

# Chapter One

**"I'm down here Dad!"**

FIRST DRAFT

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I was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> of November 1955 in St. David's Hospital, Bangor, North Wales. I was adopted when I was ten days old by a lovely young couple, Fred and Dorothy Hill. My Mum later recalled when they came to see me that I was pale and wrinkly and my ever-pessimistic Dad's first reaction was to say; "Has the doctor seen him yet?"!

My Mum and Dad, who were English speaking from Staffordshire lived in and farmed a small 16-acre small holding in Bont (shortened from Bontdolgadfan), a small village in Montgomeryshire, off an old drover's road from Machynlleth to Welshpool.

My Mum later recalled that after hanging nappies on the washing line, she met with a neighbour, Mrs Price. She was expecting her own child and had deduced that my Mum was 'taking in washing' and was surprised to discover that Mum now had a son!

Our house was called Penybont, translated as 'Bridgend'. Our farm was divided into two, separated by the road and the river (Afon Twymyn). On one side were the farmhouse and some of the farm buildings, the other, the cowshed, the dairy, more farm buildings and 16 acres of land which was spread around the village.

For as long as I can remember, my Mum and Dad always told me I was adopted, avoiding my having a surprise when I was older.

The process of adoption was a long one, once they took me home, they had to wait a further six months and attend a court process, in the presence of my birth mother to ensure she was content to finally hand over me for a complete legal adoption.

I can't remember much about my early years. Both Dad and Mum 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 remember going on the milk round with Dad, around Bont and the nearby villages of Llan and Pennant, proudly sitting in the front of his rusting Morris Minor van. He gave up working for the Forestry Commission before I can remember.

On 'payday', many of the customers would leave their 'milk money' in the wide necked washed-up milk bottles, but in the winter, when the bottles were really cold, the coins would get stuck in the bottles, the change having being dropped in the bottles when they were hot from washing. The bottle necks would expand and contract due to the changes in temperature. Dad would have to leave the change in the bottles until he could re-heat the bottles with hot water back in the dairy.

Once established, many of Dad's customers would invite us for supper. One such customer was a well-educated lady called Miss Hanmer, an English lady who lived in a large house and invited us to supper. On one occasion, thinking I was bored, she gave me a book to read, a Thelwell cartoon book, 'A leg at each corner' which amused me greatly. This must have been so evident that Miss Hanmer gave it me to keep. I gratefully accepted, but not to the amusement of my Mum and Dad who believed my acceptance to be rude.

We used to go to other customers for supper, many of them surprised to learn, that their milkman, my dad, only took one single drop of milk in his tea. He didn't like it with no milk or some milk. It had to be that single solitary drop! From the man who sold milk around the area.

For his milk round and travelling to market I can remember that Dad decided to change his van. He was to buy a replacement from a man in the nearby village of Llanbrynmair. He took me with him one evening. We stopped opposite the Wynnstay Arms and Dad met a man who looked over the van. I didn't understand what was happening, but after my dad and the man had concluded their business, the man gave me a coin, a half a crown 2s 6d (12½ pence today) which I put in the glove compartment. Dad and I then left the van and walked a few hundred yards up the road where Dad met another man and looked over a different van. Eventually Dad told me to get into the passenger seat. I still had no idea what was happening. As we drove away, I asked Dad why we were in a different van and he explained that he had bought this van to replace the old one. This really upset me as I had left the half-crown in the old van. I remember crying myself to sleep that night and was disappointed for a very long time afterwards.

The van and 'Fergie' tractor were overhauled and serviced by local mechanic, Bill Owen. He would come in his oily overalls to maintain them. The 'Fergie', Ferguson tractor was the workhorse of the farm. It had a three-point linkage and power take-off, so it could connect to, and power, a range of agricultural machinery. When he'd finished his dirty oily task, he would come into the house. "Would you like a cup of tea?" asked mum. "I'll have it in my hand." he replied. "Wouldn't you prefer it in a cup?" my mum joked. But the joke was lost on Mr Owen. Apparently a 'cup of tea' meant to him, coming to the table for a full tea, but he really only wanted a cup of tea!

Mum once told me about a professional photographer who went around the village, selling the opportunity for parents to get a professional photograph of their child(ren). Both mum and dad liked the idea of obtaining a photograph of me. We had an old and battered Chaise Longue in the living room. I was perched on it while the photographer took my picture. They were black & white but coloured by hand. A few weeks later, the photographer returned with a framed photograph of me. Mum wasn't too pleased with the outcome. My hair was coloured light brown, when in reality it was auburn. Both mum and dad said that they would not pay for the photograph until the photographer delivered a faithfully coloured image of me.

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 and went to school with. I was 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?*'.

However, I became almost fluent in Welsh, reading, listening and speaking. I've lost most of it now, but retain some words plus the ability to pronounce difficult words such as 'Pontcysyllte' and 'LlanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllLlantysiliogogoch'!

As a small child I had a number of imaginary pets, including a snake! I also had an imaginary friend who lived up on the mountain. When visiting, Mum would have to lay an extra place at the table for my imaginary friend! Later on, I stopped mentioning 'my friend', as I called him. Mum asked me where he was. "He died" I said.

