

## Chapter 2

Growing Up: 1950 to 1959

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### Carre's Grammar School

I took my eleven-plus examination at the Alvey School and then, after an interview, I was invited to join Carre's Grammar School in 1950. My brother Brian was in his final year at Carre's when I joined and, much to my pleasure, he appeared to notice me for the first time. The Grammar School was for boys only; girls who passed the eleven plus went to the Girls' High School in Southgate. Those who didn't pass the exam went to the Secondary Modern School, which was at the bottom of a large drive at the north end of Church Lane, next to the Primary School; this school also had an annexe of buildings next to Westholme House.

As we heard earlier, the Carre family were important and influential figures in the history of Sleaford. There are impressive memorials in St Deny's church to George Carre and his wife (1521) and to Sir Edward Carre and his family (1618). To the south of the church is Carre's Hospital, later to be used as an almshouse; Carre Street connects Eastgate with Boston Road. The seat of the Carre family was in the Old Place, Boston Road - which we children always called the haunted house; there is also the impressive looking Carre Arms Hotel, in Mareham Lane. However, probably the best known building, because of the number of pupils that passed through it, was Carre's Grammar School. The school was founded by Robert Carre in 1604. The exact location of the early school is not clear, but in 1834 a specific location was agreed and the new school was built in Northgate, on Galley Hill and next to the 1636 Carre Almshouses. Like many schools, Carre's was based on four "Houses" with pupils being allocated to a house as soon as they joined the school. We were then expected to take a pride in, and to support, our house for the rest of our years at school, particularly on the sports field. The four Houses were: Bristol, Carre, Lafford and Welby.

Brian and I were both in Bristol House, but I'm not sure whether that was by design or accident. I was used to seeing Brian go off to school every day in his Grammar School uniform. The uniform consisted of a black cap with the school badge on the front, short grey trousers for the junior boys, but the senior boys were allowed to wear long trousers; a grey shirt and a striped school tie were worn under the blazer; long grey socks and black shoes almost finished off the set. The school blazer - that stood out for miles - had broad vertical stripes of red and black, a bit like pyjamas, but of thicker material. Just after I joined Carre's, the blazer was changed to become more modern - or possibly it was a result of the restrictions on clothing during and after the war; the new blazer was plain black with a school badge on the breast pocket and with narrow ribbons of black and red diagonal stripes sewn above each pocket.

I think that my parents must have been pleased that I had also been selected for the Grammar School, but that gave them extra financial pressures. We boys just accepted that we would wear clothes that were passed-down to us from our older brothers as we grew up, with suitable patches sewn-in where necessary. However, until I grew out of it, I found that I was eventually the only boy wearing the old type of striped blazer! The other significant difference from the other boys at school was that my leather satchel had straps across both shoulders, with a buckle at the front, looking like a small version of a modern rucksack - but in polished leather. The school buildings were scattered around the grounds in no apparent order. The main complex was built in stone, by Kirk & Parry in 1835, with the headmaster's house in the centre and classrooms on each side; Big School (the school hall) was to the north side of the school house block. In 1906 additional brick classrooms, three stories high, were added on the south end, next to Church Lane. Just inside the school main gate there was a large wooden relic from World War I called *The Hut*; this held five classrooms, with flimsy walls, and a very smoky staff room at the far end. I read recently that the Hut continued to be used as "temporary" classrooms for forty-eight years! Behind the Hut were some prefab type asbestos and concrete classrooms where science and geography were taught. The pavilion, built in 1908, was to the east, overlooking the sports field. In my

final year we had a new woodwork and art classroom built at the north side of the school. I believe that there were about 330 pupils at Carre's when I started there, but by the year 2001 it had risen to 667 with many more modern classrooms and other buildings.

When I first started at Carre's it all seemed to be quite confusing to me, and to others in my class, but we soon learned the new rules and the layout of the school. We had complicated timetables for lessons, which changed from day to day, and classes were held in different rooms throughout the school. At the start of each term we would cover our new text books with brown paper and then add our names to the covers, together with the name of the book, using scratchy pen nibs dipped into strange smelling inkwells built into each desk; we were definitely not allowed to lose books! The first form that I joined was on the top floor of the brick school building next to Church Lane; we would check our timetables for the morning, fill our satchels with the books needed and then rush down three flights of stairs to "Big School" for morning assembly and prayers. The masters always wore black flowing gowns and stood on the stage in a semicircle, behind the headmaster; singing of hymns would be accompanied by a piano and a violin - played by two of the masters. At the end of each school year there would be school reports and Speech Day; on that occasion, the masters would wear their university gowns and colours. Because the whole school attended Speech Day, the only place large enough to hold everyone was the Picturedrome, in Southgate. Prizes would be awarded for a wide range of subjects, including: 1st and 2nd prize for each Form; Governors' prizes for Woodwork, Geography and History; individual patrons' prizes for Latin, French, English Literature, Physics, Chemistry, Divinity, Mathematics and English Essay; there were also numerous sports prizes. There would then be announcements of the sixth form achievements, awards of Scholarships and applications for University places. A guest speaker would be invited to give the main speech and we were all expected to stay awake!

The headmaster when I arrived at Carre's was Mr J L Nightingale, but it then changed to Mr D.N.G. Allott the following year; the only thing that I had in common with Mr Allott was that I also had three initials in front of my surname. We were all expected to behave to a very high standard and

any one who broke the rules would stay behind after school in detention or, for persistent offenders, would be sent to see the headmaster. There were not many pupils sent to the *Head*, but I do remember one who was sent regularly for the cane; he would then come back and proudly show off the welts, even if we didn't want to see them! Although we respected, or feared, the masters they were all given nicknames, but I have no intention of mentioning what they were. The masters ranged from kindly but firm teachers to cold and somewhat remote tutors; there was only one master who seemed to fly into a rage at the slightest provocation and many a time the whole class ducked when the wooden blackboard cleaner was hurled at frightening speed across the classroom. I remember that our maths teacher was always firm but kindly and everyone seemed to like him. I enjoyed drawing in history lessons, but I had no inclination to remember loads of what appeared to be boring facts and dates. The only things that I remember clearly from my geography lessons were the rivers of Northern England that lead into the North Sea; the rivers are: Swale, Ure, Nidd, Wharfe, Aire, Calder, Don, Derwent and Trent. (SUNWAC + DDT). Not much to show for five year's of geography study, but it was a good introduction to the usefulness of mnemonics!

The music teacher was also the Latin master and he arrived at school on an old bicycle, clutching his violin case; he tended to be the butt of many jokes. In the winter we would make a slide in the playground by running and then sliding over the same strip of ice or snowy ground; gradually, the slide would build up until the ice shone like polished glass. One particularly long and cold winter we make an extra long slide that started near *The Hut*, close to the school entrance gates, and then went all the way down to the bicycle shed used by the teachers. We would wait with bated breath each morning, pretending not to notice, while the Latin master rode straight down the middle of the glassy slide and then calmly dismounted. He never once hesitated, wobbled or fell off; he suddenly became a new sort of cult hero to all the boys. I'm still not sure whether he was aware of the slide, or of what the boys thought of him either before or after that event; perhaps he was very streetwise as well as being academically gifted. I really enjoyed my woodwork classes; this was also my first introduction to technical drawing. The highlight of those lessons, for

me, was producing a Beech-wood coffee table in my final year; it had twelve different joints and many hours of fine French-polishing; we still use it in our home today and it still looks almost as good as when I first brought it home over fifty years ago; thank you, Mr Thompson! In 1954, suddenly a new and brilliant master arrived at the school; I have deliberately not mentioned many names so far, but this one really deserves what little praise I can offer. Mr Harry Gregson was a breath of fresh air and he was our Art master. It is only now, while writing this book, that I realise that I probably didn't actually paint at all in the art classes; all that I can remember is art appreciation classes and work associated with pottery, which was something completely new to me at that time; I certainly have no paintings, or memories of doing any, from that time. My most ambitious pottery creation, as a surprise for my parents, was a tea pot, sugar bowl and milk jug. They were made on the potter's wheel from red clay and then covered with a white slip before being decorated with green shamrocks, glazed and fired in the kiln. I have no idea what eventually happened to them, but I hope that my parents weren't too disappointed! I do still have two pot vases from those days, but they are now used in my art studio to hold pencils and paint brushes. I think what really struck me about Mr Gregson was total enthusiasm for everything that we boys did.

