

My parents were very poor in those troublesome times and my father was out of work for long spells and only my mother's skill with a sewing machine, kept us fed and clothed. She would buy up old coats and

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unpick them, making us trousers and skirts for my sister. She was also a good knitter and made all our socks and vests. In those days, my father drank a good deal and used to beat my mother on his bad days. She was too frail to stand up to him, but a neighbour who was very strong used to coming running and I'm told, more than sorted things out. My father was dead scared of her.

I cannot remember much of those early days, but a few things stick in my mind. The Zeppelin cruising over our house and dropping bombs for one. Then there was the night I woke to find my bedroom lit by a bright light and going to the window I saw the factory where my Dad worked going up in flames . . . and he was out of a job again.

Another early memory was standing in a queue with a large can to get soup from the soup kitchen. Each family was issued with a can according to size of family and I felt about six feet tall as I stood there and handed in ours. That meal was the best we had all the week. I can still smell it and taste it; but I was far too young to understand what it was all about.

Yet another memory was going to the estate of a local gentleman; who had thrown open his grounds for the unemployed to go in and collect dead wood to supplement their meagre coal ratio. The only stipulation he laid down was that only dead wood was to be taken; but, of course, my father had to be awkward. He started cutting live wood, although people protested and of course, the police on the gate stopped us and we were taken on one side and made to unload it off my old pram. I cannot remember if my father was fined; probably not.

To augment his dole money, father teamed up with three others and they went on the road – Busking. My father was a very good corner player and two others played the euphonium; trombone and drums. The trouble was, as soon as they'd made a few shilling, they went on the beer. So poor Mum and us children seldom got anything out of it.

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My mother would go chorrying for long hours and bring back washing and ironing to do. She also took in sewing – anything to earn a few shilling to buy food for us; although more often than not, she herself went hungry to bed.

I remember a large black man, who would come around with a sack of clothes. He would empty the sack on the pavement and the women would scramble and fight to get the best; paying a penny or twopence for the [something] won. Mother would buy a good coat and from it make two pairs of trousers and a jacket to go with it . . . anything to keep me warm.

When I was eleven years of age, I had to sit for an examination at the local High School in Yeovil. We attended the church of England School at Preston on the outskirts of the town and apparently a large sum of money had been placed in trust at that school to enable the most promising boy of eleven years of age to continue his education. I don't want to boast but of the half dozen on the short list that year, I was a cinch to pull it off. Not that I was interested in higher education; the only reason I was keen to get the place was because the High School had a football team and they actually played cricket in the summer, too. A great improvement on the silly old 'rounders' we played at Preston.

I was rattling on about this to Mum as she was doing her ironing and telling her how I would get a place in the team . . . why I might even be elected Captain . . . when she shook me by saying quietly . . . "All I can say son is that I hope you don't get that scholarship." I looked up in surprise . .

“Why not?”

“Well”, she said . . . “It only pays your entrance fees. We would still have to find your uniform and your books and sports equipment and we can’t really afford it”.

My father came into the room in time to hear the last sentence and he

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really blew his top. “You want to rob the boy of the best chance he’s likely to have all his life?” he raved.

I started crying and was packed off to bed. I cried myself to sleep as the argument raged downstairs. But, young as I was, I knew Mum was right . . . we couldn’t afford it. So when the papers were handed out for the examination that morning, I was determined to do badly. I left the Maths paper blank and skimmed the rest. When the head mistress looked through the papers at the end of the day; she called me to her desk. “What have you done with your Maths paper?” she asked. “Nothing”, I replied . . . avoiding her eye.

‘I can see that’, she said . . . ‘But why? You can manage these problems’ . . . But although she pressed for an explanation, I refused to give her the real reason and another boy went to the High School in my place.

The tragedy of it all was that this boy’s mother went out to work to help buy him all the things he needed and it didn’t do him a bit of good. He seemed unable to make the most of his opportunity and the last time I saw him he was working as a brickie’s labourer. I have often wondered whether it would have made any difference to my life if I had filled in that Maths paper. No one will ever know; but . . . as the bible says . . . “God works in a mysterious way”. Perhaps it was meant to be.