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B Positive!

A Memoir

Written by Dai Henley

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B POSITIVE!

A MEMOIR BY DAI HENLEY

"At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person.
Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us."

Albert Schweitzer

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B POSITIVE!

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CHAPTER 1 – EARLY NURTURING

"You're a persistent little so and so, aren't you Henley?" The sound was totally familiar to me. It was spoken in the distinctive South Wales dialect I knew so well and yet was strangely out of place in the school gym of the St. Albans Grammar School for Boys I'd just joined. I hadn't really thought of myself as anything other than just another twelve year-old trying to impress his gym teacher.

But this was no ordinary gym teacher. This was Bryn Meredith, the Wales and British Lions rugby hooker in the 1950's. He was built, as you'd expect an ex-coalminer to be built. His unbelievably broad shoulders and narrow waist suggested immense power, something I experienced first-hand when I was caught talking during his demonstration of rope climbing – his favourite punishment was a vicious swish of the rope against the back of your legs. To say he was a cult figure in the school would be the greatest of understatements. So, for the great Bryn Meredith to call me persistent, I regarded as a great compliment. It's only in later years I realised that this is probably my greatest gift. It's been a vital ingredient in determining my life. You can't learn it – it's just a result of a lucky dip into your gene pool.

The accent was so familiar because I was born in 1942 in Galon Uchaf, a council estate on the outskirts of Merthyr Tydfil. I lived there for those first eleven highly impressionable years of my life and developed the broadest of Welsh accents. This was surprising because my parents, Sid and Ruby, were as English as roast beef. My mother was born in Walthamstow and my father was born in Bailey's Lane, Tottenham, close to the Spurs football ground that became his Mecca – he was a lie-long supporter. They'd both been married before.

Mum was having a particularly difficult time. She'd left an abusive husband and lived in a squalid little flat with two children, Les, aged 11 and Ivy aged 14, whilst trying to make a living doing needlework for wealthy families. It was so bad that at the time they met, my mother had, a year earlier, sent Les to a children's home, something she always regretted. She kept Ivy though, which has never been satisfactorily explained within the family. Maybe she thought that although Les was younger, as a boy, he could handle the situation better than Ivy. When I grew to an age where I understood such matters, I realised it did have a profound effect on Les. He was sensitive, shy and introverted.

My father had just separated from his first wife who'd run off with someone called Alexander. Until it was explained to me several years later, I could never understand why every time the song written by Irving

Berlin, and sung by Al Jolson, *Alexander's Ragtime Band* came on the radio, my father would, very uncharacteristically, lose his temper, shouting for someone to "turn that flippin' radio off!" The band was very popular in the 1940's and 50's, so this charade was a regular occurrence!

Sid, then aged about 40, fell in love with Ruby who was three years younger. Within a very short period, he made up his mind to do two things: get Les out of the children's home and move somewhere new with Ruby, Les and Ivy where they could restart their lives as a "married couple" with a family. Being known to be "living in sin" was a serious blight on your family in the 1940's.

It must have been an enormous step for them to decide to leave London and move to Merthyr Tydfil. Although the blitz in London was horrific (like many Londoners, they never knew whether they would survive the next night's bombings) they left behind many friends and family, although my widowed grandmother on my mother's side, Lily (Nan to me), joined us in Wales in 1952.

Insisting that Les be taken out of the children's home to join the new family was so typical of my dad. He was caring, polite and unassuming, a true gentleman, but his greatest attribute was his unfailing sense of fairness, which, fortunately, I've inherited. I regard this as another gift nature, or my dad, bestowed upon me. Had my business life not taken the direction it did, I would have almost certainly studied Law. Even now I sometimes visit the Criminal Courts of Justice at the Old Bailey and dream at the prospect of being a barrister! Any injustice makes me angry!

On November 2"^{d}, 1942, a true love-child was brought into the world, courtesy of the midwives at Merthyr General Hospital. Christened David, I was regarded as "the ultimate gift" by my mother and father as it was unusual to have babies at their advanced ages. My new half-brother and half-sister were delighted too! Although I was christened David my brother always called me "Dave". Outside the family, especially in Wales, I was known as Dai, Welsh for David.

I never really knew what the term "spoilt," meant. It's generally a derogatory term but if "spoilt" means being nurtured and cared for and loved by everyone around you, then I was "spoilt".

