The Bootle Boy

Praise for *The Bootle Boy*

'A delightful autobiography … honest, revealing and a beautifully written page-turner … No one has worked more closely and for longer with Rupert Murdoch than Les Hinton, but he does not shy away from criticism of Murdoch's mistakes.'
William Shawcross

'A terrific memoir by one of the all-time great newspapermen.'
Piers Morgan

'Les Hinton lifts the lid on his 52 years working with the media mogul Rupert Murdoch and it yields a rich crop of anecdotes.'
The Times

'A great romp of a journalistic memoir.'
The Sunday Times

'It vividly captures the rise and fall of the press over 60 years… [no] acolyte's paean.'
The i Paper

'Pacy and engrossing … overflowing with the names of the rich and famous, from Yoko Ono, Johnny Rotten, Graham Greene … to Bill Clinton, Princess Diana and Gordon Brown.'
British Journalism Review

'Les Hinton's story is about the glory and the tragedy of the newspaper business. He knows all the secrets of this tale and few are more clear-eyed than him when they tell it.'
Michael Wolff

Praise for Les Hinton's novel *Dying Days*

'An original story told with frightening conviction
told by a damn good writer. Could it happen?'
Jeffrey Archer

'A breathtaking novel.'
Michael Dobbs, author of *House of Cards*

'A brilliantly feasible and gripping thriller about power,
corruption and lies among the global elite.'
Daily Mirror

'Hold the front page, Hinton's debut thriller is a belter.'
Daily Express

'A super nail-biting thriller.'
The Sun

'Suspenseful and well-plotted.'
The Times

'An awesome debut . . . a rattling good page-riffling yarn.'
Irish Independent

'A must-read … Hinton skilfully deploys his inside
knowledge of the news business to conjure up the
fading world of Fleet Street.'
Financial Times

‘Thrilling tale of an attempt to destabilise media . . .
crammed with insider knowledge.’
Daily Mail

‘Very enjoyable . . . Hinton has elegantly exchanged mastery
of press prose for prose about the press.’
British Journalism Review

Les Hinton

The Bootle Boy

My Untidy Life



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For my Kath,
thank you, thank you

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Preface

I HESITATED, for a number of reasons, before writing this story.

First, I was afraid I might not have it in me to sit alone for months on end completing a 450-page book. When I worked as a reporter, writing was mostly a hasty activity in noisy newsrooms, or on the road, scribbling into notebooks. Writing a book is different: without a looming deadline and a fierce editor hovering, an inner discipline is required and I wasn't sure I could find mine.

Second, a leading character in my story is Rupert Murdoch, a man with many critics. I disagreed with the harshest among them, even though they weren't wrong on everything. But I couldn't work out how to tell my story without being accused of biting the hand that fed me for half a century, or of coming across as a brainwashed Murdoch cultist.

Third, writing an autobiography seemed to be the ultimate act of conceit. Not, of course, if you're Winston Churchill, or Ulysses S. Grant; for people such as them it's different. For most others, it seemed self-indulgence.

In the end, I overcame these doubts. My self-indulgence and conceit defeated any modesty; I grew to love those lonely hours at a keyboard; and, on the matter of my old boss, I must have found a decent balance, given the critics pretty well balanced themselves out when the first edition of this book was published in 2018.

Also, it wasn't until I started writing that I realised I had a story that deserved to be told.

It has adventure, happiness, heartbreak, fame, power, triumph, failure, and a little danger now and then. It's about a wandering little boy who witnessed, without knowing it at the time, the dying days of the British Empire. It's about a man who watched first-hand as a great industry was swept away, in an almost incomprehensible wave of technological change, to become the greatest casualty so far in the battle for the world's most precious resource – human attention.

I was born three months before D-Day in the bomb-wrecked docklands of Bootle, Merseyside, in the front room of a tenement without electricity. My father was an army cook who hauled his wife and three children across the post-war world. At the age of fifteen, I found my first job as an office boy on a local newspaper in the town of Adelaide, South Australia. A regular task was buying sandwiches for Rupert Murdoch, its twenty-eight-year-old proprietor. My travelling life with him went on and on for half a century.

