RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Fred

David Hall

About the Book

Fred Dibnah won the hearts of millions of viewers with his television programmes about his life as a steeplejack, and his passion for the industrial history of Britain. With his trademark flat cap, enthusiasm and knowledge of the country's steam past, his gift for storytelling, and his cry of 'Did you like that?' as another giant chimney slid to earth behind him, he quickly became a genuine favourite with viewers.

This is an intimate portrait of Fred, from his childhood in Bolton, to his days as a steeplejack – the job he was to love above all others – and on to his successful television career. We discover all the different sides of Fred's personality – engineer, steeplejack, artist, craftsman, steam enthusiast, inventor, storyteller and eccentric. This definitive biography will delight Fred's many fans.

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FRED

The definitive biography of Fred Dibnah

DAVID HALL

To my wife, Fran,
with love and thanks
for her support

In memory of
a friend and
much-loved steeplejack

Acknowledgements

It was one of the major privileges of my life to know Fred Dibnah and to have made so many television programmes with him. Writing this book and making the television series that complements it has been in the main a highly enjoyable process, bringing back many happy times with Fred. My thanks are due first and foremost to Fred not just for this and for bringing pleasure to the lives of millions of viewers but also for telling me so many times that he wanted me to write his biography and providing me with so much material for it. If it hadn't been for Fred's wish, this book would not have been written.

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Without his television programmes and the fame that came with them there would have been no book. Television production is a team effort. Nobody was more aware of this than Fred, and I know he would want me to thank the people who made him what he was – Don Haworth and his team of Jean Thompson, cameraman Arthur Smith, sound recordist Jack Wilson, film editors Peter Gibbs and Roy Newton, and Martin Lightening, the cameraman who went up the chimneys with him to get those spectacular shots: and my team of assistant producers Bob Sandy and Jon Doyle, cameramen Andrew Hartley, Rob Taylor and Mark Hamilton, sound recordists Nigel Chatters and Alan Parry, film editor Steve Parry and dubbing mixer Chris Rayson,

who eased Fred through the difficulties of recording his commentaries.

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Introduction

Fred Dibnah – steeplejack, steam enthusiast, television presenter – was many things to many people but you'd be hard pushed to find anyone who didn't admire his commitment to Britain's industrial heritage. He longed to tell everybody who cared to listen how things were built and how they worked. Over a period of seven years, from early 1998 until his untimely death from cancer in November 2004, I made more than forty programmes for the BBC with Fred. During this time he became much more than a presenter of our programmes; he was a good friend whom I would see throughout the year, not just in the months when we were filming.

Fred and I hit it off from the first time we met. We came from the same working-class background in the north-west and grew up when places like Bolton and Manchester, where I was from, were still alive with manufacturing industry. I never really understood how Fred's engines worked but we shared the same passion for telling the stories of the engineers whose skill and inventiveness made them possible, and recounting our history from the point of view of the builders and engineers and the ordinary working men who helped to make it. For seven years Fred and I spent every summer travelling the length and breadth of Britain, visiting magnificent castles and cathedrals, climbing to the top of great bridges like the Forth and the Humber, searching out steam-powered mill engines and pit

winding engines, tunnelling beneath the earth in coal mines and tracing the routes of long-forgotten canals. For Fred it was all a holiday paid for by the BBC, taking him to all these wonderful places that he wanted to go to. It was in that spirit that we made the programmes, so that his enthusiasm and sense of fun were never diminished. But filming with Fred wasn't without its dangers. Climbing to the top of the dome of St Paul's with him wasn't a problem, but driving was. As we sped along the motorways I'd often struggle to keep going in a straight line as Fred would dig my arm to point out a chimney. Wherever we went, we'd always go for a drink together at the end of the day and I've lost count of the number of lock-ins we had as the pints were lined up on the bar while Fred chatted with his many fans.

Fred was already a well-established television personality long before I met him. Through the wonderful films of Don Haworth that chronicled Fred's life as steeplejack and steam enthusiast and his marital ups and downs, he had become what many people described as a 'national treasure'. But by 1997, when I first met him, his television career, along with his steeplejacking, was in decline. There were not many chimneys left to restore or to demolish and, as the work began to dry up, the broadcasters started to feel that they had gone as far as they could with Fred Dibnah.

