

SUMMER MEMORIES

Were there summers before 1945? I remember none of them. Perhaps summer had been put on hold during the war.

As if to make up for lost time, the summer of 1945 began before Spring was over; and it began, I remember, at night. I was woken up. It was dark and seemed like midnight.

As I came out of North Square onto the cross-roads where High West Street and South Street meet, a huge bonfire was blazing. There were crowds of people; they were singing. Some, I think, were dancing; some were certainly piling more onto the bonfire. I had neither seen nor heard anything like it before; indeed, I had never seen a bonfire before. It was new and exciting and strange.

I was with my aunt and my Mum; they told me it was because the war had ended. In those days there was no television broadcasting news at all hours of the day and night; and I do not recall hearing the radio (or wireless it was then called) very much when we were living with my uncle and aunt in Dorchester in Dorset.

They were my Dad's brother and sister and lived in a large three-storey house in North Square. At least the building had three storeys, but the ground floor was all shop – my uncle's grocery store. We lived and slept in the first and second floors. The kitchen, the lavatory and the bathroom were not part of the house; they were in the "outhouse" across the backyard.

We, that is my Mum, my younger brother and myself, had gone to live with them in 1944 when V1s did not always make it to London but occasionally came down in our village in Sussex. At least they did not get to Dorset. My Dad had not come with us because he was with the RAF and either in the Netherlands or soon to go there.

After the nocturnal bonfire and celebrations, I saw, during the following days and weeks, other signs that the war had ended. There were red, white and blue ribbons in the shops in South Street which spelled out the letters VE. It was explained to me that it meant 'Victory in Europe' and the bonfire had been on 'VE Day.' The war was not quite finished, it was explained; they were still fighting in a far away place called Japan. But it seemed that as far as everyone around was concerned, the war had ended.

A few of the shops in South Street had captured German flags in them: red and white and black, with a swastika in the middle. They were not, of course, for sale. Who would have wanted to buy them then? They were war trophies. The war was over and we had won!

At sometime that summer there was a street party in North Square. But what I remember most of all about that summer was the seaside. We had never been to the seaside before; now we seemed to go whenever we could – first at weekends and then, when the school term finished, almost every day.

My aunt was one of the few people with a car. We had to walk across the town to the lockup garage where she kept it (in those days people did not

clutter the streets by leaving cars outside their houses). But we boys did not mind the walk – we were on our way to the seaside.

On the days we could not use the car we took the train. There were two stations in Dorchester, one for the Southern Railway and one for the Great Western; and at both stations there were trains to Weymouth. But we preferred the Great Western with its diesel railcars; they seemed more intimate and friendly than the trains of coaches on the Southern line.

It was nearly always Weymouth we went to, with the broad sweep of sands around the bay. Although there were other people there, the bay was so large that we were well spread out. It was *never* crowded, and my brother and I could play and dig in the sand almost wherever we wanted.

The sea was always calm and welcoming. There were, when we first went there, two or three red flags out at sea with wire barriers around them. We were told that these marked unexploded mines and the flags were to warn people to keep away. But they were too far out to worry us since neither of us could swim; nor was there anyone who could have taught us to do so. We spent very many happy hours splashing around in the warm sea.

Besides playing in the sea and in the sand, there were other diversions. There was a man who made model buildings out sand: churches, town halls and the like. He would spray the sand the keep it moist as he worked away. His sand buildings seemed huge and wonderful to us boys. How we wished our sand castles could rival his!

There was also the Punch and Judy show. It had two different versions of the story. The booth always displayed the times of performances and we would go along regularly to watch and never seemed to tire of doing so. It was not long before I knew all the words of both versions off by heart!

There were one or two occasions when we did not go to Weymouth. I remember once we went to Lulworth Cove. We boys were disappointed; it seemed so very grim. There were a lot of places with barbed wire around and a lot more red flags. Where was the sand? All we could see were rocks and pebbles; and the sea seemed to be full of crabs. We had never met these strange creatures before and their pincers looked threatening! How we longed for the sands of Weymouth where the sea was welcoming and there were no crabs.

We also, I remember, went once to Swanage. I was disappointed to find no swans there (Why did they call it Swanage?) but there were lots of jellyfish instead. Why had they brought us here? Weymouth never had troublesome creatures like crabs and jellyfish.

Occasionally we went as far afield as Bournemouth where there were yellow trolley-buses. I remember walking through the Pleasure Gardens. There were squirrels there, and they were red. I was fascinate by those little creatures.

We did other things as well that summer – some much closer to our house in Dorchester. I remember catching minnows in a jam-jar in the River Frome, just down the hill from North Square. We boys used sometimes to go for walks by that river with our uncle and his two black spaniels. There were

kingfishers by the river. We would look hard to see if we could spot them and I still remember the excitement of catching sight of the orange and blue of a bird patiently watching for fish.

I remember also that we walked sometimes in the Borough Gardens in those long, light evenings of double-summer time. I don't think it was ever dark when we boys went to bed.

Then in the middle of August I saw VJ appearing in red, white and blue ribbons in shop windows. It meant "Victory in Japan", I was told. But it did not have the same impact as VE day had had at the beginning of that summer. There was a celebration organized, though I remember little of it except that there were fireworks. They were, I think, at or near the Keep on Bridport Road.

So that summer drew to a close and we would soon be back at school. That first memorable summer would be over; we had done many things we had not done before, but of all those things what I still remember most were those long days on the sand and in the sea of Weymouth bay.

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