RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

A Kentish Lad

Frank Muir: His Autobiography

About the Book

For more than twenty-five years Frank Muir, in partnership with Denis Norden, produced some of the most sparkling and original comedy ever written for radio and television. Later, working at the BBC and then at London Weekend Television, he produced some of the most popular television comedy of 1960s and 70s.

From his very first joke at the age of six, Frank Muir knew that his destiny was to make people laugh. He also know from an early age that he wanted to write, but it took a childhood illness for him to discover that humour and writing could be combined. The death of his father forced him to leave school at the age of fourteen and work in a factory making carbon paper.

But it was during the Second World War, as an air photographer in the RAF, that he really began his career as scriptwriter and performer. At his demob in 1945 he moved naturally to London and the Windmill Theatre, before joining the BBC, the legendary partnership with Denis Norden, and half a century of fulfilling the boyhood ambition of that Kentish lad.

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Unless otherwise stated, photographs are from the author’s collection.

A KENTISH LAD

The Autobiography of
Frank Muir

For the grandchildren.

Abigail and Gabriel Wheatcroft
Isobel and Anna Muir

To give them a whiff of how kind and colourful life has been to Bummer.

Chapter 1

SMALL PLEASURES

GOOD HOLIDAYS STICK in the memory and I have complete recall of one trip which turned out to be quite perfect. I was travelling alone and I packed fussily with care and precision, emptying out my case and beginning again until all my holiday things lay in neat, unruffled order.

When the day of departure came at last I bade farewell to my loved ones, picked up my heavy case and off I went. I had three days of good food, late nights, sing-songs, games and laughter and then returned home with happy memories.

I was aged six. I had spent the holiday at the Derby Arms Hotel, Ramsgate, Kent, the pub in which I was born, which was 100 yards down the road and kept by my granny.

A pub is an excellent place for a holiday when you are young and impressionable. The Derby Arms was excitingly crowded and noisy on Friday and Saturday nights with a penny-in-the-slot mechanical piano plonking away and a great deal of loud singing of sad songs; the favourites in the public bar were ‘Way Down Upon the Swanee River’ and ‘There’s a Long, Long Trail A-Winding’, both sung slowly and sorrowfully with deep feeling. The favourite

tipples were pints of mild and bitter (a mixture of the two draught beers), stout, and, for ladies in funds, port and lemon (a tot of tawny port topped up with fizzy lemonade).

My brother Chas and I were not supposed to go into the bar, but we could see in and we would sneak in whenever possible to be nearer the action.

At weekends the bars were packed with sailors from the boarding houses up the hill and miners from Chislet colliery and Irish navvies working on the new railway line; there must have been some outbreaks of rowdyism and violent behaviour but I cannot remember seeing or hearing any in the years when I grew up there. Perhaps because the working man had just survived a war and was not taking his pleasure in a fight but in a bit of fun; the local pub was his equivalent of radio, TV, theatre, music hall and bingo – and his wife was usually with him. Another factor was that our granny had a glittering eye like the ancient mariner and a very powerful, indeed awesome personality when provoked.

The Derby Arms Hotel was well positioned for a pub, being on the outskirts of Ramsgate on the main road to Margate. Just along the road, McAlpine's built a huge brick viaduct to carry the express trains from London over the Margate road to the new Ramsgate station and my brother Chas and I watched it being built.

Better still, we watched when the viaduct was tested by a convoy of six enormous railway engines which, like a family of elephants, huffed and puffed backwards and forwards across the viaduct, hissing steam and blowing their whistles triumphantly. For two small boys – very heaven.

On the far side of the road to the pub stood a grey, granite horse trough, much appreciated in summertime by the huge shire-horses in the brewer's dray when the pub's beer was delivered. It was a long pull from the town. In the granite on the front of the trough a message was chiselled

saying that it had been donated by a local resident, the creator of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, Baroness Orczy.

To my delight, a beer delivery took place on the Saturday morning of my perfect holiday. The dray was backed up to the front of the pub and two enormous draymen, not so much born as drawn by Beryl Cooke, jumped down and hooked back the huge trapdoors in the pavement. A special squat and very strong ladder was then lowered into the cellar; this ladder did not have normal wooden rungs but curved iron bars, which allowed the heavy wooden barrels to be safely slid down.

In the cellar where I crouched, overexcited and probably half drunk from the heavy fumes of beer which permanently hung in the cellar air, all was cobwebs, bent lead piping running from the barrels to holes in the ceiling, wooden spigots and mallets, and a lot of dust.

The massive draymen rolled a barrel off their dray and slid it down the ladder where it thudded onto a sandbag at the bottom. Granny's cellarman Fred then manhandled the barrel up a little ramp onto its rack. Four full barrels were delivered and then the four empties were pulled up the ladder by Spanish windlass (a rope looped round the barrel's tummy with one of its ends fastened to the top of the ladder and the other hauled upon).

