

**BOOTS, BIKES  
&  
BOMBERS**

**by Eric Jones**

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*To Barbara*

*When all seemed lost she came into my  
life and made me happy.*

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# PART 1

## My Father

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They told me that, as a young boy no more than nine years old, my father was struck down with polio. Sadly, not only did it cause him to be lame for the rest of his life but it also curtailed his somewhat limited village education at Tibberton School. It must have been tough on him as a child but even tougher when, as an adult, he came to look for work. There were not many options open to a young lame man in those days but he could always become a cobbler. Perhaps the fact that he had to wear specially shaped boots prompted his entry into this trade. I was soon to discover that he shaped his boots to own requirements. Always boots and never shoes. There was no ankle support in shoes. My two sisters were older than me, Peggy by three years and Phyllis by six years and I later understood from them that, as a boy, and arriving late on the scene, I was the pride and joy of my father and mother. Pity I didn't know this at the time, I could have made better use of it. My sisters will say I did.

One of my earliest recollections was playing horses crawling around the legs of a table. I collided with one rather hard and I remember the water in the enamel bowl (no plastic in those days) getting redder and redder. My father's pride and joy was the centre of much concern on that day.

After this early experience of survival one of my next clear recollections is sitting on a wooden box at the end of my Father's work bench and watching him get to grips with worn boots and shoes. I can still smell those kips of leather hanging like tapestries on the workshop walls, each one representing the whole side of cow, I used to think. The smell of leather must be one of the more pleasant smells of life. Not so pleasant was the smell of neat ammonia applied to colour the new leather soles. It used to make my father's eyes water.

I used to notice that the ends of his thumb and forefinger were scored from the constant holding of nails before driving them through the leather into the waiting boot or shoe. It was nails he held in his hand, rivets, a kind of old fashioned tack, he used to hold in his lips. This was a standard practice amongst shoe repairers and I never heard of my father swallowing one. It all made for speed and fast he was. He could tack a sole onto a shoe in the twinkling of an eye. Sometimes soles were hand-sewn to the shoes with heavy wax thread and oversize needles the shoe being held by a long wooden clamp which in turn was held between the knees.

The shop also contained a retail section for the sale of boots, shoes and footwear accessories. This was separated from the workshop by a narrow, short passage which included the shop entrance onto the street.

One day, a cow straying from a passing herd - they were driven through the streets in those days - walked into the shop. It was a fat cow and the corridor was narrow and it refused to reverse. Pushing, tail tugging and heaving failed to move it. I can't remember how long it was before it decided to catch up with its mates, but it must have gone, it's not there now. The mess it left took ages to clean up which reminds me cattle and sheep were herded through the town to the thriving market which the town then held and of course their droppings littered the street. A call from my father would get me running onto the street with my special pan hoping to beat the competition in the race to this rich prize. My father needed the stuff for his Virginia stocks. He used to plant Virginia stocks every year around the border of his flower garden. By the way, a small point, Newent, I am told, is a derivative of the words 'new way'. The drovers' route through Newent was a new way for bringing sheep from the pastures of Wales to the lucrative markets further east.

The shop was a kind of gossip focal point and sitting on my box I used to be enthralled by the variety of gossip talent that used to grace the shop. Two names I remember very well, one was Bert Palmer (there was something about a distant member of his family having invented tubular scaffolding) and another was tall, imposing Tom Tilling. There was another who always called my father 'Dad' and I always resented that. There were only three of us entitled to that privilege and he was not one of them. We will forget him. The friendship between Mr. Tilling and my father was one which complicated my life quite considerably. Mr. Tilling was the janitor at the Newent Grammar School and consequently knew all that happened at the school including the names of boys and girls who got into any kind of trouble. On one occasion when I was the recipient of capital punishment (it wasn't my fault, of course). I wasn't too worried about the physical bit, Mr. Dickenson, our head, was a gentle, kind man, but I was worried because I knew that Mr. Tilling knew and that the news might get back to my father. For quite some time I dreaded seeing Mr. Tilling in the shop but in the event he was obviously a gentleman who did not talk out of school.