Growing up in Galon Uchaf was idyllic. However, the surroundings could never be described as such! The council estate consisted of fourteen Avenues, unoriginally numbered from one to fourteen! I was born in First Avenue, but in the first eleven years of my life we moved to Fifth Avenue and then to Third Avenue. I think it was to do with the neighbours.

Lily Trailer was a good example. She was a tubby, stooped, ginger-haired woman who dressed scruffily and stank of a mixture of body odour and whiskey. She always pushed an old dilapidated pram that

was used for shopping or for transporting anything she found on the streets or in dustbins that may prove useful.

She was the first eccentric I'd known. Although I never went into her house, my mother told me she'd used a wooden toilet seat as a picture frame! She was also the scourge of the local Co-op asking for any cracked eggs or broken biscuits for free. On one occasion when the shopkeeper said he hadn't any broken biscuits, she replied," I don't suppose you could break me a few?"

In the middle 1800's, Merthyr was a prosperous town − its wealth generated mainly from the iron and steel industries and coalmines that fuelled the Industrial Revolution. Its location too, at the head of the Rhondda Valley, was a major advantage. However, since the 1930's, recession had taken a very heavy toll on the town and unemployment reached epidemic proportions, from which it has never fully recovered. The coalmines around Merthyr, too, began to yield less of the black stuff.

Galon Uchaf was built to house the neediest people of the town and the estate was really just one notch up from being a slum. The houses were clad in the same dirty grey, pebble-dashed concrete, which seemed to reflect both the mood, which was sombre, and the climate, which was invariably damp. We were surrounded by houses with boarded-up windows where either the tenants or the local council couldn't afford to replace the broken glass. They all had outside toilets which were dark and dank, a place you didn't linger too long. Toilet paper consisted of newspapers cut into squares and rammed onto a spike or large nail hammered onto the inside of the wooden door. Some houses were in a great state of disrepair with gardens overflowing with weeds. I remember a few homeless dogs roaming the streets. Washing lines running the length of the gardens always seemed full of grey washing. Many of the kids I grew up with wore dirty and ill-fitting clothes.

I'm sure my parents didn't know any of this when they decided to move from London. I remember, aged nine or ten, thinking our surroundings shouldn't be like this. I don't know why I had this thought because I hadn't experienced any other kind of location, except when we occasionally visited relatives and friends back in London. Perhaps it was because the contrast was so great.

I don't remember them having too many friends although socialising was hardly a major priority for the residents of Galon Uchaf! The side-effects of the war had an impact, too. Although bombs never fell on Merthyr, the food shortages and other deprivations made life difficult. I never saw a real banana until my brother, who'd joined the Merchant Navy for a year, brought home several green bunches from the West Indies when I was nine years old. We placed them in the airing cupboard for a few days until they

miraculously turned yellow. Such an odd shape, yet the taste and texture was unlike anything I'd experienced before. I still adore them!

One thing we never went short of was coal. There were dozens of slag-heaps surrounding our town. I would be sent out about once a week with two buckets, usually joined by several other children and adults to pick through the latest offerings. One bucket I filled with coke− a by-product of coal used for smelting in the steel works − and one with slabs of brittle coal pieces. The coal was used for starting the fires and coke, which was slower burning, used for topping up. It was dirty work and my fingernails looked like I'd painted them jet-black!

My brother had left school at 14 and managed to obtain an apprenticeship as a stocking fitter, which meant setting up and minding the huge machinery at the famous Kayser Bonder factory in Dowlais, just outside Merthyr. This proved to be a sound decision as he was rarely out of work and once qualified, the job paid well.

My sister apparently found Wales so dull that after 12 months and now aged 18, she joined the Women's Army and was promptly billeted back to London, which, as it was still wartime, she found very exciting. Ivy was a lively, fun-loving girl, always laughing and game for anything, a trait she carried throughout her life. Within a further 12 months, she'd met and married a fellow soldier, Bob, also 18, who came from the East End of London. He shared Ivy's *joie de vie* and passion for "jitterbugging", a manic dance craze performed to music that was a forerunner of rock `n' roll.

