

Dipping into 60 Years



Two faces of work... shopping for family groceries and preparing to conduct a funeral at Breakspear Crematorium

I was born in Crumpsall Hospital, Manchester on a cold January day in 1946. My birth coincided with the elapse of about 9 months since Victory in Europe was announced in May, 1945.

January in Manchester was a cold and murky affair. I remember that on really foggy days, oil lamps with naked flames would be placed along road curbs to mark corners so that vehicles wouldn't mount the pavements and cause havoc. Health and Safety? Either way, forget it! Born into this terrible climate, made worse by chimneys billowing smoke everywhere, little wonder that my early life was marked by illness and the disruption which it sometimes causes. I developed asthma at a very young age and had a near-death experience before I was 5 years old.

The family rented home was in Newton Heath, about a mile and a half from the centre of town. Although I didn't realise it at the time, my parents were poor. To be honest, I think that they lived a precarious hand-to-mouth existence and there was never any spare money to spend or save. My father was in work as a tailor's cutter, which meant that he often came home with fingers and hands bleeding with cuts from the band knives used to cut cloth. My mother was a talented seamstress and tailor, but after glimpsing as a young woman at fashion houses in Manchester, she found herself using her skills to eke out the family income rather than providing herself with a promising career. The house was always full of her "jobs"- trousers to be mended, skirts to be shortened, turn-ups to be changed, new clothes for her children...it was never-ending and made the house messy. The sewing machine dominated the sitting room and almost always purring away.



The view from our front door, 1963

Between the ages of 5 and 10, I was sent away to Open Air boarding school to help my asthmatic condition. This had the effect of separating me from my parents and siblings at a very critical time. As a result of this experience, I never again really felt at home when I came home. I felt puzzled by what it meant to have brothers and sisters. At these boarding schools (I attended three in five years) I was both emotionally and physically abused. At the time, I just assumed that this was normal life. I was very unhappy, but on reflection, I feel no bitterness. In fact, these experiences were going to be of use to me in my future life, part of my personal make-up equipping me to deal with various

issues. Of course, these experiences marked aspects of my adult life permanently and not always with a positive result.

I was the third of four children who survived into adulthood. My older sister Anne became a teacher and married a Londoner, setting up a home and a refuge for Mancunian ex pats in St. John's Wood. From this base, two of her siblings would eventually launch their own London lives. Anne brought up four children as strict vegetarians and to this day, they maintain their diet fully. My brother Colin left school and entered an iron Foundry as an apprentice. After serving his time he went travelling and eventually met an American in a kibbutz in Israel. He married her in London and went to live in Los Angeles, fathering five children. Colin eventually found his way back to Israel where he still lives. My younger sister Kay qualified as a Nurse and then moved to London and into her own life, eventually marrying and becoming a mother. She now lives in Cornwall.



Ada Kaye was a woman
All Saints' Newton Heath

So, very little remains of the Manchester life I knew as a child. Manchester was in fact where my grandparents came at the start of the 20th century, leaving their home in Shaw, Oldham in search of prosperity. And yet, Manchester still feels like home to me, whenever I visit and I always feel at home in Oldham.

From the age of ten, I returned home permanently and tried to take up life as a family member again. I quickly became aware of a terrible rift between my parents. We children were obliged to take sides. It was horrible. My father sought refuge more and more at the local pubs, like the Shears Hotel or The Copenhagen, and my maternal grandmother became very important in my upbringing.

who had a more than
usually strong vision of what
life should be like and she inspired me in many ways.

My parents were married at All Saints' Church, the oldest church in Newton Heath, close to where my father lived. I never knew either of my grandfathers but I remember visiting my paternal grandmother in Culcheth Lane. She was and dressed like a Victorian, a mother of ten children of which my father was the youngest. By the time I remember her she was very old indeed. One of my uncles was a coal merchant and they used to deliver free coal for us to burn as a gesture of family support in difficult times. Because of the parental rift, relationships with my father's side of the family always seemed tense. The blame-game was just beneath the surface and uncomfortable.



The legacy of my childhood has been a mixture of good and bad. From the age of five I needed to learn quickly how to live in an institution and draw comfort and strength from an inner life. I had to be self-contained to some degree. However, one of my earliest memories is being handed over at the age of 5 to a nurse and watching my mother go away without me. This was in Conway, Wales, and a long way from home. Of course, there was no explanation which made sense to a small child. I grew up with a feeling that I had done something wrong but could never quite discover what it was. The feelings of guilt and anger have never left me. Being displaced for that crucial five year period has had many effects, but one is quite strange. I never really feel at home and I often feel uneasy in the home. I find it hard to know what to do when I am at home. Perhaps this feeling is

exacerbated by the fact that I live in an official residence which is never really my own home? On retirement, I look forward to feeling at home for the first time since the age of 5!!

As a family, we had always been closely associated with the local parish church of St. Wilfrid, Newton Heath. At St. Wilf's as we affectionately called it, I found a vision of life which raised my sights after my return to the family home in 1956. Two rectors in particular contributed to my religious development, Brian Cramp and Denis Shaw, and at the age of 13 or 14 I felt a sense of vocation to the priesthood. However, this sense made no sense as I had not been served well educationally by the schools I attended as a boarder. My educational levels were very low, and local people didn't see how I could answer any call to the priesthood. I saw the problems, but a call is a call and I knew that God wanted me to be a priest and a parish priest in particular. I knew that I had to find ways of responding to the call through education and set about managing the transition from under-developed kid in back-street Manchester to candidate for Ministry in the Church of England. I often doubted my ability, but I never doubted my call from a faithful God.