During my holiday the weather was warm and sunny and I was taken for walks. Facing the Derby Arms was an old sunken country lane which was my favourite walk. It led through cornfields gashed with scarlet poppies ('Don't lie down and fall asleep near the poppies or you'll be drugged by opium and never wake up'), past St Lawrence College, Ramsgate's public school, eventually coming out on the main road near the Brown Jug pub, Dumpton Park, nearly at Broadstairs. The lane had the ancient and melodious name of Hollicondane.

At the side of the Derby Arms was a road leading uphill to where the new railway station was being built with the

help of my father, who had a little wooden hut all to himself and was putting up a mile stretch of iron railings alongside the station's approach road. The hilly road up which my father walked to work every morning went past what was, in the last century, a rough and quite dangerous conglomeration of lowly boarding houses, slop shops and grocers called the Blue Mountains – a nickname almost certainly bestowed by Australian seamen from Sydney, which has a range of hills behind the city known as the Blue Mountains.

Until recently most pubs were called hotels and years ago they probably did provide accommodation of a modest 'commercial gentleman' nature. The Derby Arms Hotel could well have been built for that kind of trade.

Upstairs on the first floor there was a penny-in-the-slot loo for ladies, and my brother Chas and I, on our way up to bed or bath, grew used to making our way up the stairs alongside cheery ladies breathing out fumes of Mackeson's milk stout and hauling themselves up by the bannisters towards comfort.

One afternoon I crept into the ladies' loo – utterly forbidden territory – to find out what mysteries lurked there, and managed to lock myself in. As the pub was closed and my granny was resting, I had to cry myself hoarse before rescue arrived.

On the floor above were some small chill bedrooms where commercial gentlemen might once have been thriftily accommodated. At the age of six I thought there were about fifty bedrooms up there, but as I grew older the number shrank to more realistic estimates, until one day I counted them and found that there were three bedrooms, plus a couple of tinier rooms which had a bath and a loo.

In these bathrooms, above each enamelled iron bath crouched a Ewart's 'Victor' geyser, a gas-fired engine of copper and brass which had to be operated with caution and bravery.

The lighting operation was an act of faith. It required a good supply of matches and an iron nerve. An arm had to be swung out from the belly of the machine and the pilot light on the end of it lit. It was reluctant to go ‘plop’ and produce its tiny blue flame and often had to be warmed up first, which might take half a box of Union Jack matches, though there was some compensation in that the matchbox had a joke on the back. (Sample joke on the back of a Union Jack matchbox: ‘Mummy, mummy! Johnny’s swallowed a sixpence!’ Mother: ‘That’s all right, it’s his dinner money.’)

Then the lit pilot light had to be swung back into the stomach of the engine. This action opened up all the main gas jets which hissed threateningly for a moment and then, touched by the pilot flame, exploded with a great ‘WHOOSH!’ If you swung the arm in too slowly or – and I’ve never understood the scientific reason for this – if you swung the arm in too swiftly there could be an explosion which charred the eyebrows. Ever since those days I have never been happy putting a match to gas.

After a few minutes of gestation the geyser’s nozzle began to deliver a thin trickle of steamy water at a temperature of about 2,000 degrees centigrade.

A huge room which must once have been the function room of the ‘hotel’ took up most of the first floor. It had a faintly Far Eastern smell to it, probably from the Chinese bits and pieces of furniture with which the room was stuffed: brass gong-like tables on fretworked teak folding legs; huge black-lacquered screens with mother-of-pearl cockatoos flying across them; faded little framed watercolours of junks on the Yellow River and distant mountains capped with snow. The oriental smell probably lasted because the windows seemed to be kept tightly shut even in mid-summer. During the ten years or so when I more or less lived in the Derby Arms I had the feeling that I was the only person who ever went into that room.

I loved the place. When I walked across the floor the joists creaked and the floorboards floated up and down beneath me like a stiffish trampoline. I found all sorts of treasures stacked away in cupboards. There was a fine large musical box which still worked beautifully. It was cranked up by a ratchet handle and offered six tunes, changeable by working a lever which urged the cylinder sideways a tenth of an inch so that a differently arranged set of pins was presented to the musical teeth.

One of the machine's sophisticated extras was a set of large graduated bells. When I had forgotten all about the bells and the box was delicately tinkling away delineating a waltz, a pin on the revolving cylinder would lift a bar of heavy clappers and drop them down onto the bells with a terrific jangle.

I found four enormous volumes of *A Pictorial History of the Great War*. Terribly gripping photographs of Somme trenches and howitzers and mud and early tanks shaped like rectangles squashed sideways.

