

No Baloney

A Journey From Peckham To Las Vegas

Frank Maloney with Kevin
Brennan



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Frank Maloney with Kevin Brennan



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INTRODUCTION

I FIRST MET FRANK IN A HOTEL BAR IN RUSSELL SQUARE. THE MEETING WAS arranged by John Stern, the Assistant Producer on *The Fight*. Frank was to be my trainer and I had five weeks before I was to meet Grant Bovey for the first time - in the ring. I knew who Frank was, of course, but didn't know what to expect. He walked in wearing a long overcoat, hands in his pockets, and came up to my table. I stood up to shake his hand and we exchanged pleasantries. He ordered a soft drink and I felt guilty about already being half way through a pint of lager. I sort of got the feeling he didn't really know who I was but that he'd done some homework and knew people who were fans of *The Office*. As he talked about Grant Bovey, saying things like, he's taking it seriously, and he's got stuff to prove and he's failed at stuff in the past, and Jim McDonnell (Grant's trainer) was a fitness fanatic, I realised that, although it sounded derogatory, and that he was trying to gee me up, his first choice of who to train wouldn't have been me. We got on well and soon we were having a laugh, so I felt brave enough to ask, 'Do you think you drew the short straw with me?' 'No,' he said, 'you're funnier.' I knew that. I wanted to be tougher. Respected in this real man's world. 'And don't drink for the next month.' I agreed, with my fingers crossed behind my back.

The first time I went down the Gym (Maloney's Fight Factory) I was like a kid in a sweet shop. It was perfect. No fancy machines, no fancy anything, just boxers quietly training. Even the name was like something out of a 1930s American movie. In fact so was Frank. He reminded me of

one of the urchins in *Angels with Dirty Faces*. And to be honest I felt I was walking into a gang's hide out. They were a tight unit. Frank and his brother Eugene - the bosses - the staff they employed and the fighters they trained. The swearing, the machismo and the subjects talked about, would suggest that these people would not make the greatest role models, yet all the boxers were polite and respectful. They weren't aggressive bruisers, they were student athletes trying to make someone proud of them. Frank mainly. I decided to make him proud too.

I started my first training session sprightly and confidently. It wasn't as hard as I expected. Eighteen minutes later, as I collapsed on the floor gasping for breath and begging to stop, I remember Frank with his last attempt at rousing me saying, 'You're not acting like a boxer.' I replied, 'I'm not a fucking boxer, I'm a fucking comedian.' That made him laugh. I'd proved my point. I'm still a comedian but I felt like a boxer for a few minutes on 9 December 2002. A fat one.

The next day Frank called from Russia and said he was proud of me. I did it.

Ricky Gervais

1. THE PUNCHING PRIEST

HAD THINGS WORKED OUT DIFFERENTLY I MIGHT HAVE FOUND MYSELF WITH A church to look after in some far off place rather than the heavyweight champion of the world.

It may seem strange now to think that I once had ambitions to be a missionary Catholic priest with the Mill Hill Fathers, but the idea was genuine enough, even if it did take only a matter of weeks before I realised my talents would be better suited to something else.

It probably upset my parents and grandparents who were proud to think that their little Francis had what was needed to become a priest. But I think they soon got over their disappointment and came to realise that their loss was the church's gain. There was no way I would have had the dedication or enthusiasm to see it through, and when the Holy Fathers politely suggested that I might not be cut out for the task, I felt a rush of relief run through me.

I'd been very serious about the whole thing and because of my background the Church played a big part in my life from the day I was born. I suppose I must have been about 13 when this all happened, and as a kid growing up in Peckham, south London, there was still a big wide world out there that held all sorts of mysteries for me.

It's funny to think I was so serious about the priesthood, but it was something I found fascinating because of all the religion that surrounded me. My mum and dad didn't go overboard about it, but being a Catholic was very much part of our lives. The idea of becoming a priest didn't seem that

outlandish, but the short experience I had soon persuaded me to look elsewhere for my true vocation in life.

It wasn't so much a lack of religious belief that was the stumbling block, it was realising I would have to forget about the pleasures of getting to know all about the opposite sex. Even at that very early age the thought of a life of celibacy certainly didn't appeal to me!

I think the idea of being a priest came from hearing missionaries talk when they visited my school. For some reason they had a big effect on me, and their lifestyle, together with the stories they told, seemed pretty exciting. There was also a bit of gentle persuasion from my headmaster, Mr Timmins, who himself later became a Christian Brother. It seemed to spark my imagination and I would come home bursting with enthusiasm for the whole thing.

