

Memories of Stevenage - 1950 to 1963

Origins

I was born on 12 March 1950 at the Fox Holes Nursing Home in Pirton, a small village just outside Hitchin. The original post-war nursing home has now been replaced by a modern care home. I was christened as Andrew John, but have always been known as 'Andy'. My father was Anthony Robson, and he was born in Carshalton, Surrey. My mother was (still is) Vera Robson, nee Hadley. My parents met in the late 1940's when my Dad was still in the RAF after WW2 and was stationed up near Manchester. Mum's family home was in Rycroft Road, Stretford, a suburb of Manchester, and her father was a baker. After they married in 1948, Mum & Dad moved down to Stevenage and briefly lived with Dad's family in Haycroft Road. They must have applied for social housing, because after I was born my family moved into number 12 Brox Dell, which was among of the first phase of new housing forming part of the 'new town' development. I have always assumed that the name 'Brox' was a corruption of 'brocks', suggesting there might be (or have been) badgers in the area, but I don't recall ever seeing one when I lived there.

My father qualified as an engineer's toolmaker and worked for English Electric in the town's industrial area. He commuted to work on a Raleigh 'Runabout' moped, and then a BSA 'Dandy', an early form of motor scooter. He later bought an old Vauxhall car, I think the registration number was ELP 59. I don't remember the model, but I do recall that it had little rotary handles to operate the front door quarter-lights.

My paternal grandfather, William (Bill) Robson, was an HGV mechanic working at Jack's Hill Garage on the Great North Road near Graveley, north of Stevenage. My grandmother was named Olive Robson, nee Finch. Also living at Haycroft Road was my Dad's younger sister, Betty. Betty worked for a while at De Havilland's in Hatfield and later at the UK's Foreign & Commonwealth office in London. She always told me that she was a 'secretary', but in later years she revealed that she worked for MI5. Today, her son in Australia refers to her as 'Moneypenny', the secretary portrayed in the James Bond movies. She did admit to her son that she had undergone espionage training. In Australia, she married a Polish man who had been a spy for the Allies during WW2.

My grandparents sometimes rented a caravan at Jaywick Sands, near Clacton, and in my early years our family often took holidays there. Once, my Dad rented a 1950's Ford Anglia and the family crammed into it and drove down to Somerset for a week's holiday. I remember the struggle the poor car had trying to get up the infamous Porlock Hill in first gear. It's a wonder we got there and back without breaking down.

Although my memories of my paternal grandparents are incomplete today, I do remember my grandma Olive making home-made ginger beer, which I loved. My aunt Betty told me that she used to dance round their living room with me as an infant in her arms.

Unfortunately, my grandfather Bill suffered badly with rheumatoid arthritis, his hands were deformed through it, and his doctors recommended that he should move to a warm, dry climate to prolong his life. So a few years after my birth, in 1954, my aunt Betty emigrated to Perth, Western Australia, to make a home for her parents (we had family members in Australia since the late 1920's), and then in 1955 my grandparents joined her over there. They sailed out on the S.S. Himalaya, a popular emigration ship in the 50's

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At some point during the 50's, Dad knocked a hole in the wall between the kitchen and the living/dining room at 12 Brox Dell so that dinners could be passed between the rooms without having to carry them via the hallway. I don't think he got prior approval from the Council. I wonder if that 'serving hatch' is still there.

Sadly, during the mid-50's, my parents' marriage started to break down, eventually leading to their divorce and my Dad emigrating to Perth in 1958, when I was 8 years old. I remember being given the choice of going with my Dad or staying with my Mum, something the Divorce Court had apparently stipulated. I chose to stay in Stevenage with my mother as all my friends were there. I know that Dad was upset to leave me behind, but whatever I had done would have upset one of my parents. Mum never encouraged me to write to Dad after he left, so I lost contact with him, although he did send me presents from Australia at Christmas. Mum never re-married.