I unearthed several albums of cigarette-card collections, depicting such excitements as famous British footballers with haircuts like Dr Crippen and long shorts down to mid-shin, and British racing cars painted racing green with spare cans of petrol clamped to their ample running-boards and bonnets buckled down with leather straps.

I came upon albums of early picture postcards, each card held in place by having its corners tucked into oblique slits in the album's black pages. The favourite subjects for the photographers and watercolourists seem to have been pretty girls with their hair piled high, Canterbury Cathedral, cottages with heavily floral front gardens and sailing ships crowded together in Ramsgate's inner harbour, their bare masts and complicated rigging making patterns as delicate as spiders' webs.

It was a mystery how Granny came to amass this odd collection of oriental oddments and local semi-collectibles

and I suggested to my mother that they were bestowed by sailors in lieu of bar debts. For some reason my mother was horrified by this and pointed out that Granny's then current husband, known as Pop, was the engineer of a trading vessel plying the China Seas, and Pop had probably brought the Chinese bits home. Seemed a long way to transport furniture.

Pop turned up once or twice when he was a widower and my mother looked after him. He was a very fat man in a pale and crumpled tropical suit. I was greatly impressed by his revelation that he sweated so much in the Mystic East that an expensive leather watch strap rotted on his wrist in a few weeks, so he switched to knicker elastic.

He looked like the American movie villain Sidney Greenstreet, but I did not find him at all sinister. Like so many salts when ashore he flung money around freely, behaviour guaranteed to win the affection of any normally venal small boy.

If the character and shape of a growing lad is determined by a mixture of heredity and environment, then heredity from the maternal side of my family could have played only a small part. I am tall. I was once, some years ago, before I began to acquire a literary stoop, 6 feet 6 inches tall, and my son Jamie is even taller, and my daughter Sal is a good height, whereas my mother's side of the family were (except for my mother) shortish and on the plump side.

Granny was a splendid lady of great character but she was small and stout and she waddled. She had a remarkable goitre like a small dumpling poised on her shoulder, so impressive that it took considerable will-power not to keep looking at it. Granny was not a great eater or drinker but every evening she sipped a half-pint glass of fresh milk – only one – which she had previously spiked with an unspecified quantity of whisky.

Granny was a Cowie from Peterhead in Scotland. The Cowies had always been connected with the sea and sea-going folk. Granny's mother had kept a kind of up-market boarding house in Barking High Street, East London, where she accepted as guests only ships' captains and chief engineers, and our granny continued the maritime tradition, although the life of a sailor was frequently brief in those days. Granny's father, a ship's carpenter, was drowned when the *Union Castle* went down in May 1896. He left six Cowie children, four of them girls. Besides Granny, whose name was Elizabeth Jane, there was her sister Susan, also short and stout, who stayed with Granny most of her life and helped her run the Derby Arms.

During the First World War Susan became engaged to a Canadian who then took himself off to live in Tiverton, Devon. He exchanged letters with Susan regularly for many years, but Mr Green behaved more like a pen pal than an ardent suitor, which was probably just as well as after forty years of correspondence it emerged that he had been married all the time.

Then there was Vera, charmingly bulky, who married a chap with the splendid name of Captain Helmer Augustus Dilner and went off with him to make a home in New Zealand.

And finally there was Adelaide, known as Addie, a jolly lady and nice to have for a great-aunt. Like her bulky sisters, Addie was not avoirdupois-deprived; indeed she was immensely proportioned, with a one-piece bosom which was a cross between a French provincial hotel bolster and a sandbag. In the garden she would lie back in her deckchair and park her cup of tea on nature's shelf; no hands. Addie married Jack Turnage, an Anglo-Indian who was a foreman in a gun and shell factory in Calcutta and they went off to live in India.

Jack Turnage was amiable and kind and Chas and I were fascinated by his ear lobes, which were long and dangly

like an elephant's. When I was grown up, Addie and Jack retired from India to a modest house they had built on Ramsgate's West Cliff and here Jack was able to go quietly doolally in comfort (when we called, he would take us aside and whisper that they were coming up through the cavity walls to get him).

Our granny, when aged twenty-one, married a ship's carpenter, aged twenty-four, named Harry Harding, who was a breakaway member of an ancient West Country family which had farmed at Cranmore, Somerset, since before the Norman invasion. The union produced my mother, Margaret (Madge), and then poor Harry Harding, like Granny's father, was lost at sea.

