

U for Uncles

Uncles played a very important part in my childhood. I had four 'real' uncles and lots of other uncles who happened to be friends of my parents.

My real uncles were Uncle John times two, Uncle Stanley and Uncle George.

Uncle John M was married to my dad's sister May. He still had his slight North Wales-Liverpudlian accent despite living in Ashton for many years. He was Captain of the Boys Brigade and a teacher in an inner Manchester school. I saw him every Sunday at chapel and when we went for tea and biscuits at Grandad's house after Sunday school. Uncle John was always happy to play at "The Gentleman's Horse..." bouncing me up and down as we trotted, and galloped through the rhyme. At Christmas we often spent at least one afternoon at Uncle John's. There we played games such as guessing the smell when blindfolded.

Uncle John C worked in a cotton mill and was married to Aunty Lilian. They had an old lop-eared spaniel called Wendy. Uncle was keen on photography and I was often photographed in his little side plot of a garden or playing with the dog. I was staying at their house one summer night. The window had been left open and the room was full of daddy longlegs. My screams alerted Uncle John who raced in with a rolled up newspaper to fend off the beasts. Uncle John was an accomplished dancer. He would partner me at Sunday school socials and wizz me around the dance floor in the quickstep.

Uncle Stanley was a coal miner. He could crouch on his haunches easily, something he had become accustomed to, working in the mine. He was a quiet presence in his own home although he could always see the funny side of things. I often spent Saturday afternoons at his house, watching their television as we didn't have one at home. Uncle Stanley had a pen on Knott Lanes in Bardsley which, when I was young, seemed as if I had been transported to the countryside. In his pen he kept a pig and some hens. The pig was a friendly animal who stood on his hind legs with his forelegs against the sty wall as we entered through the gate from the road. I would scatter corn for the hens and brush the rough ground. I have a vague memory of there being a pond where I gathered frog spawn in a jam jar. Uncle Stanley also had a horse and cart. He brought the horse and cart to our house on Turner Lane, tethered the horse to the railings and gave him a nose-bag. Uncle Stanley smoked a lot. Were they Woodbines or Senior Service or maybe Park Drive? They were the popular brands at the time.

Uncle George was my mother's older brother. Even though he and his wife and daughter lived very close by, we didn't socialise with them at all. As a child, I accepted this without ever querying it. Uncle George had auburn curly hair. He worked in Allen Shaw's grocer's shop at the top of the Market Avenue. My mother would buy bacon and cheese there. Uncle George would serve her but no-one would ever have known that they were brother and sister. There had been some major disagreement in the past which was never resolved.

There were other 'Uncles' who were not blood relatives but friends of my parents. One Uncle, Dan, was actually my great uncle. He lived with his tiny wife Ada on Burlington Street. I would be taken to visit him where we would find him always in the same chair, tamping down his pipe before lighting it. His whole head would be wreathed in smoke as the pipe took hold.

My first ever visit to London, when I was 13 was to stay with another 'uncle' and his family. Uncle Ernie had been my father's army friend and I had started to write to his daughter who was about my age. I was invited to stay during the long summer holidays. My dad took me to Central Station in Manchester and put me on the train to London. The journey would have

taken about 4 hours. Uncle Ernie and his daughter Mavis met me at the other end and I was whisked off to the nearest Lyons Corner House for a drink and some cake.

“Uncle” Jim was reputed to have been instrumental in getting my parents together. They both belonged to the Comradeship, a sort of Methodist youth group associated with Alexandra Road Chapel. When my dad joined the Army in 1940, Jim suggested that my Mum started to write to my Dad. She said she would often be writing letters whilst in the air-raid shelter at Shaw’s Brushworks. Jim’s ruse obviously worked as my parents married on 11 August 1945 when my Dad was home on 10 days leave. Jim and his wife Gladys were a big part of my childhood. They adopted a baby who was about my age and my parents used to holiday with Jim and Gladys with their respective children.

All my real and adopted uncles are now dead but they still form a rich backdrop to my childhood.