Childhood

I have only happy memories of my young life in Stevenage, and the loss of my Dad had a negligible effect on me, so far as I could tell. I had a group of 5 or 6 friends of similar ages to me, some from Brox Dell and some from Broadview, the next street down, and we played together a great deal. In those days, there were only fields behind our houses, the one immediately behind Brox Dell had barley or wheat growing in it. We all referred to it generically as 'the corn field', and it formed part of Marriott's farm. Every year, the combine harvester came round to gather the crop, and children from local neighbourhoods followed it round. Afterwards, a baler came round and converted all the straw into large bales, and we would then use them to build dens to play in. The farmer didn't seem to mind.

At the top of Sish Lane, at its junction with Brox Dell, the road abruptly became a single track lane lined with hedgerows which led to Marriott's farm. Sometimes my pals and I walked up the lane to play in other fields, wander through woodland, climb trees, collect birds eggs, or to visit the farm. Again, the farmer was very tolerant of our presence.

We played typical childhood games like 'cowboys & Indians' and war games around the fields, also cricket and football on local green spaces. In the big corn field behind the houses in Brox Dell, there was a large hollow which had been left to permit access to a gas main. It was normally surrounded with a barbed wire fence, but over time that got knocked over and we played in the hollow. We also sometimes lifted the metal cover on the gas main and hid down inside the chamber with the pipework. On one occasion, as I was scrambling out of the hollow, I badly gashed my left hand on one of the barbs of the fence. It bled profusely but wasn't stitched and eventually healed. I still have the 2-inch scar on the palm of my left hand.

I can see on Google Street View that the road in Brox Dell has been extended from its layout in the 50's and more car parking added. When I lived there, where the car parking is today there was a large grassed area with some immature tree saplings where we played cricket and football, and there was a brick-built sand pit that local children played in. One of our neighbours had temporarily fostered a child named Roger, and one day he came to play in the sand pit, and proceeded to stick a meat skewer into my left cheek! I wasn't too badly hurt, but I still have that scar. Roger was removed soon after.

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There also used to be a proper dell which stretched from the corn field down to a block of garages on Broadview. It made a great toboggan slope when it snowed in winter, and in summer we would ride our 'go-karts', made from old bits of wood and pram wheels, down the footpath that ran alongside the dell. It's a wonder we weren't killed when we careered into Broadview without stopping. Today, the dell appears to be yet another thing that has been built over.

Brox Dell comprised three rows of terraced houses, as it does today. I can still remember many of the family names of our neighbours. As well as my family at number 12, in our row and that opposite there were –

10 – Mr & Mrs Ashworth

14 – Mr & Mrs Tomlin

16 – Mrs Mapp and son Tommy

7 – The Peyton family, incl. daughter Jane

9 – Mr & Mrs Morris and son Paul, one of my pals

11 – Mr & Mrs Bielby and daughter Lorraine

13 – Originally the Wrattton family, and later the Barnes family.

In the 3rd row, those I can remember were the Cox family with mother Joan, father Bill, son Raymond and daughter Jeanette, then the Goldsmiths with son Anthony and daughter Christine (who was in my class at school), and in the house on the far end of that row was the Luhman family, and father Alf Luhman was a local Councillor – I believe he later became town Mayor. Alf's son Alan owned a couple of little 2-stroke 3-wheel cars, including a Bond and a Berkeley, made in Biggleswade. In the next street, Broadview, the Babb family lived with sons Alan, Raymond and Philip. (I was to meet up with Philip here in Birmingham a few years ago after we contacted each other through 'Friends Reunited'. Unbeknown to me, he had been living in a canal-side cottage for several years, only a couple of miles from my house).

When I was still quite young, I had a pedal car. My aunt Betty told me that I used to pedal to other parts of the town, with our faithful pet spaniel, Peter, accompanying me and we were usually brought home in a Police car.

As I grew older, I graduated through 3-wheel bicycles to more 'grown-up' 2-wheelers, and my pals and I cycled all over the town and beyond. We often cycled out to Walkern village to play around the ford that could be found along Church End. I recall that on one occasion I lost control of my bike's front wheel on some slime and ended up on my backside in the water.

In the 50's, in the area around Sish Lane and Popple Way were several blocks of flats, the tallest of which was Chauncey House which rose to 6 floors and had a pair of lifts. The lifts became one of our play areas, and we spent many enjoyable hours going up and down in those lifts, much to the irritation of the residents, and we were often chased away!