Bob had seen some action during the war in Burma and I remember quizzing him when I was at that curious age of about 12 and wanted to know if he'd killed anyone. He had to be pressed about anything to do with the war but he admitted that he *had* killed a man. This was so uncharacteristic of him, that on further badgering, he explained that he once found himself unexpectedly face to face with an armed Japanese soldier and it was simply a case of kill or be killed. This left a lasting impression on me but I suspect nothing as deep as on Bob. Neither he nor I mentioned it again.

My father landed a job straight away as a foreman at a button factory, also in Dowlais and he often shared a bus to work with Les. He didn't appear to have any particular qualifications for this job. He'd previously worked as a clerk in Dents glove factory in London, but because so many of the younger men were fighting Hitler, there were plenty of vacancies in British factories

When I was older, probably about six or seven, he often took me to the factory on Saturday mornings when he would catch up on paperwork and give me the task of counting out the buttons for stocktaking. The smell of the paint used for the buttons was very distinctive and even now, when I sniff the odour of cellulose

used to thin the paints, it evokes warm memories.

Mr Adler who owned the factory was a plump Jewish man who was very demanding. Dad must have got on well with him though, since he invited the whole family to watch the Coronation in 1953 on probably the only television set in Merthyr − what a treat!

My mother's role was, like many housewives of that era: ensure there was always a meal waiting when Dad and Les returned from work, to nurture me and to make the household budget stretch to match the wages Dad and Les brought home each week. Not only did she do a great job on all counts, she found time to indulge in her greatest passions: gardening, cooking and playing the piano. She was expert at all three and although in later years I inherited the gardening bug, I can't cook and still don't know the difference between the black and white keys on a piano!

I have very few regrets in my life but this is one of them. It's entirely my fault. Often she'd ask me to come and sit with her whilst she taught me how to play. But by that time I was deeply involved in my own passion − playing football with my pals. I'd give anything now to be able to walk up to a piano in a pub and pump out the kind of tunes my mother was famous for. She played in the style of Charley Kunz and Winifred Atwell, both renowned for playing jolly, happy numbers.

I've since thought a lot about the philosophy of parenting − when do you *insist* on something being done and when do you give free rein to your kids allowing then to express themselves? I so wish Mum had insisted.

My earliest sporting memories began when I started at Penydarren Junior Mixed school aged five and discovered playground football. The school was two miles away from home and unless the weather was awful I'd walk with several other children across a couple of roads and through a field almost always full of sheep or cattle. Ken Adams Morgan was the Head teacher who seemed to take *all* the lessons. He was a large, grey-haired, grey-bearded, fearsome-looking man but despite this appearance was patient and kind. His features reminded me in later years of a fire and brimstone preacher you'd see in the Western movies.

We never had a proper school football team until I was 10, but those playground matches every break-time had me hooked. We were only allowed to use a tennis ball and it required considerable skill to control. Teams of twenty-a-side were common and we played in the clothes we went to school in − no uniforms for primary schools in those days! The goals were hand-painted onto the walls at both ends of the playground. My mother continually complained about having to buy new shoes every few months, not because the soles had worn through but because the toes had disintegrated through playing football on concrete!

After the two mile walk home, I'd have tea, usually something wonderful my mother had cooked that day, then listen to “Dick Barton - Special Agent”, a wonderfully exciting children’s radio programme that always left you in suspense at the end of each fifteen-minute episode. This show was incredibly popular with a record fifteen million listeners, almost a third of the population, tuning in. It began in 1946 and was taken off the air in 1951 because the government were concerned about the potential bad influence it could have on adolescent boys! This was despite the scriptwriters’ strict adherence to thirteen codes of conduct, such as: no sex, no booze, no bad language and all violence must be limited to “clean socks to the jaw!” Such a programme wouldn’t get off the ground today!

The second the programme ended, I’d be out again to play football either down the "Dell", a flat field just behind Fourth Avenue or, if it was too wet, or too dark, outside my house in Third Avenue. In both locations, someone's jacket was put down for goalposts, causing many arguments whether it was a goal or not. My pals turned up at different times and joined the game, which went on all evening or, if we were playing outside my house, until my mother called out from the front door, “David, it’s about time you came in to go to bed!”

There were certain protocols that *had* to be followed. As each boy arrived they’d join the team alternately. They’d also have to spend the first ten minutes in goal or until there was a goal scored against them, which was hardly a great incentive to make saves! You couldn't choose which position to play except that the younger boys, my best pal George Mackinney and I starting in that category, were always stuck out on the wing. The most exciting games were usually under the gas streetlights in Third Avenue and I remember once playing with a tin can when we punctured our one and only ball!

