mosoho
bringing life to history

A museum of Soho Archive

A London childhood 1926 - 1939

The West End area of London known as Soho was indeed once at London's western margins . An old hunting wood, (w ith 'so-ho' the cry of the chase) it was roughly a half mile square in extent, bounded to the north by Oxford St. Part of that ancient highway between the City of London and Oxford along which many a tumbrel made its way to the Tyburn gallows. Its eastern boundary ran south from the parish of St.Giles along Charing Cross Rd. (Hog Lane) whilst its western border (Shugge Lane) remained ill-defined until John Nash at the behest of the Prince Regent created Regent Street, not simply to form a grand north-south ceremonial route, but to separate the run-down lower class dwellings of Soho from the then burgeoning growth of new town developments in adjacent Belgravia. To the south the Royal Mews (on the site of the National Gallery) and Leicester Fields (Leicester Square) with its grander houses completed Soho's enclosure. The hunting wood was initially sold off to aristocratic developers, and some of the early master planning can be seen in the layout of Soho Square, streets Greek and Frith, and others in the eastern half of Soho. In the 17th century these new developments provided those who could afford it, with an escape from the City congestion, and later were to be joined by French Huguenots and Greek Christians fleeing religious persecution in their homelands. They brought with them their considerable artisan and other skills, finding a ready use for their talents. The arrival of other nationalities, and their descendants down the generations, evolved a special atmosphere in the by now largely congested dwellings and streets of Soho.

At the time, in ignorance of Soho's history and evolution this was our domain, and the centrally situated tenement block in which we lived was, in retrospect, our 'refuge', not that we feared rival incursions; it was simply, after our many excursions, a place of retreat. Named 'Ingestre Buildings' (after an aristocrat instrumental in its construction) it was known locally as 'The Buildings', and if in pronunciation the 'l' and 'g' are omitted the reader will have an indication of our speech patterns at the time.

The tenement, situated in Ingestre Place, (demolished in the 1960's) stood block-like on an island site, very plain and rather grim in appearance, built of London stock brick, notable for its initial clean ochre colour, but much blackened by decades of London soot, (see adjacent photo and brickwork surround.) The dwelling however was substantially built, providing much needed basic amenities for its several hundred occupants.

A central courtyard was accessed through decorative iron gates – a sort of 'keep'- leading to eight stone staircases distributed around the inner yard each serving a ground floor and three floors above, with mostly two flats at each level. At each half landing an unglazed window opening filled with a decorative iron grille let in light and air, important in such compact dwellings, particularly as the whole building was fuelled and lit by coal/coal gas. The stairways consisted of heavy stone treads, with plain black iron balustrades, walls were gloss painted dark green to waist height, cream above, with the two colours separated by a one inch black band. Entrance doors to the flats were heavily boarded, painted green, with heavy black door-knockers and letter plates completing the ensemble.

It was built in the late 1850's shortly after an extremely serious Cholera outbreak, (600 fatalities; pump water contaminated by raw sewage,) the epicentre of which was in nearby Broad St. (now Broadwick) and was a major reason for our dwelling's construction and provision. Soho was at its lowest point by the middle years of the 19th century, and Bazalgette's major London drainage scheme along with public health concerns and various philanthropic housing endeavours saw a slow but continuous improvement.

Each flat had a fresh water supply via a single large brass tap over a brown glazed sink, adjacent was a properly connected water closet, and close by a large open cupboard into which very fit coalmen tipped their two cwt. loads, needless to say dust was a problem. A gas stove stood in the dark narrow passage that gave access to these facilities, leading to the sink, the centre for all ablutions, with the added luxury of a galvanized tin bath that hung in the coalhole. Gas lighting was standard; stairways were unlit relying upon ambient light sources (courtyard lighting). A further facility was a communal laundry at roof level, one corner staircase had an extra flight of stairs leading to a vertiginous bridge that momentarily placed one high over the central courtyard before entering a steamy glazed structure containing timber zinc lined tubs on one side and gas fired coppers on the other. Mum had little use for the wash-house, - the climb and weight of laundry - preferring the local bag-wash, I on the other hand often climbed to the bridge simply for the thrill of height.

The whole tenement was raised on an undercroft, well ventilated through area gratings around its external perimeter, (the gratings were frequently scanned from above for dropped coins, a long stick with a small piece of soap attached to the end would often meet with

success) this meant that the outer ground floor windows were higher than usual and gave a degree of privacy and protection. The rather gaunt appearance of its external elevations was partially relieved by an assortment of window boxes, some precariously so. Particularly as one top floor tenant affectionately known as 'mad Annie' a disturbed but otherwise harmless older lady was inclined to lean over her window box and harangue everybody in the street below. Initially the tenement was specified as being suitable for artisans, and at the time of our occupation the sixty plus flats housed a mixed white population, on the whole probably lowly paid, and to my young eyes law abiding.

My father's brother and two of his three sisters also lived in the tenement, the family having been raised in a similar dwelling called 'Grosvenor Buildings' situated to the rear of New Bond St., still standing but refurbished with a concierge and controlled access. Grandfather Long was a butler and hailed from Shanklin on the Isle of Wight, his wife's maiden name was Crisp, that is all I know of my paternal grandparents, without photographs I can only surmise a likeness from dad and his siblings. Dad and his brother Sam were both tall and slim, bordering on the skinny, their three sisters were quite buxom. Just one little snippet concerning grandfather Long, dad remembered being hoisted onto his father's shoulders to see either Queen Victoria's funeral procession or King Edward the 7th's coronation parade. This occurred in St. James's St. Piccadilly where much later in 1941 dad and I viewing that night's bomb damage caused the memory to surface. Sometime ago our son Mark and I were on a London walkabout and finding ourselves in the area I pointed out the spot and related the story.Dad (1895-1952) worked in a solicitor's office before army service during the First World War, his post war life was I suspect a little dissolute with gambling a regular pastime. Mum (1900-1960) had done what so many young women did during that period; following wartime work in a Chelmsford munitions factory, she left the country backwoods of Essex for a life of domestic service in London, finding employment as a chambermaid in a block of mansion flats in Oxford St.; so called because of their solid Edwardian build and probably comfortably off occupants. Mum was raised as a Roman Catholic but dad gave no indication of religious belief, (his texts were more likely to be found in the 'Racing Star') how they met I don't know, but following marriage they moved into Ingestre Buildings sometime in the early 1920's. I arrived in 1926, mum had gone 'home' for her first child, home was a barn cottage on the outskirts of a small village called Highwood near Chelmsford in Essex,where her mother lived with her second husband Alfred Sitch. Granny Sitch (1872-1964) was born in Yorkshire, her maiden name was Fry, born out of wedlock, and fathered according to her son Wilf, by a seafarer. Her mother's family fostered

*Figure 2: **Lilly**, my mother aged 21.*

out 'Liza' (the name on her gravestone in Fryerning churchyard at Ingatestone in Essex,) to a Roman Catholic family called Bannister living in Essex, sending with the child the then not inconsiderable sum of £600 pounds; because of this arrangement I assume the mother's family were R.C. Gran retained that faith for the rest of her life. Granny Sitch's first husband (Brewster) dug and bricked-up wells, dying aged forty (1907) of Peritonitis. Of his origins I know nothing except that his mother was Irish. Mum was the only girl in a family of five, the eldest was George, followed by Harry, Lilly (mum), Wilfred, and Charles. With the sudden demise of her husband granny Brewster with a young family to support met and married Alfred Sitch, and reared a second family of three; Beatrice ('Beat'), Evelyn ('Fairy') and William ('Uncle'). Two of her offspring were destined to disappear from the family scene, her eldest son George, post WW1, married into an American family (Keyser ?) with an antique business in South Kensington, and with two young daughters they later returned to the States; eventually all contact was lost. William her youngest (always known as 'Uncle') survived Dunkirk, served throughout WW2 in a bomb disposal unit and on cessation married my cousin Kitty Thomas (dad's niece) and emigrated to Australia. The marriage failed and Kitty returned. In spite of much searching by his sister 'Beat', 'Uncle' was never heard of again. He was very popular throughout the family and his absence was the cause of much quiet grief.