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There was, and still is, a small block of shops in Popple Way. The end shop, closest to Sish Lane, was during the 50's run by the Atterton family. One of their daughters used to ride horses at local stables, I can't remember where that was. Mr Atterton had a 2-tone Ford Zephyr-Zodiac Mk1 and sometimes took me along for a ride in the car with his daughter when she went horse-riding. I noted from the map of the New Town Centre on one of the 'Our Stevenage' web pages that there were two Attertons shops there. They may have been part of the same family, but I can't be sure.

We would get shopkeepers delivering their goods to the neighbourhood streets. One of those delivered dog meat for pet owners. Another, I think it was called Smeaton's fishmongers, delivered fresh fish. Mr Smeaton had a fish shop near the High Street, it might have been in Basils Road. I remember that he had a very early 3-wheel Reliant van which had a simple motorcycle front fork and wheel arrangement sticking out of the front to steer it. It looked really strange stuck on the front of what was otherwise a normal van.

The houses in Brox Dell had side passages which ran from the side door at the front of the house to the rear door opening onto the garden, and these contained coal storage bunkers inside cupboards, with removable wooden boards which could be lifted out to gain access to the coal as the pile went down. Coal and other solid fuel was delivered to homes on lorries. The coalmen humped the heavy sacks on their backs, and then tipped it into the coal bunkers in the cupboards. Residents always had to ensure that the correct number of sacks had been delivered, and that there hadn't been an under-delivery.

Then there was the gully cleaner lorry that came round to clear out the surface water drains. The workmen would try to scare us kids by telling us in menacing voices that if we got too close we would "catch the fever". Rather more pleasant was the 'Tonibell' ice cream van, with its distinctive bells ringing out to alert the neighbourhood of its imminent arrival.

One of our favourite pastimes as kids was train-spotting, and during school holidays we could often be found sitting on the railway embankment at Chequers Bridge Road, ticking off the steam locomotives in our 'Ian Allen' train-spotter books. Sometimes we'd go down to Six Hills Way where the railway lines had a set of water troughs for the express trains to replenish their water tanks at speed. It was great fun watching the huge plumes of water spraying everywhere when a train came through with its water collector lowered. We also went to Stevenage station which, in those days, was in Julians Road, where there was a steel latticework footbridge linking the ticket office to the platforms. We thought it was wonderful to stand on the footbridge above one of the tracks as a fast express came through, and we all got enveloped in smoke and steam.

Having the LNER line running through the town meant that we got to see most of the famous A3 and A4 Pacific locomotives, designed by Sir Nigel Gresley, including better-known ones like Mallard and the Flying Scotsman before it was withdrawn from regular service in February 1963. We always waved to the drivers, and they always waved back. As diesel locomotives gradually replaced steam, we lost interest as we saw no fun in noting carriage numbers on diesel multiple units (DMUs). Interestingly, the Flying Scotsman still occasionally runs through Stevenage, these days hauling 'steam specials' between London and York where it was restored and now resides. 'Sir Nigel Gresley', one of the famous A4 Pacific locomotives, can still be seen today on the North Yorks Railway.

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At the bottom of Sish Lane, and on the opposite side of the High Street, was a lane which led past a timber yard. I can still recall the sweet smell of the wood. The lane ended at the railway line, and there was a simple fence intended to stop people getting onto the tracks. Of course, it didn't stop us, because on the far side of the tracks, between the railway and the backs of the houses on Fairview Road, was a broad expanse of wild green area and hedgerow, in which was a pond which was home to frogs and newts, and sometimes their spawn, which we enthusiastically collected and put in jam jars to watch them grow into tadpoles and, hopefully, adult frogs and newts. It might still be legal to collect frogs, but newts are a protected species nowadays.

In the autumn, we would usually be found patrolling The Avenue, next to Alleynes school, to retrieve conkers from the horse chestnut trees so we could hold challenge matches in the school playground.