George was a very good footballer .His parents were Scottish and his father worked at the local ICI gas works. As we progressed up the pecking order of street football, he became a star player and as his best mate I enjoyed some reflected glory.

Another pal George and I got on well with was Alun Jones, who lived near George in Fifth Avenue. He was four years older than us and saw to it that we weren't bullied or intimidated by the older boys on the estate. Alun was an outstanding goalkeeper. He was tall and very athletic. When he was 14 he was offered a trial for Wales Schoolboys in Cardiff, twenty-five miles south of Merthyr Tydfil. His father couldn't take him so my dad took me, George and Alun by bus one Saturday morning. We were really excited for Alun, but he only had one save to make in the entire match whilst the opposing goalkeeper had plenty to do and played a blinder. Alun didn’t progress. This struck me as grossly unfair but he went on to play some

seriously good football although never quite made the big time − a great disappointment to the Galon Uchaf boys.

My obsession with football was fuelled at home too. My brother played for his works team, Kayser Bonder FC and my dad, much to Mum's mild annoyance, was the team manager. This entailed, amongst other duties, Mum having to wash and dry by hand the team's kit at home each week! Dad took me to some of the matches, which were played on a pitch affectionately known as "the Bont". The playing surface was simply coal, coke and ash rolled flat into a semi-hard surface that just about took a stud. Very often after a match, my mother prepared an iodine concoction and applied it to the inevitable cuts and sores that were full of the colliery waste from the pitch.

In summer, we played cricket with the same group of boys from the council estate, although there was always a football match being played as well. I was quite keen on cricket at first and as a left-arm bowler, I had some limited success. For me though, it lacks the dynamism of football and rugby which were more aligned to my impatient nature! Although I tried to get into cricket seriously later in life, another factor that put me off the game was that weekend matches were almost invariably being cancelled because of inclement weather. I'd look forward to a game all week and then be so let down, I'd become quite depressed!

When Ken Adams Morgan announced one morning at assembly, that Penydarren Junior Mixed School were to start a football team, I was ecstatic with joy and so sure to be picked. Then came the very first setback of my 10 year-old life. I wasn't selected! I was devastated. My parents and brother Les were very supportive but no amount of sympathy could console me. On the Saturday morning of the first match, ironically played at "the Bont", I watched from the sidelines with my kitbag at my side just in case someone didn't turn up; no substitutes were allowed in those days. My emotions were in turmoil; 1 didn't want us to lose or not play well, yet on the other hand how would I get a game if all went successfully? Fatefully, the team didn't play well and we lost.

The very next Saturday, I *was* selected! I had an overwhelming feeling of wanting to prove that I should have been picked in the first place. I literally ached with a desire to do well. We met at the Penydarren school gate at 9.30 am and were taken by bus to the Heolgerrig school grounds, five miles further up the valley. The pitch was level and the grass lush and there was a much larger attendance than in the first match. Unfortunately, my father couldn't attend because he had to work on Saturdays which was a great disappointment to me.

There are certain events in anyone's sporting life, which can only be described as *ethereal.* You're elevated to a higher level from everyone else or indeed from anything you'd achieved before. No matter what you attempt, it comes off. Everything you do feels effortless. Golfers call it being "In the zone". I've experienced this feeling only about five or six times in a sporting career spanning nearly sixty years.

My performance at Heolgerrig School that Saturday morning was one such event. We won three goals to nil and I scored a hat trick! I glided over the turf covering almost every inch of the pitch. Every time I had the ball I did something useful with it and I began to hear some of the crowd murmuring compliments about "this kid on the wing". After the match I tried not to look too smug but inside, I was elated. I couldn't wait to get home and tell Dad who, although delighted, warned me I'd now set a standard I'd be expected to maintain. How right he was. Although I played for the school team in every match after that I never played as well.

