

Boyhood and Youth

Simon Chapman AO



© Simon Chapman 2018

Permission to republish simon.chapman@sydney.edu.au

Contents

Prologue	4
1. My parents and my early life	5
Two surprises	11
2. Moving to Bathurst	18
Primary school	20
Bathurst High School	22
3. All Saints College	23
Memorable teachers	23
Army cadets	29
Cadet camp	31
Bullying	32
School chapel	35
Sport	35
Swimming	39
4. Home and town life	40
Music	43
Musical theatre	48
Books	48
Stamp collecting	49
Illness	51
The dentist	53
Church	54
Pets	56
Violence	57
The Bathurst show	60
Shooting	62
Anglo-Saxon homogeneity	64

Social class	64
The Bathurst Club	65
Holidays	66
Numbers in my life	67
5. Forbidden fruit	69
Comics	69
Smoking	71
Drinking	72
Drugs	74
Condoms	74
Protestants and Catholics	75
Girls, kissing and sex	76
Naughty magazines	82
6. Working for the man	83
Boyhood jobs	86
Race program selling	87
The Western Stores	90
The Handyman	91
Epilogue	93

Prologue

I was born at Bowral hospital in the southern highlands of NSW, on December 14, 1951. From the age of five until I finished high school, I lived in Bathurst, 200km west of Sydney over the Blue Mountains on the central plains of New South Wales. There, my parents Margaret and Alec who had emigrated to Australia in 1949 from England, together ran a ladies hairdressing salon, The Park. I have a younger sister, Virginia, who has always been called Ginny. She was born on September 16, 1954 and today lives in Earlwood in Sydney. She is a (retired) renal transplant research nurse, has two sons, Tim and Michael, and is married to Paul Bielski, a Geordie from Newcastle in England, who works as a security guard.

I have many vivid and almost all very wonderful memories of my childhood in Bathurst, and of my parents. Mum died in 1984 of breast cancer, and dad in 2000 in his sleep, after living for about 10 years with obvious, but not profound Alzheimer's disease.

The people I love most – my wife Trish, my son Joe, his wife Bev, children Florence and Jasper, my two step children Ali and Patrick – never knew my mother (Joe was about 18 months old when she died), and the older ones only knew my father as he progressed through his Alzheimer's. They have all heard me talk often about some of the incidents and periods described in this memoir, but have not heard most of it. I wanted them to know more of my early life.

In telling friends that I was writing it, some said they would also very much like to read it. So I've written it not just for my family but for anyone curious about one person's account of their daily life as a child and teenager in a medium sized country town in Australia in the 1950s and 60s. It covers my life until the time when I left home for good, a few weeks before I turned 18 in 1969.

1

My parents and my early life

My mother and father, Margaret and Alexander John (always known as Alec), were English. Dad was born on June 12, 1910 and grew up in a tiny two story bald-faced terrace in a bleak, narrow, treeless street, Morgan Road, in Portsmouth. When I first lived in England in 1973, I once went down there, drove down the street and parked outside it, trying to take it in.

His mother Kathleen was Irish and his father, whose name I never knew, was English. As I was growing up, I recall him phoning back home to England only a few times at Christmas. When his mother died, I remember a telegram came with the news. Mum handed it to him when he came home from work. Dad took himself off alone to church and nothing more was said of it. He didn't seem close to his family in England at all, beyond annual Christmas cards.



Dad's mother, Kathleen

Mum was born on May 1 1919 to Mary Ann Reeves (formerly Pilgrim) and Alfred Reeves. Dad was therefore nine years older than mum. She grew up in Farnham, Surrey. They met each other while working on ships bringing migrants to live in Australia after the second world war.

As far as I could gather when I later started to reflect on such things, mum was middle class. She spoke with what I came to understand was a home counties accent. Her father was the editor of a local Surrey newspaper. I can't ever recall her speaking of her mother (whom I assume is the woman with her in the photo below). But she often spoke of her father presiding over the dining table with a wooden ruler with which he would hit anyone who spoke out of turn during the meal. This is the only fragment I recall hearing about the person I never knew who was my maternal grandfather. The ruler ritual was mockingly threatened at our dinner table many times as I grew up.



Mum as a girl

Mum was the youngest of six children (Eric, Dick, Claude, Bernard, and a sister whose name I don't recall). Bernard was the only one I ever met. This happened in 1973 when I went to live in London with my first wife Annie Cooney when I was 21. I think he was the only sibling alive at the time. If that was not the case, mum certainly made no effort to link me up with any of the others. Bernard was living in Farnham woods in an old gypsy or circus caravan (see photo below). He went on European cycling holidays with friends from his local pub.



Mum and her mother

The day we met at his caravan, he made us nettle soup and boiled goose eggs to eat with bread. He asked me seriously if kangaroos were intelligent animals because he had once seen a packet of tea (presumably Billy Tea) showing a bushman sharing a cup with a kangaroo. I was thrilled to learn that I had such an eccentric in my family.



**My uncle Bernard (standing), and his home in
Farnham woods**

During the war, Mum was stationed at Windsor Castle. She was a Captain in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (the ATS). We grew up with three photographs of her from that period on our mantelpiece. One (see below) showed her in the centre of the front row, in charge of a platoon of 75 women in military uniform who were stationed at Windsor to look after the Royal Family.



Captain Margaret Reeves at Windsor Castle (front row, eight from the left)

The young Princess Elizabeth was in uniform during the war and was stationed there with her sister, Princess Margaret. Another posed photo, since lost, showed mum instructing the Elizabeth in how to change an ambulance tyre. There didn't seem to be any tyre black or grease on their hands, so the photo was probably a posed official photograph. A third (below) shows her escorting the Princess as she inspects the troops on parade.



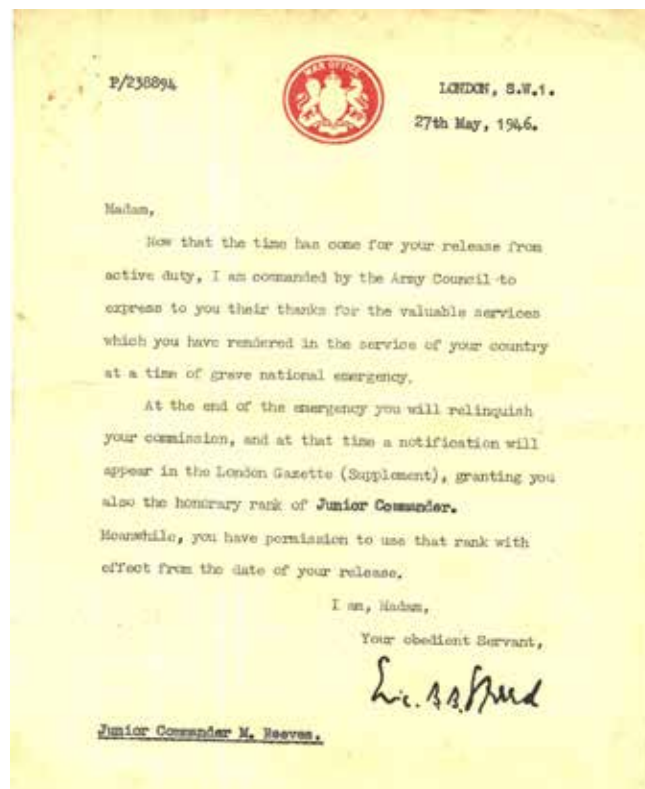
Mum with Princess Elizabeth Windsor, Windsor Castle

To my great delight, I found the photo below on the web when casually searching for photos of the Queen at Windsor Castle during the war. I'd never seen it before.



Mum, middle row third from the left. Princess Elizabeth front row,
fourth from left

After the war when she received her discharge papers, she was made an honorary Junior Commander. Perhaps this title was granted to all decommissioned officers.



Mum was plainly 'foreman material', as the old King Gee work overalls advertisement used to put it. She had never been to university (it was uncommon for women then and she would have been barely old enough -20- as the war started), but she spoke a little French and our house always had books. I thought that books were perfectly normal, but as I grew up I went into many houses where there were no books at all. Mum was worldly.

Dad came from a poor family. His father had consumption (TB) and in his last months, dad told us of how his father lived for some time in a tent in the narrow backyard of the terrace house in Morgan Road before being taken to a sanatorium to die.

Dad lived in the house with his two younger sisters, Kit and Rose, older brother George and younger brother Jim (see photo). By the look of the house from the street, it most likely had just two bedrooms, so the five children may have all shared a room, and probably beds.



Left to right seated: Jim's wife Joy, Kit, Rose, George, Alec, Frank (Kit's husband). Jim is standing

I gradually learned as I grew up that Dad despised George. From various anecdotes, it seemed that George had a chip on his shoulder about something. According to dad, he was bullied by George throughout their adolescence and George later resented his emigration to Australia as a sign of dad rising above his station and trying to 'better himself'. Christmas cards were exchanged between all the siblings each year, except with George. When I went to live in England after my undergraduate degree, I was welcomed warmly by Kit and Jim, and later in life I twice brought Rose to Australia to stay with my family for a few months. But I never met George and was warned off him by the rest of the family as a grumpy, narky bastard.

Growing up in Australia away from uncles, aunts, cousins and various in-laws, I had no experience at all of an extended family. When I was about 10, Jim once visited us from England when on a business trip to Australia for the company he worked for. All I recall was that he was a jolly, back-slapping sort of man who took us all out to the opulent Wentworth Hotel in Sydney (now the Sofitel) where I remember eating a delicious John

Dory fish served with hot banana, in the manner of the nouvelle cuisine of the day. It was the most exotic thing I had ever eaten.

I have always understood instantly what aunts and uncles are, but I have to think for a moment to understand what it means when someone is introduced to me as their cousin. I still have no idea about what a 'second cousin' means, for example. I never felt in any way deprived in this. When I meet friends' extended family members, I think how complicated it all sounds, having to keep up with them all, remember birthdays and special occasions.

Two surprises

When I was about 15, one afternoon I was going through Dad's wallet in his coat pocket in the wardrobe and found a piece of official paper that showed he had been married before in England, to a woman named Clementine. Until that moment, I'd known nothing of this. I remember the thrill of having discovered something I plainly was not meant to know about.

That evening, I asked mum and dad what it was all about, and dad told me ruefully and with still raw guilt, that he had been married to Clementine before the war. They had a son, whose name I either was not told or have now forgotten. Dad muttered a few things about how Clem, as he called her, was 'impossible' and would have violent and hysterical episodes that 'all became too much'. So one night he left and walked alone from West Byfleet to London, never returning. Google shows this was some 25 miles, via the A3 today.

His anxiety in describing the breakdown and abandoning his son (he never saw him again) was palpable when he explained it all to me. There was a real sense that he had taken a decision he would never be able to forget. But he never mentioned his son again, even late in life before he died.

While this new discovery about his previous marriage and his son was unforgettable, I had no curiosity at all to try and discover anything about my genetic half-brother, nor to meet him. When living in London in the early 1970s, his sister Kit offered to have her husband Frank drive me down south to see where they believed the son had once lived. I wasn't at all interested.

Dad told me that they had never divorced and that the breakdown of the marriage was the main reason he'd gone away to sea after the war to work on the migrant boats. Divorce in those days was fault-based, and mostly a course open only to those with money who could afford lawyers and who had hopes of court-ordered alimony and settlement payments. As a hairdresser without his own business, dad would have been barely worth pursuing. I seem to recall him telling me repeatedly that his hairdresser's wages were something paltry like 'five and six a week' (five shillings and six pence). But of course Clementine was presumably left penniless with a child to care for, unless she remarried. I know nothing about her life afterwards.

A second surprise, related to the first, was that at the age of 20 I discovered that my fine, upstanding, loving parents had never been married. After finishing my bachelor's

degree at university, Annie (my then wife) and I prepared to do what many Australians of our age did – go on a working holiday to England. With my parents being born in England, at that time I was entitled to get either a British passport or a ‘patriality’ document which would have given me extra entitlements in England. So when my sister Ginny and I visited my parents’ flat in Sydney’s Rose Bay one day in 1972, I asked them if they could give me their marriage certificate which I’d need to prove my eligibility.

They went ashen and asked us to sit down. They explained that, with dad never having divorced (which I had long known by then), they could not legally marry. I hadn’t ever thought about that possibility, and assumed that, as mum had always been Margaret Chapman throughout my life, that naturally they were married. Mum had changed her name by deed poll at the registry office and had always worn a wedding ring.



Mum and dad, possibly before coming to Australia

I thought all this was delightful: my very upright parents engaging in this subterfuge for all these years in a staid country town. And the bonus of me being an official bastard! That would give me serious and frequent bragging rights. But Ginny was terribly upset and cried at the news. It just didn’t seem right to her.

There was a postscript to this. In 2015 when I was writing this memoir, I found mum’s 1949 diary in an envelope of papers. On Monday February 28, the single entry says simply “Got married 2.30 very quietly.” Ginny and I talked about this. We remembered well how mortified they were when they told us they were not married. So that must have been true. The diary entry then, probably referred to an informal ceremony they might have gone through alone, or perhaps a blessing from an understanding minister. Whatever it was, they never spoke of it to us.

I asked my parents many times why they had come to Australia. Mum had been engaged to a Royal Air Force fighter pilot who had been shot down and killed over Ger-

many. She described him more than once as 'dashing' and I cannot think of him without thinking of a Dirk Bogarde cut of a man, with a thin moustache and the good looks of the period, although I never saw his photograph. Mum told me she went to sea to try to get over his death.

She worked as a children's nurse on board the migrant ships. The photograph below I found among her things, shows her in nurse's uniform in what looks like teenage years. But Ginny swears mum never had any nursing training, so 'nursing' in those days may have been little more than comforting the sick.



Mum the nurse

In the war, while mum lived at Windsor Castle, Dad had been a sergeant in the British army in Burma with Mad Mike Calvert's [Chindits](#), the British Special Forces unit. He got very bad malaria soon after arriving in Burma and was quickly repatriated to Kashmir where he spent some six months recuperating on a houseboat on Nagin Lake. He saw no combat action in Burma or elsewhere. Where he was before arriving in Burma, and after Kashmir, is a blank. He sometimes wistfully alluded to his time in Kashmir. The odd raised eyebrow and smile hinted at worldly pleasures. Having been there in 1985, I know it is a stunning, unforgettable place, with wooden houseboats, gondola-like shikharas selling

cloth, chocolate, *papier mache* boxes and strong hashish. It must have been an amazing experience for a young man who'd barely left his apprenticeship in dismal Portsmouth.

Mum and dad went back and forth between England and Australia eight times working on P&O's Strathaird (see photo), always via the Suez Canal. The ship was one of several carrying "£10 poms" emigrating to the new world after the war. I was told stories of Arab traders pulling up alongside the ship on small boats, selling cloth and trinkets in the canal and in the port of Aden in Yemen. In my late teens when I went through a period of using hippie patchouli oil, dad would tell me with disdain that I smelt just like an Arab boat trader.



The Strathaird

They had great affection for Colombo in (then) Ceylon, and met a couple (the Pouliers) there who thereafter sent a Christmas card every year to them in Australia covered in exotic stamps which I gleefully soaked off and added to my collection (see Stamp Collecting at p47).

They told us very little about their shipboard life, or how their romance commenced and developed. On one trip in 1948, the passengers included the Australian "Invincibles" cricket team, captained by Don Bradman. Mum had a small souvenir booklet with each of the team's photos autographed in blue ink from a fountain pen. She gave it to me in my teens and I stupidly swapped it with a school friend, Graeme Lasky, for a 2 shillings and 6 pence face value Queen Victoria stamp. Smart Simon knew that 2/6d would have been a lot of money in Victorian England, so the stamp would have had low circulation and therefore would have been quite rare and valuable. One evening a few years ago I heard a cricket memorabilia expert taking calls on Sydney radio and I called in asking how much the

booklet would be worth today. He said about \$5,000-\$10,000. I sold the stamp on eBay in about 2005 for a whole \$80.

In 1949, they decided to emigrate to Australia. Mum's diary shows that they left Southampton on The Moreton Bay liner on April 2. It's not clear if they were again working on the ship or whether on this last voyage they were passengers – '£10 poms' themselves. They reached Malta on April 8, Port Said the next day, Aden on April 12, Colombo on April 22, Fremantle on May 2, Melbourne on May 9 and then finally Sydney on May 20 – a voyage of 48 days.

On the same day they arrived, mum's pencil-written diary says "Alec gets job at Elizabeth Arden David Jones £800 PA!" A job paying £15 a week was worth an exclamation mark. But the diary then noted while he started in the job the next Monday, that he 'left' the job on Thursday that week. He started a new job at another department store, Farmers, on June 6, but again 'left' two days later, starting another job at "Browns" the same day. There was no indication if he was frantically upwardly mobile in all this, or quickly sacked in succession. Mum started work at Sydney Hospital on June 15. Her first week's pay was £6 10 shillings. During these first couple of months they lived at 17 Wunulla Rd, Point Piper (long demolished for a luxury house).

On Thursday July 14, they took the train to Mittagong about 115 km south west of Sydney, stayed overnight. The next day they bought a hairdressing business in a tiny shop next to Mittagong railway station (9 Station Street, also now demolished). It seems significant business transactions in those days could be conducted very quickly. They moved to Mittagong on July 21 and opened for business on July 25. They moved into a rented house called "Greengates". Two years and five months later, I was born at Bowral hospital on December 14, 1951.



My earliest memories

I've often talked with friends about our very earliest recollections. We all agree that they exist as dissociated fragments from a time we can't remember and that it's always interesting why a tiny fraction of what we lived through in those early years survives into

later life. You occasionally hear radio programs asking people to call in to recollect their earliest memories. I have no memory at all of my very earliest days in Mittagong where I was born and spent maybe the first 18 months of my life. My granddaughter Florence is 8 and grandson Jasper 5 as I write this, and I expect they will have little conscious recall in adulthood of anything that has gone on in their lives in the first couple of years. Florence certainly has already no recollection of living her first 18 months in an apartment in Camp-erdown which we own. I took her there recently and it triggered nothing for her.

My parents made friends with an English couple, Ann and Godfrey Topp. Godfrey worked at Frensham school for girls and Ann, a tall, jolly woman was appointed my god-mother. I have a book of common prayer that she inscribed for me. They played no part in our lives after we moved from Mittagong.



Mittagong and Wollongong houses I lived in

In 1952 my parents moved to Wollongong to a white weatherboard house at 9 Pleasant Avenue, North Beach. In 2016, I took the train down there and found it had also been long demolished for block of apartments. We lived there for about two years during which my sister Ginny was born. Again, I have very few memories of Wollongong. But here are a few.

Next door, there lived a couple. The man's name was Keith Waller and he was some sort of athlete because he had a pair of black runners' spiked shoes. One day, shortly after the couple had new linoleum laid on their kitchen floor, I got my feet into Keith's man-sized spikes and clomped over the lino, putting holes all over it within days of it being laid. I retain the memory not of my walk, but something of the commotion afterwards. It must have been an event because my parents retold the story several times to me as I grew older. Did my parents, scratching for a living, have to compensate their neighbours? I've no idea.

Across the road was my first friend whose name was Stephen Wean. I've no idea why I remember this. I think he was a little older than my 3 or 4 years. I would often be over the street at his place. One day, we went across the street to the backyard of a girl, Susan Appleyard or Applecross, whose father had pitched a child's canvas tent there, with pictures of redskin indians on it. The three of us sat in the tent and somehow, we got

around to giving each other a 'look'. I remember this even today. The indelible curiosity had begun.

Then there was an older woman called Mrs Anderson who sometimes looked after me and Ginny at her house nearby. She had black grapes growing at the side of her front path and we would eat the plump grapes from the vine. Long after leaving Wollongong and until this day, I always pluck grapes from people's vines and taste grapes in shops, trying to find the sort of grape that Mrs Anderson had grown. How do you describe the taste of a grape? It was deep and sugary, with what I later discovered to be a port-like taste. Not dissimilar to a muscatel, but definitely not a muscatel.

But for about 40 years I never tasted this grape again until one day I found it hanging over a fence in Balmain in Sydney. I knocked on the door and asked the owners what it was. It was an Isabella. I was so excited to have rediscovered it and read up on it. It was once a very popular garden grape, but had for some reason fallen out of favour with commercial grape growers, so you never found it in shops anymore. I eventually found a Northern Rivers nursery which grew it. I had two root stock vines sent down and I now have it in my own garden. The first year it produced fruit, I was ecstatic as the memory of the taste rushed in. I know that the memory of a taste can stay with you for life.

My final memory of Wollongong was that my father went through a phase when he would come home from work with a plastic toy animal, cowboy or soldier for me. He bought them from what we called "The Men Shop" because of its stock of toy figurines. I remember he would buy just one at a time and give it to me. I was deliriously happy with my growing collection, always anticipating the next one. I got into the habit of constructing elaborate landscapes out of cushions, boxes and tins in which I would orchestrate Ramayana-length sagas of arrival, battle, conquest, battles between beasts, between man and beast, of swords versus fists. I would talk away to myself for hours, providing the commentary on it all.

I saw Jasper, aged 5, doing the same in our garden recently, totally absorbed, and memories rushed back.

When my granddaughter Florence started to play with simple toys, I went to a toy shop and for a ridiculously cheap amount, bought her whole packages of mixed wild beasts, dinosaurs, sea creatures and cowboys and indians. You couldn't buy just a single tiger or a seal. She became quite attached to the tiger, a turtle and a crab.

2

Moving to Bathurst

My parents decided to move to Bathurst. We drove from Wollongong to Bathurst in our tiny dark green Morris Minor. We must have arranged for the luggage and household goods to be railed or trucked to Bathurst. I remember that the car's radiator would quite often overheat and boil. Dad would cuss "damn and blast it!" So journeys like this one would see us pulling off the road while dad would gingerly remove the radiator cap with a rag, with the boiling water then shooting into the air. We'd wait 30 minutes for the engine to cool off and then replenish the lost water with that carried in a waterproofed canvas bag that would be strapped to the front of the car to keep it cool in the breeze.

I recall that the day we arrived in Bathurst it was extremely hot and we sat in the local Machattie Park under trees to cool off. I don't recollect, but I think we must have either stayed briefly in a hotel or moved straight into a very rundown and unprepossessing rented house at 80 Rocket Street opposite a dry and dull park, Centennial Park. Like those in Mittagong and Wollongong, this house has long been demolished.



18 Ophir St Bathurst, where I grew up

The property had large backyard and a local horse owner arranged to fence it off so he could keep a horse there, I assume for some agistment fee. One day the horse became very ill and had to be put down. It had tetanus and we were all vaccinated and the dead horse buried in the backyard, covered in quicklime. Men came with shovels to urgently dig the big hole.

Centennial Park hosted circuses a couple of times a year: Ashton's, Bullen's and Wirth's. They would pitch a giant big top tent, shackle three or four Asian elephants which would eat straw, along with a few tired camels and Shetland ponies. Mum used to furtively gather up the elephants' giant manure pats for our garden. There were half a dozen caged enclosures with lions, monkeys and occasionally a tiger. All this was happening within 200 yards of our house. The smell of the elephant dung and the night time roaring of the lions was more than wonderful.

