

# **HAROLD'S STORY**

## **Preface**

*Just before Harold retired to Wales in 1979 a number of people asked him what he was going to do with himself, thinking that after his active working life he would become bored. Among those was Dennis Udall who suggested that Harold should write his life story. Harold quickly dismissed this idea – he knew exactly the sort of things he intended to do in retirement and sitting down writing was not one of them. He had enough of being at a desk during recent years and anyway he thought the story of his life would not make particularly interesting reading. Many years later, when Harold was ninety and had done many more incredible things, I remembered this suggestion and decided that, if he would not write the story, then I would. In spite of what he thought, it had been a remarkable life, where almost overwhelming difficulties had been overcome and challenges had been met with great fortitude. I considered the future generations should know of this, especially the grandchildren and great grandchildren, whose childhood, with all the comforts, possessions and opportunities given to them, had been so different from his. I hope after reading this they be might be inspired to live with similar determination and courage.*

*As for myself, the more I continued with the book the more I realised how great an influence he had had on me and what strength of character I had gained from him. It was not always easy living with such a perfectionist but how different my life would have been had I not fallen in love and married this amazing man who has left me a legacy of wonderful memories.*

*Rene Hayes*

## **Chapter 1 Early Years**

Harold's mother, Clara Emma Harris, was born in Shropshire in November 1887. She was the third of five children, all girls except the youngest, Frank. The family moved several times while the children were growing up, all within the Ironbridge area. Granny Harris seemed to have an obsession for moving house. Later on for many years she lived at Rose Cottage, Ketley Bank, and eventually moved to Horsehay where she died in her nineties.

When Clara left school she was sent to work as a servant in a big house in Buildwas. The family for whom she worked sometimes visited friends who farmed near Bramhall in Cheshire, taking Clara with them on occasions. It was here that she met her future husband, Thomas, who was in charge of the horses on the farm. There appears to be little information about Thomas or his family. They were married on Christmas Eve, 1911 and soon after moved to 139, Nelson Street in the Bradford area of Manchester, where Clara lived for over fifty years. Thomas found employment at a nearby steel works. It must have been a great contrast for both of them who, until then, had always lived and worked in a quiet rural setting. They had known little of the noise and bustle of city life and of the crowded and often squalid conditions in which the working classes were compelled to live.

It was here in Nelson Street, that Harold was born on 6<sup>th</sup> February 1919 and where he spent all his childhood. He had three elder siblings, Ellen, born in 1913, Arthur in 1914 and Wilf in 1916. Jim, who was born in 1921, unfortunately had a deformation of his feet and he was hospitalised many times with frequent operations in an endeavour to straighten the bones. He needed to wear callipers and had to attend a special school.. When he was about twelve or thirteen he was seen by an eminent orthopaedic specialist at Ancoats Hospital who performed

another operation which had a more permanent and successful effect. This meant the callipers were no longer needed and Jim could lead a more or less normal life though he always needed special footwear even when he was accepted in the army.

The house was in a cobbled street of terraced red brick houses with sash windows and wooden doors and with their living rooms opening directly on to the pavement. Across the road was a stable where some local tradesmen kept their horses and carts, to one side of which was the playground of the Grange Street Infants School. On the other side were more terraced dwellings and a coal yard. At the end of the street was a corner shop that sold groceries, sweets, tobacco etc. There was not much traffic and what there was largely horse drawn. There was little space at the back of the houses so most of the women hung their washing on lines strung across the street. They were very annoyed when any large motor trucks came along which necessitated holding up the lines with clothes props after having removed some of the central garments. In spite of the grime and dirt in this industrial area the women, on the whole, were very house-proud and would diligently clean their windows, scrub their steps and window ledges and even the paving slabs. Street sellers were up and down the street most days calling their wares. There was the woman with a box on three wheels who shrilly yelled ‘Crumpets, Crumpets’. Another regular call was that of the ‘Rag and Bone’ man who would push his barrow up the centre of the street singing ‘ Wine bottles, beer bottles. Any rags, bottles or bones’. There was an elderly Jew who would carry panes of glass strapped across his back crying ‘Any windows, any windows to mend today, I wish all those windows would break’. His services were often necessary because of the ball games that were played in the street. The Italian ice-cream vendors were the favourites. Their cart, pulled by a pony, looked as if it belonged in a fairy tale book. It was brightly coloured and decorated with carved pillars at the corners of the cart that supported the roof.

Like most of the other houses 139, Nelson Street was a ‘two up and two down’. On the ground floor was a living room and kitchen with stone-flagged floors. Centred between these was a straight staircase leading to the two bedrooms. The main bedroom had a small fireplace, though it is doubtful whether a fire was ever lit there. There was an iron bedstead, washstand, dressing table and chest of drawers. The back room had two beds, one large and one small, and a recess where clothes and bedding were stored. These rooms were icy cold in winter often with frost on the insides of the windowpanes. The window frames were ill fitting and draughty.

It was much cosier downstairs in the living room where there was a kitchen range with an oven and water boiler. A gleaming copper kettle stood on the hob as a permanent source of hot water. To the left of the range was a floor to ceiling cupboard and to the right was a hanging space concealed by a curtain. Above this was a shelf with ornaments and a few family photos but pride of place was given to a small ‘escritoire’, possibly a wedding present from the family at Builwas, where Clara had worked. Horse brasses hung either side of the fireplace – mementoes of Thomas’ work on the farm. The furniture consisted of a deal table, covered by a fringed chenille cloth, and four wooden chairs, a chaise longue and a rocking chair. The latter was often a source of imaginative play for Harold, who, pretending he was in a horse and trap, would kneel in it and rock violently while hanging on to ropes from the clothes airer which hung from the ceiling. The floor was covered in linoleum with a pegged rug in front of the fire around which was a high fireguard with a shining brass top.

