

MY CHILDHOOD

I was born on February 21, 1927 in the City Road Hospital, Islington, London. My father was Charles Russell Baughen who was manager of Collins Music Hall in Islington and my mother was Gladys Baughen, an ex-chorus girl. I was named Berney Charles, my god-father was Sam Berney, the owner of Collins Music Hall who also owned Fox Studios which he later sold to become part of Twentieth Century Fox, the American film company. I was the second child; my elder brother was named Clifford being almost five years older than me.

For some reason, even to this day I do not know why, my parents split resulting in both of us boys being placed in the care of the Shaftesbury Homes. It meant separating from my brother as at the age of four I went to the school in Royston, Hertfordshire, whilst Cliff went to the school in Bisley, Surrey. Being taken to Royston by my mother was one of the earliest memories I can recall and remember crying my eyes out on her leaving me there.

At the age of seven I was transferred to Bisley to join my brother, but we still did not see much of each other in the following two years as the younger members were accommodated separately from the older boys. Discipline in the school was very strict, more on military lines, which at the time was very draconian and I hated every moment. However, I must have settled down and accepted that I must obey the masters. We were not allowed outside the school boundaries, except when being marched to the chapel daily and could not mix with the local villagers. Several of the lads could not accept their lot and 'went over the wall' to escape the harsh discipline. I did at one time think of joining the escapees but where would I go? Nowhere, so I thought I would join the brass band and learn to play an instrument. Then I would be able to visit places outside the school boundaries as the band played at various functions around Surrey. The band had a very high reputation and the bandmaster, Mr Ffitch, an ex-Royal Marine bandmaster ensured the musicians not only met high musical standards but deportment in military style drill. I began to learn to play the cornet at eight, and eventually played soprano cornet. The success of the band was reflected in their presence at Brass Band Contests held at Hanwell and Alexandra Palace competing with men's military and civilian bands around the country.

The standard of military style drill was so high that at Hanwell we won the Department Cup against all comers in 1937 and 1938. In 1939 the Contest was called off just prior to the outbreak of war when crowd events were restricted. The highlight for me was when we played 'The Teddy Bear's Picnic' on BBC Radio's very popular 'Children's Hour' programme in 1937.

The only other alternative of visits outside the school boundaries was to join the Scout movement, but my first choice enabled many more outside events to take place. As Cliff was almost five years older than me he left the school at fourteen years old but took a keen interest in caring for me while I was still there at Bisley.

At holiday periods the children at Bisley had the opportunity of going back to their parents, whilst a few with uncaring relatives remained at the school. There were occasions when my mother had me back with her, but also times when I remained with the unwanted fellow children. When Cliff left Bisley he always took the opportunity to have me join him at holiday times, and it was he who ensured I left the school at the age of fourteen. Although the discipline in the school was harsh I believe it was for the best and influenced my judgement and attitude to adult life.