



William in the army during the first World War

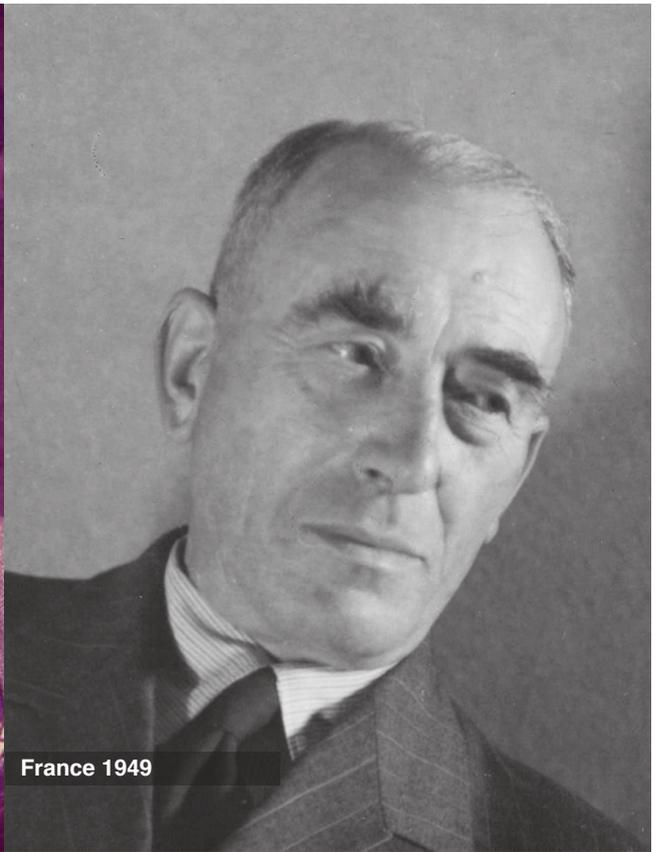
Early Days in Brighton

Written by William Ranson in about 1962

William was born 7th June 1884 and died 13th April 1967



Will Ransom



France 1949



Will Ransom c.1960



In the Home Guard c. 1941

I am encouraged and prompted to write down the following notes by the interest in my previous chapter shown by my nephew Bob and members of the family. It will no doubt be observed that I am writing about a period of my life 65 to 70 years and more ago, and whilst I think that I remember things clearly, time no doubt has played tricks with my memory. I will endeavour, however to set down truthfully as much as I can remember in the hope that someone will find these notes interesting.

Our family life was no different from thousands of others in those early days but I may perhaps be able to convey some idea of the conditions under which a working class family lived in the closing years of the 19th century. Hard as conditions were in those early days in Brighton we were, no doubt better off than a good many. Father was in a regular job and we were never faced with the spectre of unemployment, which in those days hit families very hard. There was no unemployment pay, or national assistance, and the family of an unemployed man would have to exist on credit and charity, cold and hunger had to be endured with the occasional relief in the way of soup kitchens etc. Parish relief was given only to the very needy and I was always given to understand that the recipients were put through a sort of inquisition.

In winter it was not an uncommon sight to see a procession of about 100 men parading in the streets chanting a mournful dirge which went:

We've got no work to do-o-o
We've got no work to do-o-o
So give us a job, or give us a bob,
'cause we've got no work to do.

Even in those days however, the spirit of "I'm alright Jack" existed and the uncharitable were won't to declare that the third line went: "Give us a bob instead of a job!"

I am setting out to write mainly about my mother and father, but I am afraid however that impressions about myself and other people will creep in, but perhaps these will serve to form a background to my central figures.

Before carrying on with my notes, I want to take this opportunity of placing on record my very deep gratitude to my wife Daisy for the care and love given to my mother during the long illness, which preceded her death. Mother required constant nursing, and Daisy in turn with others spent long periods at Offington looking after mother and father without complaining. Also after father got too old to carry on at Offington, she persuaded him to come and live with us at Bromley and did her best to make his remaining years happy and comfortable.

Mother once told me that when they first moved to Brighton they had a house in the Carlton Hill area. How they came by this house I do not know, but they soon found the house and locality very undesirable and quickly moved to a flat in the "Model Dwelling Houses" in Windsor Street. Subsequently they moved to a house in Windsor Street, I do not know the number but I think that the front room had been a shop.

My age at that time must have been about 18 months, or 2 years. I can not get a mental picture of my mother and father whilst we lived in Windsor street, yet I seem to remember quite well people who lived in the street, but perhaps this memory was formed during subsequent visits when I was a little older. I remember that there was a row of small cottages opposite us (now demolished) and in one of the cottages lived a Miss Thorogood who was a Milliner. My sister

Alice, I believe, worked for her for a little while. Miss Thorogood interested me; I think she must have suffered from indigestion trouble because she would thump herself in the ribs and remark that she had got the 'Pincers' again. In her garden was a hedge of some plant, the leaves of which we ate and called in 'bread and cheese'.