Figure 3. ***Brewster, granny Sitch's*** *first husband. b.1867 – d.1907.*

Returning to Ingestre Buildings I am curious as to why, four Long siblings all married should be living in the same tenement, did they all arrive at much the same time? Without knowing their family background or when their parents died (no photographs) and I cannot recall them ever being discussed, my puzzlement remains. There may be a clue in the fact that laughter and merriment seemed to be in short supply amongst the Long siblings, (a hint of past sorrow perhaps?) although they were on amicable terms with each other, I am probably reading too much into what may have simply been a difficult early life. However, dad (Ted/Harry) his brother Sam, and sister Florence ('Flo') produced thirteen offspring in total, Flo had six, Sam two, and rest were ours, (sister Gladys was childless). In spite of so many cousins only the youngest of Flo's brood were my playmates, whilst Sam's two girls were

Figure 4: ***Granny Sitch*** *with her second family. Front row:* ***William*** *('uncle')* ***Beatrice*** *('Beat')* ***Evelyn*** *('Fairy'.) back row,* ***Wilfred*** *from first family, &* ***gran*** *. The year 1920.*

kept on a tight rein by a reclusive wife whose name and face are lost to me. Dad's third sister 'Kit' (three children?) lived in Dagenham, and was married to a sailor, she was my favourite paternal aunt. Her husband Charlie Morison had made a career of naval life, and been much decorated for his part in the First World War 'Gallipoli' campaign. When relating his service life he impressed me by never talking down to me, I was just approaching my teens and appreciated his attitude, his experiences were factual and never boastful.

The central courtyard of our dwelling was a natural gathering place and provided undisturbed space for our play constructions, but mostly we sallied forth into the streets and courts (wide pedestrian passageways) usually on roller skates, and home made scooters, (ball-race wheels donated by uncle Wilf – he worked for the manufacturer of these particular items) they were extremely effective as transport, because most road surfaces at the time were very smooth. They were dressed with a brown asphalt minus stone aggregate, laid hot and fashioned with an assortment of heavy iron smoothing implements, it was a calming and intriguing process to watch. Nevertheless some surfaces still retained stone sets, providing a purchase for the many horse drawn vehicles still in regular use. The sound of those immensely strong shire-horse's feathered hooves scuffing the granite sets as they moved a heavily laden dray is not easily forgotten, neither were the copious amounts of urine discharged into the gutters by these handsome creatures! Decorative stone water troughs (installed by the 'Metropolitan Water Fountain Ass.) were situated at strategic points for these thirsty animals.

*Figure 5: **Silver Place** – architectually unchanged, probably listed. Shops from right: Buttons: Sweets & tobacco: Groceries & tailoring: the latter my uncle **Valentine Thomas's** business.*

The weekly brewer's deliveries usually aroused my curiosity as they dropped very large full wooden barrels onto an extremely thick coir mat and with the aid of a stout rope lowered them down a rung-less

ladder into the pub cellar. The empties were returned by the same route and hoisted aboard the dray by the driver and his mate, both of whom were built like the proverbial brick convenience. Coal was delivered by horse drawn dray, and if the vehicle was suitably parked, with the animal tucking into its nosebag and the coalman otherwise engaged we would skate at speed, go down on our haunches and pass under the horse's belly. Another horse drawn supplier provided block ice, an ice pick expertly wielded by the driver, split the large blocks to suit customer requirements, wrapped in a sack and shouldered to its destination, whilst we lapped up the chipped remnants to suck.

Having explored our domain in some detail, I particularly enjoyed drawing street plans of the whole area from memory. Richly endowed with shops, and street markets, the great majority of outlets were small, with the owners living above or below the business premises. One particular horse meat stall springs instantly to mind, it stood outside Rosin's the Jewish bakery in Peter St., bloody hunks of horse flesh were reduced to customer requirements with blood staining the wooden stall top and the road surface beneath.

Our nearest shops were situated in Silver Place, a wide pedestrian court directly opposite our tenement. On one corner a café offering the usual fare, was frequented by the betting fraternity, street betting was illegal, the bookie standing in a nearby doorway taking bets whilst his lookout rapidly scanned in all directions, prepared to give a sharp whistle on the approach of suspect bodies, the lookouts swapping duties with others in the café for rest and sustenance. The police employed various disguises and ruses to get near enough for an arrest but were rarely successful. One particular lookout called Danny was young and probably considered a sharp dresser, he wore a long navy blue close fitting overcoat, collar usually turned up, hands always in pockets, wide razor sharp trousers with turn-ups over black patent leather pointy shoes, a grey trilby worn at a snappy angle, and with a most peculiar walk in which the feet and lower legs were flipped forward, almost as if he was trying to shake each shoe loose in turn. If the police did approach, having warned the bookie, Danny would be away to his nearest refuge, several depending on the direction of escape. Dad being a regular user of the bookie gave Danny permission, for a while at least, to enter our flat when necessary, I can remember two occasions when it happened, but the arrangement was of short duration.

*Figure 6: **Silver Place** – Shops on left: fish &chips; dairy; greengrocer; & cafe on corner with **Ingestre Place.***
*Behind distant gates – site **of Ingestre Buildings.***

*Figure 7: **Berwick St. Market – 1926.** (My birth year) later our centre for foraging.*

Next door to the café was the greengrocer, run by Alfie and Annie Habgood, they were brother and sister, living above the shop with aging parents. The shop was very basic, large internal divisions housed root vegetables and greens with a few choicer items displayed outside the shop front. Annie ran this part of the business, a large lady with florid cheeks clad in leather and canvas checked every piece of silver coinage offered by striking its milled edge against another, counterfeit money was in circulation, and the grating sound was her verification.Alfie ran a full time stall in nearby Berwick Street market selling a full range of fruit and vegetables, his days were long and hard, stocky and strong he was the most placid of men. If on a bright morning with no school in prospect I was up early and out on the street, I would occasionally find Alfie about to leave for Covent Garden Market. He used the traditional costermonger's two-wheeled barrow, and in exchange for a push from behind on the return journey, I enjoyed a ride amidships outward bound. The route from central Soho to Covent Garden Market is a variable but gentle downward incline towards the Thames, easily walked, but the return journey with a loaded barrow took a lot of effort, hence our arrangement. Alfie was broad and robust, wore a stout canvas and leather apron, and used a wide leather strap across the barrow handles to lean against when pulling. On our return the produce was stored in a nearby lock-up, beetroots were boiled in the lock-up's basement, and large hands of very green bananas were hung to ripen in yet another store, a very old and dilapidated wooden airy structure adjacent to Habgood's market stall. This was situated in a narrow alley connecting Hopkins St. with Berwick St. market, since lost with redevelopment.