My mum recalled that once, after tea, I sat on dad's lap while he sang 'Don't jump off the roof dad' to me. When he'd finished apparently all I said was "Oh dear dad"!

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. I would also sing at home, in bed to attract attention and on the yard gatepost to attract tips – the latter worked but the former didn't.

There was a small river that ran through the centre of the village called 'Afon Twymyn'.

A 18<sup>th</sup> century stone bridge carried the road from one side to the other. It was a lifeless and inert river with no fish, save the odd dead fish. This was due to contamination caused by old abandoned lead workings at 'Dylife', a way upstream. But the river was a great place to play, as I frequently did. Mum once caught me playing in the river, covered in paint. She saw that I had poured brightly coloured paint into the river and paint had washed up onto the pebbles leaving lovely layers of colour on the pebbles. Mum was concerned who the owner of the cans of paint was, and was not in the least happy when she realised that I had taken them from our own outhouse.

On another occasion, my dad couldn't find his brand-new spade, but eventually found it lying a few inches underwater in the river. I was the only culprit, and I got spanked for it. I cried and thought it was terribly unfair, particularly as it was my birthday!

In the mid-sixties, when I was about 9 or 10, the village, the river and other parts of Bont became a large construction site as the village was 'piped up' for mains sewerage. Prior to this, our only toilet was in a privy in the garden. Part of our yard and farm were given over to temporary site works. Alongside the other side of the river from our yard a big 'pit' was excavated for the construction of a large holding tank and pumping station. Every other day or so, the solid slate would be blasted into manageable rocks which could be carried away. These 'rocks' were dug by a large

JCB type excavator and deposited into dumper trucks that stood in the river. The dumper trucks would then carry the spoil, across the river, through our yard, over the bridge and down the lane to the other part of our farm. The slate would then be dumped onto the riverside of the farmyard thereby increasing its size.

The dumper truck drivers would often let me ride on the mudguard of the truck as they drove backwards and forwards between the tank and the farmyard. In hindsight, this was a really dangerous thing to do, especially as on one occasion, a truck (minus me), hurtled down the embankment into the river, trapping the driver under it. Many workmen rushed to his aid and together lifted the ¼ ton truck off him. I saw part of this from the bridge and alternated from watching the drama unfold and running back to the house. The workmen loaded the man onto a piece of used shuttering and carried him up to the road. A long while later, an ambulance arrived and transported him to a hospital. After this I was barred from riding on the dumper trucks.

The workmen had a 'rest room' housed in my dad's fertilizer shed, adjacent to the farmhouse, where they would take their tea breaks. The men nicknamed me 'red' because of my bright 'ginger' hair. These workmen had an incredible thirst for bottles of pop. They would ask me to go to the post office shop with the empties and buy full bottles. In return they would let me keep the change and the deposit redeemed on the empties. One of the workmen, whom we children nicknamed 'workie' used to have a habit of putting his hand up my shorts to touch my genitals. If that were to happen these days, it would be called 'sexual harassment'. The other workmen seemed to turn a blind eye to his behaviour. It frightened me, but I never told anyone, thinking it was my fault and that I would get into trouble.

Sometimes I would share the money I'd made from doing the 'pop run' with the other children, by buying them sweets etc. One occasion stands out in my memory. I asked Mrs. Pitcher, the shopkeeper, for something "for the kids". "For the kids?!" she queried. "Are their parents' goats then?"

Another memory that stands out was 'Auntie Lucy'. She wasn't really my auntie, but used to 'baby-sit' me during harvest time. Mum had known Auntie Lucy since she was a young girl back in Staffordshire. Auntie Lucy came to stay every year and I looked forward to her arrival very much. Dad and I would drive the three or so miles to Llanbrynmair station to meet the train. This was exciting stuff.

I can vividly recall expecting the arrival of the steam train and Auntie Lucy. There was a lovely aroma of steam trains in the station. Then there was a sound of a steam whistle in the distance, raising the expectation and finally the train appeared. It pulled into the station and oh, that steam smell! I would run up and down the platform, looking for Auntie Lucy, until I finally I found her. Dad would help her with her luggage while I went up to the engine end to experience the train moving off.

Auntie Lucy was a kindly old lady with silvery hair. She had an unusual habit of ending her sentences with the phrase "with it". While she was with us, Mum could join in the haymaking and harvesting and often doing the milking. Throughout this time, Dad still had to deliver milk to his (loyal) customers. When all the harvesting was done it was time for Auntie Lucy to go home which meant another exciting trip to Llanbrynmair station.

In the summertime, during the school holidays, I would go on holiday and stay with my Auntie Joyce (Mum's sister) and Uncle Bill. They had a farm near Swynnerton in Staffordshire. Things were different and thrilling there. They had bigger black and

white cows, Friesians which I used to go and bring in for milking with Uncle Bill. Other things were different to what I was used to. Their soil was a 'red' sandy soil and they had big electricity pylons in their fields. Their house and garden had a distinct aroma of tomatoes which were grown in two greenhouses and stored in their outer kitchen. I was always disappointed when the holiday was over and it was time to come home.