After a couple of years of living in Rocket Street, my parents got a bank loan and commissioned a local Dutchman, a Mr Pet, to build a white painted weatherboard house on a block of land they had bought at 18 Ophir Street, a short *cul de sac* running off Rocket Street between William and George Streets. We would visit the construction site on most days in the late afternoon to see its progression. This house still stands today, and I've two or three times in the years since parked outside it when visiting Bathurst. I hoped to drink in the memories, but the trees and shrubs in the front garden were all now different and new owners had built a second floor on the back of the house, so it was hard to imagine the new interior.

When we moved in, the adjacent land on our side of the street was covered in large native trees and scrub. When this land was parcelled into lots for four more houses to be built, all the trees were cut down and left strewn about. They stayed that way for weeks and the piles of fallen trees became a wonderland for me and some neighbouring children, the Stevens, to play in. We burrowed our way deep into the fallen trees, breaking branches to form passages to our central cubby house lairs where we'd sit and hide. Then one day men came and moved it all away with bulldozers and building commenced on the four new houses. Every now and then, I awake and sense that I have been dreaming of being in those cubbies.

Bathurst had four quite distinct seasons. It had many days in summer which were scorching hot with low humidity, sometimes passing the 100 Fahrenheit mark. In winter, it often happened that the taps turned on in the morning yielded nothing: the water had frozen in the pipes. In anticipation, large pots of water were filled and left on the kitchen bench overnight. When we forgot to do this, our rubber hot water bottles were decanted in the mornings to make tea or boil eggs. In secondary school, I often rode my bike to school, some 4-5 miles away. I wore gloves, scarf and a balaclava, but often I would arrive with my eyebrows frozen hard with iced sweat.

Winter had Bathurst smelling for months on end of burning wood from the fires that were standard in most homes. We had a yellow glazed enamel Rayburn slow combustion wood burner in our living room. One of my jobs was to stack the jumble of logs that was tipped from a small truck into our back yard at the start of each winter, split the larger ones and keep a stock of logs and kindling ready inside on the hearth.

Spring saw fabulous riots of blossom trees and in autumn, leaves from Bathurst's many European exotics like maples, London planes and poplars would choke the gutters when autumn arrived.

Primary school

I began attending Bathurst Demonstration Primary School, which was about four blocks from our first Rocket Street house, and later, about two blocks from our Ophir Street house. It known as the Demonstration School because trainee teachers from the local teachers' college near Mount Panorama (now Charles Sturt University) would come to observe classes, sitting around the edge observing lessons, and practising teaching.

I don't recall the trainee teachers ever teaching (I suppose they must have). But I will never forget one day during a painting lesson, a Yugoslav boy taking out his penis, carefully painting it bright green, and surreptitiously showing his efforts to the nearby trainee teachers, who mortified, all said nothing.

I loved school and can still remember several of my teachers' names 60 years later: Miss Falls (later Mrs Wilcox and who looked like the US TV star Donna Reid), Miss Offord, Mrs Howie, Mr O'Meara, and Mr Hanlon who taught us the sing-song arithmetic times tables from 2 till 12. Infants school (K-3) was co-educational and then primary school (years 4-6) was all boys, with the girls' school being on the other side of the infants school, in the middle of the two. Like all school kids in those days, we were all given free milk in glass bottles each morning at recess (called 'playtime'), but in summer, it was often undrinkable, having been left in crates in the sun. Kids would often vomit after drinking it. This story was legion throughout Australian schools.

We would order something that was known as an 'Oslo lunch' from a parent-run canteen. This was presumably some gesture toward healthy eating, named after a [Norwegian nutritional professor](#). I read now that it was meant to be based on wholemeal bread and cheese, but I recall ordering sandwiches with vegemite, the lowest form of pressed meat known as 'devon', corned beef, and salad (iceberg lettuce, sliced tomato, cucumber). The local Larkey's meat pies and sausage rolls were also sold.

In primary school, there were three roles that were much coveted. Ringing the giant playground bell, raising the flag during the daily singing of God Save the Queen and the School Song at each morning's assembly (the words of which I can still sing in my sleep), and best of all, carrying the Oslo lunches across to the girls' school at lunchtime in a big wooden box. This was a prized job because it allowed the secreting of little love letters into particular girls' sandwich bags ("Kisses from a secret admirer"; "SWALK" (sent with a loving kiss) etc). If you were assigned to carry the lunches across to the girl's school, you could acquire considerable caché both with other boys and the girls, who would want to persuade you to secrete these notes back and forth.



Kindergarten (me, third child from left top row, with Miss Falls and year1, me 2nd row from back 6 from left) and 1st class (me 2nd top row, 6th from left)

I was bright in primary school, a prefect and was dux of the boys school. I still have an inscribed dux prize book of black and white photographs of dogs, inscribed. I chose the book and another one on motor cycle racing at the local bookshop. I enjoyed 'social studies' best. This was a mixture of descriptive geography and Australian early colonial history.

Like everyone else, I had to learn the names and gallant deeds of all the early white explorers and by rote, the names of all the rivers in New South Wales.

My mother kept all my school reports from years 3 to 6 and I still have them in a faded envelope. My position in the class, with 27-32 kids in each, ranged from eleventh to first at the end of year 6. Remarks included "high marks in all subjects reflect his earnestness and desire to do well. An excellent pupil... Well-behaved and very neat worker... thoroughly deserves his place in class."

We did an exam to grade us for entry into high school. One of my parents' customers was the local district inspector of schools, who covered schools from Lithgow to Mudgee, and out as far as Dubbo and Parkes. She told my beaming parents one day that I had scored the highest marks in the whole district for high school entry, so I romped into the A class in what was then called year 1 of high school.

Bathurst High School

I went to Bathurst High School for the first year of secondary school. I was in the top class of about 4 or 5 academically ranked classes. I learned a little French and Latin, mucked around with Bunsen burners in science, and did some nursery slopes trigonometry and algebra in maths. A few years before I went there, the school had made the front page of one of the Sydney Sunday tabloid newspapers with a headline I remember: "Keeler College!". The English Christine Keeler-John Profumo sex scandal was an obvious parallel for saucy revelations that some students had been failing to join their classmates for physical education, preferring to stay behind in the change rooms and engage in unimaginable debauchery that of course deserved to be on page one of the statewide tabloid.

Bathurst High was the only 'public' high school in the town, with there being two catholic schools, St Stanislaus ('Stannies') for boys and St Mary's for girls, the Presbyterian Scots School (boys), and the Anglican All Saints (for boys) and Marsden (for girls where my sister Ginny went). With the exception of the Catholic schools, the three private schools charged substantial school fees for the time, so unless you were catholic, if you were from a modest or poor family, you went to the high school.

I don't recall much about the High School, other than a growing sense that I didn't want to stay there when the possibility arose that I could go to All Saints. I'd seen the boys from Saints and Scots in town in their smart uniforms and hats and just warmed to the thought that I could be decked out in such finery myself. The High School competed against the private schools at the annual inter-school athletics and swimming carnivals. I looked on with envy at the well-behaved and orderly cheering of the private schools and wanted to be among them.

When I left to go to All Saints, I afterwards had very little to do with the kids who had been in my Bathurst High class, many of whom I'd been with all through primary school. I hooked up with several of them later at university.

3

All Saints College

I attended All Saints College Bathurst as a day boy from year 7 (1963) to year 12 (1969). The school was on the outskirts of town, just past the Edgell's cannery. Day boys were far in minority compared to all the boarders. These came from farming families living in places like West Wyalong, Cobar, Narromine, Mudgee, Kandos, Rylstone, and Cowra. One came from as far away as Hungerford, many miles north of Bourke. There was also a small group of boarders from Sydney, often from what were referred to quietly as 'broken homes'. And there were a few international students from Papua New Guinea, Thailand and the Philippines. They must have wondered where on earth they had ended up.

Memorable teachers

The headmaster for most of the time I was there was Seamus Peter Gebhardt, a tall, rake-thin educator who had been recruited from a teaching career at the prestigious Geelong Grammar in Victoria and Shore in Sydney. He also had a law degree and a degree from Harvard. He later went back into law and became a Victorian county court judge. He died in 2017. When I read about him being a judge later in life, I thought "that would be right": Gebhardt was an aloof, private, judgemental and very serious-minded man, and a stickler for proper conduct such as boys always needing to stand up when his wife passed by in the school grounds. I thought he would relish judging and sentencing people.

Gebhardt had a pronounced, rather hooked nose, so was naturally called Eagle Beak, or more commonly, just The Beak. Even my parents called him that at home. I think he pretty much detested me, so my memories of him reflect his animosity. Here are his headmaster's reports on me in the three years I was there during his time.

- 1967 Term 2: A much better set of reports. He must develop a coherent set of standards and see to it that his life exemplifies them.
- 1967 Term 3: He must try to be more discriminating and less concerned with the impression he is making
- 1968 Term 1: Quite good progress.
- 1968 Term 2: Some of these comments would seem to indicate that he is not working as well as he should be

1968 Term 3: The indications are obvious: he has got to work in depth.

1969 Term 1: More encouraging in every way

1969 Term 2: He must think to the point

1969 Term 3: Still, I believe, too concerned with himself

I recall him calling me over several times in the school grounds, just to tell me to either get a haircut or to shave off my youthful sideburns that I let creep down the sides of my face (see photo below). I don't think I ever recall any positive interaction with him. In year 11, he introduced something called the Buzz Club, which comprised a group of boys he presumably felt had potential to go on to be more serious-minded in life. The idea was that we would meet about one evening per month after dinner and chat together about contemporary events and issues.



**In my bedroom, in full mod mode, with Fugs & Vanilla
Fudge LPs on 'casual' display**

We could volunteer to lead discussion or suggest guests. I suggested that I bring out the local manager of Edels record store in town, Peter Sainthill. Sainthill was a magnet for some of us who were very interested in the Sydney music scene, vicariously understood through magazines like Go-Set and Drift. He had been sent up to Sydney by Edels to manage the local store and knew a lot about all the new pop groups, as well as having deep knowledge of music in general. He went on to become a senior person in the ABC's record library in Sydney and wrote liner notes for albums.

I asked Sainthill if he'd come out to speak to the Buzz Club. He willingly agreed and suggested the topic 'Doing your own thing' which was a line from the daring 'nude' musical Hair that was playing in New York and opened in Sydney in June 1969. It turned out that he was quite a poor speaker and basically enthused in gushing clichés about the virtues of hedonism and self-discovery that Hair promoted. From the moment he started speaking, I could see Gebhardt looking on with utter disdain at a man who was trying to promote the virtues of everything Gebhardt tried to belittle and discourage in boys in the school.

That I had suggested Sainthill should come to speak would have simply capped Gebhardt's sense of me as non-prefect material. I was one of only three day boys in year 12. Convention had it that there needed to be one school prefect in year 12 who was a day boy, but Gebhardt could not bring himself to lower the bar to include me. So he pointedly made me a 'sub-prefect'. I understood the insult and tucked it away hoping I might one day show him how small-minded he'd been.

Everyone in the school was required to do religion, maths, science and English. I also did electives in modern history, geography, German (until the end of year 10) and economics (years 11 and 12). Many boys did agriculture ('ag').

Having entered secondary school as a high-achieving student, in adolescence it was all downhill for me. I matriculated in the Higher School Certificate with a mediocre script: first level modern history, second level geography, English, economics and general studies, and second level (short course) maths. I got neither a Commonwealth nor a Teachers' College scholarship.

As I will explain later, this was mostly down to discovering girls and immersing myself obsessively in music.

The school chaplain was the Reverend Dryden, whom everyone alliterated to Drippy Dryden, or Drips for short. The rumour, believed unquestioningly by all, was that he had only one testicle. The other had either been surgically removed or had shrivelled to the size of a pea after he had been tackled groin-first into a rugby goal post as a boy. We 'knew' this. A less likely rugby player one could not hope to see, but then being childless, something was required in explanation. Drippy was about 60, I suppose. He certainly had grey hair, but he used to draw breath and try and adopt a very obvious, ill-fitting modernity. It seemed that he had been to some sort of seminar for school divinity teachers which probably had a title like "Making religious instruction relevant to the needs of today's youth". One week, like all those before them, we had bible readings and his totally futile attempts at getting us to discuss them. But then after the seminar (or perhaps it was an article in some progressive newsletter for divinity teachers) everything changed. Well, at least for a few weeks.

Drippy announced that he was starting a big new, progressive thing. There would be a question box placed permanently in the room and anyone who had a question on anything - yes, *anything* he emphasised - could write the question out and pop it in the box. These would be answered by Drippy in each week's class. So, this was going to be a great hoot. Everyone - well, about four of us - held a working bee to write out stacks of questions. We disguised our handwriting and used several different pens. We wrote questions like "Please explain in detail what sexual intercourse is", "Why is 'fuck' not in our dictionaries?", "Have you ever pulled yourself off?", "How many balls do you need to make a girl pregnant?", "Is tongue kissing a sin?", "How can we stop boys staring at us in the showers?"

Variations on these were crammed in the box and we sat expectantly in the class the next week waiting for his reaction. He came in all buoyed up and exclaimed enthusiastically about the number of slips in the box. He then began to read them in silence, a-hm-

ming and contemplating the little piles that he began to create. But it was all too much, and either a few of the class sucks had put in legitimate questions about what the apostle Matthew had said to Paul, or else he was covering up by ad-libbing phony questions about neglect of prayer and not getting on with parents. We kept it up for a few weeks with the same result, except that some weeks later we all had to go to the hall one evening and listen to a local doctor who got straight down to it: masturbation, and everything you ever thought of asking about it. I remember how incredible it seemed when this doctor said it was all very natural and not to worry about a thing if we were doing it. Saying this broke all the rules and gave us nothing to work against. It seemed to dissipate a lot of the need we all had to relentlessly hint to all adults that we knew that they knew that we knew about wanking.

Things got really worse for Drippy after his experiment with modernism. Ranald Allan and Bob 'Foul-Bowel' Howell used to sit in the front row. Drips would arrive, ostentatiously displaying some poster about some ecumenical folk-singing Christian afternoon or the equivalent of 'Cliff Richards Talks to Youth', and never cynical, express how delighted he was that Allan and Howell were up the front so they could participate more. Participation involved thunderous farting and burping when Drip turned to write on the board and theatrical innocence when he would turn to ask them to please grow up. His downhill run continued with Allan perfecting the silent burp followed by a rapid blowing of the putrid air straight in his face as he read across the desk. He forever turned the other cheek but appeared to be deteriorating rather badly.

Drippy's treatment was nothing compared with that meted out to two hapless characters whom misfortune drove to the school at the beginning of one year. When these two were spotted sitting with the other masters on the assembly hall stage on day one of first term, a buzz almost went around the hall. They were two men whom had clearly had a rough time of things at other schools and perhaps had been advised to get out to a quiet country boarding school for a bit of cricket supervision. They had that beaten-around-the-ears look and everything and more we thought they might be like turned out to be true.

The first was one of those unfortunate men blessed with no chin. Or at least a chin so receded that it seemed to cause his top lip to have to forever quiver in the effort to make contact with its lower partner. He had the works in the unfortunate blessings department. It wasn't so much any individual characteristic, but their combination that made him such a sad looking fellow. And now that I come to describe him, I can see that it was probably his chin that might have caused his whole demeanour. It seemed to infect his entire carriage, way of speaking and follow-through. We called him Wimpy, many years before the word "whimp" broke into its everyday, deprecatory use. I later learnt that the British actually had a hamburger chain named Wimpy too, but I'm certain no-one at Saints had any experience of Wimpy burgers: the name we gave him somehow seemed to suggest itself.

Wimpy taught geography which was a difficult subject to bring to life. Igneous rocks couldn't metamorphose into much that was interesting and whatever slight potential the subject might have had was past redemption in the dithering hands of Wimpy. Not that he was ever given the chance. Ray Linden had epilepsy and I understand that teachers are always told about epileptic kids and are given a lesson or two at teachers' college about what to do in the event of a fit. At the time, there had been an item on one of those

Believe it or Not American TV shows about something known as the Limp Fallers Club. These guys used to specialise in spectacular falls over waterfalls, through plate glass, across restaurant tables, that sort of thing. This item must have lasted five minutes, but it had a big impact in our class. A craze developed where, in the mid-sentence, we would suddenly fall as if pole-axed into the arms of those next to us. The really game ones would keel over on the parade ground during army cadets (easier and less risky if someone known to be indecisive was in charge of the parade).

So Ray Linden passed the word around one day that he was going to execute a spectacular limp fall in the middle of Whimpy's class. He rose from his desk, stiffened and began to Catherine-wheel across about four desks, crashing chairs as he went and shaking in mock seizure. Whimpy sprung into his epileptic fit drill and tried to prise Linden's mouth open until Ray could bear it no more and laughed in his face. Whimpy slunk out of the room humiliated again. He lasted a year.

The second we named Gundy. He was a portly, mumbling man who seemed lost to his thoughts behind a constant squint and sun-shielding salute as he plodded aimlessly through the grounds. Gundy was colourless but probably this meant nothing to him. Perhaps he had some private passion like Edwardian model railways (no, that would have been too animating). Anyway, Gundy was one of the masters who lived in a single room with a bleak *en suite* at the end of a dormitory corridor. In return for housemasters' duties such people got free rent.

One day some kids having a smoke in the creek bed behind the school found a wombat. They cornered it and managed to truss it up with some towels. After dark, they carried it down to the school, put it on Gundy's bed and closed the door. The wombat began to burrow down through the blankets and into the kapok mattress. When it reached the wire in the bed springs, it took a different tack and climbed onto the floor. There it started to burrow but hit concrete after ripping a huge hole in the carpet. After this it unloaded thick, runny black shit all over the floor in panic and then began to bulldozer the bookshelves. Those responsible were given weekend detentions for two terms. Gundy lasted less time than Whimpy.

Stuart Partis arrived one year, having studied history at Oxford University. He was a man who had an English complexion and often wore shorts and long socks which revealed pink hairless knees. He wore a constant grin and tended to tilt his head to the side when asking you a question. We'd never seen anything quite like him. Teachers always seemed so much older than even the most mature looking blokes in sixth form. It was difficult to imagine how old teachers actually were and I think I never really tried to work it out. They were simply experienced as being much older than us - a different category of age altogether. Probably many teachers were in their early to mid twenties, and so on a scale of the way things seem now, were only recently kids themselves. But Stuart Partis was unique. He was wise and clearly a teacher, but almost one of us. We all liked him a lot, he was interesting, not aloof and held in some sort of affection.

I loved modern history more than any other subject, won the final year history prize and made the state merit list in the HSC. He infected me with a love of reading prime source material rather than secondary accounts of history. Stuart Partis really inspired me.

Who were some others? There was an English teacher in my first two years there named Bill 'Spring' Lowe: Spring because of the way he walked. He was a short man who always wore his academic gown around the grounds and walked with real purpose, like a pointer dog going after a kill. His step was quite astonishing and on brave days, we'd call out after him "boi-ing ... boi-ing". He could cane unmercifully, so much hiding and running was called for. Spring was a stickler for grammatical parsing and I used to really love doing it, whereas it was generally considered one of the more loathsome lessons you had to sit through. An hour of parsing was actually handed out as punishment in detentions, and one day I remember making a split-second decision to do something punishable when the threat had been made that parsing was on the detention menu that afternoon.

Today, even the word sounds like it's from a different era, let alone the thought of kids actually doing it in school. But when I occasionally read of nostalgia for its passing, I find myself siding with the educational conservatives.

Geoff 'Razor' Hardy had a very long thin, sharp nose. He was a Tasmanian and another geography teacher and could not laugh any other way than rapidly sucking air back through his teeth in short bursts. I learned about map contour lines, rock types and weather patterns from him, and got the cane once for something long forgotten.

Trevor Press a younger teacher who was rumoured to have been a seminarian who couldn't hack it and had slunk off to teaching in an Anglican school to escape the hexing of disapproving Catholics. He drove a Fiat bambino which would often be parked outside the science block (he taught science). One day a bunch of kids opened up the two big doors to science block entrance and lifted the Fiat inside the building.

I had Trevor for science one year. We all went up to the creek behind the school to collect examples of seeds, grasses, insects and rocks for nature study. We caught a largish spider, put it in a jar and took it back to the classroom for identification. As it was passed around, I purposefully let it out, which occasioned much theatrical faux screaming in the class. Trevor twigged that it was me who'd released it and so called me up for a caning in front of the class. He gave me three of the most unimaginably feeble swats. After the first, I straightened up to see what the trouble had been, because I just couldn't believe what I'd felt was a serious attempt at caning. He told me to bend over for more. The next two were as weak. I grinned as I walked back to my seat. I think it's likely he had no taste for caning.

Chris Ellis was my English teacher for several years. He loved teaching and tried to interest boys in books that were not on the syllabus. One day he walked with me in the grounds and asked me if I had a girlfriend. I think he sensed I had my mind on other things a lot of the time. I told him about my girlfriend Annie and the next day he gave me Erich Fromm's book, *The Art of Loving*. I was very touched by his interest and non-judgemental, encouraging words. He was a teacher I'll always be grateful to have had.

His end of term reports suggested I must have been away with the fairies a lot of the time at this time in my life. "He thinks of English as a subject in which it is not necessary to do thorough preparation or bother about more than superficial thought. His paper consisted of a great deal of verbose writing and nor a great deal of valuable matter." And "He is bound down by a desire to express himself in rather inflated and pompous prose."

Peter 'Bear' Kenvyn was a quiet and introverted and large framed Welshman who taught German. He often seemed to have his mind elsewhere and would often sit in class staring into the distance. I was more or less coerced into studying German by my father who was peculiarly obsessed with the language himself. He kept an elementary German grammar and vocabulary book next to his bed literally until the day he died, and still read it daily well into his dementia, often upside down.

Army cadets

Like most private schools I those days, our school had an army cadet corps. It was compulsory to be a part of this. We'd never heard of conscientious objection in those days, and there was no provision for any alternative. I looked forward to it immensely and recall the day that a busload of us travelled to the local Citizens Military Force building where some professional soldiers had come up from Sydney to fit us all out in our army cadet uniforms. Each boy was issued with a winter and summer army uniform, boots, a webbing belt with brass buckle and keepers, webbing gaiters that sat above our boots, gathering in the bottoms of our trousers, and a strapped felt slouch hat. We wore our school tie with our winter uniform, and went open-necked in the summer uniform.

It was at these outfitting days that I first learned I had a large head. None of the hats that had been sent up from Sydney would fit me and a special one had to be sent up from Sydney the next week.

Every boy was designated a cadet private when they first joined the cadets, and you could progress through four non-commissioned officer (NCO) ranks (lance corporal, corporal, sergeant and parade sergeant major) with the glorious possibility being then promoted in your final year to one of about three officer positions (lieutenants and one captain's rank.)

Cadets was held every Tuesday afternoon. We would first all file past the entrance to the quartermaster's store (the Q-store) where we would be issued with a .303 Lee Enfield rifle. We would then line up on the parade ground (a school sports field) in small platoons, each led by a sergeant. We would first be inspected by the officers for the shine on our boots, webbing and brass. Anyone with sub-standard shine and sparkle could be issued with a detention or told to do some tedious or strenuous job. Any sustained insubordination was punished by the offender having to run around the school oval several times holding their rifle across their chest.

Eighty percent of cadet afternoons were taken up by parade ground drills: marching, in ranks; line dressing to ensure each line was perfectly straight; and parade ground drills where the parade sergeant major would shout out series of commands like "attention!", "stand-at-EASE!", "shoulder arms!", and "present arms!" Marching featured the commands "squad ... halt!", "squad ... right (or left) turn!" and "mark time!" (marching on the spot, without moving forward).