Granny did not languish long as a young widow. She soon married the son of an inspector of lighthouses for Trinity House, Frank Herbert Webber, after whom I was christened (I could have done without the Herbert). In fact Granny and Frank Herbert could not have been legally married as poor Harry Harding's whereabouts and death could never be established. But in 1909 the Webbers moved to Ramsgate and Frank Herbert became the licensee of the Derby Arms Hotel, and there they produced a half-sister and two half-brothers for my mother: my Aunt Mary, Uncle Jack and Uncle Alex (my favourite of them all). All went well for ten years until in 1919, in the middle of the Spanish flu epidemic, Frank Herbert rather unwisely tried to shovel snow whilst wearing only trousers, shoes and a singlet. He caught flu and died.

Granny persuaded the magistrates that she, widow of the ex-licensee, was quite capable of running a decent, law-abiding public house by herself and she took over the Derby Arms and ran it trouble-free for twenty-two years, assisted in the bars by my mother, Margaret – known as Madge – my great-aunt Susan, and two employees, a French slave-of-all-works named Eugenie and, for the heavy

work, a newly demobbed naval petty officer named Fred Pearce.

Meanwhile, in the superior boarding-house in Barking High Street, a young marine engineer from New Zealand booked in. His name was Charles James Muir and he was my father. He and his sister Rose had been orphaned in New Zealand when they were quite young and had to strike out for themselves. My father went to sea as a ship's engineer (a profession which at that time seemed to have consisted almost entirely of Scotsmen), and my Aunt Rose went to work in Christchurch Hospital in a lowly capacity, probably heaving a bumper across the ward lino to bring up a polish. She ended up Superintendent of the Hospital MBE, remembered by the Rose Muir Society for Nurses, which she founded, and a stained-glass window in the hospital chapel celebrating her contribution to nursing in New Zealand.

In the boarding house in Barking, young C. J. Muir caught a glimpse of the landlady's granddaughter, Margaret Harding, and that was that. He pursued her to the Derby Arms in Ramsgate, wooed her between voyages to and from New Zealand and they were married in St Luke's Church, Ramsgate, in 1916. Chas was born in 1918 and I in 1920.

Dad was tall. He was a lean 6 feet 1½ inches and he was gifted with accomplishments that were dazzlingly impressive to a small son: he could cut hair, repair socks, name the stars, do a little tap-dancing and he never lost his temper or shouted or complained. He was also rather good-looking, as was my mother. I am allowed to say this because physical traits notoriously jump a generation.

Dad found that life with his family was infinitely preferable to life on the ocean wave and he left the sea.

The Muir family moved out of the Derby Arms and along the road into Thanet Lodge, a pleasant but elderly and inconvenient little house, though with a garden. My mother

had to cook on a neurotic kitchen range of great age which needed frequent stoking, and there was an old-fashioned ‘copper’ in a corner which had to be filled by saucepans and was heated from beneath by a small bonfire. On laundry days, or when a pudding needed a boil-up, a match was put to the bonfire. About an hour later the water began to hubble and bubble, all the windows steamed up and the whole house dripped with condensation.

On the opposite corner of the road to the Derby Arms stood a tiny sweetshop which was owned by my mother, bought with help from Granny. This yielded a small but steady income, very welcome as the depression of the Thirties built up.

It was a bad time for my father to have made his move away from the sea. Jobs on land were increasingly difficult to find and the only work available to him was in unskilled occupations like working on Ramsgate’s new railway extension or loading stores onto naval vessels lying off-shore from the First World War ‘mystery port’ of Richborough. It was called the ‘mystery port’ (a military secret known to everyone in Ramsgate) because it was the main port from which ammunition, guns and tanks were shipped to France.

For Chas and me those were happy days. One of our occasional pleasant chores was to walk up the hill past the Blue Mountains to the railway site where Dad was putting up his railings and take him his tea makings. This was a spill of greaseproof paper containing a stiffish, unlovely-looking pudding of tea leaves, sugar and condensed milk. In his little hut Dad would boil up an enormous iron kettle, scrape the mixture into a large mug, add boiling water from the kettle and stir the brew into fragrant life.

I have never drunk tea since.

Mother was busy working in the pub and the sweetshop, so she would occasionally hire a very sweet, plump, young local girl named Edie Budd as a minder for Chas and me.

Edie would take us for walks along Hollicondane (‘I keep telling you, don’t lie down near the poppies’) or a splash about in the sea from a bathing machine on Ramsgate sands. It was all a bit Dickensian – a family with hardly any money hiring a girl for a few coppers who had no money at all, but it worked amiably.

Edie was a member of a fervent Pentecostal sect in Ramsgate and asked Mother whether she could take Chas and me to a service one Sunday morning. Mother was delighted to get us out of the house so that she could get on with cooking Sunday lunch, so off we went with Edie.

