

# My Leyton Memories

By Michael Gilbey [[email](#)]

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Due to family circumstances, in 1951 my mother moved to live with her parents in Leyton in East London with four of my five siblings. The house, a large three floor Georgian building with a cellar was rented like most housing at the time. Although I was only five years old at the time, I do recall feeling my original unease at this strange bustling environment which was in complete contrast to the quiet serenity of Dulwich Village which was the only place I had known for my short existence.

My grandparents were typical Victorians in both their manners and outlook. Born in the 1880's, Queen Victoria and Empire clearly influenced their own childhood and carried through to their post World War 2 years. In common practice with many Victorians they had a large family of eight children to support them in their latter years. Apart from my mother, two of their daughters, both married with their husbands and children also lived with them. It was fortunate that the house was so large. To me the difference in the disposition of my grandparents was like chalk and cheese. Both were large people but where as my grandfather was one of the kindest people I have ever known and whose memory I still cherish, my grandmother was very strict and something of a martinet.

In a modern household, we all take for granted essential services and appliances such as washing machines, fridges, freezers and central heating rarely giving them a second thought, but in truth these are still relatively recent developments which for most households only started to appear from the 1960's onwards. I also found electricity in my grandparents home something of a novelty. My previous home in Dulwich was gas lighting only with a coal-fired cooking range. Candles were used for lighting the way when going to bed and in winter, ice would be frozen on the inside of the windows.. Adjoining houses did have electricity but these suffered from frequent power cuts that followed the war. I still remember my father saying that like the first car without a running board, he did not think electricity would catch on as a workable idea. I recall this wondrous fascination with electric lighting led to me standing on a chair and repeatedly turning a light switch on and off during my first day in my grandparents home. The rapid reprimand via a clout around the ear from my grandmother swiftly and painfully alerted me even at that tender age, that she was also someone to steer clear of.

Day to day management of such a large household was clearly a major undertaking with daily and weekly routines executed with military precision to a set of unwritten, yet never-the-less, fully understood rules. Monday was always laundry day, a process that continued through subsequent days of the week until Thursday. This included washing, drying followed by ironing. There was a scullery at the rear of my grandparents house fitted with a copper boiler and two large butler sinks. Washing laundry was a three female process, two manned scrubbing boards in one sink while a third undertook rinsing in the second sink. All linen was initially soaked and scrubbed before being

transferred to the copper boiler, other laundry avoided the boiler process. Soap powder was not in general use at this time but all households had soap flakes that required dissolving before use. A bag of "blue" was also added to linen in the boiler to help whiten it. As children our task was to operate the mangle outside the scullery door. For those unaccustomed to mangles, these were two large rollers of solid rubber mounted in a cast iron frame. A large crank wheel to the side was turned to operate the contraption and voluminous amounts of water was squeezed out of laundry as it passed through the rollers. As a child I could just reach the crank handle when it was at its zenith. It was only natural as children to make our mangling duties a fun game. Trying to turn the mangle as fast as possible to see how quickly we could pass a sheet through the rollers being part of the game. One day my sister while feeding laundry into the rollers let out an almighty scream as her fingers went through the rollers due to a momentary lapse of concentration. One of my aunts immediately appeared at the door to instantly and wrongly appraise the situation followed by the customary retribution of a clout around the ear. My sisters fingers were treated by being smeared in butter which was thought somehow to have miraculous healing properties.

It may seem strange in today's protected society that anyone other than a child's parents should physically chastise them, however in the early 1950's aunts, uncles and grandparents frequently did this at a whim without fear of legal retribution. I received more clouts around the ear during my time living with my grandparents than any other time of my life including a boxing match. The midday meal on a Monday that we now call lunch was always referred to as dinner in those days and consisted of a stew made from the remains of the Sunday dinner. Similar set meals followed on the same day of each week with a Friday always being reserved for fish. Cutlery for eating fish was not immediately washed following the meal as it was considered the soap flakes and scouring powder of the day did not remove the smell of fish and as yet, washing up liquid was not available. Cutlery was always pushed into the earth for 24 hours and looked like a small forest of cutlery sticking out of the ground as it was believed that this neutralised the odour of fish. One day Snowy the pet rabbit disappeared only to re-emerge on the dinner table as the main course. No one could bring themselves to eat a much-loved pet and if ever a death was in vain, Snowy was a prime example.

