

Chapter 1

The Early Years

Growing up in Cumberland after the war
Like father like son!

My father grew up in West Cumberland during the depression with one elder brother and two younger sisters. He had a difficult childhood and he suffered from terrible asthma attacks. These prevented him from attending regular classes and he left school to work in a local garage when he was 11 years old.

The first indication of his ingenuity and skills as a craftsman became apparent at an early age when he built a complete motor bike using parts from the scrap heap. He sold this to raise pocket money and then took a job selling Tognarelli's ice cream on Workington docks. Togi's, as the local ice cream chain was affectionately known in Workington, supplied Dad with a 3-wheeled ice cream bicycle; the forerunner of modern day ice cream vans. Aunt Iris told me how he would take her for rides on the crossbar and hide his Woodbines in the ice cream box whenever a bobby came around the corner.

Workington was a wealthy iron making town at the beginning of the twentieth century. Its prosperity had been assured on the 24th July 1872 when four enterprising individuals; Peter Kirk, James Valentine, Henry Kenyon and Mary Gibson formed the Moss Bay Haematite Iron Company. By the turn of the 20th century it had grown into a large operation that included four blast furnaces, a sinter plant, several Bessemer converters, a rolling mill and one of the most advanced rail making plants in the world.

The people living in and around Workington were used to the night

time glow of the slag heap, sulphurous air-borne red powder from the cupolas, foul fumes from the sinter plant and white clouds of steam from the coke ovens. Housewives were always careful to test the wind direction before putting washing on the line and workers listened for the early morning horn which called them back to work. Such was life in a steel making town.

“Where there is muck lad, there is money”, and this saying was so true of Workington. It had four excellent cinemas and an opera house. One of the cinemas, the Ritz, had a Wurlitzer Organ hidden below the stage at one side of the huge screen. It rose like the Phoenix at the beginning of each feature performance; an organist playing music appropriate to the film being shown.

The occupation of many individuals was described in the national census as ‘Gentleman’. It is very difficult to imagine anyone having such an occupation in present day Workington. My grandfather was the foreman of the locomotive transport department. He had upwards of one hundred men working for him and he would not hesitate to dismiss a person on the spot if he did not do a fair day’s work. Nevertheless he was a fair man and well respected in the local community. As a child I remember walking with him along the streets of Workington; middle aged men tipping their cheesecutters and trilbies as we passed by.

All of the industries in West Cumberland were interlinked and entirely dependent upon each other. Central to these was the Iron and Steel Works. Rich hematite ores were mined in Beckermeth, limestone was quarried in Distington, clay for the furnaces came from Mickleham, coal was mined in almost every single village and a plentiful supply of water came from the salmon-rich River Derwent.

Workington became and still is known as one of the highest quality rail makers in the world. Workington rails still join towns and cities across every country in the old British Empire and some of the very first continuously welded rails to be laid in the United States carry the Workington name. The Workington Iron and Steel Works has long since vanished but the rail making facility has been retained and steel blooms are transported from Scunthorpe to enable rails to be rolled under the Workington name.

Joining the Iron and Steel Works down by the harbour was a large foundry, the Distinguon Haematite Iron Company, known locally as Chapel Bank. It was named after Distinguon, which was five miles away, as a war time deception to divert bombing raids. U-Boat action and the capitulation of Norway starved British factories of the special steels that they needed to manufacture ball bearings and six electric furnaces were secretly built at Chapel Bank to fill this need. The only connection this works had with my home village, Distinguon, was the large ornate iron gates at the entrance to the works, which had been taken from Distinguon Hall.

The reason why the War Department chose to divert enemy bombers to Distinguon is a mystery to me, especially when you consider that High Duty Alloys, a factory that produced special alloy parts for the production of war time aircraft, was, and still is, located just outside the Toll Bar at Distinguon. The mystery becomes all the greater when you consider that a top secret factory manufactured aircraft engines nearby.

World War II

At the outbreak of war my father, Robert Coulton, worked alongside my future father-in-law, Joe Elliot, in the shell foundry at Chapel Bank. My father was too young to join-up and he was also in a reserved occupation. Undeterred he caught the local steam train to Carlisle where he was unknown and presented himself to the Royal Air Force recruiting office. Falsifying his age and describing his employment as a motor cycle mechanic he was accepted into the Royal Air Force for training as an aircraft fitter.

Because he finished school when he was 11 years old he had to work extra hours each evening to keep up with the other trainees on his wartime crash fitter's course. His instructors never suspected his real age and they gave him additional lessons to improve his mathematics. Towards the end of his very short training period he became one of the best aircraft fitters in his class.

One evening my grandfather looked through his window and saw my Dad, Sam and his cousin walking home from the local pub. They were all on leave together, for the first and only time during the war. His

brother Sam was on special Dunkirk leave, he fought a rearguard action and was one of the last to be snatched from the beaches. As they walked laughing and singing down Senhouse Street in air force blue, army khaki and navy blue, my grandfather suddenly felt very proud that his family could give so much to England.

Dad was posted to 603 The City of Edinburgh Squadron at RAF Turnhouse; the squadron had just been converted from Gladiators to Supermarine Spitfires. On the 16th October 1939 they were joined over the Firth of Forth by 602 The City of Glasgow Squadron and each bagged a Junkers 88. These were the first two enemy aircraft to be shot down over British soil in the Second World War.