The vocal enthusiasm of the congregation and the charismatic nature of the service made a deep impression on Chas and me. So much so that back home, halfway through lunch, Chas suddenly leaped to his feet and declaimed very loudly, ‘Alleluia!’ Then he sat down leaving our two stunned parents looking at each other.

Not to be outdone and now well in the mood of the meeting, a few minutes later I too leaped to my feet, eyes shining with zeal. ‘God be praised!’ I announced ringingly. ‘Can I have another potato?’

On non-Edie days the railway construction depot up the hill provided excellent play facilities; there were tall heaps of sand to run up and down and flatten, bags of cement to jump on and kick into grey clouds, heavy nuts and bolts to hurl at the watchman’s hut, and, best of all, an old, slow-moving and bad-tempered watchman to provoke.

One evening Mother asked us what plans we had for the morning. We said, ‘We’re going to the builders’ depot to play with the Bugger-Off Man.’

So much for the influence of heredity. Not much influence, really, or I should be walking with a waddle, sporting a goitre, or at least be able to break into a tap-dance, but all these accomplishments are alien, so perhaps the stronger influence on me when a toddler was environmental; it was

being a Kentish lad growing up in Ramsgate and Broadstairs which did the damage.

Towns, like strangers, often seem dull and unattractive at first but become interesting the more one learns about them. Ramsgate is like that. Nowadays one thinks of it as vaguely seaside, something to do with cross-Channel ferries and hovercraft, with a good harbour (some may perhaps even remember that this was a rallying point for the Dunkirk 'little ship' armada), on the whole not a very exciting place. But it was quite a town in its day.

In Tudor times it was a humble fishing village of about two dozen hovels clustered, as with most of the East Kent towns, round the sea end of a natural cleft in the chalk cliffs. This cleft was enlarged to allow carts first to haul catches of fish inland and later to carry into the hinterland much more lucrative goods.

By the eighteenth century the town was beginning to grow and to prosper modestly, due to the development of trade with the Baltic, Europe and Russia, to good fishing, but mostly to the most profitable trade of all – smuggling.

Everybody seemed to be in on smuggling. The gentry, farmers, professionals and tradesmen put up the working capital and they (with the clergy) were the customers. It was a good investment; it has been said that almost every house of any size built along the coast of Thanet in those days was paid for with the profits of smuggling. The actual heavy work on the beach at night – loading the casks and cases onto packhorses, avoiding the occasional officer of the Preventive Service, leading the train of horses up the steep cleft and on to an inland hiding place – was done by farm labourers only too happy to oblige at the going rate of three times their day wage.

A kind of highly profitable reverse smuggling also went on around Ramsgate and the Romney Marshes area in which high-quality, raw English wool, a carefully controlled export much sought after by continental weavers, was

smuggled *out* by specialist wool smugglers known as ‘owlers’.

There were two extraordinary things about this nationwide criminal activity; firstly it seemed to carry with it no pangs of guilt; almost everybody who could afford to drink tea, which was heavily taxed in England, bought smuggled tea. And secondly, although smuggling was losing the government enormous sums in revenue, the politicians of the day never bothered to tackle the problem seriously. In the eighteenth century there were only fifty mounted revenue officers to patrol the whole length of the Kent coast, ludicrously few when the smugglers could assemble pony trains of 200 armed men.

In the eighteenth century the business of smuggling was called, without irony, ‘free trade’. A rather more legitimate source of prosperity enjoyed by Ramsgate in the middle of the eighteenth century came with the invention of the British seaside holiday.

Until the middle 1700s, waves and mountains were not regarded as objects of natural beauty but as dangerous and boring obstructions which the traveller had to endure to get where he wanted to go. Then all this changed. The grand tourists began to enjoy the ‘picturesque view’ and the medical profession invented the seaside.

Up to the 1750s, citizens suffering from scrofula and various other unsightly diseases were prescribed a course of the waters, which meant taking rooms at a fashionable spa such as Bath or Royal Tunbridge Wells and enjoying a regime of dunking the unsightly body in a public bath of hot spring water claimed to be ‘chalybeate’ (not a word which passes the lips daily, meaning ‘containing iron’) and reeking of sulphurous salts, and then drinking a pint or so of the revolting stuff from a fountain.

The trouble with going to a fashionable spa for treatment was that it was like going to a modern health farm: far too expensive for the average citizen with a spotty

back. But the sea was free and much more hygienic than cruising around in a hot bath with a batch of other skin diseases.

So wallowing in the briny, which began at Brighton as remedial treatment for the afflicted, became fun for the whole family. The great British seaside holiday was born.

The Isle of Thanet became London's seaside; its three key resorts being Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate. The pioneer town of the three was Margate, England's first seaside resort of any consequence. It was the nearest of the three towns to London, so it appealed to rich Londoners travelling by coach and to the poorer East Enders who arrived by the cheapest form of transport, boat. Margate was on the Thames estuary side of the North Foreland and so holidaymakers did not have to endure the boisterous seas which visitors sailing round the headland to Broadstairs and Ramsgate had to endure.

