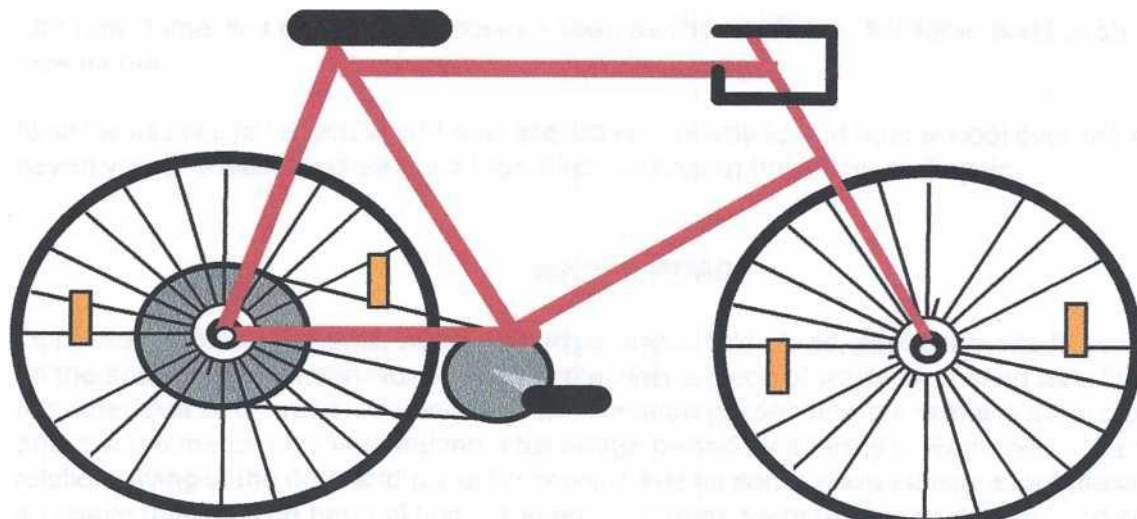


My Journey to and from School



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ROMAN BANK

I, at the age of seven, moved into a brand new council house with my mother, father and sister. To us it was a house of luxury after the cottage we had just left. We now had gas lamps, not oil lamps or candles, we got electric a few years later. A bathroom, no more tin bath in front of the fire, running water over the kitchen sink, not a pump from a well and a filter. A flush toilet a few yards from the back door, not a little wooden hut which sat over a big hole in the ground with a wooden seat way down the garden.

Outside was the River Welland, but more about that later. At the back were bulb fields. My sister worked in them later. Some years, the fields at the bottom of our garden were planted with thousands of hyacinths which looked and smelt very nice, but could be overpowering when the wind was in the east. Gone were the strawberry fields of the old house. At the front we now have other houses, not an orchard and a long rose covered archway from the front door to the road.

Ha - well you win some, you lose some!

I think the best thing about the new home was it was only one mile from school, instead of the two and a half miles we used to walk - and much more interesting. Walking past allotments, agriculture and dairy farms daily were of no interest to me.

Our new home was one of forty houses known as Roman Bank, My sister and I soon made new friends.

Now I would like to tell you what I saw and did on my way to and from school over the next seven years. Please excuse me if I roam off the beaten track now and again.

MARSH ROAD

Opposite our housing estate, behind a hedge, was a field of red, pink and white Peonies - that's on the south side of Marsh Road. Next to that was a piece of waste land used as a tip and on the other side of the road was an old cottage, a large garden and the remains of an old mill, and a scrap merchant's yard behind a tall hedge owned by a family of Romanies. We had relations living in the area and my older cousins told us some weird stories about these people, so I gave them a wide berth at first but eventually found them to be nice, friendly and sociable. The Romanies had some lovely colourful horse drawn caravans.

On the opposite side, next to the tip, was a family living in an old four wheeled wooden caravan and some huts. I made friends with one of the two sons. Outside, the van didn't look much, but inside it was warm and comfortable.

Next to the scrap yard was a blacksmith who made and repaired agricultural tools. I would stand by his door watching him pumping the bellows of his furnace to heat the steel, then beat it on the anvil to shape, then dip it in the cold water to harden it. Often the smithy would remind me of the time and that I would be late for school.

