

The good old days were also the poor old days



LES WALTON

ONE of my favourite sketches is 'The Four Yorkshiremen'. It was about men drinking Chateau de Chasselas wine and reminiscing about their childhood - drinking cold tea, without milk, sugar... or tea; living in one room or cardboard boxes or in the ground covered by a tarpaulin. They end by saying 'Try telling the young people today that.... and they won't believe ya'. So here I go about my early childhood.

I was named Leslie Howard Walton, supposedly after the famous film actor Leslie Howard, who played Ashley Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind*. When my friends and I were being called home by our mothers shouting, "Billy, Dereck, Jimmy!" Hilda Walton would follow with 'Leslie Howard - time for tea'. Johnny Cash was to describe this situation in his song 'A boy named Sue'. Unlike Sue, I was never a good fighter.

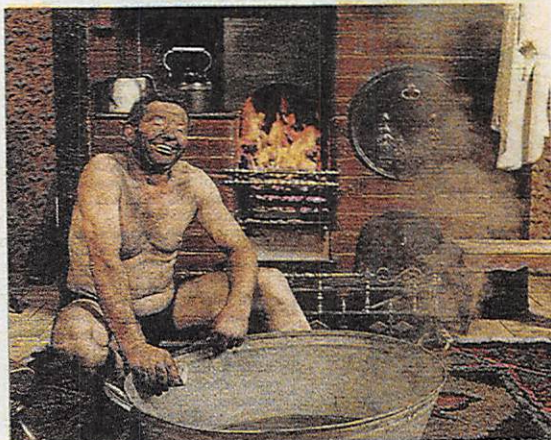
We played the usual football in the street as well as marbles and 'chucks'. Chucks were blocks of chalk, which you would throw in the air and try to catch on the back of your hand. Another favourite was Japs and Americans - why not Germans and British I will never know!

Without being arrogant I was one of the best 'soldiers' in the group. After being 'shot' I would grip my chest and proceed to fall down in slow motion, eventually writhing on the ground, expiring in agony after about ten minutes. (I could stretch this out for at least half an hour.)

I was brought up with a massive work ethic. My mother saw her role as staying at home and bringing up the kids. My father's main role was to earn money for the family. I didn't see much of my father as he did a lot of shift work and overtime. Often he would be in bed when I went to school and at work when I returned.

My mother came from a family of committed Methodists and insisted my sister and I attended church and Sunday school every week. Education and hard work was THE way out of poverty.

My father, mother, my sister and I lived in a house with one living room downstairs, a 'scullery' and an outside toilet. The floor was covered with oilcloth, a cheap floor covering with 'hooky' or 'proggy' mats on top. The mats were made out of rags cut



► This Coal Board promotional image of a miner washing in a tin bath makes a hard life look just a little bit cosier than it really was

into strips and pushed or pulled through a hessian backing. Legend had it, that if you took your jacket off in my grandmother's house, it was in the mat within minutes.

Our 'coal house' was filled with free coal from the National Coal Board.

After helping to shovel the coal into the coal house we bathed once a week in front of a coal fire in a metal bath tub. My Dad and I would sit freezing in the scullery waiting for my mam and sister to bath - girls first, dirtiest last. I remember how cold my back was compared to the parts heated by the fire.

All my clothes, with the exception of my short trousers and shoes, were home knitted or stitched. This included my knitted swimming trunks which, when wet, would immediately slide down my legs!

A memorable Christmas present was a 'cowboy fort' made by my father from a Jaffa orange box and painted with creosote. The words Jaffa could still be read on the side of the box and so I called it Fort Jaffa. The fort was inhabited by lead cowboys and Indians. My father also made me a cowboy outfit with a real leather waistcoat.

My parents sacrificed to give me one 'bought' Christmas present. Memorable presents included a Wolves football shirt (I liked the colour), an American jeep pedal car and a 'caser' leather football, which, when kicked, would dislocate an ankle in one go.

Looking back I now understand that the first years of my life were dominated by post war austerity and rationing. Due to continual rain in 1946, which ruined Britain's crops, bread rationing started again. The

winter frost of 1947 led to potato rationing. Confectionery and sugar rationing ended when I was eight and meat when I was nine. My diet would probably be considered the 'bees knees' today.

I had two access points to the outside world. One was the Arthur Mee Children's encyclopaedia. It had sections on great lives, bible stories and things to make and do, as well as covering science subjects such as geology and astronomy.

The other important access to the world outside was the radio. As a two-year-old I would listen to 'Listen with Mother' which ran right up to 1982. I would snuggle up with my mam and wait for the xylophone introduction and the question, "Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin." (The phrase was later used in the lyrics of a Moody Blues song, "Are you sitting comfortably?")

I have often said that education leaders, particularly politicians like to hark back to their own childhood and education and attempt to 'revive' an education model based on this recollection.

How often have I heard politicians call for 'strengthening the family', reinforcing strong values within children, promoting healthy lifestyles and the importance of high aspirations for parents and young people.

Are my memories, and those of politicians, as bad as the Yorkshire lads in the TV programme? We can be selective about the virtues of the good old days. Some argue that poverty is relative to time and place. In 50 years' time how will people write about their experiences of home and childhood?

■ Les Walton CBE is chair of Northern Education Trust.