

GRANDPA ROB – AGE 73 – 1986 – TO MY GRANDCHILDREN

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Should my grandchildren ever be vaguely interested as a minor topic of information, Grandpa Rob started business at age 18 in the height of the world depression in 1931 having left Cranleigh¹ with an undistinguished academic career but a healthy interest in all sports and having gained several House colours for games.

I was apprenticed to the leading shirt & collar manufacturing company of "McIntyre, Hogg, Marsh & Co. Ltd" who originated from Paisley but as a result of the skilled female labour in Londonderry, they built their first Factory over there – in Red Sandstone imported specially from Scotland by boat – in 1860. My starting salary was £100 per annum² (not per week) which barely paid my digs³ but I was given a small allowance by my Uncle

¹ He was a boarder at the famous Cranleigh School.

² Adjusted for inflation, this is equivalent to a meagre £3,950 in 2001.

³ The word means lodgings. Rob had a couple of rooms in a house belonging to Mrs Hobbs, at 63 Clarendon Street, Londonderry. Mrs Hobbs later became an 'unofficial' Aunt to Rob's children and I remember being given one small piece from a bar of Fry's Cream every time we visited her.

and sponsor, Henry Powell who was deputy Chairman of the company and was more than a father to me throughout his life.

Digressing for a moment, it has to be appreciated that the word 'inflation' was not known at that time and I recall referring to old wage records, where admittedly Textiles seemed to be the 'cinderella' of industry; but it must appear inconceivable today to learn that wages had remained static for some 15 years between the wars but conversely Income Tax was reasonable and the true value of money was good. For example one could take a lady friend away for a weekend to a Rugger match in Dublin or Edinburgh and stay at a 4 star hotel with a dinner jacket Dinner Dance after the match for only a few pence over £5 for the two of us. We always made up a party and my sister would come over from London with some of her Nursing friends. It is just impossible to make comparisons of costs today⁴.

For 10 years I led a gloriously happy existence, no overbearing responsibilities, and on reflection a selfish and perhaps thoughtless life but I worked hard although money was always a short commodity.

At age 26 War was declared on 3rd September 1939 and as a 2nd Lieutenant, our Artillery Regiment was immediately called up and within a few weeks the whole Regiment was sent to Aldershot but as 'pseudo' trained Heavy Anti-Aircraft Artillery we quickly found ourselves despatched to various areas and for the next 2 years, being Mobile A-A⁵, we dodged around the country ever chasing our tails. Whenever and wherever Jerry⁶ dropped a few bombs on outlying areas we were invariably sent there for a few weeks but usually a case of 'the stable door'. Lumbering through towns and villages with our 10 ton guns & instruments towed behind huge Scammels⁷ we made passing acquaintance with such places as Oswestry & Stockton, Edinburgh, Belfast & Glasgow, Burrow Head, Bishopton & Irvine (ICI Explosive Works), Greenoch & Gare Loch (Submarine base) and others long forgotten.

On 10th February 1941 your Grandmother and I married in her home town of Strabane and somehow we had always remained faithful to each other although I had met her first at a dance seven years previously when she was a Student and I was celebrating my 21st birthday. That same night we travelled straight back to my Unit, crossing by the only channel open to England via

⁴ Adjusted for inflation, £5 is equivalent to about £220 in 2001. However, it was evidently around 5% of his annual salary.

⁵ A-A (sometimes spoken of as Ack-Ack) is an abbreviation for anti-aircraft guns.

⁶ Slang for Germans; in this case the Luftwaffe.

⁷ Scammels were enormous, powerful lorries.

Larne - Stranraer⁸ which was mined the whole way across to deter submarine attack on any troop movements. No leave - no honeymoon, but with the optimism and initiative of youth my bride was able to largely travel round with me from site to site, rarely more than a few days behind until I found accommodation, mostly in bedsits but it did vary from a ghillie's⁹ cottage in the Highlands to a small castle on the Forth — everyone was so kind to us in those days and it certainly made us appreciate the smallest home comforts in later years.

