

LOOKING BACK

The Life of a Spittal Back Street Boy during the early 1940's and 1950's. These are his recollections in his words.

He was born at the start of the second world war and his early childhood was playing in the back streets of Spittal along with his playmates. A lot of his time was playing in the bushes in the park in West Street. He was brought up during the second world war but he never lacked for any good food as his father kept hens and looked after pigs so there was never any shortage of eggs and bacon plus chickens at Christmas time. His toys consisted of a wheelbarrow made by his Dad, a tyre from an old car which he used to play with at buses and cars, and for football. He and his friends played with a pig's bladder which was blown up to bursting point.

When he was a bit older, he spent a lot of time on the beach, the Bank Heads and the Side Cutting. It was great when there had been a flood in the river and interesting items including dead animals were washed up on the beach that could be poked at with sticks. He and his friends used to build large bonfires on the beach and threw anything they could find on to them. There was no money to spare in the household, so his father used to re-sole his boots and shoes with pieces of leather cut from old pieces of horse harness. Much of his spare time was spent helping his dad to look after the hens, and pigs and vegetables in the large garden behind the house. The fresh vegetables were available all year round so no one went hungry. The lavatory was outside across the yard which was bad enough in daylight but not so good in the dark as there were no lights outside as the house was lit by gaslight. It was of course wartime, so no lights were to be shown anyway. Toilet paper was a luxury that few people could afford so newspaper was used in its place. At least people could sit down and read yesterday's news if they were going to be spending awhile outside. He was very lucky as his house had a cold tap and sink in the kitchen which was their only water supply in the house.

Many of his neighbours only had one outside tap in the middle of a yard and shared one toilet amongst four families. All the water they required had to be carried in and stored in a bucket in the house. When he was small the bath was a tin bath in front of an open fire which was filled with hot water from a large kettle, which was permanently on the side of the kitchen range to provide a constant supply of hot water. There was only gas lighting in the house so when he went upstairs to bed the only light to guide him was a small oil lamp and when it was extinguished there was total darkness. An Army greatcoat was placed on top of the bed for extra warmth as there was no heating in the house apart from a range in the kitchen and a fire in the front room, which was only lit occasionally.

He started Spittal Primary School on his fifth birthday, being taken there by his sister and left to get on with it. After being there a few weeks he got fed up with school and ran home only to be hauled back and made to stay after that. One day he fell out with his pal, and they decided to have a fight after school. The fight had only started when another boy ran in punched the pal on the nose making it bleed so both boys went home with their arms around each other's shoulders as great mates again. A lot of his time was spent with his schoolmates as they went around derelict gardens and houses. They had a lot of exciting times making gang huts in derelict gardens. They would dig a hole about six feet square by about three feet deep and cover it all with wood and discarded corrugated metal sheets. The top was then covered with any grass and vegetation, so it was hidden from view. They would then dig out a fireplace and fit in a piece of pipe to make a chimney and have a great time pretending to live rough.

The kettle from the kitchen range was used to heat the water for the weekly wash, which was done in the wash house across the yard. This was shared with another family, and each had their days for washing. There was a wash pot under which a fire had to be lit about six o'clock on a Monday morning to heat the cold water in the wash pot. This water had to be carried across the yard before the fire was lit regardless of the weather even if it was snowing, frosty, raining, or sunny. The clothes to be washed were placed in the wash pot and boiled and they were then moved to a poss tub and thumped with a heavy poss stick to clean them. They were then put through a heavy cast iron mangle to remove most of the water before being hung out on a line in the garden to dry. In the afternoon the clothes were brought in and ironed with a gas iron then hung on a clothes airer in front of the fire to dry off. On a wet day the clothes were hung around the house on any suitable area to dry. All the baking for the week was carried out on a Sunday which was the only day the oven was heated. Sticks were pushed under the oven to heat it up for baking. When he was about ten years old his parents bought a gas cooker which made a tremendous change in his Mother's life regarding cooking and heating water. About this time also a small gas boiler was installed which would heat about a gallon of hot water at a time.

When he was eleven years old he sat the eleven plus examination and did not pass to qualify for the Grammar School. He was quite happy not to have passed the exam as he would have had to wear a uniform for school. It also saved his parents money as they would have had to buy a uniform and equipment as money was still in short supply. He started attending Tweedmouth Modern School and had an enjoyable time there as he could cope with most of the work and had few problems. He was given the cane quite a number of times by the headmaster Mr. Gleig but he felt it never did him any harm. He never told his parents he had been caned as that would have been more trouble at home. Sport was not one of his favourite subjects but he could perform fairly well with the discus and 100 yard sprint. He was never chosen for any of the sports teams and was usually left with few of his pals to kick a ball around the corner of the field while the others played their football and cricket. This suited him as his pals were not competitive either. When Physical Training was held in the school gym it was done in shorts and bare feet with no vest on and it was rather cold when you had to lie flat on your back on the cold floor. When he was thirteen the class were asked to go home and ask their parents if they wanted their child to sit the thirteen plus examination for the Grammar School. Most pupils were quite happy where they were and did not pass on this information from the school.

When he was 13 years of age his parents bought him a bicycle from Dunlop's Shop in Berwick for £19 of which he paid £2 himself. This opened up new avenues of exploration, as he was now able to cycle to places in the surrounding area where he had never ventured before. He now managed to explore the New Road, the Plantation, the Pier, the Bathing Ponds and many other places. Before this the only cycle he and his friend had was an old scrap bike with no tyres on, no seat and handlebars which would not turn. An old bag was tied on to where there should have been a seat. They used to push each other back and forwards along the Bank Heads. He left school at age fifteen and was let loose into the world having enjoyed all his childhood escapades.

Mr Anonymous.