But the one thing television needs more than anything else is presenters with passion, enthusiasm and personality and, when it came to industrial history and engineering, it was clear that Fred Dibnah had it all. So, although up to this time he'd only ever been the subject of documentaries, I put a proposal to the BBC for an industrial history series with Fred as presenter. *Fred Dibnah's Industrial Age* was commissioned in 1998 and from that moment on Fred had a new career. But Fred was unique – unlike any other television presenter before or since. As David Robson wrote

in the *Sunday Telegraph*, ‘His genius lies in cutting through the stiltedness of so much documentary television and speaking to the viewer in simple colloquial English. There is a whole world separating the glitz of the television studios from everyday life. Very few programmes have bridged that gap, have been able to illuminate ordinary lives in the way that Fred Dibnah does.’

Fred was from Bolton, Lancashire, and he was proud of it. And it was Bolton that provided his inspiration. Growing up there in the 1940s and 1950s, he fell in love with the decaying industrial landscape around him and he developed the interests that were to stay with him for the rest of his life – steeplejacking and steam engines. He saw beauty in the mills and the chimneys and the engine houses, and especially in the great steam engines inside them. It was in these early years that Fred first became interested in climbing chimneys.

Steeplejacking wasn’t his first job. Fred served his apprenticeship as a joiner although, all the time, despite parental disapproval, he pursued his goal of becoming a steeplejack. Over many years he studied how steeplejacks erected their ladders and scaffolding, noted the faults in different systems and worked out his own methods.

But another passion was to play just as important a part in his life. When he was a lad, the engine sheds were just down the road from the terraced house he lived in and he developed a dangerous addiction – steam. It was his memories of those engine sheds that got him interested in steam preservation and led to his buying a steamroller and restoring it. Fred didn’t like modern methods and newfangled tools, so he decided to equip himself with a workshop powered by steam. He added to it over the years and created something unique.

Until 1979, Fred was only a steeplejack who had an interest in steam engines. Then, while he was working on the clock tower of the town hall in Bolton, the local BBC TV

news programme filmed a short item about him. Following this, Fred was approached by television producer Don Haworth with a view to making a half-hour film for a series about people with unusual occupations. After several months of filming, the finished article was an hour-long documentary, *Fred Dibnah, Steeplejack*, which won a BAFTA award.

From that time on, Fred has rarely been away from our screens. He became for millions of viewers the embodiment of old-fashioned common sense. Straight-talking and frank-speaking, Fred always gave you what it said on the tin and his forthright views on anything and everything turned him into something of a folk hero. Through his early programmes Fred became best known for felling chimneys. But this was the job he liked least. His preference was always for restoration and he would point proudly to chimneys and church steeples that he had restored.

When he turned to presenting, his blunt, no-nonsense style and the direct, colloquial English he used made a welcome change from the majority of television presenters. The audience didn't only enjoy watching Fred, they trusted him because he was one of them. Few people on television have been better at talking to ordinary working people and putting them at their ease. But what we loved more than anything with Fred was his enthusiasm. He had a passion for anything to do with our industrial past and an infectious zest for the engineering, mechanical and craft skills of days gone by. His heroes were the great engineers of the Victorian Age such as Robert Stephenson and Isambard Kingdom Brunel. In all of his programmes Fred's approach was very hands-on: he lived every schoolboy's dream, travelling on the footplate and driving the engines. But there was always a sense of sadness alongside the passion. He felt keenly the loss of the sights and sounds of long-gone industries.

Steam and engineering weren't Fred's only loves. Because he'd worked with wood he could talk with authority about the skills of carpenters and woodcarvers when we filmed at great castles and palaces and country houses. He loved meeting men like Peter McCurdy, who built the timber frame for the reconstruction of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. While admiring the finished products, he was just as interested in the way the job had been done and in working conditions and he was always able to put himself in the place of the workers.

Whatever the job, Fred would be prepared to have a go at it himself; and whatever he saw, he'd always got one like it at home or in his back garden. As a young man he had been to art school and the drawings he used to show how things were built were all his own. His practical demonstrations revealed exactly how things were done, even if some of them did end in disaster. And because he'd been there and done the job himself, Fred could speak with an authority that few academics could share, and bring his own unique insights to everything from a medieval siege to the generation of steam in a nuclear power station.