The one thing that I really disliked at school was sport, but my father was always a very keen sportsman. In his younger days he played rugby and was still an active hockey player when he was forty years old; moreover, Royal Air Force Conningsby awarded him the Station Badge for his sporting achievements when he was fifty. He was also an excellent tennis and badminton player and was still winning local tournaments in Grantham and Nottingham at the age of 53, and possibly beyond that. My brothers were also keen sportsmen: Brian was an excellent swimmer and water-polo player and then took up windsurfing, which he was still doing until well past his sixtieth birthday; Paddy was a keen cyclist in his younger days and took part regularly in sprints and time-trials and, now in his sixties, he still plays badminton each week. Mervyn was a keen motorcyclist and competed at Club level, with races at Cadwell Park and the Isle of Man, as well as grass-track racing at other venues; Mervyn emigrated to Australia in 1964, but sadly he died a few years later, in a

motorcycle accident. Richard's boast was that he played rugby for the RAF when he was serving with the Army in Germany; there was an annual match between the local Army and RAF teams but, as the RAF were a player short, he was "volunteered" by the Army to help the RAF and then found that he was on the winning team! He is still a keen competitor with his local bowling green club. Somehow, the sport genes seemed to switch off when it came to me, as I never really enjoyed any type of sport, particularly at school. At Carre's I accepted Physical Training (PT) as it was probably just a more energetic form of what I had been doing since starting school, six years earlier. Football and cricket were new to me and I didn't enjoy them at all, particularly the long winter walks back to the school pavilion from the football pitch down The Drove, when we were wet, muddy and cold. Summer track-and-field events were not quite so bad, but they were barely tolerated. I was never afraid of exercise and always remained fit and active during my working life; I just didn't enjoy any type of organised sport.

I then discovered something called cross-country running, which could be done during games periods; this was wonderful news as I found that I could get changed into my PT kit and then go off training all on my own. I had a regular route from school: I set off down Northgate and then turned left across the Market Place and along Eastgate towards Ruskington; then left again across the fields to Leasingham Heath, through Holdingham and then back into Sleaford and to the school pavilion changing room. I was chosen to represent the school at two cross country competitions; once against the Teachers' Training College at Stoke Rochford and once against RAF College Cranwell. Both races were during the winter, in thick snow, and I enjoyed the runs. However, Mr Berresford was probably not impressed with my results, particularly after having spent so many games periods training for cross-country - but, as we were regularly told, it was the taking part that really mattered! The other sporting activity that we had to take part in was swimming. For me, that was even worse than the other sports; it seemed as though we only went swimming if the weather was really cold. We would be escorted from school, in a long line of pupils with towels and bathing trunks rolled-up under one arm, to the open air Bristol swimming baths on East Banks - beside the River Sle,

near Cogglesford Mill. The swimming baths were surrounded by walls of corrugated-iron sheeting, with spikes on top; I suspected that the wall was designed to keep people in rather than out! We had to change into our trunks in the large wooden hut at one end of the baths and then take a cold shower to make sure that we were clean before entering the pool. The water in the pool was always horribly cold and smelled strongly of chlorine. I sometimes wondered if the water was overdosed with chlorine because of polio outbreaks in the area at about that time, but then I thought that the water was probably too cold for any living bugs to survive! There were also the occasions when someone “accidentally” pushed you in at the middle of the pool, or worse still in the deep end. Those swimming lessons were another failure for me, and I never did learn to swim in the Sleaford baths. However, I then discovered that my father had a friend who was a swimming instructor at Cranwell; more importantly, RAF Cranwell had an indoor, heated, swimming pool. I was soon using my limited pocket money on the bus-fare to RAF Cranwell, where I quickly learned to swim.

The classes that we took at Carre's stayed mainly the same throughout my five years at school. They were basic subjects and included English Language, English Literature, Maths, Geography, History, Physics, Chemistry, French, Music, Woodwork and Art; Latin and German were also taught, but I was not in that stream of gifted pupils. In the first year we practised improving joined-up writing, with the emphasis on clarity as well as speed, spelling test were a regular feature as well as reading aloud to the rest of the class. I seemed to remember being taught about Ancient Greece and the Greek myths for much of the first year. At the end of each term there would be examinations; those gradually built up to the climax of the final school exams at the end of the fifth form. When Brian reached his final year it was to sit for the School Certificate, which was awarded when pupils reached a satisfactory level in English Language and in at least five other subjects; if that wasn't achieved, then pupils left school with no academic qualifications at all. Those pupils who did very well, and whose parents could afford it, stayed on for the sixth forms and then on to university. That system changed during my time at Carre's to the General Certificates in Education (GCE) at Ordinary (“O”) level and Advanced (“A”) level. I'm afraid that my academic achievements at school were pretty

dismal, as I ended up leaving school with only one GCE “O” level, and to make it worse that was only for Art! At first I put it down to being a late developer, but with hindsight it was probably the method of teaching that did not suit me. There was no such thing, at that time, as continual assessments during the terms - you either sank or swam on the day of the final examination, depending on what you remembered or how you felt on that day. Since our GCE days the examination system changed to GCSE's and, in 2004, there was talk of having a new, single School Leaving Certificate system, which is just about where Brian was 55 years earlier! Leaving school with only one O level GCE results didn't seem like a very promising start to a working life. However, although my academic results were very poor when I left school, I believe that some very good seeds had been planted during that time which were to develop over the next few years.

#### Scouting and the Church

At the time that I started at Carre's I also moved up from the Wolf Cubs to the Boy Scouts and my brother Brian had just become a King Scout. Within a year he had left school to become a radio apprentice in the Royal Air Force. For the next few years Scouting was almost the only involvement that I had with other people, other than at school. We would meet once a week and new members would be taught the Scout Promise and the Laws. Those were sound rules based on service to God, the Queen and to helping other people; that equipped us well for the years ahead. We studied a wide range of different subjects including outdoor activities, such as camping, and first aid; we would end the evening by playing boisterous games, such as British Bulldog. From what I can remember about British Bulldog we were split into two teams and we had to get from one side of the room to the other without being lifted off the floor by the opposite team. The opposition had to stop you by lifting you into the air and shouting “British Bulldog” before you touched the floor again. I don't think that there were any other rules! Although I disliked sports intensely at school, this seemed to be very different type of physical activity and none of us came to any lasting harm, as far as I know. I sometimes wonder if they still play it today, but I doubt it somehow because those in charge

probably couldn't comply with the health and safety aspects.

The highlight of scouting, for me, was camping. Our troop had a trek-cart, which had a large box-shaped wooden body and two large wooden-spoked wheels, with metal rims, about four feet in diameter. The cart was pulled by a wooden handle, about six feet long, with a T shape at the end for two people to hold onto; the rest of the troop would assist by pushing - either at the sides or at the rear of the cart. All of our personal belongings would be put into kit-bags, which were loaded onto the cart. Canvas tents, cooking utensils and food would then be loaded and ground sheets would be thrown over the top; the whole lot was secured by ropes fastened to the cart. We were then ready to set off on our adventures. There were several regular sites that we visited within trekking distance of Sleaford. One of the most popular was at Bully Wells, the source of the River Slea. The site was in a large disused limestone quarry, and fresh water was readily available from the springs that formed the river. Near the centre of the quarry there was an old stone lime-kiln, in a very poor state of repair. Sometimes, the old man who lived there would appear, but he never had anything to do with us and we respected his privacy. He was always referred to as *The Hermit*; whether he actually lived there all of the time I don't know. Another regular site, and a favourite of mine, was Ancaster Valley. It was quite a trek from Sleaford, but getting there was all part of the fun. However, newcomers often wondered whether we would ever manage to push the heavily loaded trek-cart to the top of Ancaster Hill! Thankfully, the last bit of the journey was downhill, before turning left into the valley. I revisited the site a few years ago, when I was doing access survey work for the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust, and it brought back many fond memories. When camping in the valley we would usually go to the Sunday morning church service, at St Martin's, in Ancaster village. We also camped at Horbling, about eight miles south of Sleaford, down Mareham Lane; that camp site was next to some derelict baker's ovens. Rauceby and Culverthorpe were other regular camping haunts.

When we arrived at our camp-site we would set up the tents, made of very heavy canvas and with stout wooden tent poles and ridge poles; the guy ropes were anchored to the ground with large wooden tent pegs, hammered into the ground with the aid of wooden mallets. Waterproof

ground sheets, which also acted as personal capes when it was raining, were then pegged down inside the tent and our kit-bags were laid inside. Beds were made up for the night by unrolling our blankets and securing the snug sleeping envelope that we each made with blanket-pins, which were like huge safety pins. Those home-made beds looked all right until you tried to crawl into them in the dark and then found all the gaps that hadn't been pinned very well. We knew nothing about the advantages of sleeping bags in those days. The next tasks would be to build the kitchen and latrines. The kitchen would be staked out with branches of dead wood, collected from under the surrounding trees, and then roped off with string between those posts. The place for the kitchen fire and waste pits were marked out and turfs carefully cut from the grass and laid outside the kitchen area; these were watered during the camping period and then replaced in their original places when the camp was finished. The general rule was that when we left the camp site it should look as though we had never been there; well - that was the theory! While the kitchen was being built by the more experienced members, novices were sent to collect and store wood for the kitchen fire; they also collected straight sticks to make simple kitchen furniture, such as tables, plate racks, etc. Grass and bracken were collected for filter covers over the wooden waste-pit frames; the filters collected solids, such as potato peelings, etc., which were then burned at the end of each day.

