

# Childhood

**"But such a day to-morrow as to-day, And to be boy eternal."**

*(Shakespeare: The Winters Tale)*



I was born on the 2nd November 1955 in St.Davids's Hospital, Bangor, North Wales. I was adopted when I was just a few days old by a wonderful couple, *my* Mum and Dad.

Fred and Dorothy Hill, my Dad and Mum, raised me on their small farm in a small village called *Bont* in Mid-Wales. Both were incredibly hard working. They had little money. When I was really young, Dad worked for the forestry commission. Before work each morning, he would have to milk our few cows, an operation he had to repeat on his return followed by all his other farm work. Mum and Dad sold milk locally. Rich Channel Island milk from their beautiful Guernsey and Jersey cattle. I have fond and wonderful memories of life on a farm, but neither the stamina, determination or interest to be a farmer.



Welsh was the first language of the majority of the inhabitants of Bont. As a consequence, I learnt and spoke English at home, but Welsh with the children I played with. I'm told by Mum that I, along with my best friends at the time, Gaynor Thomas and Alwyn Price developed our own language which contained both English and Welsh words. The only phrase I can remember that consisted of both Welsh and English is '*un yes*', which roughly translated means '*isn't it?*'.

As a child I was always showing off. I still do. I have quite an ego!. I regularly participated in the traditional form of performing festival known as the 'Eisteddfod'. I won quite a few prizes as a boy soprano, and for recitation. My first school report was quite impressive, but I prefer to keep later reports to myself!



At the age of eleven, we moved to a bigger farm at Llandinam. Although only a short distance from the first, about 20 miles, the difference it made to my life was significant. Previously I had lived in the heart of a village, now we lived a mile from the nearest. Although still in the very heart of Wales, I remained in a 'language' minority, this time because I was the only child at Llandinam Primary School who could speak any Welsh.

After one term at Llandinam High School, I moved up to Llanidloes High School. It became a place I dreaded. In hindsight, I received little encouragement or support in the subjects I was good at, and much ridicule over those I wasn't.

I hated sport, football in particular. When the team captains chose their 'squads', I was always the last to be chosen, the argument being 'We don't want him - you have him'.

Until my voice 'broke' however, I was still the 'pride' of the school for my angelic voice, and continued to win prizes. Once broken however, my voice and therefore myself, or so I thought, were of no further interest to my school.



This extended to my career ambitions. I wanted to work in television, perhaps as a cameraman. The notion was ridiculed by the teacher responsible for careers, as almost was my second choice, to be an electrician. The concept that as a farmer's son, I had no wish to follow the convention of following in my father's footsteps (as my farm reared schoolmates were often pressurised into), was beyond the career master's comprehension. The best they could offer was the vague possibility of an apprenticeship with the electricity board, and nothing about further career development.

To my mind, Llanidloes High School, at that time, had a lot to answer for. Pupils were graded stereotypically into A, B or C grades, according to their overall ability, and were taught to that level regardless of any outstanding abilities in certain areas. We were pigeonholed into an academic 'class' society.

- The A stream for whom the world was their oyster. Academia and fine prospects lay ahead.
- The B stream, who could probably learn a craft, but not much else.
- The C stream, destined for a life of labour and demanour.

The most vivid example of this was a then close friend of mine. He had a passion for, and great talent and ability for cooking. Because he was a boy, and because he was assigned into the C stream, cookery classes were not an option he could enjoy. I suspect he could have followed a career in cuisine, maybe ending up running the finest restaurant in Europe, but he never had the chance. In the summer of 2005, after 35 years, I managed to get in touch with him again.

Despite the lack of encouragement of my school, but with the full support and encouragement of my Mum and Dad, I left school at the age of 15, without finishing my CSE studies, to start a career as an apprentice electrician. It meant leaving home.

## The World of Work

**"You try the handle of the road, It opens, do not be afraid."**

*(Leonard Cohen: The Stranger Song)*

I embarked on an apprenticeship in the trade of electrician with the Department of the Environment, (later known as the Property Services Agency) at RAF Sealand near Chester. Originally a civil airfield, the RFC took over Sealand in 1916, and the Station was used for training and later, maintenance, a role that continues today. No 30 Maintenance Unit first moved to Sealand in 1937, and today is responsible for the third line repair of airborne avionic equipment for all three Armed Services. No 631 Volunteer Gliding School operates Viking TX1s from the South Airfield. Today, the role of RAF Sealand is as the third-line maintenance and repair unit of all airborne electronics, electrical and instrument engineering unit for the RAF. The DOE/PSA role here (and at all other MOD & Government establishments) at that time was for the installation, service and repair of all fixed mechanical, electrical and structural services. During my four year apprenticeship here, I also spent a few months training at the Royal Aircraft Establishment (R.A.E.) Aberporth.