After a short while, Dad became lead aircraft fitter on three aircraft used by the squadron's commanding officer; the Duke of Hamilton. It was during this time that the Duke came to Dad and asked for his advice on which aircraft he should use to take Rudolf Hess, Hitler's deputy, to London. Hess had parachuted into Ayrshire to meet with the Duke who was an old acquaintance to broker an agreement between the British Empire and Germany. I can't remember which aircraft he recommended but I do recall that my father stripped it down to make it faster and more manoeuvrable.

In the summer of 1940 my father relocated to the South of England and lived in various tented camps on makeshift grass airstrips. He serviced Spitfires fighting in the Battle of Britain and as the war progressed he was seconded to the A.V. Roe factory in Chadderton, Manchester.

In the spring of 1943 he fitted special bomb slips on the Lancaster bombers that took part in the Dam Buster Raid. The idea was to use the Barnes Wallis 'Bouncing Bomb' to breach the walls of five huge dams in the industrialised Ruhr Valley. This raid did not shorten the war as originally hoped and only eleven of Wing Commander Gibson's nineteen aircraft survived the mission. However, the raid gave a much needed boost to moral and for this reason it was considered a tremendous success and Guy Gibson was awarded the Victoria Cross for his outstanding courage and leadership during the raid.

While working in the A.V. Roe factory my father met a shy young woman with curly jet black hair. Her name was Ella Mather, and she

worked on the aircraft assembly lines. They were married soon after and I was born in the following year during an air raid on the factory. I was born three months premature in a large boarding house and suffered from severe jaundice. I suppose I was very lucky to have survived in such conditions.

Early childhood in Distington

My mother and father had very little to provide for me and I slept in a suitcase for the first few months of my life. As soon as possible Dad took me and my mother home to Cumberland where he rented a small house at Hayscastle in the old feudal village of Distington.

Cromwell's engineers had destroyed Hayscastle and very little remained. To one side of the moat was Brayton's farm; in front was a terrace of three old workers cottages. We lived in number one Hayscastle, Bessie Nelson in number two and the owner, old Mrs Miller, in number three. The toilet facilities were in a brick built structure across the yard and to bathe we used a small galvanised bath tub which was stored in the shed.

Mrs Miller had extensive gardens and a small orchard which I raided at will. I suppose the surrounding countryside, the primrose banks, fresh bubbling streams, bluebell woods, potato fields, haystacks, cows and sheep compensated for the lack of facilities offered by Hayscastle. We had more than most in those late days of the war and rationing only limited us to the amount of sweets that I could buy.

There were not many young Englishmen around at the time and my early years were spent with two German prisoners of war who had been paroled to work on Brayton's farm. When my father came home on leave he became very upset when I spoke German to him. He soon got to know the prisoners, one an elderly man who had not seen his own children for many years and a youngster who was little more than a boy. I think they both softened his attitude to the war and he realized for the first time that not all Germans were Nazis.

I remember sitting beside the beck that ran past my house; the two war prisoners often stopped and threw me onto their hay cart as they went

to work in the fields. I must have been very young at this time but I have an even earlier memory; I remember getting off a red double-decker bus in Workington. My mother dragged me kicking and screaming into a small shop where she sold my pram; my chariot, my most treasured possession of the day.

At the end of the war my father was attached to the American Air Force at RAF Benson just outside Oxford. An American airman who was billeted with him had stockpiled thousands of cigarettes in a small storeroom and he was selling them at black market prices. My father could not afford to buy any, he was extremely upset and then one day the American was instructed to join an aircraft that was about to fly to the United States. My father padlocked the storeroom and shared out the Yank's cigarettes after his plane took off.

Dad was demobbed a few months later and he filled a small brown suitcase with his share of cigarettes; they represented the equivalent of several year's ration coupons. One afternoon Dad came home and was shocked to find me sitting on the window ledge of my second floor bedroom with this suitcase resting beside me. I had sat on my window ledge all afternoon, removed more than two thousand cigarettes from their packets and patiently broken each one into small pieces. He was heartbroken. Mum bought him several boxes of cigarette papers and for the next year or so, he rolled his own from what was left of the tobacco.

My father bought me an old army surplus tent which was originally intended for use by the Desert Rats in North Africa. I spent many an hour in this tent with Peter and Anne Leathers who lived nearby. On one occasion I dropped into Abby Gunn's little shop which she ran from her back kitchen. I bought a box of Black Magic chocolates and asked her to put them on my mother's account. We were eating them in my tent when she stormed over and dragged me home. She locked me in my bedroom and I watched Anne and Peter eat the rest of the chocolates while I suffered with a sore backside from the beating that my mother gave me. It was not so much the cost that upset her but the number of ration coupons needed.

After the war Dad was offered employment by my grandfather at the Workington Iron and Steel Works. He started by working in the railway yards as a shunter before being given the opportunity to work as a

fireman and then eventually a locomotive driver.

My grandfather treated him harder than anyone else. He gave Dad all the rubbish jobs and never offered him overtime, even when it was his turn on the roster. Eventually the union intervened and forced my grandfather to treat him on the same basis as the other workers in his department. My grandfather nodded and said "fair enough". He had been waiting for this to happen and had probably even forced the situation. He did not want it said that he favoured his son above the other workers under his control.