The town used to be treated to a travelling fair which annually decamped in the High Street and on fields behind the Bowling Green, accessed from the Hitchin road. Sometimes it also moved on to the King George V playing field. When the fair had departed, our gang, along with other children, went to the fields to scour the ground for coins dropped by the customers. We often found enough to pay for a bottle of pop and a bar of chocolate.

Sometimes, my Mum would take me and a friend to see a film at a cinema, either the Astonia in Pound Avenue or, if we were lucky, the Regal in Hitchin. Later, the Astonia found itself in the national news for the wrong reasons when someone started a craze for slashing the seats. I have to stress that neither I nor my friends were involved. I had my first cigarette behind the Astonia, aged about 11. I think it was a Woodbine. I did start smoking properly between the ages of 16 and 24, but gave up after that and have never touched one since.

As we all got older and more adventurous, we started to travel further afield, and occasionally we bought 'Red Rover' tickets for the buses which allowed a day's travel for one payment, and we went out to places like St. Albans to visit the Abbey. We were certainly never 'stop-at-home' kids. The pleasure of travelling and visiting different parts of the UK and the world has stayed with me throughout my adult life.

After I graduated to secondary school, contact with my neighbourhood friends became less frequent as we started to go our separate ways, and I developed closer ties with classmates. Our group of schoolfriends could often be found spending Saturday mornings at the Mecca ballroom or the 10-pin bowling alley, both of which were next door to each other on Danestrete.

Life as a single parent family

As mentioned previously, later in the 50's my parents' marriage broke up. Mum had spent a lot of time in hospital after my birth, and their relationship never really recovered after that. Back in the 1950's, single parents were not treated as sympathetically as they are today, and an unmarried or divorced mother was often shunned, although I can't recall that my mother was treated particularly badly. All our neighbours remained friendly. Mum was a hard worker, and I can remember several jobs which she held during our lives in Stevenage.

In the 50's there was a chemist shop called Russells in the High Street, it was next to the Red Lion pub, and they also processed photographs. Part of Mum's job was to take Mr Russell's Hillman Minx out to chemists and other shops in many of the outlying towns & villages, including some in

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Bedfordshire, to collect photographic roll films and bring them back to Russells for processing into negatives and prints. Then, when ready a week or so later, she would take them all back for their customers to collect.

During school holidays, Mum would often take me out with her on her rounds. What Mr Russell never knew was that, when the roads were quiet, she would let me steer the car. I would lean over from the front passenger seat and hold the steering wheel while she operated the pedals. Sometimes I also changed gear when she depressed the clutch pedal. Those were my earliest driving lessons.

Later, Mum got a similar kind of driving job with Stevenage's main Ford dealer, Zenith Motors, which was situated on Danestrete. She drove out to local car dealers, delivering and collecting vehicle parts. At one of the garages in Hertford, someone owned a 1963 Ford Thunderbird, which looked like a spaceship on wheels. To my young eyes it was a source of wonderment. Following Zenith, she worked for Moss grocers, again as a delivery driver. Moss's was on the corner of High Street and Walkern Road, on the same side as the Cromwell Hotel. The hotel had a low wall by the footpath behind which were some small gardens with ponds containing golden coy carp, and I used to stand on the wall, fascinated by the fish. After that Mum had a handful of minor driving jobs, but family matters intervened (as explained later) and she had no further jobs in Stevenage after July 1963.

With Mum's parents still living in Stretford, Manchester, we sometimes visited them by train. After a while, Mum managed to buy an old Standard car (which I recall had half-wire wheels) and a couple of times we drove up to Manchester via the old A6. That was an adventure. Amazingly, the car never broke down, but the journey seemed to take forever.

Although Mum's parents lived in Manchester, her father's brother (Mum's uncle) lived in Langley, a suburb of Birmingham. He, too, was a baker and ran his own bread and cake bakery and general store with his wife Dora. Occasionally we went to visit them, but always by train. I remember that we visited them early in 1963, the year of the Big Freeze. We caught the train back from Birmingham Snow Hill to Kings Cross, and then got our connection to Stevenage. When we arrived during late evening, no-one could get off the train because all the carriage doors had frozen up. The station staff had to chip ice off the doors before we could alight and the train could leave. Because of the heavy snow fall, there were no taxis running and so we had to walk what felt like a couple of miles home to Brox Dell with Mum lugging the suitcase.