The hours spent learning to tie knots in the scout hut each week were put to practical use when building the camp flag pole, kitchen furniture and other aids to make camp life reasonably comfortable. Another place that needed to be marked out was the wash area and the latrines; the wash area was quite simple, with tripods made from collected wood to hold the tin washing bowls and to hang our towels out to dry. The latrines were usually placed some distance away from the main camp and comprised of large holes dug out of the ground and then a simple wooden structure built over the holes. The latrine was then screened off with canvas sheeting, hung from spare tent poles and held up with more guy ropes; soil dug out of the hole was sprinkled back into the pit again whenever the latrine was used. One of the most interesting parts of camping was drawing up the menu for the week and then doing the cooking; much of this planning would

be done in the week before the camp started and we would take most of the raw ingredients with us. A roster would be drawn up each day detailing members for various duties, such as cooks and kitchen assistants. Although cooking over open wood fires was enjoyable, cleaning the blackened cooking pots afterwards was not so much fun! Most mornings would start off with porridge, followed by a fried breakfast of bacon and eggs and a mug of tea; the main meal of the day would usually be some type of stew, with vegetables. If our hunting and tracking skills were sufficiently good we could supplement our diet with freshly caught rabbit or wood-pigeon, but that wasn't very often.

In 1955 we decided to enter for the Boy Scout's national Soap Box Derby car racing competition. I'm not sure exactly what the rules were, but I don't think that Bernie Eckleston would have been interested! Basically, we were to build a "car" from scrap materials and it was to be driven only by pedal power. It was great fun designing and building it and, naturally, some parents started to get involved by offering help. Our car body was made of a wooden frame and covered with plywood; the chassis was a metal skeleton frame with old pieces of bicycle joined together to drive the rear wheels. There was just one fixed gear. I think that the wheels were off a small pram; the steering system was quite crude but effective, providing that there were no sharp corners to negotiate. After weeks of trial and error, a driver was selected - and it was me! Somehow, we managed to get through the East Midlands' selection procedure and we were told, to our amazement, that we had been entered into the National Soap Box Derby championship finals to be held in Somerset, at the seaside town of Weston-Super-Mare. There was then much consternation about how we could get there. However, with much help from headlines in the Sleaford Standard, volunteers came forward at the last minute. The race was along the seaside promenade, which at least was flat and straight. The opposition was formidable with light weight, multi-gearred, streamlined racers. I think that we should have applied for, and entered, a new category for the best tank! For all of that, it was a wonderful experience; at least we crossed the finishing line and we didn't come last. I have no idea what happened to the soap box, named *Eslaforde*, when we returned home, but I haven't yet seen it in the Museum of Lincolnshire Life!

I continued to enjoy my scouting, probably at the expense of my more important schooling, but scouting was so much more enjoyable. In 1953 a party of us helped with mopping up the damaged houses and bungalows left in the wake of the dreadful North Sea floods along the Lincolnshire coast. Eventually I became the troop leader and also earned the Queen's Scout award. The highlight of that award was a visit to Windsor Castle, where I met the Queen for the first time. Another memorable event was the World Scout Jamboree, held at Sutton Coalfield. I was also invited to join a group of Senior Scouts from London who were cycling to the Lake District for two weeks climbing, hiking and camping. They called for me at Sleaford and we set off for Windermere, carrying most of our kit in panniers fitted to our bikes. Living in Lincolnshire I had no concept of cycling over steep hills such as the Pennines, or those in the Lake District, before we actually got there. It was just accepted as a new challenge and, apart from two very sunburnt and tired legs, we arrived safely. We started climbing the nearby hills and rock faces soon after setting up camp. The only time that I ever experienced being frozen in terror was after climbing a particularly high cliff face, using a rock feature called a chimney. I was bringing up the rear of the group, but we had nothing as sophisticated as climbing ropes. I had just about reached the top of the cliff when I dislodged a stone with my foot and looked down to make sure that no one was below me. It was then that my heart leapt into my mouth as I gazed down at the sheer drop below me; I immediately felt faint and could not move or speak. After sometime, the others must have noticed that I was missing and they returned to find me still frozen to the spot; after encouragement from them I clamber to the top. The remainder of the expedition was wonderful with many highlights in the Langdale Pike and Wrynose Pass areas. If I was to sum up why I really enjoyed camping so much, it was probably because it brought me so close to nature. There is nothing quite like waking up to the dawn chorus, with only a thin piece of canvas between you and the world outside, and then walking out onto the cold dewy grass. During the day, living in a field and surrounded by nothing else but more fields and woods, you could really enjoy working with nature by discovering new wild birds, flowers, insects and animals. On a clear, night I can think of nothing more awe inspiring than studying the stars in the

middle of the dark countryside.

I'm not sure what first drew me to St Deny's Church in Sleaford, but I guess that it was because I belonged to the 3rd Sleaford (St Deny's) Scout Troop. It was also at about that time that I started confirmation classes; those classes were held in the Sleaford Vicarage that was, and still is, a wonderful building with parts of it dating back to the mid 1400s. I soon fell into a Sunday routine of attending, and enjoying, church services; the first would be before breakfast - Holy Communion, at 8.00 a.m.; that would be followed by Morning Prayer at 11.00 and Sunday School in the afternoon, where I was later to become a teacher, and then Evensong at 6.00 p.m. When I was a little older I joined the Church Youth Club, in the Church Hall, which finished with a short Compline service. At one stage I thought of studying to become ordained. St Deny's church is a true gem and deserves to be visited and explored; there is far too much to mention in this book, so I will say no more, other than to mention that it is where I was married a few years later. That strong Christian grounding has served me well throughout my life and I highly commend it.

### A Family Growing Up

I lost all interest in girls, just after moving to Carre's Grammar School; this was probably for a number of different reasons. First, the incident on the way home from the Alvey School made me feel uncomfortable about girls; second, the new school was for boys only, so we no longer saw girls each day; third, my only out-of-school activity was with scouting, which again had no girls associated with it. It was probably a case of "out of sight, out of mind"! However, things were to change a few years later. One day, we noticed that some new people had moved into No. 1 Parry's Court, next door to us. Gradually, I noticed that when I was at the back-yard door I could hear the sound of a piano and someone singing; it was coming from our neighbour's little window in the yard wall. I then became aware of the girl who lived at 1 Parry's Court with her widowed grandmother. I never dreamed that such simple beginnings would have such a profound affect on the rest of my life, as you will hear later.

The first bike that I had was a Christmas present and I just didn't

know what to say when I received it from my parents. I had never had any present like that before and it was wonderful. It had fairly straight handle bars; the frame was brightly painted; it also had three speeds and lamps at the front and the back. I would lovingly clean it each week and keep the chrome wheels polished. Over the next few years I gradually modified it and fitted a dynamo instead of buying batteries for the lamps; more importantly, I fitted some drop handle bars off one of Brian's old bikes; those drop handle bars turned it into a racing machine, in my imagination. If I started at the top of Galley Hill in Northgate and pedalled as hard as I could down the hill, providing that the traffic lights were green, I could almost get to the far end of Southgate without pedalling at all; the wonders of speed were new to me. One day, I was coming down the Galley Hill really fast and, at the last moment, I decided to turn sharp right at the traffic lights into Westgate. To get up a good speed you had to stand on the pedals and pull hard on the handlebars, using all the body strength available. Unfortunately, I had learned nothing about metal fatigue at that stage and was bewildered to find that as I turned the corner I was holding onto a set of handlebars that were no longer fastened to my bike! Luckily, I got away with some awful grazes and a lot of lost pride; another learning curve addressed! I was to use a bicycle as my chief mode of transport for the next thirty years, and particularly when I first left home in Sleaford, to work twenty miles away - at Bourne.

As I grew up I decided to look for a job after school each day; although we had homework to do every night, the only other diversion was to scouts on one night of the week. I eventually found a job and became the errand boy for Mr Roberts, in Westgate. Mr Roberts had a shop that sold wallpaper and paints, as well as many other things and it was my job to deliver the items bought by customers to their home. I was given a huge bicycle, with a massive built-in iron basket on the front, and it was nothing at all like my racing bike at home! I enjoyed the work, as it took me to parts of the town that I had never visited before. There was a huge range of wallpapers and borders for customers to choose from. Having selected the pattern, the customer could then decide whether to have the rolls of paper trimmed on either one side or on both sides before having them delivered. The roll of wallpaper was put onto a machine and the cutting blades

adjusted accordingly. When it was set up, a hand wheel was turned and the roll unwound from one side of the machine, through the cutting blades on each edge of the paper, and then rewound on the opposite side; the roll was then removed and the next one prepared. Mr Roberts told me that when he thought that I was ready, he may allow me to do this task. Naturally, I was feeling really pleased when he eventually gave me the go-ahead; I was not quite so impressed by the time I had finished my first twenty rolls of very heavy-duty wall paper.