There was a treadle lathe in the shop for 'finishing' off the shoes and boots and I gradually acquired considerable skill at keeping it going at maximum speed for long periods. I am sure that if the end brush had been replaced with a propeller the whole thing could easily have become airborne.

There was another machine operated by a foot treadle and this was a heavy-duty Singer sewing machine capable of stitching through the toughest leather.

Many years later a kind benefactor was to fit an electric motor to the lathe. My father wanted to pay but this kind gentleman would not hear of it. What a blessed relief it must have been to my father just to switch on instead of all that laborious pedalling.

Money was hard to come by in those days. I remember, one day, in the 'living room', I saw my father crying. I couldn't remember seeing him cry previously and I later found out that a debt to a Gloucester leather factor, which had been hanging over his head for years, had just been settled. This was for £100. A hundred pounds was a lot of money in those days. Especially in the early thirties when money really was in short supply. A situation which particularly affected the agricultural areas and we were right in the middle of one. The new hob-nailed farm boots used to stay on the shelves a long time and most of the income came from the repair side of the shop. And not always was money used, bartering used to take place. I can't remember if there was a scale of values but a rabbit (dead of course) a few lettuce or a cabbage or two would often change hands for repairs of shoes or boots.

Most of the action took place on Saturday evenings with the shop often staying open until ten o'clock. This was the only time the farm workers could get into the town to do their shopping. A whole week could go by and my father would only take a few pounds and then, fortuitously, the Saturday rush would be on and the takings could swell tenfold in those few hours.

But my father wasn't rich, he wasn't even well off but he did fare better than some, all his income being the fruits of his own labour.

He wasn't a spendthrift, not like me, my tuppence pocket money used to go like wildfire, he was able to find enough money to provide the family with transport. I don't know how old I was when he acquired his motor bike and sidecar, I can't remember him being without it. It had cost the princely sum of £60 and it was no ordinary motor cycle, not to him anyway. It was a 'Haslewood', that's what was written on the side, and it was 500 c.c. with a Jap engine. I knew all this when I didn't have the foggiest idea what it all meant. Oh, and I nearly forgot, it had a belt drive to the rear wheel and it was this belt I was to remember most of all.

With Mother on the pillion, us three kids in the sidecar, trying to avoid the slipstream through the cracked celluloid wind shield, it would be raining and we would come to a steep hill with this wretched belt getting wetter and wetter when suddenly it would start to slip. Out, we all had to get and we would trudge up the hill and meet my father at the top, clamber back aboard and off we went. If he felt so inclined there was a special belt shortening gadget which he would use to take an inch out of the belt to make it grip better. This was seldom used, the walking procedure being the most popular with him.

Journeys in this manner were never very long by modern standards. Nailsworth, in one direction, to visit his sister May who had married into a ready-made family and the Malvern Hills or Worcester in the other. Mind you, bearing in mind the unknown hazards, these were far enough even at the flat-out speed of forty miles an hour. On some Bank Holidays we would go to the Malvern Hills and whenever we did it would rain cats and dogs. At least, that's what it seemed like to me. This would cause other problems besides dismounting and walking up hills. Flood water in Leewall Street couldn't force its way through the narrow culvert under the roadway and consequently it spilled over into the thoroughfare. Very

often this flood water used to creep back up the street and reach our shop. Our back-yard was lower than the street so it found its way in through the back door and if the 'flood board' was not hammered into position the water would pour through into the kitchen. 'Did I fix the flood board?' was the question so often on my father's mind as we tore back in torrential rain. By the way the flood board was a plank of timber cut to fit tightly between the door styles.

I remember one occasion when he hadn't and we arrived back to find our cross breed terrier 'Jock' floating in the kitchen in his little wooden box and looking pretty fed up. However, flooding was never quite the disaster it might have been. Flag stones covered the kitchen floor and these were covered by easily driable mats. It was the living room where flood water could have caused untold damage but I don't recall it ever reaching that far.

