

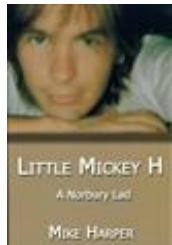


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## LITTLE MICKEY H - A Norbury Lad

Mike Harper



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## IN THE PRESENCE OF THE LORD

### *A CATHOLIC CHILDHOOD*

From an early age, we were expected to attend church on Sundays. As Roman Catholics, St Bartholomew's on Ellison Road was our local, about a mile's walk from home. Reaching the church required us to walk through the dreaded Dead Man's Alley, a particularly scary, corrugated iron-walled path maybe thirty metres in length with a right-angled bend and a concrete bridge over the narrow stream known as the River Graveney. The alley connected the corner of Ellison Road with the dead end Hermitage Gardens. Beyond a short row of shops including a sweetshop (now converted into houses) opposite a short row of terraced houses, Hermitage Gardens ran under an iron railway bridge four lines wide, the pavement beneath festooned with pigeon poo, before coming to a halt surrounded by junk yards and the entrance to Dead Man's Alley, the only other exit. Not so bad in the daylight, but at night time, particularly in later years attending Cubs or Scouts, one would always be quite worried walking along here, particularly if the lamppost at the bend in the alley had had its light smashed, a frequent issue. Eventually, the council put a grille over the light which alleviated the problem, and later still, completely restructured the area on building a group of houses at the end of Acacia Road. The walkway then went around the junkyards and over the streamlike Graveney via a little wooden bridge. That they called it a 'river' was laughable as the concrete conduit along which it ran was perhaps only twelve feet wide, but on the few occasions when the conduit which was perhaps six or eight feet deep in places, filled up due to excessive rain, it really did look like a river.

Mum always went to an earlier service, while as youngsters, the rest of us would go with Dad to the eleven o'clock service. We would sit with Dad, usually half-a-dozen rows from the front, quickly getting used to the stand-up-sit-down-stand-up-sit-down-stand-up-kneel-down routine.

After some initial interest in what was going on, I was usually bored during the forty five minute mass, particularly during the sermon which with me being only young, would go straight over my head as the priest droned on for fifteen minutes or so. So I would spend the time people watching. There would be two readings from the scriptures, read by an esteemed member of the congregation. Again due to my age, whatever message was being transmitted to those listening was lost on me. Dad later became one of those selected to read the lesson and would dress very smartly on his reading days, bowing from the neck as he made his way from pew to lectern.

After church, Dad would sometimes walk us through Norbury Park to the playground near Norbury Manor Girls School, before heading across Norbury Avenue and up onto the footbridge over the railway. Norbury was on the line between Croydon and London so there were always plenty of trains to watch from the bridge. Both the slow trains stopping at platforms one and two of Norbury Station, a quarter of a mile to the north-west, and the fast trains racing through the station, would have us scampering from one end of the bridge to the other to stand over the trains as they lumbered or careered under the bridge. As each one passed the signals, we would count to eight before seeing the green light turn red, which would

eventually turn amber, then double amber and finally back to green.

Some of the wooden planks on the bridge were loose and somewhat the worse for wear and I was always a little concerned that one day, one of the planks might have rotted away so much that one could fall through into the path of an oncoming express. On one occasion, there was much excitement due to a large hole having appeared a third of the way across the bridge from the Avenue side, which we had to skirt carefully around.

After twenty or thirty minutes of trainwatching, we would descend the other side of the footbridge to Norbury Crescent and make our way home for Sunday lunch.

An alternative post-church excursion to satisfy Dad's and Nick's thirst for buses, would see us walk to Streatham Bus Garage, stand on the short yellow posts outside the garage doors and watch the buses go in and out for a while before returning home for lunch. Other notable bus garage adventures occasionally occurred at South Croydon on a similar theme to those at Streatham Garage.

As I grew up, particularly under the weight of evidence that there were perhaps more scientific reasons behind how the world came into being, I became more cynical about religion and often wondered why Dad and Mum were seemingly such devout churchgoers. I had always thought of them both as intelligent, rational and logical, though perhaps Mum appeared to be marginally more fixed in her views. It made little sense to me why Mum and Dad 'believed' and what exactly they believed in. With Dad, I could see that there was a strong religious influence coming from his own mother that prompted him to continue to attend mass, or maybe he merely went out of a habit entrenched in him from an early age. Or maybe, simply to try and lead us by good example, showing us the ways of the Lord and that a Christian lifestyle was the basis of a good design for life. If that was the intention, it unfortunately failed to pay off as one by one (apart from Catherine), we children each discovered more enjoyable ways of spending our Sundays than sitting for forty five minutes in a usually-chilly church.

Many years later, things seem clearer to me. My view now, aged forty three, is that religion should be presented as a guide for a way of life. I don't think it's necessarily about believing in a god or a man called Jesus. However, the life that that man purportedly led should be considered as a blueprint for being a good member of the human race. Reminding oneself of these guidelines on a regular basis is no bad thing, almost like a free lesson in how to live one's life, each week's service delivering a different point to ponder.

These days, the Church is suffering from dwindling numbers, the majority of the congregation of my local church is elderly. What will happen to the churches when the older folk have all gone?

The Church's problem is that their focus is all wrong. Scientific advances have wiped away much of the ignorance amongst us regarding the universe we inhabit. In my lifetime, retail profits have reduced the stature of the weekly day of rest, a day that religion was once able to present unopposed as one for spiritual wellbeing in the company of one's family. While there is still the big question of how or why the universe came to exist, it is unlikely that we shall ever know the answers in this lifetime. So the church needs to move its focus away from the idea of a benevolent god who sent his son to earth to save us, and encourage us to consider more our paths through life, how we can be good people and think about others as well as ourselves.