Next door was a wheelwright who made farm carts and cart wheels, and the smithy made the iron rims for the wheels. A circle of stones would be built in the yard and filled with wood shavings and any old scrap wood and set alight. In this, the iron rim was placed and heated up, which expanded the rim. This was then placed around the wooden wheel and cooled with cold water and lots of steam came up into our face. As the iron cooled, it contracted and tightened the joints of the wheel and when it was cold it was fixed.

At the end of Marsh Road, were a row of cottages. One of our uncles and his family lived in one. In another, a man who charged radio accumulators. It was my job to take one in on a Friday evening and bring home a recharged one. I had to be very careful when carrying these glass containers or the acid spilt over and burnt holes in my clothes. We had to use the radio sparingly or it didn't last the week. Sometimes these cottages were flooded - more about that later.

Sometimes in Marsh Road we saw a rather large farmer (and I don't mean tall!) driving his open top Rolls Royce car with a large bull mastiff dog sitting on the back seat. It was massive, so we kept well clear of them.

HOLBEACH ROAD

Holbeach Road ran alongside the river. I'll talk about that later. The first building in this road was a grain store. Farmers sold their grain to the corn merchant and brought it on horse drawn trolley or lorry, and the store men carried the corn in eighteen stone sacks on their backs and stacked it in the granary. Next door was the Pigeon Inn. This building was of no interest to me at this time. There were just a few trees on the riverside from the inn to the bridge.

On the other side of the road was a small wood and corrugated iron shop selling sweets and general groceries. This was much more interesting to me and was visited regularly. Many years later I helped to pull this shop down. The only other place of interest on the south side was a workingman's club and cycle repair shop. Through the window of the club we could see men drinking and smoking their pipes or playing snooker. One day we were watching the repair man mending a puncture for a lady, when blowing up the inner tub it burst with a bang - the lady jumped. We thought it funny and laughed, but the man didn't laugh - he was very annoyed with himself and with us, so we scarpered!

ALBION STREET

Holbeach Road stopped at a Bascule bridge and Commercial Road started, but I preferred to cross the river at this point and go along Albion Street, which also ran parallel to the river.

The first place of interest to me was the boat builders workshop. He also made sluice gates for the drainage board, for whom my father worked, so I knew all about these and what they did. Coffins were also made here as well as general carpentry.

Mr Panel was the master man and a man named Jack worked for him. Although one of my uncles was a carpenter, it was watching these two men that got me interested in woodwork. I watched them working on all kinds of things and often had to be told to get off to school. On the way home I would sometimes sweep the shop floor for them, but always keeping an eye on what they were doing. Little did I realise that in later years I would be doing coffins etc, but never boats. Mr Panel had a wood yard and a steam box on the riverside. The steam box was a boiler which burnt the rubbish from the workshop and turned water into steam that went along a wooden airtight box, in which wood was put to be made supple so that it could be bent more easily. This was used a lot in boat building. There was also a slipway into the river for new and repaired boats. It used to give me a thrill to watch them slide down the slipway and hit the water, making a huge wave and praying they wouldn't sink, and they never did.

Some thirty years later, I started a new job on the highways. I walked into the carpenters shop on the Monday morning carrying my bag of tools. The foreman introduced me to Nigel and Jack the painters, and Jack the carpenter who was about to retire. The carpenter said 'I know you - you're the young lad who was Joe Panel's favourite, the only boy allowed in his workshop and was often late for school, you're young Lister¹. I hadn't recognised him straight away, but it was Mr Panel's Jack. I was to take over from one of the men who forged my life. It's a small world.

At the end of the wood yard we saw towers of steel grow daily, one each side of the river. When the towers were high enough, the men started to build out over the river and meet in the middle. The construction was put together like a Meccano. At the time it amazed me how the gantries met in the middle spot on.

All this was built to carry a gas pipe over the river. How things have changed over the years; they would have bored under the river today. On the riverside, from there to the next bridge, there was very little of interest - some cottages, a crane and a tailors shop.

Next to the carpenter's shop there were two grass fields and a herd of black and white cows. In later years we did some Home Guard training here. Next was a large orchard - we did a lot of scrumping here, but that was stopped when it was uprooted and another council housing estate was built.

