engineering, but once he knew I wanted to go into civil engineering, he introduced me to Mr Atherton, a partner in C.S. Allot & Partners, who explained to me how civil engineering was organised.

Mum was also very special, and we could always snuggle up to her when we were very young and frightened. She gave up her rations for us to ensure that, although we were hungry, we never suffered. She would make fudge with the girls, and if I was very good I could lick out the bowl. I don’t know how but she always got three small tins of condensed milk when we went on holiday, and we were allowed a small spoonful each day. She used *Mrs Beeton* as her only cookery book; she also bottled fruit and made jam. During the war, she found time to help out at a British Restaurant, where one could get a basic meal for a few pence. She also helped at a baby clinic.

AINSDALE BEACH

Our street, Shore Road, went from the railway station to the beach about a mile away. On Sundays, my Dad and I would often go over the sand dunes to the beach and back along the shoreline, knocking a ball with our golf clubs, to the end of our road and then home. The beach was an interesting place as it was always changing; it had been used for car racing before the war. The tide went out a long way, up to a mile. Care had to be taken if going out to the sea at low tide, as there were sand banks and channels. The banks could be soft and even had a type of quicksand which would trap visitors in their cars; the drivers could become desperate as the tide came in. Even walkers could get caught by the tide sweeping up channels behind them, cutting them off with a strong current. Shrimp fishermen would travel along on a horse and cart, with a large D-shaped net behind them to catch the shrimps.

One winter, the sea froze over and the wind piled up the floes on the beach several feet thick. On another occasion, a ship was wrecked on the beach and many locals tried to launch a boat to rescue the survivors, who were clinging on to the masts, but one by one they fell off, exhausted. Even in summer there were hazards, as the strong wind would whip up the sand, so we got sandblasted unless we took a shelter. At the start of the war, many concrete posts were erected all over the beach to stop gliders landing, but these gradually got washed away. Much flotsam got washed up from sunken ships during the war as well. On one occasion, there were large tins which, when we hit them with our golf clubs, turned out to be full of rotten egg.

Our house was a large house on three floors, with the front door facing north. There was a drive down the left side with the garage at the rear. From the front gate, a path arched to the front door, which was about three feet above ground level.

Looking at the house from the road, the lounge was on the left with the dining room on the right. Rear left was the kitchen whilst rear right was the den, where we children did our homework. On the first floor above the dining room was my sisters’ bedroom, above the lounge was the spare room, occupied by our grandmas and the naval officer at various times. Above the kitchen was my parents’ room and above the den was my room. The bathroom was in the centre rear, over the scullery. All these rooms had fireplaces but there was never a fire in the bedrooms, even with frost on the inside of the sash windows. Right at the top of the house was an attic room. In the basement, under the lounge, was the coal cellar with three types of coal: best for the lounge, slack for the kitchen range, and anthracite for the stove in the den. Under the dining room was the larder, with a huge marble slab and funny cloth tents to keep the flies off. Under the den was the air-raid shelter, whilst under the kitchen was my dad’s bench and water softener, with a drain which would back up during high tides!

Both our grandmas sometimes stayed with us and both had dementia. First was my paternal grandmother, from Purley; I think her name was Elizabeth but she was never called by that name. Every few minutes she would ask ‘What’s the time?’ which was very wearing for my mother. The Scottish grandma (I never knew her Christian name) came to stay with us at the end of the war, and sat up in her room watching all the traffic go by towards the beach. She kept on saying ‘Where do they all come from?’ which, again, was very tiring for my mother.

The front garden was all grass except for a bed either side of the path, which changed from flowers to leeks during the war. The rear garden had about eight large old fruit trees near the house and a huge vegetable garden in the left half, at the back of which was the hen run. On the other side was grass, where we played games such as cricket; we had been taught by a Kent County bowler who put newspaper on the lawn to show where the ball should bounce. We had a grumpy old lady next door who complained bitterly when we hit the ball over the fence. One day, we had a vicar to play and of course he hit the ball over the fence. This old lady was about to sound off when she saw the dog collar and was very confused, to our delight.

