

Memories

I recently decided to be ruthless with my household clutter and started to clear a cupboard. First out was an old and battered "Quality Street" tin. Inside were hundreds of buttons, many different colours, shapes and sizes. A tatty grey one had a tag on it and in my mother's handwriting it announced "Fred's Sheepskin Coat"! That coat lived on the back of a cupboard door in the "breakfast room" of our family house in Gunnersbury Avenue, Ealing. The door was permanently ajar as the coat caught at the edge. I recalled my teenage years in that house. Remembering when it was new and empty. The excitement of sleeping on the hard parquet flooring with a friend but unfortunately getting caught by a workman early the next day!

The large garden at the back had a swimming pool. It was a long time in the making but finally the pool took shape and we were able to swim in it. I don't think it was ever completely finished! Often we would look out the window to see steam rising from it. My father, being a heating engineer, had installed a large boiler to heat it and often forgot to switch it off! It was high maintenance for someone who never learned to swim and he was often busy trying to balance the chemicals to stop it going green - with limited success! I remember many parties in this garden, both children's and adults. Emily once advertised a teenage party there, on Face Book! Luckily it was spotted and cancelled before the entire community arrived on the doorstep!

Putting the button back in the tin I encountered a strand holding small white buttons that had been cut from a child's coat, some remnants of the fabric left behind. My mind shot back to a photo of me in that coat sitting on a double swing alone in Folkestone Stade. I was being pushed by my mother who was pregnant with my sister Valerie.



Folkestone Harbour was a place that we often visited, even after we moved to Ealing when I was three. It has a sandy beach with a concrete walkway above many joining archways. In a child's imagination they were caves to be explored. On a hot summer's day they were cool and damp as they were not able to recover from the relentless soaking at high tide, twice daily. At this time they would fill with the sea water and it was very exciting to walk above and watch the restless sea pound the wall below. Occasionally a ferocious wave would rise up above my tiny figure and come crashing down around me on the concrete.

Moving the many buttons around with my fingers I find a smooth red button that I recognised from a dressing gown when I was 3. I am immediately looking out of a back bedroom window in Ealing at singed furniture in the garden below. The smell of damp, burnt wood always reminds me of this time. When my Nana died we moved from Folkestone into her house on the Western Avenue in Ealing (the traffic in the early 60's was very light compared to now!). The house was full of furniture as the two household contents were merged into one. It was a cold winter and my father had been working on the electric wiring in the house. That evening he connected it back to the board. Valerie and I had gone to bed and they settled down to watch the Black & White Minstrel Show on TV. A knock on the door disturbed their viewing and they became aware of coughing from upstairs. The man on the doorstep said "do you know that your house is on fire?"!

An electric fire had been plugged into the circuit that my father had switched on and had heated furniture stacked against it in our bedroom. At the age of 3 I was able to walk out of the bedroom, but Valerie was trapped in her cot by the window. My dad rushed past the flames and rescued her.



Three fire engines arrived, put the fire out and threw the hot, singed furniture out of the bedroom windows. The next day I remember the paint on the bathroom door had blistered and discoloured and the whole house stank of the smoke and soot. The wall paper fried on the wall leaving the plaster underneath with a permanent dirty brown colour.

The red button is also returned to the tin. Now I find purple buttons strung together. They were the remains of my Montpelier School cardigan. I hated school! It is the one thing in life that you have to do! Many times my dad would drop me at the school and Gillian Carney would take me crying through the school gates! I had so many ear aches in those days. Some excruciatingly painful and real and some imaginary so I could stay at home in my warm comfy bed with my mum!

Back to the button tin. I look at it's fading decoration of a man and woman smiling and dressed in old fashioned clothes. One Christmas it was new and full of chocolates. I remember enjoying many chaotic family Christmases. In the evening the drinks cabinet was open and the children performed a concert (last minute rehearsal much to the despair of my Aunt who is a perfectionist). Badly played musical instruments, forgotten words and disastrous magic tricks were compulsory and added to the fun.

I return the tin to the cupboard. Much of my clutter is memories. This is why I find it so hard to throw anything away!