Continuing our shop review, next door to the Habgood's shop was a small dairy run by two Welsh sisters, diminutive in stature, with high foreheads and centrally parted hair swept back to impressive rear buns. Standing outside there was usually a collection of empty milk churns which occasionally provided seating for our group when one of our number had been lucky enough to see a particular film, the whole story would then be retold in graphic detail with full and dramatic sound effects; as it almost certainly concerned war and conflict, the commotion can be imagined. The ladies were generous; occasionally

after shop hours a request through the letter box for "any stale cakes miss?" often brought forth a brown paper bag with that day's leftovers.

The last shop on this side of Silver Place was, you might correctly guess, a fish and chip establishment, much used subject to the availability of cash. Opposite the fish and chip shop a small tobacconist and sweet shop, fortunately for us access to sweets was similarly limited by lack of funds. The adjoining shop was a store for the tailoring trade, an active business in Soho, its shop window was filled with cards of buttons and other requisites all pressed hard against the glass, faded and dog-eared and never seemed to be open for business.

Last but not least was a grocery business run by my uncle Valentine Thomas ('Val') husband of dad's sister Flo. He and Flo both worked on tailoring for men, Val partitioned off part of his grocery shop for that purpose, whilst Flo worked from home. I ran errands for auntie Flo, usually to a local shop selling ancillary items for tailoring purposes, shoulder pads, threads, etc. often taking a piece of cloth to be crimped around metal buttons. The lady who ran the shop intrigued me, or rather her hair-do, swept upwards, not a hair out of place, highly glossed, ending in a sort of plateau, it never changed. Uncle Val was an enterprising man, also running a small café in Broadwick St. For some reason or other I was his first customer and enjoyed a free cooked meal.

Two other needs situated in Ingestre Place were the barber shop and the pub, my haircut took place on a board laid across the arms of the chair, a short back and sides with my hair laid flat and greased. Once outside, acutely self-conscious, I would ruffle my hair and flee homewards. The pub I visited a little more often, it had a small off-license counter, there I returned dad's empty quart beer bottle and received a replacement. My height at the time was about counter height and the amiable publican would always follow the same routine, holding with one hand, what to me was a large bottle, he would allow it to tip forward, as though about to fall on me, suddenly arresting its fall, at the same time giving me a knowing silent smile from behind his walrus moustache, I never flinched, I trusted the routine. The pub also caught my attention in another way, the brewers kept it well painted and this involved 'graining' and 'combing' the exterior to represent wood and marble, I was drawn to these strange skills.

Soho in the thirties although busy and heavily populated was

*Figure 8: **Ingestre Place** – On right **St. James Buildings** – opposite site of **Ingestre Buildings** (on left) demolished 1950's (?). Note the ugly and intrusive Nature of the **Lex Garage**, its front in **Brewer St** was vaguely **Art Deco,** its rear view dreadful, but I doubt if I noticed at the time.*

relatively free of motorised vehicles, streets were remarkably clear, motorists entering the area tended to use garage parking. A regular Saturday evening activity for older boys was to spy visiting ('up-west') motorists, looking for off-street parking, and with a cry of "garage mister?" they would stand on the running board (a long step on both sides of most cars of the period) and guide them to the first multi-storey garages in Soho, either the Lex garage in Brewer St. or another in Poland St. tips could be generous. And yet the main thoroughfares that bordered Soho, Oxford St. to the north, Charing Cross Rd. to the east, Regent St. to the west, and streets Coventry and Cranbourn to the south were extremely busy, including Shaftesbury Avenue a new thoroughfare cut through Soho in the19th century. When using our skates and scooters this sparsity of traffic within Soho was to our advantage, we could for example proceed at speed in relative safety down the centre of Great Marlborough St., a short steep incline in Noel St. providing lift –off. *(this very curious prominent hump at the Poland St. end of Noel St. with pavements either side considerably lower than the road was eventually levelled, and always puzzled me,)* a remnant of the original hunting wood perhaps?

I seem to have been acutely aware of Soho's topographical features, its subtle general slope commencing at Oxford St. (in effect a 'Strand') heading south to a more pronounced downward incline at the southern end of Soho. A continuation of this incline beyond our 'border' falls more steeply on reaching the real Strand, the lowest line for this ancient highway, beyond which the Thames without its later embankments held sway. The subtleties of ground levels were heightened by our use of skates, carts, etc. Plus the double kerbs on route, not to mention pushing Alfie Habgood's barrow!

*Figure 9: **Ingestre Place** – view towards **Broadwick St.** On right (hidden) Site of **Lion Brewery** – demolished 1937. Street surfaces around Brewery were paved with granite sets (traction for dray horses) Original shop fronts – corner cafe / barber / pub.*

Many of our games and other activities took place in the streets, games were varied and partly driven by season and weather, conkers, provided a serious period of competition, with much pickling in vinegar

to achieve the longed for, all - conquering nut. The Yo-Yo had its brief flowering followed by spinning tops, spun with a cord, picked up on the palm and chopped down onto a metal bottle top in order to propel the bottle top as far as possible. Marbles were a staple activity, a particular favourite being a length of wood with holes cut through of various sizes, marbles rolled from a set distance through a hole won extra marbles relative to the hole size. We played a street game called 'Bandy,' this involved a piece of wood shaped like a butchers cleaver and a short length of wood tapered at both ends, when the latter item was chopped with the 'cleaver' it would spin into the air and was then struck. - *In later life I attended a winter ice hockey match in Sweden, which the locals called 'Bandy'*-. Another game involved one of our number guarding a small area, which others had to access without being touched, the area was called 'Bedlam' (a corruption of Bethlehem, the name of a medieval London hospital for the insane and 'distracted').

*Figure **10**: **Silver Place** towards **Beak St**.- view from bookmaker's lookout position!*

The layout of Soho was extremely mixed both in building types, size, and disposition of streets, mews, alleys and courts. The perimeter buildings on our 'borders' facing the main thoroughfares were made up of large shops and other retail outlets, cinemas, theatres, and churches, pressing in on the area available for the resident population and their trades. Many were living and working in what were once smart 17th and 18th terraces complete with mews to the rear, surfaced with stone sets, to accommodate the then ubiquitous horse, carriage, and groom; the remnants of such are still to be seen, in various parts of Soho. The two large squares, Soho and Golden, were also bordered by a variety of business premises, including three churches and two hospitals. The wide thoroughfare of Great Marlborough St. was lined with a smarter type of property housing music publishers and the like, in what were once superior dwellings, plus the local magistrate's court, and the stage entrance to the London Palladium. The stage door of the Palladium often provided us with glimpses of notables in the entertainment business, such as 'The Three Stooges', Larry, Curly, and Mo, seen often by us on the screen, and there they were practically tripping over our scooters! The Palladium also brings to mind a visit to see a stage version of Peter Pan, who my benefactor was I have no idea. I enjoyed the show, in particular the flying, and on my return to the buildings, in climbing onto a high, ground - floor window cill, no doubt to study the technicalities of a modest flight, I put my head through a window pane much to the dismay of the occupant and my parents who of course had to pay the repair cost.