With Mum being the only breadwinner, holidays away from home were a rarity. However, on one occasion she managed to afford a week at the Butlins holiday camp in Ayr, Scotland, and we had to take the train to get there. There was a service called the 'Starlight Special', which started in London and took all night to get to Glasgow where we picked up a bus connection. The train stopped so many times en-route to give way to faster trains that the journey took hours, I can't recall how many. We were in a compartment with a group of nurses, and I remember us all having 'sing-alongs' to break the tedium of the journey.

Mum and I sometimes took the bus from Stevenage to Hitchin, where we then took a bus to Luton, just for a day out. Back in the 50's, the bus to Luton had to go up Offley hill, a steep climb in 1st gear for an old bus. Also, the buses on the Luton service were unusual in that, upstairs, the isle for the seats ran along the right-hand side of the bus, rather than down the centre like the London

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Transport buses. This meant that if anyone sitting by the left-hand window needed to get off, everyone in that row had to stand up for them, as might happen in a cinema. No-one ever explained why they had been designed like that.

School Days

My first school was Letchmore Road Infants. My memories of Letchmore are vague, but I do remember one teacher, Miss Yanko, and the Head Teacher at that time, Mrs Moore. She sometimes took our class for a lesson (possibly English), and one day she asked for a volunteer to stand in front of the class and tell a story, made up on the spot. I got chosen to do it, and seemed to make a success of it, to the extent that she hauled me out in front of the class on further occasions. Perhaps she could see the roots of a fertile imagination in me as a young child (later, at my Birmingham school, I was to win national prizes for literature and essays). I seem to remember enjoying most of my time at school and I had a lot of friends who accompanied me as we progressed from school to school.

After Letchmore Road, I attended Fairlands Junior school which was just off Greydells Road, a short walk from my house in Brox Dell. At Fairlands, I never got on with my first Headmaster, Mr Briggs, who seemed to enjoy punishing me at every opportunity. I think he was a bit of a sadist. Later, he was replaced by the more avuncular Mr Dykes. Fairlands had a tradition where the end of each class period, including lunch time and home time, was signalled by a senior pupil who walked up and down the corridors with a hand-bell. For a time during my final year at Fairlands, that task was awarded to me. I generally got it right, but on one occasion Mr Dykes took our class for the final lesson of the day, and for some unknown reason decided to let our class go home early. I misunderstood the generosity, and took it to mean that the whole school should go home early, so I walked around ringing my bell, managing to turn out the entire school some 15 minutes ahead of the correct time! Mr Dykes wasn't quite so avuncular towards me after that.

Another tradition at Fairlands was that, for morning assembly, the school would be trooped in to the main hall to the sound of classical music played on a gramophone (remember those?). I offered the use of an LP we had at home, a suite of pieces by Rossini, which got left on the gramophone after assembly, and the heat from the gramophone warped the vinyl LP. No-one at the school ever offered to replace it, which I felt was a bit mean. Another time at Fairlands, I found a live caterpillar in my vegetables at dinner time. When I reported it to the kitchen staff, I was told "it won't hurt you". If that happened today, Health & Safety would be called in! The Fairlands school website carries more memories of these times, written by pupils of the day, including some from me and from a friend at that time named Tony Messant in which he names most of our classmates, many of whom followed me to Barclays. That really brings back the memories!

Other than Mr Briggs and Mr Dykes, the only other teachers I can recall are Mr Keith (tall with wild hair) and Mr Jenkins, who I think was Welsh and who I didn't get on with. Tony Messant's posting on the school website has much more information.

