



Mum, Dad and me (above).



With my baby brother Keith

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THE HARDINGS

I was singing *Lazy Bones* sitting on the top step of our home in Shakespeare Street using one of the wheels of my little metal tricycle as the steering wheel of my imaginary car. From the top step Mum and I would wave to the old people who were in St James's Hospital, Beckett Street, housed in what had been the old workhouse and is now Thackray's Medical Museum. Dad came home from work, pushed past me on the steps, and smiled when he heard me singing 'the Lazy Song', the song I would ask for whenever he was playing the piano.

'You can bring him in now.' That was the voice of 'Aunt Maggie', our neighbour. The date was 27 June 1933. My father came into my bedroom, picked me up out of my bed and carried me into Mum and Dad's bedroom and pointed to my brother Keith, who was lying in a drawer taken from the sideboard that was acting as a makeshift crib. I was four years and two days old.

I was born on 25 June 1929. Dad was an engineer in the 1920s and early 1930s, not knowing if there was to be a day's work when he set off in a morning. He was then made unemployed, in the early 1930s. Later he managed to get a casual job on the railway, following in the footsteps of his father. My Grandad had brought his wife Ruth and two sons, Herbert and Noble, to Leeds from Northumberland at the turn of the century. My Dad and Uncle Noble also became railway workers.

My grandfather, Noble Harding, had married Ruth Allison Johnstone in the 1890s. They had three children. The first-born

died as a baby. Two sons followed: the older was my father, Herbert Johnstone Benjamin (Bert), and the younger, Noble. Bert married Emma King in 1926 and had two sons, Keith and me. Noble married late in life and did not have any family.

Before I move on to my maternal grandparents I have to relate the story told to me by my Dad's uncle, Ben Johnstone. The male members of the Johnstone family made annual summer trips to Canada to find work. Two would take up residence while the others went off in different directions. After a few months they would meet up at base, have a share-out and return home to the North East of England. Apparently they earned the title of the 'Battling Geordies'.

Then came the time when the family decided that young Ben was old enough to go with them. The story that he told to me was a fascinating one. When they landed in Canada two of them set up a base house and young Ben was one of those who went off to find work. The first chance of a job appeared when he came across some men laying pipes in the road. He asked for the foreman and asked him for a job. 'Can you fight?' was the reply. Like my Dad, he was five foot four in his stockinged feet and slightly built, but to keep with the tradition of the Battling Geordies, he said yes. Uncle Ben said it was more of a rough-and-tumble than a fight, and he got the job. He was able to stay at the base house until the job was finished, but the time came when he had to leave the area to find other work.

One of the jobs that he was able to get was in a lumber camp and this turned out to be very character building. Great Uncle Ben told me his exploits in Canada after we had been discussing the pros and cons of the politics of Nye Bevan and the left wing paper *Tribune*. 'You have never seen a trade union organiser like the ones on the lumber camps,' he told me. The hardest men on camp would be the union organisers, whom he described as tree trunks with arms and legs.

I had a great deal of respect for my Great Uncle Ben, and that respect grew when he told me that he had joined the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World). At the time when he was talking to me he was no longer anywhere near the IWW politically, but he

Family tots up nearly two centuries on rails

BY BENJAMIN FRANKLIN
 The Leeds Skyrack Express, 1 April 1994

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Working on the railways: Keith keeps up the tradition, as reported in the Leeds Skyrack Express, 1 April 1994

maintained some pride about his membership which he kept throughout the various jobs in Canada. But this was to be his last trip; the following year they were refused entry because they did not have jobs to go to.

On arriving home Ben got himself a job in a butcher's shop. One day while still a teenager he went to work with his best suit under his butcher's coat. At lunchtime he went to meet his girl friend Elizabeth (my great aunt Lizzie). They got married and sent a friend home to tell his and her parents. The marriage lasted well after their diamond wedding. I don't know when they came to live in Leeds but they lived in Horsforth from at least the middle of the 1930s and were affectionately known as the unofficial Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress of Horsforth.