I had gone in search of a successful life – who doesn't? – but there was no blueprint, no fantasy I was chasing, no mountaintop to reach. I was determined not to fail, that's all, but with no definition of what success might mean. I was just pushed on by events, grabbing randomly at every passing opportunity.

I saw the highest and lowest of life: I met presidents and prime ministers, monarchs, movie stars, the destitute and homeless and drug addicted. I watched a black-capped judge deliver the sentence of death; saw the piled-up, rotting corpses of massacred women and children in a war zone; the horrifying remains of what was the world's worst air disaster; and I survived an IRA bomb.

But anyone looking for guidance in the shaping of a life or career should not count on this story for much help. It might be entertaining,

but there's no life plan in here that I would recommend. It's been too untidy, too haphazard, and things went wrong too often.

It does demonstrate the power of perseverance, but that advice is too obvious to make it special, and perseverance can't be taught. Everyone knows you must keep pushing: never be discouraged by the disapproval of others, always walk towards your fears, etc. Maybe some readers will learn from my mistakes, but that's all I dare promise.

March 2026

CHAPTER 1

Uncle Bill's wedding ring

A LIFE BUILDS ON ITSELF, but its architecture follows no rules. It can appear at the beginning to have a strong foundation and then be swept away in the first storm, mystifying those who failed to see the flaws in its design. It can seem ramshackle, yet rebuild itself to withstand whirlwinds. My own life has surprised itself again and again. In my first 15 years, we moved so many times I didn't understand what people meant when they talked about the comfort of being 'home'. I still don't get it, but eventually, when I was older, I worked out my own personal definition. We lived in Egypt, Eritrea, Libya, Singapore, and the British occupied zone in West Germany – all places where, for one imperial reason or another, the British had some kind of control. They were the dying days of the Empire, and everywhere we went the sun was setting on it.

Between these postings – most of them lasting a couple of years – we existed in a limbo the army called 'transit', which meant spending weeks or months any place the military could make a deal to accommodate us. We stayed at seaside boarding-houses in the seedy charm of Blackpool by the promenade and near the pier in Southend-on-Sea. We lived in a green, corrugated-iron hut, insulated with asbestos, in a Liverpool suburb; and spent six months in a worn-out village hotel in the Scottish Highlands.

The rest of my life might be explained by the ingrained restlessness this childhood wandering created in me. I went to so many schools I cannot be sure of the count – in some, I was only there a couple of weeks – but they number somewhere around 13 in 10 years. I didn't keep any childhood friends until the age of 15, when Dad left the army and we went to live in Australia. The only name I remember is Brenda Laidler in Singapore, but she hardly even noticed me.

These foreign places evaporated behind us. Everyone was a nomad, so the families we left melted away as we did, off to their own new postings and own new worlds.

The only constant place for me was Bootle, a once-prosperous Lancashire hamlet, jammed hard against the docks of Liverpool, and shattered by war. If ever I had roots, they were here, and if a life's foundation begins with the ground from which it emerges then tough and blighted Bootle, and the people there who loved me, must go some way to understanding mine. First, I found safety and happiness there; then, in a complicated way, it was terrifying; and then, almost when I wasn't looking, the heart of my childhood was lost forever, its people gone and all its physical evidence erased.

Malcolm Street, where I was born, was a narrow, grey honeycomb of cobblestones, a dead-end flanked by small, bay-fronted Victorian terraces with no bathrooms, hot water, or indoor plumbing, except for a tap at each scullery sink. At the bottom of each hard-paved backyard was a brick outhouse.