Our winter weekends fell into a distinctive pattern. Friday nights were reserved for preparing for Saturdays' matches. We'd ensure my brother's team kit was packed up in a large kitbag, first checking that all the shirts, which had lace-up ties around the neck, were clean, any rips or tears having been repaired by Mum. Les and I cleaned our boots with dubbin, a greasy leather preserver, until they were immaculate. Football boots were large, cumbersome slabs of leather with the sides high enough to protect your ankles. The soles, before studs were introduced in the mid-1950's, had leather bars nailed across them. Often, during a match on hard grounds, the nails would pierce the sole through to your feet. From somewhere, Dad managed to obtain a cobbler's last, so it was an important job on Friday evenings to ensure any offending nails were hammered back into place! Shin pads were made of split bamboo cane enclosed within a slim plastic covering. Very often the bamboo shoots would penetrate the covering at the bottom and dig into your instep so you had to apply sticky tape to hold them in place.

Saturdays were the highlight of the week, especially for the men and boy of the household. My game was always in the morning and Les played in the afternoon. Saturday evening, we'd spend listening to Sports Report on the radio and Dad carefully wrote down the results in the paper so that he could check the pools coupon later. Woe betides anyone making a noise during this exercise!

The Spurs result, of course, was always the most eagerly awaited. Dad's enjoyment of the rest of the weekend would depend on it. Immediately after the results were checked against Dad's pools selection, bringing the invariable sigh of failure to predict eight draws, we'd have tea of baked beans on toast always followed by home-made, delicious fruit cake or my particular favourite, pancakes with lemon juice and

sugar, both lovingly made by Mum. Occasionally, she'd buy some cakes − one type in particular went down well − forever known in our family as "four penny ha'pennies". She had no idea what the shop called them so she christened them after the price! They were huge, shaped like a small loaf of bread and made of a soft, sweet, baked dough, filled with cream that oozed out when you bit into them. They were delicious! It's little wonder I grew up with a sweet tooth. Later in life, If I went to a pub for lunch, consisting of a pint of bitter and a pork pie, I'd *have* to eat a Mars bar to finish!

If playing football was *my* passion, supporting Tottenham Hotspur (the Spurs) was my dad's. He was overjoyed when Cardiff City won promotion to the First Division in 1953. He took me to Ninian Park in Cardiff to see them play the Spurs three times whist we were in Wales. This was my first experience of being in a ground holding 36,000 people, the majority all standing. I'd been brought up a Spurs supporter so I knew all the player's names and could recite the team in my sleep. They had such wonderful players. Alf Ramsey, who went on to become Sir Alf after managing England to World Cup glory in 1966, Ted Ditchburn, the goalkeeper, who still holds the record for the most consecutive appearances, 247 − he missed just two games in eight seasons − and Bill Nicholson, who went on to manage Spurs in their best ever seasons in the 1960's and 70's when they won practically everything!

We always went into the ground early so we could watch the brass bands parade up and down the pitch and the stands fill up. The anticipation was palpable and the supporters of both sides affable and good-natured. When the whistle finally blew to start the match, I'm sure the roar could be heard in Merthyr! The most disconcerting part though, was the surge of the crowd whenever they wanted a better view of an exciting period of the game. In retrospect, it was really quite dangerous, yet to me it was thrilling! If the adults thought it was too perilous, they'd pass the smaller children over the heads of the spectators down to the pitch-side out of harm's way; unfortunately, it never happened to me! Leaving the ground as soon as the match was over was another hazard to be avoided. We tried it once and my feet never touched the ground for about thirty yards as everybody swarmed to the exits!

Sundays were an eclectic mix of washing and drying the football kit, roast dinner, Sunday school in the afternoon and sometimes chapel in the evenings. After breakfast, Mum placed the dirty kit into a bath full of water and suds and then rubbed it against a steel washboard to get rid of the dirt. (Ten years later, I'd be using this piece of corrugated iron as a musical instrument in my skiffle group!) Then the kit was taken out and placed in the sink whilst the bath was re-filled with clean water. The shirts, shorts and socks were thrown in and rinsed out. In our back yard we had a huge mangle and it was my job to help Mum feed the heavy,

sodden kit through the rubber rollers before it was hung out to dry. She warned me a hundred times, "Don't get your fingers too close to the rollers David, how many more times do I have to tell you!" She was paranoid about anything untoward happening to her "Darling David" or her "Little London Welshman" as she often called me!

