

Another Christmas Story

Memories of Christmas at St. Joseph's, Enfield 1936 - 1942

VERY FEW OF THE BOYS AT ST. JOSEPHS HAD EVER EXPERIENCED CHRISTMAS OUTSIDE THE CONFINES OF THE ORPHANAGE, THE MAJORITY HAVING BEEN TAKEN INTO CARE SHORTLY AFTER THEIR BIRTH OR AT A VERY EARLY AGE. NEVERTHELESS OUR SPIRITS ROSE AS THE CHRISTMAS PREPARATION BEGAN EARLY IN DECEMBER.

Extra prayers would be said for our Benefactors, as it was these very generous people who would provide the money to pay for any extras at Christmas time. Welfare State Benefits did not exist to ease the financial burden on the Crusade of Rescue.

On Christmas Eve, during Midnight Mass the boys sang the Carols during the Mass at the top of their voices. After Mass the boys made their way to the refectory to have a mug of coffee. This was the only time in the year that the boys were given coffee to drink. There was always a buzz of excitement, as it was Christmas and this meant that despite a time of unbelievable hardship for everyone in the country, for the Christmas period there would be extra food and entertainment to enjoy. For one week only, the Government gave people a small increase in their meagre rations to allow for the Christmas festivities. *The excesses of today were unknown.*

The excitement of Christmas Day and the expectation of a good dinner followed by Christmas pudding was always uppermost in our minds. Canon Craven who was the Administrator of the Crusade of Rescue and his deputy Father Bernard

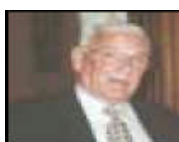
George would always carry in the pudding pour brandy over the pudding and set fire to it. We always cheered when this was done, although I have never discovered why they did it. Our usual supper of a mug of cocoa and bread and margarine, was supplemented with the addition of jam and a slice of fruitcake.

On Boxing Day, parcels were distributed to those boys that had been sent parcels by parents or relatives. The Sisters would come among these lucky boys and ask for something from their parcels to give to boys who were not so fortunate; which was the majority. I always enjoyed Boxing Day more than Christmas Day, because there were always the added treats of a conjurer coming to entertain us with his tricks followed by a film show.

The Christmas festivities extended to the Epiphany January 6th. The highlight of the Christmas season was; what was known to the boys as, “The Palmers Green Party.” This always took place on the first Sunday of the New Year. The New Year’s party was provided by the Knights of St. Columba from Palmers Green. It consisted of a splendid party where lots of goodies to eat, that were not available to us during the remainder of the year, were served. Every boy received a gift, the most prized of which was a football. We were entertained by a professional artist, who always led us in a rousing sing-song. This was followed by a really old film show.

Canon Craven always closed the proceeding by asking the boys to give three cheers, as loud as we could, for all our Benefactors and to remember them in our prayers.

An added bonus for everyone living in Britain during the Blitz, was that bombing ceased over Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in both 1940 and 1941. This gave welcome relief for everyone living in London, as we were.



Norman Taylor

Norman Taylor – At the Benefactor’s Mass 2009

(Scroll down for a complimentary adjunct by TB)

An adjunct to Norman's Story

Norman - Hello!

Thank you for your complimentary comments on my Stud Farm (circa 1950's) Christmas remembered essay. Most of the photos accompanying it I took myself, using a camera with a self timer.: 10 seconds to jump in front...

Your Piece on St. Joseph's Home in the 1930's was most interesting and described a very happy time for you among the inmates with lots of atmosphere. In the 1940's, the Palmers Green Knights of St. Columba never failed and the bonus was their connection with a USAF base at either Stansted or Croydon. The airmen stationed there gave us a party on New Year's Day and even brought a Jeep for us to sit in. Later we watched their loaned copy of a movie with Shirley Temple singing and dancing ...

I remember the Christmas Dinner soup being formally tasted by The Mother Superior whose sign of approval had us banging on our enamel tin plates with eager anticipation. Charles Dickens would have wept. We had frankfurter sausages one year - 1944 possibly. By the 1950's things were much better. I remember the Jewish couple my mother was live-in house-keeper/child-carer to, bringing gifts to be given to those who had no parents or visitors. I was puzzled about this as there was an undercurrent of anti-jewishness among the big (bully boys).