At one end of the street, beyond a high red-brick wall, panting steam trains billowed coal smoke that clung to windows and washing. At the other end, St John's Road ran parallel to the mighty Liverpool docks half a mile west, near the point where the grey waters of the River Mersey flowed into Liverpool Bay. Auntie Gladys's house was here, and just

before dawn on Saturday 19 February 1944, I was born in her front parlour and placed on the floor in a laundry basket prepared with white cotton and lace. There was no electric light to illuminate the moment, only the ancient flicker of gaslight. It was 110 days before D-Day, so there was a lot of grief to counterbalance this happy family moment.

A few doors down, on the corner of Malcolm Street, at 149 St John's Road, was the home of my uncrushable grandmother, Edith Emily Bruce, the widowed mother of 10. Her house was the chaotic and crowded gathering place for the extended Bruce family. Our house was three doors away from Auntie Gladys, who was my mother's identical twin; their sister, Emily, lived a hundred yards away; brothers and cousins were a walk.

The four-page edition of the *Liverpool Echo* announcing my birth carried more significant news: 'STUTTGART Attacked In GREAT STRENGTH By Our HEAVIES' … 'Battering For Great Nazi Rail Centre' … 'NAZIS FALL BACK' … 'DEAD GERMANS IN HEAPS'. By the time I was born, the Luftwaffe had already devastated our dockside neighbourhood. After London, Merseyside got the worst of the blitz; newspapers said bombs destroyed or damaged up to 90 per cent of the homes in Bootle.

Merseyside was the key western port in the Battle of the Atlantic, and destroying its docks and railway system was central to the Nazi effort to starve and subjugate the country. Britain was isolated from occupied Europe, and ships carrying food and arms from the United States and Canada had to reach here past a blockade of enemy U-boats.

Living in the middle of this was my family of cleaning ladies, cooks, seamstresses, boilermakers, dockworkers, and tailors. Their terraced homes were in the bull's-eye, sandwiched between railway lines and docks. They had nowhere to go except the uncertain safety of their Anderson shelters, the build-it-yourself refuges that came with a spanner,

nuts and bolts, and a page of instructions. An Anderson was less than 6-foot high, not much longer, and intended to accommodate six people. Each day, they carried gas masks to their jobs in the factories and wharves nearby, past the ruins and wrecked ships. Above them, tethered by long cables, were the floating hulks of barrage balloons, there to thwart low flying attacks. At night, they lived behind blackout curtains.

The worst time was the May blitz of 1941, Merseyside's deadliest air raid. In seven days, 680 German bombers dropped 960 tons of bombs and 112,000 firebombs. The May blitz killed more than 1700 people on Merseyside, including Uncle Bill, my mother's brother. He was the quiet son in a raucous family, a tailor, tall and thin with horn-rimmed spectacles. He went to work as an air raid warden on 4 May and was never seen again. In the ruin of a warehouse, they found a left hand and knew it was Uncle Bill's by the wedding ring engraved with the name of Rose, his wife. He was 34.

The scale of events overwhelmed such family tragedies. Mr and Mrs Richard Cruise, of Kirkdale, lost their three sons – Harry, William, and Peter – in action within eight months, and that only rated a short single column in the *Echo*.

I was born 18 months before the war ended, but in Europe the obliteration of German cities had already begun. When I was two days old, *The Times* of London reported that 2000 Allied aircraft had mounted 'the greatest daylight air assault of the war'. The night before, 1000 RAF bombers dropped 2300 tons on Leipzig alone.

Liverpool did what it could to live a normal life. A front-page advert in the *Echo* announced that Vera Lynn, the wartime singer famed as the British Forces' Sweetheart, was appearing at the Empire Theatre, two performances at 5.20pm and 7.45pm. *Gentleman Jim,* starring Errol Flynn, was showing at the Commodore, our local cinema.

The *Echo*'s conscientious editors found space to correct a mistake – a judge at Liverpool Assizes had not described the plaintiffs in a case as 'abominable' but 'admirable'.

An anxious Mr Edmund Percy wrote to the editor:

> Whilst one hails with delight the advent of a few oranges in this country, one views with dismay and disgust the amount of orange peel carelessly thrown upon our streets and sidewalks. Quite apart from untidyness [sic] this is a very dangerous practice and is likely to lead to very serious, if not fatal, accidents, especially in the blackout.