But I soon got over it and was glad to be home. There were many things that excited me there. We had about eight cows, some Guernsey and some Jersey. In the main, cows are wary of humans, but not all. We had a 'friendly' cow called Hathaway. She would lay contentedly chewing her cud and allow me to lay against her whilst gently stroking her. She would occasionally lick an exposed area of skin, and although grateful for her affection, the 'rasping' of her tongue would make me pull back. I naturally liked to sing to her, though I never discovered whether she preferred my singing in English or Welsh!

Hair cutting happened in the home. The barber came to us, a Mr Griffiths. I remember him in slightly scruffy clothes and always with a half-smoked cigarette in his mouth. He wore hob-nailed boots with the tops of old wellingtons slid over them. I would sit on a dining chair with a piece of cloth round my neck as Mr Griffiths cut away with an ageing pair of hand clippers that now and then pulled at my hair. He had an irritating practise of rubbing his privates against my shoulder. Again, I never told anyone in case they saw it as my exaggeration and figment of my imagination. Mum always concluded his visit with a cup of tea and a chat before he went on his way.

From my arrival as a babe in arms in 1955 until approximately the early sixties, Bont lacked three important services; mains water, electricity and telephone. Water for the house came from roadside wells and for the farm the river. At some point, around



1960, mains water was installed. Light was derived from hurricane lamps in the farm and paraffin lamps in the house. I can't remember the installation of water and have vague memories of the arrival of electricity.

The earliest recollection I have of this is the installation of mains cabling slung between poles on the roadside. One of the poles was installed alongside our lane, in the steep riverbank. I was intrigued and somewhat frightened by the process. The pole seemed enormous to my small eyes. But it really was quite large. Around 12 inches in diameter at the base and perhaps 15-20 feet tall out of the ground. This monster of a pole was placed in the ground in a hole first bored by hand to a depth of about 5-6 feet. Once in place two tensioning wires took the strain of the cables of which there were many. Five cables were hung from the previous pole which were terminated and carried on to the next pole the other side of the river. Two cables ran from the pole to each of the two houses opposite and two to our house.

At some point, electricians came in to wire out the house. From what I can remember, they installed a meter and fuse box above the front door. They wired each room with a single light and light switch (two in the hall and on the landing). No cooker point was fitted due to the limited amount of power available and Mum cooking on the stove in the sitting room. One day, we had been away somewhere, and when we got back, I rushed to see the electricians, and at the top of the stairs, they had removed the floorboards. Rather than step over the gap, I stepped in it with only the ceiling lath and plaster to take my weight. But it did.

Electricity was also installed in the farm buildings, meaning a vacuum pump and milking apparatus could be used instead of the cows having to be milked by hand.

The coming of electricity to the house marked the end for oil lamps, apart from one in my bedroom, positioned to give a warm glow, to help me sleep and banish any hobgoblins. This lamp gave Dad many worries. After I'd gone to bed and all was quiet, I would creep out of bed and turn up the wick until the flame smoked. To prevent me doing this alarming habit, dad fitted a small corner shelf that he supposed I wouldn't be able to reach. Nevertheless, I still managed it, so my dad took the lamp away, leaving the door ajar instead and the landing light on.

The telephone service was very limited. At first, the only house that was given a phoneline was the post office, making the post mistress and her husband the only people to be able to receive incoming calls. A telephone kiosk was installed outside the post office, enabling residents of the village to make outgoing calls. Only calls of an urgent or emergency nature for villagers could and would be taken by the post office. Such was the case

We had no television even after the coming of the electricity. Once enough prospective customers had signed up, an entrepreneurial aerial and television engineer installed a form of 'cable television'. Television reception at most homes in the village was too bad with home aerials. The village nestled in the shadow of mountains, the larger of which was 'Newyddfynddog'. The engineer installed an aerial on the summit, and ran a domestic 'coaxial' aerial cable down the mountain, simply laying it on the heather with a 'switch' or 'isolator' half way down at a remote farmhouse. This switch was fitted to isolate all the connected televisions should lightning strike the aerial. The farmer was given free television in return for monitoring the weather and isolating the village televisions should lightning seem imminent.

From that farm, the cable was slung from tree to tree and in the village split to feed the various homes in the village. Thus, it was that villagers could rent a television and an aerial feed from the entrepreneurial engineer.

The owners of the shop opposite, Mr & Mrs Morgan, with whom my Mum and Dad became friendly as they too were English, were one of the first to subscribe to have a television. Some evenings, Dad used to go over to watch football matches and I, and my friends, would watch through the window.

The only trouble was that the farmer who 'controlled' the isolator habitually went to the pub (The Wynnstay Arms) on a Saturday night and switched it to off 'just in case', leaving the whole village without television on the most popular night of the week.

Sometime later, we got our own black and white television. I remember some of the programmes I used to watch: 'Watch with Mother', 'Bill and Ben - the flowerpot men', 'Z-cars', 'Dixon of Dock Green', 'Doctor Who', 'Crackerjack' and the first DIY programme Barry Bucknall. On a Saturday evening, while he was milking, I had to write down the football results so that dad could check his coupons later.