My paternal grandparents, Grandad and Grandma Harding, kept a pub in Carlisle but when my Dad was still a young boy they left so that Grandad could take a job on the railway in Leeds. The only address that I can remember them living at was 27 East Park Mount, near East End Park, off Pontefract Lane, off York Road. When Grandad retired he was the first tenant of a railway bungalow, 10 Sussex Avenue, close to Horsforth Railway Station.

I was told that either my Grandad's or my Grandma's brother, after hearing about the 1903 earthquake in San Francisco, decided that being a plasterer, there ought to be a lot of work for him there – so off he went, never to be heard of again. I wonder what became of him?

Unfortunately I never met my maternal grandparents Mathew

King and Edith King (née-Turnpenny). They had three children: Ada, John and Emma. Ada King married William Dixon and had two children, Lillian (Lily) and Alan. John King married Jessie Gough. They had two children, Iris and Beryl. Emma King married H.B.J. (Bert) Harding and had two children, Keith and me.

Photographs of Grandad King show him as a tall upright man in a dark suit with pocket watch and chain on his waistcoat, complete with bowler hat and moustache. He was a moulder at Catton's iron foundry. He was union leader there and became secretary of the Leeds moulders' union. Judging by the stories told me by Mum and Aunt Ada he held some very strong working-class principles.

Mum and her older sister Ada worked at the same mill. They used to go to work with the big pockets in their aprons bulging with ready prepared bobbins. The kindly mill owners used to allow the women and girls to take the bobbins home with them for preparation – work they didn't have to pay them for. The two girls would walk down Pontefract Lane about two miles, then take a penny tram ride to the bottom of Cherwell Hill and walk up the hill to the mill in Morley to be ready to start work at six o'clock.

At the time when Mum was a two-loom weaver the workers in the weaving shed were asking for an increase per yard on worsteds. The management had refused to meet this request. She discussed the situation with her father. 'Well Emma,' he said, 'you will have to stop shop.' 'How can I do that?' 'Kick belt off pulley,' he told her. Mum went to work the following day and got the girls to again put in the request and put a deadline time for the answer. The time arrived and there was no reply from the management. From Mum's description I have the picture of Emma King walking down the weaving shed in her long black dress and white apron with head held high and her hair, usually half way down her back, tucked away. After kicking off the belt she walked back to her looms. How long it took I don't know, but the end result was they won their increase.

Years later when making one of my infrequent trips to Leeds to visit Mum in a sheltered housing complex, I went into her flat to find that she had a visitor. It was a new resident in the complex and they had not seen each other since working at the mill. Through

talking to this lady I found out that Mum became known in the Leeds weaving sheds as the girl who stopped the looms. I bet Grandad King was proud of her. I certainly am.

For tens of thousands of families the 1930s were very difficult. We were more fortunate than many others because Dad, who was a talented pianist, was able to supplement the family income. He did this by playing as resident pianist in pubs and as an accompanying pianist on the club circuit in Leeds. He sang too, but purely as an amateur.

My grandfather brought a piano to Leeds from Carlisle, where Dad had his very first lessons. It was given to him when he and Mum married. My earliest memory of hearing him sing in public was when he was principal tenor at the Leeds Town Hall when a number of Leeds choirs came together for Handel's *Messiah*. I remember him standing up to sing the opening tenor solo *Comfort Ye My People*. But I think his proudest moment was when he was given the opportunity to sing with the Huddersfield Choral Society. This was in the days of such singers as Frank Titterton, Walter Widdop and Elsie Suddaby. They were a great Yorkshire front row.

Music was his great love. In his early teens he played at the silent movies and as a 'song plugger' in Hartley's music store in Vicar Lane, Leeds. As a song plugger you had to be prepared to play any sheet music thrown at you and this helped to develop his skills as a sight reader.

At one very difficult period, when Mum and Dad were experiencing an acute shortage of money during the first couple of years of their marriage, they applied for help from the equivalent of today's social security. A representative of that department made a visit to the house. The interview did not take long – as soon as the piano was seen Mum and Dad were told that there was no chance of any financial help whilst ever they owned a piano. I don't know what was said but if Dad did not say anything, Mum would have asked the Social Security man to 'please leave the house', or something that could be translated to mean that. Mum was more forthright than Dad.