For me it was a real privilege to make programmes with Fred. One of British television's greatest characters, he was also a lovely man to work with and go for a pint with at the end of a day's shoot. And he was totally untouched by fame or celebrity. Wherever he went he always found time to chat to anybody, to sign an autograph or pose for a photo. Every one of his old friends said fame never changed him; he was still the same Fred that he had been twenty or thirty years ago when they first met him. There was never anything remotely showbiz about him. Right up to the end his mates were engineers and miners and steam men; he respected men who made things, who mined the coal or drove the engines that powered the wheels of industry. These were the men Fred wanted to spend his time with, not people from the world of television or show business.

The audience trusted him and believed what he said because he wasn't a posh television presenter just reading a script. He was a working man who spoke from practical experience when he talked about how things were made or built. Fred enriched the lives of those who worked with him and were his friends. There were a lot of laughs when Fred was around; and everything was always a bit more dangerous.

Much of his appeal came from his obvious love of life and his sense of humour. He always had a smile on his face and in all the time I worked with him I never heard him complain about anything. Fred was a great raconteur with a never-ending fund of stories, a larger-than-life character who could walk into a pub and hold an audience enthralled until the beer ran out.

Fred embodied everything that was wholesome from what many people perceive as a more wholesome era. He represented old working-class values of hard graft and pulling yourself up by your bootlaces – values that are largely missing from modern society. He was enthusiastic about a way of life that has virtually disappeared now and he made no apology for living in the past. For many people, he epitomized the affection they felt for the architecture and machinery of Britain's once-great manufacturing empire. With his flat cap and his working clothes he was a working man who typified the northern mill towns of the 1950s. If you went into the local pub fifty years ago, there was always a guy like Fred in the corner. He could have been a builder or a plumber, or he could have worked in a local foundry, an engineering works or a mill. Fred was the epitome of northern grit.

But Fred was also a complex individual, a man whose life and personality were full of contradictions. He spent much of his working life demolishing chimneys, but it was a job that filled him with sadness. He loved the chimneys and had a great appreciation for what to him had been the

heroic efforts that had gone into building them. For Fred they were architectural treasures that should have been preserved.

He was tough and fearless and he revelled in a certain kind of macho image. Everything he liked, he used to say, was heavy, dirty or dangerous, but he was so sensitive that he would be moved to tears when he heard the news that a friend's engine had been destroyed in a fire.

He could be stubborn, selfish and driven by his own obsessions, but he was the most non-confrontational man you could ever meet and he was easily manipulated into doing things that other people wanted him to do. For Fred it was often a case of taking the line of least resistance, being persuaded by the person with the loudest voice, and saying the things he thought people around him wanted to hear.

Fred was a gentle, friendly character with no malice in him, but in his relationships with women he was something of a male chauvinist. He always claimed that he had been born out of his time, that he should have been born in the Victorian Age. For Fred a woman's place was in the home. His wife would be expected to get the cleaning done and have his tea on the table at a certain time. For all his three wives it led to problems and confrontations.

Although he was always surrounded by people, Fred was essentially a loner. As a boy he wouldn't join in with his brother and their mates to play football or Cowboys and Indians, but would go off on his own to look at chimneys or old engine houses. When he got older his mind was always on his next project, working on one of his engines or on his coal mine in the garden. But he was a loner who loved people. He enjoyed being the centre of attention, holding court as he told one of his stories. If you met and talked to Fred, he would treat you as if he had known you all his life. This meant that, as his fame spread, he became public property, and he always wore his heart on his sleeve. There

was a certain naivety about him, which meant that he would open up his heart to any stranger who cared to listen. Through the medium of television those strangers ran into millions. Everywhere you went with him, people would come up to Fred and ask him about his wives. Nobody can have discussed their marriages and personal problems with more people than Fred.