In keeping with many homes still influenced by the Victorian era, the front room of my grandparents home was a parlour. This room contained all the best furniture and was thoroughly cleaned and dusted every day but was never used except for special visitors and at Christmas. An obligatory upright piano that no one could play also adorned this room. As children we were forbidden to enter the parlour under any circumstances. The rules were simple to understand even for us, to so much as touch the door handle meant death. One thing my grandparents did possess was a television. These were still quite rare and very expensive. In keeping with the trends of the time, such items were disguised to look like other pieces of furniture. This television resembled an oblong radiogram with a hinged lid on top. The lid was raised and propped up at a 45 degree angle. Beneath the lid was a mirror and set into the bowels

of the cabinet was a tiny television screen pointing upwards to the ceiling. Viewing the television required sitting in front of the cabinet and viewing the television reflected in the mirror. Why such a Heath-Robinson device was ever made I will probably never know. The television was always turned on for the children as we were never allowed to touch it. There was only one TV channel at the time which was the BBC. I remember my favourites were Hank the cowboy and his arch-enemy, Mexican Pete. Muffin the Mule presented by Annette Mills I also liked. Muffin the Mule attached to strings would dance across the top of a grand piano while Annette Mills played the piano and sang a song. At the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, half of the street who did not possess a television were crammed into one room attempting to watch the ceremony on this small screen.

In those days even as young children it was quite normal for us to be allowed to play in the street, go to the park or walk to school unaccompanied. One place we always went to was Leyton Orient football ground when they were playing at home. After half-time admission to the ground was free. It was not a case of budding footballers idolising their heroes, it was more a case of being aware money was to be made. Many of the fans bought bottles of Coca-Cola during the interval. Being glass, a deposit of 1d, (one old penny), was incorporated into the purchase price. Most people could not be bothered returning the bottles as their attention was fixed on the second half of the game. Adults always allowed us to take their bottles back to the canteen to collect 1d deposit for every bottle with which we could buy a slice of bread pudding for 3d as well as making a few bob on the side. For small children in the early 1950's this was serious money. We did however always take our money back to our mother as financial times were hard and to which she was always grateful. Our mother would give us a small proportion of our earnings back to us to spend, the rest going into a lockable money-box that she kept for rainy days.

It was possible to take a number of variations on our route to school, one of these was via a footpath through a graveyard that was part of St Mary's Parish Church, Leyton. Many old Victorian graves festooned the graveyard with a number of large family graves abutting railings that lined the footpath. One particular grave always frightened my sister and I. This was a large stone box like grave surmounted by a baby's cradle type sarcophagus. In our simple minds we thought the bodies of adults were inside the stone box and the body of a baby was contained in the sarcophagus cradle. It was at this point in our journey that we always ran as fast as we could before returning to a walking pace once we emerged from the graveyard.

It was after 18 months of living in my grandparents home that sadly my grandfather died. I was awoken by the sounds of crying and wailing throughout the night, my mother telling us the painful news in the morning. I loved my grandfather not only for his kindly understanding ways but also as a protector from the worst painful disciplinary excesses from other adults but rarely from my mother. With my grandfather gone it was only a matter of time before disciplinary excesses for childish mischief grew exponentially. It was not unusual for one adult to administer physical chastisement for a supposed childish misdemeanour to be followed by similar treatment from a different

adult who thought they should also administer discipline for the same misdemeanour. Such treatment was not at all unusual in many homes in the early 1950's

One day after finishing school I found my mother waiting at the school gates to collect both myself and a younger brother to whisk us away to another home in Walthamstow that she had been secretly preparing. I was not aware when I left my grandmother's house for school that day I was never to return, something that I have always been eternally grateful to my mother for. The saddest thing I recall at the time is not being able to say goodbye to all my school friends. I suspect my friends would have been equally sad the following day to discover they would never see me again. I have not written any of the previous paragraph to engender sympathy, it is more to illustrate how life actually was for many children at that time period coupled with an unwillingness by authority figures to get involved in family matters. On reflection although we had fun times as most children do, this undoubtedly was the unhappiest period of my life.

*Michael Gilbey*