Sometime, in the distant past, a relative by marriage of my father's brother Herbert had an unpleasant experience with lightning. Either a looking mirror was broken as she was looking into it or a iron-bedstead was struck whilst she was lying on it. Family folklore is a little confused about this but it certainly had a very direct influence on our family's attitude to thunderstorms. Come a thunderstorm and it would find us all cowering behind or between furniture with the front and back doors wide open (with the flood board in position of course). Why the doors open you may ask? Well, the idea was, that if a thunderbolt struck the house it would go through the back door and out of the front. A clear passageway was always left for its possible route. Later I came to believe that there was no such thing as a thunderbolt but later again I was convinced there was, so perhaps my parents' safeguard was not so funny after all.

One evening, when my father was attending one of his 'Buffs' meetings (in no way connected with the Kentish Buffs) and Mother was sitting in the kitchen when a strange man came in through the back door, through the kitchen, opened the shop door and passed through the passage out into the street. Not a word was spoken. Later, the man, most apologetic, said he had been trying to find a quick way from the square at the rear of the house through to the street. A little the worse for drink if you ask me.

The living room was only used on Sundays and special occasions. One modern piece of equipment kept in this room in those early days was a crystal radio set. The type kids make for fun these days. Two sets of headphones which would break down into four separate ear pieces, one each for four of us so there was always one unlucky person and I was the youngest.

However, this all changed when, one day, my father bought a modern Lissen radio set. To me, this new piece of equipment was a miracle of modern science. It could pick up relayed 'broadcasts' from all over the world.

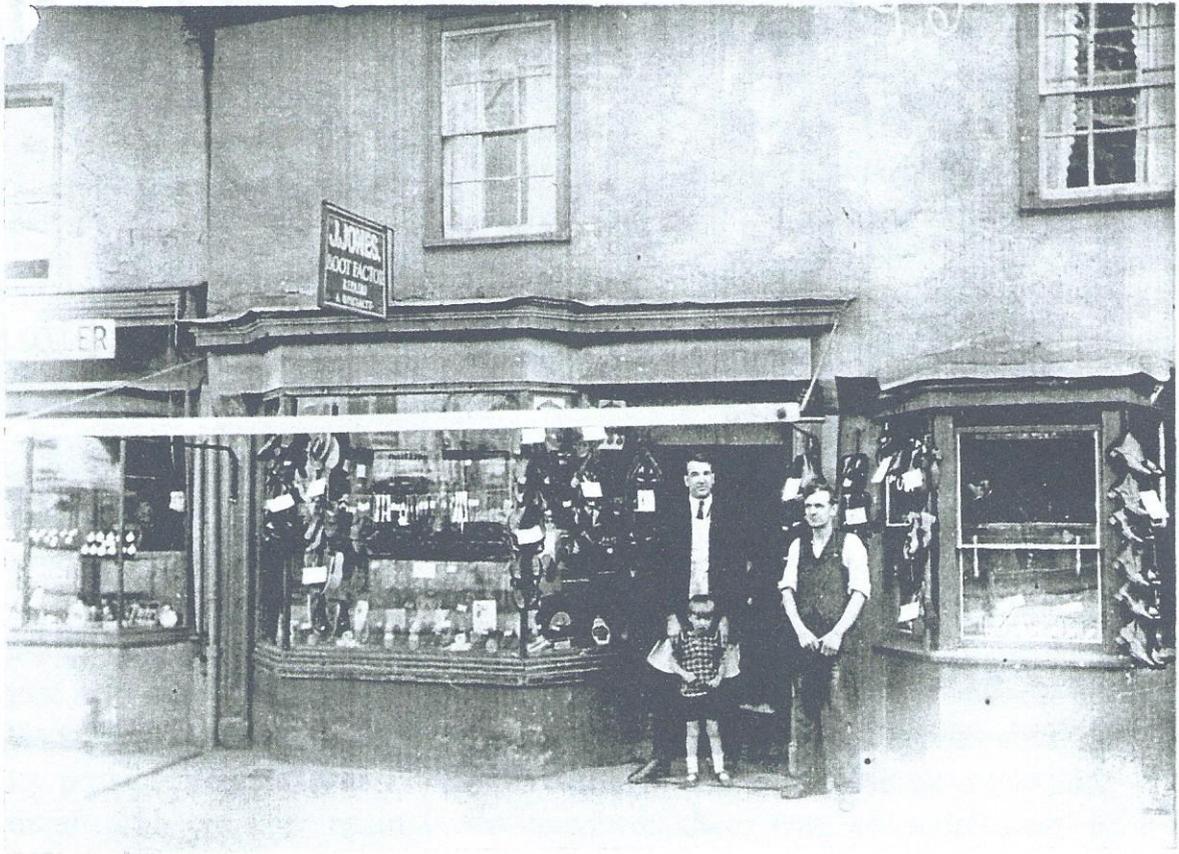
One day I was asked if I would like to get up at three in the morning to listen to the Tommy Farr/Joe Louis world heavyweight championship. Would I like? Of course I would like. What a fight it was with Farr going the whole distance against the 'Brown Bomber'. My father said that Farr had won the fight. I enjoyed the