The gasworks was next. On the riverbank was a crane which emptied barges of coal, this was used to make gas and coke. The coke was sold to the public, coal men and nurserymen who fetched it in horse-drawn carts or lorries and the general public fetched in wheelbarrows, handcarts, old prams and anything with wheels, I earned my pocket money by fetching it for my parents and neighbours at two pence per strike (half hundredweight). My father made me a cart with a wooden box, a pair of old wheels and a pair of wooden handles. I usually carried four bags at a time, but I sometimes carried five or six to save time. Doing this I often needed help to push over the bridge. At first I did this on Saturday mornings, but later in the evenings, the reason for that will be apparent later. Some weeks in the winter I fetched eighteen or twenty strikes.

A grass field came next, and then an old house which we were told was haunted, so we gave it a wide berth.

A sergeant of police lived along here. This man had a BOOMING voice that frightened the life out of us, he was very strict but very fair. He listened to what you had to say before boxing our ears - and no I didn't! He rode around on an upright bicycle and he was a big man. If you were doing something you shouldn't, he seemed to appear from nowhere like a genie. He would tell your parents if you did wrong and expect them to punish you. I met him several years after starting work and found him to be a gentleman and helpful. Between there and the next Bridge were a warehouse, a garage, a greengrocers and a sweet shop.

Over the road on the riverside was a tailors shop. We could see Mr Egor working at his table, but mostly sitting cross-legged on the floor sewing mens suits all by hand. The door to the shop was a stable-type door and in warm weather he would have the top half open and we could watch him working over the bottom half. This shop was at the side of a passage leading to a footbridge.

THE RIVER

I'll now talk about the River Welland. It was a tidal river. I mentioned earlier some houses got flooded, this happened when the spring high tides met the fresh water coming down river after heavy rains.

We boys went totting in the river for eels. The totts were made of earthworms, threaded together and hung on a thin string fixed on one of dad's garden canes. Sometimes we caught a Dabb (flatfish).

Barges came up river on the tide all the way from Fosdyke docks to the gas works and the granary just pass the footbridge. These were pulled by shire horses along a towpath; odd barges were power driven. The ones going to the gas works were power driven. The barges returned on the ebb tide.

When the tide came in we saw the Eagre (bore) and sometimes it was quite big. When the river traffic was on the move, West Elloe Bridge closed to road traffic. Being a Bascule bridge, it opened from the middle to let the barges through, when they had passed, the bridge was lowered and road traffic and pedestrians went on their way.

COMMERCIAL ROAD

When the bridge was closed that was the only time I used Commercial Road, as I didn't find it very interesting. On the riverside of the road was a coal yard, garage, a small fish shop and a pub. Just before getting to the footbridge was a turning bay for the garages. This was a big piece of the bank dug out so that the barge's nose was steered into the bay and the tide pushed the back-end round, it was then pulled the rest of the way backwards.

On the south side of the street was a little corrugated iron chapel where we went some evenings to watch a silent comedy or western films for a penny, two pubs, two sweet shops, a small builders yard, a chimney sweep - he was also the town crier - and a baker's shop with his bakehouse at the back on Willow Walk. It was a shop where you could buy warm fresh bread almost all day and it smelt lovely. They made smashing Hot Cross Buns.

The sweet shop on the junction of Commercial Road, Willow Walk and High Street also sold tobacco. Some of the older men smoked a tobacco called "Thick Twist", it looked like black tarred rope. The tobacconist would weigh a pennyworth by putting a penny on one side of his polished brass scales and cut the twist until it was equal in weight.

It was a long narrow shop with windows on the street side and several shelves on the other side, filled with dozens of large glass bottles of every kind of sweets made. It took us a long time to spend our pennies here.

On the riverside of the road next to the footbridge was a fish and chip shop (the best in Spalding) and a blacksmiths shop. Mr Dodd was also a farrier and bridge master. Men on farms and working with horses were known as waggoners, they would walk their horses to the smith to be reshod. It was very interesting to watch Mr Dodds cut the iron bar to length, put it in the furnace, beat it to shape and fit it to the horses hooves still hot. It made a lot of smoke and smelt terrible, when he had got it right it was fixed with horseshoe nails.