I'd already been on a trip to Lourdes as an 11 year old and that had left its mark on me as well. I suppose I was exposed to quite a bit of religion, because I was also an altar boy at St James's, our local church, which meant being on duty for weddings and funerals. I actually used to look forward to the funerals more, because for some reason or other you got paid extra money.

My parents probably knew my grand plans to become a priest would be nothing more than a five minute wonder, but they were quite happy to go along with the idea, and I was shipped up to a seminary in Freshfield, Liverpool.

I don't exactly know what I was expecting, but it was certainly a disappointment to me when I was shown a big dormitory and told that was where I'd be staying while I was up there. It wasn't long before I realised the whole thing was not my scene at all, but when I tried to talk to one of the other boys about it he seemed very reluctant to say anything to me. It was only some time later that I found out he was on a retreat, which meant he was expected to stay silent and concentrate on studying the Bible.

I eventually did talk to one of the other boys who was much more into it and clued up about what was expected. Once he told me what was going on I quickly decided I should start to look elsewhere for something to do with the rest of my life.

Although it was a pretty serious place I'm afraid I couldn't help being my usual cheeky self and I managed to play tricks on the other lads, like swapping all their clothes over in the dormitory at night when they were asleep. I was also into trying to make a bit of extra cash by selling sweets to the other kids, which probably didn't go down too well either. Apart from being told there were no girls involved in any of the activities, I think it was the quietness of the place that really got to me. So I headed back to south London a wiser young man, but still without any kind of idea about what I wanted to do with my life.

Things were very carefree for me and I suppose I got up to all the usual pranks kids of my age were into. I had arrived in this world, kicking and screaming on 23 January 1953, the son of a pretty typical working-class Irish couple, Thomas and Maureen. Mum came from County Wicklow and Dad from Roscrea. They had settled in south London, bringing up a family that consisted of me and two brothers, Eugene who was three years younger and Vince who came along four and a half years after I made my first appearance.

I was born in Lambeth Hospital just around the corner from the Elephant and Castle, and in the shadow of the Oval cricket ground. For the first few years of my life the family lived in a one bedroom flat in Gipsy Hill with my mum and dad sleeping in the front room on a makeshift bed.

It was the place where my youngest brother Vince was born and where I got my first real taste of school, although I did have some experience of the education system in Ireland for a time, where I spent six or eight weeks in a pretty strict environment trying to come to terms with learning all the subjects using Gaelic.

We went there because my parents had been told by our landlord in London that we had to move out of the flat. I was really excited by the prospect, because I'd spent so many fantastic holidays in Dublin and in the Tipperary countryside during my very early years. I would have been quite happy to have stayed in Ireland had I been a farmer's son working on the land, but once schoolwork reared its ugly head things didn't seem quite so rosy.

As you can imagine this wasn't exactly easy for a kid of seven, particularly as I'd spent most of my time in London since being born, and apart from the language problem there was also the physical threat from stick-wielding nuns. It really was a very stern set-up and certainly not the sort of school I was suited to. The nuns ran the place with a rod of iron, or to be more precise, a rod of wood.

I couldn't believe it when I first saw the Mother Superior walking around the school with a great big stick, and she would lash out with it whenever she thought a pupil was doing something wrong. On one particular occasion she ended up getting a bit more than she bargained for with me, and when she tried to give me a swipe I somehow managed to get hold of the lethal weapon and break it. The incident didn't go down too well and only added to the general feeling that my brother Eugene and I would be better off back in London. After about six weeks there I just couldn't take it any more and to be honest, I don't think the nuns could either. They must have been just as relieved to see the back of us as we were to wave goodbye to them.

We soon settled back into south London life and the family moved to a large Victorian house in Camberwell Grove which had been converted into a couple of flats. It all seemed very grand to us at the time and was a real step up from our last accommodation. We all had our own bedrooms, and the really big thing was having a family bathroom. I was sent to a local school called St Joseph's, which happily was a much nicer and friendlier place to be

than the almost prison-like regime I'd experienced in Ireland.

By that time the real sporting love of my life was not boxing but football. I couldn't get enough of it and played matches every day with the other kids in the playground. I was also hooked on Millwall Football Club after being taken there by my dad to see a game at the tender age of three. Some of the most vivid memories I have as a kid come from that time: going to home games at the Den, which wasn't very far from our house. It was a ground with a unique atmosphere and also a place with a bit of a reputation for having some supporters who were real hard cases.