## Altar Boy

I wasn't always as cynical. As Steve and Nick had done before me, at around the age of eight, I became an altar boy and would happily and regularly take part in the 11 o'clock Sunday mass and occasionally, the 8am Saturday Latin mass. At that age, just to be doing what my big brothers were doing made me feel more grown up. Later on, when I would stay up much later on a Saturday night, I might have lain in on Sunday morning and attended the 5pm service.

From age eight through until thirteen, I would arrive with Steve and/or Nick about ten minutes before the service, don a black cassock and white cottar before lining up with a few other boys to accompany the priest to the altar. Usually one would be able to wear the same cassock each week, but this wasn't always possible. In such a case, one might have to hitch up an oversize cassock like a Victorian lady's skirts to avoid falling flat on one's face on the altar steps.

We usually served on the altar with the same group of boys, some of whom normally served at other services but would occasionally join us. Julian Theobald, the Jupps (Bernard, Simeon and Thomas), the Cowies (Michael, Steven and Gerard and their father Philip), Vernon Quaintance (brother of Veronica who had driven Gill and me part of the way to the school coach stop many years before), the Gibsons (Sean, Guy and Dean), the Mooneys (Joseph and Danny) and the Desas (James and Flaviano) all stand out.

The high spots of serving on the altar were:-

- Ringing the communion bell which produced an almost magical tinkly sound (later the church's big bell would occasionally be rung in accompaniment)
- The occasional wearing of red cassocks for special occasions e.g. Easter or Christmas
- The ceremonial accoutrements for some of the more important services and for Stations Of The Cross and Benediction

Some of the rituals were elaborate and fascinating to watch. It was always something of a feather in the cap to be chosen as cross, acolyte, thurifer, boat or candle at any of these ceremonies – cross, thurifer and acolyte commanding the greatest kudos. Generally the older boys/men would be awarded these privileges. The 'boat', which was light enough for even the youngest altar boy to carry, contained incense which was fed into the charcoal-lit thurifer at a certain point during Benediction. The pungency of the incense had a sweet, smoky flavour.

Once one had been an altar boy for a considerable while, one would be inducted into the guild of altar servers, the Archconfraternity of St Stephen, which allowed one to wear a lozenge-shaped medal with pointed ends, on a woven red cord. The object of the guild was the sanctification of the altar server by teaching him that to serve in the Sanctuary is a great religious privilege; by instructing him in the manner of observing the rites and ceremonies of the Church; .....and by encouraging him to understand the meaning and the purpose of the ceremonies in which he takes part. So said the accompanying booklet anyway.

A guild member on enrolment would promise to observe the following rules:

1. To serve at the Altar reverently, intelligently and punctually.
2. To make the short acts of preparation before, and of thanksgiving after, serving Mass.
3. To observe silence in the sacristy, and great reverence in the Sanctuary.
4. To recite the Guild Prayer daily.

I'm not sure that rule No.4 was often observed, and the use of 'reverently' in rule No.1 was applied by probably only a few of us. However, rule No.2 allowed one to become involved with preparing the wafers and the wine before the service, and to deposit the 'collection' plates into a locked drawer in the sacristy by pouring the contents through a letterbox-sized slot in the top of the cabinet.

Reverence in the sacristy was not always observed either. Before the service, the altar boys would line up in pairs by the sacristy door with the priest(s) joining them at the last moment. Going out of the door, the first boy on the left would ring the small bell signifying the start of the service, before all would troop round past the smaller altar devoted to the Virgin Mary, then onto the main altar, closing the gates behind them. Two boys would go to the left and would perform various functions during the service, while the surpliced surplus would sit on the bench to the right (and if necessary, the additional stools), making room for the lesson reader as required. If there was no lesson reader, the priest would read the lesson.

There were some notable moments from my five years serving on the altar. Being copiously sick on the bench one morning rings a merry bell – it had to be cleared up by usher Mr Jones mid-service and must have been excruciatingly stinky for the remaining altar boys. Heh heh heh. I had to take my cassock and cottar home to be washed by Mum.

Also, it could be quite exciting when you were the only altar boy that had turned up for a service as you would then get to do all of the altar boy jobs for that service.

And for me at least, there was a frisson of excitement when the priests would prostrate themselves in front of the altar at one of the Easter services.

Finally, there was the interesting Stations Of The Cross service. This service told the story of Jesus' condemnation, crucifixion and resurrection in fourteen stages. The hymn 'Stabat Mater Dolorosa' was sung as the priest and acolytes moved from station to station. An accompanying booklet enabled Nick, Gill and I to 're-enact' the stations on the stairs at home, taking it in turns to 'be' Jesus. Particular high spots of our re-enactments would be the three times Jesus fell, Veronica wiping the face of Jesus, Jesus meeting the women of Jerusalem, when whoever was playing 'Jesus' would have to solemnly intone 'Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me but for yourselves and your children'. On reaching the bedroom, on one of the beds, 'Jesus' would be 'nailed' to the cross. As grim as it must have been for Jesus himself, it tickled us to re-enact the stations. Here

are the fourteen stations:

1. Jesus is condemned to death
2. Jesus receives the cross
3. Jesus falls for the first time
4. Jesus meets his blessed mother
5. Simon of Cyrene takes the cross
6. Veronica wipes the face of Jesus
7. Jesus falls a second time
8. Jesus meets the women of Jerusalem
9. Jesus falls a third time
10. Jesus is stripped of his garments
11. Jesus is nailed to the cross
12. Jesus dies on the cross
13. Jesus is taken down from the cross
14. Jesus is placed in the sepulchre

My altarboyship has one particularly grim memory, one that left an extremely unpleasant (though fortunately not literally) taste in the mouth. No one except Vernon Quaintance and me know the full facts (until now!) though some may have an inkling of what might have happened based on a later similar occurrence.