Accidents were not uncommon, one that was potentially serious occurred when riding my scooter I ran into a gas fitters cart, they were usually left out overnight with iron piping protruding fore and aft, striking my left cheekbone just below the left eye, a fraction higher would

have been disastrous. Whilst in the realm of injury I can recall only two street fights, both involved adult men, neither too serious, no doubt I missed other affrays, but the area seemed remarkably well behaved, at least to this young boy.

The Lion Brewery in Broadwick St. a large rather forbidding red brick edifice stood next to Ingestre Buildings, separated by a narrow alley impeded at both ends by bollards formed from the ubiquitous upturned cannons of Napoleonic origin. Our flat at the time – our third and last flat in the dwellings - was on the ground floor and little natural light reached the interior, large mirrors were hung outside at a suitable angle to ameliorate the gloom, ancient lights indeed! The brewery built in 1801 avoided the serious Cholera episodes of the 19th century because its considerable demand for water came from an uncontaminated well within its own premises. It was demolished in 1937 to make way for a police section house, we enjoyed dazzling natural light for the rest of our stay! The site was surrounded by a high boarded fence which soon yielded to our need to enter this wonderland of brick buttresses, arches, and other strange shapes all down to basement level, offering many climbs of varying difficulty. *(At the time of writing the forbidding tortuous drawings of Piranesi springs to mind).*

The population density in the remaining areas of Soho was considerable, there were other compact dwellings such as ours; directly opposite St James's Buildings, smaller and of later vintage, - memory of dad climbing through a high ground floor window to extinguish a burning over-mantle cloth whilst its elderly lady occupant continued to snooze by the fire. In nearby Brewer St. another large dwelling called St. James's Residences lined the south side of the street, and at the eastern end of Gerrard St. stood Newport Buildings, a very large block of flats, we had a friendly rivalry with the boys from Gerrard St.(Their dwelling was totally destroyed during WW2). The remaining older dwellings of Soho were fully utilised, from basement to attic, housing a mixed population of Italian, Irish, Belgian, French, and Greek nationals alongside European Jews who had fled the harsh conditions of their various homelands, not forgetting the indigenous residents, many of whom were themselves descendants of earlier generations of immigrants. *Soho in the thirties had a resident population of perhaps*

*Figure 11: **Broadwick St.** Looking to distant **Wardour St.** with **Berwick St.** crossing. Frequently hosed down by W.C.C. workers wearing wide brimmed bush hats.*

30,000 (?), considerably reduced post 1945. I was no doubt unaware of other nationalities - that is other than Prince Monolulu. He was a large flamboyant African dressed in colourful native robes and feathered head-dress, well known at all the racecourses as a tipster with the familiar cry "I gotta horse". If he found us playing marbles in the gutter he would hoist up his voluminous robes and join in the game.

As you might expect the trades and businesses of the area were extremely varied; the rag trade, tailoring, gold and silversmiths, film industry, theatre workshops and costumiers, lace-makers, restaurants, clubs, ethnic grocery outlets and bakers, delicatessens, antique dealers and cabinet makers; not forgetting prostitution, which was quite subdued, and certainly had none of the blatant display of the current Soho scene. Indeed we were on first name terms with some of these ladies without fully realising what it was all about. Add to this not only the supporting trades and shops for the indigenous population, but the occasional soup kitchen and hostel catering for the indigent, always in evidence. The external area gratings that ventilated many basements provided much needed warmth for those unfortunates on the streets.

The commercial activity throughout the area provided us with much of the raw material for our different activities. Street markets yielded a great variety of boxes for constructing our transport and other fanciful assemblages, usually carried out in our courtyard, any spare timber was reduced to saleable bundles of kindling to be hawked around the dwellings. The rag trade rubbish produced useful timber sections from the frames around which their fabric was wrapped. Wardour St. and adjacent areas were heavily involved in the cinematic industry, and their dustbins were a constant source of inspection, lots of 35mm film to be perused at our leisure, and if rolled-up with newspaper and the paper given a final twist to make a wick, when lit produced a very effective smoke device. We searched the streets for discarded cigarette boxes, collecting cards into sets was a prominent activity and gaining the last item for completion was akin to finding the Holy Grail, *(not something I would have been aware of at the time)* and cards became an important form of currency. Dad who chain-smoked had a fine collection, stored in old 'Woodbine' packets, now in the possession of brother David. Similarly with our comics, we each bought a different publication and swapped when read. My favourite was 'The Wizard', the others being 'The Champion' 'The Rover' 'The Hotspur' and 'The Skipper'. Apart from scouting and other annuals, the Daily Mirror, and the London Evening News, I read whatever appeared before me, books however were scarce, not only at home but as recalled below probably also at school.

As already mentioned tailoring was a prominent trade in Soho, a figure, carrying work in progress protected with black lining, was a very familiar sight. Outworking was common, and uncle Val and aunt Flo so engaged dealt with a family living in Berwick Market called Mathews, amongst whom daughter Jesse had achieved fame both sides of the

Atlantic as an actress and dancer, partnering at some time Fred Astaire. I was taken to a local theatre to see one of her shows called 'Over My Shoulder' full of music and dance all rendered in that curiously 'posh' accent of the time which pronounced 'a' as 'e', so Jack became 'Jeck' and 'men' could be both singular and plural, as any play, show, or film of the period will confirm. Aunt Flo a large lady capable of sharp rebukes, occasionally met Jesse at home, and dismissed her as a "stuck-up little cow". *Nevertheless Jesse was a pro and re-appeared on radio in the 1950's as the eponymous lead in a long running radio serial called 'Mrs Dale's Diary' playing the wife of doctor husband Jim. She often commenced her lines with the phrase 'I'm worried about Jim', her acquired accent of earlier days remained.* Jesse's brother Bernard ran a sweets stall in Berwick market, situated outside 'The Blue Post' pub, this was on my school route, one halfpenny would buy five toffees or some broken Palm toffee, the latter with its triangular pieces would often force out both cheeks, to be hurriedly dispersed before reaching St Patrick's school in nearby Great Chapel St.

*Figure **12**: **St Patrick's** R.C. school. Great Chapel St. Weather permitting our Play area was under the netting. My feelings About the school are expressed in the main text.*

The school was RC and overseen by St. Patrick's in Soho Square. The first half-hour of every day was spent in repetitious question and answer quotations from 'The Catechism', a basic oral instruction in RC religious belief, I recall little of these periods, except an adult realization that those two and a half hours each week through most of the 1930's, if concentrated on more useful and less prescriptive subjects, could have made a serious contribution to my general education. Unless my memory is deceiving me I have no recollection of a library, however small, or any continuous encouragement to read what was available. Unfair to the school perhaps, for I could read, and went through the text books with enthusiasm always longing to turn the page to pastures new. I enjoyed the mainstream school work, usually found myself in the top three places when tested, always doing well when 'art' and drawing were involved. Discipline was strict with corporal punishment administered quite frequently, and I received my share, strokes of the cane on both palms, dealt out by a rather grim headmaster, and on leaving his study I would run my hands along the cold white tiles lining the corridor walls. The school had a roof enclosed with wire netting. The roof was our usual playground the basement served that purpose

when the weather dictated. Two floors for classrooms and one as a hall with a small stage The hall conjures up memories of exams, enactments, (playlets) physical exercises, free milk, with a teaspoon of malt extract if a halfpenny or penny was available. Several other uses of the hall spring to mind. We assembled for Remembrance Day; the awful slaughter of the first world war was a mere twenty years in the past, countless numbers of relatively young men and women still lived with those horrific times. Inevitably Nov.11th was seriously observed, at 11am everything stopped to observe the silence, including the Oxford St. traffic just outside our windows, the silence was quite arresting. Another hall event was 'Empire Day' we each sported a Union Jack, of varying size and quality and probably waved them enthusiastically in our excitement. Poems by Kipling and Masefield found their way into the celebrations – 'Where are you going to all you big steamers'. ……. 'I must go down to the sea again'……and no doubt we were reminded of our duty to 'God, King and Country', etc The hall also brings to mind my eleven plus exam, which I failed. I have no memory of being prepared or informed about the test, that it might be important to my future.

