EARLY DAYS.

Every good story begins 'Once upon a time - -' and in my case the time was the twenty sixth of April, in the year 1893, when a good proportion of the map of the world was printed in red, and the "Widow of Windsor" was still firmly on the throne. I first saw the light of day in a bedroom above my father's open-fronted blacksmith's shop at 121 Falsgrave Road, Scarborough, in the North Riding of Yorkshire. I remember, as a very small boy, watching my father shoe horses in the forecourt, and cringe as the red-hot shoes were brought up, held in long-handled tongs, to bed into the upraised hoofs. As I write, I can hear the hiss as the hot shoe touched the foot, and see and smell the cloud of acrid smoke that arose. I used to marvel at the skill with which the nails were driven through the horny hoof, and their points clenched over with a deft twist of the hammer claws.

For my fourth birthday I was given a tricycle on which I spent many happy hours. It was fitted with cranks and pedals on the front axle, and a brightly painted horse's head in place of the usual handlebars. I was riding on it round the back-shop one day, where the horses waiting to be shod were tied up, and, without thinking, rode right under one of the great patient beasts. Fortunately for me, the horse never moved a muscle, although my cap actually brushed against its belly as I passed beneath it.

My first experience of school life was at the long-gone Infants' School which stood on the west side of Sitwell Street, but my sole recollection of the place is that we had to march into school to the sound of an ancient piano, played with more enthusiasm than accuracy by one of the teachers. My first real memories of schooling are of the Falsgrave Boys' School, to which I was soon moved. The classrooms were very steeply raked, each row of desks being set higher than the one in front, to enable the teacher, seated at his own tall desk or standing at the blackboard, to exercise maximum surveillance. My own desk was in the 'gods', on the back row. Most lessons were on one of the three R's, with, on occasion, singing or religious instruction. No paper, pens or pencils for us. We used slates and noisy slate pencils, the latter kept sharp on a special hard stone kept under the school store shed.

School hours were 9 to 12 and 1.30 to 4, with mid-morning and mid-afternoon 'play-time' breaks. Play-time brought a mad dash to the toilet blocks, then leap-frog, bell-'osses and similar noisy and boisterous games, unless the weather was very bad. Punishments were usually caning on the hand or being 'kept-in' after school. School meals, school milk and tuck shops were unheard of. To vary the monotony for pupils and teachers alike, we had frequent outings in suitable weather. These usually took the form of rambles, say up Jacob's Ladder, across the racecourse top, and back by Raincliffe Woods.

Saturdays were our only free times, but most boy's parents found plenty of work to keep them out of mischief. What happened on Sundays? Well, twice to Sunday School and to chapel in the evening with my parents. My father died in 1905 at the early age of 45. I had just won a scholarship to the then Municipal School, which later became the Boys'High School in Westwood. The building later became the second home of the Theatre in the Round, given international importance by Sir Alan Ayckbourn. The death of my father meant that I had to leave school to become the family breadwinner. I was twelve years old.

While still at school, most of my holidays had been spent at my grandfather's farm, at Snainton. In summer, I used to play in the fields and go swimming in the 'brick pond'. On one occasion, my

grandmother, hearing that there was a fish cart in the village, sent me with a dish and sixpence to buy a dozen fresh herrings. On my return, there was great consternation to find that I had been given only ten fish. I was sent off at once to the New Inn to see my uncle, who worked there, and get him to intercept the cheating fishmonger and extract the missing herrings from him. Sadly, it was too late, for by now the rogue and his load had moved on, and were nowhere to be found.

