

# Christmas 1952.

November 6th, acrid smoke still hanging in the air, skeletons of spring interior mattresses and other incombustible items litter the sites of the previous night's fires. Bonfire night over for another year, the weeks of collecting 'bommy' standing guard in case a rival gang decides to help themselves to your hoard, already seems a distant memory. The excitement of that night well and truly behind, Christmas then became the main focus, strangely in 1950s no one seem to think about Noel until the last embers of Guy Fawkes night had died down. However from that day forward everybody, particularly children were obsessed with the coming celebrations and merriment that would certainly occur. The religious element was much more important in those days, sadly as each year passes the real meaning of the 'Holy Day' diminishes.

I know that younger readers couldn't possibly imagine the anticipation of Christmas that abounded in the early 1950s, only a few years after the deprivations of WW2 and before that the depression of the 1930s. People could at last start to think of better times and splash out for the special day. Rationing was still in force for many things including 'Toffee' but everyone was determined to make it something to lift the spirits. Talking about spirits, better off families would have a bottle of whisky and possibly brandy, while those whose budgets were more stretched would have to settle for a bottle of sherry. It was very unusual in working class homes to have 'drink on tap' so to speak. So there wouldn't be anymore alcoholic drink in the house until the following Christmas, likewise the pedestal glass cake stand which at Christmas teatime held pride of place at the centre of the table would be laid away until the following year, although thinking about it that may have made a reappearance on Whit Monday. I still have my Mam's, which I treasure as a reminder of happy times of yore.

Houses would be decorated with crepe paper of various colours, bought in sheets to be trimmed into 3 inch strips and twisted into twirls and then drawing pinned to the ceiling, criss crossing living rooms, houses with gaslight had to make doubly sure the festoons were kept well clear of the light fitting. Families with a little more disposable income would boast a Christmas Tree, some 'real ones', others the artificial kind that seemed like green toilet brushes on a stick, to be fair the fake ones when decorated looked quite acceptable especially when adorned with electric lights. There was a device that could be fitted that would make the lights flash on and off at rapid intervals they would drive neighbours to distraction, goodness knows what effect it had on the mental wellbeing of families where these contraptions were installed, flashing from dark until bedtime, it must have been tantamount to torture.

Schools would start rehearsing nativity plays. I had hoped against hope to be St Joseph along with the kudos that went with the starring role, if not Joseph one of the Kings or at the very least a Shepherd, you can imagine how I was crestfallen when informed I would be one of the trees, a role that even came without a costume. I'd thought at the very bare minimum a tea towel would have been required and I told my Mam weeks before the performance to make sure there was a new one available for the big day. However the only requirement was brown trousers and shoes. A tree, I ask you, how could you look forward to being a tree!

After the disappointment of missing out on a leading role in the play, I content myself to looking forward to Christmas Day itself and the presents that would be left in a pillowcase at the bottom of my bed. I can still remember the feeling of overwhelming happiness on waking as I gazed at the

pillow case with its many shapes sticking out at abrupt angles straining against the confines of the pillowslip. The carefully wrapped gifts would peep out above the top of the make believe sack. I remember asking my Mam if I should leave a bolster case( twice the size) but it was explained that if all children did that Saint Nicholas would never get round, I can recall being sort of satisfied with the explanation . All Christmas wrapping paper seemed the same in those days, white with green holly and red berries . I'd been to see Father Christmas at Lowe's a few weeks earlier, and he had explained that dogs, cats and other livestock were outside his remit ,so I wasn't expecting to see a Jack Russell running round the bedroom. Maybe that would be something to be considered for my birthday in May! however I digress, back to the job of opening the parcels , many seem to be old faithfuls appearing every year, paintbox and colouring book, a chocolate Father Christmas , a Soap Bobby and gold chocolate coins in a net bag. Girls would Invariably get a post office set or a Toffee Shop ,with jars of dolly mixtures and a little set of scales ,skipping ropes were always a perennial favourite for young girls; John Bull printing sets and a compendium of games ( Ludo, Snakes and Ladders etc ) were unisex. One year I got a Magic Robot, and whist a long way from today's computer games it really did seem 'Magic' and the ultimate in educational toys.

The Christmas of 1952, I'm sure of the year as we had for years a photograph, dated with pencil on the back, of myself resplendent in my Cowboy outfit, try as I may I can't find the picture, but I tell you I could have given The Milky Bar Kid a run for his money. Stetson, waistcoat, holster with two six-shooters adorned with white handles with little red fake jewels and of course the obligatory Sheriffs' Badge. I'm delighted with my main present, a delight that lasted until afternoon when I go with my sister to see our Auntie Nellie who lived near St George's Church. Thereupon the despondency of being overlooked for the Nativity play pales into insignificance as I see a boy on The Drill Hall steps, he's similar age to me, with an identical outfit, but, and to me at 7, it's a very big BUT, he sports a pair of chaps ( coverings for the legs consisting of leggings and a belt), brown with fringes no less ! I'am ashamed to say I have never felt so envious, nothing in my outfit seemed to please anymore, as my desire for a pair of the afore mentioned chaps became overwhelming. My mood is lifted somewhat when my Auntie Nellie gives me a 10 Shilling note, which my sister assures me would be easily enough to buy a pair of you know what. I'll be at Woolworths at 9 O'clock the day after Boxing Day me thinks. On the way home from Auntie's I realise my Sheriff's Star is missing, in my childlike way I wonder if God is teaching me a lesson for feeling so envious, but I needn't have fretted, after retracing my steps only 50 yards or so I see it glinting on the pavement in the afternoon sun.

Christmas Day comes to an end when the last of the visitors leave. The house is tided, the fire quenched ( wasting coal in those days would have been an unforgivable sin). My feeling of envy has completely dissipated, quite forgetting the trauma played out on the The Drill Hall steps, and the feeling of animosity towards the unknown boy only hours before forgotten. In the meantime I'd convinced myself that mine was a much better hat than his and I'd put the idea of chaps firmly on hold, I reason they are a little bit ostentatious and I'm too old for them anyway, in any case real cowboys don't have fringes, perish the thought ! Auntie Nellie's ten bob would be spent on a 'Tommy Gun' instead. Mam puts me to bed and asks " Have you enjoyed the day" I reply with my well rehearsed lament "CAN I HAVE A DOG FOR MY BIRTHDAY ?". Christmases and birthdays came and went and the longed for canine pal never arrived, in fact it would be decades later before that particular ambition would be fulfilled, when in my mid forties I became the proud owner of a Staffordshire Bull Terrier, Sally, who became a wonderful companion for over 10 years . I can honestly say from the bottom of my heart that she was well worth every minute of the wait!