In retrospect, although it deprived me of some academic education, I like to think I have in my own way largely compensated for that loss, and indeed it might even have been fortuitous, for my route through an old and honourable trade, (cabinet making) into the design world has been immensely stimulating, and led to a largely freelance existence which in spite of its inevitable ups and downs has suited me very well, and the thought that my family life might have been other than what it so happily is, simply does not bear thinking about!

Apart from seeing ourselves off to school – breakfast was invariably tea with a slice of bread and butter sprinkled with sugar and tipped over the sugar bowl so that the surplus fell back into the bowl. I chaperoned sisters Molly and Margaret to school at different times during the decade, and as the eldest was instructed to hold their hand for the short walk to Great Chapel St.

Molly was born in 1928 and died in 1939. She was buried in the Catholic section of Kensal Green Cemetery, north London. She had been confined to a hospital bed for the last three years of her short life, prior to that she was in and out of treatment but when at home she was bright and ebullient and left me with some affectionate and abiding memories. During the early thirties a Barrel Organ would appear regularly in Ingestre Place, the acoustics of the street were suited to the rather haunting tones of the instrument, and Molly would rush out to enjoy the repertoire. Peter was born in 1930 surviving for only six weeks, reason for death unknown. Margaret came along in 1932.

*Figure **13**: Sister **Molly** 1928 – 1939. Confined to hospital for last three years of her life. Bright, ebullient, and I think brave.*

Sadly, although aware of the long working week of both parents, I did not fully appreciate the considerable strain on mum during the last three years of Molly's life. In the early period of her illness Molly was attending the children's hospital in Great Ormond St. this was relatively easy to visit, but for her final three years Molly was transferred to a hospital in Sutton and Cheam. Time and expense were paramount but mum made numerous visits as circumstances allowed, sometimes with dad, occasionally with me. Only in adulthood was I able to fully comprehend what the loss of an eleven year old much loved daughter must have meant to our parents.

Our parents usually left very early for work, dad to the kitchens of the Naval and Military Club (the 'in and out club') in Piccadilly, mum to shop work and/or cleaning jobs. She had arranged with Flo to feed us at lunchtime, (we of course called it dinner) our main meal of the day. When we arrived home from school dad was often indoors, having started work very early that morning, we knew as soon as we opened the front door, the smell of cigarette smoke told us so, but at that time it was a friendly and reassuring aroma.

Returning to the subject of food, dad on his return from kitchen work would usually divest himself of assorted titbits, any of the following might appear; oddments of cheese, crisps he had made that day, ham, more rarely a few oysters, -Molly loved these, no one else was interested, - butter, and really, any useful commodity that could be concealed about his skinny build. It was stealing of course, but no one regarded it in that light. Both parents worked long and hard for quite low wages and without these supplements times would have been just that bit more difficult. Mum received a weekly church food ticket worth

three shillings and sixpence (dad's wage mid thirties was about two pounds ten shillings) so what seems a small amount was in fact a useful addition. It was my job to present the ticket at a particular shop and collect a bag of mixed items. I think mum was a little too embarrassed to take it herself. The cheap meat of the period was beef and a small roast would usually appear for the Sunday meal.

In terms of food Sunday was a busy day for Aunt Flo, Uncle Val, and their six children. At teatime a large box tricycle would arrive outside the tenement, a bell summoning those interested customers. One of Flo's offspring would descend to the street carrying a very large meat dish, which was placed on the box top. Johnnie the Belgian pastry cook who worked out from a basement in Dean St. (tantalizing aromas issued forth from his area grating) would slide out trays filled with the most varied and delectable concoctions imaginable, just recalling it makes me salivate, and the filled meat plate disappeared upstairs to the Thomas's flat for a teatime feast. The products were rather expensive, but three of the Thomas offspring were in paid work, so affordable, but I must admit to being a little envious at the sight of this treat.

Soho on a Sunday was remarkably quiet, truly a day of rest, except for those on servicing or shift work such as dad. For us it meant a bath the night before, clean clothes and morning High Mass at the R.C. church in Warwick St. As soon as I was old enough I became an altar boy serving at High Mass along with several other lads of similar age. Conscious of our appearance on the high altar there was usually a scramble for the best cassocks and cotters, they varied greatly, long and short, well worn and new. We were competitive in other ways; who was to light or snuff the six tall candles on the high altar, reached by way of steep steps to the rear, similarly we vied with each other for the slightly more glamorous job of swinging the incense burner, (censer) a full 360 degrees if the priest was out of sight. At other times I served solo for the shorter Mass, then celebrated in Latin, which meant my learning the responses and taking instruction in pronunciation. Little remains except for the notable 'Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa' (My fault, all my fault), notable because guilt and sin were thrust upon us from an early age, only to be assuaged by prayer, absolution, and penance, When necessary we attended the confessional on Saturday evenings. I had this mental picture of my soul as an elongated pure white ellipse occasionally blemished by mortal sin (missing Sunday high mass) and frequently marred by the venial variety (never quite sure what I had done in this area, but at confession the phrase 'thought, word, and deed' sufficed). In the afternoon we gathered in the basement church hall, which faced Golden Square, for a Q. and A. session with the Catechism, and the rest of the day was ours.

My favourite day was Saturday, the whole day ahead with many possibilities; up early and out on the street, plimsolls freshly whitened and wearing a striped belt with an intertwined snake clasp. If the cost

was to hand, morning cinema was a favourite. Our preferred venue called 'The Tolmer' was situated well outside our territory north of the Euston Road and involved a short bus journey, but well worth it. A smallish down- at- heel 'flea-pit' filled with a surging mass of kids eagerly consuming sweets, the noise was considerable. *Also in that scrum would have been the young Kenneth Williams whose later reminiscences spoke enthusiastically of those Saturday gatherings, he lived in a tenement block in the Euston Rd. and being of similar age our paths were to cross again during army service in 1945.* The 'Tolmer' programme was of course geared to our age group; 'Flash Gordon' and his sci-fi adventures, with rockets much in evidence; 'Our Gang' an American group of youngsters, eccentric, mischievous, but without evil intent, I guess we shared a bond with their activities; 'Cartoons' of course; plus the ubiquitous cowboy saga with its simple moral message of good triumphing over bad, (goodie stars Tom Mix and Buck Rodgers spring to mind) and with the aftermath of the Great War still hanging in the air, various films depicting heroic trench warfare or battles at sea with marauding U-boats replenished our fantasies. On returning to Soho we were able to re-enact our submarine epics with the aid of Alfie Habgood's barrows, two were tipped and brought together with the handles uppermost. The handles formed the conning tower, a box enabled the skipper to command from the tower, such commands being delivered in the harsh clipped tones of the particular U-boat commander seen that morning, usually played by an actor called Conrad Veidt, tall, lean, lantern jawed, hair sleeked back with a centre parting, and of course wore his hat back to front when using the periscope.