A very pleasant memory of Shakespeare Street is coming home from Beckett Street School on baking day and turning the corner to

be met with the wonderful aroma of newly baked oven cakes resting on the top step of the houses in the street, and with a hole in the middle to let the 'devil art'. You walked home that little bit faster so that you could get a wedge of oven cake. Those who have experienced this will by now be drooling over the thought of a wedge of freshly baked oven cake, the butter and strawberry jam oozing out of the corner of your mouth. A quick wipe with the back of your hand cuts off the escape of the jam, then a lick at the back of your hand. End of bite one, now for bite two.

In 1935 we moved to 4 Accommodation Road. My Aunt Ada and Uncle Will were leaving their little general shop to go and live in Rookwood Avenue, off York Road, near to the Halton Dial. Mum was to take over the shop. That same week Dad became a permanent worker on the railway, which was better than being a casual employee, never knowing if you would have work when you arrived in a morning. The shop was situated on the corner of Accommodation Road and Broadfoot Street. On the other corner of Broadfoot Street was the Cosy Picture House and the Miners' Institute, where the Independent Labour Party held many of their meetings. When the Jarrow marchers passed through Leeds they stayed at the Miners' Institute and my Uncle Bill used to take my young cousin Lily Dixon there to hear speakers such as Helen Wilkinson. At the top of Broadfoot Street we had the slaughterhouse and the backyard entrance to the Stag public house.

The slaughterhouse meant that pigs were herded up Broadfoot Street, cowboy style. The sound of hooves on the cobbles was just another sound of the area. It was not uncommon for a frightened animal to escape and run amok with us kids running after them, no doubt making matters worse. The cattle were slaughtered across York Road, close to Shannon Street.

The local East Leeds Swimming Club, based at the York Road Baths, was a centre of activity for the community. I used go to these baths three or four times a week plus the club night and the family get together on a Sunday morning. In Leeds, as in many other cities, there were several of these local swimming baths and each one had a swimming team and many a water polo team. Each month there would be a swimming gala held in one of these baths



Doris Storey (back, left) before the Berlin Olympic Games 1936, with Dad and Yorkshire swimmers Lily Dixon, Marie, and Jacqueline de Sadeleer

with the host team providing the prizes. The supporters of each club would follow the team to each gala. One of the teams to beat was East Leeds. In the early and mid 1930s we had a cracking team with many talented swimmers. My two cousins Lily and Alan Dixon both became Yorkshire champions. The club also produced an Olympic swimmer in the shape of Doris Storey (who later became Doris Quarmby). Doris in her early days of club swimming had become a very close friend of my cousin, Lily Dixon, and of the Dixon family. In spite of the difficulty of training in a 25-yard-long pool and working at Montague Burton's as a sewing machinist she battled and clawed her way into the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin to represent Britain in the 200 metres breaststroke final.

Just before she left for the Olympics Doris came to the shop to show us her uniform. I remember that Mum could not resist the temptation to try it on. Doris became the British, European, and Empire champion as well as the world-record holder of the 200-metres breaststroke, becoming a local hero in the process.

The second world war was fast approaching but like most families we just carried on not really knowing what was happening. Our family parties were as lively as ever. Boxing night was always a happy event, with the carpet rolled up and as much furniture moved out as possible. Dad on the piano, and let the dancing commence! Lancers, Gay Gordons, waltzes, two-step – the lot. A game of darts being played in a corner with the throwers trying not to pin someone's ear to the board as one of the dancers came dangerously near to the line of fire. This would go on into the early hours with us kids falling asleep in some corner or other. Then came the walk home where we shared our carpet space for those who had too far to walk – there was not a car between us. I know there is a tendency to idealise the 'good old days', but it was a great atmosphere to be brought up in.