We were ever grateful for a year's bliss and great happiness until the inevitable came with promotion to Major as Battery Commander to a newly formed A-A Regiment that was being hurriedly formed to give air protection to the Eastern Naval Fleet that was being pulled back to the East African deep water harbour at Mombassa in the face of imminent attack by the Japanese fleet from their main base at Ceylon¹⁰.

Again I was fortunate with the draft of Gunners¹¹ posted to my Battery as they were in the 30 - 35 age group called up in late 1941 and had already received basic training in A-A work and were a solid reliable bunch of good honest London cockneys, most of them married and a settled lot; I would have gone anywhere with them and not one of them ever seriously let the Battery or myself down. In spite of the urgency to get us out we spent over seven weeks on the high seas before reaching our 'highly secret' destination, constantly tacking in a very large troop convoy nearly over to the coast of America and back to Freetown before rounding the Cape where we stopped for a couple of days to tranship some troops and equipment who were destined for Singapore only to arrive to be captured by the Japanese, many of my personal friends and brother Officers never returned. Finally hugging the East African coast for fear of encountering any marauding Jap submarines we arrived to the unaccustomed sweltering heat and humidity of coastal Africa.

Nearly four years passed in East Africa until eventually in November 1945 after 6 years & 2 months in uniform I was demobilised with a gratuity of

⁸ *The Larne-Stranraer ferry crossing is still running in 2001. But it is usually a very rough crossing, as the Irish Sea is notoriously bad.*

⁹ *A ghillie (or gillie) is a man or boy attending someone hunting or fishing. When we subsequently went fishing, with Uncle Harry, in Ireland, we invariably had a ghillie with us in the boat; not only to assist with tangled lines but, more importantly, to show us where the best fish might be.*

¹⁰ *Now Sri Lanka.*

¹¹ *Members of the "Royal Artillery" were called the "Gunners". It was, of course, also descriptive of what their role was.*

some £350¹² and a thin blue suit of my choice plus a months paid leave of which I took precisely one week before returning to my old job except that I was now made Manager of the Factory as the previous holder had conveniently died during my absence abroad. I promptly suffered a drop of £400 to my Army pay where admittedly I was receiving some extra Army allowances as the remaining senior officer of all Coastal Artillery, heavy & light A-A and the Coastal guns, no particularly onerous duties with most of the war over but I was collecting over £1000¹³ which was big money for age 32.

During my absence abroad my son Geoffrey was born and your unfortunate father received what must have been a traumatic experience to be greeted by an unknown man appearing on the doorstep; however with the resilience of youth he soon recovered his poise. Throughout the months and years away your grandmother Beryl kept me in touch with photographs and weekly letters of home and family so the transition to civilian life was greatly eased albeit with heightened family responsibilities which I had escaped to date. Financially we were always chasing our tails and it is not out of place to say that as always, it is the wife and mother who is invariably the careful one which was certainly the case with your indigent grandfather.

We shortly found a convenient flat for the three of us as your father was now four years of age and largely able to look after himself and only occasionally put two legs into the one trouser leg. The bliss was having our own place where tens of thousands of returning soldiers and uprooted persons did not know where to turn particularly with so much shattered housing and no building programme for well over six years. This flat¹⁴ lasted us about 18 months when we were extremely fortunate to find an attractive Norwegian made wooden bungalow¹⁵ in its own grounds and away from all neighbours and about two miles out of the city with plenty of garden to play in.

Having sold my car at the beginning of war rather than put it up on blocks for the duration, we were seriously handicapped to find any type of car at all but eventually ended up with a three-wheeler which lasted us about a year until we were able to exchange for an ancient but racy looking SS that was very difficult to swing by hand when cold as all cars were fitted with a starting handle in emergency and was reluctant to fire on its mixture of

¹² This gratuity would be about £8,200 in 2001.

¹³ The army pay would be about £23,400 in 2001. Now, a Major would get in the range £33,000 - £39,000 depending on length of service.

¹⁴ The flat's address was: 1 Boating Club Lane, Londonderry.

¹⁵ This was: Ardcaien Cottage, Culmore Road, Londonderry

petrol and paraffin owing to the serious rationing of petrol.