I didn't pass my 11-plus, so at age 11 I was assigned to Barclay Secondary Modern as my senior school, thankfully in the 'A' stream. One of our class teachers was Mr Allcock, and for a time our classroom was in the school library. I seem to recall that the school had excellent technical facilities, with a decent physics lab (we even had a Van De Graph generator!), a vegetable garden, and we

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were involved in lessons such as metal casting with sand moulds and also pottery. During my last year at the school in 1963, it embarked on the project of building a swimming pool and the pupils were involved in that. I can remember a lot of my classmates, too many to mention here, and around 12 years ago I contacted several of them through 'Friends Reunited' and received some pleasing responses. I was surprised that so many remembered me, as I had left Stevenage when I was 13. One of my old class pals, Alan Ries, came up to see me at my Birmingham office while he was in the city on business. It was good to see him again after so long.

Other than Mr Allcock, among the teachers who I can recall from Barclays are – Mr Coutts (French), Mr Sambrook (Maths), Mr Alexander (History). The rest have faded with the passage of time.

The Old Town High Street

Of the establishments I can remember, starting at the Bowling Green end of the High Street, there was the Publix cinema which my Dad occasionally visited when things were not going well at home. Nearby was Moss, the grocers, where Mum worked for a time. Next to that was the Cromwell Hotel. On the opposite side of the street was George Brown's motorcycle shop. George was a world-famous motorcycle sprinter and world record holder on his Vincent-powered bike, 'Super Nero', which now resides in Birmingham's National Motorcycle Museum. George's son Tony went to Barclay school at the same time as me, and I believe that in recent years he may have been involved with the Vincent Owners Club. During the mid-50's, John Surtees, the only man to win both the 500cc motorcycle world championship, for MV Agusta, and then the Formula 1 world championship, for Ferrari, served an apprenticeship at the factory. For a short time, my mother also worked at the Vincent HRD factory, and sometimes got a lift to and from work on the back of a Vincent. The 'Our Stevenage' website has an excellent section on the Vincent factory and George Brown.

Moving further down, there was the White Lion pub, now renamed the Mulberry Tree (why?), and a few doors down from that was the surgery of our family doctors, Messrs Swain and Gullick. (An interesting obituary for Dr. Gullick can be found on the BMJ website). The Georgian house in which the surgery was situated is still there and, after studying the High Street on Google Street View, even 57 years later the front doors look remarkably familiar. Dr Swain lived in a lovely house on the Great North Road, opposite Coreys Mill Lane. I believe an estate agent would call it a 'gentleman's residence'. Looking at Google Street View, the house is still there, although probably no longer with connections to the Swain family.

Across the road, in Middle Row, was a little cafe that my Mum and I used to visit. It had a wonderful Wurlitzer juke box. Unfortunately, one day while we were in the cafe, I was struck by a really painful stomach ache and the doctor was called. By the time he arrived I had recovered (probably just trapped wind), but not before the cafe owner nearly had a panic attack in case I had been poisoned by his food!

On the same side of the High Street, past Albert Street, was a dry cleaning shop. I seem to recall the name was 'Achille Serre'. It meant nothing to me at the time, but I now know that it referred to a famous chain of dry cleaning stores, originated by a pair of French brothers in the 1870's. What I do remember very clearly is that the shop manager had a wonderful silver sports car, which I later discovered was an early Porsche, a 356 model. Flashy foreign sports cars were not the norm in Stevenage in those days, and it left an impression on me. I've been a Porsche fan ever since.

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Moving back to the west side of High Street, there was the aforementioned Russell chemists. Much further down I seem to remember a Lyons store which produced its own ground coffee, the aroma of which was very appealing. Was there also a butchers in the High Street with its own abattoir? It seems to ring a bell. Moving further down again, and opposite Holy Trinity Church and the Coach & Horses pub, was the Stevenage Motor Company, a BMC dealership selling brands such as Wolseley and Riley. Continuing down the A1 heading south was a Rootes Group dealer owned by Peter Harper, a well-known rally and racing driver who won several major events.

Away from the High Street, perhaps less well-known was a local stock car racer named Willie Wanklyn. Willie lived in a 'close' off Sish Lane, opposite Popple Way, and drove an American car, I think it was a Hudson, which he used to tow his stock car to race meetings. One stadium was at Brafield-on-the-Green, just south of Northampton, and my Mum sometimes took me and a couple of friends there to watch the racing.

So, it can be seen that, in people like Willie Wanklyn, George Brown and Peter Harper, Stevenage had famous motorsports personalities long before connections with Lewis Hamilton came along, and they should be more visibly celebrated.