October 1964 saw a General Election. I collected all the candidate's election literature and stuck them to the landing window, something else that infuriated dad, who tore them down. One day, whilst singing on the yard gatepost a car covered in electioneering posters pulled up near the bridge. It had a couple of loudspeakers on the roof. The passenger got out and started speaking through the loudspeaker. Realising he was probably important I went indoors to get my autograph book. I went back out and, when he had finished speaking, approached him and asked him for his autograph. He was Emlyn Hooson MP; a Welsh Liberal already having been in parliament for two years. I was impressed.

Most Sunday mornings, Mum and I would go to church. There was no church in Bont so we had to go to St. Mary's Church in Llan, some  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile away via an uphill footpath. (This was the church where I had been christened a few years earlier). Because of Mum's workload we always 'cut it fine'. We would hear a single bell tolling meaning that the start of the service was imminent. Mum would try and get me to run, but I invariably complained of a stitch. Mum reacted with the (old wives' tale!) directive to alternate running a few steps with walking a few steps. I don't remember ever being late.

A weekly (for me) exciting event would happen after church. On the Saturday evening previous, Dad would spend an hour or two in The Wynnstay Arms in nearby Llanbrynmair. He would meet up for a game of darts with my Uncle Henry (who lived nearby in a village called Cemmaes). He brought home a packet of salt 'n' shake crisps as a treat for me on Sunday morning after church. I remember clearly rummaging in the bags for the blue wrap of salt. Sometimes there were more than one, sometimes none. The blue packets or wrap were different to as they are today. A piece of blue waxed paper had a pile of salt, (sometimes damp) in it. The corners were brought together and wrapped around the pile of salt. The crisps were great and a fantastic treat for a Sunday morning after the 'chore' of church.

Each year, a 'church sale of work' was held at the nearby schoolroom. Dad used to create a game and Mum would bake several things. The attraction I remember most clearly was the 'bran tub' from which I usually got a gift. The event was very popular and I remember it as being quite crowded. In November 1966 a special 'sale of work' was held to raise money for survivors of the Aberfan disaster the previous month.

Though no church, Bont had a Methodist chapel. Predominantly Welsh, I attended many singing festivals here and Sunday School regularly. I remember being in the main hall for the opening service at Sunday School and then into a small room for bible study and singing practice.

Each year, a singing and recitation competition, a sort of 'Eisteddfod' was held at Cwmllinau (Flax Valley), some six or so miles from home. Among all the children from the region quite a few Bont children went and one of the parents gave me a lift. I remember Mum preparing egg sandwiches (my favourites) but hating them until I'd finished competing, by which time I'd love them. There were several singing categories, solo and duet amongst them. I recall climbing up the steps backstage once it was my turn. I also remember the terrifying walk across the stage to tell the pianist what key I was singing in. Then to the front of the stage, in the centre, with my toes in alignment with the edge of the stage. I wonder how I never fell off. Then I would sing (always in Welsh) and frequently psalms, hymns or Welsh folk songs. When we had finished our turns, we could return to our seats to await the results. When they came, they seemed to last forever, with the judge giving a summary of how each of us had done, but not so much as to give the game away as who the prizes were for. There were three prizes, placings and ribbons for each category. They were given in reverse order, the worst time for my stomach. As they announced third and second (in themselves places I would have been happy with) I assumed that first had been awarded to someone else, I resigned myself to winning nothing. But sometimes, imagine my surprise as I was awarded first prize. Over the years, I built up quite a collection of red, blue and yellow ribbons. They were kept in a 'special drawer' along with newspaper cuttings of the winners. And when the competing was all over, there was one final prize: the egg sandwiches!

In 1965, the Welsh National Eisteddfod came to Dolerw Park in Newtown (Drenewydd) some 18 miles from Bont and although I hadn't qualified to compete, I still went and enjoyed the occasion. I also remember the stone circle erected especially for the druidic Gorsedd ceremonies and the ceremony of crowning the Bard. The stones can be found throughout Wales to signify that the National Eisteddfod has visited the town. It's still there.

Every now and again we had bizarre visitors. Each year, at around the same time of year, a tramp would call on us and offer his services heling on the farm in exchange for food and/or money. A stranger visitor to the front door was a Sheikh selling various items out of a suitcase. I think mum bought a couple of items. A welcome annual visitor was Mr. Tipper who sold various items for the home and farm. He sold long bars of red soap for washing and bathing and white soap for laundry. He also sold mineral blocks to supplement the cattle's diet.

The farm required a lot of running. The farm buildings and farmyard were across the road and river reached by a steep lane and a ford through a stream. There was a cowshed with a capacity for 6 or 8 cows at a time. I would go with dad to fetch the cows in at milking time. Some were eager to come in, others reluctant. However, they all seemed to enjoy their rations of B.O.C.M. or Bibby's cattle cake.