Mr Roberts was a stickler for punctuality and I always arrived for work a couple of minutes early, but one day I was nearly half an hour late. I tried to explain and apologise but Mr Roberts would not listen. He was in a rage and his face was getting redder as he chastised me saying that plenty of other boys would be glad of such an important job. He suddenly stopped and demanded to know what I was hiding behind my back. I then showed him my heavily bandaged thumb and explained that I had come straight from the doctors as quickly as I could. He then wanted to know why I had been to the doctors and his wife, who had appeared during the commotion, asked me to sit down. I then had to explain that the tyre on my racing bike at home had a hole in it and, as I couldn't afford a new tyre, I had decided to patch it with a piece of an old tyre. As I couldn't cut through the wire round the edge of the tyre with my knife I had decided to put it on the chopping block in the coal house and to cut it with the axe. However, each time I hit the tyre the axe just bounced off; eventually, I held the tyre very firmly and brought the axe down as hard as I could. Sadly, the end of my thumb was in the way and there was now blood spurting out of the end of it! There was no one else in the house so I went next door, in Parry's Court, to ask for help; luckily, the new girl's uncle was visiting and he rushed me up to the doctors. Mrs Roberts then made me a nice cup of tea and gave me a cake, while Mr Roberts went very quiet. I still carried on working for Mr Roberts for quite a while after that and there were no more serious incidents that I remember.

When I started attending the Grammar School, Brian seemed to notice me for the first time; or perhaps my mother persuaded him to do so! I was also invited to go with him when he went to see his friend, John Phillips, who lived at Woodford House. Woodford House, which was almost

next door to us at number 25 Northgate, seemed to be a magical place to me; perhaps the sort of place that Alice in Wonderland may have visited at sometime. Set back from the main road there was a large, heavy, glazed-door. As soon as I went through that door it felt as though I was in a very strange room, with coloured tiles on the floor; there was nothing else in the room except another large glazed door at the opposite end; this was the entrance porch to the courtyard at Woodford House. The courtyard had a high wall to the left and the house lay to the right. The stone steps up to the main door of the house were in the opposite corner to the entrance porch, but we always used the kitchen door, just to the right from the porch, when we visited. Mrs Phillips, and her spaniel Gyp, always made us welcome; she then let us boys get on with whatever adventures the day would bring. Occasionally, she would show me around the house and, sometimes, she would let me stay in the library; this was a large room overlooking the back garden. There were bookcases that reached from the floor to the ceiling and they were full of exciting books; I never dreamed that there could be so many books in one house! There was also a grand-piano, the likes of which I had never seen before. When we were in the house, we spent most of our time in the large kitchen and I remember one day, when Mrs Phillips wasn't around, exploring a secret passage. We had to promise John that we would never tell anyone else about it; I never have until now, but I don't suppose he will mind as it was well over fifty years ago! From what I can remember, there was a wooden panel in the wall in the opposite corner to the kitchen door; behind that panel there was a long, dark, narrow passage full of cobwebs and dust; we squeezed in and struggled, for what seemed a very long way, before turning around and stumbling back again, into the bright daylight. The direction that we were going was certainly north, towards the old Manor House in Northgate, but how close we got to it I have no idea.

Most of the time we played outside in the garden, or in the outbuildings to the north side of the house. A large lawn stretched from the library French-widows up to the summer-house at the far end of the garden; the lawn was surrounded by a gravel path, designed to hurt small boys when they fell over! There were raised herbaceous borders, full of numerous plants and flowers, on each side of the path and at the far end. About half way up the border, on the right-hand side, there was a goldfish

pond with lots of thick weeds in which the fish could hide; we had fun collecting tadpoles in jam-jars during the spring and then watching them gradually grow into small frogs before putting them back into the garden.

Our favourite area for playing was at the top of the garden, in the far left-hand corner near the summerhouse. Stone steps led up to a raised area, the shape of a three-penny bit, with a surrounding wall. Trees, overhanging from the adjacent Westholme Drive, made this place feel more secret; hidden, up on this mound, there was no limit to the adventures that we could enact, with a little imagination. If we were very careful, we could slip over the low wall on top of the mound and drop down into the trees in Westholme drive; once we dropped down, however, there was no turning back because the wall was too high to climb from that side. Keeping a wary eye out for the people who worked in the telephone exchange, at number 23 Northgate, we could then run from tree to tree and emerge at the end of the drive, where we would walk calmly home, feeling proud that we had not been noticed - or so we thought. Brian and John were always discovering new things and were particularly interested in electro-magnetism, but they didn't quite understand the fundamentals - as the fused lights in the house were often to prove! Another invention of theirs was a simple telephone from the back of John's house, across Westholme Drive, over Parry's Court and then into our house. Unfortunately, their innovative idea was not appreciated by the Post Office Officials, who operated from the town's telephone exchange - directly between our two houses - Brian and John were ordered to remove it immediately!

A couple of years later I had a pleasant surprise when one of my school pals invited a group of us to his birthday party, near Lincoln; if he had known where we were going, Brian would have appreciated it even more than I did. Our friend's father worked for A V Roe and, as a special treat, he took us all into one of the old aircraft hangars in Bracebridge Heath. It was almost as though *Journey into Space* had suddenly become real as we were then shown around a new Avro 707 delta wing aircraft. At that time I had no particular interest in aircraft, but we just knew that this was something really special. I now know that this was one of a series of aircraft designed to explore the delta-wing design for a new bomber and it was the prototype for the Avro Vulcan. The Avro 707 was one of the first aircraft

used for experiments on electrically signalled flying controls - or *Fly by Wire*, that all modern military aircraft now use. Incidentally, it is understood that the three-bay hangar that we visited was erected in 1917-18 and, because it was a very rare example, it was registered as an historic listed building; regrettably it was somehow demolished in 2001.

The only really strong friend that I made at school was Tim Clarke, who lived in Sleaford at Ickworth Road, between Grantham Road and London Road. He was my best-man when I was married, but sadly he died at a very young age leaving his wife Joan to bring up their young family, which she did very well. Tim did not belong to scouts or attend my church; we just became good friends at school. It was Tim whom first introduced me to classical music, via his gramophone. I gradually became a regular visitor to his house and his mother always made me very welcome. It was also at Tim's house that I first watched television; he asked me if I would like to watch a particular programme on TV and then, because it finished very late at night, to stay at his house for the night. I had no idea what the programme was, but I would have watched anything on television and I had never stayed in anyone else's house before. Tim then explained to his parents that I had never seen TV before, and that I really would like to see that particular programme and, if possible, to stay for the night. They agreed and we settled down to watch "1984". Tim's parents became increasingly uncomfortable as the evening drew on; clearly they didn't think that this programme was suitable viewing for us young boys. After many hints about time for bed, which Tim didn't seem to notice, they persevered and we saw the whole programme, which really was cutting edge stuff at that time. I was still made very welcome by Tim's mum whenever I visited, but I was never invited back to watch TV!

One evening, we decided to give my parents a surprise; they rarely went out, but this particular evening they were going to a meeting. My mother had been contemplating repainting the ceiling in the front-room for quite a while. I mentioned it to Tim and he said that it would not be a problem for us to do the job; his Dad had a spraying machine that would do it in no time - much quicker than using old fashioned brushes. What greeted Mum and Dad when they came home and opened the front-door were white footprints up and down the stair carpet and a complete disaster

in the front-room. Tim and I hadn't yet understood the fundamental rule that says "what goes up must come down again". Sorry Mum and Dad!

My mother lived at 19a Northgate for about twenty years. One big dilemma for any member of the armed forces with a family is what to do about their children's education. Do they stay in one place and give the children a stable schooling and friends, or do they move the family, and schooling, each time the serviceman receives a posting to a new station? Initially, there was no decision for my parents to make, because of the war. When the war finished they didn't want to move to a new area because Brian was at Grammar School; just as Brian was leaving school, I then started Grammar School and, again, they didn't want to disrupt my education. Similarly, in subsequent years, Paddy, Mervyn and Richard were settled in their schools. The end result is that I grew up not knowing my father, other than someone who would appear for a short time and then, when his leave finished, he would disappear again. As children, what is normal is what you see around you all of the time; I didn't visit any other children's houses, therefore nothing seemed unusual about having a Dad that didn't live at home. We never did have any family holidays away from Sleaford, but we often took picnics down to the recreation ground - always called the *Rec* - in Boston Road; that was particularly enjoyable when Dad was at home, as he played tennis in the club next to the *Rec*.