Dad often came home with terrible stories of accidents that had occurred during his shift. He told of men who fell into ladles of molten metal and of others who were sliced into two halves while taking a short cut across the rolling mills. He described how he himself was driving a locomotive up the slag heap in winter with a ladle of molten slag up front. The wheels started to slip in the snow and he had to jump from the cabin as it began to slide backwards down the steep slope.

Several years later one of my best friends was working as a shunter in the hot mills. He was coupling a molten ingot carriage to a locomotive and the buffers trapped him. His injuries were so severe that his colleagues were frightened to release his pelvis from the buffers, but he did survive, and with time they were able to wire him back together again.

I had a cat called Smokey who followed me everywhere. I hated having my hair cut and my father used to hack it off with a blunt pair of hand shears that always pulled. He would tell me to be around when he returned from his morning shift so that he could give me a hair cut. When I knew he was due home I would run into the fields and climb a tree. I never knew how he found me until he explained in later life that he always looked for Smokey, who would be sitting patiently below the tree waiting for me to come down.

Smokey was a real terror. No dogs could enter her territory. She was ruthless and stood up to them whatever their size. Even the local sheep dogs gave her a wide berth. I did terrible things to her and yet she always came back for more punishment and she never once raised her tail to me. I threw her several times from my bedroom window to show

my friends how she was able to twist around and land on her feet. Like all cats she hated water and I often stood on the small bridge beside our house and threw her into the cold beck.

Dad played rugby and was captain of the village team. I stood for many a cold winter's day supporting him on our makeshift rugby field beside Barf's quarry. Mum started a hairdressing business and set up a small salon in my bedroom. She was well liked in the village and had a strong clientele. With my father's steady work and my mother's income we soon had a good standard of living which certainly elevated us to what in the Lake District would be called middle class.

Life before television

I mixed with boys much older than myself and I spent very long hours, sometimes fourteen hours or more, in the countryside around Brown's farm looking for bird's nests. This was the main springtime hobby of youngsters in post war years. We had strict rules that we followed; never take more than one egg, don't take an egg if there are three or less in the nest, don't take an egg if you already have one in your collection. I have to admit that we did break the rules and often took more eggs than we should in order to swap for others. I stopped collecting when I became a teenager, and instead, I learned to appreciate the birds more than their eggs. I still have my collection hidden away and I hope to find a museum that can give them a home.

In 1952 we moved to 16 Coronation Crescent and my brother, Steven, was born shortly after we settled in. Our brand new semi-detached council house had an indoor toilet and a bathroom; this was sheer luxury compared to Hayscastle. My father remained in this house for the remainder of his life, and although he could well afford to buy his own home, he chose never to do so.

In the 50's most Distington folk lived in cold damp terraced houses with outdoor facilities and coal fired ovens. As children, my friends and I looked down on those who were less fortunate and still had to live in such places. Yet today these character homes are much sought after while many of the once new council houses on Flat Tops and around Hinnings Road have fallen into disrepair.

Coronation Crescent was built shortly after the coronation of our very young Queen Elizabeth II and it partly encircled a large open green where I spent much of my childhood. A lamp post stood inside a small roundabout at the end of the Crescent and this was where all the neighbourhood children gathered in the evenings to play 'Cannon', 'Jack Shine Yer Light', 'Knock a Nine Doors' and several other very simple but enjoyable games that have long since been forgotten.

'Cannon' was my favourite. This is a very simple game that can go on for hours. It only needs three pieces of firewood and a tennis ball. The idea is to set up two pieces of firewood against the kerb with a piece across the top. This is called a 'Cannon'. Everyone divided into two teams; Tony Mingins, Richard Armstrong, Christopher Charnley, Rosalind Douglas, Eleanor Simpson and Christine Halley in the red team and Ian Todd, Barry Armstrong, Alfie Mingins, Shelagh Donnelly, Maureen Simpson and Jean Halley in the green team.

Imagine that the red team is 'in'. Each person in the red team takes a turn to throw the tennis ball as hard as they can at the sticks. They scatter if the top stick is knocked off and try to rebuild the cannon without allowing the green team to hit anyone with the tennis ball. The green team is not allowed to run with the ball, they have to throw it at the red team or pass it to a member of the green team who may be in a better position. If a member of the red team is hit then they are out, if all the red team members are out without rebuilding the cannon, then they lose the game and it becomes the turn of the green team to be 'in'.

If the cannon is rebuilt, the person putting the last stick on top has to shout 'Cannon' before he is hit by the tennis ball. Sometimes one team can stay in for a long time without the other team getting a chance. The boys threw the ball incredibly hard and I was often hit in the face, but even at such a young age we behaved as gentlemen and took more care when throwing at the girls.

'Knock a Nine Doors' was also a favourite, but a little more risky. As the name implies the person who was 'it' had to knock on as many doors as possible and then run away. Those playing had to watch him very carefully because sometimes he would choose several doors in the direction that we were running. The last person then had further to run before getting around the corner and occasionally someone would get

caught. In the early 50's grownups were more tolerant and they accepted that children needed to entertain themselves. I suppose this game is still played today, but with malicious intent rather than just having fun.

Our parents never had cause to be worried and even on cold dark winter nights we played outside until 11 pm and it would sometimes be so dark that we added games such as 'Jack Shine Yer Light' to our programme. Parents would begin to call for us from 10 pm onwards; 'Alfie, time for bed' or perhaps the call was 'Richard, supper's on the table'. Supper in the north was usually fish and chips from the local chippy washed down with a big mug of Ovaltine.