The Sunday roast dinner was the highlight of the weekend for Dad, Les and I. Meat and many types of vegetables were still scarce but Mum always found ingenious ways to put a wholesome meal on the table. She was particularly adept at puddings and cakes. She seemed to be cooking all week so that on Sundays we had a feast. Chocolate éclairs made with choux pastry were her speciality and because they never tasted as fresh the next day and we didn't have a refrigerator, a dozen of them *had* to be consumed either after the roast or at teatime! I don't where she got her supply of chocolate from − it was still rationed for a good few years after the war but these culinary delights appeared quite regularly! I'm sure this wasn't the usual diet on Sundays in Galon Uchaf!

I really enjoyed Sunday school, which was held in a corrugated iron building at the bottom of Second Avenue and doubled as a social centre. My parents were not religious, and it was never discussed at home. However, they clearly wanted me to have some exposure to the Scriptures so that I could make up my own mind. Sometimes they took me to the chapel for the six o'clock evening service. Despite this exposure I never became hooked on religion but my most abiding memory is of the singing. There is nothing quite like the sound of a Welsh male voice choir. Whatever the hymn, they summed up the euphoria, passion or pathos of emotions in such a moving way. Even today, when the choir and the spectators sing the Welsh National Anthem at Rugby Internationals, like many Welshmen, I admit to feeling a huge lump in my throat and sometimes I'm close to tears.

My parents, Dad in particular, set a fine example of how to live a "Christian" life without believing in God. They always looked for the best in everyone and were always the first to help out in any emergency. Throughout their lives they genuinely reached out the hand of friendship. I encountered many examples of this admirable characteristic over the years. They were taken advantage of a few times but they reasoned that life-enhancing fellowship was returned on many more occasions.

My parents were fanatical about my education, possibly because they weren't educated particularly well and neither were Les or Ivy. They regarded this obsession as a major contribution they could make as parents. Strangely, this drive to get me educated only went as far as passing the Eleven-Plus exam and so get to a grammar school. I assumed they reasoned that once I got there, the rest was up to me. So up to the age of 11, homework simply *had* to be done ahead of playing football. There was a major incentive too. If I passed, a brand new top-of-the-range Raleigh bike with 3-speed Sturmey Archer gears was the much-coveted prize. I was suitably motivated! My parents sacrificed a great deal to provide this lure.

As well as playing football and doing my homework, another competitor for my time was *table* football. Subbuteo launched the game in the mid-1940's and it became an outstanding international success. The inventor, Peter Adolph, placed an advertisement in "The Boys Own Paper", a must-read comic if you were aged between eight and 15, purely to gauge the level of interest in a new game of table football. He received postal orders to the value of £7,500, (equivalent to £200,000 today), from all over the country and went on to make a considerable fortune. The game was played on a green baize cloth marked out as a football pitch that was laid onto a table and completed with goals with nets, corner flags and, if you could afford them, battery-operated floodlights. The players were cut-out silhouettes, made of celluloid, and mounted on a half-inch wide plastic, saucer-shaped base. They were propelled by the index finger and skilful exponents could engineer a way around the opposing celluloid players to strike the ball. I think I was the first to receive this game as a Christmas present but before long, about 10 of us could claim to be reasonable players. Subbuteo encouraged the setting up of leagues and you could choose your favourite team's kit. Unsurprisingly, the Galon Uchaf league was up and running within weeks. Naturally, I was Tottenham Hotspur,and George Mackinney was Glasgow Rangers! This game became a national obsession with kids of all ages and some adults even started their own leagues. Subbuteo also supported a National competition with substantial prizes.

My brother Les often joined in and despite our fourteen years difference in age, we became very close. He was my hero right up until he died in 2001, aged 73, and I often think of him. He got on really well with my father − his step-father − and was, in many ways, like him. Les too, was kind and gentle. He, literally, would not hurt a fly. I saw him on many occasions catch one that had been annoying him by covering it with a glass tumbler and sliding a thin piece of card between the rim and the base trapping the fly and throwing it out of the

back door!

He was also incredibly handsome and when he went out on a date, he was always dressed immaculately. He'd stand in front of the mirror in the sitting room for ages picking off imaginary pieces of cotton or fluff from his jacket and trousers. We'd tease him by pointing out some non-existent offending particles usually in a place he couldn't reach. Off would come the jacket and he'd examine it minutely like a forensic scientist!

He was petrified about losing his hair and he had dozens of bottles of fancy coloured lotions he conscientiously applied morning and night. Although these lotions were "guaranteed to promote healthy growth" they didn't work!.