Each move was often practised with at first everyone shouting out a timed, synchronising chant "One-two-three, one-two-three, ONE!" where the last command would be the final movement of the drill.

We would do these drills for at least an hour, while the platoon sergeants bellowed at those out of step, slouching, not holding their rifles correctly, talking or smirking. The sergeants could also order punishments for anyone slacking in the drills, and this occasionally led to a degree of bullying from some, where the more uncoordinated boys would regularly be sent around the oval carrying the quite heavy rifles out in front.

These drills were pure tedium but I admit, gave off quite a nice feeling when the drills neared perfection and the sound of 200 or so boys big black boots slamming into the ground in a single, sharp crack occurred. The drills would intensify when the school had to march and drill publicly. One such occasion was when the Governor General visited Bathurst on a blisteringly hot day at the local showground and all the local school cadet units had to stage a parade of honour, stand at attention as he walked through our ranks, and present arms as the flag was raised. As we waited in the midday sun for his arrival quite a few boys keeled over in the heat. But this was not an era of duty-of-care milksop consideration, so the rest of us were left standing among the carnage to show what we were made of.

Each cadet afternoon also saw us involved in rifle cleaning and in dismantling and reassembling Bren guns. We all were issued with pull through strings with a loop at one end. You would fold a small piece of dry cloth the loop, and the other end which had a then metal weight would be dropped through the barrel allowing you to pull the wad of cloth through the rifle, cleaning any dust and grime from inside the barrel. Again, those boys who failed to pass the eagle-eyed barrel inspections by the sergeants would be often sent running around the oval carrying their rifles.

I can still remember the Bren gun disassembly drill: piston, barrels, butt, body, bipod (with the reverse order for reassembly). Competitions would be held to find the fastest cadet to break down and then reassemble the Bren from the standing at attention position, running to the assembled gun and then tearing through the procedure as fast as we could before returning to the attention position and screaming out "Sir!" to indicate we'd finished. I was never fastest.

But I was considered good enough to be picked for the very prestigious Vickers machine gun group. The small group had to learn to disassemble and assemble the weighty Vickers and pretend to feed a bullet belt through it. This pretence was eventually rewarded at a cadet camp at Singleton one year when we got to actually fire off a full belt of rounds through a working Vickers on a shooting range. It was fantastically loud and vibrated violently. We each had a turn to press the fire button. I felt transported into the pages of my old War Picture Library comic books or the set of the Gregory Peck movie from the early 60s, *Pork Chop Hill*, that I'd seen several times.



Vickers machine gun

By year 11, I had progressed from private to corporal and then was appointed the school's sergeant major, mainly I think because I had a loud voice and could project it well on the parade ground. This was quite the best rank to have in cadets because while not having the status of officer, it carried none of the duties that the officers had throughout the afternoon of cadets. All that was required was that I call out the drills on the parade ground in the first hour, then again at the final parade of the day. During the rest of the time, I could please myself with what I did.

I mainly chose to go to the Q-store and hang out with the two or three boys who had the role of handing out and then receiving back the rifles. The Q store was located such that you could see anyone approaching a good way off. So it was an ideal place to smoke cigarettes during the afternoon, which is what we often did.

Cadet camp

Each year we would go away to cadet camp, either at the Singleton or Holdsworthy army bases. We would travel down by train from Bathurst to Central railway, change trains and then head to the nearest camp station. This was always a fantastic adventure, particularly when it involved overnight travel on the lugubriously slow coal-fired steam trains of the day.

The carriages had what were called 'dog box' compartments which each had six fold-down bench beds. These provided private havens where the six in each box could do outrageous things like moon our backsides at those on the platforms of towns like Lithgow and Katoomba. Someone always had brought cigarettes, and occasionally someone would bring along a token amount of vodka in a small hip flask. We would hold belching and farting contests.

One trip saw us all trying to light the methane in our farts with matches. The school boarders apparently regularly entertained themselves with this game, but as a sheltered day boy, I'd never seen or tried it. Most farts did not light, and those that did produced very feeble, quick small flashes. But as we were doing this, the doors to the dog box opened and there stood a catholic priest (unknown to us) who had taken it on himself to patrol the train trying to demand the rowdiness cease. He mumbled something about being disgusted and reporting this to our school, but nothing eventuated.

Cadet camp was great fun. We shared tents with boys from other schools, arranged in alphabetical order. There was a boy in my tent at Singleton one year with the surname Clapshaw. We looked disconcertingly like each other, and both saw this immediately. We had lessons during the day that were often very interesting. These included contour map reading, how to best hide oneself from sight (for example, elementary but hitherto unrealised information that you could see into a lighted room from outside but not outside if you were inside a lighted room), and how to best crawl through scrub. We also practised public speaking, as I recall it, for the first time in my life. I found this both easy and unchallenging, as I have nearly always found it since on countless occasions.

Each camp would involve an overnight bivouac where we pitched our own tents, camped out and cooked our own food that the army provided. But best of all was the mock night battle we had at these camps. We would paint our faces with black 'cammo' (camouflage paint), and were each issued with about 20 blank .303 rounds which we would load into the small magazines of our rifles.

These could be fired and make a loud bang, but other than being potentially dangerous if fired at someone from very close range -- they could cause flash burns - were harmless. But they allowed you to pretend you were really engaged in serious combat. We were divided into two camps and army trucks would then drive each group to two separate locations about 500 meters apart in terrain with trees, rocks, and small hills. The objective was for each 'army' to reach and take control of a designated place that was marked on our maps.

We had to try and stop the opposing army from taking control of the place by shooting them. Regular army marshals among us would rule on whether we had 'killed' members of the opposing force, and those deemed dead would then fall behind those still alive. According to a certificate I still have, I did a non-commissioned officer training course at Singleton army camp from 1-10 December 1966 and graduated as a platoon sergeant.

Bullying

Today when I read accounts of school bullying, of its legacy on those affected that can last a lifetime and of occasional suicide, I always think of what went on at All Saints. I can think of several boys who were mercilessly bullied. There were two boys at the school when I was there who had obvious mental disabilities. Both were borders whom the school had presumably accepted with assurances given to their parents that they would be well looked after in a school where such problems would be 'handled with sensitivity and caring'.

One of these boys had Down's Syndrome and the other some genetic abnormality that gave him an abnormal appearance and a 'half there' demeanour. The boy with Downs was several years older than everyone else in his class and not expected to complete or comprehend the work the others did. He mainly ran errands for teachers, and was assigned to sports that marked him as unable to play to any standard that would allow him to be in a team. Both these boys were mocked and subjected to various small humiliations on a daily basis.

There were also several boys who today would be mocked as 'un-co's' (uncoordinated). These were boys who couldn't do elementary physical routines that we all had to do in PE (physical education) each week. They couldn't run a few laps of the oval without stopping to walk. They couldn't do a summersault, they would mostly drop a medicine ball when it was thrown to them and they could not complete a vertical vault of a vaulting horse without either baulking several times as they ran up to it, crashing into the front or getting stranded on the top.

These boys were not spared the humiliation of these failures. It was mandatory that everyone did PE year round, and so each week we all witnessed these displays of their physical inabilities. In junior years, this invariably saw them crying as everyone snickered and roared with laughter at their more spectacular failures.

These boys would often get targeted in bullying by having their clothes hidden, possessions stolen, being generally picked on, not invited to join in anything and being kids who were just isolated from every social comfort and support. There was a particular ritual where a small group would grab one of these boys, take them into a toilet block and hold them upside down in a toilet bowl, so that their head would get soaked when the toilet was flushed. I never joined in this activity, but like everyone else neither did I ever try to stop it, report it, console the victim or ostracise the perpetrators.

I feel ashamed of this today and occasionally wonder about how these boys went through life afterwards. My wife Trish, who spent 38 years in primary education, says that so much bullying is unnoticed by teachers because the perpetrators are well aware that it is shameful and take care to do their bullying when they calculate they will get away with it. Today, children complete classroom surveys designed to alert teachers to which ones 'play alone', or who are being laughed at, those who say or do 'mean things'. Often, she says, those who are doing the bullying are often kids who have significant problems of their own.

Late puberty was also usually a cause of bullying. Not being border, I did not get to see what all the boarders saw every evening in the showers: those who had not gone through puberty, nor those known to be hung like donkeys and so who were celebrated in this respect by sayings and nicknames (I remember it being said of one very hairy boy "he's the only bloke in the school who's got to go get a haircut before he takes a dump!")

When we went away to cadet camp each year, we all had to shower together in a single shower room with no cubicles. In my tent of about 10, there was a boy from another school who never came to the showers with us. He made himself scarce and went to the showers after we had all returned. This would generally cause him to be very late to dinner

in the mess hall, which probably got him into trouble with the regular army men who ran the hall.

After this happened a few times, it was decided that one night we would wait for him to come back from the showers and 'black ball' him. This ritual was something none of us had ever done before, but it had schoolboy folkloric status as something that everyone knew could happen to you if you had a tiny dick or hadn't reached puberty.

So we waited and when he returned, he offered no resistance to the couple of ring-leaders who announced his fate to him as he entered the tent. A shoe brush was scrapped in black boot polish and then quickly pushed into his underpants by one guy and rubbed it into his crotch. It was over in seconds. The rest of us stood about and watched this happen. Our role was meant to be holding him down when he tried to fight us off. But when he silently cooperated, the abject pathos and cruelty of it all instantly filled the tent. Far from being an uproarious event to be talked about for the rest of the camp, I felt utter shame for having been part of the intimidatory group and having not tried to stop it. He kept to himself in the days which remained at the camp.

There was at least one Aboriginal boy at the school, a boarder who was very popular as he was always up for a laugh and pranks and terrific at rugby. One day we in the school dining room, he raised quite a bit of money by taking bets that he could eat 15 'sugar sandwiches' (slices of buttered white bread coated with sugar). We called him 'Boong' all the time, never maliciously and never for a moment thinking that he might not like it or feel disrespected. That, he wasn't. But the racism in those days was completely unconsidered.

I was probably a potential candidate for bullying at school. I was thin and gangly, not much good at sport, and had parents who were ladies' hairdressers whereas most other boys had fathers who could plough fields, kill and butcher their own meat and had firm handshakes that nearly broke your hand. But I don't recall ever being the butt of any nasty stuff. I was always self-confident and street smart and so probably not the sort who attracted it.

Many years after leaving school I had a drink with Ranald Allan, who had been in my class and with whom I'd later shared a chaotic and dissolute house in Glebe in Sydney in the second year of university. As the beer loosened us up and the candour flowed, I told Ranald that he'd meant a lot to me at school. He was the first guy in school I'd ever known who could backchat teachers and often tie them up in the illogic or inconsistency of what they had just said or argued. He exasperated them and I thought he was wonderful.

He thanked me, saying he hadn't realised that he would have seemed that way, and then the topic changed. But I was curious about how he remembered me at school, so a few minutes later I asked him.

"What? What? Ae you kidding me? You *must* know how you were seen!" he said. I had no idea what he was referring to, and told him.

"You were the only guy in the school who had had a root" he told me, emphatically.

Apparently, this was common knowledge and bestowed on me considerable prestige and status.

School chapel

All Saints College was Anglican and this meant that we all had to go to chapel before morning classes once a week. The chapel was a small little place and would only hold two years of kids at a sitting. We'd file in and sit in the pews and quickly look up which hymns were marked up for us to sing. "[Hold the fort](#)", was everyone's favourite and came up about four or five times a year. It was like some kind of derring-do football song and when the chorus came around, little groups would try to outshout each other "Hold the fort for I am coming, Jesus signals still!". This sometimes caused the distressed chaplain to pull it up and have us sing it again in the proper, restrained way.

The organ was a twin peddled foot pumping machine and was played by several guys whose parents had insisted that they had piano lessons. Such boys were truly pitied because they had to go to these private lessons with a town matron called Miss something-or-other who drove an Austin Lancer and who was very strict and dull. I can never remember any of them every coming back from their lesson with any stories or anything that made you envious. And none ever had a go at playing anything from the top 40. This would have changed the whole meaning of the thing, but instead, having piano lessons was seen as a sort of punishment that meant you had really shitty parents. So these guys would have to pump away on the organ and mostly, they were quite hopeless. They'd still be playing a chord from the last verse when everyone was well into the chorus. Sour notes were legion.

Sport

In primary school and first year of high school I played soccer. I was in two teams, the Cathedral Rovers and later the Cathedral Rangers. The Rovers were the B-team while the Rangers were the A-team. I don't recall any results while in the Rovers and suspect we mostly were beaten. You tend to recall winning, in my experience.

I got picked in the Rangers because their regular goalkeeper somehow wasn't available anymore and I performed well in goal at practice. Dad bought me a truly great pair of ultra-professional looking boots when I was picked in the Rangers. I was walking on air.

At the end of the season, I won a pennant for being the goal keeper in any age group (the local adult competition included) who had let the least goals through all season. I had let five through in the entire season. But unfortunately four of these were in the grand final against the dreaded and feared Police Boys Club team, local toughs who liked fighting after matches. During the year, the Rangers had won or drawn every game. I was OK in goal, but we had a really hot team who were responsible for me seeing little of the ball. The problem in the grand final was that about half of our team had gone down with chicken pox and so our team was made up with some ordinary players elevated from the easy beat Rovers.



The Cathedral Rovers (under 12s) I'm back row, third from left

When I went to All Saints, soccer was not played. Rugby was the proper game to be played by private school boys. So I played rugby and cricket at school. There was nothing else on offer, and the number of boys in each age group only allowed for a maximum of two teams — the firsts and the seconds — to be fielded. If you were hopeless enough to not make either of the two teams, there were not enough of such boys to make up a third team. So you were put onto activities like non-team basketball practice and required to go and watch the firsts play each weekend. These boys included some with disabilities like those who wore glasses with coke-bottle thick lenses but mostly uncoordinated kids who were pretty hopeless at everything physical.

While I was mainly called Chappo at school, I occasionally got Stalky. By the time I was 16 I was the height I am now – in the old measure 5 foot 11 inches (1.82m). I recall always being around 9 stone 10 pounds (i.e. 136 pounds or 62kg). Today at 66 I weigh 84kg and have a body mass index of 25.4, half a kilogram into the overweight category. So Stalky fitted. I was tallish and must have been decidedly thin.

I was therefore totally ill-suited for rugby. The school had lots of big farm boys and a few muscular surfers from Sydney. A skinny town boy who could run, kick and catch well enough, but who would not strike fear into the opposition was always going to be in

the seconds. Over the winter we twice played the seconds from each of St Stanislaus, Scots and Wolaroi, a boys school in Orange. Stannies was a renowned sporting school. Over the years, several Stannies boys went on to play for professional cricket and rugby league teams in Sydney and occasionally Australia. These included Peter Toohey the test cricketer.

One year we played Stannies' Seconds and were completely humiliated 128-0. This was during the period when a try was worth 3 points, a conversion 2, and a penalty or field goal 3. In this game, I think there were no penalties or field goals, There were just lots and lots of converted tries right under the posts.

That night as I watched the ABC TV news broadcast from Sydney, the grinning newsreader said right at the end of the bulletin "And in news just in, in Bathurst this afternoon, St Stanislaus Senior Seconds beat All Saints Senior Seconds 128-0." The headmaster informed the entire school of this gutless disgrace at assembly on Monday and gave the whole team was given a term of weekly detentions after school once a week to pick up papers around the grounds.

I was much better at cricket, although never was selected for the firsts because I was a very undisciplined batsman. I saw no point in blocking balls, I just tried to hoist everything to the boundary. I got many ducks and single digit scores and accordingly, batted about number 8. My glory day with the bat happened once when our team was bowled out for just 38 by Wolaroi, I scored a rapid fire 26. I was a just an agricultural tonker.



The second XI cricket team. Back row L–R Vic Linden, Frank Chadwick, David Chater, Simon Chapman, David Lumsdaine, Peter Nation. Middle row: Bill Henderson, Mike Chadwick, Peter Kenvyn (coach) David Bettington, John Dean Front Row David Jacobson, Hugh Henderson, name forgotten.

But I was a decent right arm medium swing bowler. ("Bowlers such as Chapman and Allan can swing the ball, and are very useful opening bowlers" said the school magazine, *The Bathurstian* in 1968). My three minutes of fame was when I was selected to attend a coaching class in Bathurst being held by the West Indies fast bowler Wes Hall. He was probably working for the Rothmans National Sports Foundation which did a lot of outreach in those days. We listened to Wes giving tips in his Barbadian accent on bowling to the bunch of county kids, and then took turns to bowl to him. We all had just one over, and on my third ball, I took out his middle stump.

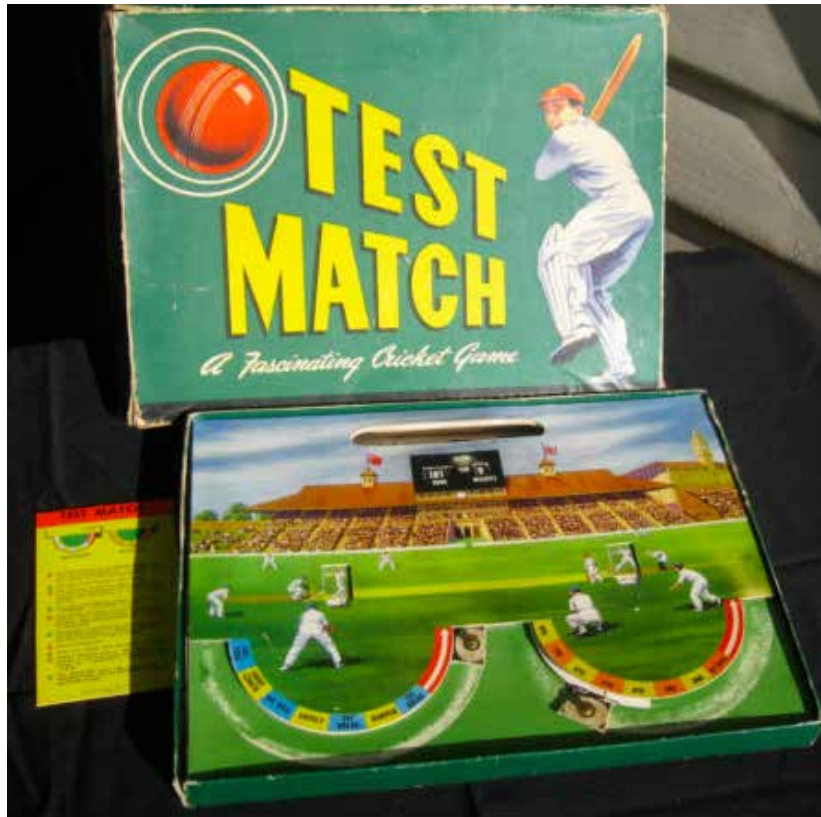
He called me and all the others boys over, asked me my name, put his giant hand across the back of my neck and said that the others should see this as a lesson in what could be done. I've told the story every time I've played park cricket over the years since. "Yes, but Wes Hall was not a batsman" someone always says. But Wes Hall's batting average was 15.73 and in 66 test innings, he got to 50 twice (and scored 7 ducks) I tell these know-nothings back. I used to take 2-3 wickets per game. For All Saints Senior Seconds. That's how good I was.

In the later years of high school, we had a sports master who embarked on a sanctioned regime of toughening up the school. This mainly consisted of us having several times each term to run 'cross countries'. Unless you were medically unfit and been excused, we had to run out of the school gates, a few miles to and through the village of Eglinton, then all the way down the other side of the Macquarie river to the village of Kelso and then turning back to the school.

One year when I returned to Bathurst I drove the route and checked the distance on the odometer. It was 18 kilometres. I seem to remember that I always ran this route without stopping. It was a killer, but the humiliation of stopping and walking and being known as a wuss who would do that drove nearly everyone on.

I had a much cherished game called Test Match (see illustration). It was produced by the John Sands company and had two panels with semi-circular cardboard wheels that you could move with a brass pin that was affixed to the wheels. The one on the left hand side was the bowler, with the right side being the batsman. The idea was that you would pull the bowler's wheel some distance around and then quickly return it to the starting position. This would cause name of the type of ball bowled to appear in a little window (leg break, off break, googly, full toss, fast, no ball etc). You would then move your finger to the batting wheel and do the same. This would then display the score in the corresponding batsman's window (0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, bowled, LBW, caught, stumped or run out).

I would draw up teams representing Australia (for example, Benaud, Harvey, Booth Davidson, Grout); England (Dexter, Titmus, Truman, Shepherd) and the West Indies (Kanhai, Gibbs, Sobers, Butcher, Nurse, Hall, Griffith, Worrall) and then play one against the other in marathon best of three test series. I would prepare full score sheets and keep records of each player's batting and bowling averages. This activity could take me a whole Saturday or Sunday afternoon. Nothing could tear me away from it.



John Sands "Test Match" game

Swimming

The town's Olympic pool was a mecca for hundreds on Bathurst's many scorching hot days in summer. It had a junior pool and Olympic sized pool with one and three metre diving boards. I loved swimming but it was mostly a place where you went to hang about with your friends on the spacious lawns. We'd play a game, fly, where we laid out our rolled up towels with gaps between them and then ran up trying to do one step between each, widening the gap after each round.

Being a skinny kid, I was envious of friends who were more muscular. One, Tony Jeffries, took me aside once and let me know about the virtues of three coiled springs between two hand grips called a 'chest expander'. So dad bought me one, I used it for about two weeks, saw no improvement in my physique and threw it in the cupboard.

There was a major scandal with a long time baths manager gaoled for sexually assaulting several girls who he trained in a squad of promising swimmers. I knew two of the girls involved. They seemed to withdraw almost totally afterwards. I think one's whole family left town.

4

Home and town life

Other than pies, sausage rolls, pasties (locally made by Larkey's) and (later) hamburgers, dreadful deep fried pastry encased vegetable rolls called Chicko rolls, take-away food was almost non-existent. You ate at home, and very occasionally at your friends' houses if their mothers asked you to stay for 'tea' which they would prepare. I can never recall hearing about a man doing any cooking, other than the manly organisation of BBQs.

I read occasionally in international comics about things called pizzas. I didn't know what they were or even how to pronounce the word. My father always spoke of "pizz-a pie" right until his death. They sounded utterly exotic.

The first of the big transnational fast food chains to open was Kentucky Fried Chicken, which opened its first Australian store in 1968, with another 75 opening [by 1972](#). I first tried the finger lickin' good chicken with my mother when she visited me in Sydney when I was at university in 1970. The mashed potato gravy and the 'secret' spices on the chicken were from beyond another planet of taste to our experience.

So what did I grow up on? Like most of my generation, we lived on red meat, offal (kidneys, lamb's fry) and vegetables, local fruit, bread with spreads like honey, jam, lemon butter and bread often sprinkled with hundreds and thousands and even just white sugar ('a sugar sandwich'). We also ate puddings and sponge cakes, which were hands down the most advanced of the culinary creations that many mums could cook.

Grilled meat (mainly lamb chops, sausages, rump steak) was always cooked till it was as dry as cardboard and then drowned in gravy or tomato sauce, as if being rehydrated. When I later got around to being asked in restaurants how I wanted my meat done, the rare choice seemed bizarre, until I took courage and tried it. Today I make a fuss about ordering steak *blu*, not medium, and I love steak tartare and Lebanese *kibeh naye* (minced raw lamb with burghul and onion). It's making up for all those years of over-cooked meat.