In 1957 my father started to seriously think about leaving the Royal Air Force and to spend more time at home with Mum and us boys. Unfortunately, by then both Brian and I had already spread our wings and had started to look at the bigger world, even if it was only to be in another part of Lincolnshire! Mum and Dad then decided to move away from Sleaford and to rent Walcot Grange. Walcot was about ten miles due south of Sleaford and was a typical, very small, Lincolnshire village in the middle of farming country. The Village Green was in the centre of the village, on the south side of St Nicholas' Church; it was an attractive church with an unusual spire, and the rest of the building had a long history going back to Norman times. There was also a pub almost opposite our new home; I think that it was called the Black Bull. One evening, three of us decided to pop over and have a drink; we found our way through the overgrown track, but couldn't find out which door to use. In response to our

knock at the door, a puzzled face appeared to see what we wanted; we explained that we were the new neighbours and that we had called in for a drink. The landlord then invited us in and we sat in his kitchen while he sorted out what "spare" beer he had, and then he served us. A couple of weeks later we noticed that the sign had been removed and the pub had closed; we think that the excitement of three new customers was just too much for him! I was working in Bourne, ten miles south of Walcot, when Mum and Dad moved to the Grange. I'm sure that it was nothing to do with me, but it was quite handy because Walcot was now a half-way-house on the twenty mile cycle ride between Bourne and Sleaford, during my courting days with Phyl.

Walcot Grange was as different to 19a Northgate as you could imagine. A large drive on the north side led to the huge stone house, with out-buildings on either side of a lawn. To the south of the house was another large lawn; beyond that there was a gentle sweep down over fields to a small stream and then up again, with the larger village of Folkingham sitting in the distance, at the top of the hill. To the east of the lawn, behind large herbaceous borders and a line of mixed trees, lay the kitchen gardens. The house itself was full of character, with the main door to the west. The backdoor, into the scullery and the kitchen, was in the north-east corner of the house; the main rooms, south facing, had French windows opening out onto a gravel path and the south lawn. The kitchen and scullery were both large, and there was a door in the north-west corner of the kitchen leading to a very small twisting staircase up into the maid's room. I hasten to add that Mum and Dad never had a maid, but that was part of the history that came with the house. There was a door from the kitchen leading to a corridor with the large walk-in pantry on the right; to the left there was a corridor leading to a large entrance hall and the main staircase. The sitting room, the music room and the spare room were to the south of the hall, overlooking the garden, and on the opposite side of the main entrance hall there was a smaller cloakroom. There were four large bedrooms upstairs and, again, a very large cold bathroom. Another flight of stairs led up to the attic rooms. The only thing that I remember as being in common with 19a Northgate was that Walcot Grange seemed to be just as cold, or even worse in the winter!

Having painted that quick pen-picture, I should add that the gardens were in complete neglect when my parents moved in; the lawns looked more like un-mown fields and the kitchen gardens were unrecognisable. However, my parents soon set to work and by the following year, surprise, surprise, there was a tennis court on the south lawn and the tidy flowering borders looked wonderful. Vegetables were growing in the other part of the kitchen garden; we boys also helped, when we were there, but in my case that was not very often. I remember that the posts for the tennis-court net were recycled branches from pruned laburnum trees between the herbaceous border and the kitchen garden; they were chosen because they were straight and smooth. You can imagine our surprise the following year when both the tennis-net posts sprouted leaves and yellow flowers. Our parents worked very hard and took produce from the kitchen garden into the market at Grantham each week. They also diversified and at times raised pigs in one of the out-buildings, with the salting taking place in the pantry, and hams hanging from the ceiling. Another project was for a mushroom-farm in the outbuildings and the attic rooms, but they certainly didn't make a fortune from those. Another small project was to have chickens, for eggs, and geese for fattening-up for Christmas. Mum got quite attached to the geese, which also made excellent security guards; understandably, she couldn't bring herself to prepare them for the pot, so they remained as pets. As my younger brothers grew up, there was always sibling rivalry between them. Richard, being the youngest, always thought that he was being "picked on"; apparently, that also included the geese, which seemed to enjoy chasing him. One day, he decided to get his own back by frightening the geese with his air rifle; he took aim at the most aggressive one, but, unfortunately, the pellet went straight through its eye and it dropped dead! Richard now had to do some quick thinking. As no one else was around, he picked up the goose and took it down to the stream at the bottom of the field. Later that day, he told Mum that he had some bad news for her. He explained that the goose had tripped over in the stream, had hit its head on a stone, and it had then drowned!

We never had, or needed, a car as we grew up. However, eventually Dad bought a car, probably to allow him to travel to and from

work when he was posted reasonably close to home. The first time that I remember travelling in Dad's car was in 1957, when I was off work with an injured arm. Dad had decided to visit his sisters and their families in Ireland and asked me if I would like to go with him. We had hardly left Sleaford when my passenger door flew open and it swung violently to the rear; the wind had forced it back on its hinges and it would no longer close properly. We then tied a piece of string to the door handle and to the front of the car and, as an extra precaution, I had to put my arm out of the window to hold the door closed on the journey to Ireland and back again. Luckily, it was the other arm that was already in a sling. Perhaps that is why I have never been interested in cars, other than to have something reliable and reasonably comfortable to get me from A to B. On the other hand, Brian was very enthusiastic about cars for many years; some of his more exotic models included a red 1933 Alvis Firefly, with a dickey seat in the back; a 1937 grey Alvis Estate that, to Mum's displeasure, had curtains in the back and a notice saying "Don't smile madam, your daughter may be inside"; and a 1938 Lanchester, with a pre-selector fluid flywheel - so Brian proudly told me!

Paddy, Mervyn and Richard, usually referred to as "*the boys*", were still going to school in Sleaford when they moved to Walcot and they will remember far more about Walcot Grange than I do. However, one story does jump to my mind. One warm summer's weekend I called in at Walcot on my way from Bourne to Sleaford, but there was no one at home; on the kitchen table there was a note for Brian, saying that Mum and Dad would be back soon. I was working away from home and, as I hadn't seen much of Brian since he joined the RAF, I decided to wait and have a chat with him. I was never built to sit around doing nothing and was wondering whether to cycle on to Sleaford when I heard the heavy front door slam shut; good, I thought, Brian has arrived - but then no one appeared. I thought that perhaps he was unloading things from his car, so I went to help him. To my surprise, there was no one there; there was no sign of a car and the front door was firmly locked. It was a warm summer's day with not even a breeze blowing, so I couldn't understand what made the unmistakable noise of the heavy front door slamming shut. I waited for a bit longer and then decided to leave a note for Mum and Dad, explaining about

the bang, and saying that I would be back later that night. When I returned home that night I was met by a very irate mother who asked why I had left the note that my younger brothers might have read, and more importantly, one that could frighten them. I was totally confused and couldn't see what the fuss was about. Mum then explained that, ever since they had moved into Walcot Grange, strange things had been happening in the house: items would move from one place to another; windows would open and shut on their own; and on one calm night the letter box in the front door kept rattling, but there was no one near the door, either inside or out. Those were just a few of the happenings and both Mum and Dad were coming to the conclusion that the house may be haunted. They had been very careful not to alarm my brothers by discussing that option, and had always been able to give what they thought were plausible explanations if the boys mentioned these events. What they didn't know, and the boys never told Mum and Dad until much later, was that just after they had moved in to Walcot Grange, and on the first day the school bus came to pick the boys up from the gate, all of the children on the bus greeted them in excitement and said that they wondered who had moved into the haunted house! It appears that there had been numerous years of horrible things happening to the many previous tenants of Walcot Grange and that, eventually, each of the tenants had to leave. We, and others, were also to inherit that legacy only a few years later. The story was that many years earlier a maid had been murdered in the house, but her remains had never been found and that it was her ghost that wandered around the house. I have thought about those events ever since and have never come up with a rational explanation, other than to acknowledge that we certainly don't understand everything that goes on around us.

Some months later, after he had left the RAF, Dad was ill and had to go into Grantham hospital for a serious operation. To my knowledge, that was the first time that he ever had anything wrong with him, other than sporting injuries. I came home from work one weekend and Mum asked me to go up to their bedroom and talk to Dad, who was still not well. I remember asking Mum what I was supposed to talk about. For the first time I realised that I had never sat down and talked to Dad about anything during my whole childhood or my young adult life; it was an awful

realisation. Somehow, we managed to pass the time, but at least that gave us the opportunity to start making up for lost time and our relationship grew stronger as the years went by.

