

Childhood

Can you trust your childhood memories? I don't think I can. Between being taken to see my great grandmother when I was two years old and my younger brother being born when I was eight and a half, I have a series of images and short clips of YouTube video playing in my head. They appear to be in colour but probably ought to be in black and white or perhaps sepia tinged.

These images and clips seem to be consistent but later commentaries from siblings and parents suggests that they are open to interpretation, variable memories, synthesised from a mixture of the real events and the re-tellings over time, which switch the focus at each recounting or reinforce the words I use to describe what was going on, true or not.

About my great-grandmother, I have this clear picture of a huge room with what I would now call a sleigh bed, and this little figure propped on white pillows peering over the side as I am brought round to her. I expect it was a small bedroom with an ordinary double bed – bedhead and bed foot with a metal frame of springs between them and a mattress on top, pre-divan days these – I was the small one in the room and everything would have appeared huge. What a traitor memory and perspective can be!

Again, my next memory is of a house in Builth Wells where we lived briefly when I was still two years of age. I say house, but what I actually have as a memory is the toilet cistern. The room itself had a tall thin oblong window beside the fat pipe connecting cistern to bowl and the cistern itself was an ornate box high up out of my reach with a chain flush. How much of that description is true I cannot now say except that it is fixed in my mind and forever associated with the family story that it is the location of where my elder brother committed the infamous crime of flushing my dummy away.

We moved a lot, being from mongrel families whose antecedents had travelled from farms to cities and from one city to another, economic migrants all, Welsh, Irish, Scottish and German, or 'Hanoverian' as we proudly called them, but as that was in the 1850's it was hardly coming over with George I. My parents, in a move emulated now on modern television, vowed to escape to the country and followed a meandering path south from Liverpool to Cornwall over most of my childhood, stopping on the way in Wales, Shropshire (twice), Herefordshire and Devon.

Apart from the cistern, Builth is lost to me although I often go through it and if you are interested, the house is on the Brecon side, before you turn for the bridge over the Wye and is very brightly coloured. Not my memory but received wisdom. After that we lived in Shrewsbury – pronounce it as you will but on old maps it is spelt Shrewesbury, so I follow that – in a tiny terraced house that I have found my way back to in later life and just about recognised despite the efforts at gentrification. I still have a scar from a fall at that house and know the story as to how I got it but it's not my memory to tell.

And then we moved to another house, owned by the Church of England where my mother looked after a new curate as part of the deal. A big house where my elder brother used to lure me to the attic and encourage me to put my fingers in the light fitting whilst he turned on the switch. I know we survived the whole family coming down with flu and I had mumps. I don't remember the bad throat, just the honey bread soldiers which was all I could eat. But the big thing I remember there is the huge range in the kitchen, an Aga or some such. I remember this not because of its function or heat or getting burned or any of the usual childhood horrors but because the lady who showed my mother round, with me tagging along, carefully explained that it was necessary to keep the kitchen doors closed as a through draught would cause the temperature to go through the floor. Alas, looking round the kitchen in wonder at its size, I misheard this and forever after believed that if the

doors were open, the range itself would plummet to the cellar beneath.

After the coming of my younger brother in Shropshire the second time we lived there, things become more focussed as if his arrival forced my attention back onto the world. It was probably just my no longer being the baby of the family and having to join in the general attention and approval seeking that my elder siblings had had to endure since my own arrival. I remember better the names and faces around me, the houses and the streets where we lived, the many schools I attended, the bus routes home from school or the long trudge at the end of the day, the roads to freedom that I cycled on my sister's bike in the holidays, the unending Summers, the butterflies around the buddleia next door. And of course, girls.

Can I trust those memories? Probably no better than before because they are coloured by wishful thinking, adolescent yearnings and the ineluctable ability of people only to remember the things that they wish to. I'm lucky in that I suppose for although I know there were bad times mixed up with the good, they have faded as we all hope they must.

Owen Parry 2020