Emotionally, at the beginning, life away from home was difficult. I went home for weekends, but life away from home was completely new experience. For the first time in my life I experienced all those things my parents warned me about including drugs, violence and sex. But with sex, there was a deep seated problem, that was only resolved in later life. I was not attracted to women, at least not in the way my mates 'appeared' to be.

On completing my apprenticeship, I moved to work as an electrician at a Royal Naval Armanent Depot in Pembrokeshire. In light of the fact that I am unable to find any reference to the place on the internet that

indicates what happened here at that time, and as I am a signatory to the Official Secrets Act, I cannot write about my work during the 18 months I spent here, other than to say I hated it. It has since ceased to be MOD property.

In 1977, I was transferred on temporary secondment to RAF Brawdy, also in Pembrokeshire. I was fortunate in that they had a vacancy and as I enjoyed the work, I applied and was accepted permanently into a team of maintenance electricians. A few months later I was promoted to 'Electrical Line Supervisor' in charge of this team. At the same time, I became interested in Hospital Radio, and became a volunteer at the newly built 'Withybush General Hospital' in Haverfordwest. Both this and work were emotionally satisfying and intellectually challenging. And, for the first time since I was eleven, I began to make some very good friends.

Experience at Withybush Hospital Radio was for me, and a number of my friends, to lead to career change. For Karen Walker, and Hugh Turnbull, it was a move into radio. Both now work for the BBC in Cardiff. For Mike Gomm, it has eventually led into a senior management within Microsoft, where he now has responsibility for AbilityNet. I became interested in hospitals, applied for, and was accepted as a Hospital Engineering Officer at St. Thomas' Hospital in London.

## London - A whole new world

### "The truth is rarely pure, and never simple"

*(Oscar Wilde: The Importance of being Ernest)*

Moving to London from my previously protected world was a major step for me. I went purely for the career opportunities, but it was to have an even bigger impact on my life, from the very first night.

I explained earlier that I *"was not attracted to women, at least not in the way my mates 'appeared' to be"*. This had troubled me for many years, and once led to my considering suicide. I knew I wasn't a 'queer' or 'homosexual', because all my experience growing up in Wales had led me to firmly believe that to be so, one would have 'feminine' traits. After all, the only 'queers' I knew of were those appearing on television - Larry 'Shut that door' Grayson, Danny La Rue and Mr. 'I'm Free!' Humphries. I knew I wasn't like that, so couldn't be 'one of them'.

However, I thought I had a problem. My mates were getting 'turned-on' by 'big breasts' on page three and nude calendars. I was not. But I did have 'stomach churning' feelings for one or two of the lads I'd known though, but didn't know why.

The day I moved to London, I moved all my things into a bedsit in the hospital where I was to be working and living over the next few years. As I settled myself in, I returned my portable television to London channel frequencies. I tuned in ITV, to London Weekend Television, to be presented at the opening of a programme called 'Gay Life', a moment of realisation that was to change my life, for the better, forever. Here, on my screen, were ordinary men and women, doing ordinary jobs, leading ordinary lives. What set them apart from anything or anyone I'd ever previously experienced outside my own feelings was that the people they were sexually attracted to happened to be of the same sex. I wasn't the only one. The story of my evolution of 'coming out' could fill an entire book, so I won't.

So, I began my career with St. Thomas' Hospital. It was interesting work, and I made many friends quickly. And they were friends from backgrounds and cultures outside of my previous field of experience. I also met other gay men and women. We shared our experiences. For a short I went through both 'political' and 'promiscuous' periods before settling down again into a 'normal' lifestyle.

At St. Thomas' I found the *Phipps Respiratory Unit*, one of the few remaining centres in Europe for home ventilator users. Over the first few months at the hospital, I became increasingly interested in the work of the technicians: Frank Kelly, John Clifton and Mick Atkinson. In 1981, Frank retired. Despite a considerable salary reduction, I applied for the resulting vacant post and was accepted.

I can honestly say that it was the most enjoyable and satisfying jobs I can imagine. I had the privilege to meet and work with some outstanding people. One day, I will write more, maybe a bookful on my time there.

In June 1983, I met Simon. He was, and still is charming, witty, intelligent and sexy. We began meeting regularly, and a few months later realised that we had become a 'couple' and that probably and hopefully, our lives would be intertwined forever. I'm glad to say, over 30 years later, they still are.

## Becoming whole again

**"My parents kept me from children who were rough, And who threw words like stones and who wore torn clothes."**

*(Stephen Spender)*

My friends, my employers, my workmates. They all knew I was gay, and none of them had a problem with it. As far as I was concerned, anyone who did have a problem with it wasn't worth knowing. But families are different, and as far as I was aware, no-one in the family knew I was gay.