No one had expensive toys; we made everything for ourselves. We made pea shooters from the hollow stems of cow parsley and used hawthorn pips as ammunition. Many of us made bows and arrows from branches that we cut down in Old Cat Wood. We fashioned pieces of white cardboard into targets and erected them at the far side of the Crescent. I could shoot from one hundred yards and strike within five feet of the cardboard target. Another weapon which we used extensively, but out of sight of our parents, was a throwing stick. I was able to throw one for more than 160 yards with deadly accuracy. A misguided throw could have been lethal and so I have chosen not to describe its materials of construction.

Hide and seek was a little more dangerous than the game practised today. We were all excellent tree climbers and so we played in Old Cat Wood or the much larger Prospect Wood. We gave a long count to enable everyone to find a suitable tree and climb into a hidden position. It was on one of these visits to Old Cat Wood when I sustained an injury that still returns to plague me. I climbed into a large tree that had been felled across a small stream. The upper part of this tree still rested on the lower stump and it remained in a semi-upright position supported by other trees. I don't know what happened but I assume that the tree broke away and fell across the beck, and I fell with it.

I regained consciousness with my back curved across a huge boulder in the middle of the beck. I was in shock and couldn't breathe. My friends gathered around and I tried to signal to them to do something; I was old enough to understand that someone should press on my chest. I

thought for sure that I was going to suffocate and it was several minutes before I began to take short sharp gasps of air. Eventually my friends carried me to the bank and placed me under a lean-to shelter where I lay for several hours. No one considered the possibility that I might be seriously injured. Eventually I managed to hobble back to my home which was a little more than a mile away. Even my mother treated my symptoms very lightly. I was put to bed for a few days and she never even consulted Dr Sharpe, our family doctor. No one believed that I was suffering immense pain in my lower back; I was too young to have such problems.

Our escapades continued and we devised ever more dangerous schemes. Most of these were directed towards building hideouts in the strangest of locations. In retrospect the most dangerous of these was a deep hole which we dug into a sand pit. We placed sheet steel across the top and covered it with a layer of heavy sand. After the sand had dried in the sun it was impossible to detect the existence of our hideout. It takes little imagination to guess what could have happened, but such a possibility never occurred to us.

We built a real tree house from branches and rusty tin sheeting in a huge tree beside the old Distington railway line. I have fond memories of this tree house. We built it without the farmer's permission and disguised it with leafy branches. I remember being choked by clouds of black smoke whenever a steam engine chugged slowly by; climbing the steep incline with a train of coal wagons strung out behind. This was always a good railway line for collecting a few buckets of fallen coal before venturing home.

Each season had its own ventures. In spring we continued to go bird nesting and in summer we swam in the sea around Tea Party Rocks at Mickleham. Autumn was the time to collect rose hips. We earned three old pence a pound and over several weeks I could gather enough hips to buy all of my fireworks for bonfire night. I would take four pounds at a time to the old lady that made the collections and then take my shilling to the village grocer who would allow me to buy perhaps six bangers, three roman candles or a couple of rockets.

Guy Fawkes' night or bonfire night, as we always called it, was a serious occasion in our calendar and we started to cut trees down as

early as September to build huge bonfires. We built one in the middle of the Crescent and the Flat Tops gang built one on the old railway line just past the village church. Every year we cut trees down and hacked at hedgerows all across MacSherries farm.

The MacSherries were one of the better farmers in the Distington area. Unlike many farmers they never restricted access to their fields and they always welcomed help to bring the cows in for milking or to gather kale for their cattle during winter months. We used ropes to drag huge branches for miles across their fields, along old railway lines and small lonnins before finally venturing onto tarred roads for the last run along Hinnings Road and into the Crescent.

As the fifth of November came ever closer we tried to set the 'Flat Tops' bonfires alight. This was one of those occasions when the parents of our 'enemies' became very angry. While we saw these attacks as fair play, they could only see weeks of hard work going up in smoke. We had to be very careful never to be caught, and in our own case there was an additional danger; we always built our bonfire with a hideout in the centre! On one occasion several of us were inside the hideout when we were raided.

When bonfire night finally came, everyone from the Crescent gathered around and we fixed an effigy of Guy Fawkes on top. Then as darkness fell we set fire to the tinder dry branches and in minutes we had tall dancing flames reaching high into the cold night sky. Our homes encircled this huge raging fire and small burning twigs were carried towards them by the hot swirling air currents that climbed away from the compacted mountain of burning trees. The more careless of my friends threw bangers at the feet of young girls and parents scolded them, but to no avail. I threw bangers high into the air and often burned my fingers when a short fuse allowed it to explode in my hand.

Fire was something that always excited me. MacSherries cows grazed in the fields behind Hinnings Road and then the Council acquired the land for housing development. For years the grass grew long and unattended. We played hide and seek in these fields and when we became bored with the long grass we set fire to it. We set fire to long swathes of grass at a time and controlled the direction of the fire by beating along the edges and watching carefully for any change in wind

strength or direction. It was obviously very dangerous and something that we should not have been doing, but this was the way that country children in post war England kept themselves occupied before the advent of television.

