

Glyn Davies – my story

I was born in Brecon in Wales on 9th July 1921. I had a harsh childhood, having been sent to live in the workhouse, first in Griffithstown and then at the age of seven near Aberdare. The operative word in 'workhouse' is 'work' – these were not educational establishments. I don't not recall even being taught the basics, such as reading, writing or arithmetic.

Instead I and the other 'inmates' were set to chopping logs, stacking coal, scrubbing floors and weeding and hoeing the garden. I did most of my own washing too. The food was limited in quantity and seriously lacking in quality. Even so, I and the other children would ask for more, Oliver Twist-style.

A couple who lived opposite the home would sometimes invite one or two children over for afternoon tea. I recall sitting down to eat a piece of cherry cake but, since I had never had cherries before, I had to ask what they were.

Basic living proved grim enough but in addition there was a strict regime of discipline too. All this changed for the better when I reached the age of about eleven and moved to a new home in Bridgend. I regarded that as my first proper home.

Of course, a key thing missing from that home was loving parents. I never experienced having a loving mother and father and never quite understood why I was sent by my mother to the workhouse - probably due to financial hardship. But even when my mother visited twice a year at Easter and Christmas she showed no warmth towards me. I don't recall ever having had a hug as a child, and kisses I could count on one hand. I never found out who my father was, and a brother I tracked down in my late teens didn't seem to want to know me.

At the age of fifteen I declined the options of farming or coal-mining in Wales, and was sent instead to a so-called home for working boys called Rossie House, on Champion Hill in Camberwell. The home provided six slices of bread and margarine a day to the boys, but nothing to drink. When we were hungry we used to go down to a baker's shop in Camberwell Green called Wilson's and buy stale cakes and broken biscuits to keep us going. A 'penny for stales' they used to call it.

I migrated to lodgings in Streatham and became an apprentice nursery gardener, but that was interrupted by the onset of the Second World War. I

was conscripted into the Navy, in which I served for four years, first based at Chatham and then in Pwllheli, in my native Wales.

With the Navy I travelled to many parts of the world, including Portugal, Italy, Jamaica, Canada, the USA and Uruguay. I had mixed duties which included shifts steering the ship itself. Out on the ocean, this could be mind-numbingly boring. I admit to falling asleep at the wheel, but no harm done.

My stop in the Uruguayan capital of Montevideo was unscheduled – I and one or two others were stricken by an illness which meant that we spent some time in hospital on the mainland, while the ship sailed on round to Patagonia. Once recovered, I enjoyed the unexpected treat of a few days in a pleasant hotel, waiting for the ship to return and collect me and my mates. For me, one of the great joys of being in the Navy was that there was good food and no rationing.

However, my life was subject to a far greater risk when my ship *The Windsor Castle* was torpedoed. Although no-one was killed, the survivors all spent much longer than they would have liked in the lifeboats, waiting to be rescued. A frigate collected us and we were transferred to *HMS Nelson*, eventually disembarking in Gibraltar.

Demobbed in Belfast, I returned to lodgings on Idmiston Road, but with no job to go to. I had little choice but to accept one on the railways, not what I would have chosen, working as a parcel porter at Victoria. In time, over four or five years, I came to work at the stations in Brixton, Herne Hill and West Dulwich. Then I finally landed on my feet with a gardening job in Dulwich Park where, among other things, I would mow the lawns and look after the cricket pitch, which used to be at the far end of the playing fields. Alongside my regular work in the park, My mates and I would do 'crusting' – a slang term for extra paid work for locals that we were not supposed to do.

After around eight years I secured a post to look after the seven acres of grounds at Sydenham Girls' School, all on my own, eventually progressing to become their caretaker. I ended my working life with sixteen years as caretaker at Kelvin Grove School.

One of the teachers at Kelvin Grove asked me if I would look after the garden at her bungalow down at Southwick, not far from Brighton. That meant that I had a number of cheap breaks from London, because the owner of the house provided all food and accommodation for free.

A key event in my life was meeting Derek in around 1952. We lived in Taymount Rise in Forest Hill until the council wanted the property back. So it was that I became a lodger at Derek's mother's house at 138 Court Lane, nice and convenient for my work back then in Dulwich Park. In fact it was I who had alerted Derek's mother Lucie when No.138 originally came up for sale, as I became aware of it when working at West Dulwich station.

One of the best forms of entertainment I recall was the Trocadero Variety Theatre at Elephant and Castle, long since demolished. There I saw top line acts, including Paul Robeson, The Andrews Sisters and The Beverley Sisters.

In its day the Piccadilly Playhouse cinema proved one of the most popular. I was a fan of Micky Rooney and Judy Garland, but especially admired Bette Davis's acting ability. In the early days there would be Laurel and Hardy and Charlie Chaplin films, then Fred Astaire musicals.

I was a regular swimmer too, at Brockwell Lido, which I recall being opened after the war.

Derek's work as graphic designer meant that he had to go abroad for various conferences and exhibitions. Through that, he and I enjoyed many trips, especially to Denmark, Sweden and Finland. And later in life we would take regular Tuesday trips out for the day to seaside places, such as to Brighton, Worthing and Eastbourne.

Another routine we enjoyed would be our visits to the carveries up in Town, at places like the Strand Palace Hotel and the Cumberland Hotel. We sometimes took in a theatre show as well, notably *Guys n Dolls* and *My Fair Lady*.

Back at home we liked to watch some of the comedy classics like *Hancock's Half Hour*, *Are You Being Served*, *The Two Ronnies* and *Hi-de-Hi!* I've enjoyed watching them in recent years on the 'golden oldie' TV stations, but I'm a bit amazed at other things I see, like pole-dancing... I also surprised myself in taking a liking in recent times to sport on television, be it rugby, football, snooker or even indoor bowls. But I've never been one to read books – they send me off to sleep.”

So many people around Dulwich owe a great deal to Glyn for their impressive gardens. As for Glyn, he says he loves all plants, although especially a nice dahlia.

Even though his physical strength declined, Glyn showed incredible determination in persevering with his walks to the shops and even getting the bus to Forest Hill or Camberwell for clothes shopping. An abiding picture will be of Glyn sitting on the seat that is an integral part of his walking frame, face pointed towards the sun, catching the warmth.

Although Glyn had a grim start in life, and had unpleasant memories that could bring a tear to the eye, for the latter part of his life, the period from the Fifties onwards, he considered himself lucky to be able to say: 'It was a dream, a lovely life.'

He wants to thank his kind neighbours Roy and Anna, Ian (remembering Heather too), Alan and Shioka, Jo, Maureen and Charles, Stevie and Neil and Jeremy and Jackie.