### Starting Work

It came to me as quite a shock when I left school and realised that I had to go to work and earn my living. From time to time I had been asked what I intended to do when I grew up and I had decided that I would like to be an architect; however, no one seriously followed that up, or suggested any other options. It was also clear that, with only one GCE "O" level my career options were pretty limited and becoming an architect was no longer viable. During the summer holidays, one of my ex-school pals mentioned that there was a chicken factory in one of the nearby villages, owned by Mr G. W. Padley, and that he paid good money. I decided to follow this up and, by looking in the telephone directory, discovered that Mr Padley lived in a house called Eslaforde House, near the Alvey School in Eastgate. The next day I put on my smartest clothes and set off for Eslaforde House. When I arrived I thought that I recognised it as being the house where Mr W. H. Brown, the Auctioneer and Estate Agent, used to live; I must have been there some years earlier during the Scout's fund-raising Bob-a-Job week. It was a very impressive house, with a sweeping drive, between thick herbaceous borders, leading up to the large house. In my innocence, I knocked at the front door and explained to Mr George Padley who I was and said that I was looking for a job at the factory; he seemed somewhat bemused but thought that the factory job may not be suitable for me. However, he said that he was looking for someone to help around the garden and to do odd jobs throughout the day. It was agreed that I would start work the next week. One of the first jobs that I was given was to wash Mr Padley's brand new car. He showed me where to connect the hose pipe and left me the cleaning materials; I was hesitant to switch on the water, thinking of my dad's old car, in case the interior of the car got wet. Mr Padley thought that this was hilarious and told me not to worry as, if the water did go inside he would take the car back to the garage the next day and get another one; I hadn't realised that new cars were actually

waterproofed! We got on very well together from then on. One of my main jobs was to keep the gardens looking smart, but I had very little experience of real gardening, and none at all on a scale like that one. One day a week a proper gardener was employed and I was told to learn from him. I explained to the gardener that my biggest problem, when weeding, was that I couldn't tell whether the green leaves were weeds or flowers; he then said "That's not a problem. Grip the leaves and pull the plant out firmly. If it's got a bulb on the end it's a flower; if it hasn't, then it might be". He obviously wasn't going to give up his secrets easily, but we did get on well together. My other jobs included entertaining the Padley's two small children.

It was during this time that I kept up some studying and returned to Carre's to take three more GCE "O" levels, in English Language, English Literature and Woodwork; I was pleased when I passed them all, as that now quadrupled my previous score. I enjoyed my work at the Padley's, and Mrs Padley was always very kind, but I began to think there must be something else that I could do. Mr Padley did explain that he was hoping to expand and have an outlet for his poultry in Sleaford, if he could find a suitable shop, and that he would be happy for me to work there as his manager. Eventually, I arranged to see a careers' advisor and I then decided that I would apply to work for the Forestry Commission, particularly as I enjoyed the outdoor life. My first interview with the Forestry Commission was in Bourne, about twenty miles south of Sleaford, and it was agreed that I could start work straight away. In those days there were about twenty men working in a gang, with a *Ganger* in charge. We would all meet outside the Forestry Office early in the morning and would be taken in the back of old army lorries to the area that we were to work for the day. There was a wide range of characters in the gang, but about six of the people were nearly my age, except that they were all forestry apprentices; they had one day off each week to attend classes in the local college. The other men appeared to be from a wide range of backgrounds and ages. There was always good-hearted banter between the mature men and the apprentices. While at work I was classed as one of the men and seemed to be accepted as such, but in the evenings after work I sometimes joined the apprentices, socially.

The men were either paid a basic weekly wage, or we could opt to do piecework, which meant you got paid for the work that we did during that day. When we arrived at a new site, the ganger would decide on the going-rate for the work. Naturally, if the working conditions were particularly difficult we were not expected to produce as much work as we would if it was relatively easy conditions. Setting the rate was always contentious; the ganger would set us all to work for a couple of days just to measure the difficulty of the job. There was pressure from the more strong-willed men to stop anyone working too hard, in case we were given a poor rate for the job, but it all seemed to work out quite fair in the end. There was always the threat that if anyone earned too much by the end of the week, then the rate may be reduced on the following week. I always opted for piecework, worked hard and earned about the same as the rest of the mature men. I remember that when I first started work that it was my ambition to eventually earn £20 a week, or £1,000 a year! The forestry work was seasonal and always outdoors; in the spring we would prepare old ground and plant new trees. Summer time would be spent weeding the new plantations with our sickles. Autumn and winter were probably my favourite seasons as we would then fell the mature trees, clear the land and prepare it for replanting in the spring. Over the years I have seen those plantations all over the south of Lincolnshire grow into mature woods and I half dread driving past in case they have been cut down, reminding me of my age! There was a wide range of axes used for felling, but my favourite was an Old English axe, which had a lovely shaped head; it was very heavy and was difficult to use well, but it cut into the tree like butter if it was properly sharpened and used well. We also used ripsaws, bow-saws and, sometimes, petrol driven power-saws. There was nothing better at the end of a hard morning's work than to stand in front of a blazing wood fire, made from our morning's work, and eat the sandwiches made before breakfast. My main drink during the day was cold tea from a pop bottle, filled every morning by the landlady of my digs from the leftovers after breakfast! Another aspect that I enjoyed was being so close to nature every working day and the unexpected arrival, at any time, of foxes, red and fallow deer, and sometimes badgers, as well as a whole range of birds and plants.,

I first learned to drive with the Forestry Commission, but only on a range of tractors that are probably now in museums. The tractors were used for pulling felled-trees out of the woods and then stacking them at the side of the rides for later collection by timber lorries. Starting the tractors on a cold winter's morning was an art; some of them were started from a small petrol reservoir and then a tap was changed over, once the engine was hot, to run off paraffin. I was in trouble one day when someone noticed the "hot plate" glowing red; I had forgotten to change over the switch and had been running the engine on petrol instead of paraffin. The only other serious event that I had was when I was told to go and see the Head Forester and to explain what I had just done. I had started the tractor in the garage one morning, but selected reverse instead of the forward gear! The next thing that I knew was that I had run into the Head Forester's pride and joy, his old Jaguar car. He was obviously very upset, but he controlled his emotions very well and accepted my apologies, probably because there was not much damage done to his car.

There is an old saying that "boys will be boys" and I suppose that we all did a range of stupid things, like most young people. One totally irresponsible event that I do remember was when some of the apprentices found a bomb and smuggled it onto one of the lorries when it was time to go home. Many of the new forest plantations were on disused, wartime airfields. The bomb had been found when clearing the ground for planting and, sometime later, it was found near the cinema in Bourne. It was inexcusable, and today I suppose we would all have been rounded up and imprisoned as potential terrorists. That incident was at about the same time that I went to see Bill Haley's newly released film *Rock Around the Clock*; I had never heard music anything like that before and I enjoyed it. When I left home, I had a most wonderful and unexpected present from my parents: a Winsor & Newton box of oil paints, which I still have. During quiet spells in the evenings I would sit in the woods, or back in my digs, and paint; the only painting that we still have from that time is one that I painted for Phyl, during our courting days. As time progressed, I was encouraged to sit exams for selection to the Forester Training Course, in the Forest of Dean. I passed the exams, and the interview at Cambridge, and was promised a place the following year.

Then the most terrible thing happened - a letter arrived saying that I was to report for National Service; I was devastated. I could think of nothing worse than joining the armed forces, particularly as I was enjoying my work so much and with the promise of better things to come with the course at the Forester Training School. Subsequently, I did receive a letter from the Forestry Commission promising me a place on the course, after I had completed my National Service. The Assistant Forester at Bourne was working there, after receiving his degree, because he was a conscientious objector, but he was very unpopular with the workmen. As we sat around the fire at lunch times during the following week, a debate revolved around the need for National Service; many of the men were ex-servicemen, including several from World War II and one from the more recent war in Korea. The unanimous decision was that it was our duty to serve the country, and opting out was not to be considered; I then realised that I just had to get on with it.

My parents must have told my brother Brian about my concerns, and he arranged to come home on leave one weekend to have a long talk with me. He explained that I had two choices; either I joined the army and marched up and down for two years, or I could join the Royal Air Force and learn one of the twenty-two trades that were available. He recommended that I chose the RAF and that I elect for one of the radio or radar trades, as electronics was the future. He explained that when my National Service ended I could then either return to the Forestry Commission or use my newly learned skills in electronics. It is clear that this was not an unbiased opinion, as Brian had already chosen his career in the RAF, but it did help me to get my thoughts together. Having thought about Brian's proposals I told him that it didn't seem possible. I had absolutely no knowledge of anything scientific, as my four GCE arts subjects proved. Brian told me not to worry about that as the RAF would send me to a technical school and teach me what I needed to know. He then explained that when I went for the interviews with the RAF I was to insist on going into one of the radio trades; if they said "no" then I was to tell them that I would go into the army instead. Brian also warned me that I would have to take some basic trade ability tests; he also mentioned that I would probably be told that there were no vacancies left in the radio trades and that they would then offer me

some other trades. He stressed that I must challenge their decision and to stick to my original resolve.

### The Royal Air Force

I registered for National Service in August and attended the medical examination at the RAF Recruiting Centre in Broadgate, Lincoln on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October 1958. There were also preliminary discussions about trades. My next stage was kiting-out, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of October, at the RAF Reception Unit Cardington, which is where I met John Defoe for the first time; John was to become a life-long friend. Like many other people called-up for National Service at that time, we were wondering how on earth we were going to survive on the weekly pittance that we were given. However, we soon found out that if we "signed-on" for three years instead of two, then the pay rise was huge and training options improved; I hasten to add that the rate of pay was still very low but, relative to the National Service pay, it was a substantial increase. This was another important learning experience; my realisation that everything in life is relative to something else. I often wondered whether that was all part of a hidden government plot to improve recruiting into the armed services from a vulnerable and captive National Service audience. I quickly decided to "sign-on" for three years Regular RAF Service, but then increased it to five years, so that I could be trained in Trade Group 2 - as a Ground Radar Fitter.