The peril of Mr Percy's killer orange peel is overshadowed on the page opposite, beneath dense columns of type headlined 'Local Casualties – News Of Our Men in The Forces'. The bleak listing of Merseyside's latest dead, missing, and captured is broken with tiny headshots of the smiling, tragic faces of young men in uniform. The headlines three pages later provide the context for Liverpool's grief – 'NAZIS' GREAT Anzio LOSSES' … 'AIR, SEA ONSLAUGHT' … 'Furious Gun Duels' … 'CASUALTIES "ENORMOUS"'.

My big sister Marilyn was three years old when war began. She remembers the noise and how buildings shook as the bombs fell, and being forbidden from using the top bunks because sleeping there meant being the first to die. During raids, the family shelter filled with the howls of Annie Laurie, the family's Scottish Terrier, who Mum said was 'shell-shocked' and driven crazy by the blitz.

In the panic of Bootle's first air raid, Marilyn – we always called her Mal – slipped from the satin-covered eiderdown in which our mother had wrapped her, and bounced down the stairs. Next morning, as the

family gathered in the back room at 149, my grandmother was less annoyed by the bombs than her daughter's carelessness. 'Well,' she said, picking up her bruised and swollen granddaughter, 'if Hitler doesn't get her, you certainly will.'

Along with the entire nation, my family was placed on a strict wartime diet to ration supplies of sugar, butter, margarine, cheese, jam, bacon, ham, and poultry. Ration books were buff-coloured for most people, but when my mother was expecting me she received a special green version, which meant extra eggs and milk, and the pick of what fruit there was. Blue books were for children between five and 15, guaranteeing more meat, fruit, and milk.

Ministry of Food advertising lauded the versatility of rationed food, even offering recipes. 'No limit to the tempting dishes you can make with dried eggs,' it promised.

Other advertising offered help in coping with the stresses of the time, promoting numerous and improbable cures for wartime nerves. Beecham's Powders showed a woman's anguished face with the line, 'I can't go on'. Beecham's, it promised, was 'a quick and certain remedy' for 'nerve pains' – 'thousands upon thousands resort to it with gladness the moment the attack commences', adding, 'Also recommended for toothaches, colds, and chills.'

For suffering children evacuated away from their families and the bombing, help was at hand – 'How Lucozade mothers home-sick kiddies.' Three or four glasses a day was the recommended dose.

Even chocolate was a necessity – 'Education officers all over the country have ordered supplies of Fry's chocolate as emergency rations for children. Because chocolate is a most valuable, highly-concentrated and energy-giving food, it is just the thing to keep children going in the event of temporary food-dislocation by air raids.'

Families were scattered by the war. In 1941, my father, Frank Arthur Hinton, was already enlisted when Mum joined the women's branch of the army, the ATS – Auxiliary Territorial Service. She signed on while angry after a row with my dad, the cause of which she subsequently forgot. It was an impulsive thing to do, especially since she had a five-year-old daughter. The recruitment office was unsympathetic when she returned next day, and declined to cancel her application.

Marilyn was sent to live with my father's parents, Frank and Magdalene Hinton, at their flat in Huyton, eight miles east. Huyton was not a Luftwaffe target. When the air raid siren sounded, instead of running to the public shelter, the family sat it out in the windowless hall of the flat. Grandad Hinton wore a big, black surgical boot on his left foot and was too slow to get to the shelter. He was a chef and had worn the boot since contracting blood poisoning after cleaning a contaminated rabbit.

My father's parents had a three-bedroom flat, with an indoor bathroom, and a kitchen with hot and cold running water. In the living room was a small electric fire; Marilyn had never seen one. Trees grew along the street, and wartime rationing somehow had less impact in the home of a chef. Visitors were offered tea, sandwiches, and cake, which sailed into the living room aboard a glistening chrome trolley. At Sunday lunch, strawberries and cream was served for 'afters'. Grandad Hinton was not so fearsome as first indicated by his wintry face and alarming limp. In the evenings, he would sit in his chair crafting butterflies and spiders out of silver wrapping paper, allowing himself a little smile as he presented them to Mal. Together, they planted apple seeds in a window box because Marilyn imagined they would quickly become trees.