It was a love affair that has lasted to this day, and although the club have since moved grounds and the old style terraces are a thing of the past, Millwall are still a unique club as far as I'm concerned with fanatical support. I've bought shares in them over the years, more through loyalty than in any hope of making money, and have a season ticket these days. I go to as many games as I can and there's no doubt the club will always be in my blood.

As you can imagine for someone who is now fully grown and stands just 5 ft 3 in., I wasn't exactly the biggest kid at school, but I still joined in all the sporting activities and gave as good as I got. I had a happy childhood, with my mum working as a waitress and Dad employed on the construction side of things by British Rail.

My parents were a big part of my life and we were a close-knit family. I must admit it was a devastating feeling, some years later when I was a teenager of 19, to wake up one morning and find out my mum and dad were splitting up. In the end they got divorced, but both have continued to play big roles in my life.

Mum was always very protective of her family and none more so than her little Francis. For 11 years of my childhood that was my name, and it wasn't until I went to the Sacred Hearts Secondary School that I was first called Frank by Mr

Timmins. I've used the name ever since and liked the sound of it right from the start because it made me feel a bit more grown up. I always thought it sounded like a character out of a Hollywood gangster movie: 'Frankie Maloney' the tough guy. It was important to me back then, particularly as I was still being dressed in shorts to go to school. My mum has done a lot of good things for me over the years, but dressing me in shorts until I was about 13 years old was not one of them!

Although I was never a big kid at school I soon learned how to look after myself and was never afraid to have a go if I got involved in a fight with a boy who was bigger and stronger than me. I got up to the usual things that might be expected, including running around the streets causing all sorts of havoc with a group of mates.

It was all harmless stuff really, especially when you compare it to what goes on with some youngsters these days. I used to love anything to do with sport and it was during my time at Sacred Hearts that I first encountered what were to become the two loves of my life - boxing and women - although not always in that order.

The first girl I was ever really friendly with was called Margaret Dooley. She used to leave messages on my school desk and I had my leg pulled by friends because of them. She was nothing like the girls I was later attracted to. Margaret was small and had dark hair, but I soon began to discover the saying that 'blondes have more fun' seemed to be right as far as I was concerned, or at least I had more fun with them. In fact, my first bit of crude fondling involved a rather cheeky blonde girl who one day invited me to explore the delights of her body while we were under the school stage.

It was a case of grope and hope on my part, with a French kiss thrown in for good measure. Going under the stage was a regular thing at school for many kids who wanted to avoid lessons or even have the odd crafty smoke of a cigarette.

Ironically, quite a few years later I was invited back to my old school to give a speech and stood right on top of the very place where that fairly innocent sexual encounter had taken place.

I first laced on a pair of boxing gloves when our PE teacher, Mr Sally, decided to organise a tournament. When I entered the competition there were a lot of people who laughed and said I was too small to box, but I was confident I could prove them wrong. I eventually got into the ring with a kid called Ray Callaghan who was about 5 ft 6 in. with red hair and physically a lot bigger than me.

Unfortunately there was no fairytale ending to my ring debut because I lost on points and ended up crying because I was so disappointed. But the boxing bug had bitten and from that day it was a sport I began to get more and more involved in. The idea of being able to box regularly led to me joining a local amateur club with the glamorous name of Dog Kennel Hill, or DKH as they were known.

From that moment boxing started to play a considerable part in my life, but at the time I suppose I saw it as nothing more than another sport I enjoyed taking part in. I certainly wasn't the sort of kid who immediately had dreams of one day becoming a world champion. I was just happy to go to a club regularly for the training, and at the same time learn how to box and take care of myself in the ring.

Little did I realise at the time that the fight game would play such a big part in my life and that I'd go on to earn my living from it. In those days the only financial reward that concerned me was the weekly pocket money Mum dished out, the paper round I did, a milk round and the cash I managed to claim as an altar boy.

Even at that stage I was keen to start making some money, so Eugene and I dabbled in all sorts of jobs to try and top up the coffers. I can remember washing cars fairly regularly and we also tried our luck with a stall in the local market selling anything we could lay our hands on. It was

usually a load of old junk that other people had thrown out of their houses, but we were happy to get it and more than pleased to take it away for them.

I can't say I was too academic and school was never a favourite place of mine. For a long time I found it a struggle to come to terms with things other children seemed to find easy, and it wasn't until much later that I discovered the reason for a lot of my learning difficulties was the fact that I suffered from dyslexia.