Before the coming of electricity, dad would milk the cows by hand and carry the stainless-steel milk buckets to the adjoining dairy. After the arrival of electricity, the cows were milked by one of two alfa laval milking machines powered by a vacuum line piped from a pump next door. But the milk still had to be carried by hand into the dairy. Once in the dairy, the milk was cooled in a churn before some of it being decanted into

glass milk bottles for the milk round. The other churns were taken to the milk stand to be collected by the milk lorry every morning.

Work had to be done out in the fields. Sometimes cultivating the ground ready for planting, at other times mowing the grass for hay or silage. For the latter there was quite a big 'clamp' hewn into the bank opposite the cowshed. Dad would fill this with freshly mown grass and cover it with waterproof sheets to inhibit too much oxygen getting in thereby spoiling the silage. Before the sheet went on, I (and some of my friends I think) would play on this grass before it was sealed up, and oh, what a beautiful aroma of freshly mown grass in such a concentration.

While working the fields, dad would often stay out without taking a break and coming home for lunch. Instead, mum and I would take some sandwiches, a flask of tea and maybe a bottle of squash. When I was older, I would take on this job on my own, something I enjoyed very much. I remember well that whatever the weather, however hot, dad would always wear his flat cap and waistcoat, the latter to keep his fags and matches in.

A couple of years before we left Bont, dad gave over some of his field above the cowshed to a form of allotments for local people to grow produce in. He would plough and prepare the soil for planting, and people would come and take a few rows each in which to plant their vegetables and the like. It seemed very popular.

Once a week, we would go shopping to Newtown some 18 miles away. I was frightened of this, as it was to me, big town. I used to hang on to mum's coat as we went around the various shops, three of which particularly stick in my mind. One was 'Boots the Chemist' with its distinctive aroma of perfume and the like. Secondly came 'Woolworths' with its bright shiny wooden floors and especially big toy department.

Thirdly was the catalogue 'end of range' retailer 'Pryce Jones', a big building near the station.

Back home, there were three main rooms which we used. The first was the kitchen with a large Butler sink under the window where, as a young 'tot' I would take my bath. Not an easy process. Buckets of water would be fetched from the well in front of the house and heated on the stove in the living room, three steps above the kitchen. Once heated, the water would be carried down to the sink in the kitchen. I would then be lifted into the sink and then bathed. Once I was too big to be lifted or fitting in the sink, we used a galvanised tin bath on the floor of the living room.

Occasionally, on a Monday, we would go to Welshpool some 26 miles from home for the weekly livestock market, one of the largest markets in Western Europe. Dad would go and view the cattle stock and market, and on occasion, buy a cow or heifer. Mum and I would go into the centre of town to visit the stores and market stalls.

Mum was an excellent cook and created much excellent food in this small, cramped kitchen. It must have been quite a chore to convey the various foodstuffs between the kitchen and living room up and down three steep stone steps. She made loads of pickles and preserves plus a wide range of other things. Down in the cellar was a very peculiar sight. A large bowl filled with eggs underwater (or so it seemed). The water was something called 'water glass'. It was claimed that of all the old-time methods of preserving fresh eggs the 'water glass' method gave the best and most dependable result. Fresh, unwashed eggs kept in a solution of water glass would remain good and useable for 4 to 6 months when properly collected and stored. Before refrigeration became commonly available keeping fresh eggs in a crock of water glass was the preferred method of egg preservation.



The living room fireplace had a stove built into it. It would heat the room and was the stove on which all the cooking was done. It featured a large hotplate, an oven and warming cabinet. Clothes were dried over it. It was fuelled by coal or more often logs that would be harvested from the hedgerows around the farm.

There was a built-in cupboard next to the stove. My toys were kept in the lower cabinet and here I could and did hide. When I was older, my grandad reminded me of this. My grandad, and his second wife May would come to stay with us once a year. Grandad would love helping out on the farm and my Auntie May enjoyed helping Mum in the kitchen. Grandad used to smoke a pipe and I loved the aroma of his tobacco. Auntie May smoked petite Benson & Hedges Gold cigarettes and carried a little ornate travelling ashtray.

The third room was the sitting room used only on Sundays and High days. Each Sunday Mum would light a fire before dinnertime, after which Dad would come in for a sleep in one of his favourite chairs. The rule was strict. Under no event was he to be disturbed.

At the top of the house was an attic, rarely used, but when we cleared it out before we left, we found hundreds of back-copies of farmers weekly. I estimate over 600 copies that dad kept 'just in case'.

When I was around five, I began school at Bont School a short way up the road from Penybont. The teachers were Mrs. Thomas and Miss Roberts, both of whom lived in the village. The school had three rooms, two being divided by a folding partition. One side were infants, the other for older children taught by Mrs Thomas. We were taught in Welsh and I clearly remember learning the times tables. We were taught to sing the two times table: (0x2) dim dau; dim (=0) – (1x2) un dau; dau (=2); (2x2) dau dau;

pedwar (=4) - (3x2) tri dau; chwech (=6) – (4x2) pedwar dau; wyth (8); (5x2) pump day; deg (=10), and so forth. I also had to learn the Welsh alphabet: a, b, c, ch, d, dd, e, f, ff, g, ng, h, i, j, l, ll, m, n, o, p, ph, r, rh, s, t, th, u, w, y.