As an altar server, Vernon, who was much older than most of us, maybe in his late twenties or early thirties, and only beaten by Mr Cowie in terms of age, possessed a most solemn and holy air on the altar and strongly disapproved of any of us younger boys messing about. This air of solemnity was enhanced by a long face and aquiline nose, though on opening his mouth, one could see tranches of rotten teeth.

One Saturday morning when I was perhaps eleven years old, Vernon called at our house enquiring if I would like to go out for a drive that afternoon. Clearly held in respect by my parents, they could see nothing wrong with me going for a drive with Vernon and neither could I. And so, that afternoon, perhaps around 3pm, Vernon picked me up in his purple Austin Allegro and drove in the general direction of Box Hill in Surrey. After some time during which amongst other things, he

commented on the metal 'Scorpio' ring (signifying my astrological persuasion – not that it meant anything to me, I just thought that it looked 'cool') that I frequently wore, the conversation turned slightly seedier.

Having pulled over into a secluded car park somewhere in the woods near Box Hill, he told me a joke about two soldiers square-bashing (i.e. drill on a barracks square). I don't recall the exact nature of the joke but the punchline involved some confusion between castration and circumcision. He then asked me if I knew what a circumcision was, to which I replied 'No'. He then explained what it was. It sounds dumb to say it but somehow, he made it seem ok for me to show him my willy, and seemed interested in determining how far I could pull my foreskin back, even gently trying to do so himself. Being only a young boy, I could hardly do so, but he said that if I kept trying, I would soon be able to. He then asked if I wanted to see an example of a circumcision, which I understood to mean that he wanted to show me his willy. Having already realised that this was not appearing to be as innocent a car ride as it had at first seemed, but until that point not being able to see an easy way out, I blurted out that I had told my Mum that I would be going to confession that day and so, had to get back. Fortunately, perhaps due to the mention of church, he didn't pursue the issue and drove me back to St Barts where confession was still in progress late on that Saturday afternoon.

I didn't tell anyone what had happened, but I felt horrified, sickened and used and if I have made you uncomfortable, dear reader, I hope you may have a notion of how I felt about this for quite a while. Having realised what a creep Vernon was, when he popped round some weeks later and asked whether I wanted to go out for another drive, I quickly declined with the excuse that I was going into Croydon that afternoon. A few weeks later still, he tried again, and hawking the same excuse, I think he finally got the message and never bothered me again.

Some thoughts and questions arise from this whole sordid issue:

- Firstly, why me? Or was I simply one of a long string of boys that Vernon duped? Based on later evidence, almost certainly....
- Secondly, it surprises me that children (and indeed their parents) can be duped in this way. I'm fairly bright but still succumbed to Vernon's persuasion. Therefore I am inclined to think that generally, children implicitly trust adults, especially those who are involved with the church, and do not expect to be taken advantage of. Adults who prey on this trust should be punished.
- Thirdly, when I declined his further invitations, was he worried that I would shop him to the police? For how long would he have desisted, before being tempted again?
- Fourthly, did he feel guilty after these events? Did he go home and toss himself off or kneel down and flagellate himself to excise his guilt?
- Fifthly and simply, what kick do paedophiles get out of messing with young children?

A few years later, I understand that Vernon was shopped to the police by the parents of Anthony Vassallo, a younger altar boy. I guess that this information became generally public. Following this, Vernon no longer served on the altar but could be seen sitting near the front of the pews as unsmilingly solemn and devout as ever. That must have been an interesting interview, when he



would have had to relinquish his status, perhaps having to admit that he was a perv. I guess that Mum and Dad and probably some/most/all of my siblings became aware of his fall from grace too and the reasons for it, but none of them ever raised the subject with me. If they did know, they must have been scared of what they might hear or else perhaps they felt that I was dealing with it in my own way, which I eventually did. If my parents did know, or suspect, then they let me down. They should have raised it with me to make sure I was okay. Who wouldn't want to protect their child from something like this? While I didn't let it get to me too much, I felt sick at the time for being taken advantage of. As the years passed, it affected me less and less as time went on until by the time I reached my late teens, I had put it down to experience. It certainly contributed to my withdrawal from the church, that there could be such unchristianness in a person who was perceived by all of us to be one of the most devout.

There are lots of things that can mess children up and this sequence of events haunted me for a long time, during which I didn't feel I could tell anybody. Nowadays, it seems all too regular that paedophiles are being outed by their victims, but I bet that there are many, many, many cases that never come to light. I hate to imagine that this could happen to my own children and that they would not feel able to tell me.

As a coda to this episode, it should be noted that some years after, Vernon could be found in the local library teaching rudimentary computing to.....wait for it.....children! I guess that this would have been before the 'Sex Offenders Register' was inaugurated, but I do wonder how many of this new source of young flesh he managed to work his way through before he was again caught, if he ever was. I would like to think that if I saw him again, performing any similar role, that I could shop him to the authorities (probably anonymously so that I wouldn't have to potentially face him in court) and ruin his career and his life as he could have ruined mine. I don't know if he is still following his sordid urges, but if he is, I hope the young children that he is grooming have the good sense to stick razor blades up their bottoms.

Frankly in my opinion, any grown man found guilty of messing about with young children should have their tackle whipped off. Very plain and simple. Removing a dog's gonads curbs its sexual urges, but dogs don't menace young children (at least not sexually), so a stronger punishment/deterrent is required for us intelligent beings. Quite simply, grown men who should be able to exercise some restraint should lose both their dick and balls. Painfully? Maybe, if they have been particularly evil, but at least remove their desire to prey on youngsters.

Two similar events though fortunately on a lesser scale would occur to me in later years. You can read about one of these in the chapter covering my school years. The second much, much lesser event would occur in my early twenties and therefore will appear in volume two.