As a small boy, I usually wore a shirt, a blouse, and shorts. In those days, the latter were usually referred to as ‘knickers’. The corresponding girls’ garments, were known as ‘drawers’, if they were referred to at all. The term ‘pants’ was reserved for the now extinct ‘long Johns’. I wore knee-length knitted woollen socks, called stockings, with a patterned fold-over cuff which concealed an elastic garter, and very sturdy boots, usually with studs or hob-nails in the soles. The heels, and often the toes of these boots were further protected by steel plates or Blakey’s ‘segs’. With all this ironmongery and the thick leather soles and heels, our footwear for most of the year was very heavy indeed. During the summer holidays, but never on Sundays, I was permitted to wear ‘sandshoes’ or ‘plimsolls’ instead of boots, and to go barefoot on the beach or in the meadows. At last I graduated to my first suit, with the coveted ‘long trousers’. This was purchased from Darlings, the tailors at 119 Falsgrave Road, next door but one to the smithy. It was a very good one indeed, and cost five pounds, a month’s wages for many a working man in those days.

There were no Parent-Teacher Associations in those days, and no school parties, although occasions such as Empire Day were celebrated with parades and pageants, much brass-band activity and the enthusiastic thumping of bass drums. Then the boredom of long-winded orations by some civic worthy or visiting big-wig. Happily, public-address systems being as yet unknown, it was often possible to miss the speeches entirely by sitting as far away from the platform as the venue permitted.

Sunday School was a different matter. Here, parties and ‘treats’ were frequent, with games like ‘ring-a-roses’ and similar high excitements. Strange, but looking back I realise that the most popular of these games were those that involved kissing. The nearest thing to a tuck-shop that we had was a small sweets and tobacconists next to Falsgrave School. It was run by Miss Haynes, for whom I used to run errands, such as fetching her mid-day meal – between two plates and wrapped in a cloth with its four corners knotted together at the top – from her mother, who lived at the corner of St. John’s Road and Hampton Road. For this I would receive a small chocolate bar. I was between ten and eleven at the time.

In my earliest days, most roads, both rural and urban, were surfaced with rough stone, with cobbles or stone setts – often laid in artistic patterns – on the steepest and busiest streets in the town. Traffic was pedestrian for the most part, with a few intrepid cyclists. Horses were used to pull the drays, carts and rullies which carried the heavier commercial traffic. Customers’ purchases were often delivered by tradesmen and shopkeepers, usually either by hand-cart or by carrier bicycle, and the delivery boys often had a hard time of it in bad weather, and in the steeper parts of the town.

Apart from exhaust fumes, there are few unpleasant smells in the town today, but then the odour of horse-droppings was all-pervading, mingling with the sharper and more pungent stench of horse-urine. During the herring-fishing season, the harbour area and the lower part of Eastborough became almost too noisome to be tolerated, much more so than anyone would put up with today.

The first car, carrying registration number AJ 1, arrived in the town at the beginning of the new century, but there seems to be some doubt as to whether it belonged to one of the local Police chiefs or to a local journalist. It was some time after this before petrol or steam driven vehicles were in use in any numbers. Soon after they appeared, the Corporation began a comprehensive road improvement scheme Among a number of other innovations, this involved the trundling to and fro of massive steam-rollers. At first, each of these hissing, snarling clanking monsters had to be preceded, whenever it moved, by an individual bearing a red flag, and armed with a horn. The object of all this was supposed to be to warn all around that the steam-roller, rushing along at fully two miles an hour, was bearing down upon them. However, the noise and general commotion attendant upon the movement of such a piece of machinery could be guaranteed to have frightened all the horses and other excitable creatures within a considerable radius long before the flag-bearer hove in sight. This obstacle to progress was eventually removed, and all the main roads on the town were soon tarmacked, except where horses might have trouble with this kind of surface, such as the steep, very sharp left-hand turn from the foreshore leading up Eastborough, which the heavily-laden fish-rullies had to negotiate on their way to the goods station.