My school career ended at the tender age of 15, which in those days was the earliest you could leave. Despite my lack of qualifications I'd enjoyed all the sporting activities and by the time I left, my footballing abilities almost gave me the chance to play for Wimbledon, who were then a non-league outfit.

I had a trial for them one snowy Saturday morning and played on the wing in what I thought were very difficult conditions. The guy who was running the game was nice when it came to discussing my efforts, and said that maybe I was a little too small. He told me to come back and have another game when I'd grown a bit, but little did he know that by then I'd virtually reached my full height anyway!

With one sporting avenue closed to me, my dad decided it might be a good idea to pursue another in a profession where my lack of inches could actually prove to be a real advantage. He had always been interested in horse racing and a friend of his, a Rotherhithe bookmaker called Eddie Reid, told him there was a stable in Epsom who were always looking to take on youngsters as apprentice jockeys.

Dad had already spelled things out to me in no uncertain terms about how he thought it was time I started to look for a 'proper' job, and to him the idea of his son becoming a jockey fitted nicely into that category.

As far as he was concerned I had started to spend too much time with my mates and some local girls hanging around the streets of Peckham, as well as going to favourite

weekend haunts like the Savoy Rooms in Catford. Getting me away from all of that must have seemed like the perfect solution to him at the time, so I was packed off to the famous green Downs of Epsom.

I must admit that becoming a jockey had some appeal to me and it seemed like a decent way of earning a living. Coupled with that was the fact that I knew many of the young jockeys took part in boxing tournaments, and the 'stablelads' show was an annual event on the London amateur boxing scene. I was eager to sample life as an apprentice, but my views on becoming a part of the sport of kings changed rapidly.

Don't get me wrong, I think Epsom is a lovely place with lots to offer, but I quickly found out that was certainly not the case if you were trying to make it as a jockey. My dreams of becoming the next Lester Piggott were shattered faster than it took me to muck out a stable. I couldn't wait to leave the place after having to endure what I considered to be nothing more than slave labour for about six weeks.

It might not have seemed that bad to some of the other apprentices, but to me it was the kind of regime that was not only unfair, but also demeaning in the way we were all treated. The whole place just seemed to rub me up the wrong way, and it wasn't long before I swapped the green acres of Epsom for the more familiar grey brickwork of Peckham and south London.

Throughout this time I'd been sharpening up my boxing skills by regularly training at the DKH club, and I'd also started to have properly regulated amateur bouts for them. I got encouragement from my first contest, which I won, and I managed to maintain the unbeaten run in my next seven bouts. But it wasn't all about success and I can vividly remember losing a novice contest to a kid from the Arbour Youth Club in east London. The thing that stands out in my memory was the fact that he looked so much bigger than me. He was also perfectly kitted-out with a vest in his club

colours, while I was just a skinny little kid with a white vest, shorts, and plimsolls on my feet instead of proper boxing boots.

I'm not saying the way I was dressed stopped me from winning, but it certainly made me feel a little inferior to him, because he looked the part more than I did. From that moment on I decided to take boxing a bit more seriously and Mum and Dad were generous enough to cough up the money for me to invest in a pair of boxing shorts and boots. DKH was a great club and allowed me to get a real taste of the sport.

I took part in the London Federation of Boys' Clubs Championships, losing to Dave Smith from Eltham, once at Café Royal and then at the Hilton Hotel, both times on points. He was a solid boxer who looked good even at that very early age, and he later went on to become a very decent professional.

I also took part in the junior ABAs, where I met a youngster called Jimmy Flint from Bethnal Green's famous Repton Boxing Club in a bout which took place in Luton. The fight was short and sweet - at least it was for him. All I can recall of the contest was the opening bell, a few punches being thrown by both of us, and then waking up in the back of the van that had taken me to Luton for the tournament.

Flint knocked me spark out, and it was the first time I'd ever experienced anything like it. The kid seemed to be able to hit like a mule, although I apparently helped his cause by committing the cardinal boxing sin of walking straight onto his punch. It may have been the first time I'd experienced the shock of an unexpected whack, but it wasn't to be the last and in the years that have followed there have been quite a few - all out of the ring and one of them from a woman!

The lady in question was the partner of boxer Kirkland Laing, who was a gifted but erratic Jamaican fighter. I was promoting him on a show in north London against one of my

own up-and-coming fighters called Kevin Lueshing. We'd increased security at the venue on the night because I was having trouble with a former business partner I'd barred from the show. Kevin eventually won the fight and I was sitting at ringside feeling pleased with his victory when I felt an almighty left hook explode onto the side of my face, and the next thing I heard was a woman screaming at me.