Large, pleasant houses were built at Margate for the *ton*, the town had (and still has) England's second oldest theatre, and bookshops and concert halls abounded. It had a long sandy beach, a sea-bathing infirmary, and it was a Margate Quaker, Benjamin Beale, who invented the 'modesty hood' to fit onto bathing machines. Bathing machines were a breakthrough in seaside decorum, consisting of a horse-drawn changing hut on wheels with Mr Beale's canvas hood at the back. The thing was towed by its horse into the shallows, enabling the lady within to change into her bathing costume, climb down a short ladder and cavort discreetly beneath Mr Beale's canopy in her own little bit of sea without the embarrassment of her wet flannel costume clinging to her form and revealing her intimate bumps and dents.

Gentlemen bathed stark naked further along the beach.

By the early nineteenth century Margate had changed considerably, moving firmly downmarket; perhaps because the new railways were demonstrating that the big profits

came not from milord in his own coach strapped to a wagon, but in the masses crammed onto wooden benches in trucks. Much cheaper accommodation was built and Margate became the seaside success story for the working man and his family.

East End Londoners mostly travelled to Margate by the cheapest and most uncomfortable of small packet-boats, the common hoy (hoy polloi?).

Charles Lamb, aged fifteen, went for a happy week's holiday to Margate with his cousin and later recalled the humble voyage (fare – 2 shillings 6 pence) in his essay, 'The Old Margate Hoy' ('Can I forget thee, thou old Margate Hoy, with thy weather-beaten, sun-burnt captain, and his rough accommodations – ill-exchanged for the foppery and fresh-water niceness of the modern steam packet? … Not many rich, not many wise, or learned, composed at that time the common stowage of a Margate packet').

Broadstairs was the permanently genteel town of the three Thanet resorts, appealing strongly to the middle classes and those who wanted to be thought of as middle class, like Mr Pooter who referred affectionately to the town in *Diary of a Nobody* as 'good old Broadstairs'.

It was hardly a resort – no fairground with big dipper, or on the other social level no golf links either – but it did have a Grand Hotel and a pleasant, curved bay and a bandstand and a bit of a pier and a minstrel show on the beach, and it developed a reputation for its healthy sea air so it became a popular site for convalescent homes and expensive preparatory schools; many a union leader recovered his voice in his union's red-brick, neo-Gothic convalescent home on a Broadstairs cliff top, and many a minor royal and future duke began his schooling being walloped in a Broadstairs prep school.

Further lustre was added to the town's reputation when Charles Dickens found it a placid place in which to write. He frequently stayed and worked at the Royal Albion Hotel

(still going strong) and at Bleak House, an odd building like a small Scottish baronial castle which overlooked the harbour. At the time it was called Fort House but the name was changed to Bleak House when the novel became successful. It is now a Dickens museum.

Of the three Thanet resorts serving London it was Ramsgate which managed to be the most comprehensive socially, offering an *Upstairs, Downstairs* arrangement of suitable holidays for both the rich and the non-rich.

The less well-off were tempted with a long, safe, free beach, an army of bathing machines, Punch and Judy shows, donkeys for children to ride, lots of pubs, bracing sea air, inexpensive boarding houses and a view of sailing ships constantly beating up and down the busy Downs (the slightly sheltered waters between the seashore and Goodwin Sands). And early in the century the uncomfortable voyage by hoy was superseded by the railway. Trains from London emerged dramatically from a tunnel cut in the chalk cliffs and disgorged their holidaymakers a few yards from the seafront. Later a new station was built on the edge of the town and the old seashore terminus became a funfair, Merrie England.

Unlike Margate, Ramsgate kept its hold on the affections of the wealthy. Elegant Georgian terraces were built on the East Cliff top, Nelson Crescent, Albion Place, Paragon Place, and well-to-do London merchants took to wintering in fashionable Ramsgate. And during the summer season their good ladies, after a discreet dip from their bathing machine, could drink their (smuggled) tea, tuck up their (smuggled) lace cuffs and enjoy their game of whist far away from both the citizens of Ramsgate, described by a lady visitor from London in a letter home as ‘the smelly inhabitants’, and the seething crowd of holidaymaking ’Arry and ’Arriets on the beach below, a busy scene captured by Frith in his hugely popular painting of 1853, *Ramsgate Sands*.