We often had shepherds' pie (beef mince covered in baked mashed potatoes), lambs fry (liver) and bacon, and steak and kidney pie.

Chicken was expensive and considered a treat in the days before mass, battery chicken farming, with many people keeping a few chooks at the back of their gardens for eggs and the occasional beheading, followed by the putrid gutting and plucking.

Living 130 miles inland, we seldom had fish other than frozen fish fingers. Local river fish were not available in shops, except for the occasional trout or perch a neighbour might have caught. The exception was that throughout my school years, on the morning of exams, my mother would buy deep yellow smoked haddock from the 'continental' section of the supermarket. This was known in our house as variously 'breakfast fish' or 'brain food'. Mum would poach it, with the idea being that by the time I finished breakfast, got to school and sat down to do the exam, the magic properties of the fish would have kicked in and my thinking abilities would be turbo-charged. I still love the taste of smoked haddock today, but rarely eat it.

Simple but delicious traditional English puddings – rice, bread and butter, and suet ('spotted dick' or spotted dog as my genteel mother preferred to call it) – were regulars in our house, as was vanilla or 'neopolitan' ice cream (a mixture of vanilla, chocolate and imitation strawberry) served with Aeroplane jelly. [Spotted dick](#) was made by wrapping beef or mutton fat impregnated with raisins in a cloth and then boiling it for ages in a pot and the serving it covered with white sugar, sweetened condensed milk, treacle, golden syrup or custard. We thought it was from heaven.

Biscuits were plentiful, and nearly always made by Arnotts and Westons (iced vo-vos, monte carlos, chocolate montes, currant luncheon - which we called fly biscuits because they looked like squashed flies -- and Nice, pronounced as in the French city, and assorted creams).

The vegetables were very limited by today's vast range: potato, pumpkin, squash, turnips, parsnips, peas needing to be shelled from their pods, runner beans, silver beet, beetroot, carrots, cabbage, cauliflower and Brussels sprouts (the latter widely reviled). Vegetables were always boiled nearly to death, or added to roasting trays.

All the fat from roasting was saved as dripping, in an old beetroot can. My father spread this on bread and then ate bread and fat as if it was the most natural thing in the world. He was always rake thin and died in his sleep at 89.

In the 1960s, two grocery innovations [Deb instant mashed potato](#) and Surprise peas made a big entrance to our house and never left. The add-water dehydrated peas were sickly sweet, and so a big hit. These two were served with at least half the meals we ate, probably because mum worked all day and they were great labour savers.

The rule in our family was that you could not leave the table until all the lean meat and the vegetables were eaten. I remember secreting peas into my pockets when my parents were not looking. One traumatic Sunday lunch, some 40 minutes after my sister had left the table, I was swallowing tasteless, cold single peas like reviled pills, each washed down by sips from a big glass of water.

Two exceptions to this blandness were wild asparagus and Jerusalem artichokes. Asparagus could be found growing beside the roads leading to the local Edgell's cannery where it had fallen off farmers' trucks bringing it to the factory and self-sown. In season, mum and I would often stop the car on the way home from school and shovel it out of the ground with a spade kept in the car boot. Asparagus was destined to be boiled too. For some odd reason, mum also had access to Jerusalem artichokes, which even today are quite uncommon in green grocer shops. She grew them in our backyard vegetable patch. Today I am almost compelled to buy them when I see them in shops.

I recall the first time we ate spaghetti. It was a planned meal and for days we rolled the exotic word over and over in the house. Mum made it with meat sauce and the sauce-flipping strands were of course sucked inwards with great relish, as all children love to do. We thought our house was terribly sophisticated and 'continental', the last word in urbanity in those days.

We had a prodigious sugar intake. Mum would often bring home massive vanilla slices, slices of pastry topped with sickly sweet gelatinous yellow custard, with this in turn topped with thick, sweet icing. I often demolished two of these at a sitting. Sweet rice pudding was made at least weekly. Most mothers knew how to make toffee and the test of a good toffee was how far it was away from the hard, tooth chipping variety and more like what we called 'stick jaws'. These would instantly stick hard to your teeth, sometimes pulling out fillings. Mum could only make the hard ones.

There was always a can of Nestle's condensed milk open in the fridge. This was sickly sweet stuff that we would spoon into our mouths straight from the can, coat fruit and sometimes spread on bread.

The local soft drink (Ashelfords) was always on the dinner table (passiona, ginger beer, creaming soda, lemonade, orange, lime and cola). Tea when I occasionally drank it, was like syrup. (I remember offering a more worldly person sugar in their tea and being smartly told "I drink tea not syrup!"). There was absolutely no awareness that lots of sugar was anything of a nutritional problem. Coffee, other than the execrable Nescafe, and later Maxwell House, was unheard of.

Other delectables available from the terribly modern continental section of the supermarket were cans of smoked oysters, and small yellow and red dyed 'cocktail' onions. Toward the end of the 1960s, ring-pull cans of soap-like Tolko camembert cheese from Denmark could be bought. After years of Kraft cheddar and Coon cheese, this was very special. Such foods were kept on hand should any special visitors like the local doctor of Anglican minister come around for a cup of tea. Mum always served these delicacies at her women friends' canasta parties, along with gin and sweet sherry. She was the 1960s personification of culinary urbanity.

Dad once arranged with a couple of his mates to have a massive wicker basket of oysters sent up from Sydney on the overnight train, packed with a lot of ice. The basket was the size of a large suitcase and must have contained many dozens of unshucked oysters. They set it up on the front lawn of the Ophir Street house and a dozen of his male friends came around and ate them, drinking beer in the Bathurst spring weather.

My parents always had a bottle of sherry on the sideboard and mum liked gin and Pimms, the English summer cocktail drink. I can't recall ever seeing wine, but the main drink dad put away was beer (Tooths Dinner Ale or DA). He seldom drank at home, but after work used to go to his club to play snooker and have a few drinks a couple of nights each week. I saw him obviously drunk perhaps two or three times in my life.

Once in a while he'd come home very skitty and get affectionate with us all. Mum would keep his dinner warm. This meant putting it on a plate on top of a saucepan of boiling water, with the plate in turn covered with a bowl to keep the heat in. By 9pm, after saucepan water had been replenished several times, the already plain and overcooked, now grey food looked very sad.

Music

Our first record player was a Kreisler radio stereogram (see photo). When this piece of ultra-modern polished furniture was delivered to our house, I was in heaven. It had a radio and an 'automatic' multi-disc record player, where you could load up a stack of up to eight records which, one at a time, would drop onto the ever-laden turntable when the record before had finished playing. It had three speeds, 78rpm for the old brittle shellac discs which by the late 1950s, were no longer retailed; 33rpm for long play records, and 45rpm for singles and EPs (extended plays) which had two to three tracks per side. We'd sometimes play records at the wrong speed and get friends to try and identify what they were. To my sheer delight, the Kreisler system also came with a microphone you could plug in and sing along with your favourite songs. I often would belt out the songs, adopting the sorts of poses I'd seen singers adopt on Johnny O'Keefe's Six O'clock Rock and Brian Henderson's Bandstand top 40 TV programs.



A Kreisler radio stereogram

My parents' tastes ran to the musical syrup of Mantovani and his orchestra, the crooner Johnny Ray (whom they had seen live at Sydney Stadium in Rushcutter's Bay), music from Broadway shows like *South Pacific*, *The King and I*, *My Fair Lady*, *Showboat*, *Brigadoon* and *Oklahoma*, and the interminable themed boxed sets of Readers' Digest LPs that would arrive in the mail to much excitement. We had several light classical sets and collections of songs from the war years and Harry Belafonte's treacle versions of calypso.

My pocket money did not allow me to afford LPs, but I quickly built up a steady collection of 45s. My first single was Rolf Harris' *Tie me kangaroo down sport* (1960, when I was nine years old). This had as its B-side *Nick O'Teen and Al.K.Hall*. In 2006, I put a band together to play at an Oceania tobacco control conference dinner at Darling Harbour in Sydney. We played six tobacco-themed songs like the Nashville Teens' *Tobacco Road* and Commander Cody's *Smoke, smoke, smoke that cigarette*. That night we also became what I am sure was the first band ever to cover Harris' execrable song. I was able to remember every word.

Early hit records I recall owning were the Delltones *Hangin' Five*, the Surfari's *Wipeout* and *Surfer Joe*, Jimmy Gilmer's *Sugar Shack* (all 1963), Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs *Poison Ivy* and *Sick n' Tired* (1964) and many of the Beatles early singles. My first LP was the Rolling Stones first eponymous album, released in 1964 when I was 12 years old. Bands I've been in in the last eight years have played *Route 66*, *Tell me*, *Can I get a witness*, *Carol*, *I'm a king bee*, *Walking the dog* and *I just want to make love to you*, all off that incandescent album.

When mum went to England for a holiday with my sister Ginny in 1965, I asked her to bring me back a single [*Anyway, anyhow, anywhere*](#) by a new English group, the Who which I'd heard once on the radio. She did and I thrashed it every day for months. It's still easily my favourite Who track.

I rapidly became utterly absorbed with rock and pop music. The local Bathurst radio station 2BS played strictly top 40, with a sprinkling of country. But my station was Sydney's 2UW, with the blonde American Ward 'Pally' Austin and Tony McLaren, who later drowned in a Sydney to Hobart yacht race. Its signal came clearly over the Blue Mountains and I listened avidly, wrote fan letters to Ward, asking him about bands he'd played and the colour of his E-type Jaguar (it was black, he wrote back). I wrote down the name of new 45s I liked and then ordered them through the Western Stores or Edels record store in George Street.

I had an early taste for obscure Australian rock music and owned Billy Thorpe and the Aztec's first single, [*Blue day*](#) (1964), Lithgow's the Black Diamonds [*See the way*](#) (1966), Jeff St John and the Id's [*Lindy Lou*](#) (1966), Python Lee Jackson's rock version of Sam and Dave's [*Hold on I'm Coming*](#) (1967) and Major Lance's [*Um, Um, Um, Um, Um*](#) (1966), The Morloch's early psychedelia [*Time Machine*](#) / [*Hit the road Jack*](#) (1966), Lloyd's World's *Pinky Lamour* and [*Brass Bird*](#) (1968) and of course Adelaide's the Masters' Apprentices [*Undecided/Wars or hands of time*](#) (1966) and everything the Easybeats put out. These were all nearly played into the ground through the faithful Kreidler, with me singing along through its microphone. I would have been 13-17 years old throughout these years.

There were four local bands I recall the Debonairs (a so-called 50:50 band, who would play ballads with a bit of early Bill Haley style rock and Shadows instrumentals), the Leedons, the Confusions and later, the Alarma. I knew the singer with the Confusions, [Tony Jeffrey](#) from hanging with him at the local swimming pool (he went on to become part of the zany club act, Wickety Wak, and represented Australia in the Eurovision Song Contest) and got to know a few of the members of the Leedons (the singer Pat 'Fatty' Carroll and the drummer, Robert Donnelly), who used to play at parties I went to at the Light Car Club on Mount Panorama.

The Leedons bass player had a Höfner bass with the violin-shaped body, made famous by Paul McCartney in the Beatles. And their guitarist had a sunburst Fender telecaster. I knew all these things from reading about guitars in music magazines. None of my friends knew this stuff or cared less. But I was totally absorbed by discussions about Fender vs Gibson, Telecaster vs Stratocaster, Bigsby tremolo arms, and later, wah-wah pedals, even though I couldn't play a note.

None of these bands played original material, but covered rock and pop well. These bands were my earliest experiences of live music, along with seeing England's [Screaming Lord Sutch](#) and the Savages who for some unknown reason was booked to play in Bathurst on his [1964 tour of Australia](#). *The Sydney Morning Herald* reported that he had 18 inch long hair, screamed his songs and wiped his nose on the stage curtains. He went on to form the Monster Raving Looney Party and serially contested British elections until 1997. He died in 1999.



I also saw Sydney's famous wild men of rock, the [Missing Links](#) play in the Bathurst Civic Hall in 1965, after having earlier bought their now very collectible singles *Wild about you/Nervous breakdown* and *You're driving' me insane*, backed with a great version of Eddie Cochrane's *Something else*, which I went onto sing in the [Bleeding Hearts](#), a band I sing with in Sydney.

My father used to often take me with him in the car to Sydney when he bought his bulk supplies of shampoo, hair colour, towels and other hairdressing needs from wholesalers like Marigny's. We would always stay at the Hotel Imperial, on the Darlinghurst end of Darlinghurst Road, just right of William Street (see photo). The hotel had creaky floors covered in dark carpet with floral patterns. It had an ancient lift, with two doors you had to open before you got in – one a metal concertina-like safety door, and then the door of the lift box itself.



The Hotel Imperial, Darlinghurst

Astonishing as it now seems, dad would allow me to walk around the Cross alone in the late afternoon and early evening. I must have been no more than 14–15 years old. The Kings Cross Theatre which was later demolished for the construction of the Crest Hotel (with Kings Cross railway station underneath) had been converted from 1963 into a big dance space called [Surf City](#). I had read all about it in [Go Set](#) (published 1966 to 1974) and the short-lived Drift (see picture), two music newspapers I avidly read every week which I could buy at Turner's news agency in town.

So the first time we stayed in the Cross I wandered up and hung around at the door. A band was playing inside, and in the street, I could hear that distinctive surf sound with the splish-splash sound of echo-chambered guitars. I rushed back to the hotel and got dad who came up with me, paid for us and sat with me up the back while I drank in the absolute wonder of it all. The band was [Roland Storm and the Statesmen](#) who were playing beach stomp music which was big at the time. I thought I had gone to heaven.

On another trip, dad took me there again and we saw Billy Thorpe and the Aztecs, then with the guitarist Vince Melouney, who went on to later play with the Bee Gees. Thorpe and the band did little skipping-like moves as they played, not unlike the way the Shadows had perfected.



Cover from Drift magazine

Late in high school, I fell in with a few school friends who, unlike me, could play guitar (Andrew Gibson, Mike Chadwick and Toby Hennessy) and John Lloyd-Green who boarded at Sydney's Kings School and could play drums. I sang. We formed a band that I named Heaven for Aching Minds and Tired Souls, after the Radox bath salts television advertisement slogan "heaven for aching limbs and tired feet". We played just twice: once at a school dance and once a party held in a woolshed on a farm on the road to Orange. We had access to John's drum kit and one electric guitar, owned by a kid at school, Dave Sutor, who couldn't play it. I asked Tony Jeffries if we could borrow some of the Confusions' gear and to my amazement he asked a few of them who said we could. I had more front than David Jones (the big Sydney department store), as people said at the time.

So we managed to get two electric guitars, a bass and amps, and put a mike turned way up in front of an acoustic guitar without picks-ups. We couldn't get a proper band PA, so we hired two of those metal conical speakers on stands that used to be used for announcements at sports carnivals, and plugged two microphone lines in, one for me to sing into and one to amplify the acoustic guitar. It must have been as rough as guts, but everyone danced to it.

We had a very limited repertoire, which meant we had to repeat songs several times in the gigs. We played songs such as the Stones' [*Heart of stone*](#), the Searchers' [*When you walk in the room*](#), Status Quo's [*Pictures of matchstick men*](#), the Monkees' [*Stepping Stone*](#), Tommy James and the Shondells' [*My baby does the banky panky*](#), Arthur Conley's [*Sweet soul music*](#), the Easybeats' ballad [*In my book*](#), and of course the mandatory Animals version of [*House of the Rising Sun*](#).

Late in the 1960s, I discovered Barry Humphries and his two main characters Edna Everage and Sandy Stone, the chronicler of suburban routines and etiquette. I was never much of a fan of Edna, but I found [Sandy Stone](#) utterly wonderful. I bought his two 33rpm 7inch singles *Wild life in suburbia* (volumes 1 and 2) on the Score label and the Bulletin magazine's legendary 45rpm *Snow complications/The old Pacific sea*, which you ordered through the magazine. They were long lost but I miraculously found them as a cheap package deal on eBay a few years ago, in pristine condition.

I played the [Sandy Stone monologues](#) so much that I could soon recite them right through. Immortal lines like "A man doesn't want a couple of kiddies dragging half the beach through his car and scratching a brand new plastic seat protector" and "You just can't get curried egg out of a burgundy Axminster" still pop out at apposite moments today. Bob Jones, a friend who now plays guitar in my band the Bleeding Hearts, also lived in Bathurst. I didn't know him then, but I found out later he too had a taste for Sandy Stone and we often compete to see how far we can get into a monologue. The idea that there were two boys in the same small country town, independently listening over and over to Sandy Stone monologues alone in their living rooms completely unknown to each other, is quietly very appealing to me today.

Musical theatre

The local musical theatre society would put on performances each year in the City Theatre. My mother was involved in a few of these in minor roles and chorus singing. I recall seeing *South Pacific*, *Oklahoma*, *Brigadoon*, *My Fair Lady*, *Showboat* and the Noel Coward play *Blithe Spirit*, where mum played the clairvoyant and spiritual medium Madame Arcati. She later held a séance at home with her gin-soaked friends, where they surreptitiously bumped the table under the Ouija board indicating a spirit was in the room, to gales of laughter. Dad assisted by helping to dress the male actors with bushy sideburns, moustaches and beards using theatrical hair he was able to access via his hairdressing business.

Books

There were two libraries in town: the children's and the adult's. The children's was upstairs from the adults. I joined the children's library early and after reading a few titles like RM Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, I found little to interest me and joined the adult library the minute I was eligible, which was probably about when I was about 12.

My library borrowing was 99% from the non-fiction section, where I would bring my maximum quota of books home on subjects like cricket history, car and motor cycling history and pictorial geography books. I would also secretly browse the photography annu-als after one day discovering a demure, tasteful nude.

I developed a formidable general knowledge from that period, and have always since been a helpless sucker for evening radio quizzes, often remaining in the car in the garage with the radio on if coming home late to see how many callers I can beat. I rarely call up myself though. Capital cities, main exports, political history, rivers and mountains. I'm your man at the trivia night.

I had been a voracious comic reader from an early age and also read lots of magazines that my parents bought for the small magazine table where women sat waiting for their hairdressing appointments. These included two magazines that my mother subscribed to from England, *Tatler* and *English House and Garden*. *Tatler* was a high society and fashion magazine, with lots of photographs of the royals with their hangers-on, film stars and what my father called 'knobs' at events like fox hunting and the Grand National steeplechase. *House and Garden* was mostly a vehicle for advertising English stately homes and castles, with photographs of vast drawing rooms, servant quarters, and sweeping gardens manicured in the English way. Mum must have missed all this being close at hand back in England, although we lived in nothing remotely like it in our little weatherboard house in Ophir Street.

I read few novels while a boy, other than school texts like Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbavilles*, *Silas Marner*, or Fielding's *Vanity Fair* and all the Ian Fleming James Bond novels, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. But I well remember one novel. In the early 1960s, I'd read in the papers about how the government had lifted the ban on DH Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (it was 1959 when I was only 8). Some years later, I then read that our very own Bathurst library had decided to get in copies of the book. This was actually a news item in the *Western Advocate*. So the next time I went down there, I sheepishly waited until no one was around the counter and approached a bun, glasses, pearls and cardiganed librarian who had often recommended books to me. I'd developed something of a bond with her over the months and she was a customer at my parents' salon. I sensed that she would treat my planned reservation of the book in an entirely professional way, which was exactly the way it happened. Unblinkingly, she noted my reservation for the book in her ledger and told me without smirking that many others had also reserved it, so it may take many months before it came my turn.

Some months later I was in there browsing for my borrowings when she quietly approached me in the book rows and said that the book was now available. I began to devour it as I walked the eight or so blocks home. After a short pause for dinner I continued until about 1am that morning, feverishly turning the pages. I have never re-read it but 50 or so years on, I can vividly recall the passage when Mellors and Lady Chatterley intertwine wildflowers in each other's pubic hair.

I wanted much more of this. I discovered that my parents had Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (which wickedly contained the sanitised 'fug' for 'fuck' throughout), Irving Wallace's *The Chapman Report* (inspired by the Alfred Kinsey sex research) and Harold Robbins' *The Carpetbaggers*, a racy novel from the 1960s.

Stamp collecting

My general knowledge of world geography is really good. I put this down to an early passion for stamp collecting. This started by my father saying yes to my constant pleading that he respond to one of the big ads published in comics from Seven Seas Stamps located in the mid-western NSW town of Dubbo, where Bill Hornadage commenced its operation [in 1951](#). The business grew to become the biggest mail order stamp dealer in the southern hemisphere. One day dad relented and bought me 500 mixed stamps from all over

the world, for some ridiculously low price. He also got me a stamp album, some hinges to mount each stamp country-by-country and some tweezers, which seemed to appeal to his sense of the right thing to do (“if you’re going to do something, do it properly” he would tell me regularly).

The stamp album had a few pages for larger countries like England and the USA, and those which put out masses of colourful stamps to earn revenue from collectors (like Hungary, the tiny San Marino and Monaco) and half a page for small nations where those responsible probably figured correctly that the average kid would only ever acquire one or two stamps. But these sort of places really appealed to me – British and European colonies like Bechuanaland (now part of Botswana), Nyasaland (now Malawi), and Ifni (a Spanish enclave in today’s Morocco). I even had a few stamps from the most remote, inhabited island in the world, [Tristan di Cunha](#). Each country had information about the population, size, capital and main industries. I absorbed all this information hungrily, and studied the pictures and important people’s portraits on each stamp, often looking up information about them in one of the twenty or so weighty bound volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* which my parents had bought from a door-to-door salesman for a small fortune, and which stood in pride of place in the living room cased in a rectangular wooden bookshelf, with a circular white doily decorating the top.

I knew which nations mined tin and which diamonds. I knew many of the US Presidents’ names and what they looked like. I could instantly tell you what an okapi was, and that there were three and two toed sloths. Rivers and major bridges were all mine to name, all over the world. All this came from stamp collecting and the curiosity it led to in books I would then borrow from the town library.

I had no patience for stamp hinges though. One day I removed all the hinged stamps and pasted them back into the page with Perkins paste. I could get them in far more symmetrical and permanent order that way. That fateful afternoon came back to haunt me a few months later.

My parents had a customer who was from Austria, a Mrs Tausig, a woman of about 60. Her husband was a serious, serious stamp collector and after dad mentioned my interest, I was invited to their house and Mr Tausig carefully showed me through his astonishing collection that took up many shelves in a cupboard. He had whole albums devoted to the stamps from all over the world, but particularly from Europe. Their house was the first I had been in that was bedecked with books, fine china plates, sombre furniture, paintings and of course, the stamp collection.

Mr Tausig gently admonished me in his mid-European accented English for pasting in the stamps and told me I had ruined them and would need to start again. I should throw out the album, he said. But the kind man gave me an old empty album of his with cellophane strips which he explained I should place the stamps behind. Even hinges were verboten. He also gave me several volumes of out-of-date Stanley Gibbons specialised catalogues with names like ‘Europe and Colonies’ and ‘Britain and Colonies’. Over the next years I would spend hours painstakingly looking up the value of each stamp I owned and enter it in a ledger, imagining that I could even one day sell my growing collection for the small fortune that was building. But of course the prices referred to the cost of buying

the stamps from Gibbons on The Strand in London and bore no relation to what I could sell my flea-bitten collection for (as I found out much later in life when I tried to sell my retained Australian collection on eBay. I think I got about \$500, while the catalogue value was many times that).