Another impression I have of Windsor Street is of being 'minded' by two superior type of young ladies who lived opposite. I try to remember what they were like but the only picture which comes to my mind is of two wooden Dutch dolls.

Whilst I was still very young, we moved to 43 Middle Street where I began to get a clearer picture of mother and father and sister and brothers. At that time there were my younger brother Tom, my sister Alice and my brother Sam. My brother Arthur must have been born about this time but whilst in Windsor Street or Middle Street I cannot say.

My purpose in giving the following details is to furnish a basis for comparison with present day ideas of what are decent standards of living accommodation. I wonder what a housing committee would say to the following: -



43 Middle Street is a five-roomed house. There is or was an underground kitchen, one sitting room on the ground floor, and on the first floor, two bedrooms, and the second floor was an attic. The front door leads straight off the street into the sitting room, opposite the front door on the right is a door leading to a flight of stone steps giving access to the kitchen. At the head of these stairs was a cold water tap; the only one in the house. In the underground kitchen was a copper for boiling washing; a kitchen stove with oven, and in one wall was a cubbyhole for storing coal. On the street side was an 'area' about 4 feet by 1 ½ feet. The only daylight entering the room came by way of this area and through a window.

In the sitting room on the left of the wall opposite the front door was another door, which leads to the upstairs rooms.

At the top of the stone steps leading to the kitchen was another door which lead into the side entrance to the Victory Inn; the Public House next door. There was also a back entrance to 24 Middle Street and at the bottom of the passage was a small cottage No 44. It had, I think three rooms. There was a communal dust hole, and a small open space where mother used to dry our washing.

In the underground kitchen mother cooked, washed our clothes, gave us our meals, and when the weather was bad this kitchen was a playground for us children.

The family consisted of mother, father, my sister Alice and by brothers Tom, Sam and Arthur. In addition we had a male lodger. Albert and Frank arrived during our stay at No 43. Mother and father occupied the larger of the two bedrooms, and my sister the smaller. There was a small landing on this floor with a small winding staircase leading up to the attic. Under these stairs was a small cupboard, which was at one time used by my brother Tom as a photographic dark room. In the attic was a dormer window in the sloping ceiling. There were two single beds for brother Tom and the lodger. The remainder of us boys slept together in a large bed. At one time I think that there must have been a maximum of six sleeping in the attic. However, by the time Frank was old enough to be relegated to the attic, the lodger had left.

So much for the accommodation. As regards neighbours mother and father were always, as far as I know on good terms with them. There was a Mrs White living at No. 45. She was in some way connected with the laying of the first Atlantic cable. The family had probably seen better days and has an air of decayed gentility about them.

At 44 lived a Mr. Picket with his young son and windowed mother. I always assumed Mr Picket was a widower. On the other side of our house was the 'Victory Inn' kept at that time by a Mr and Mrs Cowey who were the typical publicans of the period. I seem to remember Mr Cowey with oiled hair, waxed moustache and fancy waistcoat. Mrs Cowey comes to my memory in black satin, ample bosom adored with a brooch and a chain and a 'Queen Alexander' hair do, not forgetting a display of rings on her fingers. I think the Victory Inn was rather a lively pub. We boys used to sit at the foot of the stairs with our ears close to the dividing wall and listen to the faint strains of music and singing.

I have tried so far to give a picture of the conditions confronting mother in her task of feeding, washing and clothing seven children. As regards cooking the only appliance was the cooking stove. Of course there was no gas, no electricity and no kitchen sink. One thing which stands out in my memory is an old iron pot. It was barrelled shape with a tight fitting conical lid. In the centre of the lid was a sort of valve through which steam escaped. I think this pot must have been the forerunner of the present day pressure cooker. With the aid of this pot mother turned out some wonderful meals, especially stews, with sixpenny worth of butchers pieces and various additions which included dumplings, mother gave us a very satisfying meal. Then there was boiled rice, plum duff, and other boiled puddings. There was one meal however I remember disliking and that was Irish Stew; it was made with boiled mutton and vegetables. Sometimes we had a special treat in the way of herrings which cost 24 for a shilling or scallops at three pennies per dozen. Incidentally coal was one shilling and a penny per hundredweight. (Writing illegible at this point, so could be incorrect)

I do not remember much about our other meals, but I think they consisted mainly of bread and dripping, and bread and jam or treacle, but no butter on your bread if you had jam or treacle. Before breakfast I would be sent to Nappers Bakers Shop for sixpenny-worth of stale bread. For sixpence we got 4 large loaves. I do not remember whether or not this was our daily ration. On occasions I would be sent to a shop in the 'lanes' for a pennyworth of black treacle or a penny tin of bloater paste. Another item which figured largely in our menu was bread pudding.