UNIVERSITY

Having won a scholarship, I had to decide on a university. Several had good reputations for engineering, but Liverpool offered me two years in a hall of residence, so I decided to go there rather than Bristol. It was a three-year course, with three lectures six mornings a week, and lab or workshop practice on four afternoons. This left two afternoons a week for sport and the evenings for writing up notes or reports on lab work, so it was all quite intense. As I was a student, I was granted deferment of National Service so long as I passed all my exams. Those who had done National Service before university had to do a preliminary extra year to get them up to speed, as they had gone rusty.

In Derby Hall, I made several lifelong friends with men studying various subjects: Ken and Brian, who were studying the arts, studyingl, and Charles, who was training to be a doctor. On the engineering side, Don and Keith were studying mechanical engineering, Kep was doing electronics, and Teddy was studying civil engineering with me. In those days, nobody knew what electronics were, except that they were trying to do away with valves. They of course led to computers.

Derby Hall was a pre-war red-brick three-storey building, built on three sides of a rectangle, and situated in a south-eastern suburb of Liverpool. There were about a dozen staircases with six rooms on each floor, plus toilets and washrooms to serve the six rooms. The bedrooms were each about nine foot square, with a built-in cupboard, a divan bed, a desk, and a small table with two chairs, along with two bookshelves. However, the most important item was a small electric fire, which could be laid flat on its back to make two pieces of toast. Each week we got a ration of a small cut loaf, butter, jam, sugar, and tea, and by that time we were able to buy milk.

We did not have a kitchen so ate our hot meals in the hall’s dining room. Dinner on weekdays and Sunday lunch were formal meals, when we all put on our three-quarter-length gowns, jackets, and ties. On Sundays, we met before dinner in the lounge for a drink, then went into the dining room, where we sat in groups at table and were served with the meal. We then all adjourned to our rooms to study, but at about ten o’clock, we would meet in somebody’s room to put the world to rights over tea and toast.

Our warden was Prof. Seaborne-Davies, who at the start of our first year addressed all us freshers and gave us each a set of rules which, he explained, ‘were for his protection against our parents’. He was a wonderful chap who always had some students in to tea.

As we were only allowed two years in hall, I had to find digs for my last year; they were all awful but, fortunately, a room became available in Greenbank, an annex to Derby Hall, so close that we only had to cross two fields to get our meals. I shared this room with Don, which was very enjoyable. During this time, I introduced my sister Heather to a friend, Keith, but it did not work out; however, she also met Charles, a vet who was another resident of Greenbank, and later married him.

One weekend, there was a dance where the dress code was night dress rather than evening dress. I invited a girl but she asked me to collect her from the station – which meant that I had to go to Liverpool mainline station dressed in pyjamas and dressing gown to meet her. I waited for about an hour but she never turned up!

Whilst at university, I worked as a postman over the Christmas holidays; we had mechanical workshop practice one Easter and survey practice in North Wales another year. One summer, I worked as an electrician’s mate, putting up fairy lights in the trees along Lord Street in Southport. During the final summer, I went on an exchange scheme, designing roads in Kristianstad, southern Sweden. Afterwards, I hitch-hiked to Copenhagen, then back through Sweden to Stockholm, then Oslo, and over the mountains to Bergen, just as the roads were being closed for the winter. I was picked up by officers of the Norwegian army, who spotted the union jack on the back of my pack; they took me to the officers’ mess and treated me like royalty. From Bergen, I took the ferry to Newcastle; the captain announced over the loudspeaker system that there was an urgent message for me. My heart sank, as I thought one of my parents had died, but the message from my father simply said, ‘Welcome home’!

Then it was back to university for my final year. Whilst playing rugby one day, I took a hard tackle and felt a click in my shoulder. I decided to go off at half-time and cycled back to Hall where I saw our bursar; she called the doctor who gave my arm a twist, putting my shoulder back in place. Although this medical intervention was welcome, I was not popular with my team mates, as substitutes were not allowed in those days.

In my last term, I started dating my professor’s secretary. I failed ‘Structures’, a compulsory subject, but as I was supposed to get a Second Class Honours, they called in the external examiner, who asked if I had been distracted by a girl. I quickly got the hint and said ‘YES!’, whereupon he awarded me an Ordinary degree – the lowest possible, but at least I got a degree.