

# A Child's West London

By : Carl Halling

Extracts taken from the longer story, "The Gambolling Baby Boomer" (roman a clef version; so some names have been changed). All the events detailed above are accurate to the best of my knowledge, and as ever I write in a spirit of Christian truth and integrity to the best of my ability.

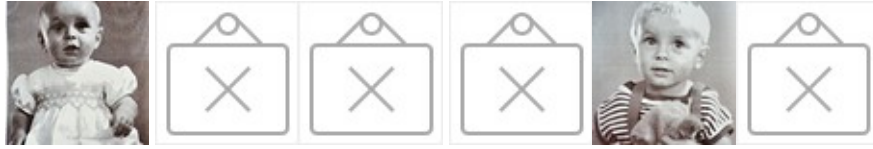


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I was born a Londoner on Friday the 7 October 1955 at the tail end of a street to the west of the city called Goldhawk Road, and my first home was a little workman's cottage in the long-demolished Bulmer Place in Notting Hill. You'll search in vain for this poky little street in any London map, although you'll still be able to locate a Bulmer Mews tucked away some yards away from the main road of Notting Hill Gate. My brother was born two and a half years later, by which time my parents had been able to afford their own house in Bedford Park in what was then the London Borough of Acton. During my boyhood, it was still demographically mixed, yet well on the way to becoming completely gentrified. Future Shepherd's Bush tough guy Roger Daltrey had moved there from Notting Hill a little time before we did. A few years later, he formed a group in the Skiffle - or Jug Band - style called The Detours. Once it had shape-shifted into The Who, its furiously hedonistic music and philosophy would go on to make a permanent impression on the Western psyche, and help fuel the British Invasion of America. My first school was a kind of nursery school held locally on a daily basis at the private residence of one Miss Pierce, and then aged 4 years old, I joined the exclusive Lycée Français Charles de Gaulle, situated in the fabulously opulent West London area of South Kensington, where I was to become bilingual by the age of four or thereabouts. My father was far from wealthy, but he was determined that my brother and I enjoy the best and richest education imaginable, and we were dressed in lederhosen with our heads shorn like convicts, so that we be distinguished from the common run of British boys with their short back and sides, and to this end, he worked, toiled incessantly to ensure that we did. Almost every race and nationality under the sun was to be found in the Lycée in those days... and among those who went on to be good pals of mine were kids of English, French, Jewish, American, Yugoslavian and Middle Eastern origin.

The sixties' social and sexual revolution was already well under way; and yet for all that, seminal Pop groups such as the Searchers and the Dave Clark Five - even the Beatles themselves - were quaint and wholesome figures in a still innocent England. They fitted in well in a nation of Norman Wisdom pictures and the well-spoken presenters of the BBC Home or Light Service, of coppers, tanners and ten bob notes, sweet shops and tuppenny chews. For all the change that raged around me, my own little world was an idyllic one that had hardly changed since the day I was born, when the spirit of Victorian morality was still more or less intact in Britain.

I was an articulate and sociable kid from the word go, walking, talking early just like my dad before me, but agitated, unable to rest, what they might call hyperactive today. Then, at some stage in the early to mid sixties I became a problem both at school and home: a disruptive influence in the class, and a trouble-maker in the streets, an eccentric loon full of madcap fun and half-deranged imaginativeness whose unusual physical appearance was enhanced by a striking thinness and enormous long-lashed blue eyes. Less charmingly, I was also the kind of deliberately malicious little hooligan who'd remove a paper from a neighbour's letter-box, and then mutilate it before re-posting it. Beatlemania invaded my world in 1963, and I first announced my own status as a Beatlemaniac at the Lycée in that landmark year. It was the very year, I think, that I took an intense dislike to an American kid called Rick, who later became my friend. I used to attack him for no reason at all other than to assert my superiority over him. One day, he finally flipped and gave me a rabbit punch in the stomach, but he wasn't punished, perhaps because the teacher had a strong idea I'd started the trouble in the first place.