I think my mother was friendly with one or two cooks and from these received a supply of stale bread and basins of dripping. Then we had stale muffins and crumpets from Mr Sicklemore the muffin man who lived opposite. Sometimes father would bring home a rabbit after he had driven Mr Napper in a dog cart to the country for a days shooting. I am sure mother was faced with a formidable task in feeding such a family, but feed us she did, because despite young appetites I do not recollect that we were ever actually short of food.

I think that we were a happy family. If we quarrelled which I suppose we did, I do not remember anything serious. In any case I am sure mother would have quickly intervened and put her foot down.

Tom, Alice and Sam attended the Central School in Church Street, whilst myself, Arthur, Albert and Frank went to Middle Street School. I remember that there was a payment of 4 pence per week, 'school money' which had to be paid. The value of education had not at that time circulated down to the working classes and who can blame them. The economic conditions were such that the idea was, in the main, to leave school as early as possible and to start earning money.

As an Elementary School, Middle Street was in my opinion one of the most progressive of its kind. In addition to the 3 "Rs" they attempted to teach us French, drawing, physiology and also a few elementary rules of geometry. There was a lesson which I suppose came under the heading of science. They had an apparatus for creating a vacuum but it never worked. When a boy moved into a higher class a number of books had to be purchased and this was always a source of annoyance to my parents. I cannot say what sort of scholar I was, just average I suppose, but I do remember on one occasion I was the only boy in the class to get all the algebra sums right. This was probably a fluke.

Out of school in fine weather we spent a lot of time playing in the streets, or on the beach. About this time I remember the advent of the 'go cart'; it was a wooden structure on two wheels. It had a seat in front and one behind and shafts, which extended in front. On Saturday mornings in fine weather it was my job to take the younger brothers to the beach. The 'go carts' would be loaded with Arthur in the front seat, Frank in the back and Albert helping me to pull. The Ransom cavalcade would start off from No. 43 en route for the beach. A stop would be made at 'Cadbys' the bakers to purchase a halfpenny worth of 'Nile' biscuits. The five biscuits, which we received, were for Arthur who was not very robust.

Another highlight of Saturday was the 'Saturday Penny', not one each but between us. After due discussion our purchase would be something like a farthing ever-lasting home made toffee. These items were divided between us to our general satisfaction. I suppose because I do not remember any quarrels in this connection.

About this time I think Tom, Alice and Sam were occupied in jobs of work, but I cannot remember what they did.

In fine weather we played in Middle Street with the other boys and sometimes would gather outside the Jewish Synagogue, the entrance to which was supported by two round pillars of that peculiar stone which when highly polished looked like jellied veal. We used to lick it and pretend that it was 'corned beef'. One of the boys we played with was Benny Moss whose father kept an old second hand clothes shop in Duke Street next to the Victory Inn. I think I am right in saying that this was the genesis of 'Moss Bros' the famous firm in London. In bad weather we younger boys played in the kitchen. The old oak gate leg table would represent a hundred things. It would be a ship, a fort, a shop or a house. (The old oak table survived until 1960 when we had to burn what the woodworms had not consumed).

We also kept pets. I remember a cage of white mice, which managed to escape, and of neighbours puzzled by the appearance of near white mice in their traps. I am not sure if we played charades but I remember a lot of dressing up and toy theatres. We would buy a penny sheet of printed proscenium and characters, paste them on to cardboard and then cut them out. We had also halma, tiddly winks and ludo.

At Christmas we all hung up our stockings and in the morning we usually found in them an orange, some nuts, some sweets and a shiny new penny. In addition there would be a toy or present for each of us. There was Christmas pudding, mince pies, nuts and oranges. Mother and father must have been very clever in providing Christmas cheer for such a crowd. I seem to remember a sort of party on Christmas evening and father singing his favourite songs, one I most remember was: -

"Poor old Jeff has gone to rest,
I'll go back to Baltimore,
What will you lend on my dolly".