Occasionally, about twice every week, I visited the village cinema which was directly above Myers and Bowman's garage. 'The Enterprise', as it was called, had posh seats at the back, scruffy stalls in the middle and a large wooden floor at the front where children could sit for a penny. I never liked the floor area because it was too close to the screen; the picture was fuzzy and my neck would hurt. Instead I sat in the posh seats for a tanner.

Pathe News always opened the performance followed by a half hour short film which would often be the original Superman or Zorro. The main film normally lasted for about eighty minutes after which the lights came on and God Save the Queen resounded around the theatre. Everyone rose to their feet, youngsters shuffled impatiently and still-young veterans, not long back from the war, stood rigidly to attention. Everyone without exception showed full and proper respect to the sovereign. When the rendition stopped we all pushed and shoved our hurried way along the narrow corridor and down the stairs to the small makeshift entrance foyer. Outside, waiting for my appearance, would be Smokey sitting patiently on 'Grants Wall' across the road.

Ypres, a sniper fired at them

My grandfather on my mother's side, Jimmy Mather, had been in the Territorial Army. I am not sure if he was in the East Lancashire Regiment or the Lancashire Fusiliers, but he was on one of the first troopships to cross into France, and he never set foot again on English soil until the armistice was signed in Versailles at the end of the First World War.

He had a very bad war. When I visited my grandparents in Royton on holiday we often walked together to the fish and chip shop down Rochdale Road and he would describe terrible stories of his time in the trenches. He told how he urinated in his handkerchief and held it to his face when mustard gas drifted over their positions.

He talked about the times when he suffered trench foot and how he carried an injured friend across open ground at Ypres. A sniper fired at them, the bullet passed through his friend finishing him off and then lodged in my grandfather's spine, where it remained for the rest of his life. When my grandfather returned from the Great War he still suffered terribly from the effects of mustard gas and he had to walk twelve miles each week to collect his invalidity pension. He was very bitter towards the government and felt that he and all his comrades had been betrayed.

After the war he worked in the Cotton Mills and supplemented his meagre income by cutting hair in the front lounge of his terraced house in number 98 Rochdale Road, which he had converted into a barber shop. His only pastime was playing bowls on the crown green in Royton Park, and even at a very young age I could give him a good game. He was a staunch supporter of Oldham Athletic but allowed his temper to get the better of him. His war years had weakened his heart and his doctor eventually ordered him to stop attending their matches.

My grandmother, Lilly Mather, was almost totally deaf and I remember her by the huge chips she used to give to me. She would sit me down at the bottom of the stairs and put my plate on a wooden stool covered with an old white tea towel. If it was dinner time the chips would be served with two fried eggs and a scoop of mushy peas. If it was supper time then she would treat me with a steak and kidney steamed pudding. The knives and forks were very old and never looked to be very clean. I often spotted Dad polishing his knife and fork on his trouser leg under the table.

Their house in Rochdale Road was an end of terrace and the gable end had a large crack running down its side; it should have been condemned long ago. Outside in the yard was a whitewashed brick built toilet, a cloth bag hung on the back of its wooden door and inside were torn-up pages of the Oldham Evening Gazette to use as toilet paper. Adjacent to this toilet was a grimy air raid shelter which they slept in along with my mother and uncle during Herman Goering's attacks on nearby railway yards and aircraft factories.

My mother was an excellent swimmer and held many pre-war swimming records at Chadderton swimming baths. She also worked long hours cutting, trimming, setting and perming ladies' hair in my

grandfather's converted barber shop. Dad was very upset because my grandfather kept the proceeds of her work and never paid her a salary. In her spare time she studied the piano and when I was eight years old she arranged for her piano, an upright Witton & Witton, to be brought to Distington on a lorry. She put me to the pianoforte, in the same manner that a Roman galley slave was put to the oars. My mother and piano teacher, Maisy Miller, decided without bothering to consult me that I was to become another Liszt. Before the end of my second year I played the Autumn Concerto at my junior school concert and in my third year I found no difficulty in playing the Dam Busters without music.

I took a red double-decker bus to Workington every Monday and Thursday to receive piano lessons and every evening, including weekends I was forced to practise for one hour before being allowed to play with my friends. On school holidays I received a special concession and my practice time was reduced to half an hour each day. Most of my practice was given to music written by Beethoven, Chopin and Tchaikovsky interspersed with long periods of scale playing. As a titbit I was allowed to include topical music and Winifred Atwell tunes featured along with anything that was played by Russ Conway. This included Black & White Minstrel Rag, Side Saddle, Roulette and Chop Sticks, all of which had an exciting swing to them.

After seven years of studying the piano I came to a serious turning point in my career and I had to decide where my priorities lay. I was only one examination short of my Cap and Gown, and to be able to achieve the required standard I needed to increase my practice periods to a minimum of two, perhaps even three hours each day. I had other priorities when I was fifteen years old and I could not devote such long periods of valuable time to piano playing. In addition, music examinations at this level required much more than purely playing one's chosen instrument. Recognition of different notes and humming or whistling of different tones was also required. My voice was breaking and I could not whistle to save myself. I had no hope of securing sufficient marks for the ancillary sections and my piano playing was not of sufficient standard to make up the difference. I decided that it was time to call it a day and when I finally broke my wrist during the first year of my craft apprenticeship I used it as an excuse to discontinue my lessons.