'You've robbed Kirkland,' she shouted. 'You've set him up.'

The security people ran over and took her away before apologising for the fact that they'd let her get to me. They'd thought she just wanted to give a sympathetic hug to Kirkland and never dreamed she was hell-bent on giving me a clump instead.

The guy who had been banned from that show was someone called Ambrose Mendy and on another occasion at Crofton Park Leisure Centre he got rather upset and decided to lash out, catching me in the face.

While Ambrose was no heavyweight, someone else who decided violence was the best way to settle a grievance with me certainly was. His name was Billy Aird, a likeable Scouser who fought professionally in the 1970s and 1980s before becoming a pub landlord in south London. He was also a boxing manager and promoter who staged shows in the same sort of places I did on the small hall circuit.

He had a boxer named Johnny Melfah who'd left Bill and switched to my camp. It was all good local fun and I decided to get some publicity out of it by playing up the angle that Johnny hadn't made much money during his time with Aird. We even stunted up a picture for a newspaper of Melfah on a park bench saying he couldn't afford to pay his rent. I think Billy got an apology from the paper but it left a bitter taste in his mouth and he had a go at me one day when we were both at a boxing show.

Billy's always been a passionate guy and when he started to clench his fist I knew what was coming and managed to turn away just as his punch glanced off the side of my face.

If he'd managed to catch me properly I would have been out cold, but I managed to stay on my feet.

'If that's how hard you punch, Bill, it's no wonder you never did anything as a heavyweight!' I told him.

As far as I was concerned that was the end of the matter, but my headstrong younger brother Eugene got to hear about it, and along with a friend of his, paid Billy a visit at his pub. A few strong words were exchanged, but Billy and I are able to laugh about the whole thing now.

The shock I received from the Luton episode didn't put me off the fight game and Jimmy Flint went on to win all sorts of titles and establish himself as one of the hardest punching featherweights around. The incident also made me realise I needed to start making a bit more progress. Fortunately, I met a trainer called Gerry Hogan, who looked after fighters at the Polytechnic Club in Regents Street and also the Fisher Club in Bermondsey.

Fisher had strong Catholic ties and made an annual trip to the Downside Monastery and public school in Somerset where we'd compete against the boys at boxing, football and rugby. The first time I went, we won the boxing event and I got a stoppage victory in a bout with one of their kids, but we lost the football and rugby matches.

It was a great trip for all of us because it was so different to our usual environment, but we made the big mistake of getting well and truly stuck into the local scrumpy cider and were soon out of our heads on the stuff. We started to run riot with all the alcohol inside us, raiding the dormitories and ringing the famous monastery bells. Apparently they were used each morning at 4 a.m. to call the monks to prayer but we started doing it at about 1 a.m. and they all began to get up!

We weren't looked on too kindly when we arrived for breakfast all nursing hangovers, and there were a few bruises on the public schoolboys that bore testimony to the

fact that we had really got out of control the night before. Not surprisingly, the trip was cancelled the following year.

I trained at both clubs under Gerry and actually got through to a senior Feds Final at the London Hilton, where I met Dave Smith for the second time. I'd boxed and lost against him in my first Class 'B' Feds final at the Café Royal, and my second clash with Dave was just as disappointing for me, and once again I missed out when I was outpointed by him.

Although I loved my boxing, despite the disappointment, I was also heavily into football, playing for a club that was part of St James's church where I was an altar boy. The priest, Father Clements, was a nice man who encouraged me to take part in as many sports as I could, but it was always boxing and football that really held my interest.

Father Clements actually did a lot for the kids in the area, including starting a football league for local teams which really blossomed over the years and it certainly helped to keep the kids off the streets and give their lives more purpose. He would also organise day trips during the school holidays to places like Box Hill in Surrey, which we loved and looked forward to with a lot of anticipation. We were a bit boisterous on a train one year and got accused of being little hooligans by a rather snooty woman. Father Clements immediately spoke up for us saying we weren't hooligans, just excited young kids who were looking forward to having a day in the country. He earned a lot of respect from the boys who came into contact with him, and I'm sure he stopped quite a few from going off the rails.

As well as actually playing football I'd become a fanatical Millwall supporter by this time, going to all the home games and making as many away trips as I could. I continued to box after I'd left school having flunked every exam put in front of me. I just couldn't wait to get away and explore the great wide world outside the school gates.