Mother somehow managed to take us to the pantomime at Christmas. There was no queuing in those days. The first comers would take up a position as close to the gallery entrance as possible; as more people arrived they would form into a solid mass around and against the door. There would be a lot of pushing and shoving and loud protests from those who considered that they had been pushed out of their rightful place. After an interminable wait footsteps would be heard on the stone steps inside and a gasp of relief would go up. The doors would then be flung open and a wild rush to the ticket office would ensue. Once settled down in their places it seemed to me that everyone started to eat oranges, and all through my life I have always associated the smell of oranges with my first visit to the pantomime. I think I must have been very young when I was taken for the first time, because after a period of anxious waiting the front of house lights were lowered and footlights illuminated; then whilst waiting for the curtain to rise I could see the top portion of the double bass showing above the footlights. To my young mind it seemed to be some sort of figure and I had an awful feeling of apprehension that we were going to see a sort of puppet show.

I remember being taken to a circus at a place, which eventually became the Grand Theatre and is now a factory. I have a distinct recollection of seeing an act there about which I have often pondered. It was performed in the middle of the circus ring and unless there was some clever trickery it could have been pure levitation.

Sunday was something of an ordeal for me. In the morning a bunch of us would go to 11 o'clock service. I think that I got to like the simple morning service at the old St. Nicholas church. In the afternoon we went to Sunday school in Centurion Road. (The Sunday school is now a film

studio). We sang hymns and had the Scriptures read to us.

We were told the story of how Jesus performed the miracle of healing the sick, and I remember complaining to the teacher that Jesus didn't cure my brother Tom who was deaf. I was told to 'hush' but I was left in ignorance of the fact that the miracle was performed hundreds of years ago. On Sunday evenings we either stayed in or sang hymns, or we were taken by sister Alice to evening service at one of the other of the nearby churches. In spite of this religious training I had a great dislike for clergymen and to this day church bells give me the 'willies'.

If you attended Sunday school regularly you received a ticket for the winter treat, which consisted of a tea followed I think by a magic lantern display. The proceedings were presided over by the Rev. Bond, a benign old gentleman with gold spectacles. He would join us to make a good lining of bread and butter before starting on the cake. He always gave men a sort of Christmas day in the workhouse feeling. For the summer treat we would be taken by train to one of the pleasure gardens a few miles from Brighton. On one occasion we were taken by train to Kemp Town Station and marched in procession to Queens Park which at that time was still a private park. Sometime later mother took us for a walk and we found ourselves looking through the gates of Queens Park. The discovery that we had 'been to Queens Park' for our treat filled me with a great sense of having been cheated.

I do not remember that father took a very active part in bringing up the family. His work kept him early and late and the rearing and guiding of the children was left to mother. Her method of control was as far as I remember, persuasion and I have no recollection of any of us receiving a 'hiding' an occasional slap perhaps but nothing more. Mother had a method of her own and it worked very well. She encouraged us to find ways and means of amusing ourselves and sometimes of an evening would read to us such books as 'Black Beauty', 'Channings' etc. Both mother and father could read very well and when one considers their scant opportunity for schooling, this seems to me rather wonderful especially when viewed in the light of present day conditions where we have thousands of children leaving school at 15 years unable to read.

At an early age my sister Alice went into domestic service, Sam used to go to the YMCA gymnasium and Tom went to the art school. I do not know how he came to be caught up in art but I think he came under the influence of the Curate at St. Pauls Church in West Street. Some examples of his artwork are still distributed in the family. I think he would have made a good artist. At one time several of us went to the 'Band of Hope' at the Friends Meeting House in Prince Albert Street.

Clothing was of course a problem. There was a lot of handing down and 'left offs' and father used to do quite a bit of boot mending. I remember mother used to make us boys summer suits, sailor type, out of some cotton material. Mine used to be tight under the crotch much to my discomfort.

As we grew older, the question of jobs came along. Tom worked in the Livery yard at the Sacacens Head in Windsor Street, and Sam worked in the mill at Ship Street. I was old enough to do jobs out of school hours, and for a time worked for Mrs. Sicklemore the muffin maker, who lived opposite to us in Middle Street. My job was to take muffins and crumpets to the hotels on the sea front and also to the famous Bun shop in Pool Valley. I also fetched Mr. Sicklemore's beer. He would instruct me to get a pint and then follow me to the shop door and out of the hearing of his wife would whisper 'get a quart!' He would meet me at the door on my return and reduce the quart to a pint in one swallow. He would also send me to the butchers for a 3d chop and a 3d steak. Often he would send me back to the shop with the complaint that the quantity was too

small. On Sundays he would send me to the bakehouse with a baking tin containing the Sunday joint and potatoes. I also collected the joint after it was cooked and Sicklemore would always complain the baker has stolen one of his potatoes.

Another of my jobs was to go to the Church Hall in Cavendish Street armed with a basket containing a basin and collect a free dinner for old Mrs. Picket in No. 44. I think that this happened about twice a week during the winter. At the Church Hall the meat and vegetables were laid out on tables. The vegetables were served by a bevy of lady helpers and the meat carved by a portly old gentleman. No doubt this charity served a very good purpose and the people who ran it were well intending, but young as I was I resented their air of patronage, especially the old gentleman. I hated his guts.