When I was born, the war in Europe had 15 months to run, but the last air raid had been two years before. The closest I came to wartime

action was when I was two and my mother rushed with me into the street when an explosion rattled our windows. She said people were running and crying, and a column of smoke was rising from a fighter plane that had crashed in St John's Road. It was a Fleet Air Arm Fairey Firefly fighter. The pilot bailed out, but his plane killed a neighbour's child.

The last family casualty was Uncle Joe, who was an infantryman in the South Lancashire Regiment and went to fight the Japanese in Burma. Uncle Joe came home with terrifying tales of hacking his way through the jungle in steaming heat, and of his perilous crossing of the Irrawaddy River under machine-gun fire as his regiment advanced against the Japanese. When a soldier yards ahead of him was shot dead in the back of the neck, Uncle Joe said he ran to his side to see the fatal bullet stuck between his friend's teeth like a cigarette.

Disease was another lethal foe in Burma and that is what killed Uncle Joe. Dysentery, dengue fever, and malaria were common enemies in his war. He came home with tropical sprue, a digestive disease that basically destroys the body's ability to absorb nutrients. After the war there was no sure treatment, and Uncle Joe was almost always sick, constantly thin and pale. He spent much of his post-war life in and out of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine. He suffered the fatal wound of his war far longer than he was in action. Uncle Joe died in 1954, aged 41, nine years after the war ended. Sprue was responsible for many Allied deaths – an Indian research team estimated in 2006 that the disease accounted for one-sixth of casualties in India and Southeast Asia.

Air raids killed about 4,000 on Merseyside, but few knew the scale of the carnage at the time. The morning following attacks, after hours spent in the cramped darkness of their Anderson shelters, my family would turn on BBC radio news, reacting with bleak amusement as the announcer played down, or even ignored, what they had just been through.

For years after, lost buildings left great gaps in the streets. In many there were no buildings at all, only stretches of rubble, dusty pyramids of bricks, and high, lonely walls. The sight of young men in wheelchairs, or with missing arms and legs, was normal to me.

Mum said she never imagined that Germany would win the war, which was a testament both to her powers of self-delusion and a brilliant wartime propaganda machine. I wonder now how the country's spirit would have stood up in the era of 24-hour news, with Hitler's blitzkrieg coming live into their living rooms, his mighty Panzer divisions spearheading the greatest war machine in history as it swept across Europe.

While Bootle was a wasteland when I was born, my Auntie Gladys's parlour was meticulous. Families lived in cramped homes but reserved their front parlours for occasions. This is where people gathered around newborns and coffins. I would sit alone in my grandmother's parlour as a little boy. The room was cold and stale with a frayed effort at gentility. Antimacassars rested on the backs of chairs of carved wood and satin. They were laced and bright white, and no heads ever touched them. A yellowing music book was opened on the rack of an untuned upright piano. A grandfather clock stood still at 5.26. Photographs of long-dead relatives made it a shrine. Beautiful Auntie May, who died aged 20 in 1922, regarded visitors with an unwelcoming gaze. The parlour was dense with unlovely aspidistra plants. Aspidistras thrive in heat, cold, drought, bad light, and poor soil. Such an unconquerable survivor, so well adapted for hardship, must have been easy to identify with.

This may have been a tough and sooty dockland, but its streets bore incongruous names bestowed by high-minded Victorian burghers. They evoked Oxbridge colleges – Pembroke, Balliol, Exeter, and Hertford – and Shakespearean characters – Othello, Romeo, Juliet, and Viola.