## ***The Priests***

Several priests came and went during my time attending St Barts. Father James Carolin sticks out the most, a thin man with short, straight, greying hair and glasses, he presided as parish priest for much of my youth and beyond. His occasional visits to the family home prompted Mum to inform



me that I was an 'accident', and I had Fr Carolin to thank for my existence as he had in some way encouraged her. His mellifluous tones at each service and during the lesson would wash over me while my mind drifted elsewhere, but he was a kindly man.

I don't remember much about Father O'Hanlon apart from his almost Alvin Stardust-like coiffure, but I do remember his successor Father Gilbert, who took a dim view of any high jinks in the sacristy either before or after mass. He claimed that loud noises could be heard outside in the chapels (the church had what was termed 'the retro chapel' meaning simply that it was behind the altar, which along with the side door, made it easier to sneak into a service if one was late). Anyway Fr Gilbert was not well liked by the altar boys.

Later, into the 1980s, Fr Gilbert had been replaced by Father Leo Asciak, a bald and tubby Malteser. His presence was supplemented by Father Anthony Porter, but I remember little about him.

Finally, I recall one priest that didn't appear to have a name. It never appeared in the weekly church newsletter. He was a small bald man with round glasses and was perhaps more of an assistant than actually a priest. He had a distinct aroma of stewed apples and custard, which I only years later realised was the same smell emitted by anyone who drank a lot of alcohol. Clearly this man had been a frequent visitor to the communion wine which was kept in a locked cupboard in the sacristy. As one of the altar boys duties was to ensure that there was enough wine and hosts (the small circles of wafer-like 'bread' to dish out to the punters) for the service, it was a matter of principle if no one was about, to take a quick swig if one was tasked with wine duty.

## ***Communion and Confirmation***

On 1<sup>st</sup> July 1972, at the grand old age of seven, I made my First Holy Communion. Later described to me as the dressing of little girls in white dresses that they may become as brides of Christ, it was another of the rituals that at that age, and as one's older brothers and sisters had already undertaken it, seemed like another exciting door that everyone passed through on the road to adulthood. In company with many of the children in my primary school class, I passed through that particular door at the church of SS Peter & Paul on Madeira Road in Mitcham. As mentioned in the chapter covering my school years, my elder sister Liz has teased me for the last thirty five years or so over a picture that she took of Penelope Fielding (a girl in my class) standing next to me on that day, with me wearing impossibly short shorts over my thin, gangly legs.

For my communion, I received a prayer book from Nana which contained the formats of some of the masses. Looking back, while I'm sure it wasn't meant as such by my parents or by Nana, there was a considerable amount of indoctrination being subtly dripped into our consciousnesses. This was later compounded at the age of thirteen by the present of a missal which I received after I had been 'confirmed', a rite which involved the spooky task of kissing the ring of the Bishop! The missal was a more in depth prayer book containing the formats of all of the different mass types – mine was red (whereas Dad's was black) and I was very proud of it for a few years.

Incidentally, as part of our 'confirmation', we were all allowed to take a confirmation name. In many English-speaking and German-speaking lands, as well as in Poland, (but not those countries where Spanish, French or Italian are the prevailing languages) it is customary for a Roman Catholic who is being confirmed to adopt the name of a saint with whom they feel a special affinity. The theory is that the saint is secured by the confirmer as an additional protector and guide. The saint's name can be used in conjunction with the confirmer's middle name and is without effect in civil law (unless the appropriate legal avenues are taken). Our confirmation names were as follows (in brackets):

- Elisabeth Jean (Theresa) Harper
- Stephen Francis (Christopher) Harper
- Nicholas David (John) Harper
- Michael John (David) Harper
- Gillian Margaret (Mary) Harper

Originally I had toyed with choosing Martin as my confirmation name. I had wished at times that I had been called Martin as Michael had a tinge of Irishness about it that I wasn't keen on. This is largely why I have always called myself Mike, though some family members, teachers, partners and bosses have persisted in using the full moniker. When the time came to choose my confirmation name, 'Martin' had fallen out of favour with me and I decided to go with the name 'David' instead. To be honest, I'm not sure I felt any particular affinity with St David, I simply envied Nick's middle name, and one of my best friends for several years had been my 'blood brother' David Geraghty. Seeing as Nick had nicked my middle name as his confirmation name, I saw no harm in reciprocating. For many years after, I used the name 'David' as if it were part of my regular full name, though it's probable that the only official piece of documentation on you will find it referenced is my driving licence where I am called 'Michael John D Harper'. I did also use it when filling out the personal information in the front of each year's diary, even dropping John from my name on occasion. Eventually, I stopped using it as its use appeared to cause the occasional confusion through not being part of my civil name.

Anyway, following my First Holy Communion, I could now take part in the weekly ceremony, rather than just watch the others. One would line up before taking one's place kneeling at the altar step as the priest walked along the row, intoning the words 'The Body Of Christ' (or 'Corpus Christi' if the mass was in Latin) as he dished out the wafers. 'Amen' was the correct response before the priest placed the host on one's tongue, after which one would momentarily bow one's head as if in prayer, before crossing oneself and getting up to walk solemnly back to one's pew. The whole ritual would take up to ten minutes depending on how full the church was. At some time during these early years, a new rule was introduced whereby one could receive the host in one's hand, instead of onto one's tongue (probably much healthier overall). This became quite the fashion at our church and more than once, I palmed the host and disappeared to the toilet where I would mimic the ceremony.

## **Confession**

Another bizarre aspect associated with church was 'going to confession'. Confession was usually held for a couple of hours on Saturday mornings or late on Saturday afternoon during which time, a steady stream of punters would line up on the pews and shuffle along until their turn came. A twenty or thirty minute wait was not unusual before the light would come on above one of the two wooden-doored booths beckoning one to enter. In the darkness, one would kneel down and reel off the sentence, "Bless me Father for I have sinned. It is x weeks since my last confession". For me x would usually be well into double figures, though Mum and Dad encouraged us to go more regularly. One would tell the priest on the other side of the grille of some lies that one purported to have told or some other trumped-up wrongdoing. I could simply never think of anything particularly bad that I had done that was worth telling, so I would often make it up.