It was these very contradictions and flaws in his character that made him so loved by so many people. But more than anything else, I believe his appeal came from the fact that he was the eternal schoolboy. With his collection of boys' toys he was the envy of every one of us who would have liked to spend our working lives playing with the things we played with as children. And we had a certain envy for that childlike self-centredness, even selfishness, that kept him focused on the things he wanted to do to the exclusion of all else. He was the lovable child who would never come indoors when his mother said it was time for tea. He was lucky, we felt, to be his own boss; to be able to do his own thing without worrying too much about what anybody else wanted; to be free to say the things he wanted to say without being too concerned about what anybody else was thinking; and to make a living out of doing what he was passionate about.

Fred loved having film and television cameras around him and the camera loved Fred. It was drawn to him as if to a magnet and Fred was always centre frame. He gave the distinct impression that he would have been happy to have a camera recording his every move, and I lost count of the number of times I had to turn down his requests to go to his house with a crew to film an important stage in the building of his traction engine or in digging his coal mine.

Fred was a joy for any producer to work with. You can't manufacture the passion and enthusiasm that he brought to the programmes we made together. He was a natural broadcaster, no different off camera from how he was on

screen. And there were never any tantrums or awkward moments. He'd always go along with whatever he was asked to do and, although he enjoyed being the centre of attention, there was never any 'look at me, I'm a star' about him. There was only one complaint: 'All the best stuff ends up on the cutting room floor,' he would say. But Fred's idea of the best stuff was a detailed explanation of the workings of a mechanical lubricator, which was not the sort of thing that was suitable for a half-hour prime-time television series. So I promised Fred that I would make sure the unedited versions of his programmes would be made available to his fans on DVD.

Fred became the voice of a vast silent majority, a large slice of middle England whose views and aspirations are not reflected very well on modern television. He represented the values of a time when Britain still had manufacturing industries, when the concept of empire wasn't politically incorrect. He spoke with pride of a Britain that led the world – an idea that has become unfashionable today. He stood for the dignity of making things, the comradeship of the working man and the satisfaction of an honest day's work and a job well done; and he represented the values of generations of working-class people who believed in self-help and in education, the sort of people who always wanted their children to have a better life than them. These were the values that Fred felt we had lost and he thought that, as a nation, we were much the worse for it; and his views were shared by many, many people.

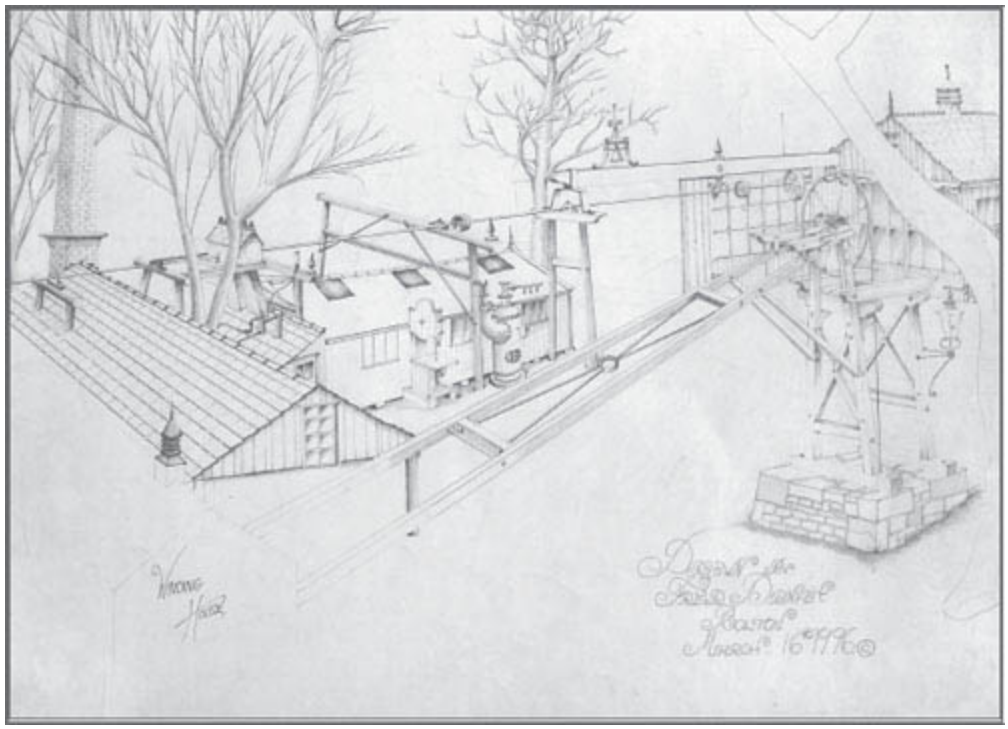
They are the values that Fred wanted to preserve and they will live on in his programmes and in all the things we filmed together. The most recent series, *Fred Dibnah's World of Steam, Steel and Stone*, is a fitting tribute and it will form a lasting record of the things he stood for. Making it and writing the biography he always said he would like me to write have brought back many happy memories of my time with him, and his distinctive tones still ring round