'William Shakespeare' was the name of a local pub, and the art deco facade of the Commodore Cinema stood between Portia and Falstaff streets. Malcolm Street was named after the good guy in Macbeth. My younger brother was given the name of the next street, Duncan. My name was more up to date. I was named after Leslie Howard, who was a matinee-idol when the Luftwaffe shot down his plane eight months before I was born.

Once a village seaside resort, Bootle had long ago been swallowed by Liverpool; its gentility sacrificed for the industrial prosperity that made Merseyside one of the great trading posts of the British Empire, and a place of riches and proud architecture. By the end of the nineteenth century, Bootle was itself thriving. New railways crisscrossed the town, and its riverside houses and pubs had yielded to bustling docklands.

Bootle's promise made it a mecca for hopeful young men, including James Downie Bruce, a Scot from Kilwinning, Ayrshire. James was an apprentice boilermaker, and would become my maternal grandfather. On 15 September 1897, aged 21, he married a local girl, Edith Emily Brooks, who was 19. They had 10 children. My mother, Lilian Amy, was the eighth but only just; her twin sister Gladys arrived 10 minutes later.

My grandmother's marriage was unhappy. No one said a fond word about James Downie. The Bruce daughters repeated stories about their father: he had been a violent drunk whose arrival home, swaying and swearing, filled the house with fear.

One night, Grandma mistakenly put her hatpin into her husband's flat cap on the hallway hat stand. The hatpin was still there when James Downie put on his hat and walked to the pub. When he came home, my grandfather beat his wife for the mockery he had suffered from his drinking pals.

My grandmother attempted several times to leave her brutal husband, but he tracked her to every rooming house. When he died in 1916 after an accident at work, he left his wife seven gold sovereigns. My mother told stories of her unloving father as if she had been an eyewitness, but she was only two when he died.

If my grandfather was a brute, Grandma was forgiving to the point of saintliness. She always kept her dead husband's picture on the wall in the back room above the fireplace. It was a huge photograph of a solemnly handsome man who always seemed about to speak. His apprehensive gaze may have represented some quality of his personality, but was possibly nothing more than shock at the strange, new-fangled camera equipment that would have confronted him. He wore a fine moustache that was beginning to curl at each end, and a stiff Edwardian collar. A watch chain looped neatly across his waistcoat. To his left, in an elaborate pot, was an aspidistra.

All her life, my mother told stories of my grandmother's difficult life with her father. But the deepest sadness of the Bruce family was for my grandmother's lost children. Even allowing for the working-class mortality rates of the time, this was an unlucky house. Edith, her first-born, died as baby; John Douglas was 15 months; Auntie May was 20; Bill was killed in the blitz at 34. In 1916, a few weeks after the death of her 40-year-old husband, Grandma's tenth and last child, Jean, died aged three months.

Growing up with tales of James Downie seems to have rendered Bruce women suspicious of men. It was clear to me even when I was small, listening to my mother and her twin sister. They didn't often talk warmly of men. With the exception, that is, of Gregory Peck. My mum liked him, and always told me we looked exactly alike.

She also loved her older brothers, and her cousin Don, who had been brought up as a brother after his mother died. I think they were the big

laughing men who threw me high in the air until I touched Grandma's ceiling. Mum made them sound wild and admirable.

Dad was short and, when Mum brought her fiancé home to meet the family, her tall brothers walked around on their knees. She said her brothers were always in trouble, but smiled when telling stories about them. Uncle Jim, she said, had fired an air gun through the front door letterbox at a passing policeman's helmet and knocked it off.

I only remember Cousin Don and Uncle Dave. Dave was once a musician, and on the piano in the parlour he appeared in a framed photo, wearing a tuxedo, with a trumpet on his lap. He had a neat Clark Gable moustache and dark hair pasted back from his forehead. As a young man, he had played with big orchestras, but took a job in insurance after catching tuberculosis. Cousin Don had gone to night school, qualified as a ship's engineer, and gone on to a successful career in the maritime industry. All my childhood, he was held up to me as an example. Uncle Dave gave me a few piano lessons, and I wish I had kept them up.