Nearly opposite the shop was a pub called the Spinners Arms and on the other side of York Road opposite Accommodation Road was the Hope Inn – it is still there. Closing time on a Saturday night could be very entertaining. On one occasion I was awakened by a lot of noise. I came down the stairs into the main room. This served as a sitting room, kitchen and living room and as a bath room when us kids was bathed in a zinc bath placed on the clip rug in front of the fire. When finished, the zinc bath was hung up, behind the cellar door. I went through into the shop area and noticed a policeman's cape laid just inside the door (I wondered if it belonged to Rocking Horse, a much respected and feared policeman in our area.) Mum was standing in front of the front window of the shop wielding a broom and letting everyone know that if they came too close to the window she would have to clobber them.

On a Sunday morning men would gather on the street corners throwing coins in the air playing heads or tails. We youngsters would keep a look out and if a cop came in sight we would shout 'Cops!', they would scatter and we would collect the coins left on the ground. It wasn't unknown for there to be a false alarm now and then.

There were some jobs that have long disappeared. There was the lamplighter, for example. I remember when lamplighters were made redundant when a timing device was introduced for automatic lighting. We used to kick the lampposts to make them light, or

turn off. There was the 'knocker up' lady, who for a penny or two would wake you up by knocking on your bedroom window with her long, padded pole. She'd shout the time until someone responded. This continued into the war, until alarm clocks became available to everyone, not just those involved in essential war work. Following an air raid or anti-aircraft gunfire I used to search the streets and spare ground for shrapnel. This became a hobby, as did aircraft recognition. There were loads of characters. Mum always had a pack of five Woodbines and a book of matches for 'Woodbine Lizzie' (known throughout Leeds) and the same for the tingerlary man (barrel-organ player).

From a very early age I was brought up on music of the likes of Gershwin, Berlin, Porter, and all the wonderful music of the 1920s and 1930s. Dad was a particular fan of Fats Waller and the singer Elisabeth Welch. I had the pleasure of meeting Elisabeth Welch in the late 1970s. The first time was when she did a concert for the Young Socialists. She was in her 80s but still had the gift. Maybe she had on occasions to rely on her wonderful sense of timing rather than to try and hit too high a note, but she held that young audience in the palm of her hands. What a lady. After the show Kika Markham arranged for me to meet her in her dressing room. We talked about Dad being a great admirer of her and the period when she became famous. I told of Dad's collection of music that had in it the professional copy of *Stormy Weather*. She agreed that if I got the copy to London we could meet for her to autograph it and to have a chat. Unfortunately Mum had given every single copy he had away. This included all the music that he had been given by older musicians when he was playing at the latter end of silent movies as a boy. I later discovered that it would have been worth a small fortune. I never did tell Mum. In spite of this setback Elisabeth Welch agreed to meet me socially for her to tell me about the old times.

It was very exciting listening to her talk about all those wonderful composers and artists who were only names and pictures on the front of sheet music, to me. In those early years I had not even been to the picture house (cinema). I still have a copy of a video that Elisabeth gave me, *Keeping Love Alive*.

Songs and music of the shows of that period became so familiar that if Dad skipped over any part of shall we say *Land of Smiles* or *Show Boat* I would let him know. If I was going to bed before he finished playing he had to play certain songs – and he dared not miss any. My parents always said that I could recognise music before I could talk.

We were now attending York Road School. It was here that I was given special permission to go swimming with the school, although I was still in the infants. I remember Dad picking me up from school to take me to see Malcolm Campbell's car 'Bluebird' that was on show in Lewis's store on the Headrow.

It was at York Road School that a teacher spotted that I was developing a speech problem and I was given special attention by Mrs Jackson, a speech therapist. I was under her care until I left school at fourteen years of age. I had a regular session once a week, along with other children from various schools. This lady was a keen supporter of the methods used in the USA by Helen Keller's teacher. Helen Keller was deaf and blind from being a very young infant, yet she was taught to speak. She became a writer and spoke out against injustice at many a public meeting. I will leave to you to work out just what a gigantic achievement that was. Our teacher always reminded us that you do not stammer when you sing, and insisted on breathing exercises and letting your words come out on a gentle exhale.

