

Old Father Time. (1950s)

The invisible enemy COVID 19 has stolen much of 2020, it's a year most will be glad to see back of. As we approach the start of a new year I go down Memory Lane - again, as I get older it's a Lane I visit more often, perhaps too often. However, I don't think I'm alone, particularly at this time of year in remembering times and people from the past, after all it's those events and people shaped who we are today. Little things will bring memories flooding back, maybe a song or favourite hymn of a loved-one no longer with us. All sorts of seemingly mundane reminiscences stir the emotions ,an example in my case, I never eat a mince pie without thinking of my Auntie Annie; whist most people associate this confectionery with Christmas my Auntie always made batches for all her extended family for New Years Eve; with these sentiments in mind I thought it might be amusing to take a lighthearted look back at ' Hogmanays ' of 1950s .

There were no night clubs, in those far off days. The first one in Wigan opened in the early 1960s, incidentally Matt Monroe was the artist on the opening night; you can win many a shilling on this name this club, everybody seems to have forgotten its existence. It was 'The Golden Clog', situated in King Street West, formally Miss Gee's School of Dancing . It had numerous names later, Puffers and Pemps among others and was run by Barbara Calderbank, who ran a tight ship, she would sit in her car outside the premises vetting would be 'clubbers' if she didn't like the look of you, you didn't get in - no ifs or buts. Sorry for that little digression, when I start to write of the past my pen seems to have a life of its own!

In the mid-1950s New Years Eve would be spent in the ' local ' or the umpteen social clubs, political and non-political that adorned Wigan, there were 7 in the Scholes area alone, it seems like another age. The clubs would have artists backed by an organist and drummer, pubs would often have a 'Singing Room' complete with piano and pianist, the latter would have an incredible knack of making even the most tone deaf participants seem like Mario Lanza; they were known as 'Mugs Concerts', I can't for the life of me think why!

For the people of a more sober outlook they were catered for by the now increasingly available friend in the corner, the television, and a show from Scotland with names like Kenneth McKellar and Andy Stewart not to mention the irrepressible Jimmy Shand and his orchestra, they would be

the order of the night; for those not fortunate to own a T.V, the wireless would broadcast a 'New Years Eve ' special programme.

Back to the folks who like a tippie to welcome The New Year, pubs and clubs closed long before midnight in the those days so people would wend their way home or to a neighbour's house to a party and enjoy the potato pie that had been left cooking in the oven whist the cook was in the 'boozer' singing "I Belong to Glasgow" in a Scottish brogue at the same time propping up the piano - I think it's impossible to sing that song without adopting a Scottish twang - try it !

To the ritual of letting ' The New Year In ' would start about 10 minutes to midnight, first requirement ' a tall dark stranger ' in the absence of the aforementioned anybody willing to go out in the cold would suffice. The chosen one would be given a piece of coal a slice of bread, he, and it was usually an 'he' in those days, would leave the house by the back door walk to a point where other first footers assembled, usually the corner of the street, however each area would have its own assembly point. New Springs for example it was the bridge on Wigan Road; each waiting for the church bells and the factory whistles to signal the start of another year; after shaking hands with the other 'chosen ones', no air kissing or even hugs in those more restrained days. Back then to the house a few minutes ago you left by the back door, after the bells and whistles, you enter by the front door, bread in one hand coal in the other, these to symbolise the house would have warmth and food in the year ahead.

On entering the house the assembled company would sing the obligatory ' Auld Lang Syne'. A glass of something alcoholic, preferably scotch whisky, this not always available because of the cost in those austere times, so it was more often be a glass of sherry that would be given to the ' first footer '. Then to 'The Hot Pot' the cook, now sobered up, dishing out the fare with gusto, side dishes with red cabbage, beetroot and pickled onions, on the table along with plates, with instructions from the hostess to... "help yourselves" referring to the accompaniments, not the Hot Pot itself, that was her domain, and woe betide anybody who went anywhere near the ladle.

After the meal people would start to drift from the celebration, most would have to work the following day, New Years Day didn't become a bank holiday in England until 1971, it had been in Scotland for a century. Before the guests left, someone, usually an uncle, slightly tipsy would attempt to singing ' Bless this House ' out of tune and getting the words mixed up ; but like my Mam always said " it's the thought that counts ! "