Another problem at that time was the continued shortage of food and clothing which was regulated strictly by coupons but with occasional forays by foot over the Irish border and using ‘unapproved’ roads (smuggling by car was open to confiscation) together with growing all essential vegetables — the family survived. Clothing coupons were not such a serious problem for me as with some 500 girls working in the Factory and most with large families, there was invariably a surplus of coupons with them so they were only too willing to trade in for cash although I did profess a slight feeling of conscience.

On 25th February 1947 your father’s young sister GAIL was born at the height of a snow storm when even the doctor had difficulty in getting through the snow on foot up the hill to the Hospital.

Following the War, Britain’s economy and our own business continued to expand and flourish for the next 20 years or so with the usual five year cycles of peaks and hollows in trading. But with certain industries booming such as engineering and motor car manufacturing lay the first seeds of management’s unwitting surrender to the Trade Unions which was to have such a disastrous [impact]¹⁶ on labour relations in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s with a spiralling of wage costs until some 20 years later it took a determined first woman Prime Minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, with the courage to pull the economy and labour back to something like normal and also to reduce the destructive powers of the Trade Unions.

Textiles, already the ‘cinderella’ of industry, was coming under increasing pressure from imports, particularly from the Far East, both for woven fabrics and made up garments, with the result that our own company decided to seek amalgamation and endeavour to become absorbed into the international Group trading as¹⁷ “English Sewing Co. Ltd” who specialised, as their name describes, in producing sewing and weaving cotton and synthetic threads. Subsequently wishing to continue their expansion programme further, “English Sewing” were on the market for a compatible company who specialised in the actual weaving and finishing of fabrics with the result that the well established name of TOOTAL was taken-over about 1964. Following this move, our Head Office in Aldermanbury near Guildhall was closed down where I had probably spent the better years of my working life travelling over to London for regular meetings, originally staying at the Euston Hotel (now defunct and where I proposed to your grandmother Beryl earlier in 1940)

¹⁶ *There is evidently a word like “impact” missing at this point.*

¹⁷ *I always thought the group was called “English Sewing Cotton Ltd”, sometimes shortened to “ESC”, but spoken of as “English Sewing Cotton”.*

and later at the RAC Pall Mall which was very central for the West End and the City office. I never managed to visit the RAC Country Club at Epsom, I expect in my 30's I preferred the faster city life and all it had to offer.

The centre of operations for the new Group which was now registered under the better known name of TOOTAL was moved to their huge office block in Oxford Street, Manchester. Most of our original Directors, not wishing to move to Manchester or a new Group, either resigned or took early retirement but our then Chairman and myself, being only about 50 years, moved our headquarters to Manchester although I continued to reside in 'Derry with my wife and now grown up family although it entailed continual travel back and forth to England for regular meetings when I only had weekends at home. In 1966 the main Group split into various Divisions of which I became a Director of "TOOTAL Men's Wear" with responsibility for all the manufacturing side and inherited six different factories ranging from England to Scotland and N.Ireland and several other sub-units and producing, in addition to our own shirts, collars and underwear, handkerchiefs, pyjamas & dressing gowns, ties, socks and knitwear and I also had to coordinate various ancillaries such as boxes, printing, labels etc.

From records I took of all my trips over the years between business and pleasure, I made over 800 separate flights¹⁸ by air between 1933 from Aldergrove to Croydon, to 1969 when I stopped keeping a note of further occasional flights. Sometimes in one week I had to travel from Belfast—London—Manchester—Glasgow and back to Belfast in all weather conditions.

[Footnotes were added by his son Geoffrey in October 2001. Monetary values were then brought up to date, based on RPI figures¹⁹. Robert Halley Henderson ("Rob") was born in Wallington, Surrey on 12th September 1913 and died in Avoch, Ross-shire, Scotland on 18th April 1988, about 2 years after writing this].

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¹⁸ This is an average of over 22 flights a year.

¹⁹ The following official UK Retail Prices Index (RPI) figures are used: 1931=4.4, 1935=4.0, 1946=7.4, 2000=170.3, 2001=173.2 (estimated).