Eventually our family moved to 9 Ship Street Gardens, where father had previously shared the stables with another coachman. Father was able to take over the whole of the stables together with the flat over the top. I am sure that the flat must have been a welcome change for mother. There were only two bedrooms and a living room, but there was a small scullery and an indoor lavatory.

I do not know what year it was that we moved, but it was about the time the building now known as the Hippodrome was built and opened as an Ice Rink.

At the new flat the bedroom used by us boys had no window but had a lantern light in the roof. On one occasion some of us boys climbed out of this lantern light then clambered over a roof on the dome of the skating rink.

Sometime whilst we were at No. 9 father and Tom had a pet bird, its cage had a small sloping runway with a little truck in which the birds seed was placed. The bird would pull up the truck by means of string and it did the same trick with its water. Father also had a hedgehog, which we kept in the stables to keep down the black beetles, which found a way in from the bakehouse next door. On one occasion the beetles found their way upstairs into the flat and father brought the hedgehog upstairs letting it run loose in the kitchen during the night. The result however had a rather unpleasant experience for Arthur. Apparently our bedroom door was left open and the animal found its way in. We all thought he had been seized with cramp in the stomach, but investigation showed that he had a number of punctures in his tummy. It appeared that the bedclothes had trailed on the floor during the night and the hedgehog had found them an inviting nest. The bedclothes had then been hauled back on the bed together with the hedgehog. In his sleep Arthur had turned over and lay on the animal who had then erected his quills.

Some of us used to help father in the stables and we were taught how to 'muck out' and clean the harness; I think that I was too young to attempt the grooming of the horses.

Our neighbours at this time were the Browns who lived in the house at the corner of Middle Street and Ship Street Gardens. One of the sons once told me that in one of their upstairs rooms there was a secret panel which gave access down the inside of the wall to a passage leading to the sea shore. I have never been able to confirm this but a year or so ago my wife Daisy and I were in a small café, which had opened at No 19 Middle Street opposite the Brown's house. During a conversation with the proprietor I mentioned to him about this secret passage and he informed me that when he took over No. 19 he had to have some alterations carried out and in the course of which some cellars, which extended under the roadway were discovered. He also mentioned that he had been unable to discover anyone who knew of the existence of these cellars.

There was another family we were friendly with, the 'Brains'; Mrs Brain had been on the stage and Mr Brain was a musician. He obtained the post of Bank Conductor when the ice rink opened. The Brains had a son Archie and a daughter Lil. Lil would sometimes perform a cartwheel.

One of the young Brown boys was something of a character. He never walked out of the door of his house. He would shoot out as if propelled by a cannon, bounce off the opposite wall and then scamper along Ship Street Gardens uttering that high-pitched yodel much in vogue amongst the boys of that time. He seemed to be always hitching up one of his stockings and to have a piece of bread pudding unwrapped in his jacket pocket. He would consume the pudding by pinching off small portions with his thumb and forefinger.

The eldest of the Brown boys was prominent in the YMCA as a strong man, and was until recently a Governor of the Brighton branch.

Our removal to Ship Street Gardens appeared to have severed my connection with Mr Sicklemore and I was given the job of conveying large cardboard boxes of finished dress making to the homes of the customers of the dressmaker in Ship Street. I was given a few coppers for each journey but I didn't care much for the job. About this time my brother Arthur was old enough to do an odd job or two, one of which was to assist a Mr Doughty who lived at 19 Middle Street in taking a batch of performing dogs to the West Pier where Mr Doughty exhibited them.

I left school when I was 13 and was found a job as an errand boy at a shop in Upper James Street. I received 3/-d per week. I did not stay there long and was found another job at a ticket writing shop in Bond Street "The Trick & Twigit" works it was called and was kept by a Mr Butler. In those days most sale tickets used in shops were done by hand. The 'writers' would write the outline of the figures or letters with a special pen. Two kinds of ink were used, one called 'ticket ink' which was used to give a raised shiny effect to the letters and the second called 'waterproof' which gave a flat dull surface. It was the job of us boys to fill in the areas outlined by the writers. We used a special brush for this purpose. After a while I was either promoted or demoted to work in the shop; however after a while I was found another job as page boy for a Dr. Gerald Hodgson at 35 Montpelier Road, where I did all sorts of jobs, the principal one being to answer the door to patients, show them into the waiting room and eventually into the surgery. On one occasion I showed a lady into the waiting room and then forgot all about her. She was discovered an awful long time afterwards in a very distressed condition.