Distington Village School

I hated my first day at school. My mother took me to Distington Village School when I was five years old and left me in the infants class with several children that I had never seen before. One hour later I sneaked out and ran home to Hayes Castle. She had a terrible time for the next week trying to get me to stay put.

The infant and junior school was a stand-alone building built in a traditional style using blocks of sandstone mined in local quarries. The front of the building was symmetrical with a tall clock tower in the centre flanked by five large classrooms, two at the front and three at the back, each with a very high ceiling. Iron railings were still installed along the front of the school; most other railings in the village had been melted down and reprocessed into tanks and guns.

The front left hand side was the Infants Class. I loved to build tall towers using small wooden sticks and competed with my friends to see who could build the largest pyramid. We were often asked to express ourselves through painting and I am convinced that this was a big mistake. I hated painting and I always ended up with more paint on myself than on the large piece of rough paper we were supplied with. I enjoyed counting on large bead racks and forming characters with the lead pencils we were given. This was much more practical and I have always been a very practical person.

After two years I moved into the front right-hand classroom. This was Mrs Lawson's class and my first year in the junior school. I remember this class well; one day while sitting at my desk a large slab of masonry fell from the ceiling and hit the floor in front of me. The slab was heavy enough to kill several children, but fortunately it fell into a vacant space. The room had a wooden floor and was furnished with sixteen small wooden desks, each with a hinged bench seat, a hinged desk top and two white ink wells. Each desk was suitable for two small children; invariably we were partnered boy and girl to prevent fighting amongst the boys and to limit idle chatter amongst the girls.

I remember reading and writing and even doing very simple sums but I have no idea how old I was at the time. In the beginning we used Lakeland Pencils and then Miss Lawson filled our small white inkwells

with black school ink and supplied each of us with a small pen which comprised a thin plated nib on a short white stick. This pen was a scratchy thing which cut into our rough school paper, and I found it was more difficult to learn how to use this crude writing instrument than it was to learn how to read and write in the first place.

As I scrawled across the rough white surface of my paper the pen alternated between thick black lines, little puddles of ink and scratchy sections containing no ink at all. I used a thick piece of blotting paper to soak up the puddles before they smudged into an even greater mess. I remember my thumb and second finger, the two digits used to clutch the end of the pen, were always covered in a shiny black layer of ink and the inside of my finger felt a little numb from the way I clutched so hard on the metal nib holder. I suspect I may have done better if I had used a feathered quill.

It was around this time that I remember my school taking its one and only school photograph. There were four of us lined up at the bottom of our playground. Sitting beside me was Stan Henderson, Reggie Gallagher and Bob Bennett; three of my class mates. Sadly I have no photographs of my other school friends and in particular I would like to mention Keith Wiley, Dougie Hunter, Glen 'Spuggy' Douglas and Graham 'Fargie' Ferguson.

The senior school was built as an after-thought and stood in ground extended behind the well established sandstone building of my infant and junior school. The classrooms were small stand-alone prefabricated buildings and army style wooden huts arranged around a very large tarred playground area.

Behind these wooden huts, set apart from the rest of the school in the 'boys club field', was a relatively new extension, a modern style wooden hut, slightly wider than the rest and containing large windows along the side walls. The entrance was flanked by two small rooms; one was a cloak room and the other a storage room for papers and writing materials. It was a completely self contained unit and I was fortunate to spend my last two years in this hut. My housemaster for both years was Mr Evans, an excellent teacher who flew as a navigator with the Royal Air Force during the war. I understand that he often removed small pieces of shrapnel from his legs and buttocks.

We had no playing fields and so our sports were limited to touch rugby on the tarmac playground or a game of football using our jackets as goal posts. This was not very satisfactory when one considers that our school was surrounded by some of the best and most open countryside in England. The senior school did offer two vocational classes; woodwork for the boys and cookery for the girls. The headmaster even tried to introduce the boys in my class to a brief course of cookery. We made our views clear from the outset; cooking was for sissies and we were not going to be caught in an apron. He was forced to give in.

Our woodwork teacher had a game leg and he hobbled around our benches showing us how to use our tools. Most of our teachers used a cane to maintain discipline but old man Dobbin used the nearest piece of wood he could grab hold of. I never had any problems with him, but Tony Mingins said that he was beaten so heavily that he was frightened to attend his classes. I have my doubts on the truth of this story; Tony was a good friend of mine but I suspect that he may have been given what he deserved.

Discipline was rigid and it needed to be. We had a lot of school bullies and many would take advantage of their teachers whenever they had an opportunity. Our headmaster, Mr Scott, was a rigid disciplinarian. He was ex-army and he always carried himself stiffly and very erect. He walked five miles to school and then five miles home every day, rain or snow. The women teachers never administered their own punishment; they chose instead to send offending boys to Mr Scott. He used a stiff cane to give six of the best across the boy's open palm. I was given six on one occasion for breaking a sulphur stink bomb in the classroom. I remember the knuckles of my fingers were painful for two days. It worked because I made sure that I was never sent to him again.

My birthday fell in July and because of this I suddenly found myself taking my 11-plus examination one year earlier than my classmates. It was no surprise that I failed and my mother was bitterly upset with Mr Scott who was unable to do anything to help. Distington School taught me how to read and write, how to add, multiply and divide. They drilled my times tables into me and they even taught me a little geometry. I never took any chemistry lessons and their history teaching was limited, but Mr Evans gave excellent geography lessons. I gained a

very good understanding of the rest of the world and, in particular, those countries comprising the old British Empire.