But Mr Tausig saved the best for last. He gave me the address of a man, Brian Wheatley, who lived not far from our house and had 'a room full of stamps' for sale. This turned out to be quite true. He lived near Ben Chifley's old house in south Bathurst, and Brian welcomed me about once a month on a Saturday afternoon where I would sift through his stamps from all over the world, selecting particularly exotic, usually older stamps. I especially liked African stamps showing animals or etched landscapes. I would often be there for hours and at the end of all this, I would hand over my accumulated pocket money which would have been seldom more than about five or ten shillings. He had infinite patience.

On one of my birthdays, dad bought me a penny black (the world's first postage stamp) which Brian ordered in from a Sydney dealer. I thought my heart would burst with pride.

Illness

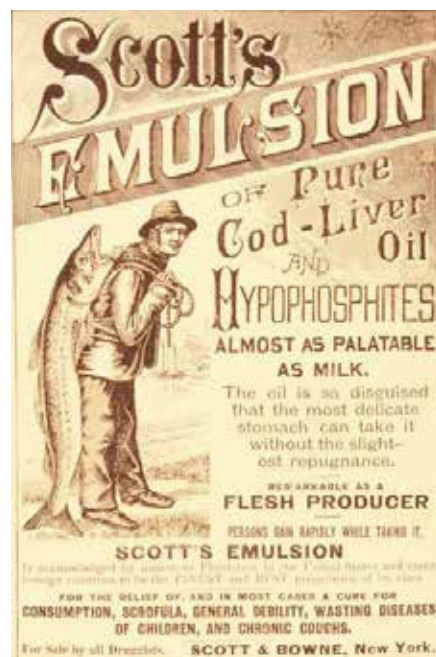
Like nearly everyone else, I had childhood measles, mumps, and chicken pops, as I thought it was called. Immunisation rates were poor in those days, explaining the epidemics of those diseases. Ginny and I were both fed various tonics to 'build us up': Scott's Emulsion of cod liver oil with a label showing a man carrying a giant cod on a rope over his shoulder (see picture on the next page); a weird tasting carmine red concoction called Waterbury's Compound (still sold today and which interestingly contains creosote), and a black molasses vitamin tonic product called [Irradol-A](#). Dad carried the emotionally vivid memory of his consumptive father and was always concerned if we got our clothes wet or if the house was ever damp. In my teens, I once had a bout of pleurisy, causing him great distress, presumably evoking his father's TB.

In the medical fashion of the time, kids had their tonsils and adenoids removed at the first signs of throat infection. So it came my turn at about the age of 5 or 6. On the appointed day, I was put in my pyjamas and dressing gown early in the day so as to arrive at the hospital ready dressed. In mortal fear, I took off out the front door and ran screaming up the street to avoid the terrifying ordeal. After being caught by dad, we made the journey to the frightening Bathurst District Hospital where it would all take place.

I still recall the smell of ether and the mask that was held over my face, as I do the luxurious ice cream and jelly that was given to me as my first meal afterwards. They had also taken the opportunity while I was under to remove my foreskin, daubing my poor little dickie in brown antiseptic ointment. It was the golden age of circumcision.



Waterbury's Compound



Cod liver oil

In 1961 when I was 10, I became very ill with hepatitis A. A boy at my school died from it in the weeks I lay dreadfully ill, jaundiced, utterly uninterested in food, vomiting and passing very dark urine. Because my parents had to work, I was taken every day to the house of one of the apprentice hairdressers mum and dad employed. Her mother, Mrs LeBreton, nursed and comforted me over about three weeks until I was well enough to stay at home for another few weeks, gaining weight and sleeping a lot. My school report in November that year said "For a lad who has had a prolonged absence from hepatitis, Simon's improvement is so much more commendable."

Dad bought me a balsa wood carving set with the goal of carving a Spitfire model airplane, and passing the long hours. I promptly gashed my left thumb and still have the scar today.

When I was 13, mum and Ginny sailed to England to see mum's family on a Greek liner, the *Elinnis*. They were away for several months and I stayed home with dad. I have little recollection of my time with him over those months, other than one day single-handedly eating a whole bag of cherries he'd brought home. I swallowed the seeds too. All of them. The next day I felt nauseous at school, with a sore stomach. I went to sick bay and after school dad took me to the local hospital where appendicitis was diagnosed. I remember having my pubic area shaved by a beautiful, tall, dark-haired young nurse, Nurse Perrott. What you remember ...

Other than these episodes, I escaped any trauma, breaking any bones, or any major illness. A friend, Alan Myer, who had lived in the USA prior to coming with his family to live in Bathurst, was killed on his bicycle and a girl who lived down our street was killed in a car crash. But serious injury and death were largely strangers in my life.

One dramatic exception was when in primary school, the headmaster appeared at our classroom door one day, spoke briefly to our teacher who then asked a classmate to go with the headmaster. His parents had been found dead in their house, in a murder-suicide by the father. They were Polish. He and his older brother were taken in by a local couple active in the Anglican church community. The couple already had two children of their own. They cared for the two orphaned boys throughout the remainder of their schooling and were often spoken of in our home as profoundly decent people.

I often reflect on how lucky I was to have avoided serious injury or death as a teenager. The next door neighbour of one of my best friends since primary school, Richard Gorrell, was an older boy called Tony Mulvihill. Tony was old enough to drive and had a tiny two-door Ford Anglia. It had a modified exhaust system so you could hear it coming a block away. It also had widened wheels, or 'fats' as they were called, tramp rods and a fitted tachometer on the dash, which was standard in all performance vehicles. But an Anglia was not a performance vehicle: it was a small car, the sort that might have been bought as a second car for a wife in those days to do the shopping.

Tony did all he could to repudiate this reputation and he'd often take me for laps of the nearby Mount Panorama racing circuit. He would thrash the car to its limits. We never crashed but once the car broadsided in the notorious Mt Panorama 'esses' at the top of the mountain. Tony went on to become a racing driver, although appeared to have never won any major races when I looked up his record.

I grew up in the era before seat belts, mandatory motor cycle helmets and long before random breath testing. The road toll in the 1960s was far higher than it is today. Rates climbed during the 1960s to a peak of 30.4 fatalities per 100,000 population. In 2016 it had fallen to 5.3 per 100,000 nearly six-fold lower.

When I learned to drive, dad would take me out on back country roads and give me lessons well before I had a learner's permit. When I got my license, the local constable and I drove around just one block, which was apparently enough for him to be satisfied.

The dentist

Water supplies were not fluoridated in Bathurst in the 1950s and so it was normal for people to have mouths full of teeth filled with amalgam. I was no exception and went to the dentist regularly, a Dr Hammer, who worked in an old terraced building in George Street. Local anaesthetic in those days was injected through a massive metal syringe with circular metal finger grips to give the dentist better purchase on the plunger that was pushed by the thumb. The gauge of the needle was by today's standards the size of a thin straw. Generations of children must have been traumatised by these monstrous needles and the slow speed drilling equipment that pre-dated the modern high speed, high-pitched drills with built-in water sprays. Hammer had the WC Fields view of children and I recall one visit where my pain and distress provoked him to tell my mother who came with me, while I was in the same room, "kids, I hate them!" I don't recall ever going back. I don't much like the dentist today.

Church

In primary school I went to Sunday school at the local Anglican cathedral. Someone called Miss Bassett would stick little coloured camels, stars, wise men and a baby Jesus in the cradle on a felt story board. At the end of this we were given coloured stickers for our books. These were OK, but nothing compared to the racing cars or history of flight stickers you got under the wrappers of Nestlé's threepenny chocolates or the swap cards you got in cereal boxes. With these, I filled about three albums. But the Sunday School stickers went on the wane when I began to play soccer on Sunday mornings or read the mountains of comics I had got as swaps on the afternoon before at the Saturday cinema matinee (see p69).

But when I turned about twelve, I really got stuck into a lot of church. It all happened after I went to an inter-school sports carnival. I was going to Bathurst High School and that day felt profoundly depressed about how drab and motley kids from my school looked compared to those at the carnival from All Saints College. While we wore vee-necked jumpers, grey trousers and desert boots, they wore grey suits and straw boat-ers. Two thirds of our kids were from the wrong side of the tracks while the Saints kids looked like they were going somewhere. So I arrived home that afternoon and asked my parents if next year I could change schools and go to Saints.

Saints had school fees, and while I had no sense of how much money my parents had, I knew enough to know that the fees would be hard for them to pay. The solution was obvious. I had to get some sort of bursary and being the ex dux of primary school, this seemed the obvious course. But that route saw nothing on offer. It emerged that there was some sort of relationship between the local Anglican Cathedral (also called All Saints) and the school whereby boys who sang in the choir or were servers (which was the local Anglican term for what the Catholics called altar boys) could get partial scholarships.

So I became a server. This involved joining about twenty other boys (girls didn't seem to be excluded but none ever tried to join) under the tutorage of a local man called Daryl something-or-other who had a crew cut and looked exactly like Kirk Douglas in *Spartacus*. I think he must have been very spiritual, but of course we all saw him as simply someone in charge who would draw up the roster and tell us that the ribbons to our white neck ruffs were showing. At the end of services, those who had been on the roster that day had to go back into the church after all the people had left and join in prayers that Daryl led. There was a bit in the service where you had to say "my own fault, my own most grievous fault", beating yourself on the sternum with your fist as you said the words. I always noticed Daryl would really give himself quite a thump. Maybe he had some very grievous faults in there.

After the services, there was a roster for staying back to tidy up kneelers in the congregation's pews and other tasks that were listed on a sheet. One job that wasn't listed but which made the staying back very attractive, was getting stuck into the supplies of altar wine that weren't kept under lock and key. We'd gulp the sticky red port down straight from the bottle and one time, to rub salt right into the sacrilege, we opened up a box of wafer breads - 'hosts' - and stuffed handfuls in our mouths. The first time I witnessed this

happening, I had a terrible rush of fear. It wasn't the thought of being tracked down afterwards, but somehow the idea that if it was ever going to happen, this was the occasion: God would surely appear in a dreadful fit and let us know that we were marked down in his book for life.

What made it seem all the more sure that this would happen, was that one of the main regular feasters was the son of a very senior person in the church. This boy appeared to have a mission in life to make up for this dreadful legacy. He would smoke inside the church, really wolf down the wine and breads in these sly feasts, and was rumoured to be screwing his girlfriend in the belfry. This last rumour was a bit precarious, because the belfry was inches deep in pigeon droppings. When it was a church icon's son blaspheming in this sort of ultimate fashion, it lent an inevitability to the thought that wrath would one day be visited. I've since heard he's a very responsible citizen.

The worst thing about being a server was that you were rostered to help about once a fortnight with holy communion at the weekday 7am services. This meant riding my bike through the Bathurst winter fogs in the freezing cold to the cathedral. The usual attendance was around two. One was an elderly woman who went to church every morning and twice on Sundays. She always wore thick very red lipstick which she tended to smear over her teeth and all around her top lip. I got a close-up of all this when she came up to the communion rail and opened her mouth for the bread. The other person would be one of about six regulars who seemed to go about once a week. Occasionally there would be someone I had never seen before. These would be religious travelling salesmen or someone whose wife or husband had died the day before. These people would tend to have a little session with the priest after the service.

When I was about 14, I started thinking that church was tolerable because there were girls in the choir and one thing might lead to another. So I switched from server to chorister.

I didn't mind the pageantry of parading into the church in robes, particularly on days when incense was being burnt, either. But I began to realise that I had thought all the religious stuff we were allegedly all there to express our beliefs in was just a pile of silly stories. The idea of heaven sounded rubbish. The big tales that there was a virgin birth, life after death and a bloke who could perform miracles sounded frankly ridiculous. The fact that the church was full of old widowed and sad, lonely people also got me thinking that it was pretty much a security blanket for people who didn't have much else in their lives.

I kept most of this to myself. But one day asked my parents at the table "If God made man, then who made God?" They looked at each other a little nervously and asked me if I would like the local Canon to come around after church one day and explain it to me. I said I would and so one Sunday soon afterwards, Canon Barker, a rotund, ebullient man brimming with self-confidence came to our house for afternoon tea.

After the small talk, mum told the Canon what it was that was troubling me. He told me earnestly that he could understand why I wanted to know that, but that it was easily answered. God had simply always been there. I found this predictable and my silent bullshit meter flew off the dial. I nodded in acquiescence but was totally unimpressed. When

I went to university, I learned off a Korean philosophy student who loaned me Bertrand Russell's *Why I am not a Christian*, that my little question was known as the argument from first cause.

An undated press cutting from the local newspaper, the *Western Advocate*, headed Young Christian students meet, listed speeches given by students from different schools at a day-long seminar. These included 'drugs', 'racial prejudice', 'drink at teen parties', 'world poverty', and 'God and modern youth'. A young Simon Chapman spoke about 'prayer'. I don't ever recall praying.

I recall volunteering for this because it would be an opportunity to be in the same room as Annie. I threw together some pious homilies about prayer from a book of quotations, gave me talk and then hung around Annie, my girlfriend.

Pets

We had several cats and two dogs as I grew up. I don't recall any of the cats and have been indifferent or hostile to most cats all my life. Rudie was a short haired dachshund who would bark at his own shadow. I can't remember how he died. I suspect dad might have got him put down quietly one day as he hated the racket he made.

In the last two years of primary school, we got a basset hound, Bessy, who we all loved dearly. Her mournful eyes and constant affection made her a wonderful presence in the house. But she used to wander constantly, with her nose leading her all over town following the adventures the smells promised. On many occasions, we'd get a phone call from someone who had found her, sometimes miles away, read her tag and suggested we come and pick her up. She loved rolling in horse manure and one day when we fetched her, she stank so much we had to lock her in the boot to carry her home.



A horse-drawn bread van

On my first day of high school, I came home to find her crushed and dying in the front garden. She had been run over by the giant wheels of the horse-drawn bread van that came up our street every day selling hot bread (photo). I lay down beside her and stroked her until she died.

When Bessy was run over, I missed her terribly. On some nights I would have little conversations with her in my head, sending my love to her and telling her how much I missed her. I imagined she was in some sort of heaven and warm thoughts about that sort of imaginary nirvana were about the only times I ever had anything approximating religious thoughts.

Violence

In 2014 I got talking to a guy at a party. We chatted amiably and then he asked me, “have you lived in Sydney all your life?” I told him I’d grown up in Bathurst and he had too. Very soon I heard him say above the din of the party, “Christ, it was such a violent place.” That was my recollection too.

There was often talk of open brawls and one-on-one fights. There were certain families with big reputations for public violence. Their surnames often appeared in court reports in the newspaper. If you saw their kids in the main street, you’d cross the road. If you ever saw them in your local neighbourhood or a park, you’d go home immediately because they would almost certainly try to ‘pick’ you.

This routine usually went like this:

Tough kid: “What are you fuckin’ lookin’ at mate?”

Picked-on kid: “Err ... I wasn’t looking at you ...”

Tough kid: “You were and last week you gave cheek to my mate” or “I seen you lookin’ at my girlfriend last week at the footie.”

This was all just a pretext to come up to you and then give you a huge shove in the chest. If you then retaliated, the fight began. If you ran away, you were chased, almost always caught and then bashed.

Bathurst had a lot of pubs for a country town: from memory, there was the Oxford, the Railway, the Knickerbocker, Tattersalls (now the Elephant and Castle), the Park, the Royal, the Kelso, the Commercial, the Dudley, the Victoria and the Kings. Several of these (the Oxford, the Railway, and the Commercial) had big reputations as blood houses when I lived there, where the police would regularly attend.

My first brush with violence happened one afternoon as I walked from home to the local cinema, about eight blocks away. I must have been about 10 or 12. About a block away from home I heard someone call my name from behind and turned to see a local tough kid, Bubba Arrow, racing toward me with about three others following him. I took off as fast as I have ever run. Thoughts of being beaten up flushed adrenaline through me and I ate the pavement up finding astonishing speed, outrunning them until they gave up.

Bathurst was a prison town. The local gaol was near the golf course and when I went there with friends to look for lost golf balls, you could go right up close to prisoners behind high security wire in the gaol garden which abutted the golf course. The prisoners would furtively whistle to us to come over near them. I imagine they wanted to talk us into getting items for them or passing messages on. We never went near them.

Growing up, I had several minor fights. My first was in about year 5 at primary school with Ross Henden, a local bank manager's son. He'd grabbed hold of a new model car I had – a [Corgi Toy](#) BRM in British racing green. I had saved up pocket money for it. We used to race these across the cement of the school playground to see whose car could travel furthest without careening over. We'd weight them with plasticine to get their centre of gravity just right for the races. So Ross Henden grabbed my pristine, unscratched new car and whizzed it violently across the cement, sending it cascading across the surface, scratching it. The only thing to do was to fly at him in retaliation. He was a tough, athletic kid and immediately smashed me in the nose, sending blood everywhere. It was over that quickly.

In high school I took on Terry Pascoe (a win, and reason long forgotten); Robert Ambrose (another win, for taunting me at choir practice about a girlfriend I had who had several other current boyfriends); and Wes Hardman (pretty even, and reason again long forgotten). But the most memorable was against John 'Lippy' Lawrence, a local dentist's son who was the proverbial smartarse. I was captain of the second eleven cricket team in year 11 at high school. Lawrence was on the edge of selection in the team. One afternoon he was in smartarse overdrive at cricket practice, refusing to help pack up the gear at the end of the session.

So I told him I'd see him a few minutes later out the back of the day boys' locker room, an area away from the view of teachers. The whole team assembled there, pulling in other boys along the way. They formed a circle and Lawrence and I shaped up. I moved in immediately and knocked him down with a single punch. He didn't get up quickly and cried.

But these scraps were nothing compared to beatings we all heard about and sometimes saw. A quiet, tall boy in my class at Bathurst High was severely bashed by a local tough. He was badly injured and traumatised by it all. One family had several members of both sexes with fearsome brawling reputations. The girls would mostly fight other girls but could have flattened most boys too. There were a dozen or so local kids who were sent away to the notorious Mt Penang juvenile detention centre near Gosford in the years I was aware of all this.

There were often brawls outside a local dance hall, the Bathurst Hall. Some of these involved car loads of guys from the coal mining town of Lithgow, a godforsaken place about 40 miles away from Bathurst toward Sydney. They would drive up to Bathurst on Saturday nights to try and get into fights with our locals.

But there was one man who stood tall above all others. Tommy Bowman was a tough local railway fettler who each year would take on all comers at the annual Bathurst Show, where the famous Jimmy Sharman travelling boxing tent would set up over three

days. Sharman carried a troupe of journeymen boxers from town to town across the country, setting up his tent and inviting local fighters to take on his boys in different weight divisions. Most of his troupe were young Aboriginal men. They would stand arms folded across their chests, in satin dressing gowns and boxing boots, occasionally shadow boxing uppercuts and straights to show their moves. One beat a big bass drum and Jimmy Sharman spruiked the contests in his nasal voice through a microphone, urging men in the crowd to try their luck in the ring. His troupe ranged from whippet-thin young men to heavyweight, typically older scarred bulldogs.

About 150 payers would crowd into the bloodstained sawdust floored tent and see three or four three round fights, starting with local schoolboys who would don massive man-sized gloves and throw agricultural style arcing haymakers at each other to the cheers of the crowd over one or two rounds, if it went that long. One punch would usually connect and see blood pour from a nose, occasional staggering and temporary collapse, but there was always a rain-shower of coins tossed into the ring at the end, which could net the boys up to fifteen pounds, an unspeakably large amount for what was often some staged slapstick 'boxing'.

Tommy Bowman fought in the Sharman tent every year, and I saw him several times, pushing my way to near the front. He was as tough as teak and fast as they get. He could absorb unbelievable punishment, spit teeth, get knocked down, but would always get up and punch on, nearly always beating the best that Sharman's troupe or anyone foolish enough from the crowd who fancied their chances could offer.



Jimmy Sharman's boxing tent

When I went to All Saints College, from year two of high school, the school rule was that show attendance must always be in school uniform, in some well-meant effort to promote the school. Even day boys – as I was – were required to wear their uniform on the weekend even if not arriving with or planning to move around with the large contingent of boarders in their uniforms.

This requirement meant that our school boys were totally conspicuous to the local toughs, who saw us as privileged, wealthy toffs. They would flip off or throw away our hats and try to pick fights. But there was one thing they had not reckoned on. One of the boarders from the far west was Charles ‘Chocko’ Saunders. Saunders was the toughest kid anyone ever connected with the School could remember. He could fight like a threshing machine.

One year, the prefects addressed the school assembly before the annual agricultural show (see below) and told everyone that if there was any sign of locals trying to pick fights with Saints boys, then Chocko needed to be found quickly and he would sort them out. This happened with great efficiency, although I missed seeing it. Apparently Chock went up to some invincible local tough who was throwing his weight around and gave him a royal hammering, humiliating him in front of his urgers. The problem didn’t happen the next year.

The Bathurst show

Every year without fail, we would all go to the annual agricultural show held at the show-ground located just after you crossed the Macquarie river as you drove into Bathurst. It ran over about 2-3 days. The main attractions for kids were the side show tents and rides like the octopus, the ferris wheel, the ghost train, dodgem cars, the utterly feeble haunted house, the wall of death (where a motorcycle raced around the wooden interior of a 30 foot cylindrical tower) and the mirror maze. These attractions were run by professional show family groups who moved from country town to country town setting up their tents and rides, with the Royal Easter Show in Sydney being the biggest event of the year for them.

Gill Brothers rodeo was always there. This was by far the largest tent and featured bareback buck jumping, steer riding, roping and wrestling and whip cracking and knife throwing. Pale brahman bulls were the most exciting to watch being ridden. We’d see tough local cowboys done up in chaps and Stetsons try their luck and often get injured by being thrown hard, stomped on or gored.

The whip crackers and knife throwers would call for volunteers from the audience to come out. I came forward one year for the whip cracker whose curvy assistant gave me a length of folded paper about a foot long to clench between my teeth while facing sideways. The man with the whip then whipped off sections of the paper with the last section being only a few inches from my face. I never saw anyone come to grief.

The knife thrower would have a volunteer stand against a wooden panel and with their arms and legs akimbo. He would then throw large knives around the periphery of the arms, torso and legs, with the biggest gasps coming from then the knife thunked into the

wood right between the volunteer's legs. It's amazing to think today that these risks were taken and considered all part of the fun.

Gill Brothers' tent also had country and western singers like Tex Morton, Reg Lindsay and even Slim Dusty occasionally. But my favourite was Chad Morgan the Queensland yodeller known as the Sheik of Scrubby Creek who had with buck teeth so pronounced that it was said he could eat an apple through a tennis racquet. Chad always got on the sauce and the next week's local paper would often run a report that a Mr Chad Morgan had appeared before the magistrate on a charge of being drunk and disorderly. You could set your watch by it.

There were also always sideshow tents exhibiting bizarre human shapes. Some of these were harmless (very tall men, bearded ladies, very fat people, amateur theatrical hermaphrodites where one side of the person was dressed in a man's suit and the other in a dress with their hair cut short back and sides on one side and long female tresses on the other). But others I recall seeing were truly tragic exhibits of people with congenital deformities, retardation, dwarfs and multiple amputees. One tent I went into had an armless and limbless man who lay on a large silk cushion in a canvas pit. People would pay their money, file in, and gawp at this fully sentient man for a minute or two and then move on.