When I was 14, I became a telegraph messenger. I enjoyed my work as a messenger. For one thing the wages were good in comparison with other jobs for boys. In addition we were supplied with boots and uniforms and sometimes we received tips or cops as we called them.

At this time the Telegraph Service was the principal means of urgent communication. The Telephone Service was in its infancy and very little used. Telegraph delivery offices were in operation at various points of the town. In addition to the head office in Ship Street there was one in Cannon Place and at Kemp Town, and others in various parts of the town. I was employed at most of the offices and eventually as an indoor messenger at the H.Q.

I enjoyed my work as a messenger, on the whole the boys were a friendly and jolly lot and we had lots of fun. There was always a new boy to be initiated, we would send him to one of the smart cafés armed with a dirty old can for a pennyworth of coffee, or we would send him to one of the 'eating houses' for 'two meat pies, one apple and one fruit'.

At the Cannon Place office there was a large wooden receptacle for storing coal and in which there was a nest of mice. By suddenly lifting the lid of this receptacle and making a quick grab we sometimes caught several mice. We would then tie string to their tails and take them for a walk up the street. This escapade usually resulted in a visit by irate old ladies to the Officer in Charge and of course we were duly reprimanded.

I think we were young rascals, but according to a story current at the time, we must have been well behaved in comparison with our predecessors. Before removal to Cannon Place, the delivery office for that district was situated in one of the kiosks at the entrance to the West Pier. The story goes that the messengers there combined to back a horse in the Derby and his horse won. To celebrate the win the boys engaged one or two bath chairs and persuaded the chairmen to parade them along the promenade. In addition each boy smoked a long clay churchwarden pipe. I never learnt what disciplinary action followed this escapade; probably none for the reason that the whole of the staff were I suspect involved in the betting transaction. In those days Telegraphists were wizards at their work and the controlling officers were dependent on their good will and, in consequence, were forced to be very indulgent. It was not an uncommon sight for a Telegraphist to have a jug of beer by the side of his instrument.

Our hours of duty varied and we had no set breaks for our meals, so far as I remember we took our meals during our waiting periods. One took one's food for the day in a small wicker basket and a supply of tea in a blue enamelled can, the lid of which was made to form a drinking cup.

When we were on late duty we were required to attend on two mornings each week at the Drill Hall Church Street, for 'drill', we received a small extra payment for this.

'Drill' consisted of foot drill, carbine drill and physical exercises with carline. I have always considered this was an excellent thing and was sorry that eventually owing to pressure from Parliament, it was dropped.

Despite the fact that some of the 'yobs' in the town would shout after us 'pigs in harness' or 'run a mile for a halfpenny', we took pride in our uniforms which we kept scrupulously clean and tried with each other in shining our leather and brass with a circular motion of the thumb we produced a shine on the top of our caps similar to that on the top of a gent's tall silk hat.

To return to mother and father, with one or two of us at work and taking home some money, mother's task of caring for the family must I am sure, have been made a little easier. I remember that mother and father had an occasional evening out and we boys were left to amuse ourselves. One of the pranks was to place the paraffin lamp in such a position to cast a shadow on the window blind. We would then perform (rest of sentence is missing).

Our parent's evenings out took them sometimes to the 'Alhambra' a famous music hall on the sea front. The price of admission was 4d in the gallery and 6d in the pit. Fixed on the back of the seat in the pit and the position now occupied by the ashtray were racks for holding glasses. During each performance there would be an interval, and waiters would walk up and down the gangways calling 'any orders Gents'. The orders of course referred to beer and spirits, which were indulged in freely and resulted mostly in high spirits. On some members of the audience however the effect was the opposite and these had to be dealt with by the 'chuckers out'. One of these was a well-known character known as 'Scottie Gunn'. He was a fisherman by trade and something of a pugilist.

There was another music hall in the town known as the 'Empire'. It had a lot of ups and downs, and various names since then, and is now the 'Paris Cinema'. My brother Tom took me to the old Empire one evening. There was a crowd around the bar and my brother Tom pointed out one hefty individual as Charlie Mitchell one of the last of the professional bare fist fighters.

My original motive of writing about mother and father's early days in Brighton appears to have dried up at the point. I cannot remember anything else outstanding before the Nappers moved to Worthing taking father with them. I was just about 16 and it was arranged that I should stay in Brighton and lodge with Mrs White of 45 Middle Street and take my chance of regular employment in the Post Office.

At this point I must end my notes, but before doing so and in order to give some idea of conditions prevailing in our early days I would like to set down my impressions of life in Brighton round about 1900.