He was once invited to a film premiere in London and he had his photograph taken with one of the lesser known, but outstandingly beautiful, female stars, whose name I never knew. This photo, resplendent in a silver frame, took pride of place for many years in my parents' various sitting rooms! Les looked every inch a film star too!

He also bought me some wonderful Christmas presents. I remember one in particular which was a wind-up model plastic army tank. I'd fill the gun barrel with white flour from Mum's pantry, and when I wound up the tank, it would miraculously fire with a loud "pop" and smoke emanated from the muzzle every few seconds! Very realistic! Every year he'd buy me the *Sunday Chronicle Football Annual* and the *Charles Buchan Football Annual* –essential reading, but not necessarily just for me − Dad and Les enjoyed reading them as much as I did!

Although football was the number one sport followed and played intensely in the Henley household, boxing was a close second. My brother had a particular interest having learnt how to box during his National Service between 1947 to 1950.He boxed as a middleweight, around 12 stone, and he was, according to my father, very good. He visited fairgrounds that had an all-comers boxing booth. The resident boxer would take on anyone and if you beat him over three rounds you'd win £2.The bruisers were ex-pro's who knew all the tricks and often boxed 20 rounds a night. I don't think Les ever won, but Dad told me he always gave them a good fight. I was never allowed to watch; Mum thought it too brutal for a young boy to witness, although it added further credence to my hero-worshipping my big brother!

Wales is famous for producing world-class boxers and Merthyr in particular produced some of the best. Jimmy Wilde was probably the most famous boxer to come from our town. He was an ex-coalminer who was the World flyweight champion between 1916 and 1923. Johnny Owens too, was a World Champion and tragically died after being knocked out by Lupe Pintor from Mexico in the 12th round in Los Angeles in September 1980. Dai Dower, Tommy Farr who fought the great Joe Louis for the world title in 1937, and Howard Winstone also from Merthyr, were all wonderful boxers. Eddie Thomas, a British, Empire and European welterweight champion in 1951, was born in Merthyr and trained in the Sunday school/social centre I attended. Les once sparred with him and Eddie Thomas accidentally knocked him out, so he didn't return! It was Eddie who coined the famous quote, " Children born in the tough valleys of Wales were so angry, they were born with their fists clenched!"

Despite these distractions, I dutifully did my homework and revised hard for the Eleven-Plus exam. I really enjoyed Penydarren school and came fourth out of 30 in my last year. I was not especially good at any one subject but pretty average across the board. I didn't feel any exceptional anxiety about winning a place at the grammar school even though, as the exam approached, it seemed to be the sole subject of conversation in the Henley household.

However, my apprehension was diluted, because in the last year, I was selected to play the King in the school play. I don't even remember auditioning for the part. My mother made the most superb King's robe and crown. The robe was a deep red material, covered with hundreds of silver milk bottle-tops, hand-shaped as stars, lovingly sewn on. It flowed behind me like a crimson tide. I had a beard stuck onto my face, which, complete with a crown of red and silver cloth and a black ostrich feather completed the transformation from a short-trousered, bespectacled, primary school pupil to His Royal Highness, the King of England!

I can't remember what the play was or who else appeared in it. I just remember wearing the robe and crown at home on many occasions to the delight and amusement of my mother and father! I loved dressing-up and almost getting high on the smell of the semi-congealed, sticky glue used for the beard. This was my first taste of thespian life and I loved it!

This joy was considerably superseded by the news of my passing the exam! My mother said, " Do you know Sid, I think this boy will be Prime Minister one day!" She really meant it!

So I got the top-of-the range Raleigh Bike with the 3-speed Sturmey Archer gears and was the envy of my mates. What made it even more special for my parents was that I was one of only three boys from Galon Uchaf to pass. The other two were my best mate, George Mackinney, and Brian Ellison who lived in Seventh Avenue.

Cyfarthfa Castle Grammar School could not have been more different to Galon Uchaf. It was a magnificent baronial mansion built in 1825 by the owner of the Iron works in Merthyr, Richard Crawshay; he was once the 50th richest man in the country. The castle was surrounded by meticulously maintained lavish gardens. The Ironmaster, as he was known, bequeathed the castle and grounds to the town council on his death as way of repaying society for the contamination and desecration his filthy industry had infected on the town. It became a co-educational grammar school and a museum in 1913. My proud parents took George and I there before we started school.It took our breath away.

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