I still remember some common names that I learnt: yard = iard; desk = desk; door = drws; snow = eira; class = dosbarth; teacher = athrawes; lesson = gwern; raining = bwrw glaw; good morning = bore da; accident = damwain; mother = mam; father = tad; friend = ffrind; boy = bachgen; girl = merch.

Once a week, before and after the summer holiday, we had a treat – ice cream! The van would park-up near the bridge and a parent would place an order for his/her child. The ice cream man, in his van, would park-up alongside the school gate and he would serve the children with their appropriate indulgence!

The toilets at school were out in the yard, a brick-built building with no roof except over the cubicles. 'Toilet paper' was pages from a shopping catalogue and I remember looking through the catalogue at toys, and even at those tender years, men in underwear!

I remember the school Christmas nativity play. A friendly man called Hedd Bleddyn-Williams would help erect a stage with curtains. We would rehearse for what seemed like weeks. One year, Hedd constructed a wire framed goose costume for me. However, it was extremely painful, forcing me into a stooped posture. No matter how much they encouraged me to use it, I just couldn't bear it, so eventually it was abandoned and replaced with a costume made out of cushions. Before the school broke up for Christmas, we children performed to the parents, my own included, even though they didn't understand the language

Linda Anne Jones (nee Hughes) recalls on particular Christmas: 'I remember you and I doing a duet at Bont School Christmas concert.' she recalls and added 'We would sing our own version of 'There's a hole in my bucket', it was, "There's a hole in your bucket, dear Linda, dear Linda," to which I would sing "Well mend it, dear Richard, dear Richard." I cannot remember whether we had a costume to perform it but I do remember having some props, a bucket, an axe, sharpening stone and some straw! It's funny just thinking back on it. All the concert would be in Welsh but obviously that item was specially to cater for your family!'

In February 1963, when I was about 8, snow engulfed the UK. Temperatures dropped to -21 and around 95,000 of roads in Britain were snowbound. Such was the case in Bont, the steep road past the school being covered in snow even though the snowplough had been through. At the end of school for the day, the children who had to travel were waiting for their minibus which came carefully down the slope. I had to cross the road to walk the 200 yards or so home and I did so just as the minibus, driven by Hedd, tried to come to a stop. Slipping in the snow, I was hit and got pushed along the snow-covered road under a stationary skidding and sliding wheel. Terrified, I got up, unharmed, and ran home to Penybont. Somewhere between the accident and arriving home, I wet myself. Back home, Mum asked me what was wrong. Crying, I told her about the wetting myself but omitted to mention the incident. Soon after, Hedd came to ask if I was alright, which I was, apart from being badly shaken. That evening the constable from Llanbrynmair came to see my Mum, Dad and me. After giving my account of the episode I was sent to bed. The following morning, back in school, I was given a telling off by teacher for being so thoughtless and reckless.

The regular trips to the dentist were terrible. We had to travel in a minibus driven by Hedd to the dentist in Machynlleth around 10 miles away. I and the other children had

to remain in a waiting room until our turn came. Sometimes, if you were last, or near it, the anxious wait was agonising. Then, when my turn came, I would go nervously into the treatment room, a cold clinical room with the ghastly reclining chair under a intense light. I never saw the dentist's face. All I can remember is that he spoke in Welsh and called me pal. Finally, treatment over, the welcome return journey to Bont school.

One year, in the run-up to Easter, we had a quite unusual challenge. Unusual in so much that each child had a different challenge. The challenges usually started at the beginning of Lent. Mine was to eat all my greens for the duration of Lent. This was a major challenge because I loathed cabbage, cauliflower, sprouts et al, and still do! But there was a prize, and I was determined to win it. Every child could get a prize if they completed their challenge. I completed mine, and won an Easter chick egg cup, and how proud was I of it. When I got it home, I insisted on boiled eggs for tea, and pleaded for no more cabbage etc!

An unusual distraction from lessons was a bike race coming through the village. I think it was the 'Milk Race' Teacher let us go out and watch the riders race through. I wonder if they were aware of the formidable mountain that was facing them after the downhill run into Bont. But it was a welcome distraction.

It was 1962. Another 'race' was quite scary for us all. Mum, Dad and I went to a family party for my cousin Alan's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday in Staffordshire. Coming home we had Stephen, another cousin, about my age and from Penkridge, with us. He was coming to stay for a few days.

Dad chose to take the quicker route from Talerddig down a steep single-track road to Bont. After no more than a few hundred yards we saw these incredibly strong

headlights approaching us, and the driver wasn't slowing down much as he approached. He literally roared past us, engine roaring, with his two nearside wheels on the grass verge. "Bloody idiot" said dad, which was strong for him. Dad rarely swore, and certainly not in front of mum, Stephen or me. Yet, lo and behold, about a minute later, another car, lights blazing, careered towards us, barely slowing and straight past us in the same manner as the earlier car. It quickly dawned on Dad that we were right in the path of a car rally. After running the gauntlet of 2 – 3 rally cars, we finally made it back to Penybont. Stephen and I were sent to bed. Instead, we opened the landing window and cheered every car that came past. It wasn't long before dad realised what we were up to, chastised us, and sent us to bed. It was 1am.