I cannot resist comparing the present state of the roads and traffic with that of 60 years ago. The roads were made up of granite hard-core combined with a sort of gravel and ground in with a steamroller. Constant repairs were necessary because potholes quickly developed. In wet weather the roads were inches deep in mud and muck. Pedestrian crossings were provided and were formed with granite blocks. Their purpose however was not safety from traffic but protection from mud etc.

All vehicles were horse drawn and the traffic was only a fraction of the number of vehicles on the road today, but complaints of furious driving were not uncommon and cases of people being knocked down or run over were not infrequent.

Brighton enjoyed two seasons, In the summer the trippers and boarding house types would occupy the town, and in the autumn when these had departed the 'nobility and gentry' would return from London and other places and take up residence in the larger houses in fashionable quarters of the town.

Anyone who was or wished to be thought anybody would have a 'carriage and pair'. Lesser folk would sport a 'dog cart', or a 'phaeton'. Every afternoon there would be a not inconsiderable number of these 'turn outs' driving along the sea front. The carriage folk spared no expense in ensuring that their vehicles and horse were of the finest quality, nor was any expense spared in providing livery for the coachmen and grooms. In the afternoon parade along the sea front it was quite a sight.

The hotels would be full of foreign Princes and titled people and nearly all of the large houses, now turned into 8 or 9 flats would be occupied by a single family. This side of life in Brighton entailed the employment of a number of domestic servants, and this brings me to another aspect of the town. I once heard Brighton described as a town of swank and squalor, an opinion I do not quarrel with. There certainly was plenty of squalor in the slum area, but in addition there was a large area of small terrace houses occupied by very respectable families depending directly or indirectly on the visitors of all classes for their living.

There was also the middle class composed of professional men and shopkeepers and who lived mainly in the Preston Park area. To my mind the label 'swank' should have been stuck on this class, but, looking back I think that they had a quality that I admire, that of individuality. They

had a different way of 'keeping up with the Jones's' It was not a matter of conforming, but of setting ones own standards. Each one adapted his own style of dress and manner of deportment. Walking sticks, hats, moustaches, and buttonholes were all used to express individuality. One typical example I remember was Mr Sicklemore the muffin man. He was tall and lean and on Sundays in company with his wife he would take a walk along the sea front. His suit was made of small check brown cloth, the trousers were narrow, and the coat was cut in the style of a morning coat, the hat was a square brown bowler and his tie was one the peculiar type worn at the time. I think it went twice round a stand up collar, before being tied in a bow in each side of his mouth. His moustache grew across his upper lip and down each side of his mouth. With a straw in his mouth, a light cane in one hand and the other in the middle of his back he would escort his wife along the promenade. I don't remember that he ever spoke to anyone, but I could always imagine him as owning cotton fields and slaves in the southern states of America.

There was another individual who went under the sobriquet of 'Dotty Dawson'. He would parade along the sea front on a horse the like of which I have only seen in old sporting prints. It was a slender build like a racehorse, and its tail stood out from its rump before dropping in a graceful plume. Its rider wore riding boots of soft black leather, white riding breeches, a sort of hunting coat in black cloth and a square black bowler. I do not think that he was anyone of great importance, but I always regarded him as a typical example of how to exploit ones individuality and gain notoriety by mere outward appearance. The art of the publicity agent had not been fully developed in those days.

Another colourful character I remember was 'Captain Collins' who owned several sailing boats and weather permitting did a roaring trade in taking trippers for a 'jolly wail in the skylark'. 'Captain' Collins was a short stocky man who always wore a straw boater painted a shiny black; his coat was of the double-breasted naval type, rather short and with brass buttons. Round his neck he wore a blue scarf with white dots. He had a round jovial face, clean-shaven except for 'side-boards'. His general appearance reminded me on Nelson's sailors.

Lower down the social scale there were other well-known characters. For instance there was 'Billy the Jew', who would occasionally embark on an orgy of drink, he would then offer to fight anyone he met. He was very violent and it usually took the combined efforts of 3 to 4 policemen to escort him to the police station. There were no police cars, police boxes etc., in those days. Arrested persons were hustled though the street to the police station followed by a mob of people who would linger outside long after the prisoner had disappeared inside, as if to enjoy to the last drop the excitement afforded. The star turn of those onlookers however was the sight of someone being frogmarched to the police station.

Then there was 'Moggie Tea Leaves', a poor old woman who dressed in rags, would make periodic appearances round the streets shouting and shrieking and followed by a crowd of yelping youngsters. I was informed by one boy that she was a 'morfidite'. It was many years before I discovered what he meant.

Beer and spirits were cheap in those days and a lot of it was consumed. Saturday nights were lively; drunken men and women were quite common and street fights were a regular occurrence. Whether this was due to the strength of the liquor or a desire for relief from the repression I cannot say.