It was claimed that King George IV actually deserted his beloved Brighton one summer for a holiday at Ramsgate but I can find no proof of that; however, the monarch did graciously condescend to visit Ramsgate in 1821 when he disembarked from a visit to Hanover. The town fathers, in ecstasies, had 100 tons of Dublin granite fashioned into a copy of a classical obelisk and erected to commemorate this widely unpopular king's gouty foot touching down on Ramsgate soil. Local townspeople referred to the obelisk as the 'Royal Toothpick'.

During my childhood, trams used to grind noisily up and clatter noisily down Madeira Walk, the steep winding hill which descended rapidly from the rich terraces of the East Cliff through an ornamental chine to the harbour. I remember when very young being shown the sharp corner where, I was told, a tram had once jumped the tramlines, tipped over the edge and plunged down into somebody's back garden. I could never pass that corner again without an enjoyable little frisson.

Other frisson-inducers in my early years included the unhygienic-looking iron mug chained to the drinking fountain in Ellington Park, from which, I was informed, a boy of my age had recently caught the Black Death; a synagogue – actually a Jewish seminary and college set up by the Montefiore family – lying behind high walls on the road to Broadstairs where, my brother Chas told me, Jews used to be flogged until they agreed to give all their money to the roller-skating rink along the road and become Christians; and being christened at the age of seven, the ceremony having been postponed because my father was at sea when I was born. I was a bit old to be christened, but queuing up with the babies at the font was not so embarrassing in retrospect as was my appearance. The solemn ceremony marked the first occasion on which I faced the world with my hair stiff and glossy from a generous handful of Field's Lavender Solidified Brilliantine.

King George IV was not the only person of high consequence to enjoy the pleasures of Ramsgate. In AD 449, Hengist and Horsa (their names translate as ‘The Horse Brothers’) led the first Teutonic invasion of the island, setting sail from Jutland and landing on a beach, Ebbsfleet, to the west of Ramsgate. The Horse Brothers were followed in AD 597 by Augustine (later St Augustine), sent by Pope Gregory to bring Christianity and Latin verbs to our Isles. Augustine and forty monks managed to achieve this peacefully and he became the first Archbishop of Canterbury.

Princess Victoria, before becoming Queen Victoria, enjoyed a number of visits to Ramsgate, staying at many of the fine houses and meeting everyone of substance. The town also had its odd eccentric resident, such as Sir William Curtis, Bt, who built his estate, Cliff House, on Sion Hill, a splendid site overlooking the harbour. Sir William, a ‘very badly educated Tory’, made a huge fortune from manufacturing sea biscuits in Wapping. He became Lord Mayor of London and was famous in his day, rather like Lord and Lady Docker were in the 1960s, for his conspicuous wealth. His sumptuously fitted yacht was particularly marked out for mockery by Whig wits. King George IV, though, enjoyed many a luxurious cruise with his rich friend and stayed at Cliff House, Ramsgate, in 1821 when he returned from Hanover.

Another resident, less noble and rich, who made his mark on Ramsgate was the great Gothic revival architect and designer, Augustus Pugin, perhaps most famous for working with Barry as designer of decorations and statues for the Houses of Parliament. Pugin built himself a Gothic house in Ramsgate with its own little church. He was converted to Roman Catholicism in 1833 and made his church into a kind of abbey. His house and the church – St Augustine’s, Ramsgate’s first Roman Catholic church – are

still there, faced with glistening black flints. Pugin died at his house in Ramsgate, insane.

And then there was young Vincent Van Gogh. In 1876 the somewhat muddled young Dutchman, aged twenty-three, recovering from unrequited love for his London landlady's daughter and uncertain whether to become a pastor like his father or an evangelist amongst the working classes, moved to Ramsgate and was taken on as a teacher in a small impoverished school with twenty-eight pupils, run by a Mr Stokes. For four months Van Gogh taught some of the young of Ramsgate their mathematics, French and geography.

My friend Michael Meyer pointed out to me that Mr Stokes almost certainly could not have afforded atlases for the geography lessons, so somewhere in Ramsgate there is probably an old gentleman whose father tucked away in the attic a sketch map of Mesopotamia drawn by Vincent Van Gogh.

Before he left England and went back to Holland leaving school-teaching for more creative pursuits, Van Gogh drew a charming little pen-and-ink sketch entitled *Vue de la fenêtre de l'École*. Ramsgate, 31 mai 1876.

The first school my brother and I went to was not unlike Mr Stokes's academy. Ours was about the same size, was called Thyra House School and its proprietor, headmaster and 50 per cent of its staff was a Mr Rule. Mr Rule, a heavily built man with a Bavarian accent, had a look about him of Field Marshal von Hindenburg, so when the First World War broke out he prudently changed the spelling of his name from Ruhl to Rule.