The main memory of St. Joseph's Christmas for me is the frenetic spell of major cleaning throughout the whole institution and the Sister's preparation for Midnight Mass. The holly garlands that festooned the chapel Stations of The Cross were individually leaf threaded onto long strings.: we wore improvised gloves made from undarnable socks..

As a child of 5 (1945) I thought the baby Jesus was born in the Sacristy. The massive - almost walk into it Crib - was empty and in darkness when we filed into the Chapel for Midnight Mass. Then Canon George went into the Sacristy, after hearing some confessions, and carried the statue of the baby Jesus, led by a procession of all the nuns singing loudly and carrying the lifelike, oxen, ass and sheep which were placed carefully in the straw. There was a stuffed robin and other similar birds looking on. Finally, when all was placed Canon George miraculously switched on a light within the Crib's star and Christmas began.

After Midnight Mass we all went to the refectory and had a mug of cocoa. Canon George, smoking a cigar - I can't remember the Mother Superior having a puff - wished us all a Very Happy Christmas. We were already thinking of breakfast: the thought of the annual fried egg, bacon and sausage dominated. Had we been able to see into the kitchen we would have seen the trays containing the goodies already laid out to go into the coal-fired range.

Everyone got a present: a dolly, a book or a puzzle was the gratified expectation.

A very happy New Year. TB



Tony: it would appear that Norman Taylor and yourself went to a different St. Josephs than myself. Xmas 1931-1941: I can remember the Xmas routine as if it was yesterday. On the morning of Xmas Eve the whole school marched down to the Rialto cinema in Enfield Town. As we entered the cinema we were each given a bag of sweets. I'm trying to remember the top film stars of the day: names that come to mind are Tom Mix and Flash Gordon. Usually a Cowboy and Indians type of film..

Halfway during the show this theatre organ would arise from somewhere down below bathed in multi-coloured lights. Besides the boys of St. Josephs, the cinema was full with lots of other children. It was the same performance thing every year. The organist played all the latest hits of the day and complained he couldn't hear the boys from St. Josephs singing. As I wrote in my book, I thought he was a silly sod..

For most of my time at St. Josephs all we had in the way of music was a clapped out wind-up gramophone and a single 78 record of someone singing the Laughing Policeman. Back at St. Josephs a few of us would help to decorate the refectory. Xmas day started like any other day: no bacon and fried egg in my day. The first fried egg I ever tasted was at Blaisdon on some Feast Day.

CHRISTMAS DAY - TASTY RABBIT

Xmas 1931-1932 cont., Xmas day started like any other day. Breakfast as normal: two slices of bread and “marg” (margarine) and a cup of tea.. I forgot to mention Midnight Mass. Most of the boys aged over 10 years of age attended this Mass. I can honestly say I never attended one Midnight Mass. There must have been a reason. As to what happened after Mass - I have no idea.

Back to Xmas day. Dinner was rather special. braised rabbit, cooked to perfection, plus mashed potatoes and greens of some sort. Whilst eating this repast I used to think why the nuns couldn't produce meals like that every day. Dinner was followed by Xmas Pudding and custard.

BOXING DAY - WILL THERE BE A PARCEL FOR ME?

The rest of the day was like any other day.. Boxing Day was personally a bad day for me. Sometime in the afternoon we would all gather in the play-hall. At one end of the hall there would be a big pile of parcels.

Two nuns took part. One nun would call out the name of the recipient? The other nun would assist in opening the parcel. For ten years I used to watch this pile of parcels getting smaller and smaller. For the ten years I was at St. Josephs the same half dozen of us went away empty handed. One of the boys who had a parcel stated that the nuns used to make up a parcel for the unfortunates. It didn't happen in my day. One could always wait to next years Boxing day.

KNIGHTS AND SHINING TORCHES

Another big event was the party on the first Sunday in January given by The Knights of St. Columbus from Palmers Green: a fabulous day! As we walked into the refectory in the evening the tables were laden with cakes sweets, jelly etc. The people who organised this party were so kind. We'd leave the refectory to go to the play-hall. There, we would watch a conjuring show followed by a black and white (silent) film.

At the end of it all we would all receive a small present. A large percentage of us received torches. Without seeming ungrateful (far from it) the torches were great fun for a couple of hours. By the time we went to bed, most of the torches had flat batteries:. 99% of us had no money. After a couple of days, the torches were utilised as footballs. Those parties from the people of Palmers Green were the highlight for most of the boys.

The day after Boxing Day everything was back to normality.

Eric Natcher