our offices every day as we continue to edit some of his programmes.

Fred was Britain's unlikeliest superstar. As his death was announced on BBC News 24, presenter Peter Sissons remarked, 'They don't make them like that any more.' He was one of a kind and now he has gone we will never see anybody quite like Fred Dibnah again. As I worked with him and watched him do a drawing, make a model or come up with a unique solution to a mechanical problem, I often used to wonder, somewhat fancifully, whether Leonardo da Vinci had been a bit like Fred. Leonardo was an artist, an inventor and an engineer; a man with passion and energy who, just like Fred, didn't mind rolling his sleeves up and getting his hands dirty. History paints a picture of the hero of the Renaissance as someone associated with high culture, but perhaps Leonardo was more like Fred: a clever, artistic, inventive, highly skilled working man who was able to achieve great things. Perhaps Fred was not just Britain's unlikeliest superstar; maybe he was an even more unlikely Renaissance Man.

Part One

The Working Man



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The Industrial Landscape

FRED WAS BORN in Bolton, Lancashire, in 1938 and his early years were spent in what he always described as a '*Coronation Street*-style house' next to the railway sidings. His father, Frank, worked at a bleach works and his mother, Betsy, was also employed there before she got a job as a charlady at the gasworks. They both had hard lives and never had much money when Fred was young, but it was a happy home.

Bolton was built on the cotton trade and when Fred was born the scale of the industry in the town was massive. He grew up surrounded by cotton mills and the great steam engines that provided the power for them. It was a sight that was to stay with him for ever, and when I started filming *Fred Dibnah's Industrial Age* he recalled it vividly. 'One of the first sights I remember was the factory chimneys that surrounded the town, especially all those near Bolton Wanderers' old football ground at Burnden Park. When the sun was setting in the west, you could see them silhouetted against the evening sky above the area where I used to play as a kid. Then at night, when you looked in the dark at this great big five-storey spinning mill when the night shift was on, it was an unbelievable sight. All the lights would be on and you could see literally

hundreds of yards of two-inch shafting with the chromium plate all shining in the dark.'

As a small boy he used to ride his bicycle along the Manchester–Bolton–Bury Canal with his father and to Fred the world around that towpath was an exciting place to be. It was a landscape of great, gaunt spinning mills and bleach works standing by the side of dirty old canals and railway tracks. Steam hissed from the engines and the smoke from the mill chimneys filled the air – dozens of them belching out thick, black clouds day and night, so that a grey canopy hung permanently over the cobbled streets and terraced houses. The chimneys towered above everything like tall grass in a meadow. They had to be high not just to carry the smoke and noxious fumes up into the atmosphere but also to create a draught for the boilers in the mills and factories down below.

There were so many chimneys that around seven tons of soot would fall on each square mile of Bolton every year. Thick smogs, or pea soupers as they were known, would envelop the town for days on end and it wasn't a very healthy place to live. If you went up on to the moors around Belmont to the north of the town, you couldn't see the place because it was completely covered in a thick greenish-yellow blanket. November was the worst time, always bringing the thickest smogs. But sometimes on a summer's day you could watch the shadows of the mill chimneys from up on the moors as they moved slowly, like the hands of a clock, over the streets, terraces and houses. The smog could get so bad that one of Fred's friends, Alan Crompton, remembers going to the cinema with his mum and dad, and when they came out they got lost and couldn't find their way home. They couldn't see the street name four or five feet above their heads so they had to knock on doors to ask what street they were in.