Grandma Bruce – Edith Emily Bruce – was monumental to me. Born in 1878, when Disraeli was prime minister, she was a widow at 38, and worked two shifts a day as a cleaner while caring for her family. She had little money and no prospect of improving her circumstances, but was proud never to have ignored the landlord's knock. Her children were educated away from home by a charity for the poor.

Somehow she managed to save, and after her death in 1960 my mother bought me my first typewriter with the little she inherited. It was a portable Olivetti Lettera 22, a sleek and beautiful machine that travelled the world with me and now sits nearby, a battered veteran in happy retirement, as I type this on a MacBook Air.

Grandma Bruce was held in awe by her daughter as a woman of indestructible will who kept everything together in the face of engulfing

challenges. When her son's wife committed suicide, she had taken in their two children, a baby and a toddler, and raised them as her own. When another son had a daughter, and abandoned the mother, she had paid for the baby's upkeep – seven shillings and sixpence each month until she was 15. Nothing made her break.

It would be too tidy and romantic to say she coped with it all and managed to bring up a healthy and happy family. I'm not sure she did, but it must be some success in such a hardscrabble life that none of them ended up in prison.

Unable to support a big family, she had sent Mum and her twin sister Gladys to a children's home 55 miles away in Lancaster. They were eight years old. It was called the Ripley Hospital, but Mum always told us it was the 'Ripley School for the Children of Poor but Respectable Families'. The school had been built with the legacy of Thomas Ripley, a Lancaster publican's son who made his fortune as a merchant prince of Liverpool. It was a home for orphans and fatherless children in Lancaster and Liverpool, and there was an idiosyncratic condition for entry that qualified my mother and her twin; they lived within seven miles of Liverpool's Anglican cathedral.

Ripley offered strange lessons to its poor pupils, teaching little girls how to curtsy when presented in court, or how to behave in front of their servants. They were taught how to talk and how to walk. Mum liked demonstrating how she was made to walk balancing a book on her head, while making sure her toes touched the ground first with each step. I was confused, never having seen anyone walk in this fashion, before or since.

This kind of finishing-school learning was not much use when my mother left at the age of 14 for a job operating the lift in a dry-cleaning factory. It was a tough life in Bootle for a girl, her Scouse accent sanitised

by elocution lessons, who had been given the sense of entitlement that goes with preparations for the moment she would curtsy before the King.

Ripley teachers were strict. Talkative pupils were made to sit cross-legged facing the corner with large cotton reels thrust into their mouths. Ripley helped poor families for years after my mother left, but it became a regular school after the war when the support of the welfare state allowed one-parent families to stay together.

The Bruce clan, my mother's side of the family, had more difficult lives than the Hintons. Dad's family was a success compared with hers. The Hintons had migrated to Australia and thrived in farming, real estate, and the food business. A distant cousin was a veteran of Gallipoli and Passchendaele who won the Military Cross, was twice Mentioned in despatches, and became a brigadier. Dad's father had worked at Boodle's, an exclusive gentlemen's club in St James's, London. His name appeared in a 1922 edition of *The Times* in a story headlined 'The Cook's Art' registering his attendance at the opening of the 26th Universal Cookery and Food Exhibition.

For a long time, the Hintons earned their living from food. My dad, Frank, was a chef. His dad, also Frank, was a chef. His grandfather, another Frank, was a baker. Isaac Langley Hinton, my great-great-grandfather, owned his own bakery in Great Chapel Street, Soho, in the mid-nineteenth century.

My father was born in London. He grew up in leafy suburbs in the southwest, near Wimbledon Common. His main mischief was squeezing through the fence to watch tennis at the All England Tennis and Croquet Club. He augmented his pocket money foraging for lost balls and selling them to departing players.

Seen from the tough streets of Merseyside, the Hintons were lucky people. My mother told stories of lost wealth and hardship. Her mother's

parents had a thriving leather processing business. They had lived in a big house with their own housekeeper, and travelled the prosperous streets of nineteenth-century Liverpool in their own horse and carriage.