I'm sure that the priests must have been as bored as hell having to listen to the endless drivel that most of us probably came out with. And if anyone did reveal anything really meaty, how did the priests react? They were meant to keep all wrongdoings between themselves and their confessee. I know that if I were ever in their position, I'd be secretly hoping for somebody to come out with something exciting. Surely also, although it was dark in the booth, the priests must have recognised some voices, maybe those more devout amongst the congregation who confessed more regularly. Perhaps that was the game? Guess the punter? And did the priests ever gossip amongst themselves – "You'll never guess what Mrs Jones told me in the confessional this morning etc etc"?

Anyway, after delivering one's falsehoods, the priest would rattle off absolution which was a minute or so of unintelligible burbling and finish up by prescribing five Hail Marys or similar depending on the amount of atonement required. Having knelt down back in the main body of the church and having said one's penance, one was apparently spiritually cleansed and could happily skip off to commit some fresh sins.

## **Cubs**

Being part of a church-going family meant that we children also got involved in the various groups associated with the church. Primarily for the boys, this meant Cubs and Scouts, and for the girls, Brownies and Guides. Each of Liz, Steve and Nick had followed these paths and had suitably infused me with the need to belong to these institutions too. Steve and Nick talked of their experiences with the 32<sup>nd</sup> Streatham Scout Pack run by Mr Tambirassa, who looked Sri Lankan, but may have been South Indian, and who lived on the corner of Glenister Park Road, near to the Glencairn Road railway bridge. Regaled with what sounded like exciting camping adventures, I was keen to join as soon as I was allowed.

At around the age of seven or eight, I joined the 32<sup>nd</sup> Streatham cubs. Akela, the Pack leader was a kindly middle-aged lady whose real name I forget. Dark-haired, she had a mole on her top lip and lived on Briar Road, just the other side of Pollards Hill park from us. The Pack consisted of

maybe four or five “sixes”, headed by a sixer and a seconder. Each meeting would last maybe ninety minutes or two hours and would consist of activities towards acquiring Activity Badges. Occasionally, we would play games such as ‘handball’ where conversely to football, all dribbling and passing was done by hand and it was a foul to touch the ball with one’s foot.

At the end of the meeting, those who had actually joined the Cubs would recite the Cub Scout Promise as the Union Jack was unfurled, “I promise I will do my best, to do my duty to God and to the Queen, to help other people and to keep the Cub Scout Law”. The Cubs uniform which having enrolled, one would be entitled to wear, consisted of a green scarf, a coloured woggle (colour dependent on which ‘six’ you belonged to), a purple badge with the Cub insignia to be sewn onto one’s green jersey, a green cap with yellow piping, grey shorts and socks, and elastic garters with a green flash. In my younger years, after the meeting I would sit on the 5ft high wall outside the church hall and wait for Dad to collect me. Given that it was a mile’s walk each way from home to the church and that he probably also had to collect Gill from Brownies on a different night and had probably had to do the same for Liz, Steve and Nick, it amazes me that it was another ten years or so before he finally passed his driving test and got himself a car.

One week each year would be designated ‘Bob-a-Job’ week. This gave all cubs licence to knock on the doors of complete strangers and ask them if there were any jobs they wanted doing e.g. gardening. I suppose in the early ‘70s, earning 5p for a job wasn’t bad money if you were under ten, but it did rather depend on the nature of the job. Occasionally, we would work in pairs. One two-man job at a house on Norton Gardens involved an awful lot of weeding and moving earth, but at least the lady there provided us with home-made lemonade and paid us 20p for our trouble.

There were occasional events such as the annual parade, where all of the church groups from the surrounding area would march around in public. Someone from each group would be chosen as a flag bearer and would carry a large and, for a young lad, heavy flag on a wooden pole, supported by a small leather cup strapped around one’s waist. At the height of summer, it was usually far too hot in one’s jersey and cap to consider also the exertion of carrying a heavy flag. Thankfully, the privilege was never offered to me.

Bazaars and jumble sales occasionally hit the church hall, where the church packs – Scouts, Cubs, Guides and Brownies - would usually operate a stall each. Maybe a shove ha’penny table or the lucky dip or a home-made fairy cake stall would be the usual for our pack. If we were lucky, we would get to finish any left over cakes. The only items I ever remember buying were a small model fighter plane with a wing missing (Why would anyone buy a model plane with a wing missing?), and the third member of my small golliwog family, Long John Golly. Tom Jones – not the preening, singing Welshman but a squat, bespectacled, grey wavy-haired church usher – would operate the tombola or the Wheel Of Fortune wearing a tall multi-coloured hat like Slade’s Noddy Holder had when singing ‘Far, Far Away’ on Top Of The Pops. Mr Jones, who also taught Maths to the lower streams at St Joseph’s College would in later years, apprehend Sean and me drinking tea in the church hall crèche when we should have been in church worshipping the Lord.

Also, each year there would be a games day where Cub and Scout packs would slug it out against each other and Brownie and Guide packs would do the same. I only went to one of these events, at Tooting Bec College on Abbotswood Road (where I later attended as a Day Release

student), where I was only involved in one game. Each 'six' had to manoeuvre two large, coloured planks of wood around a course. By lifting up their right feet, the right plank could be moved forward and ditto for the left plank. I am sure we did not win that event and as there were few announcements detailing which packs were leading the event, and there were no other events that I was involved in, it was all a bit of a letdown.