Chas and I used to walk to school, and a fair way away it was, too, for a couple of ex-toddlers. We would toil up the hill from the Derby Arms to what was the flour mill at the top and down the other side to South Eastern Road where Thyra House was, pausing to hurl a potato in a desultory sort of way at the front door of an old lady who lived in a

row of houses on the left pavement. If we scored a hit the lady would hurtle out of her door shaking her fist at us and screeching. It was the kind of mindless bad behaviour which most children seem to enjoy for a while. Perhaps she, too, came to enjoy it as part of life's rich pattern because she never seriously tried to catch us.

The other 50 per cent of Thyra House School's staff was a thin, almost transparent lady who pedalled the harmonium with spirit and taught us to sing hymns, her favourite being 'You in Your Small Corner and I in Mine'. Chas was good at hymns and was nominated Best Singer. I was nominated Best Opener (opening the mouth wide was a much-esteemed virtue in Thyra House hymn-singing). Years later I was delighted to find that the French for 'small corner', *petit coin*, was a popular euphemism in France for the lavatory.

It was in the middle of an arithmetic lesson at Thyra House, taken by the headmaster himself, that I discovered the enormous satisfaction that came from creating laughter and it became the main aim of my working life.

I was sitting at a double desk with a plump fellow scholar who was almost asleep with boredom. To cheer him up I made a humorous remark. He sniggered and whispered what I had said to the boy behind him and he sniggered too.

Mr Rule's fat hairy forefinger bent in a beckoning movement and I slid out from my desk and stood next to him, clutching my pencil, knuckles white with fear.

'Muir, you were talking in class again. That is not permitted, heh? Vill you kindly repeat aloud vat you said to Leatherbarrow? It is fair, is it not, that you share your vit vith all of us?'

'Please, sir,' I mumbled, 'I said, "This pencil top is sir's bum."'

The roomful of children erupted in joyful mirth. It was an intoxicating moment. I had made the whole school

laugh.

It might be thought that it was not really much of a joke on which to base a career. It was not even remotely witty, and it was hardly comedy of observation; my pencil top was only half a centimetre in diameter and held one of those useless pink rubbers which smear pencil marks without erasing them, whilst sir was what Americans call a ‘lardbutt’; his behind was about a metre wide. But the roomful of children laughed at what I had said and my destiny was fixed.

Chapter 2

BEACH BOY

THE PARENTS SUDDENLY upped sticks from Ramsgate and moved to Broadstairs, settling into a pleasant rented house named Fernbank. The move probably came about because Dad had been offered a reasonably good job with McAlpine's, helping to build a factory up in Selby, Yorkshire.

Then things began to go wrong. My father caught pneumonia rather seriously and my mother went up to Yorkshire to nurse him. My brother and I were looked after by Mother's sister Mary and her husband Len (Chas and I were pages in daffodil-coloured satin at their wedding. Yellow Pages?).

Mother was away for months and when she and Dad returned to Broadstairs their savings had all gone and Dad was none too strong. Uncle Len came to the rescue. He had opened a shop near Broadstairs railway station selling electrical goods and was building a business based on the new craze – listening to the wireless.

Dad became an installer of sets and aerials for Uncle Len. He rode around Broadstairs on a curious vehicle called a 'Ner-a-Car', not unlike the outcome of a liaison

between a motor scooter and a sway-backed motorbike. Its main feature was a large storage box under the rider's legs, large enough to hold tools and bits of wireless sets.

Wireless was a growth industry and for years things went well for Uncle Len and Dad. One weekend Dad brought home the makings of a crystal set and put it together. I remember moveable coils like a pair of ears, glowing valves, the 'cat's whisker' (very important component), which was a piece of fine wire moved about by a little lever, and the 'mighty atom', a tiny lump of quartz glinting in the light. The quartz was probed by the 'cat's whisker' until a station was located and we could listen to it through the heavy black earphones (two members of the family per headset).

The excitement when Dad first tuned in and we heard sounds coming to us through the air *without wires* was terrific. Never mind that we knew perfectly well the transmission came from the North Foreland Lighthouse a mile up the road and was only a few dots and dashes of morse code – it was magic to us.

We moved to a newish rented bungalow, Adstone, on Linden Avenue, where Mother was able to take in lodgers during the summer season. Chas and I much enjoyed our lodgers, who made a change to our routine. We particularly liked a Mr Sumner and family who were most amiable and came year after year.

With the extra money coming in from the guests, Mother was able to cover the bungalow's floors (almost but not quite wall to wall) with grey haircord, an inexpensive form of carpet which was attractive enough to look at and hard-wearing. Walking on it in bare feet was like strolling across Brillo pads, but the carpet was my mother's pride: people like us – I suppose lower middle class hoping to become middle middle class – did not have carpets in those days, we had bare floorboards, varnished, or lino and rugs.