All this was lost when Grandma's father died, and his grief-stricken widow turned to drink and ended up penniless. Grandma Bruce, still a small girl, had been raised by her own grandparents.

Frank met Lilian in Liverpool when she was 19 and he was 23. She became engaged to him when she was 20, but Grandma wouldn't let her marry until she was 21. Her birthday was 27 May 1935, and she married on 8 June. They posed on the steps of St John's Anglican Church in the next street. The wind had caught my mother's long white dress, sweeping it to one side. In her left arm, Lilian carried a huge bouquet of namesake white lilies. With her right, she seemed to hold my father tightly. He was wearing a large white carnation and a dark suit with gigantic lapels, the sort that have gone in and out of fashion ever since. Mum was beaming brightly, a picture of happy sweetness that was to fade with the years. My father was taking the day more seriously, only a slight smile breaking round his mouth. He was never a big smiler.

It was a happy start to an unsteady relationship. For my mother, marrying Frank Hinton was to be a way out of Bootle. Before the war they moved frequently around Britain, travelling with Marilyn, who was born 11 months after their wedding. My father changed jobs often. One of the quirks of this otherwise quiet man was his quick temper. Kitchen conflicts led again and again to him storming out of a job, or being fired. My mother said she dreaded the days he brought home the black canvas bag that held his work knives – they only came home with him after he'd lost another job.

Dad volunteered as an army chef in February 1940, six months after Britain declared war. Dad liked telling us that Napoleon had said an army

marched on its stomach, and that helping them march was his job. He spent the war in Britain. He wanted to go abroad, and once got as far as the dock before his departure was cancelled. Dad remained a soldier for 19 years: Army no S/173319.

My mother was one of millions of women who volunteered for non-combatant jobs. There was the Women's Land Army, whose members stood in for farm workers conscripted to fight, and 'Canary Girls', who worked in munitions factories, earning their name because exposure to toxic TNT turned their skin yellow. For ATS volunteers like my mother, duties stretched from driving and repairing vehicles to acting as kitchen maids. My mother could never drive, or even ride a bicycle. She did her share of humdrum work, but most remembers waking to sirens, and running through dark woods to anti-aircraft guns. She would provide the ammunition while men did the firing.

The war brought the first of my parents' many separations. Dad's peripatetic military life caused most of these separations – but not all of them. They tested their marriage without ever quite breaking it.

The war years gave women left at home a new sense of independence. Between 1939 and 1945 divorce petitions increased fivefold. In a reversal of pre-war trends, two out of three were filed by men against their wives, many on the grounds of adultery, brought by soldiers returning from the front.

When the war was over, and soldiers returned looking for jobs, most women went back to being housewives, many reluctantly. By the late 1940s fewer than 20 per cent of married women worked. Mum returned to being a housewife, and my sister Mal, who was nine, had to get to know her parents all over again. Her grandparents hated parting with her.

Fifty-nine years after the war, when I was running Rupert Murdoch's British newspapers, Baroness Boothroyd visited my office in London.

Betty Boothroyd, a former Labour MP, had been a colourful and popular Speaker of the House of Commons. She strode forcefully into my office, immaculate in red, her shining white hair perfectly in place, and said immediately: 'I need you to give me some money.'

The baroness was raising funds for a monument to the women of the Second World War. She visited me on 27 May 2004, and could not have chosen a better moment. It was Mum's ninetieth birthday.

My company offered a generous donation, and I was told Lilian Amy Hinton's name would be placed in a time capsule beneath the monument, along with many thousands of others who had joined the war effort.

On 9 July of the following year, I watched Queen Elizabeth unveil this monument to my mother – a 22-foot tall bronze monolith set in the middle of Whitehall, north of the Cenotaph. London was in the grip of a new wartime tension; two days earlier, Islamic extremist suicide bombers had killed 52 Londoners and injured more than 700. It was a difficult and moving day.

It was also 10 months after my mother had died. I think that day would have pleased her.