Later in life I read that these truly awful spectacles were gradually outlawed or perhaps just dropped because of changing public values, but they certainly still occurred in country shows in the 1950s and early 60s.



'Freaks' featured in the 1932 Todd Browning film [*Freaks*](#)

There were also striptease shows which very much interested young Simon and his friends. Two acts I remember were Vanessa the Undresser and Bubbles. Vanessa was a middle-aged woman who cavorted on stage to music doing the dance of the seven veils and the fan dance. The first involved her enticing up on stage one at a time, seven of the most gormless looking men in the audience and subjecting them to various sorts of minor humiliations climaxing in these victims having to remove one of the seven veils tucked into Vanessa's lurid bikini. When all veils were removed, the audience naturally anticipated the top and then the bottom of her bikini going too.

So Vanessa switched to the fan dance, using two large fans made of feather boas. She would lasciviously swipe the fans across her body, first removing her bikini top to reveal two tasselled nipple pasties. She then removed her bikini pants and draped them over some local's head as he panted in anticipation. All the while she would call out "Naughty but noice!!" and "eww-la-la!!" Public moral standards of the day ensured that no one was corrupted by ever seeing her bits.

Bubbles was a much older woman, probably in her 60s. She would also do fan dancing, but her signature act involved a bubble bath. After going through her routine with the feather boas, Bubbles would select someone from the audience. I put my hand up one year and got the gig. She equipped me with a toy bow and arrow set, with the arrows tipped with black suction caps. She then stood behind a full length pane of opaque glass and ordered me to shoot my arrows first at her bra and then at her panties.

I did my best to the cheers of my friends and the audience. When she had removed her bikini she then discreetly climbed into a big full bathtub on stage, brimming with bubbles. I was next ordered to come up and scrub her back. She of course grabbed my hands and pulled them down into the water shrieking "Oh, you naughty, naughty boy!! I'm telling your parents! I hope your girlfriend isn't watching you being such a naughty boy!"

The climax was when she pulled my upper body into the bath, soaking my shirt and causing gales of laughter. They gave me some money to buy a Dagwood dog and a drink afterwards "for being a good sport".

Shooting

My father owned a Slazenger .22 rifle. He would take me out several times a year on weekends to shoot rabbits, which could be seen almost anywhere past the outskirts of town. There were foxes about too and dad was equipped with a round tin fox whistle that he said made a noise like a trapped rabbit and explained that this "would pull foxes in from everywhere, just watch". While I occasionally saw a fox from the car, I never saw one in the bush while carrying the .22.

While being right-handed, I always shot the rifle from my left shoulder. I shot my first rabbit soon after dad handed me the gun to have a go for the first time. It was pretty easy and was made easier by how easily rabbits died. If you got to the rabbit too soon, it might be still twitching, but mostly killing rabbits was a kind of remote control experience that gave you little pause to think about whether killing living animals was any different

than shooting cans off a fence post. You aimed, fired, walked over and there was a warm but stone dead rabbit that you then carried by the hind legs for the rest of the shoot, feeling like some invincible hunter.

A family down our street, the Carters, had an older son who kept ferrets. One day I went with them about 10 miles out of town to do some ferreting. Burrows were everywhere. We pegged small nets over the burrows and then introduced a ferret down one hole. It was magic! About half a dozen rabbits stormed out of the burrows into the nets whereupon the Carter guy broke their necks with a nonchalant twist. Later in the day, a ferret didn't come out. It was explained that it would have come upon some rabbit cubs down there and would be now dining out at leisure. We'd have to just wait.

All that changed when dad decided to take me all the way to Bourke with a borrowed .303 rifle, to shoot kangaroos. It was what they would call a bonding trip these days. We set off in the Holden, with the backseat down so we could sleep in the back if it rained. We drove up through Dubbo, Narromine and Nyngan followed by endless miles of straight driving onto Bourke on the Darling River. There were flies everywhere. After we arrived, we drove around a bit, 10 miles or so outside the town and near the Darling, and began to see hundreds of 'roos among the gums.

Dad's .22 fired unimpressive little bullets, but the Lee Enfield .303 fired seriously big, long thin rounds that it was impossible to not imagine being absolutely lethal. It had a small magazine that allowed you to manually reload with a two movement bolt action. On the way up, we'd fired a few shots at cans and the .303 had a recoil that thumped the butt back into your shoulder. It was suddenly very serious shooting.

So, we stopped the car and the 'roos scattered, stopping then to stare back at us. But within minutes they were back and it was time to do what we came to do. Dad passed the rifle to me in a kind of father and son ritual. I pushed a round into the breach, took aim at a large grey about 50 yards away and fired. The shot knocked the 'roo over but it immediately got up and, wounded, careened off, crashing about and regaining its feet trying to catch the others in the mob. I understood immediately that I had put a large wound into a big animal but had not killed it. It was now crippled, but not so badly that we could get after it and finish it off. The thought of what I had done just sickened me. For my pathetic momentary need to do the blokey thing and shoot a kangaroo, I had instead condemned a wonderful, lithe animal to a painful and probably slow death. I'd probably shot it in front of its mother.

I think dad felt exactly the same way, because that first shot was the last one we fired on the trip. We went into a Bourke café and had some fish and chips that night and then drove home the next day. I recall nothing else about the trip.

I didn't shoot again for a good while, but one day up at my friends Frank and Mike Chadwick's place on Mt Panorama, we were dicking around with .22s and I took aim at a willy wagtail hen and shot her dead. Her mate flitted around the body, moving frantically between branch and ground for about 10 minutes, trying to take in what I'd done. I have never fired a gun since and warm to passages of analysis about the gun lobby that make the obvious point that there are people who actually enjoy killing animals.

The Chadwick's dad, Bill, was a wonderful, taciturn man who had a big grey Jimmy Edwards style moustache, smoked pipes and maintained several vintage cars that he would sometimes drive down to Amaroo Park on the outskirts of Sydney and enter them in races and hill climbs. We once sat in the dickie seat of a 1920s silver Vauxhall all the way down and back, feeling pretty big time. Bill also had a pistol that he kept in an unlocked drawer along with boxes of ammo. Several times when his dad was at work, Frank handed me the pistol to take a few shots at targets down in the creek. It was a two hand job to hold it. We couldn't have been more than 13 or 14. We would have got our arses kicked hard had we been caught, but just having such access is hard to imagine today when handgun ownership is strictly regulated in Australia.

Anglo-Saxon homogeneity

When I look today through my old school photos, one thing is immediately obvious. The overwhelming number of kids were Caucasian Anglo-Saxons. I can recall one Dutch and one Italian girl, two Yugoslavian boys (with the 'vic' suffix on their surnames), a Lebanese girl – Louise Shehadie – who turned out later in life to be directly related to Sir Nicholas Shehadie, the Sydney Lord Mayor, Wallaby football captain, and late husband of NSW Governor Marie Bashir (whom I much later came to know well through my time on the Senate of the University of Sydney where she was Chancellor).

I recall no Asians at all in primary school, with only two (Thai boys who boarded) at All Saints College in secondary school. The only Asians in the whole town were those associated with a couple of typical Australian country town Chinese restaurants serving sludge-sauced dishes like sweet and sour pork and chicken chow mein. There were two Greek cafes –the Red Rose and the Acropole, an Anglicised spelling of Acropolis. This was universally pronounced as the 'Acro-pole'. It's still there today. It served no Greek food like the standard vine leaves, taramasalata, satziki, moussaka and galaktabourico (long served in Greek restaurants in Australia over the last 40 years). It served massive plates of meat with names like 'mixed grill', 'ladies' grill', t-bone and rump steak and fish and chips. These big meat dishes served at the Acropole were considered top shelf fare by Bathurstians. Our family would go there perhaps three times a year for a family treat and leave bloated in a culinary swoon, having eaten big steaks, schnitzels, or deep fried fish.

It also served drinks called ice cream sodas. These were lemonade with a splash of flavour and a dollop of vanilla ice cream which would melt into the fizzy drink. It was served in a tall, fluted glass and always drunk through a straw. Milk shakes were also available, but these were quickly considered pedestrian, at least until thick shakes came along, which were quit a trial to get though, and so something of a test of character.

All this was consumed at booth-like seating about 3-4 each side. It was unquestionably the main place to go and sit and be with girls.

Social class

While the main social divide in Bathurst was between protestants and Catholics, like everywhere else, social class divisions were evident. My parents' salon became the hairdresser of

choice for the wives and daughters of landed, professional and monied classes of Bathurst. There were many graziers' wives who came to get their hair done, as well as the wives of doctors, dentists, solicitors, accountants, bank managers and well-to-do businessmen like car dealership owners. They often brought their daughters.

I was unaware of Jewishness all through my childhood. There was the odd isolated remark about the source of wealth of certain families ("he's a Jew and made a lot of money during the war, selling hard-to-get items") which made no sense to me, but which I later understood to be part of the age-old racist narrative. A local tailor, Mr Lasky (presumably anglicised from Laski) was said to be Jewish, as was a boy in my class, Ian Cohen. But this was never couched in any sentiment that made it in any way remarkable.

The Bathurst Club

In Bathurst there were two main clubs: the Leagues Club and the Returned Soldiers' League (RSL) Club. These were essentially beer, cheap food and poker machine joints for ordinary working men. Their families could attend I never went inside either in all my 12 years in the town. But there was a third, much smaller club called the Bathurst Club. This was known by those who did not belong to it as the 'Gentleman's Club'. It was a men-only place that allowed members to nominate others, who would then be accepted or rejected by the other members via a black-balling system. Its core members were local landowning farmers and graziers and the town's professionals – doctors, lawyers, architects, accountants, bank managers and headmasters. It's since been demolished.

If anyone needed any rapid insight into the class system that was alive in Bathurst in the 1950s and 1960s, visiting the Rugby League Club and then the Bathurst Club would have provided unparalleled understanding.

Somehow my father got to be a member. I didn't understand the significance of this until I'd left home and at university started to reflect on the class structure of the town I'd grown up in. Being a hairdresser, dad was inescapably a tradesman. And being a male hairdresser in an Australian country town in the 1950s and 60s, he would have found it hard to escape the idea that he was an oddity at the Bathurst Club. Barbers were of course always men. And barbers would never have been accepted as members. But male ladies' hairdressers would have been simply unknown.

When I reflect on it, I think my parents' acceptance by the burghers of Bathurst would have been almost entirely due to my mother. She spoke more or less in the manner of British film actresses that locals would have known from films. She'd travelled the world, attended to the Royal Family at Windsor during the war, and was above all a warm and delightful woman who made friends very easily. She was almost certainly seen as great company by the many women who were at first customers in the salon, but soon social friends and acquaintances. Dad, while not having the sort of job that any men had in those days, also was far more worldly than nearly everyone else in the town. He was English, but was not vulgarly English in the Sid James (of the *Carry On* films) way.

There were two other 'non-Aussies' in the club whom dad was close to: a Bulgarian architectural draftsman (Vasko Koitchiev) and an Italian panel beater (Victor Hollo).

I remember Vasko as an exotic man who sometimes wore an embroidered waistcoat, and held his cigarettes in a distinctly different way to other smokers. Dad was a good billiards and snooker player and used to like going to the club several nights a week “after spending the whole damn day with women in the salon” I recall him saying often. He would usually come back merry, talkative and generous about 9pm. This was in the days long before random breath testing for alcohol. More than once, mum had to call the Club staff to gently encourage them to send dad home. There was never any thought about whether he posed a danger on the roads. This was well before random breath testing, but people regularly appeared in court charged with driving under the influence.



Mum and dad (centre) at a ball with dad's friends Vasko and Victor

Holidays

For most years when we lived in Bathurst in the early 1960s, our family would drive up to the Gold Coast straddling the border between New South Wales and Queensland, to spend 10 days in the sun in the summer school holidays. We'd always drive the New England Highway route up and sometimes come back via the Pacific Highway. We'd either stay at Coolangatta or Surfers Paradise, and always in a cheap motel or a flat with names like Sea Breeze Bungalows or Palm Springs apartments.

After the fusty Bathurst country town familiarity, the Gold Coast was the last word in modernity in the 1960s. All the buildings were new. Many had neon signs on them, and 60s architectural splashes of contrasting colour. There were palm trees and frangipanis everywhere. You could buy lurid coloured snow cone ice drinks almost everywhere, mixed grills served with pineapple rings from a can, or an exotic banana fritter.

A man would spray you on the beach with a spray gun containing some miracle tanning agent called 'mutton-bird oil'. Loudspeakers played the Surfariis, the Beach Boys, the

Atlantics, Al Casey and the K-C-ettes, and the Denvermen all playing the new surf sound. You could hire inflated black rubber surfoplanes with two lateral rubber hand grips on the side and ride these all morning or afternoon for next to nothing.

In the evenings you could go to a movie with the family and sit in deck chairs watching a film and drinking Coke. On Greenmount beach at Tweed Heads you could attend a daily event for kids where a compare would run talent quests and start up sing-alongs, One song was called 'Doing the Greenmount rock'. We'd always go to the Cur-rumbin bird sanctuary (see photo below) and feed the lorikeets and then to the nearby Fleahy's Wildlife Park to pat a kangaroo and a koala.

I may have been on holidays, but I was always on the lookout for easy money. The beaches of the Gold Coast were a goldmine for kids picking up empty soft drink bottles. Back in those days before there was any talk of bottle deposit legislation to increase recycling, soft drink bottles could be sold back to shops for a few pennies each. So my daily routine on the beach when I wasn't surf-o-planing was to walk up and down the beach looking for people without kids who were drinking soft drink.

If they looked friendly I'd stroll up and ask if I could have their bottles when they had finished with them. I'd then sit and wait for them to finish. No pressure. If they looked a little unfriendly, I would sit down 10 yards away, wait for them to finish and then walk over and ask. I'd then take as many empties as I could carry up to the nearest shop and recommence. I'd earn five shillings or so a day and buy the latest Phantom comics from a newsagent.

Numbers in my life

We had three cars over the period we lived in Bathurst: a yellow Morris Oxford (number plate BEL-045), a Holden Special EK station wagon (CLX-130) in 1962, and another Holden HK Premier (DSU-439) in 1968. Those number plates were just sitting in my head, 50 years and more later, but I couldn't tell you the number plate of any car I've owned since. Dad came home with the brand new white Holden Special with a green top looking prouder than I can ever remember. I think my recall of the number plates points to all the talk of car ownership in those days being something very, very special.



A Holden EK Special station waggon in the same colour as ours

It's the same with recalling phone numbers. The phone system was manually, operator connected all through my childhood. Our home number was 3694 and the shop, 3718. You'd lift the receiver, wait for the operator (always a woman) to come on line, and then ask for the number you wanted. She would then plug your line into the other party's line and you would hear it ringing. A call to Sydney or beyond was called a 'trunk call' and often involved being called back. It was often said that the operators could listen in to any conversation. They would be one of the first to know about local shotgun weddings, it was said.



Feeding the lorikeets at Currumbin, Queensland

5

Forbidden fruit

Bathurst had two cinemas in the 1950s and 60s when I was young. The cinema was always referred to as ‘the pictures’, as in “I’m going to the pictures on Saturday”. The City was on the main city block and the Tudor slightly out of the main business area in William Street. The City held little interest for me around the age of nine when I first began to go regularly on Saturday afternoons. It seemed to specialise in wholesome films like *South Pacific* while the Tudor went in for schlock, B-grade world war II action films like [*Pork Chop Hill*](#), John Wayne movies, early Elvis stuff and best of all, serials like *The Spider’s Web*, *The Shadow* and the original *Batman*. In my 50s, I tracked down a bootleg supplier on old cinema serials and bought whole series of *The Shadow*, *The Spider’s Web* and the *Phantom*, which I still have today.

Comics

The Tudor’s main action however, was off the screen. In my primary school years, I was a voracious reader of comics and a lot of this was due to the trade in comics that took place between boys each Saturday outside the Tudor on the footpath. Dozens of boys (never girls) would stand with armfuls of comics crooked in one arm. Others with comics would approach and you would begin turning yours over one at a time.

Comics included the Disney stable (Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, Pluto, Gyro Gearloose, Scrooge McDuck); Lee Falk’s the Phantom (I couldn’t get enough of these); a small formatted series of armed forces action comics called War Picture Library; Little Lotta; Baby Huey; Elmer Fudd and Daffy Duck; Caspar and Spooky (two ghost characters); and ‘Classics’ (famous novels reduced to comics). I was a voracious comic reader, and also religiously read the comics in the Sunday newspaper (Prince Valiant; the Potts; Ginger Megs; Boofhead; Blondie (with Dagwood and Mr Dithers)). New comics could be bought at the town newsagents, but most of my reading was in second-hand, traded comics.

In the second-hand comic trade at the Tudor, the prospective buyer would mumble to the seller “read it, read it, read it, read it, maybe, read it, maybe” right to the bottom of his pile and then you would go through his and do the same. Then the trading began, usually on a straight swap basis but often compounded by a demand for an extra five pence or the condition that you get yours back next week for free.

You got to be wary of a few kids who had bundles of absolute rubbish but because of their size or reputation as kids who'd be happy to fight you, would force their torn and dated numbers on you for a brand new Phantom or Caspar. Their usual line was to stop you in your tracks as you recited the "read it, read it" mantra about their offerings and say aggressively "OK, what's it about then?" or "What happens at the end?" Of course you hardly ever knew, you just didn't want their rubbish comics. But kids who used this tactic always had the will to force you to take it if you couldn't answer. I once resisted a guy who did this to me, but afterwards as I was walking home he caught up with me and calmly said to put my things down because he wanted to fight me. He said it with no malice or excitement. It was the first time I had encountered someone who seemed to simply like fighting in the way I might ask someone if they wanted to climb a tree. I talked my way out of it, but got chased a few blocks and came home in tears. My mother asked the man who ran the Tudor lolly counter to keep an eye out for me after that. He was an ex-Grenadier guard and he and my mother seemed to have some sort of understanding.

I'd usually come home with about five new comics and get straight into them, finishing them all before tea time. In those days, Phantom comics had coupons to send away for metal Phantom rings, or rubber ones you could press into a stamp pad and then give yourself the skull mark on your chin, indicating you'd been belted by the Phantom. I wore my Phantom ring for a few weeks until one day a nasty teacher called Monty Kelk said to me in class "Chapman, is that a ring you're wearing?" What could I say. "Well, do you know who wears rings? Women and girls." He later gave me three cuts of the cane for being like a girl. I knew there had to be something very arse- up here. How could a stylish, tough Phantom ring possibly be sissy? But Monty calling me out must have made a big impression on me. Despite being attracted to rings right through my teenage years, I could never bring myself to wear one until I was 23 in 1974. I got over the problem in a souk in Tehran when I bought with a beautiful moss agate in old silver. I didn't take it off even once for ten years.

The Tudor had another attraction too. There were four ticket prices: lounge, dress circle, back stalls and front stalls. Dress circle was where your parents made you sit with them when they came. I never knew anyone who sat in lounge, but stalls was where it all happened. I sat in front stalls which was one and threepence and I dreamed of sitting in back stalls. But it wasn't the extra threepence that prevented me. It was sheer blinding terror.

The local motorcycle and Holden FJ driving crowd whom everyone called bodgies and their girlfriends widgies, would sit there although sitting was hardly the word for it. It was widely rumoured that several girls would be 'doing it' in the back row of back stalls every Saturday afternoon. I could never corroborate this rumour by going up the back and having a look for myself, but the noise and the regular arrival of the police to clear the commotion augured well for the rumour's veracity. The police's arrival would be preceded by the film being stopped, the lights thrown on and the Tudor's manager taking the stage with his torch. Prior to this he had spent about ten minutes patrolling the back stalls and flashing the light on people with feet on seats or in the early stages of organising the real action. The manager had silver hair and a neat barbered moustache and he got apoplectic very quickly once on stage, threatening to cancel the film if the back stalls didn't cool things. He never carried out his threat, and his performance just fanned the flames.

One girl's name was 'Bronco' Suzie because the story went that she bucked like a wild horse when doing it. This I learnt from some other nine year old. She was absolutely amazing. A true widgie's widgie in black leather, teased hair, pink lipstick, wildly chewing gum, shouting and swearing. Once the police took her out and a few of the bodgies went to her rescue. It turned very nasty and my mother put a stop to me going after hearing town gossip about it. It amazes me that people eulogise their experience of cinema in the 1950s as centring on Jaffa rolling (small orange balls with chocolate inside). Jaffa rolling happened, but it was just nothing. The pictures in Bathurst were all about what went on in the dark.

I guess a few of my friend's mothers must have also banned the Tudor because I soon decided that the City was not so bad after all. The girlie action at the City happened at the back of the dress circle lounge, just in front of the projection room. The attraction here was that this area could only be approached by walking up the stairs. So if you were doing things with a girl, you could spot the usherette or the manager coming from about 20 yards and quickly desist. The same went for spotting friends of your parents who you feared would dob you in. They would always be in front of you, not behind where they could see your every move.

The five o'clock session was considered too rough. Local bikies and hot Ford Cortina drivers (from 1962) would park outside the City around five and by the time the session ended at around 7.30, there would have been at least one brawl, some beer bottles smashed on the footpath and a visit from the cops. Once when I was inside, the police chased one of the members of a notorious family into the cinema. They careened all around the stalls, jumping over rows and crashing across the patrons before tackling him on the stage while everyone cheered the place down.

Unbeknown to me, my mother, through her pioneering involvement with a small group of friends called the Business and Professional Women's Association of Bathurst, was a key mover in establishing a film club. They would arrange to bring up from Sydney what were known as 'continental films'. These were what were later called art house films. They apparently had some arrangement with the City Theatre manager to make the cinema available on nights when it would be normally shut. I knew she went off to the movies some weeknights with her friends, but I had no idea what she was going to see until one day in the 1970s when I described to her a wonderful Fellini film I'd seen at a university film festival. She knew it and then went on to list for me many films by directors like Fellini, Renoir and Goddard that she'd seen.

Smoking

I was one of the first kids in my class to smoke, at around 15. I would first pinch occasional single cigarettes from dad's packets (he was a very occasional smoker) and smoke them after school before mum and dad came home. I soon wanted the thrill of buying them myself and would go on my bike to corner shops away from my neighbourhood, where I never recall being refused.

I was immediately consumed by the importance of selecting the right brands: those that would lend me just the right level of interesting-ness when I pulled out the packet when I was with friends. I bought different brands each time: Country Life, Benson &

Hedges, Marlboro, Senior Service, and Camel. This was the way I kept smoking until I finally decided at around age 26 that it was all just too stupid and actually not enjoyable at all. I stopped without any difficulty, and very occasionally had one for old times' sake, usually throwing it away after a couple of puffs.

Boarders at my school would occasionally ask me to buy them a pack. This gave me extra petty cash as an obliging risk taker. But I never really liked smoking at all. It tasted pretty foul after the first one or two puffs. So it took me many weeks to go through each pack that I would retrieve from a secret storage place I had in the garage at home. But I liked very much being known to be a smoker. As it's always been for kids, it was a richly attractive means of adding a richly signifying layer of meaning to one's demeanour, in addition to being one of the first small clandestine acts of doing something that you felt was a step away from just being your parent's dutiful and totally obedient son. My smoking career took place well before the first government steps to try and reduce smoking (the first pack warning that appeared in tiny font size at the bottom of packs in 1973).