Another year, there was a similar event where we were required to turn up in fancy dress at the church hall early on a Saturday afternoon. I had a cowboy outfit comprising of a brown hat, a waistcoat with silver plastic sheriff's badge and yellow corduroy trousers with plastic tassels all the way down each leg. I also had a holster, but as Mum and Dad did not allow us to have toy guns (as they felt it might one day lead us to get involved with the real thing – for the same reason, we were not allowed to watch James Bond films), the holster was a shade superfluous. Anyway, I turned up at the church hall at what I believed was the designated hour and.....there was no one there! Whether or not I had the wrong time, wrong day, or whether the event had been cancelled due to lack of interest, I never did find out. Not wishing to appear foolish by going home early and admitting that somehow I had got it wrong, I hung around for half an hour before going home proclaiming that we (the pack) had won. Needless to say, my parents saw through this little deception and I was left feeling foolish anyway.

There were also occasional events at Streatham Swimming Baths, but as I could not swim then, I believe I only went to one event which involved pulling floats across the shallow end of the pool. Not much to write home about.

Each autumn, there would be a show put on by all of the church groups at Bishop Thomas Grant, the school located at the top of Streatham Common. Each pack would do a performance over perhaps two nights in front of the rest of the local groups and parents. The only event I remember involved my pack taking off a Gilbert and Sullivan song – I'm afraid I could not tell you which one as I'm not a great fan of their oeuvre – but I remember a snippet of the words that we had to sing:

"Where's your woggle? Don't make me laugh"

"The dog ate it when he chewed my scarf"

We were also introduced to Roy Hudd, a well-known and Croydon-born radio comedian of the time who would many years later appear as a much fatter undertaker Archie Shuttleworth in the TV show Coronation Street. He was apparently a keen supporter of the Scouting Movement and gave each pack a few rousing words and a burst of his allegedly famed chicken walk (which was actually very good).

Still later in autumn one year, I attended a conker competition held at the school on the junction of Valley Road and Sunnyhill Road in Streatham. Although I wasn't particularly brilliant at conkers, I somehow made it to the semi-final stage before getting knocked out. For this astonishing feat, I was awarded a bronze-painted conker, the finalists naturally being awarded gold and silver

conkers. Lucky old me, eh?

Each year there would also be a weekend camp at Downe, near Orpington (if you were a Cub) or a whole week's camp at Broadstone Warren, south of East Grinstead (if you were a Scout). I only went on one Cub Scout camp at Downe (perhaps around May 1974 – I recall that the Doctor Who serial 'Planet Of The Spiders' was broadcast around this time), the high/lowlights of which were a communal thin-tasting Lancashire hot pot which had a lot of bones in it, and some indoor map reading and contour studying which I was quite good at. Before leaving home to go on this camp, which was possibly the first night I had ever spent not in the company of any of my family, I recall I said to Mum and Dad, "Pray for me". Mum replied, "It won't be quite as bad as that, dear, but we'll think of you". It was only a one night stay, sleeping in a thinly-blanketed bed next to the window, and though it was cold and damp in the woods outside, the grim food and the evening sing-song where one of the local chief scouts sang a song about parts of the body ("...breadbasket, wigglywigglywaggywoo (wiggling his ears), That's what they taught me when I was at school") were just enough to cheer us through the night.

Eventually within my pack, I became a seconder and later a sixer, the primary tasks of which were leading your six, and assisting the other members of your six in presenting themselves properly e.g. showing them how to fold their scarf.

Many of the other boys that I first met at Cubs would also form parts of the other groups associated with the church e.g. altar boys, youth club. One or two of them, I would later meet again in school or working in Sainsburys. Notable members included Simeon and later, Thomas Jupp who lived on the corner of Pollards Hill North and London Road; Terry and Sean Weddell who lived down towards Windermere Road; John Setra, an older boy who it was rumoured had a much longer name, John Setrangiwallah; Aidan Palfreyman from Kilmartin Avenue; and Andrew Thiel. Andrew lived in such a large house on Pollards Hill South that at his birthday party there one year, there was plenty of room to play that great party game 'Murder In The Dark'. Simeon often referred to me as 'Happy Harper, with a smile like a Cheshire cat', though whether he was being facetious or simply alluding to Nick's once-upon-a-time nickname of "Smiley" (though he was more commonly referred to as "Speedy"), I do not know.

There were two other lads called Joseph and Danny Mooney whose parents took over the running of the pack maybe a year or two after I joined. They lived a third of the way up Glencairn Road and were an avid church-going family. I thought Mr Mooney, who was a fireman, was very friendly, but Mrs Mooney was sterner with short dark curly hair and a large rubbery mouth. Joseph had clearly taken after her in the looks department, while Danny's features were softened by his father's influence. I found their family relationship a little twee though.

I can only really remember a few events involving them. Firstly, in trying to earn a particular Activity Badge, I went to their house one evening and spent an hour or two trying different foods like apples, honey and raw potato blindfold. I found that I particularly detested piccalilli. Following that, we took part in an experiment which involved placing a daffodil in a pot of ink, the daffodil turning blue after a few days as it sucked up the ink. Finally, cress seeds grown on a flannel in the dark of the understairs cupboard grew anaemically, while those on the windowsill in the back room grew with an appropriately green colour.

## Scouts

I graduated into the Scout pack around the age of eleven, becoming a member of the Eagles patrol. Mr Tambirassa continued to host the bi-weekly meeting for a short time after I joined, but was soon replaced by Bert Collison, a ginger-haired, bespectacled, bearded and moustachioed man with an ostensibly jolly temper, whose friendly exterior gave no indication of the explosion of anger I was later to witness.

Many of my co-Cubs sooner or later graduated, so that many of the Scouts I knew were longtime associates. A notable addition was a tall, fair-haired and thickset lad called Julian Theobald, who lived at the Barclays Bank Sports Club on the A23 opposite the library, formerly part of the grounds of Norbury Hall.