My father attends the centenary  
celebrations at Tibberton village  
school. He is third from the right  
in the back row.



I am best man at the wedding of Peter  
and Amy (1947). My parents are on the  
extreme left.



Dad, his assistant  
Clem Beachus and  
myself.

1926

broadcast tremendously, but what I enjoyed more was the privilege of being allowed to get up in the middle of the night.

We owned a piano and it was kept in the living room. Next door was a jeweller whose son taught music so what was more natural that all three children should take music lessons? There was no coercion or cajoling, we were all three going to play piano and that was it whether we liked it or not. I think my two sisters liked it and I did not. Under threat of dire punishment, which I must admit never happened (at least not in connection with piano playing), I stuck at it for five years. My only achievement after all these years, much to my shame, was 'The Isle of Capri', 'Alexander's Ragtime Band', 'So Deep in the Night', and just a few others and all with the right hand only. I never could get the left hand to work. One is often asked 'What was your greatest embarrassment?' Without question mine was when my father insisted that I played piano at his Comrades Club. Even with the maximum of wriggling I could not get out of it. I'm sure my father lost quite a few comrades that night.

We thought we were very upmarket with gas lighting and cooking. We still had to rely on candles for upstairs lighting. My grandmother, my father's mother, living in the country still relied on oil lamps, but more about Grandma Jones later. Cooking was still carried out in the kitchen range in the winter months when there was always a fire roaring up the chimney.

My father, working on the assumption that if you have a major gas leak you would almost certainly finish up on the floor dead was in the habit of looking for minor (he hoped) gas leaks with a lighted match. This used to drive my mother frantic. I thought it quite sensible because it often used to produce a little blue flame indicating a small gas leak. The system was never proven wrong probably because he never found a large one.

Coal was expensive in those days, even Forest of Dean steam coal which used to explode in the fireplace and throw burning embers over the fireside rug. In fact, in these depressed years everything was, or seemed, expensive. But there was a fuel source peculiar to Newent. We had a saw mill and employees were allowed to take away off-cuts of timber and dispose of them in anyway they wished. So we had unique two wheeled boxes with a pair of handles for pushing and steering being trundled down the High Street to willing customers in the town. And the cost - well, my father used to arrange deliveries at six pence a load. Not bad for an ensured week's warmth.

It's high time I mentioned our cousin Peter. Peter came to live with us for\* many years, leaving us only to join up in the Coldstream Guards as soon as he was old enough to do so. Three years separated us so our interests were in different pastimes. Over the years we became close friends and that situation exists today. In fact he is like the brother I never had.

In spite of his disability my father used to really enjoy playing games, particularly cricket. Perhaps there was not too much running about in cricket, especially as wicket keeper which was his favourite position. Outings to the top of

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\* See addendum

May Hill always ended up with a game in the shadow of Queen Victoria's trees.

Right from early days aeroplanes had always captured my imagination. We didn't often see any over Newent and when we did I used to chase onto the top lawn to see them pass over. So much so that Jock, our terrier, got into a similar habit and many years later whenever a plane went over he would still chase onto the top lawn barking his head off.

Aeroplanes, or a least one aeroplane, did come to Newent. A Spartan three-seater used to arrive at the Nellfields on the Gloucester Road every year for a limited period and offer flips for the princely sum of five shillings a time. I never really knew whether I wanted to go up or not, but the fact that my father would not pay the five shillings offered me an excellent excuse for not flying.