At 11.00 hours on 3 September 1939 war was declared and York Road School was closed down to become a centre for air-raid wardens and for the street fire-fighting committees, as well as a first-aid post, and a base for the auxiliary rescue party. The street fire-fighting committees were made up from the civilians in the area. They had a roster for patrolling during air raids. These street groups were issued with a stirrup pump, a bucket for water, and a device for picking up unexploded incendiary bombs.

After the retreat from Dunkirk soldiers were brought to Leeds to be billeted in Quarry Hill flats. At the time this was the largest block of flats in Europe. According to Lord Haw Haw, the Nazi radio propagandist, they were to become the Nazis' Northern Headquarters.

Before going to the flats they were rested in Accommodation Road and surrounding streets. Mum went out with the entire shop's monthly ration of cigs and handed them out to the troops. The street committees set to work organising tea and any sandwiches that could be produced. For my part I gave away all my comics and went round collecting foreign coins. I was old enough to notice the soldiers' dishevelled state and how tired and quiet they were, but I was too young to understand why.

During one of the air raids on Leeds, Richmond Hill School was closed down and in the same raid our shop and house were damaged. Keith was transferred to All Saints' School on Pontefract Lane, but it was several months before I was transferred to Ellerby Lane School. We were both destined to be evacuated to America, but our parents changed their mind at the last minute. One of those transport ships went down shortly after and I suppose we could have been on it.

The shop and house were both condemned in 1941 and we were allocated a house in Cross Gates: 93 Poole Crescent. It had a garden front, side and back. The council moved our furniture and belongings in the traditional way for areas like ours, namely in the green 'bug van' where everything was fumigated. We were to attend Cross Gates School. This made it four schools in three years, and in my case many months without one at all. Moving to Cross Gates was a bit of a culture shock. There were green fields to play in and the houses had gardens and not back yards. When we first went to school we were surprised to see children working in the school gardens. The teachers called us by our first names, which gave you a warm kind of feeling even if it was a surprise. I am sure that this helped new pupils to settle in and make new friends. I made two close friends that first year, John Atkin and Ernest Godly. While we went our separate ways in the late 1950s we have remained in contact to this very day.

Not long after we had settled in Cross Gates we went for a walk. We were crossing a bridge over the railway line when we spotted a little station. Mum said it looked nice and that she would like to work there. At that time she was working with Dad at the Marsh Lane goods yard wheeling sacks of grain. The man who

worked at this little station, Pendas Way, was called up to the forces, so my Mum applied for the job and got it. Two shifts a day, eight trains a shift. She was station mistress, booking clerk and ticket collector rolled into one.

I was encouraged to join the scouts and became a member of Manston's St James's Church Scouts. Things were going very well until the vicar started to give us little talks about god. I asked him a question about something that was worrying me. I had seen a film where an RAF padre was blessing the bombers and I asked if the padres in the German airforce were doing the same, and if he thought this was wrong. He did not give me a satisfactory answer. I asked him again why vicars in both countries were wanting Christians to kill each other. He did try to get out of it by saying that what they did was to ask god to keep their men safe. I asked the very same questions at a church religious class. I got the same answer, and this time I added that if god were to keep both sides safe there would be no killing, so no war. The padre sent a letter to my Mum and Dad asking them not to send me again as I was a disruptive element.

The first job I applied for when I left school in 1943 was at James Gough's cabinetmakers in Regent Street. I was put to work – at the age of 14 – on wood-working machines. When Dad found out he said that I was too young to be working on machines and told me to talk to the union man. When I was told that there was no union he advised me to leave. I then followed the family tradition and started on the railways. This only lasted a few months because I failed the eyesight test. I wasn't up to railway standards.

I then went after a job at Archibald Ramsden's piano and organ tuners and repairers. I literally sat on their doorstep waiting for them to open for three mornings trying to get that job, but they wanted an experienced person. Some of the workers there recognised how keen I was and tried to intervene on my behalf, but to no avail. Dad had the idea of trying to get me into Neller Hall, the Military School of Music. This came to nothing, I think because of the war.