As I have said before the summer and winter visitors provided a fair proportion of the locals with a means of livelihood. Many were engaged in the laundry business. Only a few laundries

used machinery, the bulk being called 'hand laundries'. These had laundries of which there were many, employed a large number of young ladies. The work was very hard and Saturday nights these workers set out to enjoy themselves. To many of them Saturday night meant a round of the pubs. Some would favour a particular pub, and other groups would favour a pub in a different part of the town. There were occasions when a desire for pastures new would possess one of these groups and they would desire to visit a pub of another group, often these visits would result in a clash. Somebody's 'Judy' would cast a roving eye on somebody's 'bloke' angry words would follow and before long a fight would be started.

Fights in those days were often bloody, but fists only were used. The crowd would be quick to intervene if either of the contestants resorted to foul play. These meetings were usually in the Lewis Road area, but one pub in Hove was much favoured and received the nickname 'The Blood Hole'!

These Saturday night outings however did not always result in hostilities; usually there was a lot of laughter and singing. The singing lasted all the way home and whenever I hear a certain popular singer of today I am reminded of the laundry girls. Their full-throated uninhibited voices would echo through the streets and looking back I am sure one could have found many potential singing stars amongst their number.

A group of people I remember with pleasure are those who performed on the lower esplanade. The first I remember was 'Ally Slopers lot', I think that was what they were called. The leader of the 'lot' was dressed to resemble the leading character in a periodical of that time called 'Ally Sloper's half holiday'. The music of these entertainments was provided by a sort of portable harmonium, the sides of which were made to fold inwards and the whole contrivance could be carried by means of a strap over the shoulder. This instrument would sometimes be augmented by bangers, bones and tambourines. Later Pierrot troupes made their appearance and being more up to day, sported a piano. There were several of these troupes, but the one that I remember best was 'Uncle Freds'. Performing on the beach must have been good training. I think one member graduated to the 'Mohawk Minstrels' and another became a London variety star. His name was Charles Austin. We saw quite a lot of these performances that made the 'Spotted Dog' in Middle Street their headquarters.

These forerunners of the seaside concert parties had neither enclosure nor seats. The audience stood around in a rough semi-circle, and one of the troupe would circulate amongst them with a little bag and importune for coppers and the odd sixpence. I think this method of collecting was called 'bottling'.

There were also a fair number of individuals who played around the streets and outside hotels and boarding houses. Some of these I remember well. There was 'Blind Harry' who possessed a very fine voice and accompanied himself on an accordion. His pitch was at the western extremity of the Brighton front. He was very well patronised. There was also a very famous harp and violin combination 'Alexander and Marcartoni'. This pair played around the streets of Brighton for over 50 years. The harpist still plays around the town, but sad to relate his partner died a year or so ago.

In addition to the 'troupes' various other performers would appear on the sea front from time to time. There would be acrobats, conjurers and jugglers with clubs. To my mind the performances they gave are comparable with many seen on television today.

Another pair of characters well known around the town was a shabby old man and his equally old and tattered wife. The old man played some sort of flute, and the old woman would make a rather pathetic attempt at singing hymns. They would shuffle along in the gutter and the old lady would solicit patronage by dangling a rather dirty little bag in front of passers by. It was claimed by some of the lads that after someone had dropped a coin in the bag, the hymn went: -

“How much did he give you?
Only a ha’penny!
Stingy old B****r
Jesus loves me ---“

I have tried to give some idea of the little world in which we were brought up. Living as we did in the centre of the town we were brought into close contact with the holiday spirit; Brighton being the playground of the rich and poor, and thinking back I get a confused picture of the crowds along the promenade. “Nanny goat chaise” invalids in Bath chairs, shabby old cabs, and public houses always full of customers. West Street always stands out with its numerous eating-houses, each with a tout outside inviting the passers by to partake of a ‘but from the joint and 2 veg’ for a shilling. A day trip from London to Brighton cost 2/6d. Many of the excursionists would find the Brighton air and beer too much for them and would have difficulty in making their way to the Railway Station in the evening. Many would fall by the wayside. They were picked up by the police and shepherded towards the railway station. Some would collapse many times but the police would patiently again and again put them on their feet, their object being to get them on to the London train and out of Brighton.

All this may seem trivial and incidental to many similar seaside towns, but what I am trying to bring out is that surrounded as we were with a host of distractions and with very little cultural or intellectual, the influence of mother and father was strong enough to guide us through our impressionable years and enable us to grow into that I think I may rightly claim, useful and law abiding citizens.

I like to think that both mother and father died happy in the knowledge that their sons and daughter had ‘turned out alright’. May they rest in peace.

William Ransom

Written in 1962