Drinking

My first drinking experiences were taking sips from my parents' small range of alcohol. I tried gin (it smelt and tasted like scent), brandy, Scotch. Tia Maria, Drambuie and Pimms. These were all beyond awful to my innocent palate and held no interest. From around 16 I started to quite like the taste of beer, after having supervised sips from dad's glass at the table.

Every now and then a few of us would pool money to buy a few cans of beer from a pub down near the local railway station, carry them to a park or sit in an older guy's car and furtively drink them, holding them out of sight if cars passed. The trick was to have an older looking friend who would go in with at least a sliver of possibility that they wouldn't be refused. Some of these cans would be saved up if there was a party coming along and secreted into the event with lots of knowing looks from those hoping to get offered one.

When I was in years 10 and 11 (so about 15 and 16), I was in two school plays, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* (Malvolio) and *Macbeth* (McDuff). We took the plays around nearby country towns like Molong, Wellington, Dubbo and Mudgee and performed them in school halls, after parading in costume up the main streets as actors did in Shakespeare's time. When we took *Macbeth* to Mudgee, we all camped in the local camping ground just adjacent to the town area. On the first evening we had no performance scheduled, and so were told by the two supervising teachers that seeing we were all mature and responsible boys, we could have the afternoon off to walk around town and be back in the camping ground before about 8pm.



Twelfth Night street parade, Bathurst, me on bass drum

About ten of us took off immediately for a nearby pub that one of the group knew from others would serve us beer in a closed room in the back of the hotel. I'd had hepatitis A some years earlier, and as a result could not drink very much alcohol without feeling unwell. So after one beer I left the group and went back to the camping ground where the duller boys were sitting around a campfire, probably singing Kumbaya.



McDuff slays Macbeth (Andrew Gibson)

Around 8pm, those who went to the pub began returning to the camping ground in various stages of drunkenness. Some very tottering, some throwing up. I watched as one at a time each boy was checked over by the teachers and then told to pack up their things and go and sit on the bus. A phone call was made to the headmaster back in Bathurst who ordered that everyone immediately be returned to school in the bus. In solidarity, I sheepishly 'fessed up that I too had been at the pub.

We drove back to Bathurst late that night arriving about 11pm. The headmaster, Peter Gebhardt, was waiting in his office in his dressing gown. The parents of the day boys in the group had been called and were waiting in their cars in the driveway. One by one we went into the headmaster's office, told how much we had let the school, our parents and ourselves down, and then told that we were suspended from the school.

This was November 1968 and effectively suspension meant that my school holidays had just been extended by a couple of weeks, although there remained some question of whether suspension would be upgraded to expulsion. I immediately took a job in the Western Stores and earned money while all those who had not been drinking slaved away at their desks at school.

Gebhardt realised that among those who had been suspended were several who were likely to do well in the higher school certificate in the next year. If he had expelled us, it would have cut a big swathe out of the cohort of brighter kids and the net result would have been bad for the school in promoting its academic results. So we all came back in 1969, to much admiration and kudos from many kids in the school.

The first time I got drunk was on the afternoon of the final exam in the 1969 Higher School Certificate, general studies. We all trooped down to the Knickerbocker Hotel in William Street and got firmly stuck into the beer. I had about six schooners, walked home as happy as could be, amiably talking to strangers in their gardens on the way, and by 7pm began a prolonged retching session, crying out to Ruth, Hugh, Ralph, Earl, Bert and Jesus on the big porcelain telephone.

Drugs

I never encountered any illicit drugs the whole time I was at school. A few of the Sydney boarders seemed to smoke dope when they went home, which made them seem perfectly exotic. I made up for lost time when I went to university, smoking dope for a few years.

Condoms

Along with cigarettes, condoms – or frenchies or frangers as we called them – were the other must-have objects in the illicit category of things that parents must not know about. When I was 15, I bought a packet of Wet Check from a chemist that was correctly rumoured to sell them to kids with no hint of approbation. I tried one on and then kept the pack hidden in my bedroom, occasionally taking one with me in my wallet to show friends that I was ready for business. I didn't get to actually use one until my long-time girlfriend Annie turned 16. Her father ran a chemist shop, so there was never any problem getting

them after that. Annie worked in the shop for pocket money and often sold them to customers as well as supplying them to friends.

Protestants and Catholics

Bathurst was a town of clear division. Basically, there were protestants and Catholics. There were Anglican and Catholic cathedrals, as well as substantial Presbyterian and Methodist churches in the town. Our family was Anglican, with mum being a regular church goer. She was not in any way devout but Sunday morning holy communion was a social ritual where cakes and tea were had in the church hall afterwards. Dad was not religious at all, but would come along to church sometimes, to be sociable.

As a child, I was unaware of any stand-off or antipathy between the protestants and the Catholics, other than occasional chanting and taunts that would occur sporadically at interschool sports carnivals until teachers put a stop to it. Two I recall were “Publics, publics ring the bell while the Catholics march to hell!” and “Catholics, Catholics sitting on a log, eating maggots out of a frog.”

But there was certainly a social divide. I knew no Catholics, or more accurately, I had no friends who were catholic. I never went to their homes, and my parents didn't socialize with any of them. There was no overt anti-Catholic narrative in our house or indeed anywhere I ever went. It was just that the Catholics were not 'us'. Catholics pronounced the letter 'H' as “haitch” while protestants said “aitch”. Most Catholics also held their knife life a pen, while protestants placed their index finger on the back of the knife where the blade met the handle. Mum would point these things out quietly to us if she heard or saw them, just so we knew who were we dealing with. But that was about the extent of it.

When I was 15, I saw a beautiful, tall, dark haired, lithe girl at the Bathurst Olympic pool, leaning on the pool perimeter fence. I went over and asked her if she was new in town and she said no, she had lived there all her life. She went to St Mary's catholic school in William Street, and lived above the chemist shop which her father owned in Howick Street. Her name was Annie Cooney, a good Irish catholic name.



Annie, aged 15, in our garden in summer and at a dance at the Police Boys Club

From that day on, I fell hopelessly in love with Annie. I was preoccupied with her and thoughts of her filled my days. I invited her to all the parties I went to. She came, but no one else had ever seen or met her either. This was not because she was locked up or shy. It was simply because she was Catholic and we were all Protestant.

We were married four years later when we were only 19. We lived together for 16 years until we were about 35. Our son Joe was born in 1982.

Girls, kissing and sex

When I'm asked to pick a number, I always pick 6 because I was 6 when I first kissed a girl. I remember it as clearly as it was yesterday. Her name was Felicity Evans and she was the daughter of the headmaster at All Saints College, Ted Evans, whose wife Mary was a friend of my mum. She had a pure blonde pageboy haircut and was just lovely (see p21, second photograph. Felicity is top row, 6th from the left). Our two families went on a picnic and she and I wandered a little bit away and I furtively took the unforgettable initiative. It was never repeated, but I never forgot and I couldn't wait to try it again.

I had to wait a few years between drinks. The next occasion was again just once with a very pretty girl, Margaret, at the annual Bathurst Primary School 'continental'. This was the name that presumably some parent with lofty social horizons had proposed for the school fund raising fete. It was run on a Saturday evening in the school playground. After the sun went down and our parents were absorbed talking with one another, quick kissing started among the more game of us at the back of the sports storeroom down at the end of the playground.

Years then went by until adolescence rushed in and a lifetime utter fascination with girls began. I had various romances with girls at different shades of girlfriend status from about 12 onwards: Karen Moras, Sue Fitzgerald, Tina Woods, Wendy Aubin, Jane Campbell, Jane Jenkins and Annie Cooney.

As discussed earlier, the City Theatre cinema in Howick Street was the place where many things opened up for me in the dark. You'd arrive and meet your friends in a huddle on the footpath outside. "Sarah is inside and she wants you to sit with her" I was told one day by one of the girls who acted as runners. "Jeanie is inside and she says you can sit with her today, but only after the lights go out, and only if some other guy (name forgotten) doesn't turn up".

You'd make your way into the darkened cinema to the upper dress circle and sit next to the girl who had sent the message. Ever so slowly, your arm would inch slowly across the back of the girl's seat next to you. When the time seemed right, you'd move your arm down around her shoulder and if things were going well, she would then quickly lean into you. Seconds later, urgent and prolonged deep, head twisting kissing would start which would go on for most of the film.

There were some who left it at that, but others were up for 'going further'. Sometimes this was explicitly negotiated via a scoring system that went up to ten, which was

the mythical holy grail score for sex. No one in these early years I knew ever had sex or even hinted that it might be possible. But the scoring system allowed for the possibility of 'upstairs outside' (fondling breasts outside the clothing), 'upstairs inside' (actual breast fondling), with the same options for 'downstairs'.

I must have been about thirteen when I got my first touch of female breast and pubic hair. It was in the City Theatre which alas, is no more. The Tudor theatre era (see p69) had whetted my intrigue for what might be able to happen with girls. It got to be known that various girls who were willing to give you a feel would be at the City for the two o'clock matinee on Saturday afternoons. I couldn't keep away and must have participated in these furtive rituals at least a dozen times.

These episodes were unbelievably exciting to me. They had turned on a tap that wouldn't turn off. I once read that Freud had said that people think about the possibility of sex many times each day. That was me he was writing about in my teens.

From about 13 and 14, I started to go to parties. These were organized by parents and held in the school holidays. The parties I went to were nearly all run by parents of kids who went to Sydney protestant boarding schools like Kings, Scots, Ascham, Abbotsleigh, and Presbyterian Ladies College, Pymble. They were nearly all children of local graziers. I had come to know these kids because their mothers got their hair done at my parents' salon and my mother struck up friendships with some of them.

Most of the parties were held at the graziers' homes and we would bring along LP records which would be played in the room where the party was being held. The *Most of the Animals* and a Beach Boys hits album were two that got particularly thrashed. The parents would stay well clear, giving us all the freedom to rapidly get into serious pashing sessions. Over these couple of years, I had few momentary girlfriends whom I met at these parties. There was Wendy Aubin, who lived out past Kelso, and two girls from Sydney, Jeannie Garrett and Prue Williams, who were friends with Bathurst kids and must have come up to stay for the holidays. But I spent a few months writing smitten teenage love letters to Wendy and Jeannie and eagerly waiting for theirs back in the post.

I had marathon party pashing evenings with these three, initially via games like spin the bottle, where we took turns to spin a bottle in the middle of a circle of girls and then had to have a prolonged full tongue kissing clinch with the girl to whom the bottle pointed when it stopped spinning. I don't recall anyone absenting themselves from these games. They served as a way of pairing people off for the rest of the night, so we could get with someone we liked the look of and then spend the whole time dancing and kissing until our parents arrived about 11pm to drive us home. Unlike in the back rows of the City Theatre, there was never anything that my father would have called 'funny business' that went on at these parties. The sort of girls who went just didn't go there.

Prue Williams was a very attractive girl, who had long straight blond hair in the style of the English pop singer Sandy Shaw. She was someone's friend who was a boarder in Sydney and once came up to Bathurst for a few days to stay. The gossip about her was that she was in high demand in Sydney, so I was under no illusion that the night she paired off with me was a case of any port in a storm. But I was beyond thrilled.

The parties graduated to being held at the Light Car Club at the top of Conrod Straight on Mount Panorama. At these parties, the Leedons band played, so the dancing was more frenzied. The parents on duty included the odd one who would patrol the darkened room trying in vain to separate the kissing couples. But mostly they left us alone. It was quite enlightened, when I think about the era.

When Annie Cooney and I started 'going steady', her parents open disapproval of her going out with a boy and the added disaster me being a non-Catholic, forced us into completely clandestine arrangements. Phone calls had to be planned and quick. My parents were very concerned about my obsession with Annie, but her parents wanted her to have nothing to do with me. I was never allowed to call her, but with mum and dad working till about five o'clock in the afternoons, there was always a window when she could call me when they wouldn't be home.

Annie lived in a flat above her father's pharmacy in Howick Street with her parents and a younger brother. Jack, her father, was nearly always downstairs working in the shop, which left her mother as the main obstacle to us talking on the phone. There were many calls quickly ended when she heard her parents coming up the stairs.

After first meeting at the local swimming pool, I was in a swoon. She was long legged, extremely attractive, openly flirtatious and coquettish. We got into kissing each other more or less immediately, and would often meet in Machattie Park after school for long, torrid sessions. We soon began what the magazine advice columns of the day referred to as 'heavy petting'. This would occur in the glasshouse gardens at Machattie Park, where you could get some privacy with the advantage of being able to see people coming, stop and adjust your clothing.

A habitué of the park was an elderly woman with psychosis who everyone knew as the local mad woman who went about the town shouting frantically at people. The ignorant urban myth was that old ma Walpole, as she was known, had fallen off a roof and damaged her brain. Whenever she saw us in the park she would shout out repeatedly "she's a slut and you're a dog!" which amused us no end.

I was six months older than Annie. Our decision to delay sex until after Annie's sixteenth birthday was entirely about our conviction that if we did, it would somehow become known and I would be charged by the police for having had 'carnal knowledge' of a girl aged under 16. There had been massive publicity to the case (eventually dismissed) involving the pop singer [Normie Rowe](#) in 1966, when he was charged with having had sex with a 13 year old. We were convinced that, somehow, authorities must surely have some way of being able to tell that we had crossed the line.

There was a town myth rumour that knowledgeable medical authorities could tell if a girl was not a virgin by looking at the angle that her legs came down from her hips to her knees. Armed with this folklore, I would look at older girls and conclude that some looked like they must have had sex.

There were also stories of local youths who had knocked up local girls being told by police to "leave town" or else they would be prosecuted in the children's court and sent to

the notorious Mt Penang reform school on the central coast of NSW. This was the feared place that local toughs, house breakers and vandals were sent. We just knew that I would be certain to join them if we decided to have sex early.

When she turned 16 in May, fortune had it that school holidays commenced soon afterwards. There was a party being held at a friend's house on the Mount Panorama race track. Things at that stage must have been such that her parents were OK about Annie attending protestant social events at the house of people she didn't know. This would soon change.

So on the appointed winter's night when the time seemed right we had the usual fumbling, rapidly concluding event that most recount when describing their own first time, in a bitterly cold paddock away from the party lights, brushing sticks and dirt from us as we returned to the dancing back in the living room.

From that day, we could think of little else. Every interaction was preoccupied by planning out next furtive rendezvous. I had a friend whose parents mainly lived on a farm some thirty minutes drive out of Bathurst, but had a house in town as well. I made it my business to find out from this friend when they would be next living out on the farm, so knew when the town house would be empty. I knew where they kept the backdoor key and so we went there a couple of times, let ourselves in, got undressed and rolled around in our teenage passion on their couch or carpet. These clandestine house visits were full of tension, imbued with the fear that the family who owned the house might unexpectedly come in through the front door.

One day we planned for Annie to set out for school as usual, but to make her way to my place. I would feign illness and take the day off. My parents would both be at work, returning home around 6, so this would give us all morning and into the afternoon to be alone.

Annie reminded me recently that she had detoured to the privacy of the glasshouse in Machattie Park before walking to our house. There she applied nail polish to her fingers and toes, ready for the big day. As arranged, she arrived at our house shortly after mum and dad left for work. I was primed with unimaginable excitement. But within minutes of her arriving, the phone rang. I had to answer it because I was meant to be sick at home, and it may have been mum or dad calling.

But it was her mother. She asked me if I had her daughter there. I told her yes and she then immediately drove the seven or so blocks and picked her up. We never found out how she found out; whether her absence from school had seen the school nuns immediately call her parents, or whether a nosey neighbour had seen her arriving in school uniform, perhaps recognising her or sensing that a uniformed girl walking in the wrong direction on a school day was likely to be up to no good and made the call either to the school or directly to her parents. It was that sort of town.

Annie had previously caused a deputation of nuns to come to see her parents after she had been found to be the source of condom supply from her father's pharmacy to a

boarder she knew at the Scots School. This marked her as a girl to be watched closely by the nuns.

The combination of her entrepreneurial condom sales ventures and our aborted day off school adventure coalesced at the end of 1968 in the decision that she would spend her final year of high school in a Catholic girl's boarding school, Elm Court, in Moss Vale in the southern highlands. She was told that this was to keep her away from me and to give her a better chance of doing better in the Higher School (matriculation) Certificate at the end of 1969.

We were permitted to write to each other, but never to phone. This saw us both writing letters of often six to seven foolscap pages, several times a week. These letters hatched plans for secret phone calls from a public pay phone in Moss Vale's main street on Saturday mornings when the girls were allowed out to the few local shops. Long distance calls in those days were not cheap, so at the appointed time Annie would call me at home (mum and dad would be working at the shop) and feed a succession of twenty cent coins into the phone to give us about five minutes of breathless teenage love talk.

Somehow, I managed to convince my parents to allow me to drive myself in the family Holden from Bathurst to Moss Vale one Saturday to see Annie. I'm certain that her parents knew nothing of this, because they certainly would not have given permission. My parents were thus being very progressive and collusive with my desire to see her. Also, by this time she had the confidence of a wonderful younger nun, who conspired with her to allow her to meet me for a couple of hours when I arrived. We drove to a local lookout on Mt Gibraltar, walked into the bush, spread a blanket and resumed where we'd left off before we were so unkindly interrupted.

My excitement about seeing her after a few months saw me gunning the car hard most of the way, after I left in darkness in the early morning to time my arrival around 10am. I was pulled over by a police car at Aylemerton, just shy of Mittagong, fined \$60 and lost my P plate license. Sixty dollars was a huge amount for a school boy. I had to work off the fine back home by polishing the shop floors on Saturday afternoons after sport had finished.

Annie's father owned a second chemist shop on The Corso in Manly. It had been run by her father's brother, Howard, also a pharmacist. It had a two-bedroomed flat above and the family would stay in the flat during the Christmas summer holidays. At the end of this final year at school, her family sold the Bathurst pharmacy and moved to Manly. On an earlier school break when they stayed there, we secretly conspired for me to come down to Sydney to stay with a boarder at my school who lived in Paddington. On an appointed day, she caught the Manly ferry into Circular Quay on the plausible pretext of going to the NSW art gallery. I met her at the Quay and we caught a bus to near Central railway where I knew there were very cheap, truly awful hotels used by overnighting rail travellers and low rent lovers.

We walked into one, with me carrying an empty suitcase, figuring we could make out we were a young country couple down in the big smoke. I actually remember registering in the name of 'Mr and Mrs Jagger.' The bored looking guy on the desk of course

couldn't have cared less. After an afternoon of teenage lust, innocent Annie caught the ferry back home clutching an art gallery pamphlet that would show her mother where she'd been.

I showed an early draft of this memoir to Annie and she commented that I seemed to have forgotten the grief that our relationship caused my parents. After 27 years since we divorced, she mentioned for the first time that she had kept a boxful of letters that I had written to her when she was sent off to boarding school. One was written after my father had confronted me in the kitchen one night about town rumours that I had 'seduced' Annie. Paragraphs of my indignation followed about his total inability to understand the love that Annie and I had. But the passage below stood out, in all its adolescent self-absorption. I had plainly repressed any memories of how much it all was distressing my parents.

Anyway that was very mild compared to what happened yesterday with Mum. She suddenly started crying in the kitchen when I was in there-over us having it. It was half over the shock and mainly because all the people knew. I said what kind of people were they who cut you off as friends for an external little occurrence like that-I told her if she didn't have enough integrity in herself to see that these people's opinions, who no nothing at all of the depth of our relationship, are worth nothing-then she had missing a big part of her character. I asked her why she always had to look for a bad side in us, and not appreciate the complete wonder of it, why she didn't believe in the strenght of love-perhaps because she was hardened against it because of her own 'love'-perhaps because she had convinced herself love can't go right. She cried for hours Anne, and I love her so much it nearly killed me to see her-so in the end I said I was leaving home this afternoon, would do my HSC in a public hall, as a private student and get an ordinary job during the day-and believe me Anne I meant it-if she was going to keep on going round the house on the brink of tears, sighing and giving me despondent looks ending with forced smiles to show something was/wasn't wrong-it would drive me crazy. So I meant it, much as I love her-I don't want to get her worse, and there's one thing equally important and thats you-so I've got to preserve them both at all costs to myself, even if it meant living in a dive, failing HSC, working on the roads. God I've expressed that badly-I'm rushing it so I can get on with some work, but anyway when I told her that I was streaming with tears and it seems a show of emotion is (ironically) the only thing that will convince her I'm 100% sincere, so there was the old mother-son reunion and she said she hoped it worked out for me because I deserved alot. There's one thing...

Extract from letter written in 1969 to Annie while at boarding school

Naughty magazines

The main downtown newsagent, Turners, had a good selection of the very tame 'adult' magazines from the period like [Man, Gals & Gags, and Laughs & Lovelies](#). Among the selection was a strange little magazine called Solar, which was published by a naturists' association. While the adult magazines had women in lascivious poses with breasts and fan-nies either covered by swimwear, lingerie or a strategically placed hand, Solar showed both men and women naturists fully nude, except that their genitalia had been airbrushed out to save readers from these corrupting sights. But there were breasts and bums on every page. Those photographed were not posing as they were in the girlie magazines. They were firing up the BBQ, playing volleyball or tennis, or sitting about stark naked in oh-so-wholesome celebrations of nudity.

I took courage one day and decided to buy a Solar along with a Phantom comic, when I could see that a man was serving at the counter. Mercifully, no questions were asked. Perhaps the owners were rugged, wholesome nudists themselves and were just blind or indifferent to my teenage prurience. I developed a small collection of these magazines which I stored in the false bottom of a large box under my bed. I'd take them out after I'd gone to bed and rush to the most exciting photos before committing the sin of Onan.

When I was in my 20s, I once asked mum out of curiosity if she knew I had that box with its secret collection. "Of course" she roared with laughter.

6

Working for the man

My parents ran The Park Salon in George Street, named after the Machattie Park across the street. They soon moved premises to Howick Street, in the same block and near to the back entrance to the Western Stores, the main department store, later taken over by the Myers chain. They carried the name of the salon to the new address.

It was a women's hairdressing salon and offered cuts, the 'cut, shampoo and set', tints (hair colouring) and perms (permanent waves). Dad also could hand-make wigs and made several for local women who had lost their hair through illness. Dad was the boss, but mum worked there most days for shortened hours as well. It was open during the week and on Saturday mornings. Beside mum and dad, there were up to three girls in their late teens or early 20s who worked there as apprentice hairdressers and then as 'seniors' after their apprenticeships concluded.

I recall several heated incidents where women had been very displeased with how their cuts or perms had turned out. These were always about work that dad had done, not mum's or the girls' work. There was some tension between mum and dad about this, as dad had much longer experience with hair and believed that this was all that needed to be said when it came to any discussion about who was the better hairdresser. But an increasing number of customers asked for mum to do their hair, as I did when it came time to have my haircut.