Frequently Saturday meant swimming, I looked forward to this all week, our venue being Marshall St. Baths just behind Broadwick St. and occupying the site of an old workhouse. A rather fierce attendant would usher us through a foot-bath at the same time reminding us with a cuff behind the ear that he would be keeping a beady eye on anticipated frolics. Costumes issued by the Westminster C.C. and stamped accordingly were triangular, made of a denim type material and usually ill fitting. My immediate image is of numerous pale- skinned young boys with elbows pressed against their ribs, knees together, hands clasped in front of their mouths and shivering slightly before launching themselves into the water. The boldest amongst us used the spring-board.

Mostly Saturday meant complete freedom; skates, scooters and box carts, enabling us to roam our domain, inspecting whatever took our fancy, holes in the road or pavement, particularly if they were deep, were absorbing, and the heavy wooden tripods and poles enabled us to hang quite safely over the excavation whilst attempting to unravel the mysteries below. I recall the fascination of watching a lead joint being wiped, the gentle skill of a plumber with blowlamp and moleskin.

During my free time I was on regular bag-wash duty, delivering to St. Anne's Court a relatively light load in a well-bleached sack to be spun with many other sacks in an enormous rotating drum. On collection I needed our much used push chair (see photo) the bag was heavy with moisture, I would race back with the now top heavy load and several times turned turtle when cornering. It reminds me that my route included Broadwick and other streets which were frequently hosed down by Westminster City Council workers, wearing their distinctive wide Australian bush hats. This washing of the whole area left a welcome fresh sweet smell, much to the advantage of our capsized bag-wash.

Off duty my pals and I often foraged for anything useful, Saturday was usually construction day, it was also the busiest time for our street markets. Berwick, Rupert, and Brewer. They were extremely active until quite late, and apart from rescuing useful timber and boxes, fruit and veg. became cheaper as the evening wore on and was often discarded, but with selection quite acceptable. I would arrive back home dirty and dishevelled and described by mum as being as "black as Newgate's knocker". Winter fogs with a high soot content did nothing for my appearance, the gloom of gas lit streets did not stop our roaming after dark, perhaps to feast on a baked potato or roast chestnuts, subject of course to the wherewithal.

If not engaged elsewhere on Saturday evening, radio (wireless) was a favourite, two programmes in particular, 'Music Hall' and 'In Town Tonight'. 'Music Hall' was varied and entertaining with dad answering back to the spoken word in nonsensical ways much to our amusement. 'In Town Tonight' ranged over visitors, celebrities and oddities. Its opening sound sequence included the voice of an elderly lady softly calling "violets, sweet violets, lovely violets". She was to be found seated at the base of Eros in Piccadilly fronted by a very large wicker basket full of flowers. She lived opposite our tenement next door to the bookmaker, and weather permitting sat outside on the pavement tending her flowers. She was a striking figure, dressed from head to foot in black, a full length dress, voluminous skirt, long sleeves, a high neck secured with a large broach. All topped with a high black torque hat, a Victorian lady who had retained her 19th century ways.

We ventured beyond the confines of Soho quite often, a very early memory was of being taken to the Metropolitan Music Hall ('The Met') in the Edgware Rd. by my father, this meant a bus ride which was exciting, plus a ride on my fathers shoulders, I can still feel my hands clasped tightly around his forehead. We naturally sat in the 'gods', steeply inclined without seats, each step having a narrow padded front edge. I have some very strong images of the performances, Nellie Wallace was such a, case, a comedienne of uncertain age, dressed outlandishly with frequently exposed red flannel drawers, sang of the lack of men in her life, always hoping to find a suitable male under her bed. Her patter delivered in a rich and humorous manner was full of

witty innuendo and double entendre, which at the time of course was beyond my understanding, but appreciated in later life. Dog acts, sing-alongs, conjurers, acrobats, assorted comedians etc. filled out the show. I was particularly intrigued by one frequently used backcloth depicting a grand country house with a balustraded stone terrace and greenery to the rear, its effect on my young eyes was so realistic that I spent much time at the expense of the performance trying to peer around the house corner at the background shrubbery. To one side of the auditorium at circle level, a very large decorative glass screen allowing patrons of a large pub/bar on the other side to imbibe whilst continuing to view and listen to the performance. 'The Met' was demolished post WW2.

There were frequent outings to Hyde Park, Green Park, and St James's Park, all within easy walking distance, particularly when mums younger brother Wilf visited, he was an eager shopper at east London's street markets, and always called in. He was very fond of mum his only sister in the first family, and doted on her children. He and his elder brother Harry were my favourite uncles, both always caring and concerned and I like to think that their father (grandfather Brewster) was similarly disposed. Uncle Harry gave me a small insight by describing how his father, who left early for work, walking to sites that were often distant, scattered and varied, returning just in time to see the children off to bed, would then settle down to brush the long fair hair of his only daughter (mum) before seeing to his own needs.

The usual route to St James's Park, exiting Soho at Piccadilly Circus, was by way of Lower Regent St. and the Duke of York Steps, across The Mall and into the park heading for my favourite venue, the sandpit, initially accompanied, but later in the decade just with my peers. An added attraction was the nearby lake with its watery inducements, the lake – part of a natural stream - was crossed by a bridge with very broad timber balustrades, and of course unless frustrated by park keepers we walked the plank . Hyde Park was a little further to walk but had the Serpentine ('The Long Water') and the prospect of a rowing boat outing with the family. Other attractions on route were the shipping line's premises in Lower Regent Street, fronted with window displays of large model ships, I never lost the opportunity to gaze upon these fascinating objects. I did so at a very early age, unknown to my parents, having remembered the route, and was returned home by a friendly policeman, who gave me a halfpenny. At about this age I have a distinct memory of standing in Ingestre Place, suddenly looking up at the airship 101, its great bulk moving slowly across my view.

Regent's Park north of Hyde Park housed the London Zoo and although you might suppose our main interest was in viewing the inhabitants, which we did, the mother of my particular pal at the time, Arthur Stead, worked in the Zoo's restaurant and by a surreptitious appointment he and I arrived at the kitchen door to receive a bag of goodies, we devoured them immediately. In roaming the site, the

monkey enclosures would yield more titbits, the public threw monkey nuts, which were in their shells, at the wire enclosure, some falling to the ground, we ducked under the barrier, what else could we do?

Other trips beyond our borders involved my time with the cubs and scouts, based in the church hall. I enjoyed these gatherings, one priest in particular would enter the hall, duck down behind the nearest cover, upturn his pipe and commence firing. We were expert in such matters and returned fire instantly, much to the dismay of our leaders and the elderly senior priest who clicked his tongue. Over time we did a camp and a Jamboree at which the Chief Scout was present, but our major outing was to Ireland in 1938.