It was at this stage that the oath had to be taken by recruits, at attestation. The oath is reproduced here as it was to set the scene for far more years to come than I ever anticipated: *"I swear by Almighty God that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Her Heirs and Successors, and that I will, as in duty bound, honestly and faithfully defend Her Majesty, Her Heirs and Successors, in Person, Crown and Dignity against all enemies, and will observe and obey all orders of Her Majesty, Her Heirs and Successors, and of the Air Officers and Officers set over me. So help me God"*. Over the decades there has been much discussion over whether we should have a Monarchy or a Republic and there are good arguments on both sides. However, I am certain that service personnel should swear allegiance to a Head of State

and certainly not to the political party that happens to be in power at any particular time; one only has to think back to the second Gulf War to see the problems that could arise. Personally, I believe that we have had an outstanding Head of State in Queen Elizabeth II and it is difficult to imagine an alternative that could work as effectively. As the old engineering saying goes..."If it ain't broke, don't fix it"!

The brief stay at RAF Cardington was followed on the 20<sup>th</sup> of October by "Square-bashing" in Shropshire, at RAF Bridgenorth, where more career interviews were held. The basic training was hard but fair and was aimed at teaching recruits to accept discipline and orders without question. Each morning would start with a very early wake-up call, a wash, shave and then standby for inspection of kit and bed-pack, including highly bulled-boots - even if they were covered in mud the night before! The coke-burning stove in the centre of the wooden barrack block, which kept twenty-four men warm during the night, was expected to be cold and black-leaded before inspection each morning. If it had been frosty the night before, then the grass outside had to be swept into straight strips, to look as though it had just been mowed! After queuing for breakfast in the airmen's mess, with our mug, knife, fork and spoon held firmly in our left hand, behind our back, we would then race back to the barrack block in time to go on parade. Parades always started by the Corporal shouting "Fall-out the lame and the lazy"; that was a sign for recruits to report sick - if they dare! If we had a church parade there would be another announcement by the Corporal "Fall-out the Roman Catholics, Jews and Unbelievers", not very politically correct, but no one seemed to think of that in those days. The weeks and days all seemed to be of a similar routine with marching drill, rifle practice, PT, mini-exercises and various lectures. It was surprising how a totally disorganised group of people could be trained to conform so quickly into a smart-looking Flight of men. The secret for a reasonably quiet life was to accept what we were told to do and then to get on with it as well as possible. The training instructors were nearly all at Corporal level, although the Sergeant would take us for parades and some lectures.

True to form, as predicted by Brian, I took more aptitude tests and was then told that there were no vacancies in the radio trades, but that I could train to be a Fireman, a Cook or a Dog Handler. I was weighing up

those options when I heard Brian's voice in my head. I stuck to my guns and, to my surprise, after my basic training was over I was posted to RAF Locking on the 17<sup>th</sup> of December awaiting a final decision on my new career; RAF Locking was the No. 1 Radio Training School. During the Christmas break, Brian then had another career briefing session with me. He explained that I could be trained either as a Radar Mechanic or as a Radar Fitter. The difference was that as a mechanic my promotion ceiling was limited to Senior Aircraftman; however, as a fitter, there was no limit to my airman promotion prospects. Again, I said that with no science background it did not seem to be feasible, but he told me to stick to my guns for a fitter's course, as there was nothing to lose. When I returned to RAF Locking I then went through more aptitude tests and was told that I was unsuitable for a Fitter's Course. I explained that I would work hard if they gave me the chance and I was given the temporary status of *Radio Trade Assistant* while they decided what to do with me.

Eventually, I was allocated a place on a Ground Radar Fitter's Course! However, that decision was relatively short-lived; I soon found that the whole of my course, with the exception of me, were people whose National Service had been deferred until they had finished either their University Engineering Degree or their Higher National Certificate in Electrical or Electronic Engineering. I sat in the classroom each day trying to fathom out what they were all talking about and what on earth the hieroglyphics on the blackboard were supposed to mean. They were all extremely enthusiastic about the theory of radar on this wonderful postgraduate course - except for me! There were regular phase-test throughout the course, to make sure that everyone was keeping up to the standard required; naturally, I was soon called in for a progress interview with a senior tutor. The pass mark on the course was a minimum of 60%, but I was achieving only about 35%. We mutually agreed that my simple "arts" background was not really at the level required for this intensive course and I was then allocated to the next Radar Mechanics course, which started a few weeks later. The teaching techniques on that course were very good; they took us potential mechanics, assuming that we knew nothing, from the basics of mathematics and the through the theory of electricity and magnetism. We then moved on to the theory and practice of

radar, in simple terms. I had no problems with the course, or with the final exams, and I was then ready for a posting.

While we were at RAF Locking weekends didn't start until lunchtime, after drill and Pay-Parade on Saturday mornings. If we had permission to be absent for the weekend, after the parades, we had to be back on camp by Sunday evening. Pay Parades seemed to last for ever; hundreds of recruits were lined-up on the parade ground and then the laborious procedure began with individual names being called in alphabetical order; the named recruit would then march forward, repeat the last three digits of his Service number, pick up the small amount of money on the table, check the amount and sign for it, salute again and then march back to his place on the parade ground. You can probably imagine what was going through everyone's mind with this tedious procedure before we could relax for the weekend. When we were dismissed there would always be a rush to the cookhouse for lunch and then we were usually free for the weekend. I said that there was always a rush for the cookhouse, or Airmen's Mess, but that was not always the case. While I was at Locking the standard of the food dropped from bad to terrible; although there were numerous complaints, nothing changed. The Duty Officer would visit the Mess each day and ask if there were any complaints; we soon learned to be careful with any comments as it was not unusual to find that anyone who spoke up was on "*Tin Duty*" the next day; that extra duty was to clean the cooking tins in the Airmen's, Sergeant's or Officer's Mess, after the main evening meal. One particular day there was a high-powered visit from an Officer of Air-rank with a tightly controlled tour of the Station, including lunch-time at the Airmen's Mess. There was huge embarrassment to the Station executives when the visiting party found no airmen at the Mess but a huge queue at the NAAFI. The following week there were endless interviews by the Special Investigation Branch of the RAF Police, to track down the ringleaders of this "mutiny". Apparently, everyone just happened to feel like going to the NAAFI on that particular day instead of going to the Mess! The ringleaders, if there were any, were never found but questions were still being asked months later; strangely enough, the food suddenly seemed to get much better after that.

Because of the shortness of time available, and the distance to travel home from Somerset to Lincolnshire, most weekends were spent at RAF Locking. One advantage was that we could either explore the local area or get involved in one of the numerous activities organised by clubs on the Station. I enjoyed hill-walking in the Mendip Hills close by, but only once went on a pot-holing expedition: I preferred the open sky and the fresh air! We also had many enjoyable and very inexpensive evenings in the local pub at Banwell, with pints of scrumpy and hunks of bread & cheese. A short bus-ride away was the seaside town of Weston-Super-Mare, of earlier Soap-Box-Derby fame, and that was another favourite place at weekends. Like many seaside towns at that time, it had its fair share of problems from rival gangs of *Mods and Rockers*, particularly at weekends. We were surprised one day when our normal, fairly boring, PT sessions suddenly changed into classes on self-defence. Subtly, we were told how some types of clothing may help to protect us if we happened to be in town if trouble broke out; that included our webbing belts and boots; the self-defence techniques were quiet easy to learn, but were not for the squeamish. The Armed Services have a duty to "Give aid to the Local Authorities in times of need". I'm sure that this was not what happened in our case, officially, but I often wondered if a quiet word had been passed down the line from somewhere quite high up. On another occasion I was surprised to be selected by the PE staff for a special event. For several weeks I had been the target of a particularly nasty bully in our barrack block who would wait until I had gone to bed and would then jump onto my bed and proceed to punch me, for no apparent reason. The "event" was a strictly supervised boxing match between myself and the bully! I was terrified, but did as I was told. After weighing each other up for a few circuits of the ring, and a few tentative jabs, I landed a punch on his jaw and he fell to the ground, looking even more frightened than me. I can only assume that some one in our barrack room must have mentioned the bullying to the PE staff, but their solution worked and there was never anymore trouble from the bully. One weekend, I asked if I could be excused the Saturday morning parades, which was unheard of. I was told to report to my Flight Commander and I then explained that Phyl had managed to get a pair of tickets to "My Fair Lady", which had just opened in London, at

Drury Lane. He was amazed and then told me to go and enjoy it as he had been trying to get tickets, but couldn't find any! It was the first time that I had ever been to a London Theatre and it couldn't have been a better introduction. Eventually my course ended and I was about to start a real adventure in the wide new world - or so I thought. I was then posted on the 8<sup>th</sup> of June 1959, the day before my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, to RAF Waddington in Lincolnshire - about fifteen miles north of Sleaford!