In later life I found that Distinguon had taught me the basic necessities and I think I am a much better person for this than most. I may understand very little about the agricultural methods of North America but I know where the river Ganges is and I know the name of the capital city of Brazil. I also know how to do simple arithmetic without using a calculator. My son and daughter cannot say the same and they were both fortunate to enjoy a private education.

My mother continued to press hard for me to improve my prospects. By now she had realised that I was not going to become a concert pianist and she looked in other directions for any means by which I could obtain a better education. She discovered a number of special vocational courses that were being offered by the West Cumberland Education Authority.

Richmond School

My mother spoke with Mr Scott and everyone in my year was invited to submit an application for one of these courses. Penrith offered farming, Keswick hotel catering and Whitehaven light engineering. I took an entrance exam for the light engineering course at Richmond Secondary Modern in Whitehaven and they accepted me for their August 1958 intake; the year following the Windscale Incident.

I spent two enjoyable years at Richmond. I worked with light duty machinery, cutting machines, lathes, welding machines and metal forges. My subjects were very different to a normal school. I studied for a pre-national certificate with subjects that included technical drawing, metalwork, physics and industrial technology. For the first time I found myself being asked to do homework and I worked very hard on my core subjects. Suddenly everything started to fit together and I found myself becoming very proficient with basic subjects such as algebra, which I had never heard of before. I actually enjoyed learning these new subjects, and because I enjoyed them, I progressed faster than most on the course. I moved from perhaps being the dumbest person in my class to being one of the brightest.

During my summer holidays I joined my new school on a mixed trip to Bruges. It was my first time abroad, with the exception of a one-day cross-channel excursion to Le Touquet. We stayed in a hotel beside one of the canals. The boys shared one large room with about a dozen beds and the girls had a similar sharing arrangement. Strict supervision was needed because there were many Belgian Romeos causing problems with the girls and, to our great pleasure, the headmaster instructed that no girl could leave the hotel unless she was accompanied by one of the older boys.

What more could anyone ask, we had a great holiday and it was the girls that had to come looking for us. We spent a lot of time in the small cafes along the canal and drank copious amounts of Belgian lager. I remember a little ice cream trolley that must have realized that there was a bunch of school kids in the area, and every night I bought a cornet with three big scoops of gorgeous ice cream; ice cream that was different to anything that we could buy in England.

On one of our excursions a priest held a glass phial and we each took it in turn to kiss the blood of Christ. I don't know if this really was the blood of Christ, any more than anyone can be certain of the origin of the Shroud of Turin. On another occasion our bus driver took a comfort stop beside a children's playground. We all clambered out and joined another youngster on the swings; it was Paul Anka but his bodyguard bundled him away in a limousine as soon as we recognised him.

Discipline was equally strict at Richmond, perhaps even more than at Distinguon, but on one occasion I thought that I was punished without justification. I was playing the school piano during lunch break and one of the prefects, Mel Bibby, decided to be a sod. He reported me to the headmaster and I received six lashes with a leather strap. I thought this was terribly unfair. The headmaster never even allowed me to explain that I was an accomplished pianist and that I had been playing the piano correctly and not just banging around on the keys. Mel is still a good friend and I forgave him many years ago.

This was not my only visit to the headmaster. Each week the complete school visited Whitehaven sports field. Our specialist class had such large amounts of homework that many of us decided to sneak away. As we walked up Mirehouse Road we dodged into the public toilets and

waited until everyone had passed by. We then took the bus home and made an early start on our homework. One day our sports master noticed that many of the older boys were missing and he made a roll call. The following morning, along with several other boys from my class, I received a lashing. It was a deterrent but our need to keep abreast of our large amounts of homework soon required us to play hooky again.

My friends in Distington finished school at the end of my first year at Richmond. Many started work on local farms or joined the armed services while Trevor Phillips and I entered our second and final year on our special engineering course. It was a difficult year and we were still considered as outsiders. We were picked on by two other boys in the school but we could not risk getting into a school fight. The more I tried to back away from my particular antagonist the cockier he became. In the end I challenged him to a fight down on the docks. I tried to keep it a low key affair but the whole class soon found out and we trooped down to a patch of land at Wellington Colliery which is high above the harbour breakwater. Everyone gathered around and formed a circle while we faced up to each other in the centre.

I found it very difficult to get my adrenalin going and I could not bring myself to throw an aggressive punch. Eventually he started to land his punches and a bear knuckle fight developed. If we had been wearing gloves we could have been following the Marquis of Queensbury rules. We slogged it out and eventually he asked if he could take a breather. I just laughed at him and then walked back to school; he never troubled me again.

Whitehaven Harbour

Whitehaven harbour nestles in a small bay and is flanked on both sides by gentle sloping hills and sandstone cliffs. These cliffs are frequented by large flocks of herring gulls that remain close to swoop on the fishing boats when they return at high-tide to land their catch of prawn, scallops, lobster, crab, dogfish, plaice and sole. In early England local fishermen used small reed coracles to fish in the bay for whiting. One line of reasoning would suggest that this is the origin of the town's name.