By the end of the year, a single new group had started threatening the Beatles' position as my favourite in the world. They were the Rolling Stones; although my initial reaction to what I saw as a rough and sullen performance of Buddy Holly's "Not Fade Away" on TV, was one of bitter disappointment. But before long, I'd become utterly entranced by these martyrs to the youth movement, and during a musical discussion I

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can remember having about a 65 with some of the new breed of English roses, who may or may not have been flaunting mod girl fringes and kinky boots, I proudly announced my undying fealty. One of the girls was a Fab Four loyalist and had the requisite seraphic smile, while another preferred the Animals, and acted cooler than the rest of us, as if those Geordie bluesmen were somehow superior to mere Pop acts like the Beatles and the Stones.

I divided my time between the Lycée and my West London stomping ground, and from a very young age took Judo classes at the Budokwai in South Kensington. It was there that one of my teachers, a former British international who'd fought in the first ever World Judo championships in Japan, once despairingly said that he always knew it was Saturday once he'd heard my voice. Some of the other kids knew me as Alley Cat, and it was a pretty apt name when you think of it. Later, I took classes at the Judokan in Hammersmith, but if I thought I was going to raise Cain there I had another thing coming, given that its owner was a one-time captain of the British international team who'd served as an air gunner with 83 squadron during World War II. He later held Judo classes in Stalag 383. I went on to study Karate with him, and was still doing so as late as 1973, when I got it into my head that I no longer wished to have anything to do with anything martial, precious blooming aesthete that I was. For all that, I was rarely happier than on those Wednesday evenings, when I attended the 20th Chiswick Wolf Cub pack and I was less of a menace there than pretty well anywhere else I can think of.

Thanks to a story I wrote in the mid 1970s, the solemnity of my enrolment, and being helped up a tree by an older cub to secure my Athletics badge can live on, as well as the time I won my first star, and my swimming badge with its peculiar frog symbol, and a memory of the pomp and the seriousness of a mass meeting I attended, with its different coloured scarves, sweaters and hair, and the tears I shed, despite the kindness of the older cockney kids who were so eager to help me find my way back home to Chiswick High Road.

There was a point in the mid '60s when I was dubbed Le Général by a long-suffering form teacher at the Lycée in consequence of what she presumably - perceived as my dominance in the playground with regard to a tight circle of friends, and my tongue-in-cheek superciliousness in the classroom. This typically saw me at the back of the class leaning against the wall pretending to smoke a fat cigar like a Chicago tough guy.

Certainly, I was not above organising elaborate playground deceptions. One involved me pretending to banish one of my best friends, Bobby, from whatever activity we had going on at the time. He played along by putting on a superb display of water works, which had the desired effect of arousing the tender mercies of some of the girls. They duly rounded on me for my hard-heartedness, but I refused to budge. Of course it was all a big joke, and Bobby and I had never been closer. I can remember going around to his house to lounge on his bed watching "The Baron" or "Adam Adamant" before staying the night at the central London home he shared with his American father, a gentle melancholy redhead who'd been very much in love with his English wife. In '67, he spent a week with me in the wilds of Wales as part of a course known as the Able Boys. This was a combination of a simple sailing school and what could be termed outward bound activities which involved us living in tents and cooking our own food under the supervision of "mates". I spent one week there with Bobby, and another with my cousin Rod.

If I was Le Général at the Lycée, back home I saw myself as the leader of the kids whose houses backed onto the dirty alley that ran parallel to our side of the Esmond Road in those days but has almost certainly vanished by now.

One fateful day I crossed the road to announce a feud with the kids of the clean alley, so-called because unlike ours it was concreted over rather than being just a dirt track. It was to cost me dear. Soon after the feud had thawed I went over to pal around with some of the clean alley kids who I now saw as my allies, but there must have still been some bad blood because before long a scrap was under way and I was getting the worst of it. Finally I agreed to leave, and as I shamefully cycled off my bike squeaked all the way home in unison with great heaving sobs. If my good mate, local tough Dave, had been with me on that afternoon in the clean alley, it's likely I would never have had to suffer as I did. Dave lived virtually opposite us in Bedford Park, but he was from another dimension altogether. He was a skinny cockney kid with muscles like pure steel who seems to me today to have been born to wage war on the bomb sites of post-war London. For some reason, he became devoted to me; "Carly", he'd always cry when he wanted my attention, and he'd always be welcome at our house even though this brought my family some opprobrium within the neighbourhood. One of my

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mother's closest friends warned her of my association with Dave as if genuinely concerned I might end up going to the bad, but he was a good kid at heart...and one of my dearest memories from my early school days.



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