Mr Collison's son, Gerard who was a little older than me, was also a member of the Scout troop and an altar boy, so we had a fair amount in common. I became quite good friends with Gerard for a few years, and would spend a lot of time at his parents' terraced house up a short flight of steps at the top of Newlands Road (No.95) which was in the centre of the Norbury Estate, though they would later move one street away to 82 Tylecroft Road..

The Norbury Estate was one of the earliest London County Council (LCC) cottage estates, completed around 1921, and deemed a 'Local Area Of Special Character'. Apparently, although considered in their time "unlikely to meet the criteria for designation as Conservation Areas", such cottage estates possessed "sufficient architectural townscape and environmental quality to make them of significant local value". Additionally, they were a "considered and important part of the LCC's pioneering efforts to alleviate the poor living conditions of many city dwellers". That may well have been true of its time, before many of the surrounding roads were constructed, but the houses built later in the surrounding roads far superseded the quality and size of the Norbury Estate, which to my family, living just outside it on Norbury Cross, was referred to a little demeaningly as council housing and populated by those who couldn't afford their own houses.

Apparently although some of the country's best architects were working for the LCC in the early twentieth century, they could not, in Norbury, for cost reasons, reproduce the gardens and tree planting employed at Letchworth and Hampstead. They did nevertheless use their ingenuity to design and build tasteful exteriors, including prominent chimney stacks, projecting timber porches, decorative ceramic house numbers, red clay tile garden paths, low walls and wrought iron railings.

Scouts wasn't much different from Cubs, just with older boys. On Saturday mornings in winter, we were slaughtered at football on the asphalt pitches at Tooting Bec. Afterwards we would go back to Gerard's house where his mum would reinstalled some warmth into our frozen limbs by making us hot tea to drink in front of the gas fire in their front room. On such mornings, I could be home again for lunch very quickly as Gerard lived only five minutes away.

A shop, a little way down Newlands Road, sold very large and multi-coloured party balloons for 2p each, quite the most impressive I can ever remember!



We went to camp again, this time for a week between Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> July and 7<sup>th</sup> August 1976, this time at Broadstone Warren. My only firm memories of this camp are cooking and eating jacket potatoes and charred sausages next to the camp fire, and feeling constantly damp, though it was in the middle of one of the hottest summers in years.

But my abiding memory of those scouting years is crystallised by one afternoon at Gerard's house. We would often play around the house, occasionally interrupted by Gerard's elder and skinnier, and like his father, ginger-haired brother, Derek. Playing upstairs in Gerard and Derek's bedroom one afternoon, Derek was as usual teasing his younger brother, when suddenly their dad burst into the room in a thunderous rage and proceeded to thrash Derek with a thin cane. So I found out later, this was an occasional event and maintained Gerard's fear of his father so much so that even in his early teens, he still sometimes wet his bed. I'm not surprised with a psycho-father like Bert lurking in the background. I certainly saw this jolly, bluff fellow in a different light after that.

Overall, although I enjoyed my time at Cubs and Scouts, it sounded like they had a lot more fun at the less-squarer-seeming Boys Clubs, though whether this was just a case of "The grass is always greener....", I never found out.

## **Youth Club**

At about the age of fourteen, notice went out about a new youth club that was starting up in St Bartholomew's upstairs church hall. Each Wednesday for two hours, youths could meet up to spend time with each other, listen to music, and play pool. Sean and I both went along initially, though Sean dropped out after a short period. The club was run by Mrs Felton who lived at the Streatham end of Ellison Road. She had a gorgeous daughter called Colette, a very sociable girl with short, jet black hair, smooth, coffee coloured skin and long mascara'ed eyelashes surrounding her gorgeous dark eyes.

I would play pool with Sean, his brother Guy, Simeon Jupp, his brother Thomas, Austin Breen (who lived at 36 Norbury Cross), classmate Paul Hewish (who lived on Donnybrook Road, off Streatham Vale), David DeRuyter (also from school) and Rob Gammell. There were sweets and cans of pop to buy, and a record deck on which we were allowed to play our own records. One evening seemed to be dominated by the endless playing of "The Prince" by Madness, dating those early youth club nights to September 1979.

Although my head was later turned by other girls at the youth club (see below), for those first three months, Colette remained as the main target of my affections. I sang to myself to the tune of "I'm In Love With My Car" by Queen, about how I was in love with Colette. However, she soon teamed up with weedy-looking Bernard Jupp. At the club Christmas Party, which didn't amount to much more than sitting around and chatting in little groups as we usually did, Paul Hewish blurted out to Colette that I fancied her. Her reply was "Hard Luck", a real dagger in my heart. Later still, she would call me a 'creep' for walking into the kitchen area where she and Bernard were canoodling. I guessed that if she ever had been at all interested in me (which she probably never was), she certainly wasn't now.

Aside from the luscious Colette, my attention was captured by Rob Gammell's entourage which initially consisted of just his three sisters, Anne, Melena and Juliette. The Gammells lived on Buckleigh Road, just a stone's throw from the church. From around the end of October, Rob would bring along his new girlfriend, Morag Byier.

My God!!! Morag was absolutely stunning with her long dark hair and eyes to die for. Rob said that she was his girlfriend but this state of affairs didn't last very long, particularly as she flirted with me outrageously. I thought I was fairly cool, even in my dark blue, furry-collared jacket and acne-spotted tendency and basked in her luminous presence and attention over that Christmas. The electricity crackled between us for a couple of months until February 3rd 1980, a few days after I learned from Paul Hewish that she had been asking at the club for my address, when I finally got to hold her in my arms and kiss her after church, which made my whole body tingle. Sadly, our liaison was over almost as quickly as it started and within the month, she had completely disappeared from the scene, not even appearing at church and I saw her only once more around three months later. Apparently Rob had become rather fed up with her flirting tendencies and had dumped her, though he and I still seemed to remain on very good terms. I did try to trace Morag's address but came to a dead end when I found no trace of any families named Byier in the phonebook.