Hero of the hour was a certain Mr. Bill Cook, a relation of our then local baker. The deal was that, if a member of the public would go up and do a loop-the-loop, he or she would get their flight for free. Mr. B. Cook accepted the challenge. I think that when he landed he had blood streaming from a cut hand. Apparently he had grabbed something sharp in the cockpit whilst the plane was inverted. What a brave man.

One year, Alan Cobham's Flying Circus came to Ross-on-Wye using a field near the famous Horse Shoe bend. I remember one little black nosed bi-plane roaring over the crowd (permissible in those days) at a speed, they said, of two hundred and thirty miles an hour. Almost a world speed record in those days.

My father had never been airborne, so immediately after the war when son Keith was a babe in arms I took them both on a joy ride in a D.H. Rapide from a small airfield which was later to become Heathrow. So, son and grandfather both got airborne for the first time on the same day.

My father's mother lived in Tibberton, four and a half miles from Newent, and this was a regular run for the motorbike and sidecar. As I said before, she had oil-filled lamps for lighting and her mantleshef was covered with brass candlesticks. She was stout and homely and I could not remember her husband, my grandfather. As a youngster I was always somewhat afraid of the moon. In later years I would learn to welcome it because it meant no flying operations over Germany. When we were about to leave she would lean over the sidecar and say 'You mustn't be afraid of the Parish Lantern'. She always called the moon the 'Parish Lantern'. So in those winter months it was always dark when we left and the road ahead would be illuminated by the shape of a large, inverted flame reflected from the mirror at the rear of the acetylene lamp. Old, discarded acetylene still had some life left in it. I used to put it in an empty dustbin add water and jam the lid back on. If I was in luck the lid would blow off to a considerable height. This was one of the easier ways of getting into trouble with my father.

Sometimes, on the way home from Grandma Jones', my father would call at the 'Travellers' Rest' for a clandestine drink. Clandestine because he used to cajole me into keeping quiet about it when we arrived home. My business acumen must have been sadly lacking, surely that was a situation which lent itself to personal

gain. In all fairness to my father and in spite of the fact that mother thought he imbibed perhaps a little too much on occasions I cannot recall seeing him the worse for drink.

When I lived at the 'shop' for the first 18 years of my life, the front facade was covered in stucco. Later, when others occupied the premises the stucco was removed to expose the half timbers beneath. About this time it was established that the house was built in the early sixteenth century and the manner in which the rain used to come through into our bedroom I would not dispute this theory.

My father rented the shop and living accommodation and as the rent was reasonably cheap and 'tied' he was responsible for all the internal and external decoration. Like the repainting of the Forth Bridge he seemed to be constantly decorating and so much of this decorating time was taken up in papering OVER timber beams, particularly in the front bedrooms. When I think of the time he spent in cutting and juggling with the scissors to make the paper fit ... Nowadays of course people love old timbers and ensure that they are exposed and paint them black and the very last thing they would do would be to cover them up. I recently visited the house and all the timbers have been exposed both internal and external and it looks a treat. I forgot to ask them if they had repaired the roof.

The war came and eventually it was my time to join up. Needless to say it was to be the Royal Air Force. So I left Newent and the rest of the family. 'The rest' because my elder sister had left home at the age of sixteen to become a nurse. A career which was to later lead her into the Queen Alexandra's Nursing Service and thence to the Far East on War Service. My other sister did wartime service in the Rotol Airscrew factory on the Cheltenham and Gloucester road. Perhaps she even assisted in the manufacture of the propellers which were fitted to my own aircraft - who knows. Peter, as I have already mentioned, joined the Coldstream Guards.

So the war disrupted all our lives, as it did to millions of others. When I left home after being on leave my mother and father were always very distressed. Sometimes my father cried and as this was so unusual and as I was so young I didn't understand. Now, with our son, an only child living in the States, someone I see only infrequently, I fully understand how my father felt. In those days I was going off to war when he knew he may not see me again.

When he reached the age of sixty-five he retired and with my mother and Peggy they went to live in a council house a mile outside town. He had looked forward to his retirement but just a few months later in September 1956, whilst mowing his front lawn, he collapsed and died from a brain haemorrhage.

Having worked so hard all his life and having become lame at such an early age I always thought he deserved a far better deal in the shape of many happy retirement years.