On some main roads, brick-sized wooden blocks were laid, with a covering of asphalt. This gave a quiet, resilient surface, which proved to be remarkably durable, even under the narrow, iron-tyred wheels of most of the traffic of those days. The last of these wooden blocks were removed in the early 1950s, and were sold for half-a-crown for a fifty pound sack from the Corporation's Dean Road Depot. Being soaked in creosote and covered with asphalt, they burned exceedingly well in living-room fireplaces, and kept many a family warm in those winters

My family were keen cyclists, and one day, having graduated from my 'horse-tricycle' to a small 'safety', I set off with my father and mother to visit some relatives in Aldborough in Holderness. In those days the village was some distance from the coast, but the relentless erosion of the soft clay cliffs has brought it to the sea's edge, and it seems that a very few more of the dreaded winter north-easters will sweep it away to join the many drowned farms and townships of this doomed part of the coast. We rode via Seamer and Spittal Corner, then climbed Staxton Hill and over the wolds through Foxholes and Langtoft to Driffield, where we had lunch. Our next stop was at Mappleton church, and while we were admiring its unusual spire, the vicar came out to have a word with us. Strangers, particularly cyclists, were scarce in those days. Seeing the smallest member of the party, he asked my age. I was six, and on receiving this information he made a hasty dash back to the vicarage for his camera. In due course, one of the photographs he then took appeared over the caption 'The Youngest Cyclist in Yorkshire' in the 'Sunday Companion'. I wonder if that periodical still flourishes, and if anyone still retains a copy of the issue in which appeared that very proud small boy, clutching the handlebars of his most treasured possession.

During my long life, the town has seen many changes. Some have been slow and barely perceptible. Some have been fast and dramatic. One that was certainly slow, but which was far reaching and dramatic in its effects occurred in my early childhood. It was the construction of the Marine Drive. Year after year the winter seas effortlessly, and almost contemptuously, undid the work of those who all summer long had laboured to complete the task. However, despite all the setbacks, it was finally finished. I have what I believe to be the rare distinction of having been round the Castle Foot on land before the Marine Drive existed. Truth to tell, my father carried me part of the way, obstructed as it was by huge boulders, covered by slimy weed.

The advent of the tramway was the next major change to the transport system of the town. First, the rails were laid, with a fine disregard for the convenience of other road users. Most of the routes were ‘double-tracked’, but where the roadway narrowed so much as to make this impractical, as at the Westborough end of Aberdeen Walk, recourse was had to ‘gauntletting', to obviate the use of points. The trams were small, open-topped double-deckers, mounted on four-wheeled frames, with both axles driven. The lower deck had two longitudinal seats, facing inwards, running the full length of each side. Since these were of bare, polished wood, and the motors of considerable power, I regret that we extracted considerable amusement from sitting as far forward as possible in a tram starting up Eastborough from the Foreshore, or up Vernon Road from the valley, so that when the driver applied full power to negotiate the steep, sharp upward bend, it was possible, by lifting one’s feet slightly off the floor, to slide sparantly helplessly along the polished seat and collide heavily with any passenger seated further down the car.

The seating on the upper deck, fully exposed to wind and weather, consisted of slatted wooden single or double reversible seats. From the centre of this deck rose a stout wooden pole, to the top of which was hinged the collector or trolley pole, bearing at its end a grooved brass wheel, kept pressed against the underside of one of the overhead power wires by the springiness of the trolley pole.The power wires were supported by metal posts which had been erected, some in the centre, but most at the side, of the roads. Until quite recently, some of these posts were still in situ, in use as lamp standards. When all parts of the installation had been completed and tested, came the great day when the first tram, gaily decorated, swept majestically out of the Scalby Road depot. It was driven by the then Mayoress of Scarborough, assisted by Driver Tibbett. Once out on the main road, disaster struck. By some oversight, the collector wheel had been set on the offside wire, and the trolley pole fouled one of the supporting standards. With a mighty clatter, and amid a shower of sparks, the inaugural trip ground to an ignominious halt. No injury or material damage was sustained, although some embarrassment occurred. The collector wheel was quickly reinstated – on the correct wire this time – and the rest of the journey passed off with no further untoward incident and amid considerable enthusiasm.