After the unfortunate experience in Epsom my dad spoke to another of his friends, this time someone who was in the catering trade and he suggested I might like the idea of becoming a chef. So, equipped with the regulation outfit that included a hat which seemed bigger than me, I got a job in the West End of London at St Giles Court, in Shaftsbury Avenue, which was a Ministry of Defence establishment. At the same time I began attending Westminster Catering College to study for my City and Guilds certificates.

It seemed like a good opportunity for me, although I must admit that when I arrived I started to have my doubts, especially when I was told to start preparing about 600 sausages. As I was changing into my oversized trousers one of the second head chefs, a guy called Eric, made a crack about them being big enough for two people to get into. I thought no more about it and accepted his offer of a piece of string to help tie them up around my waist. A little while later when I was getting on with the brain-numbing job of rolling the sausages Eric appeared behind me, put his hand on my backside, and made some very strange remarks.

I couldn't believe what was happening, but pretty soon the initial shock was replaced by a raging anger, and I immediately reached for a knife that was close by. Before Randy Eric could make his next move or get any more ideas about what he'd like to do with his own little sausage, I stuck the knife right into the back of the hand he was using to lean against the table I was working on.

His scream must have been heard by everyone in the building, and just to emphasise the point I was trying to make I warned him that if he tried anything like it again, I'd stick the knife very precisely up another part of his anatomy. Not surprisingly, after that little incident Eric decided to leave me alone to continue my apprenticeship, and I was taken under the wing of a female West Indian cook who remained a friend and went on to work for me at a later

date. I actually began to enjoy catering, particularly when I was given the opportunity to learn the management side of things.

With the job came some money and because of my new-found wealth I was quick to start experiencing some of the more enjoyable pleasures of life, even if I was only 15 at the time. Although my brother Eugene was younger than me, he always seemed to have cash, and a lot of it came from some of the street scams he devised which I helped him with on occasions.

I can remember the time we sold a whole batch of stuff outside London Bridge station one evening just before Christmas to some unsuspecting soul who took one look at what we had on offer and decided to buy all 12 boxes from us. The trouble was, as he later no doubt found out, only the top box contained any goods because the rest were full of junk. It was real 'Del Boy' stuff, just like the characters in the TV comedy, *Only Fools and Horses*, even down to the fact that we were doing a lot of this in Peckham where the series is set. But our scams were for real and happily for us we got money from them as well.

We had a stall selling anything and everything near East Street market and also did some trading out of suitcases, which was known as fly-pitching. Eugene and I would take it in turns to look out for the police, while the other would try to sell goods from the case as quickly as possible. We got caught out once because we weren't quick enough running away with the suitcase we were using to trade from. It meant having to appear at a Magistrates' court the same day and although we pleaded poverty he obviously wasn't going to be fooled. Instead, he fined us the amount we had in our pockets, which was an absolute bundle.

Getting up to little scams like that was all part of growing up and we were really no different to any of our mates that we hung around with. Although it was a bit like 'Del Boy' in many ways, I have to say that the way we learned to duck

and dive and survive on the streets made us a lot shrewder than the TV character.

There was a kind of pecking order with the younger guys learning from the older ones, as you gradually became a part of the scene. As a kid we did things like nicking empty lemonade bottles from the crates at the back of shops where they sold them, then nipping round the front and taking them into the shop because you used to get some money back on the bottles. We later progressed to doing things like stripping lead off roofs, and taking scaffolding from building sites and selling it on to another.

Some of the guys around at the time always seemed to have money and they were very conscious of their appearance. Having stylish clothes meant a lot to them and their sense of dress and the amount of time they spent on it would have given David Beckham a run for his money. There was one guy called Bobby Scanlon who always seemed to have the best clothes, a nice car and great-looking women hanging around him. Although nobody could have claimed to have had a great formal education, the people I knew and had as friends were very street-wise. What they lacked in qualifications, they more than made up for in other ways and were always able to earn a very decent living.

While Eugene carried on 'ducking and diving,' I started to settle into my career in catering. I was also beginning to get really interested in girls. I'd had a few mild flirtations while I was at school, but they were nothing out of the ordinary, although one liaison did result in me getting the sharp end of my dad's tongue when he found me out with a girl one night enjoying a kiss and cuddle just around the corner from our home, when I should have been studying or sleeping.

Sometime before I had moved to my secondary school the family left Camberwell Green and set up home a short distance away in Peckham. The new place was a large house owned by St James's church and the downstairs area was used as a social club by them. It covered a huge area

with a full-size snooker table, a basement room with a table-tennis table, and enough room outside to play things like badminton.