When he was still very young, Fred's family moved from the house by the railway sidings to one just next to

Burnden Park, the home of Bolton Wanderers Football Club. Behind one goal the railway line ran along the top of an embankment and at the other end there were four tightly knit little streets packed with terraced houses built for the people who worked in the nearby Croft Lane Mill. The scene was immortalized in L. S. Lowry's painting *After the Match*, which was based on Burnden Park and its surrounding streets. The painting shows huddled figures in cloth caps, mufflers and clogs walking towards a football ground. The backdrop of smoking mill chimneys and terraced housing gives it the dark and forbidding atmosphere of northern industrial town life in the 1930s and 1940s.

Fred's younger brother Graham remembers the days just after they moved there. 'I think my earliest memory of Fred was when he was a kid, when we lived at home in Alfred Street. We had no bathroom suite or anything like that, not in the old terraced houses, so we used to have a tin bath in front of the fire. But Fred never liked getting in it and he was always screaming. So to keep him quiet, my mam used to give him blocks of soap, and he used to stick matches in this soap. Then he'd get bits of cotton to make ropes on the matches, as though they were going to be ready for putting the sails on.'

The main road from Bolton to Manchester ran past the end of the street. It was made of cobbled stones and it had two tram tracks running down the middle. Between half past six and seven o'clock every morning Fred was woken by the sound of clog irons on the paving stones as the workers tramped to the mills. All was hustle and bustle and the noise reached a great crescendo about ten minutes before work was due to start. Every Monday each street had its lines of washing hanging out and the coalman with his horse and cart was always in trouble with the local housewives if he had a delivery to make up their street on washing day. Trams rattled along the middle of Manchester

Road and noisy diesel lorries lurched past carrying coal and bales of cotton to and from the mills. Steam engines were everywhere – in the mills, on the railways and, occasionally, trundling up and down the roads.

Fred never liked going to school, so his mother used to push him on to the tram that stopped near the end of Alfred Street. In the next mile and a half there were five chimney stacks along the way. Passing the mills, Fred used to peer through the windows of the engine house to get a glimpse of the gleaming leviathans inside with their great flywheels spinning round. And up above, there was the clag of black smoke curling out of the chimney when the fireman shovelled the coal into the boiler. Every so often long ladders painted bright red appeared on the chimneys. Fred always kept a lookout for them from the top of the tram and watched the men climbing up and down. Those fellows really fascinated him, but there were only two things he knew about them: they'd got red ladders and they wore flat caps.

Colin Shaw was in Fred's class from the time they started primary school and he remembers their early days. 'One of our first teachers was Miss Draper. She used to have what looked like a Hoover band round her head holding her hair in. As you went into the classroom there was a prayer area, and I can remember there was a little cradle. It had a red metal frame with two seats on and it rocked backwards and forwards. Right from his first day at school Fred seemed to develop an affection for this rocking cradle. But whenever he was on it he'd never let anybody else have a go.'

One morning, at assembly, the headmaster announced to the whole school that they were going to have some time off lessons to go out and watch a great big chimney fall. In strict single file they were marched from the hall to a field at the back of the school, and were told to sit perfectly still. The kids sat there and the tension began to mount as they

waited for the giant to topple. They waited all morning but the chimney was still standing when they went home at midday for dinner. When they returned in the afternoon the chimney lay on the ground and they'd missed everything. Fred was about seven at the time, and he was really upset to have missed that chimney's fall. 'I never saw it come down,' he told his parents, 'I never did.'

But he didn't have to wait long to see another one as he grew up surrounded by relics of the Industrial Revolution. Much of the machinery and many of the buildings he saw as a child were just starting their decline and would soon be swept away. He understood at an early age that the world he lived in and the people he was seeing, like the steeplejacks and engine minders, had fascinating stories to tell and it was this that would shape his life and his character. Talking about it later, he couldn't recall exactly what had sparked this passion but he knew he'd had it from childhood. 'I can't remember when I first started noticing steeplejacks. My mother always used to say I was able to spot them from my pram. But whenever it was, this early fascination with steeplejacking and steam never went away and I never really acquired any other interests.'