RAF Waddington was a base for the Avro Vulcan Squadrons - the first large strike aircraft in the world designed with the delta wing. The Vulcans, otherwise known as one of the three types of V-bombers, arrived at Waddington in 1957, about two years before me. I soon settled into a routine as the new Radar Mechanic on the Ground Radio Flight and was promoted in July to Leading Aircraftman and then to Senior Aircraftman by November. My main duties were to service and tune the simple airfield navigation aids called BABS and Eureka each day. From what I recall, BABS resembled a small chicken hut at the end of the runway and the pilot received signals from it to move either to the right or to the left so that he could line up with the runway - I told you it was simple! The main search radar was called CPN-18 and was an American airfield radar with a normal range of about fifty miles, although it could be used well beyond that range at times; its purpose was to guide returning aircraft back to their base at RAF Waddington. I recall that in the early hours of one morning we could clearly see the whole of the Lincolnshire coast, the Wash and the Norfolk coast on the radar screens, due to some freak weather conditions. The radar site was on the east side of the airfield, between the main runway and the Sleaford Road. The transmitter and receiver equipment were in a building at the foot of a skeleton-type metal radar tower and the rotating aerial-head was connected, by a rotating wave-guide joint, to the building below. The processed radar signals, which included a Moving Target Indicator system to reduce ground reflections, were fed by land-lines across the airfield to the Air Traffic Control tower on the west side of the airfield. The data was then decoded and displayed on radar screens. We worked a shift pattern, as there were both daytime and night-time flying programs; the radar maintenance work started after cease flying at night and the consoles in Air Traffic Control tower were set-up each morning

before the start of flying. There was also a Precision Approach Radar (PAR) in the centre of the airfield, quite close to the east side of the runway, but I was not involved with that - yet! By the end of the year I was feeling quite comfortable with my new trade, but I realised that I had already reached my promotion ceiling unless I could return to the training school on a Fitters Course.

### Phyl

I alluded to "the girl next door", earlier on, so now it is time to introduce you to Phyl. To me she was my sweetheart, my fiancée and my wife; now, after over half a century, she is still my wife and my best friend. To others she was, or still is: a granddaughter, daughter, sister, niece, cousin, mother, aunt, grandmother and a wonderful friend. Phyllis (Phyl) Marina Robinson was born on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August 1940 at Algakirk, near Boston - in the Lincolnshire fens. She was the youngest of eight children born to Cyril and Annie (nee Bell) Robinson. Her paternal grandparents were Joseph John and Elizabeth Sarah (nee Leany) Robinson. Phyl's grandmother was raised in Kent and was "in service" to reasonably wealthy families, prior to meeting her future husband. One of her few boasts to Phyl was that when she was nineteen years old she had a nineteen inch waist; and she had a photograph to prove it! Her grandfather was an honest and hard working man all of his life; he never spoke of his origins, other than to say that he had arrived in England, from County Monaghan in Ireland, when he was seventeen years old. It was said that his only possessions when he arrived in England were the clothes that he was wearing and a bible in his hand; he started work with the London Brickwork Company and then met his future wife, in Kent. Phyl's grandparents raised four sons: Cyril, John, Albert and Bill, and a daughter - Mary.

In about 1920 Phyl's Grandfather was promoted and moved to the Flowerpot brickyard, in Mareham Lane, about four miles south of Sleaford. As he was the manager he and his family lived in Flowerpot House, next to the brickyard; his sons also worked with him in the brickyard as they grew up. Phyl's Dad then decided to work for British Rail and he married Annie when he was nineteen years old; she was twenty-one and they moved into the "prefabs" next to the Flowerpot. The war then started and Phyl's uncles

Albert and Bill joined the army; Uncle Albert was a very quiet man, but he distinguished himself in North Africa and then in Italy, where he was awarded the Military Medal. Phyl's father had a severe case of pneumonia before the war and, therefore, was not fit enough to be called-up; he carried on working for British Rail throughout the war and beyond, until his eventual retirement.

By the time Phyl was born, her family were living in the small railway cottage next to the Algakirk railway crossing, where her mother opened and closed the gates for either the passing trains or the road traffic. Sadly, Phyl and her siblings had a pretty hard start in life; Phyl was only four when her Mum died in 1944. With eight children to support, her Dad must have had a terrible time. To start with various members of Phyl's mother's family helped out, but eventually, about a year later, her brothers and sisters had all gone away and Phyl moved to the Flowerpot to stay with her Grandmother and Grandfather. When she was five she started school, about four miles away at Quarrington, just south of Sleaford. Shortly after that, her Grandfather became quite ill and she was on the move again for about the next six years, with a variety of foster parents and temporary homes in Blankney, Great Hale, Heckington, Sleaford and Digby. In 1951, after her Grandfather had died, she moved back to live with her "Gran" at the Flowerpot for the next two years; she was then eleven years old. Travelling backwards and forwards to Sleaford for school and shopping became increasingly difficult for Phyl and her Gran. Therefore, in 1953, they moved to Sleaford - into No. 1 Parry's Court. Phyl was then at the Secondary Modern School, in Sleaford, and remembers when her Dad bought her a new watch, which she needed because she was made chief "bell-ringer" for class change time. The following year she was made Head Prefect and was the Principal Boy in the school pantomime "Cinderella"; she still has a telegram from the Queen congratulating the school for their pantomime performance and for their generous fund-raising for local charities. When Phyl left school she worked for the Lincolnshire Library Service, based in Westholme House, and she enjoyed travelling around the villages in the county with the mobile library service.

It was a couple of years earlier that I started to notice new things around me: such as singing and piano music coming from the small

window in our backyard at Northgate; a cheerful smile from the new girl who lived next door, who was also helping to run the Wolf Cubs; and then comments from boys at school about the girl in the pantomime with the lovely legs! Romance was starting to blossom. Gradually, I overcame my initial shyness and we began to speak to each other; we would then go for walks, cycle rides or visit the Picturedrome in Southgate, to see the latest musicals such as: *Oklahoma*, *The Student Prince*, *The King and I*, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, etc. Perhaps this new pleasure was another reason for not taking as much interest as I should during my last year at school! As well as being a leading light in the school pantomimes, Phyl was also quite involved in the local amateur dramatic society, including a production at the Little Theatre in Jermyn Street. Phyl also joined the Church Youth Club and we were both selected to go on various Youth Leadership courses that were run by Lincolnshire County Council. One of those courses was held over a long-weekend, in an old school at Leadenham; we were all roused at about two o'clock one morning to "rescue" someone who had fallen down the cliff-face in a local quarry; good morale building stuff in the heavy rain! On another occasion we spent a week camping near Hathersage, in Derbyshire, which included a wide variety of topics ranging from elementary rock-climbing at Froggatt Edge to a visit to Chatsworth House. It was during that week that we were given permission to briefly visit Phyl's sister, Josephine, in Sheffield; that was the first time that I met Josie and her husband Frank, and they made us very welcome; they emigrated to Australia a few years later. We also went on an organised bus-trip once, from Sleaford to Blackpool for a day's outing; although we enjoyed it, we have never rushed back there again. We were courting seriously by the time I moved away from Sleaford to Bourne, to start work with the Forestry Commission. I would sometimes cycle the forty miles to Sleaford and back again, in the summer evenings during the middle of the week. About a year later we became engaged to be married. I was then called up for National Service and we had to think seriously about our future; that was not a difficult decision and we were soon married.

The beginning of our married life started in two rented rooms, sharing the bathroom and kitchen with the rest of the household in Hykeham Road, Lincoln - which didn't suit us. We then moved into a small

caravan in North Hykeham, which gave us privacy but not much else; it was midwinter when we moved in; we had to fill the electric kettle before we went to bed so that the next morning we could boil the water and pour it over the gas cylinder outside to thaw the gas to make breakfast! The walls of the caravan were running with condensation every morning when we got up. The other thing that was not at all pleasant was the outside toilet, which was effectively a large bucket that never seemed to get emptied very often; we didn't stay there very long either!

Luckily, we saw an advertisement in the Lincolnshire Echo for a flat to let in Lincoln High Street. We responded and were interviewed by Mr Smith at his house on Cross O'Cliff Hill. We found that he was not an easy man to speak to, but he obviously had no objections to us as and we soon moved in to the flat, over and behind May Drinkwater's sweet shop at 45 High Street. There was a backyard leading to the main door of the flat, through the kitchen, and we had an outside toilet, but this time with flushing water! There was one downstairs living room, behind the shop, two bedrooms upstairs and a bath with hot and cold running water, in the attic and we had it all to ourselves! Our happiness was complete with the arrival of our first son, David Peter, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 1959. He was a chubby baby and we couldn't wait to take him next door, to Takorski's Photographic Studio, so that we could show him off to those that lived too far away to visit us.