The Old Quay was built in 1633 to ship coal and salt to Ireland. In later years the Sugar Tongue and the Bulwark Quay were built on a foundation of squared oak with large sandstone blocks. It was built to withstand the passage of time. Whitehaven became the third largest harbour in the country and general merchandise was exported in return for tobacco, rum, sugar and slaves from the American Colonies. In 1876 the Queens Dock was built. This was a wet dock with one set of dock gates to hold the water in as the tide ebbed.

Ship building flourished and more than 1000 ships are recorded as being built in Whitehaven yards. Two press gangs operated in the town and smugglers landed contraband in nearby Fleswick Bay. One well known person to be apprenticed to a local merchant in the town was the founder of the United States Navy; John Paul Jones. On the 23rd April 1778, as the commander of a warship flying the stars and stripes of the 'Continental Navy', he sailed into Whitehaven harbour and raided the town. The harbour dredger found guns from his warship while I was at Richmond and these were placed behind the Sea Cadets headquarters on the old quay.

Whitehaven has the distinction of being one of the first planned towns in England. The Georgian town centre was built to a design by Christopher Wren and it still has more than 250 listed buildings. In my lunch breaks from Richmond several of us used to wander the streets and visit the old library, or on rough days we would walk down to the harbour and try to reach the lighthouse without being hit by the huge waves that surged over the breakwater. It was a dangerous pastime and one that we should never have been allowed to do, but no one seemed to care. Everyone was busy working harbour cranes or shunting coal wagons from the pit.

Often I stood by the wet dock with Stewart Crellin watching workmen, black as the ace of spades, offload coal wagons into the coal shoots. I was always amazed by the Coasters that visited Whitehaven to collect this coal, they passed through the lock gates with only inches to spare and then manoeuvred in such an impossibly small space.

The red sandstone cliffs of St Bees Head tower 300 feet above the waves that thunder relentlessly below. Cormorants, gannets, skuas and shearwaters skim across the thrashing waves of the cold Irish Sea. Rock

pipits, ravens, peregrine falcons and stone chats can be seen flying in the huge updraft that sweeps over the cliff rim while razorbills, kittiwakes, fulmars, puffins and black guillemots lay their eggs on the narrow ledges far below.

When I was a teenager this was a bird lover's paradise that still remained to be discovered. Difficult road access and a long walk across unmade paths from the village of St Bees still afforded good protection from day tourists.

Further along the coast towards Whitehaven lay the cliffs of Fleswick, which were a little more accessible to those of us who could climb, and far below lay a small hidden bay where smugglers landed contraband in the 18th century. The mountains of the Scottish Borders could be seen across the Solway Firth and Snaefell on the Isle of Man struggled to emerge from the light stratus that drifted across the Irish Sea.

I often walked along the beach and gathered whelks, mussels and crabs which could be found around the rock pools. I didn't like seafood and never kept any for myself. I flattened the sabellaria tube worm structures which were formed in the dark coal laden sand and rummaged in the pebble banks for pieces of coloured glass. We gave these to young girls pretending that they were gemstones; many years later I found out that they really were gemstones!

After a heavy storm small shiny discs of coal gathered in huge troughs on the beaches north of Whitehaven. My father often rode down to Parton on my old bicycle and filled two sacks of coal before sunrise. In all of my father's years he never burned anything other than shore coal. It burned hot and fiercely, with small round pebbles exploding every few minutes to throw glowing pieces of slag onto our thick carpet. We always had to erect a fine mesh wire guard before leaving it unattended.

If my father could find such a supply of free coal then it will be no surprise that coal has been mined and shipped from Whitehaven Harbour since 1633. In the early 18th century Whitehaven boasted the deepest mines in the world and was proud to be the first town to cut work faces deep under the sea. More than 70 mines have been sunk in the area and several of these run as far out as five miles beneath the Solway Firth. Carlisle Spedding pioneered the use of explosives to sink

several of these early mine shafts and he invented the first form of safety lamp which used a spinning cog with flints to produce a shower of sparks to illuminate the work area.

Fire damp, rock falls and underground tram accidents have caused more than 500 deaths to local miners. The largest of these disasters occurred at Wellington Pit in 1910 and William Pit in 1947. These are well remembered by the local population and almost every family has a relative who was lost in one of these two disasters. Both disasters were caused by fire damp explosions. The explosion at William Pit occurred beneath the sea and it was considered so dangerous to recover the bodies that they sealed the mine and entombed the men and young boys for the rest of time.

While at Richmond our class was invited to visit Calder Hall, the first ever Nuclear Power Station. I marvelled at huge control panels in the control centre, everything was so impressive and from that moment I determined that I was going to join the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority. I yearned for an opportunity to work with this futuristic equipment.

I did very well at Richmond. I gained a good sound education with a bias towards engineering and my pre-national certificate was well received by local industry. I applied for an apprenticeship with the Atomic Energy Authority, the United Steel Company, Distington Engineering Company and High Duty Alloys. To cover all eventualities I also applied to join the Army as a junior leader and the Cumberland Constabulary as a policeman. Two years earlier my best opportunity would have been in farming, now I was able to apply for a host of job opportunities.

Six weeks later, after an in-depth security scan of all my relatives, past and present, I received an official looking letter from Sellafield. I was so excited and I trembled as I cut it open with my dinner knife. Yes, it was my very first job offer. The UKAEA had invited my parents to indenture me for five years from 1st August 1960 until my 21st birthday on 30th July 1965. My parents immediately accepted and I was over the moon!