Fred liked the house in Alfred Street and he liked Bolton. In fact he liked it so much that he never wanted to go away. So he made a great hullabaloo every year when a trip to Blackpool was organized, for children with parents like his who couldn't afford to go to the seaside on a week's holiday. Fred would be there in his best gear and they'd try to force him on to the bus, but he wouldn't go. While all the rest of the kids went off to Blackpool for the day, Fred stayed at home watching the trains from his bedroom window.

'That was the thing with Fred,' recalls Colin Shaw. 'If he decided he was doing something, he was doing it. It didn't really matter who else it affected. Fred could be quite selfish like that. If things didn't go his way, Fred didn't

want to know. If the teacher said we were going to do this, that or the other, and Fred didn't want to do it, he would sit there and put his head in his hands. The teacher would say, "Right, Fred, we're doing this," and Fred would just get up and do a runner. Me and another lad, because we were slightly bigger than the rest, used to have to go to the old shelter in the Rose Queen Field, at the back of the school, to fetch him back to class.'

The first teacher who had any real influence on Fred was Miss Buckley. Apart from doing the odd runner when he didn't want to do something, he was never a really naughty boy. But Colin Shaw remembers when he and Fred went off one lunchtime to have a look at some mill lodges. 'We got back to school late and Miss Buckley's punishment was to put us at the front of the class with our hands out. Then she got a ruler. We had the ruler on the back of our knuckles, which you'd probably end up in jail for now. But it seemed to have the desired effect on Fred because he was never really disobedient again after that.'

Fred was a well-behaved pupil but he didn't shine academically. There were about three of them who had problems with reading and they were eight years old before they could read properly. Fred always said he was no good at reading and writing, so they put him in the art group. They painted vases of flowers and bowls of apples, and when the teacher felt like it they went out for walks with their drawing books. Of course you couldn't go anywhere without seeing chimneys, so not only did he draw the chimneys he saw, but he put in red ladders and staging. 'What have you put those in for?' the teacher would ask. And Fred would answer, 'It was in my mind.'

When he was little Fred was quite shy. He was never one of the gang in the playground. 'We'd be playing football, throwing stones, chasing or playing tag, but Fred never ever joined in games like that,' says Colin Shaw. 'He was always a bit of a loner, standing in the corner. He'd either

have two ball bearings in his pocket or he'd be playing with a piece of wire. He'd always be messing about with something. And, considering Fred lived next door to Bolton Wanderers football ground, I never ever saw Fred play a game in the whole of my life, be it football, cricket or whatever.'

His brother Graham agrees. 'When he was young he'd be different from the normal lads. When we were growing up the majority of the lads round here used to play football, but our kid and his mate, Alan Heap, would go down to the river, trying to kill rats with their catapults and things like that.' Fred himself said, 'I've always been a bit weird really; other kids would be playing Cowboys and Indians but I would be finding pieces of piping sticking out of the ground and be thinking what the hell is that? I must have had a mechanical interest even back then.

'Once I rode my bike down a narrow sewer. I was with my mate Alan Heap and when we got to the end we couldn't turn the bloody things round so we had to back-pedal to get out! That were an interesting tunnel where we could have been gassed but we never thought of things like that. The only thing I worried about were the fact that if it rained and you were playing around this tunnel – basically an open sewer – it would go from three feet of water at the bottom to over eighteen feet after a heavy downpour, and that were the scary bit.'

In the valley at the back of Burnden Park there were a few old mills and Fred and Graham would go fishing in the mill lodges there. 'Lodge' was a Lancashire word for mill pond and the lodges provided water for the boilers and also the cooling water for the condensing plants. Fred recalled that they supported an unbelievable amount of wildlife. There were goldfish and all sorts because the water was slightly warm. 'The other thing that was a bit sad really was that when I were a kid, there were quite frequent drownings of young children in the lodges. After a

drowning they always filled about three of them in, so it wasn't long before they were nearly all gone.'

When I was with Fred at one of these lodges filming a piece for the *Industrial Age* series, he recalled a day he had spent with Alan Heap. 'Me and Heapy were quite experimental as kids and we decided we'd have a go at making a diving suit so that we'd be able to see what it were like on the bottom of the lodge. We got a Smith's crisp tin and a piece of motor car inner tube that we stretched round the bottom of the tin. And then on the top we soldered a piece of copper piping with a rubber hosepipe and a big lump of cork and a window in front. First of all we thought we'd try it out with a test dive in the local swimming baths, but when they saw this contraption they threw us out. So we had to try it out in the mill lodge and it were rather funny because Alan had to hold me head down, there were so much air inside this Smith's crisp tin. The thing is, it would never have worked anyway. You would never have got under water; you'd have floated along with your head on the surface with the amount of air that were inside the thing.'