Dad would tell me often that I was 'an advertisement for the business' and was forever trying to give me a 'just a trim' whenever my hair got any length. But he had absolutely no sense of contemporary styles in hair, either for women or men. His abilities seemed to run to a very limited set of styles, whereas mum had far better instincts and rapport for how people wanted to look. From the age of about 14 I was highly conscious of how I wanted my hair to look (basically the 'mod' look epitomised by Roger Daltrey and Pete Townsend of the Who). (see photo below)

At the back of the salon was a small room where the girls used to sit and wait for customers to arrive. They'd sit and smoke cigarettes and carefully study their huge black false eyelashes in little palm-sized compacts. Their lashes would be so caked with mascara that they often would have quite prominent balls of black gunk in the corners of their

eyes. Geraldine was the most exotic. She was a widgie and had black hair teased up from a forward crown, light pink lipstick and long red talons. My father often used to argue with mum at home, saying he was blessed if he knew how Geraldine could manage to hold the scissors with those nails. Mum would reply that she was “a good little cutter, so just leave her alone, Alec!”

Geraldine had a James Dean lookalike boyfriend, Donnie, who played rugby league for one of the local first grade teams and drove an FJ Holden. She had never been to Sydney and one day dad drove her across the mountains with him on one of his stock buying trips. When they were going down the Kurrajong Pass, Geraldine could not believe that the cries of the bellbirds were not the brakes squeaking. This story was told and re-told in our house and became a running joke every time we went down Kurrajong Pass.



Simon the mod

There was a black box that was kept in the back room of the salon which was meant to have some sort of conditioning effect on hair. It contained a small electrical transformer with a cord attached to a black plastic handled grip into which you could fit one of three cathode ray glass tubes of different shapes. One had a series of glass tubular protrusions, like a giant comb. The box had a power switch and dial on it where you could raise or lower the power going into the cathode ray tubes. Once switched on and held near your body, tiny blue fingerlings of electricity would snap and crackle out of the glass tubes, giving you a tingling sensation. Turned up full, it was like getting a mild snap from an electric fence. I never saw dad using this gadget on any customer and each time I asked him what it was for, he could never coherently explain it. He just said it was a ‘hair strengthening treatment’. It seems likely that it was some sort of hocus pocus promoted as a ‘scientific’ modern approach to hair care that dad had fallen for under the spell of a fast-talking salesman at the hairdressing supplies stockists he visited. I’ve no idea what happened to it, but it was really something out of the ark. I wish I had it today!

There must have been something of the entrepreneur in my parents, because for about a year, my father experimented with driving to nearby towns to cut hair in empty shops he had located. He'd load two black-domed hairdryers into the station wagon and a bag of towels and drive off into the morning fog to either Oberon and Portland, two small towns about forty miles away in different directions with no hairdressers. Oberon had a developing pine forest industry and Portland was a sort of dormitory town to a nearby power station at Wallerawang, just west of Lithgow. But both seemed to have lots of dire poverty. Once I went with him to Portland. It was unimaginably bleak and wet and in the centre of its main street, dad unlocked the door of an abandoned shop he rented from someone on a daily rate. He taped a handwritten price list on the window and had arranged for the local weekly paper to run a small ad.

Inside the shop was a single washbasin and some old Namco stainless steel and plastic chairs. He brought a single bar electric radiator and put this on as a little mecca of comfort. The customers had names like Ryan, Houlahan, Hanrahan, Kennedy and Kavanagh and they were the wives, mothers and daughters of the power station workers. Having their hair cut and set in this freezing, empty room was probably the height of luxury for some of them but it grew to be a different experience for Dad, money in the bank or not. Quite a few of the women had lice. Lice connoted the very worst of poverty to his generation, and dad's reaction to it was a mixture of revulsion and almost dutiful officialdom to treat the scourge.

I remember the tiny staff room at the back of his salon as a cauldron of sensuality. Being only a boy, my frequent presence in the room after school or on Saturday mornings waiting for dad to close the shop was often ignored and so I could witness all sorts of private behaviours. It was before pantyhose, so stockings would be fixed onto suspenders, aching calves massaged and toenails painted on feet tucked up on a chair. I would often turn up there after school and wait there for a couple of hours till business finished, drinking it all in.

Like most people of my age, my parents both lived through the Depression. In the case of my father, it clearly marked him for life. Coming from a family of six children, with a father who had died of consumption, he had been taken out of school and apprenticed to a Portsmouth barber at the age of 14. I was told this story many times as I grew up and my recollection is that he either worked for almost nothing, or for a wage so small that virtually every coin earned deserved polishing and mounting at the end of each week. Instead, it all went to support his mother's efforts to raise the children.

Quite understandably, the legacy of all this was a brooding anxiety about the financial future. It showed itself in the usual ways: meticulous counting of the day's takings in the shop; storing hundreds of pounds in the bottom of an Uncle Toby's oats box to avoid the taxman; re-treads on the car instead of new radials. But mostly I noticed how it all got applied to me. I was the classic case of a post-war baby boom kid with migrant parents who'd lived through the depression and were never going to let their kids go through what they'd had to.

Consequently, I'd be rushed off to German coaching classes at the mere hint of falling below the top five in the class and rewarded with an Oris stainless steel watch when

I became dux of the primary school. I was also encouraged from a very early age to know the value of a pound and how money wouldn't grow on trees, as I was constantly told. Like a lot of kids, I'd wash the car for two shillings and chop the wood each afternoon in winter and lay the fire to earn my pocket money.

Boyhood jobs

The first time anyone outside my family gave me money for some sort of work was during "bob a job week" in my one and only year with the cub scouts. I lasted only a year in the South Bathurst cubs because I was asked to leave by the chirpy little man who was the local Akela, or cubmaster. He was from Lancashire and had those pink hairless knees and the right level of briskness you need in a cubmaster. This man and his wife, who was much larger than him and who we had to call Baloo the Bear, got rid of about four of us for persistent cricket playing in the cub hall. We all knew it wasn't so much the cricket as our continuing ability to break into the hall before he arrived to open it. I suppose the expulsions were an antidote for his fear of being exposed for his lax security and turning up late.

I had joined with a few kids in my class and our parents arranged to take it in turns to fetch and carry us from the meetings on Tuesday evenings. One boy's father opened my eyes to what "father" could mean besides the experience of it that I took for granted. This man would roar and bellow at us to shut up and sit still in the car. One evening his car wouldn't start and I heard an adult swearing for the first time in my life.

Cubs were a dreadful let down for me. I nearly burst myself in anticipation of joining because of the wonderful uniforms. Well, mostly the cloth badges you got awarded for passing little tests in knot tying or stamp collecting and then had your mum sew them on your shirt sleeves. I had one of the largest stamp collections in school, but they refused to give me the stamp collector badge because I pasted them all in my album. Apparently, everyone was supposed to understand this was not on, little sticky hinges being the correct way.

The crouching dib-dib-dib, dob-dob-dob ritual has been described often enough, and was certainly bizarre. I can't remember thinking anything of the sort at the time though. Prattling this stuff while crouching with your fingers pointed to the floor seemed the most natural thing in the world to do on a Tuesday night. Our troop had a wonderful stick with a moulded wolf's head in some sort of brittle plastic on the top, with dozens of ribbons swapped from other packs around the state at jamborees fixed under the wolf's head. It was a privilege to be chosen to fetch the stick from its cupboard and hand it to Akela for the ceremony.

Bob-a-job-week was eagerly anticipated by everyone. Why, I don't know. It wasn't as if you got to keep the money that people gave you. Everyone knew the procedure that had to be followed and would sign the paper we carried around saying what we'd done, how thorough we'd been and how well we'd applied ourselves to the work. Each afternoon of bob-a-job-week I cruised the neighbourhood in old clothes with my cap and woggled tie on to show people I was a real cub and not a masquerading imposter. Everyone knew the houses of old grouches and mean bastards who'd have you cut their lawn, rake it up,

pull the weeds, chop the wood, wash and polish the car and then give you one shilling and sixpence. One kid's father had to go around and tick off one old bloke who'd done this.

Mrs de Ferranti, wife of the district school inspector, got me to rake up her leaves and then gave me some home-made lemonade and amazingly, five shillings, an unholy amount. This was the meaning, I decided, of one of my father's favourite sayings: that "some people had more money than sense". The best job I remember was to climb our next door neighbour's walnut tree and beat the branches to get the tardy ones to fall off. Imagine getting paid to have fun like that.

Old Jack Palmer (as Dad called him) down the road was about 85. He had recently won the lottery and when I knocked on his door he gave me four shillings for nothing. But I had to make him a cup of tea and then sit in one of his old chairs with its lace antimacassar hair oil protectors while Jack told me about the wonderous Clarrie Grimmet the cricketer and Les Darcy the boxer.

Race program selling

Bathurst is home to the famous Mt Panorama motor racing circuit, just out of the town. There were two race meetings each year: Easter (starting with motor cycles on Good Friday and Saturday and then cars on the Sunday and Monday) and the October long weekend, which was cars only – both "production" cars (modified version of cars that could be bought from motor dealers) and open wheeler, proper racing cars that you would never see on public roads.

Pit Straight at the bottom of the mountain was about a mile and a half away from our house, with the main road leading to the track being literally the next block away. When I was in primary school, opportunities arose twice a year for local kids to sell the race programs.

I jumped at this opportunity. You earned a small amount of each program you sold, so there was huge incentive to put in long hours and develop compelling sales techniques that would see the cars and bikes pull up at your little stand, instead of any of the dozens of other kids trying to sell as well. The most intense selling occurred on the side of the road where there was line of cars and motorbikes inching forward in the queue to get into the gated-off public viewing areas around different parts of the track.

Some kids had parents who were far more strategic and would drive them well beyond the outskirts of the town, mainly in the Sydney direction, so that incoming race goers could grab their programs at just as they saw the first glimpses of Bathurst in the distance, and as their excitement began to rise.

There were slim pickings inside the race venue, moving among the crowd trying to sell to the few who'd not already bought one on their way in. Those trying to sell like this had to carry their supplies with them, so could never carried many nor of course earn much.

In the week before the race meeting, all the school kid sellers and their parents would go to the school assembly hall and ask for a pile of programs they estimated they could sell. There were apocryphal tales of some kids selling 500 or more and almost needing an armed guard to escort them back home on payday. I sold over 200 one year but 500 was the stuff of legends.

I sold for about three years in succession, each year becoming more sophisticated and strategic in where I pitched my pile of programs and how I went about it. The programs had all the races with the driver and riders listed; race records; lots of photographs and advertising. Dad made me a big amateur sign painted onto a piece of plywood and would help me load the piles of programs into our car and get me up to a good selling position beside the road at about 6am. I would fan out an artistically inspired array of programs in my ten year old's hand and then start up the chant "Pro-oh-grams!" hundreds of times a day to the on-coming cars.

I don't remember any memorable incidents, nasty or happy, but selling programs also got you free into the race area where you could smell the exciting Castrol R(acing) oil fumes, hear the screaming engines and particularly drink in the antics of the often very wild looking motorcycle crowd.

The bikies, as they were called, rode mainly British bikes like Nortons, BSAs, Triumphs, Ariel Square 4s, and Velocettes. This was in the era before Japanese makes like Honda, Yamaha, Suzuki and Kawasaki ("Kwackers") began their dominance. Italian bikes like Ducati were unheard of and I recall no Harley Davidsons, which were only available at that time as imported US army surplus in parts you had to assemble.

On the Thursday before Good Friday, the crowd would begin arriving in town. Motorcycle helmets were not compulsory in those days, although many wore them. Many also went bare headed, but some wore Nazi war helmets and World War II fighter pilot leather head and side of face caps. I also remember one frighteningly majestic rider who had a black wide-horn steer's scalp with the horns somehow still attached and a flowing mane of long-haired cowhide half way down his back. A modern Visigoth.

More would arrive on Friday for the race practice sessions and stay over on Saturday night after the races had finished whereas the local newspaper would fret each year, they would "terrorise the town". There were many hundreds of them lining their bikes on up either side of William street and roaring continuously around the block bordered by William, Russell, George and Howick streets. Many had what we called "bikie molls" (pronounced "moles") with them, always as pillions. Like the men, these girls were amazingly exotic to me. The standard look was black dyed hair, leather jackets, light pink lipstick and lots of badges, chains and metal studded belts. They would lounge like satanic serpents across the bikes, and aggressively kiss their men in public.

Drinking on the street was not allowed, but it was rampant, with the dark broken glass of smashed beer bottles everywhere. Every year, lots of police reinforcements would arrive from Sydney and the next week, the *Western Advocate* newspaper would list the number of arrests for drunkenness, disorderly conduct, resisting arrest, assaulting police and the hundreds of defect notices that had been written for non-compliant bikes.

One year, our Cathedral's bishop decided that the forces of light in the city needed to show these invading infidels what Bathurst stood for. So a procession of witness was organised to take place leaving the cathedral (which was inside the main block which the bikes thundered around) and parading around the block as hymns were sung. A bunch of maybe 100, led by the bishop and several ministers, followed by the fully robed cathedral choristers and then the most pious of the congregation, wended its way slowly around the block.

As I was a chorister in the cathedral choir, I had to join them. I wanted to run down the first lane between shops we passed to spare myself the total humiliation of this spectacle. The bikies roared with laughter with a few well-pissed among them striding out alongside of us, often trying to mockingly put their arms around us. I remember several bkie girls lifting their tops and shimmying their tits at us. Others in the choir felt the same as I did, but the sanctimonious parishioners who sang out loud were convinced they had held Satan at bay.

Perennial racing drivers I remember well were Arnold Glass (red Maserati), Bib Stillwell (Cooper Monaco and Cooper Climax), Bob Jane (Jaguar), Bill Buckle (Buckle GT), Ron Hodgson (Jaguar), Leo and Ian Geoghegan (Lotus Ford and Ford Cortina), Brian Muir (Holden), Frank Matich (D-type Jaguar), and Brian Foley (Cooper S and Studebaker Lark). Jack Brabham raced at Bathurst in 1960, winning the Bathurst 100 in his [Cooper Climax](#).

In the bikes, one man totally dominated: the great Kel Carruthers who seemed to win several races at every meeting every year, way out in front on his exotic Honda. Side-car racing was particularly exciting, with the bikes sometimes sliding into others and the side-car passenger planing across the bitumen into the safety fences. One year I saw a death.



Side car motorcycle race start

When I was awarded dux of the primary school, the headmaster took me down to the local bookshop to select two books as an award present. I chose one on motorcycle racing.

The Western Stores

After I stopped singing in the cathedral choir and lost my church scholarship, things must have become a little difficult financially to keep me going to the local Anglican school, All Saints College. So when the town's only department store, the Myer's Western Stores, announced it was doing the civic-minded thing and offering bursaries for two upstanding youths, it got brought up at the dinner table. I applied and duly went along for my interview with the local manager and some town dignitary, no doubt a judge of good character. I remember nothing about the interview except that I was bought a navy Bermuda jacket and that it seemed obvious that I should say all the right sort of things about what an interesting thing it would be to make one's career in retailing. This seemed to do the trick, because I got one of the bursaries and had my photo taken for the local paper shaking hands with the store manager.

The school fees were paid, but the biggest perk for me was that while others would have to try and get jobs picking fruit for Edgells in the school holidays, I got to work in the Western Stores – in the menswear section, no less. The Western Stores was a vast, flat building in the main street. On hot summer days, the footpath would shimmer outside it and the tin roof would make cracking sounds as it expanded in the heat. But inside it was always cool, with fans circling and different smells identifying which part of the store you were in. The perfume counter had the usual line-up of harpies with teased hair and pancake makeup you could scrape off and long scarlet talons that they'd file below the glass display cases when things were quiet.

The woman who had run the tobacco counter for as long as anyone remembered also attended every wedding that was held in the Roman Catholic church. She and a small circle of friends, mostly other spinsters, were outside the church in any weather. Some said that they simply liked weddings and comparing bridal dresses and the rest. But others said that they had a watching brief on signs of advanced pregnancy. By actually being there, they could be the first to ignite the rumours if they weren't already current. Spent shotgun cartridges were regularly scattered with the confetti on the pavement by mates of the groom.

Landing the menswear department was too good to be true. It was headed by a gangly fellow named Terry who I first judged to be a total company man. Terry was perhaps 22 and saw his future in the retail trade. He was working his way around the various departments to get valuable experience that would put him in good stead to become a manager by the time he was 30, he told me. Terry had an unfortunate complexion and a large Adam's apple that he drew attention to by wearing Carnaby Street polka-dot or paisley ties.

On my first morning, I was eager to please Terry, as well as to get in good with the two other guys in the department, Ted and John. Ted was a bodgie with a flat-top haircut. He drank and played in the darts comp at the Commercial hotel. This was a pub that frequently saw fights spilling onto the pavement. He chewed gum all day and constantly asked my opinion about whether passing girls would root or not. He would serve the grazier's wives, patiently unpinning shirts from their boxes knowing all along that four or so would need to be unpinned before just one was bought. To their faces he was attentive and helpful, but ten yards out of range he would be merciless.

John though, was very enigmatic. He was an olive-skinned, short handsome man with a nameless wife and kids. I could never understand why he was working there. He was perceptive and intelligent, but above all tranquil and helpful to me.

Terry soon picked up that I was quick on the sales uptake and so needed to organise something that would put me in my place. One hot afternoon he called me over and told me to go down to supplies in the basement, ask for Bob and say we needed a long weight back in menswear. I set off. Bob told me to sit down. I sat and waited and after about ten minutes of watching Bob read the paper at his desk, I then worked it out and slunk back to the guffaws of the staff of each section who'd had the word passed down. To make things worse, two days later I was sent to fetch a sky hook and blithely went down again to Bob's. I worked it out as the words left my mouth.

One weekend, I was invited to a party in a woolshed, some 15 miles out of town. The band I sang with was playing our second gig. Being a wannabe mod, I needed something suitable to wear, so decided to quietly borrow a three-quarter length brown fake leather coat from the prime rack in the menswear department for the weekend. I wore it to the dance, thought I looked a prince, and returned it to the rack on Monday after carefully restapling the price tags.

Out the back was the hardware section where farmers and builders would pull up in their utilities and load up with bags of cement and sand, and lengths of four-by-two timber, or fourbee as it was called. I worked there for one Christmas holidays and must have been as good as useless. I knew absolutely nothing about what I supposed to be helping to sell and every second question from a customer saw me dart over to one of the real staff to ask them to decode what I'd been asked to fetch.

The Handyman

My school, All Saints College, was always looking for students to do maintenance work around the grounds during school holidays, so one year a few of us (Frank Chadwick, Toby Hennessy and Stuart Westgarth and I) signed up. The pay was desultory, but the rumour had it that the work was dead easy.

This proved not to be the case. I was set up to paint out classrooms and a honeycomb of wooden lockers. There were acres of these and it was utterly boring work that made your hands ache from hours of painting each day. The grounds foreman was a self-assured Cockney called Ernie. One day he called us together and explained how we were all to get up on onto the sheet metal roof of the two-story main building of the school with wire brushes and brush off all the surface rust that was visible across much of the roof. After that, we'd have to paint it with an anti-rust chemical and then later paint the roof.

It was mid-summer and Bathurst often baked in Fahrenheit temperatures in the high 90s. That day was one of those days. These were the days well before high awareness of skin cancer prevention, although lotions like coconut oil said to prevent you getting "burnt" were in common use. None of us had brought anything like this with us, so Ernie improvised. We were ordered to take off our shirts and he then dipped a broad paintbrush

in a bucket of linseed oil that they school keep in bulk quantities to oil cricket bats. He slopped this viscous oil all over us, with rivers of it running down our bodies. “Nuffing like it to stop you from burning in the sun”, he told us all, grinning wildly.

Anyone who’s oiled a cricket bat with linseed knows it takes several days to penetrate the wood and leave the surface of the bat non-oily. Applying it to skin was always going to be a problem. And indeed it was. When I got home, I was nearly black with metal dust that had stuck, half-baked in the linseed oil, which after six or so hours in the sun on a tin roof with no shade, was still oily to the touch.

I first got in the shower, and must have gone through half a bar of soap trying to wash off the dusty oil. But it barely broke down the oil at all, let alone removed the grime. Mum came in and filled the bath and then began trying to soap and scrub it off. It made some difference, but most of the mess was unremovable. Dad then tried dousing a rag in kerosene and rubbing my skin. Again nothing, with the fumes adding to what was now considerable distress.

Finally, dad went to the local chemist for advice and came back, incredible as it now seems, with a bottle of acetone. All the bathroom doors and windows were to be opened and a fan set up to blow the soporific fumes away while mum wiped me furiously with an acetone-soaked rag. This worked. My parents got on the phone to those of the other linseed-plastered boys and passed on the useful information.

The next day the parents stormed out to the school and spoke to the principal “in no uncertain terms”. These days, lawyers would have probably been immediately summonsed.

With these work experiences under my belt, I set out to conquer the world.



L-R Stuart Westgarth, Toby Hennessy, Frank Chadwick, me

Epilogue

I think most people ask themselves from time to time why they turned out the way they did. Quite obviously the early influences in your life are absolutely critical. Trish my wife often uses the expression that she can see that someone she knows has been 'well loved'. It's always struck me as the central, core dimension to people's character. And it's how I feel about my early life.

My sister and I were deeply loved by our parents, and particularly by our mother. We were cared and provided for, lived in a family without conflict or much obvious stress, and showered with affection. Our years were filled with routines and rituals that gave life a constancy and platforms on which we grew emotionally secure and self-confident. We were not poor, but we were certainly not remotely well off. My mother had to work, which was not common among my school friends. My parents, and especially my father, had their lives turned upside down by the depression, the second world war and then cutting themselves off from their families, really for ever, by emigrating. Like so many of their generation, they desperately wanted more stable secure lives for their children.

But this goal was never used as justification to stifle my spirits. I was very much allowed to be my own person in ways that were important to me.

When my son Joe was two, I asked my mother what she believed the most taxing period for parents was with children. I expected her to immediately say 'two', because of the popular narrative about the 'terrible twos'. But she didn't hesitate to say 14. She didn't say it with regret but with affection. They must have been saddened to see my early promise being apparently wasted in what could have seemed like the soppy pursuit of a teenage girl.

From the moment I met Annie, I neglected school work. My descent into academic mediocrity from the early promise I had given in being dux of the primary school must have desperately upset my parents. I hugely regret that mum never knew anything but the very first years of my career. Dad knew some of it, but his dementia made it difficult for him to understand what I did beyond the most elementary level. But unlike Annie's parents who did all they could to put barriers between us, my parents seemed to soon come to respect the love I developed for her, while hoping it would fade away.

The intensity of my love for her and of our determination to be together was all-consuming. In 1969 when Annie was sent away to boarding school, I poured out letters to her of many, many pages several times a week. Across the year I must have written tens of thousands of words, with only a small fraction surviving in those that Annie had kept.

While I handed in unfocussed and rambling essays at school, I threw myself into writing about what I cared about most. That year may have laid important foundations for all the writing I did for the rest of my life.

When they allowed me, without consultation with Annie's parents, to drive alone from Bathurst all the way to Mittagong to spend a few hours with her, they must have drawn on their own experiences of longing and loss. I've thought about their decision many times, and can only see it as a clear sign that they deeply respected the power of love. They had worked hard to give their children a happy life, with a house, holidays and private schooling (my sister Ginny went to the Anglican high school Marsden, not on a scholarship). I had shown great early promise and then in their eyes, risked losing it all by being mesmerised by adolescent love and sex. But their love for me was boundless and their anxiety soon dissipated.

I was blessed having the family I did. It set the foundations of a life that has nearly always brought me great joy.