These shire horses feet were very big. Mr Dodd told me later the biggest shoe he made was from twenty four inches of iron bar. I think that hoof would be about thirty inches round - that's big

Now I have to cross the river by the Albert Footbridge, better known as Chain Bridge.

Mr Dodd told me this is because the first bridge had chain hand rails. It swung on a big cast iron pivot to the side of the river to let river traffic through. The bridge master swung the bridge turning the handle.

I had the pleasure of building a new foot bridge still known as chain bridge. Luck was on my side when it came to dismantling the old bridge. The cast iron pivot broke the very last time it was to be swung and fell into the river. I was turning the handle. We had to get a large crane to lift it out and on to the bank, but it was much easier to strip than it would have been over the water - and safer.

On Albion Street side of Albert Bridge was a public toilet, very smelly and at the end of the passage and opposite the tailors was a barber. He had a long white beard and rode a trike. I would have loved to had a ride on it, but never did.

TAKEN FOR GRANTED

Before I talk about the last two hundred yards to school, here are some of the everyday things we took for granted. The rag and bone man with his pony and cart, the milkman's pony and trap with two large churns and another milkman on his bicycle with two small churns hanging from his handle bars making house calls. The bakers pony and cart setting out with fresh bread to deliver to farm houses and cottages down the marsh. The postman walking his rounds carrying a heavy bag of mail on his back. The road man with his orange or green painted handcart cleaning the roads and footpath every day. His work got easier as more motor traffic and less animals used the roads.

Tuesday is market day and some cattle or sheep were brought to market by a drover and his dogs, chickens and rabbits were brought in every kind of transport you can think of. Market stall holders came with their wares on pony and cart. Of course by the late 1930's more motor vehicles were on the roads and bringing animals and produce. The finest sight of them all was a waggoner driving a team of four Shires pulling a large wagon loaded with bags of potatoes to the station. The Shires were very smart with brasses shining and their manes and tails plated, sometimes with coloured ribbons. Other things of note were the hedge rows and the trees in Marsh Road and Albion Street. They were pretty in the Spring and Autumn and a haven for wild birds. There were lots of wild flowers.

THE LAST LAP

Now back to the final run to school. On the riverside of the road was a butchers shop, some houses and a pop makers and bottlers factory. If we ventured in their yard we were soon chased out. Just past there was another passage down to the river, on the left hand side of it was a little shop owned by a Mrs Hurling - a lovely lady. She made all her own pastry, meat pies and sausage rolls.

Her shop was the front room and she baked on her kitchen range. The right hand side of the passage was a builders yard on which I saw the new Fire Station built. It was grand to see the fire engines turn out. Another fish shop nearby.

On the north side of Albion Street from Chain Bridge was a pub, two shops, a fish shop, a garage and a private dead end road known as The Green. In The Green was a wheelwright and a sign writer who I got to know better when I started work. I loved watching him work. He offered to teach me his trade in my spare time, but I didn't take him up. Later I wished I had.

From the garage, we have been in Westlode Street. The Westlode was an open drain that ran through the town and into the river near the Fire Station. It was piped and covered over and Westlode Street built on it. My school was named Westlode Street School. A sweet shop and barber's shop was between The Green and our school. The sweet shop was very popular with us school children.

I had my hair cut once a month at Mr Clark's barber shop. At the age of twelve he asked me if I would like to work for him. I did. I worked Friday evenings and all day Saturday. On Friday I got to work as soon as I could after cycling home for my tea and changing out of my school clothes. On Saturdays I started at nine o'clock am and worked until we shut shop, mostly around ten o'clock pm, or even later. When we got a slack period, I went to Mrs Hurling's shop over the road for a bottle of pop and a homemade meat pie and ate it sitting on a crate of pop bottles in the shop.

I worked for Mr Clark as lather boy until I left school for two shillings and six pence a weekend, but tips were very good. I learned a lot at Mr Clark's. By the time I left I could shave a man. I learnt to be polite and converse with the customers.

And so to school. As you may have noticed I liked going to and from school, it was the bit in between I didn't care for.