Then 1944 saw me starting work at John Barran's clothing factory as a trimmer in the cutting room. Before getting the job I

was interviewed by the cutting room foreman. Mum went with me. The entrance to the offices was rather awe-inspiring: a grand staircase, polished wood walls, a handrail down the centre and a uniformed commissionaire behind a grand big polished wooden desk. He was known as the Major and, as I was to find out, ruled us youngsters with a rod of iron. Mum introduced us and the Major sent a message for Mr Thomas Boyes, the cutting room foreman. The only question I remember being asked was whether I went to church. My Mum immediately dived in and said, oh yes. I got the job and was told to report to the cutting room the following Monday morning. My real education was about to begin.

When I entered the cutting room I found it overwhelming. I was to learn that it was 110 yards long and 75 yards wide – as long and as wide as a football pitch. The roof was half glass. Alongside the cutting room were five floors the same size where the clothing was made up. You could get to these floors either by stairs or a lift that was positioned in one corner of the cutting room. Workers at each end of the room could go weeks without seeing each other.

At the end of the war in 1945 the young men started to return to the factory, bringing with them the memories of what they had seen and experienced. But most of all they had a determination that things were going to change as regards working conditions and wages. Before the war in 1936 a number of clothing workers in Leeds had joined the International Brigade to go and fight the fascists in Spain. This reflected a certain amount of left-wing and communist activity in the Leeds clothing factories. So now the pre-war militants returned with the younger men who had been called up at different stages during the war. These were the ingredients for the development of left-wing activity, not only in our factory but in all the other clothing factories in Leeds. By the late 1940s there were three union branches, each with 10,000 members and their own full-time secretary and elected branch committee. But what is more important, very strong factory organisations were being established.

The aspirations of millions of people were poured into the general election of 1945. A lot of hope and faith was placed in the Labour Party. When Labour's landslide victory was announced there

was much genuine joy and celebration. Charlie Powell, one of the old fitters, had explained to me during the run-up to the election that in his younger days he had sold the Labour paper the *Daily Herald*. He said that in those days this was considered quite a revolutionary thing to do. When the result of the election was known he came up to me, shook me by the hand and said: 'We have done it! We have taken over. Do not let anyone take it away from you.' I did not fully understand what he meant but his sincerity and enthusiasm had an effect on me. So much so, that that evening when I saw a young man who had gone round our estate canvassing for the Conservative Party (me and my mates thought he was stuck up because his father worked in a bank) I shouted at him that we had taken over and they would never get it back. He chased me round Poole Crescent shouting something about letting Mr Churchill down. This was my first clash with the enemy.

I guess the Communist Party members would have agreed with him. After the war at a demonstration in London, they carried a banner with a picture of Churchill in one corner and a picture of Stalin in the other, with words like: 'Do not let anything separate those who have been joined together in struggle'. This featured on the front page of their paper the *Daily Worker*.

Another older worker in the factory, a band-knife operator, was close on retiring age. He had a great influence on me and many of the other youngsters in the factory. His name was Robert Armstrong. His grandfather had emigrated to Australia in the late 1800s, taking his son and toddler grandson Robert with him. Robert spent most of his time going from one mining camp to another, first with his grandfather and then with his father. Somewhere along the line Bob developed a great interest in history and geology and this led him to become an exponent of Darwin and the theory of evolution. He was always prepared to spend time with anyone to explain the difference between evolution and creation. Bob did not go down too well with the Communist Party members because he was a supporter of the right wing of the Labour Party. In spite of this I am sure that he sowed the seed that made me into a communist. Bob was living proof that you had to be more than a supporter of Darwin to be a Marxist.

My friends John and Ernest and I were having our first holiday away from our parents. We went to Butlin's holiday camp at Filey on the east coast of Yorkshire. It was early August 1945. One morning I went to get a paper. The front page carried the news of the atom bomb raids on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I did not have any strong political beliefs at the time but this made me feel disgusted and horrified. All the papers, including the *Daily Worker*, justified the bombing. They said it would speed up the end of the war. It is now well documented that Japan was ready to surrender but the West had deliberately ignored this until they had dropped the atom bombs. This did not affect me sufficiently for me to join any political party or to go into a monastery. I simply carried on with my interest in Rugby League football and generally being a teenager until in August 1947 I was called to do my National Service in the Royal Air Force.