In 1963, I had a rare treat. Mr & Mrs Morgan from the shop opposite and their children took me to the cinema in Newtown, the first time I'd ever been to a cinema, to see Walt Disney's 'The Incredible Journey' about a Siamese cat, an old Bull Terrier and a Labrador Retriever who travel 250 miles through the Canadian wilderness to find their family. I cried.

Another time, I went with a group of schoolchildren to Powis Castle; a medieval castle near Welshpool. In the yard, where we alighted was a large double-doored stable. Inside were mannequins of horses, a carriage and footmen. I was terrified and hid behind one of the stable doors. Yet another scenario that gave me nightmares.

I also got frightened when Mr & Mrs Morgan, from the shop opposite, invited us into their garden on November 5<sup>th</sup>. I was okay with the sparklers, until the Catherine Wheel, Roman Candle and Fountain began I was petrified and pleaded with Mum and Dad to take me home.

Another frightening experience was at the town of Borth, a seaside town not too far from Aberystwyth on Cardigan Bay. When we arrived and parked up in our rusty yet trusty van, I couldn't really see anything save a concrete wall and the sky above. It wasn't until we got out and up the steps of the wall that I saw it; the sea! I didn't really get bothered at first, but dad took his shoes off, rolled his trousers up and told me to do the same that I feared to worst. Dad took me by the hand and led me to the seashore. The waves and white horses were vast to my minor eyes and they came running in almost to my feet. I cried and pulled away, but dad held on and tried to get me to paddle in it. No way. I screamed and shouted and pulled like crazy until dad finally gave in. I stayed afraid of the sea until my late teens. I still wouldn't like to go out of my depth, even though I learnt to swim in the early 90s.

Christmas was a wonderful time of year. On the evening of Christmas Eve dad would bring in a 4ft high real Christmas Tree from somewhere. Mum had brought the tree and room decorations from the attic. And before I went to bed they decorated the room with colourful paper garlands, some and the tree with glass baubles, tinsel and a fairy. Some of the decorations in the room were coloured paper chains made by me at school.

I hardly slept that night. Father Christmas would be arriving to fill my stocking hanging by the fire in the living room. I would wake up ridiculously early and go downstairs to see if he'd been. He always had! I took the stocking and its' contents up to bed where I would excitingly open them. Somehow, one or two of the presents would be the toys I already owned.

As I mentioned earlier, Mum and Dad didn't have much money so expensive Christmas presents were out of the question. I once got a children's carpentry set,

which was fabulous, but the best present I got came in a shoe box marked 'D.I.Y. Kit' and inside it was packed full of bits and pieces including sticky tape, stapler, battery, wire and bulb holder etc. I could stretch my imagination in all directions with this. One such project I constructed was a theatre made out of a box, cloth for curtains, backdrops made out of coloured and crayoned paper. But the best part of it was the working light made out of wire, a battery, bulb holder and bulb. I turned my toys into puppets who would entertain my Mum and Dad, and no matter how tired they were, they gave their time to watch my little shows.

In the morning, all three of us would don our Sunday best and made our way, in the van, to Llan for the Christmas communion at St. Mary's Church. It was quite a small church as I remember and would be fairly full. We sat about half way down the church and during the service sang carols from the hymn book. During the service came the Holy Communion. Dad and mum would leave me sitting alone in the pews as they went up and knelt at the communion rail to receive the eucharist. They bowed their head to receive the communion. First, the priest would go up the row offering wafers, symbolising the body of Christ, and then with wine saying "The blood of Christ preserves thy body and soul unto everlasting life." When dad and mum returned to their pew next to me, they knelt in prayer for a while.

Later in the day, following a wonderful Christmas lunch cooked by mum, Dad would have a doze besides a good fire in the front room. Then it was time to watch the Queens Christmas address which was usually followed by Billy Smart's Circus, and later, a pantomime.

One of the unusual traditions in Wales was the money (clennig) to be collected on New Year's Day. This was a folklore alternative to going round the villages before

Christmas carol singing. We, the children of the village, would go from house to house around Bont and Llan, singing the 'clennig' song and a carol. In return, the householder would give us money and/or sweets. The recollections that I have are that it was always cold, icy and snowing. We would start up in Llan, by the church and work our way through the village before moving on to Bont, where we aimed to be finished by midday. Somewhere along the route, we would usually meet dad doing his milk round. We would sing to him as well for a little extra cash!

One year, Father Christmas bought me, and my friend Alwyn, the same present. A small guitar each. Together we formed a 'band' and once entertained the pupils with an out-of-tune strumming rendition of The Beatles "She loves You" except we changed the words to "The Beatles, No, No, No – with a row like that you know they should shut-up"!

I've always been good with my hands, building dams in small diversions of the river, constructing road works as I resurfaced the gravel path to the privy etc.