Initially Juliette and later Melena took Morag's place in my esteem, our mutual admiration of each other threatening to erupt into lustful affection. Although not half as pretty as Morag, I fancied Juliette immensely until she too disappeared from the scene and later Melena, but somehow though we had shared a Christmas kiss, we never got any further. After a while, the number of Gammell's attending the youth club dwindled and the moment passed for Melena and me. However, the waters were muddied by the arrivals of Joanne Lea and Louise Dillon on the scene – Louise being a schoolfriend of Gill's. Typically for me, I kept a chart of my weekly favourites from around mid-November 1979:

|       |           |           |          |            |          |
|-------|-----------|-----------|----------|------------|----------|
| 21/11 | 1.Colette | 2.Morag   |          |            |          |
| 28/11 | 1.Colette | 2.Julie   |          |            |          |
| 12/12 | 1.Colette | 2.Joanne  |          |            |          |
| 21/12 | 1.Colette | 2.Joanne  |          |            |          |
| 24/12 | 1.Morag   | 2.Colette | 3.Melena | 4.Julie    | 5.Joanne |
| 01/01 | 1.Morag   | 2.Colette | 3.Melena | 4.Juliette | 5.Joanna |
| 06/02 | 1.Morag   | 2.Julie   | 3.Melena |            |          |
| 13/02 | 1.Morag   | 2.Julie   | 3.Melena | 4.Colette  |          |
| 16/02 | 1.Morag   | 2.Louise  | 3.Julie  | 4.Melena   |          |
| 12/03 | 1.Morag   | 2.Louise  | 3.Julie  | 4.Melena   |          |
| 22/04 | 1.Louise  | 2.Joanne  | 3.Julie  | 4.Morag    | 5.Melena |

After perhaps mid-1980, nearly a year after the youth club had started up, it seemed that most of my friends no longer attended and I too, eventually stopped going. I guess that it eventually closed down.

## Chapters

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23 24 25 >

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RSS

Norbury Girl wrote 348 days ago



I have lived in Norbury for a long time, went to St Joseph's Primary School and still go to St. Barts Church in Ellison Road. I roared with laughter at some of the things you said about people that I still know and how true they are!

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eloraine wrote 694 days ago



Well written, loved it. Good luck with it. E.Loraine Royal Blood Chronicles book one

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Burgio wrote 724 days ago



LITTLE MICKEY

This is an interesting coming of age story – interesting because the narrator is much older than in the average coming of age story. And because it's so detailed it reveals much more than usual about the narrator and his family. It's courageous to write this type of story because it holds back no family secrets. Those reveals, tho, are also what makes it a good read. I'm adding this to my shelf. Burgio (Grain of Salt).

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Melcom wrote 724 days ago



A truly humorous read. And it's all true, great stuff.

Happily shelved  
Melxx  
Impeding Justice

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Harpic wrote 725 days ago



Thanks for your comments Missy, very much appreciated:~) Mike

“ I love the nostalgic feel to this, you brought that time period alive! The style is great and your pacing is just the right speed. I got involved quickly and stayed involved. Kept forgetting this was a biography, thanks for sharing this with us.

Missy  
Mark of Eternity ”

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[carlashmore](#) wrote 726 days ago



You know, if nothing else you have left this for your descendents. It is a sharp, well written, humorous and moving book that is highly involving. And you've lived it all. I felt there were a few too many semi-colons in Chapter 2, but that aside it is a wonderful book.

Carl  
The Time hUnters

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[missyfleming\\_22](#) wrote 726 days ago



I love the nostalgic feel to this, you brought that time period alive! The style is great and your pacing is just the reight speed. I got involved quickly and sayed in volved. Kept forgetting this was a biography, thanks for sharing this with us.

Missy  
Mark of Eternity

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[soutexmex](#) wrote 726 days ago



Mike: Actually, I can go with both pitches. With the long pitch, I would break it down into smaller paragraphs so it reads faster. End it with one succinct question. Perfecting your pitches is how you climb in ranking to gather more exposure and comments to better your novel. The writing is good so I am SHELIVING you.

Though I have been a very active member for over a year, I can still use your comments on my book when you get the chance. Every little bit helps. Cheers!

JC  
The Obergemau Key

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[SusieGulick](#) wrote 727 days ago



Dear Mike, I love that you shared your story - especially your singles & tapes names - I'm 70 (memoir named below) & still have all of my singes, 45, LPs & tapes since I was in high school in the 50s. :) I can hardly wait until you write volume two of your story. :) Before I began to read your book, I was prepared by your recap/pitch that was before your story which was very well done. Your story is good because you create interest by having short paragraphs & lots of dialogue, which makes me want to keep reading to find out what's going to happen next. I'm commenting/backing your book to help it advance. Could you please return the favor by taking a moment to comment/back my TWO books, "He Loves Me, He Loves Me Not" & the unedited version? "Tell Me True Love Stories," which tells at the end my illness now/6th abusive marraiage." Thanks, Susie :)

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[lynn clayton](#) wrote 727 days ago



Forget aliens and fantasy, this is my sort of book. The more parochial, the better. When autobiography is well-written it can't be beaten for fascination and truth. My only complaint is about the size of the text. Three cheers for promising to give us your

thoughts without apology - any writer who's afraid to shouldn't write. Backed. Lynn

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AJB wrote 729 days ago



I've enjoyed reading your autobiography, Mike. I grew up at roughly the same time and a lot of your memories have brought back vivid ones of my own - particularly the music and TV references!

Your writing is smooth and easy to read and I like your honest, open style (although your experience with Mr Wilshire was somewhat disturbing!!).

Perhaps your experiences won't have a huge commercial appeal, but as a piece of family and social history, this is a fascinating read.

Amanda

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