I'd heard too many stories of men and women, young and old, rejected by their families because of their sexuality. This troubled me. I wanted Mum and Dad to know. I loved them, and wanted them to know everything.

My cousin Chris visited me in London regularly, as his work brought him to the city once a week. We always met up for a drink. It was during one of these visits he paid me the honour of asking me to be Godfather to his and Penny's newborn son Nicholas. I was honoured to be asked, but had reservations. It was inevitable that soon Chris was going to realise that I was gay. I couldn't say yes to being a Godfather without first telling him, so I did. It made no difference to him, and I am proud to be Nick's 'Uncle' and Godfather. I'm also very proud and moved that Chris and Penny named their second son, Richard, after me.

Some months later, after much thought and many sleepless nights, but on the 'shaking' spur of the moment I told my Mum and Dad that I was gay, and that Simon was my partner and I loved him. They were brilliant, and from that day on accepted Simon, and we became a whole family, spending weekneds, and holidays together.

Shortly before he died ten years ago, my father made one of the most touching gestures of love that I have ever felt. On a visit to him in hospital, in respect for our privacy, Simon stayed in the car while Mum and I went in to see Dad. Despite being seriously ill, Dad asked for Simon to be there as well, because he was part of our family.

A few months later, at Dad's funeral, Simon made an equally touching gesture. As I escorted Mum behind Dad's coffin out of the church, Simon touched the back of my hand. He was, without words, telling me he was there for me.

## Heartbeat

**"Just a heart-beat away..."**

*(Adlai Stevenson: New York Times)*

In September 1990, at the age of 36, I suffered a heart attack, followed by two more, resulting in heart surgery in January 1993. In 1995, my heart condition deteriorated further and reluctantly, I had to retire in December of that year.

Throughout my years with St. Thomas', I was fascinated by the iron lung. I collected as much information about the history of its development and uses as I could find. By chance, in my last few months at St. Thomas', I heard about an annual competition run by the Special Trustees of Guy's Hospital - 'The Lord Brock Memorial Historical Essay Prize'. Thinking little of my chances against learned medics, I decided it would be a challenge I would enjoy. I researched, wrote and entered an essay on the history of the British Iron Lung from 1832 to 1995. To my surprise, I won joint first prize. This was the point I realised that maybe, despite having to retire, I could earn money from writing.

## Becoming a writer

**"Proper words in proper places, make the true definition of a style."**

*(Jonathan Swift)*

In hindsight, my first attempts at writing were very basic. I threw ideas at publishers without knowledge of or thought for the intended reader. I attended evening classes in creative writing, and in the Summer of 1996 I attended the Annual Writers Conference, never having had published a word. But of course I had a great idea, that was bound to become a best-seller. This idea I told to the writer Gordon Wells. He showed interest, but told me that it was of little interest in a commercial market. What he told me next was the most significant piece of advice I have ever had as a writer. "Don't write about what you know." he told me, "Know about what you write, and make every word work." He went on to explain that you can write about almost anything providing you research your subject thoroughly, and sell it almost anywhere providing you research your reader thoroughly. He also told me to think about everyone in my life, and that I would be sure to find something of interest on every one of them.

He was so right. Following his advice I made a list of all my family and friends. I found that in the 1920's, my grandfather (my mothers father) had worked on a horse-drawn narrowboat, collecting milk in churns from the dairy farms of Shropshire and delivering them to the canalside Cadbury processing factory in Knighton. I talked to my mother, uncles and aunts about him, and gathered the facts. Then I looked at the three possible magazine markets: Inland Waterways Magazines. By careful study, I deduced that the most likely magazine, if any, to accept this article, would be *Canal and Riverboat Magazine*. The editor Chris Catrall accepted and published it, and I have worked regularly for the magazine ever since. Using the same principles I eventually came to write for a whole range of UK leisure magazines. By September 1998, I had filled over 200 pages of various periodical publications. In November last year, one of my articles was seen by over one million readers.

## Temporary setback

**"To live, and act, and serve the future hour"**

*(William Wordsworth)*

In September 1998, my health suffered another setback. Three of the four grafts performed in the 1993 heart by-pass began to fail. I was devastated, and went into a period of severe depression. I gave up writing altogether and almost gave up on life.

In November, the Royal Brompton Hospital took a look at my health and my heart. I was expecting the worst, but I got the best. They explained that one of the grafts was completely blocked, and that another two were in danger of doing so. The previous operation (performed at a different hospital) had been done in emergency 'life-saving' circumstances, harvesting the only easily available veins from my legs. These were not particularly good quality, and it was inevitable that in time they would need replacing.

I spent a few months suffering difficult side effects as I was tried on different cocktails of drugs to stabilise my symptoms. The Royal Brompton made a detailed study of arteries they could use from elsewhere in my body, and found some good ones. In late May 1999, I had a second heart bypass. The operation went well but respiratory complications set in shortly afterwards after parts of my lungs collapsed. I spent an additional seven days connected to a life support ventilator in intensive care. However, once my lungs recovered and I was slowly weaned off artificial ventilation, I recovered well.