In 1966 at the age of 20, I came to London to train as a teacher at the College of St. Mark & St. John, which meant that I lived on the King's Road in Chelsea at the time the Beatles produced "Sargeant Pepper." It sounds great, but to tell the truth, I couldn't find much interest in popular music as a young man and I still find it difficult. I enjoyed my studies and decided to major in English and study R.E. as a subsidiary subject. All this time, my sights were still trained on Ordination, rather than a career in teaching. I knew that teaching skills would always come in useful.



During my first long vacation as a student, and based at my sister Anne's house, I managed to find a summer holiday job as a cleaner and porter at the National Hospital in Queen's Square. One of my jobs was to push patients in their wheel chairs from the hospital wards to the gym for physiotherapy. So, I met some physiotherapists... and one was Marion Stanford. Our first date was a concert at the RAH on 2nd August, 1967. It was Marion's birthday. I wrote her a poem. I saw quickly this was a life-long affair. Fortunately, she saw it too! We were engaged in September 1967 and married at the Parish Church of St. Mary Burton Bradstock, Dorset, on 30th March, 1968.

After two years of demanding experiences as a teacher at an Inner London High School, my preparation for the Sacred Ministry of the Church of England was a fairly smooth affair, with a move to Salisbury and the Theological College in 1971. It was challenging in various ways. We started the course with a small child to look after as Toby was born in 1970. The college had about 100 men studying for the priesthood. All men in those days! I remember hearing the students singing in the college chapel and being moved by the all-male sound, something I hadn't experienced before in person. Some of the students were intellectuals, others were ordinary blokes with a late vocation. There were nylon salesmen and Army officers, aspiring musicians and former policemen. It was at Salisbury that I learned to understand the Bible and grasp theological insights.

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (LZW) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Student days. On yer bike, Neil and Toby

It was here that I learned about that closeness to God which is called prayer and which has sustained me for the past 30 or so years. Friendships were formed that have lasted. Difficulties were discovered and ironed out. It was here that I met and appreciated the integrity of those with other sexual preferences. It was here that I had confirmed my own vision from Manchester days of the parish church as a community in which people at any point on the journey of faith may find friends and a home. I was grateful for all I found at this Theological College, to its staff and my fellow students. Those days are never forgotten and continuously provide inspiration for me.



Ben aged 9

Marion loved her time at Salisbury. We went with one child and left with two, as Ben was born in the summer of 1973 in our bed at 34 Mill Road, where we lived for three years with a magnificent view of the Cathedral spire and the river Avon just over the road!

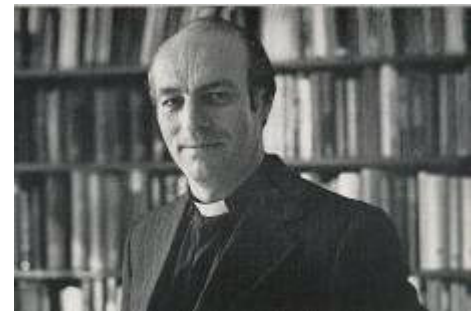
By coincidence, I started my first post in the Ordained Ministry in 1974 in my family home town of Oldham. I made some new friends and started to rediscover some of my family history during this period, visiting aunts, uncles and cousins who I had not seen for many years. I also managed to



Hannah aged 8

recover something of a relationship with my father, until he died in 1977. My post as Curate of the Parish Church lasted three years and then, in 1977, I was appointed as curate-in-sole-charge of St. Hugh's Church on the fringes of Oldham, a parish made up almost entirely of Council houses. For five years I struggled to encourage the congregation to develop and grow, and in the end, I left without a sense of success, although I never forget that clergy are in post to sow seeds. It is God who provides the new life which comes from the seeds.

In 1981, Marion had our third child Hannah and our family seemed complete, rich and satisfying. My eight years in Oldham were a time of great discovery and development for me. I was delighted to work with the Revd. James Bentley as my first boss, the Vicar of the Parish of Oldham. James was a unique person, a man of many talents, including languages, intellectual grasp and above all, sheer humanity. When you talked to James, you felt that you were the only person in the world, such was his ability to pay attention and listen to you.



The Revd. Dr. James Bentley

There was an indefinable quality about James, something roguishly lovable, playful even, and he often got into scrapes, but his mind was so sharp! I was devastated when he died in a car crash in France a few years ago. James Bentley was one of the most impressive people I have met in my whole experience of life. He was a source of genius which I never quite managed to explore, sad to say.

And then, in 1982, I saw an advert in the Church Times for a parish called Greenford Magna. I liked what I saw and applied. After an incognito visit to see the house and church, during which we met a bloke who later we discovered was Johnny Johnson, I went to Cambridge to be interviewed by the Dean and Fellows. So it was that we moved to the splendid Victorian Greenford rectory where it has been our privilege to live and also from where it has been my privilege to be the parish priest for 23 years. More about that next month.