Having all those facilities made us very popular with our mates and they started to come around to our house on a regular basis. I was left in charge once when my mother and father went away to Ireland for a holiday, and was pressurised by a few of the 'chaps' to have a party on the Saturday night. Everything was going well until an argument broke out which ended in one of the windows being smashed. It was a disaster and I knew I'd be in real trouble with my parents, but the next day a friend of mine named Micky Griffin turned up with his dad and helped me clear up. They also installed some new glass and by the time my mum and dad got back, everything looked back to normal. I thought I was off the hook, but hadn't bargained for some nosy neighbours who told my dad everything. He also spotted the wet putty in the window frame, which was a dead giveaway, and I quickly realised the game was up.

Parties were a big thing and when you began to be invited to them, you really knew you'd arrived. We'd quite often bundle into cars at the end of a night out and drive off to a party someone was having. Some of the cars would have double the amount of people they should have had in them and there was never any thought about drinking and driving, because everyone did it back then and it was an accepted part of having a night out. I had to get into the boot of a car for my first experience of one of these parties because I was small enough to fit in and all the seats had been taken by other people. I was worried they might forget about me and kept shouting out to remind them just in case.

Cars were always very important to us and having them gave you a lot more freedom, although on one occasion we all decided to go for something a bit bigger after leaving a party in the early hours. Not being able to get a taxi, we decided to nick a bus out of the local garage to get us home

and drove off in it before finally getting stopped by the police. They charged the guy who was driving, but the rest of us were luckier and got let off with a warning. There were also things like prize fights and dog fights organised above snooker halls. These were a regular part of the scene and we all used to go.

By this time I had resigned myself to the fact that I would not be playing football professionally for a living, and instead continued to turn out for my boys club. It was a combination of my love of football and women that led to me meeting my first wife when I was 17 and she was just 14.

I'd gone to a football club dance with Eugene and a mate of his called Tony Hudson, who boxed with us at the Fisher club. The two of them also played together for the same team. Tony, like Eugene, was a few years younger than me but both were real characters who were always the life and soul of any party.

They were very much alike in many ways and were to get into several scrapes together during the years that followed. While my youngest brother Vince was never any real trouble, Eugene had shown from day one that he could be a real handful. He never seemed to be a kid for long and although he was younger than me he just seemed very advanced for his age when it came to the ways of the world - or at least our little world. He was certainly the only kid around our way who was driving a car at the age of 14.

In fact, it wasn't just any old car; instead it was a gleaming white Bentley! I'll never forget the day my dad pulled me to one side and asked if I knew anything about Eugene having a car. I remember laughing, as I explained Eugene was just too young to be driving. But my father was deadly serious. He'd been told by some people in the area that they'd seen my tearaway brother driving around alongside Tony in a white Bentley, with some girls in the back seat. I genuinely thought the story was too far-fetched

to be true, but just a few days later I happened to be walking along a road quite close to our home and there in front of me was a gleaming white Bentley, with my brother Eugene sitting proudly behind the wheel.

When I asked him what was going on he told me in a very matter-of-fact way that he and Tony had bought it with money from some 'bits and pieces' they'd been up to, but asked me not to tell our dad. He also offered to give me a ride in the car, but I declined, knowing what our father's reaction would be if he were to see his sons cruising around south London in a white Bentley.

Eugene always seemed capable of going that one step beyond anything I would ever dream of doing, and quite often it would lead to him getting into trouble.

Tony Hudson was often a willing accomplice in some of their schemes and on one occasion they had been up to no good in London and had their pockets full of certain things they shouldn't have had. They had both got jobs working for a diamond merchant and it didn't take them too long to work out a way to boost their weekly wages. You can just imagine how they felt when a policeman tapped them on the shoulder at Holborn Underground station.

The two of them froze, expecting the worst, but were then relieved to see the familiar face of a copper called Johnny Banham, who was a boxing trainer and coach to the Metropolitan Police team. All he wanted from them was their help in lining up for an identity parade that they were holding at the local Holborn Police Station. Not only were they happy to oblige, but they talked boxing with Johnny all the way there and back, as he politely dropped them at the station after they'd finished. The two of them couldn't stop laughing the whole way home on the train with their ill-gotten gains still tucked safely into their pockets.