Soon after the advent of the trams, the first motor buses and coaches appeared in the town. In the main, they were for some time unreliable, noisy, smelly, and grossly underpowered. They were most uncomfortable for both crew and passengers, and the trams were able to hold them at bay over the town routes until the late 1920s. Some of these early vehicles - all petrol engined, since steam had not caught on, and diesel was unknown – were of very strange design. All had solid rubber tyres. One type, known locally as a ‘toast-rack’, resembled a long, flat-bed lorry with a number of wooden benches mounted transversely across it. There was nothing to prevent a passenger falling off a seat on to the road. These vehicles had a number of flat-topped iron half-hoops bolted to the sides of the chassis and extending over the heads of the passengers – giving a slight resemblance to a toast rack – over which it was possible to draw a heavy canvas hood in bad weather. There were no side-screens, so protection was somewhat inadequate. Because of their manifold disadvantages, their use was usually confined to providing a shuttle service between the bays on fine days in summer. Another, somewhat earlier type of coach, proved more successful. It was regularly used for country routes and as a hire vehicle for organised parties. It had transverse rows of upholstered seats, with a low door at the end of each row.The bed was steeply raked, like the rows of desks in my old school. In some models, the rear rows were so high off the ground that it was necessary to carry a short set of folding steps to mount and dismount. The hoods resembled, in design, although very much larger, the folding hoods fitted to the bath chairs and perambulators of the period.

The first open-topped double-decked buses appeared in any number just after the first World War. These had steep, sweeping curved stairs, open to the elements, at the rear, to give access to the upper deck. The driver, too, had little protection, with only a very inadequate windscreen in front of him. But at least he was seated, while the tram drivers, with no protection in front or at either side, had to remain on their feet at all times

With so little vehicular traffic, there were few road accidents in those days, but those that did occur tended towards the spectacular. Among the more memorable was one involving a runaway tram on Vernon Road. For some reason which was never discovered, both wheel and track brakes failed, and the vehicle ran out of control the full length of the hill. It was carrying conductor, driver and only a single passenger at the time. The conductor 'abandoned ship' as soon as he realised what was happening, but the driver continued to struggle fruitlessly with his now useless controls and the sole passenger, apparently resigned to his fate, remained in his seat on the lower deck. At the foot of the hill, the track turned sharply to the left. The tram, however, did not. It continued straight on, and still upright, nose-dived some twelve feet into what was then the Aquarium Ballroom, and is now an underground car-park. The driver and passenger walked away without a scratch, but the conductor sustained a broken leg when he bailed out. None of the thick, heavy glass of the tram's windows was broken, but the front of the chassis was buckled.

When the trams were in full operation, they could move a large number of people in a very short time. A line of trams for various parts of the town would wait on the Spa approach road when there was a function at the theatre, ballroom or hall, and everyone could be clear of the Spa in less than twenty minutes. It takes a good deal longer today. Few traces of the extensive tramway network, which extended from Scalby Road to the East Pier, and from the Alexandra Gardens to the Spa, now remain.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, many changes and developments took place in the town, especially on the North Side. Peasholm Park boasted a popular and busy boating lake. What had been a wild tract of woodland with a muddy stream trickling through it was no longer 'Wilson's Wood', but had become 'Peasholm Glen', straddled at its head by a graceful single-arch road bridge. This was described by one eminent authority as 'the most beautiful thing that ever came out of a bag of cement', which it could well have been until quite recently, when some Council vandal had the triple-light globe clusters, which formed an important and integral part of the original design, replaced by featureless standardised street lamps.

In the season, the Galas held in Peasholm Park each fine Wednesday drew capacity crowds. They became quite an institution with residents and visitors alike, as did the MC, Mr Walker, under whose benign but despotic control they were run. Tub races, comic canoe races, a greasy pole competition, a wonderful exploding house, called 'Heltopop', inhabited by a pair of crazy tramps, and, to end the festivities, a fine display of fireworks, often became the high spot of a visitor's holiday. Then came a series of events which were to bring even more profound changes to the town, and of which I hope to write more later.

Wilf. Sherwood 1983.

Sadly, the author died 1987 before he had set down further reminiscences.

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