One aspect of visiting the High Street in those days intrigued me, and it had nothing to do with the shops. Occasionally, I would see a lorry or bus chassis being driven through the town, with no body attached, not even a cab, just a skeleton chassis. They looked very strange to me because they were just this open chassis with an engine and a driver who was completely exposed to the elements. I seem to recall that they generally wore goggles, sometimes a leather helmet, and the seating area may have been enclosed with wooden boards of some kind. But otherwise it was just a bare chassis, an engine and the driver, like a 4-wheel motorcycle. Today, I assume that they were being delivered from a lorry factory further north to a vehicle body assembly factory in the south, possibly in London, but I never did find out who those factories were.

The New Town Centre

Living in Stevenage during the 1950's and early 60's meant that we were around when the New Town Centre was being constructed. Along with that, there were new housing developments springing up all around the area, notably around Bedwell Crescent and new roads like Plash Drive and Cuttys Lane. Our gang of pals never spent much time hanging around the building site that was to be the New Town Centre, but the half-built housing estates became a regular playground, and we spent many happy hours playing in what was destined to become someone's living room or bedroom. Of course, we weren't supposed to be there, but that never stopped us.

There was a pathway that led from what became Silam Road down to St Georges Way, and alongside that was installed what we called the 'artificial lake'. I believe it is now part of Town Centre Gardens. We spent a fair bit of time playing in that area, although we never got wet. Unlike a couple of lads who thought they could paddle an old wooden box across the lake, but only got halfway before it sank. Luckily for them, the lake wasn't very deep, but the watching audience all laughed their socks off.

Once the New Town Centre had been completed and opened by HM The Queen, our gang did spend a lot more time down there. We were all approaching our teens, and female company was becoming

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more interesting. My local gang often visited the Fine Fare store on Saturday mornings for Coca-Cola or similar refreshment, and nearby there was a shop which sold Airfix kits which I enjoyed making. My Mum and I got our general groceries from Sainsburys.

There was also a shop selling bicycles, which might have been called Currys but I'm not sure now. As a present for my 12th birthday, Mum bought me a new bicycle, a superb 'Viking' racing bike resplendent in metallic turquoise paint and with 'derailleur' gears. It was probably a bit big for me at that age, but I managed and gradually grew into it. That bike took me to a new world of distance cycling, and I loved it. I cycled all over Stevenage and to the surrounding villages.

After we moved to Birmingham in 1963, and then aged 13, I cycled the 110 miles back to Stevenage to visit my friends, the first time going via Northampton and Bedford, and then repeated the task the following year, but taking the A5 to Dunstable (no Milton Keynes in those days) and then going through Luton and Hitchin. At the end of my holidays, Mum drove down from Birmingham in a car and collected me. I kept the bike until, aged 16, I was old enough to buy my first motorbike whereupon my Viking went to a new home. I'll never forget that bike, it changed my life.

Life after Stevenage – July 1963 and beyond

Details of my life after leaving Stevenage may not be relevant here, but there are some connections to Stevenage, and in some ways they help to tie up loose ends. After my parents split up and Dad emigrated, Mum held a handful of jobs that didn't offer good wages, and we scraped by. As mentioned previously, Mum's aunt and uncle had their own bakery and shop in Langley, Birmingham, and they had no children of their own, so they suggested to Mum that we should move up there with a view to taking over the business when they eventually retired.

So, in July 1963, we upped sticks from Brox Dell and moved to Langley. To say it was a culture shock would be an under-statement. We moved from the bright modernity of a new town coupled with the classic traditionalism of an old market town, to a district with its roots firmly in the grimy Victorian era, it felt like we had been transported into the pages of a Dickens novel. Not for nothing was it referred to as the 'Black Country'. Worse still, nearby were some major chemical factories – Albright & Wilson, ICI, etc. – which had produced munitions during the war, and once a week they emitted a foul-smelling fog which turned the area grey. The local canal was so polluted that the water had turned green and nothing could survive in it. I reckon that if you had dumped a shopping trolley into it, the trolley would have dissolved!