The pair of them managed to make my love life a misery one evening when they turned up at our house drunk and giggling, just as I was beginning to get rather serious with a

young lady on the sofa in our front room. When I asked them what the hell they were playing at, all they could do was laugh and then they started to throw what looked like tiny pieces of glass onto the table in front of me. I didn't know whether they were diamonds but they were obviously pretty precious to them, because when I picked up a fistful and threw them out the window, it immediately had a sobering effect on the pair.

They went scrambling down the stairs and into the garden trying to retrieve whatever I'd thrown through the window. As I looked out at them crawling around on hands and knees I had no sympathy and just thought it served them right. The only valuables I was interested in getting my hands on had by that time been well and truly covered up by the young girl on the couch, who was furiously trying to rearrange her clothes following my fumbling attempt to remove them. To this day Eugene swears not all of those stones were recovered on the night, so there might still be some hidden treasure to be found in that Peckham garden.

Soon after we arrived at the football dance I spotted this terrific-looking girl who was just my sort: small, blonde and very pretty. She was also wearing hot pants, which were all the rage at the time, and they made her look even sexier. She was with four or five of her friends but I immediately went over and introduced myself. I found out that her name was Jackie and she was none other than Tony's little sister, which just went to show what a small world it was and one that would often prove to be difficult to live in at times during later years.

I suppose I shouldn't have been too surprised by the fact that we all knew of each other, because everybody seemed to know everyone else in Peckham. It wasn't exactly a big place and we tended to do the same sort of things. As I've said, you kind of graduated and progressed as you got older, but there were certain routines and rituals that almost everyone got involved in. I remember one particular fad

among a lot of the boys was having a bull terrier dog and walking them on Peckham Rye. I had a white one called 'Peggy', and the idea was to have really flash collars for them.

The café at Peckham Rye railway station was also a favourite haunt for all of us. As well as serving food and drink you could usually find someone in there who could get you anything you wanted, from a decent pair of shoes to things like televisions and cars. I bet half the homes in Peckham got their TVs from the place!

Watching Millwall was a big part of regular life for most of the boys. As soon as I was old enough I started watching them home and away. The older guys were real role models on the terraces and when I first started to go there as a kid the club had a big following among the dockers, whose language left little to the imagination. Millwall supporters have always had a bit of a reputation, and I can recall the time the Northern Ireland striker, Derek Dougan, got a clump from one of the supporters down at the Den, because he obviously wasn't happy with what was going on. I was guilty of jumping the wall one day and giving the manager at the time, Benny Fenton, a mouthful of abuse because I didn't like the way the team was playing.

The club produced some real characters both on and off the field, and as fans we used to worship some of the players, who were heroes to all of us. The players and supporters had a great relationship and there was never any hint of the sort of big money that floats around the game these days. One of the players I watched at Millwall was a winger named Joe Broadfoot. He had a couple of spells with the club and I can remember him telling me some years later that part of the deal in one of his transfers was that he got £1,000 and two second-hand Mini cars. A bit different to some of the perks expected by today's Premiership stars!

I suppose it might have been easy for me to get caught up in the whole football hooligan thing had it not been for

boxing. Going to matches was a very tribal thing and there was a definite buzz to being there with all of your mates. Although we didn't look for trouble, there was no hesitation on our part in getting stuck in and helping out if it did get a bit naughty. I did get worried once at a game when I was part of a mob of fans who went running down the Old Kent Road and managed to smash some car showroom windows, but we avoided being caught by the police.

As well as our nights out locally I would regularly go to the West End of London to shop for clothes at the weekends, and then go to some clubs at night. In 1966 I financed one of my shopping trips by cashing in on a cup final ticket. I'd managed to get my hands on a couple through the football club I played for and my dad managed. He'd won them in a draw and passed them on to me and a friend of mine so that we could go along for the big day at Wembley and watch the match between Everton and Sheffield Wednesday. But just as we got to the famous old stadium I was offered a lot more than the face value to part with the pair. My mate, Micky Griffin, was keen to see the match and wanted to hold on to his ticket, but the temptation of getting my hands on some easy money was too much for me to resist and I quickly said yes to the desperate supporter. I headed off to the West End to spend the money on clothes, before meeting up with Micky to find out what had happened and what the result was in case my dad asked me about the match.

Like so many young working-class kids of my age, the first experience I had of foreign travel was a two week holiday to Benidorm in Spain, which saw a few of us get kicked out of the hotel for being too rowdy, and ended with me feeling as though I needed a holiday when I got back to England because the trip had been so exhausting. The holiday had been all about booze, sex and sun.

Pubs were also very much part of the scene and drugs could be found fairly easily if you wanted them. Most people