It was my first trip out of England and the crossing from Holyhead to Dun Laoghaire introduced me to the unpleasantness of sea-sickness. We camped in the grounds of a monastery and were fed in its refectory, and at our first breakfast I tucked into the generous supplies of bread and butter which seemed perfectly normal (I can't remember if sugar was present) only to be served dinner! Needless to say I soon overcame my surprise and did justice to the egg and bacon. Later I was to reflect on the source of such food, I knew where it came from of course but the method of slaughter employed by the monastery's farm stopped me in my tracks, the sight of a brother dressed in his long brown habit, wearing an apron, and expertly hoisting a squealing pig by hoisting its back legs until fully suspended, then quickly cutting its throat to release copious amounts of warm blood, caused me to quickly turn away from the twitching hapless creature. The same brother dispatched perhaps a dozen chickens in as many seconds by using both hands to wring their necks.

Trips into Dublin for various events, with a strong remembrance of how quiet the city was, much less traffic then of course. One occurrence that stands out in my memory was the rescue of a dog from the Liffey. The river's steeply embanked walls prevented the animal from making land, we formed a circle around one of our senior scouts whilst he changed into his swimming costume, he then descended a rung ladder, swam to the unfortunate creature, brought it back to the ladder and with some difficulty hoisted it to safety. Meanwhile a crowd had witnessed the scene and generously applauded his efforts. We then reformed the circle for him to dry off and dress. Later that day we visited the Guinness brewery and sampled the stuff, not to my taste, but gratefully acquired in later years. The Cooper's shop – now obsolete – a rather extraordinary skill, had my full attention,

A meaningful part of my thirties childhood revolved around our frequent visits to my mother's mother granny Sitch and her second husband Alfred, the only grandfather I knew. The journey to my delight involved four buses, first to Bow by London Transport; 'Greenline' to Brentwood; a local to Blackmore; and finally a country bus to within walking

*Figure **14**: The **Sitch's** barn cottage. A London friend and myself.*

distance of their cottage. The Blackmore stop was the most memorable, a long stop as it turned out, adults and bus crew adjourned to the adjacent pub for a comfortable period of time, I sat outside with my lemonade and large arrowroot biscuit whilst from the gloom within issued the pleasant aroma of beer and tobacco, and the murmur of voices.

My grandparent's barn cottage although relatively close to London was situated in a sparsely populated backwater of Essex, becoming very important to me in the course of many childhood visits. (An abiding first memory of London life when returning from the quietness of the Essex countryside, was the way sound reverberated through the 'ravine' like streets of Soho, it usually took a couple of days to readjust). The cottage consisted of two 'one-up-one-down' small cottages knocked into one plus outhouse extensions to the rear at ground level. There were no services; heating was via a wood burning stove with side oven, lighting was provided by assorted oil lamps, and water was carried in from the local pump a distance of perhaps 250 yards. A small amount of water was required to prime the pump, and to aid the carrying of buckets on the return journey a metal hoop

*Figure **15**: **George Brewster** eldest son in first family. Wounded in WW1, married into AmericanFamily,(**Keyser** ?) two daughters, returned to U.S. **Wilf** Kept in touch but contact eventually ceased.*

*Figure **16**: Sister **Margeret** – 1936 (?)*

kept the containers apart. Adults could also use a wooden yoke shaped to fit the shoulders and extending outwards with a chain either side. As I grew I made many such journeys with stops on the way, usually at the local forge, held by the darkness within, its glowing fire, the hiss of quenching steam, the ring of hammer on anvil, and even more exciting the adding of metal tyres to wooden wheels. This took place outside; a large flat heavy circular plate with a central hole large enough to receive the wheel's hub allowed the wheel rim to lay flat on the plate, a pre-heated metal tyre was hurriedly hammered into position by several men and then promptly cooled with water, the shrinking tyre tightening the whole wheel. Opposite the forge was a pond, where when the forge was 'resting' I would skim flat stones across its smooth algae covered surface. Adjacent to the pond was a farm house where I collected a daily milk supply, ladled into gran's small milk churn from a large flat bowl protected with an edge-beaded cloth. This small dairy always seemed to be full of sunlight.The cottage windows were small, adding to the comfortable gloom within although the main door was always open, only the worst of weather or cold would see it closed. As it was often open during the evening darkness I became interested in the night sky, with no light pollution - weather permitting – I was held by what I saw, simply not available in central London. I guess this was the start of my life-long interest in Astronomy. Life centred on the living room with its range, it was needed throughout the year for cooking and grandad was kept busy cutting forest thinnings for its provision, he also maintained a large garden which provided most of their needs, he was seventy plus and I spent much useful time watching how he dug and tended the crops, helping him in small ways, *(a direct benefit to my wartime allotment, scythed, or so I thought, by an adjacent doodle bug ? or eaten perhaps.)* The property had an outside closet and sitting on the warm wooden seat with dusty sunbeams streaming through the structure's empty knotholes remains a vivid memory, and of course there was something to read.The cottage and its contents made me conscious of the passage of time, perhaps unusual in a young boy, but the atmosphere was heavily redolent of past events. With grandparents of mid-Victorian origin, their memories and mementos fresh from the last great upheaval, namely world war one, in which two of their sons were wounded, (George and Harry) meant that whenever family or friends appeared the conflict and iaftermath would often arise in conversation. One visitor in particular revived even earlier times, not by what he said but by his dress. He was probably in his seventies and always referred to as 'old Brazier' ('Braysher'?) he wore what in retrospect seemed to be clerical garb, a long black waisted-coat fully buttoned with black fitted gaiters, buttoned and extended spat-like over his shoes, just like our Soho flower lady he had persisted with Victorian dress, but in spite of appearances he was not a cleric. He called often to see grandad but uncle Wilf mischievously suggested he fancied gran, she was in her

sixties and could sit on her long iron grey hair – I watched with great interest as she brushed, plaited, and gathered all into a neat bun. She was a resourceful lady, kept her home spick and span, cooked and preserved, made large amounts of wine each year, and found time to act as the local unofficial midwife. She went everywhere on an old upright with a large basket up front, the machine creaked and groaned as pressure was applied to the pedals, and when punctures occurred she was highly competent in their repair. Apart from her midwifery she also laid out the dead, in rural areas these services seemed to combine, she had a fund of stories, I only remember the gorier variety, her arriving to attend to the deceased and finding that rats had reached the corpse before her, or perhaps as distressing attending to farm girls giving birth on the barn straw.