When I was young, I was troubled by bouts of sleepwalking. One night, my dad awoke to the sound of bumpety-bumpety-bumpety-bump... He looked into my bedroom to find it empty. He called out my name to which came the words from downstairs: "I'm down here Dad!"

We seemed to have plenty of visitors to Pen-y-bont. One, my cousin Eve, came to stay with her boyfriend. I was always frightened by her saying she was 'putting her eye in'. I imagined her putting a glass eye, which I certainly didn't want to see. When I got older, I realised she was talking about contact lenses. One night Eve and her boyfriend went out. I watched fascinated as she put on her make-up, especially her eyeliner.



Later, Eve told me that after they'd gone out, Mum caught me having applied 'eyeliner' with a ball point pen.

Another time, my Auntie Margaret came to stay with her sons David and Graham. We had great times together. We once went up the mountain, belonging to High Court Judge Wintringham Norton Stable. Judge Stable was very pleasant to Mum and Dad, admiring the Guernsey and Jersey cows. He was very generous in inviting Mum and Dad and their relatives to pick fruit on his land, which is what Auntie Margaret had planned. We drove up there in Auntie Margaret's old Austin van. The four of us piled out and were given our receptacles to pick bilberries. I ate more than I collected ending up with a blue face and fingers. I can also remember a walk that took us to a stone stable in which were two donkeys which were appreciative of our attention.

The day after the bilberry picking, we all went to Welshpool Annual Agricultural Show. I remember enjoying collecting leaflets which all the manufacturers and retailers had. However, this year took on an unhealthy turn. I had awful diarrhoea and hardly made it to the toilet block. Doubtless the result of eating all those bilberries! I don't think I've eaten a bilberry since.

I often played with one of my best friends, Eleanor Jones. She lived in a house a couple of hundred yards from ours which perched high over a stream which ran into the river. We often played together in our 'dual language' world. Eleanor had a play area alongside her house and once set-up a 'kitchen' where we made mud pies which was fun until our parents saw what a state, we' got ourselves and our clothes into.

Mum and Dad also made friends. One evening after milking came a knock on the door. Mr and Mrs Jones introduced themselves as farming a few miles away and had seen, and been impressed by our cattle. Mr Jones wanted to introduce Guernsey cattle into

his own herd. They came in and, after going to see the herd, spent the rest of the evening with us. I had to go to bed, but showed off by singing as loud as I could.

Mr Jones was a fluent Welsh speaker, but not Mrs Jones. However, they became good friends, going to each other for supper about once a month. They had five children, three boys and two girls.

I used to love our trips to them. Usually on a Sunday evening. I remember that Mrs. Jones used to 'perm' my Mum's hair and that there would be an acrid smell of the chemicals used. In the van, I used to sit on a stool in the back. One time, returning from the Jones' Dad braked suddenly and I fell headlong into the gap between the two front seats.

Once a month or so, dad and Mr. Jones would go to the big cattle market in Crewe, Cheshire. They had special auctions for Channel Island cattle. Sometimes dad would buy a cow or two that would arrive in a cattle lorry which had to unload by the bridge, being too big to go down to the farmyard. In the dead of night, as it usually was, dad had to drive a cow or two down to the cowshed.

On the opposite side of the river was a disused pigsty where us children would congregate for fun and some mischief. Dad discovered that we were pushing stones off the stone wall into the river and was not best pleased.

Bont school was facing closure. There were insufficient pupils to make it viable. One of the teachers had been ill for a long time and eventually alas sadly passed away and was never replaced.

Eventually the school closed and we were transferred to a bigger primary school at Llanbryn-mair. I hated it. It made no concession for my poor Welsh and taught everything, without exception, in Welsh. We were even made to speak Welsh in the

playground. I was bullied by some of the boys for not wanting to play football, preferring instead to spend playtime with the girls. Fortunately, though I didn't know it, I would soon move to a new school.

One day, we had a visitor, a smartly dressed man with a briefcase. They discussed various issues which I didn't understand. However, when Mum and Dad were out of the room, this man asked me how I was looking forward to moving to a new school. I took it that he was from a school, but discovered later that he was the land agent for a new farm we were moving to. Mum and Dad had deliberately held off telling me in case it didn't come off.

We went to visit the new farm about 14 miles away. Middlegwerneirin Farm near Llandinam. A 110-acre farm mixed dairy and arable. We met Mr and Mrs Andrews, the current tenants and their two sons Terry and Tony. I didn't know it, but I was to be in the same year in Llanidloes High School as Terry. Mr Andrews was a haulage contractor so Dad asked him to move all our farming equipment, cattle and household contents, to which he agreed.

We moved over the Easter weekend in 1967. I can remember travelling to and from between Bont and Llandinam in the lorry cab with Mr. Andrews, which was great fun.

Bont was left with a degree of sadness and I have many great memories of life there. There was a large block of slate set into the bridge wall where people and children had carved their initials. The only trace remaining of me in the village are my initials, RH.

I do have one memento from Bont. A Holy Bible inscribed 'Presented to Richard Hill by Bont Sunday School on his departure to Llandinam. Easter 1967.