In 2004 and 2005 I had a number of hospital admissions due to severe angina and low blood pressure. This was subsequently sorted out and I now am receiving treatment for acute angina by the Royal Brompton Hospital.

## Media Mania

**"Documentary: 'the creative treatment of actuality'"**

*(John Grierson - 1929)*



Having been given the opportunity to work as a Research Associate on the ITV documentary series *'Water World'*, I became smitten by the documentary bug. The production of factual programming became fascinating to me. I began studying the production process and 'having a go' at making my own short documentaries using very basic and affordable 'domestic' equipment. I began by using a Sony Digital-8 camcorder.

But I was hungry for more and eventually enrolled on a course at Uxbridge College in West London to study HNC in Media (Moving Image - Factual). I had two very fine tutors; John Symonds who spent most of his working life in the BBC, and Rob Miller, then Picture Editor for the BBC series 'On the Record' and 'The Politics Show'.

I completed the course in June 2003, having been awarded a distinction.

# Flopumentary Filmmaker

**"Studious to please, yet not ashamed to fail."**

*(Samuel Johnson - 1749)*



Following my success at college, I was encouraged to begin making documentaries for money; to start my own commercial company. I was encouraged when I procured my first commission, not from a local client, but from a company in Australia (*pictured right*).

Although lasting only 90 seconds, this short video took two weeks in pre-production, a day to record, and a week to edit. But it was worth it.

However, it gave me false hope and I foolishly expected work to come flooding in, and the two commissions I subsequently got took a heavy toll on both my physical and psychological well-being. If you have ambitions in filmmaking, and strive for excellence, don't let anyone let you think it's a soft option. It isn't. It's extremely hard work, especially trying to get commissions and during pre-production. It was this that led to yet another downturn in my health.

## The future...

**"I have seen the future; and it works."**

*(Lincoln Steffens)*



I said near the top of the page, that it had been a boyhood ambition to work in television. That remains the case. But it won't be on a practical level. At the time of writing, my aim and ambition is to write a six-part television drama series called '**Digital Darkness**', and I'm currently working on the first episode entitled '**Ondine's Curse**'. I have also returned to writing for magazines, including Gay lifestyle magazines such as 'Gay Times' (UK) and 'Out Traveler' (US).

Writing is a solitary activity, but for me is not stressful, so along with some therapeutic employment (Media Training), that's what I now do.

In June 2004, Simon and I celebrated 21 years together by spending a week aboard an Exclusively Gay Hotel Narrow Boat and were filmed by ITV Carlton as part of their series 'Water World' which was subsequently screened in January 2005.

The law in the UK regarding 'same sex partnerships' was implemented on December 5th 2005. Consequently, so that we can enjoy the same rights as other couples, Simon and I 'tied the knot' at Slough Registry Office on Saturday 11th March 2006.

## Happiness

**"The happiness of a man in this life does not consist in the absence but in the mastery of his passions."**

*(Alfred Lord Tennyson)*



In the spring of 2005, I was approached by Optomen Television who had been commissioned by the BBC to make a four-part documentary series about the *science of happiness*, to be called '**Making Slough Happy**' and to be screened on BBC2 in the Autumn of 2005.

On Thursday 19th May 2005, I recorded the first of my 'video diary' pieces for the series (*pictured right*), and at the time of writing am actively taking part in the project. Check out the BBC website [here](#) for details of transmission dates.

I revealed much more of myself than I'd originally intended to, including my bouts of depression and those things in life that make me personally 'happy'.

I spoke about how my health and happiness are intertwined. And furthermore, I challenged the perception that Slough may (by implication in the title) be seen as an 'unhappy town'.

And so were filmed over the summer and the results were screened on BBC2 over four consecutive Tuesday nights in November 2005.

But what viewers saw was only a 'snapshot' of what we, the participants, actually experienced and engaged in. Over 400 hours of recording edited down into four one hour programmes, not forgetting all the activities that we took part in that weren't recorded.

## One Dog and her Man

**"Happiness is a warm puppy"**

*(Charles Shults)*





November through to May saw many hospital admissions with acute chest pain. Fortunately, the cause is not dangerous, but a reaction to one or both heart bypass operations. A change of medication has improved me no end, as has the acquisition of Poppy, and 8 year old terrier, also with a heart condition.

## **And of death**

**"Though lovers be lost love shall not And death shall have no dominion."**

*(Dylan Thomas)*

Not in the least bit morbid. Suffice to say that I'm not afraid of death. I have achieved and enjoyed far more in my life than many. Partly through hard work, partly through luck, but mainly with the support, friendship and love of so many people who have been close to me.