The cottages other front room – seldom used – and its contents added to my sense of the past, a large round Victorian pedestal table stood amidships which groaned slightly as I leaned on its edge, along with other furniture it was well polished, granny Sitch was a stickler where furniture and brasses were concerned, even the brass nose cones from anti aircraft shells found in the surrounding countryside were lovingly restored! A Dulcimer sat on the table top, 'Uncle' he of gran's second brood was the sometime user. High on one wall was an antlered head attached to a wooden shield, a handsome beast. To its right a large reproduction of a typical Victorian painting depicting a last desperate stand by heroic British soldiers, stoutly posed in their pith helmets with evidence of bandages and blood, and in the encircling gloom wild Dervishes closed in for the kill. I spent much time studying the detail. Nearby stood a sepia photograph in a treacle-coloured Birdseye Maple frame, it showed gran's first husband grandfather Brewster peering over the edge of a bricked well parapet, wearing the small peaked cap of the period. In the corner of the room stood a couple of shotguns used mainly by 'Uncle' to fill the pot. The silence of those times – just the various horse drawn carts scrunching into earshot; the occasional motor vehicle; slow moving upright bicycles creaking along the pea-gravel roads; wireless broadcasts strictly rationed (batteries and accumulators were expensive) added to the stillness which impressed me, and which contrasted so acutely with the sounds of Soho. It was about this time I became aware of a London family who at weekends and holidays occupied an old gypsy caravan opposite our cottage. In particular, their daughter, being of similar age

*Figure 17: The **Brewster's Ingatestone cottage. Granny Brewster** standing in doorway (white apron) **Grandfather Brewster** died 1907. Gran met& Married **Alfred Sitch**, moving to **Highwood.***

(10 perhaps) caused me to view the opposite sex in ways, new to me but not unwelcome. I was used to girls at school of course, but this was a new experience, our families did not mix and I could only gaze from afar – one of life's little milestones.

When family and friends gathered it was usual on Sunday for the men headed by grandfather Sitch to walk a mile and a half to their favourite pub 'The Cricketers' passing on route 'The Viper' a no-go for grandad, for reasons probably known only to himself. He would select a walking stick from a large brass shell case - polished by you know who - which stood by the ever open front door, the remaining males would then take their pick of assorted sticks and set out at the leaders pace. The route heading for Ingatestone took a short cut through an oak wood, the dappled light falling through the foliage of well - spaced trees fell on ferns and rosebay willowherb, whether I was trailing or racing ahead the experience is firmly etched in my memory, sadly the wood no longer exists. As usual on reaching the pub I sat outside and consumed my lemonade and arrowroot biscuit, listening to the familiar sounds of gentle merriment from within. The return journey was cheerful, uplifted no doubt by the prospect of dinner, I certainly shared the feeling. Suet pudding was usually in evidence for both savoury and sweet, meat varied, I can remember dad carving Pigeon breasts. Grandad had his particular seat at the table and his own cutlery, afterwards he would settle into his windsor chair by the stove, opposite the small window to which his gaze was invariably directed, having just filled and lit his pipe, selected from a well stocked rack that hung by his chair. Next to him stood a similar but smaller chair which if not occupied by gran was used by visitors to chat comfortably with grandad, whilst all and sundry would sample gran's home-made wine, usually rhubarb or dandelion. These were brewed in a corner copper standing in one of the rear kitchens, and very large un-corked glazed pottery flagons would then allow the mixture to bubble and ferment.

In the earlier part of the decade grandfather Sitch was more involved with his horse trading, water divining and smallholding activities. He owned a nearby farmyard with barn and housing for assorted stock, and fronted by a small cottage, in which I was born, this was occupied at the time by Wilf and his young wife Em. Presumably I was delivered by gran, and being a ten pounder and chubby with it, Wilf likened me to an American ball-swinger popular at the time called 'Soskino' and I was thereafter referred to as 'Sos', thankfully no longer. A particular memory of those earlier years was riding in grandad's pony and trap, a lightweight vehicle, open but snug, with a small rear access door reached via a single suspended metal step, with a bench seat on each side. The reins held by grandad and confined at the front by a metal rod hoop snaked along the pony's harness to the mouth bit, the rhythmic trot together with the nearness and power of the animal held me enthralled. It was grandad who during one spell of haymaking gently removed from my grasp a pitchfork I was wielding rather

dangerously, took me to the nearest hedge, and with his ever present penknife cut a me stick of appropriate length with a forked end.

Another prominent memory involved sleeping arrangements when the cottage was full. I was quite small and found myself tucked in between my grandparents, although snug and warm, when one or both rolled outwards I lay in a warm tunnel untouched by either, or the bed clothes above, when one or both rolled inwards they and the bed clothes descended upon me, a tight but not unpleasant experience. Another recollection was when a little older being taken up to bed by gran. The cottage staircases were built into the recesses either side of the chimney breast, extremely steep and enclosed by cupboard doors, she would lead the way carrying an oil lamp holding on to the stair treads as she went. Once I was tucked in - a feather mattress and pillow - she would descend carefully, her shadow enlarged with the light slowly fading, it mattered not, I slept soundly until morning sunshine came through the yellow curtains, and that punctual cyclist creaked his way past the cottage whistling those trills that I have attempted to emulate ever since.

The ten years from my earliest memories in 1929 to the outbreak of war in 1939, were as for any child, highly formative and It seems to me I had the best of both worlds, the protective and intimate nature of Soho, small, defined, but within its borders safely and fully available to our rambling exploratory activities; contrasting with country visits throughout the decade providing an experience of rural life unknown to many of my Soho peers. Although seen through young and uncritical eyes, the pace of country life, the open Essex countryside, not flat but gently undulating, with much to explore, made a deep impression on my boyhood years. Added to this the kindness and concern of our country relatives, their basic good humour, all expressed with their friendly elongated vowels have, when recollected in later life, been both warming and sustaining.

The late twenties and much of the thirties was a period of acute economic depression. I was naturally unaware of such difficulties, except perhaps a growing awareness that money in its most basic form was hard to come by. In spite of serious unemployment both parents were in work, albeit menial, with low pay and long hours, It was particularly hard on my mother, who over time developed a noticeable lateral curvature of the spine, the discomfort of which was worsened by her various cleaning jobs. Partial relief was to come when, soon after the outbreak of war dad changed his job and became caretaker at number 1 Savile Row for Hawkes & Co. military tailors of long standing. Accommodation, heat and light included, plus the cosiness of a basement pad, made a welcome change for both parents.

The year proceeding September ‘39 witnessed increasing

preparation for what was to come. How much of this activity registered with myself and my peers is difficult to recall, our vicarious experiences of war were absorbed from the silver screen, our magazines, the press, and the recollections of our elders. We saw the street exercises of wardens in the newly formed ARP (air raid precautions), air-raid shelters were being dug into green spaces, and protective sand-bag structures appeared in a variety of positions.

I remember being impressed by the neatness of some of these constructions and in later life having acquired some knowledge of architectural styles I saw a likeness between the very neat sandbag jointing with their external faces sloping back towards the top, (meticulously so) and the ancient stone walls of South American and Egyptian civilisations. (Some may find this rather fanciful but the care with which some sand-bag walls were erected compelled that retrospective comparison)

One particular memory stands out, namely the 1938 crisis when prime minister Chamberlain returned from Munich flourishing a piece of paper and declaring its significance for 'peace in our time'. The memory is sharp because a large number of Soho residents had gathered outside Marshall St. Baths, - a sand – bagged ARP post if I remember correctly – to listen to a broadcast on the emergency. *It has occurred to me since that historically where better to gather the latest news than the local bath house.*

Margaret and I had by this time left London because September 1st 1939 saw the mass evacuation of children into the countryside. She to a kindly childless couple in Castle Combe, Wiltshire, staying for the full duration of the war, I to a friendly billet near Malmesbury, also in Wiltshire. On the 3rd of September having received a massive cooked breakfast from my host, (I was just into my teens and growing fast), we listened to the wireless and heard the then Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announce that as from 11am we were at war with Germany.

My Soho childhood was over.

Henry Long 2008