Fred never learned to swim but, when he was a lad, water always had a certain fascination for him. The Bolton branch of the Manchester–Bolton–Bury Canal ran alongside the river Croal in the valley behind Burnden Park. The river and canal were both used as rubbish tips and Fred spent many profitable hours dredging with a rope and an iron hook for what he described as 'plunder'. This would all be hoarded in his mother's back yard or even in his bedroom because, he said, 'You never know when it will come in handy. But the river and the canal were not just a source of treasure trove, they were a place of adventure; a place for fantastic voyages.'

Alan Crompton was one of the gang and he remembers the things that Fred and Alan Heap used to get up to. 'Him and Heapy used to explore the canals a lot and one time

they even built a canoe! They'd no money for materials, but they did have a few tools that Fred had inherited from his grandfather. They got about three or four sizes of bicycle-wheel rim; no spokes, no tyres, just the bare rim. Then they cut them in half and these became the ribs in the canoe. After that they got slate laths and they nailed these into the spoke holes. Then they got a wagon sheet and they draped it over this and nailed it on with clout nails. The whole thing was about fifteen foot long.

'They'd been building it for weeks, and it was in the back bedroom at Fred's mother's. The trouble was, when it was complete and the time came to get it out of the back bedroom, it was miles too big. So they ended up taking the window out and they slid it down the roof of the old shed at the back to get it down into the back street. Then they took it to the river Croal round the back of Burnden Park for a little cruise.

'The boat sailed all right, but it was very unstable. You had to sit dead centre in it or it would tip over. Fred mastered it and paddled a couple of miles along the Bolton–Bury Canal. But it took him a long time and his mother started to get worried. By the time he got home it was pitch dark, about half past nine. His mother went mad. She didn't know where he'd been and thought he could have drowned.'

'Our kid,' says Graham, 'and his mate, Heapy, were forever making rafts, and sailing them on the mill lodges, and we had really good times. We used to make dens in the disused mills and we used to go and sit in them and have a quick ciggie, where nobody could see you. We made one in the roof space of an abandoned factory once. We had a rope ladder that we had to climb to get in. And then, when we got up into the roof space, we'd pull this rope up so that nobody knew we were there.

'It was down by these old mills on the banks of the river Croal that our kid first got into steeplejacking. There were

two big chimneys down there on this old bleach works. When the time came for demolishing the chimneys it was in the middle of the six-week summer holidays. Our kid would sit there on the bank of these lodges all day, from getting up in the morning till they finished work at five o'clock, and he used to watch the steeplejacks knocking these chimneys down. At the end of the day he'd say to my mother, "I'm going to be a steeplejack." And then Mother said, "You're joking, you must be mad."'

One of the stories that stuck in Graham's mind was of the time they were down by the river one Sunday afternoon, after it had been in flood. Fred saw some half-submerged pram wheels sticking out of the water and decided they were worth adding to his load of plunder. 'Our kid bent down,' recalls Graham, 'and started to trawl for it with a branch. As he did he whipped a piece of tin over to reveal fur boots and what was left of a leg. Further investigation revealed the leg was attached to a woman's body. Most of it had been eaten away by the rats because it had been there for quite a while. So we left it there and shot up to get help. The first place we got to was the works of a cough medicine manufacturer called Roberts Croupline, where we found the watchman and got him to phone the police. The police came and we were all there for quite a while. But they sent me away because I was the youngest.'

Fred's father, Frank, worked in one of the many bleach works that had grown up along the banks of the small brooks and rivers that flowed through Bolton. Like Fred, he was quite short in stature and, because of the damp environment he worked in, he suffered with his chest as he got older. Fred's boyhood friends remember he always had a cigarette in his mouth, but he never flicked the ash off. He left it burning and it was always falling off. He never really seemed to suck in any smoke. His only recreation was acting as a checker on the turnstiles at Bolton