Mum's uncle's living accommodation behind the shop was so old that it had an outside toilet and no bathroom. Baths were taken in an old galvanised tin bath on the floor of the bakehouse, in winter the heating came by opening one of the oven doors, and you 'luxuriated' in the bath with cockroaches scuttling around on the floor beside you – I kid you not. At weekends and during school holidays, I was required to be up at 5.00am each morning to help in the bakery. I was 13, and felt like little more than an unpaid slave.

My new school, Bristnall Hall Secondary Boys' School, offered no respite. It had been founded in 1929 but felt 100 years older, and had nothing like the modern facilities that Barclays had afforded. Further, the local kids enjoyed taking the 'mick' out of me and what they ignorantly and erroneously referred to as my 'cockney' accent. Even one of the teachers called me a 'cockney

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sparrow'. It worked both ways, as I could barely understand anything they were saying in their impenetrable accents. I absolutely detested the place and most of the people in it. To make matters worse, the curriculum was different from that which I had started at Barclays, so my first two years at Barclays had been for nothing and I had to start all over again. My education suffered as a result. Having previously enjoyed my school days in Stevenage, in contrast no-one was happier to leave school than I was when I reached the age of 16.

There was, however, one surreal moment. When I entered my new classroom on my first day, on the wall behind my desk was a poster depicting an 'exploded' view of a modern school – it turned out to be Barclays! I couldn't believe it. Whether that was a pre-planned idea to help me feel at home, or a complete coincidence, I never discovered. It didn't really help to make things better, though, serving only to make me even more homesick than I already was. Despite my fractured schooling, I later made a successful career in the vehicle fleet & finance industry, eventually working for Peugeot Motor Company from where I took early retirement in 2007, aged 57, having accepted a generous financial offer.

With hindsight, I accept that Mum made the move to Birmingham in what she thought at the time were our best interests, but things never worked out, and after a couple of years of living a nightmare with elderly relatives who clearly wished they had never proposed the idea, Mum and I moved out of the bakery and into a private flat just down the road. I never ventured near the bakery again.

In 1976 I married a girl of Welsh heritage, and since 1980 have lived in a house on the south-western edge of Birmingham, close to Bromsgrove and overlooking rolling Worcestershire countryside. In many ways, it reminds me of Hertfordshire and of Stevenage as it used to be in the 1950's before the developers took over, decimated the countryside, and created a rat's maze of a road system.

I have no remaining family links to Stevenage of which I am aware. However, I believe that the Robson side of the family had connections to the Barnes and Finch families in the town (Dad's mother before marriage was named Olive Finch), so there may be relatives in the area of whom I am unaware.

However, I do share a couple of links with Stevenage today, albeit tenuous, the first of which is through the MG Car Club. I own two MGs, one classic and one modern, and since 1999 I have been heavily involved with the Midland Centre of the MG Car Club. The Club was founded in 1930 in Stevenage, its inaugural meeting being held at the Roebuck Inn & Hotel. How many people in the town know that?

The second relates to the previously mentioned Cromwell Hotel which, according to the hotel website, is so-named through its connections with Oliver Cromwell and his secretary, John Thurloe. My home address for the past 37 years has been in Thurloe Crescent. How's that for a coincidence?

In 1981, with my wife's encouragement, I made contact with my Dad in Perth, found that I had another family over there, including a younger half-sister, and in 1983 we flew over to be reunited with Dad, my aunt Betty and my grandfather Bill (grandma Olive sadly died 2 weeks before we arrived there), thus bringing me back into the fold of the Stevenage family and closing a circle. We have been to Australia more than a dozen times since then and toured much of that country, as well

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as the USA and much of Europe, thus continuing my Stevenage childhood tradition of venturing to far-flung places, if you can call Watton-at-Stone or Hitchin 'far-flung'!

Despite having lived in Birmingham for the majority of my life, and now disappointingly having absorbed the accompanying accent, I have never considered myself to be a 'Brummie' and never will. As far as I am concerned, Stevenage is my home town and I will always be a Man of Hertfordshire.

ANDREW (ANDY) ROBSON

December 2017