In the kitchen, under the window looking out on to the back yard was a shallow porcelain sink with one cold tap. As well as being used for washing pots etc. this was where the family all carried out their daily ablutions. Beside the sink was a wash boiler that was heated by a fire underneath. On washing day Clara would get up very early to light this. Washing would take up the whole day from scrubbing the clothes on the living room table beforehand until late in the evening doing the ironing, again on the table. Curtains were taken down and washed every three or four weeks because they quickly became dirty in the polluted atmosphere. A mangle with wooden rollers and a big winding wheel stood against a wall, using this was a hard back-aching job. The children were forbidden to touch this but nevertheless sometimes succumbed to temptation and on one occasion Wilf had his fingers trapped when he and Harold were mangling newspapers. Also in the kitchen was a tiny gas stove with a single burner on top and a very small oven beneath. There was no electricity in the house for some years. Along one wall was the pantry with shelves and a stone slab. There was also a meat-safe with perforated zinc front. There was more storage space under the stairs. A back door gave access to the small yard where there was a toilet and a coal shed. Thomas had a wooden container and a window box where he grew a few flowers to remind him of his former life. From time to time there were rabbits in a hutch, which the boys had made from old orange boxes. Harold had been especially fond of a fluffy white one he called Snowball, which he bought for sixpence from Tib Street Market. At the bottom

of the yard was a gate on to the back entry which separated it from the yards of the houses in the street behind. Coal was delivered regularly through the gate and tipped into the shed.

It must have been a very hard life for Clara especially as the family increased but her early training stood her in good stead and the house was kept tidy and spotless. The children were always clean and neat, their clothes well laundered though darned and patched many times. Each week they were bathed in a small zinc bath which was brought into the kitchen from the yard. Thomas had a last in the kitchen where he would repair the family's shoes and assisted Clara in many ways. They were thrifty and careful about how they spent the meagre wage that Thomas brought home each Friday. Over the years the work at the steel factory was intermittent and Thomas found himself out of work a number of times. On these occasions he would be outside the factory at 6am to join the queue of those hoping to be taken on once more. At these times there was barely enough money to buy provisions for a family of seven but most of the time there was enough food to give the children a simple but adequate diet. Like most housewives Clara baked her own bread and on baking days the house would be filled with the aroma of freshly baked loaves. One of Harold's favourite teatime snacks was a slice of bread with black treacle – no butter or margarine. Bread and dripping was another, especially if there a jelly from the solidified meat juices. Thomas seldom had a drink, apart from perhaps joining his workmates at Christmas. He allowed himself just ten cigarettes a week but otherwise his earnings were spent almost entirely on paying the rent, buying coal and feeding and clothing the family. He had a good singing voice and would often entertain the family with renderings of popular music hall songs of the day, standing with his back to the fire. Harold remembered many of these and later on in life was able to amuse people with them on a number of occasions. A money-saving trick (common among many of the working class of those days) instead of paying a chimney sweep to brush the soot down, was to clean the chimney by deliberately setting fire to it – dangerous and illegal. This was preferably done on a wet night, when the police were less likely to be patrolling the streets. Thomas would make a long 'spill' with newspapers rolled up thinly and soaked in paraffin. He would then push this up the chimney before putting a match to the bottom. Very soon the soot lining the flue would ignite and with a big roar there would be a great blaze all the way up to the top. Clouds of black, evil-smelling smoke and glowing sparks would belch from the chimney. This conflagration would last for several minutes before gradually subsiding.

Clara must have become familiar with taking her children to hospital from time to time especially Jim with his deformed feet. From a very early age Harold was noticeably short-sighted. Clara carried him down to the Eye Department of the Royal Infirmary where he was examined and given a pair of steel-rimmed glasses with very thick lenses. Later on at school he was given the nickname 'Specky 4 Eyes'. A traumatic hospital trip occurred when Harold was about seven years old. He was running home pretending to be a train and hopping up and down the kerbs when he tripped and bit his tongue. He ran screaming in the house with blood pouring from his mouth. Clara grabbed her shawl and with Harold in her arms dashed down to Ashton Old Road for a tram to Roby Street Hospital in the centre of town. The doctor there took one look, shook his head and ordered an ambulance which took Harold, Clara and a nurse who was holding a basin to catch the blood which was swishing to and fro with the movement of the vehicle. At the Manchester Royal Infirmary the tongue was stitched and it was a subdued little boy who was taken home. The next day, to Clara's dismay, he managed to jiggle the stitches out, and the wound had to be re-stitched.

Some days when life was particularly fraught and the children were misbehaving or grizzling Clara would lose her temper and shout at them and give them a smack but both she and Thomas were devoted parents and the family started life with a stable and loving background.

## **Chapter 2 School Days**

When he reached the age of five Harold was excited at the prospect of starting Grange Street Infants School just across the road. At first he was very upset at being left by his mother amongst a crowd of other children in a large, strange environment. However he had a kind and understanding teacher and slowly he began to settle to the infants school routine and to enjoy the challenges presented. In the reception class the pupils sat at tables or on mats on the floor and much time was spent playing with bricks, plasticine, crayons and various toys. In the next class the boys sat at rows of double desks and began their more formal education. Because of his poor sight Harold would sit at the front where he was able to see the blackboard and even then often had difficulties. He was a bright and able pupil and quickly mastered the three Rs. He got great pleasure from books and was an avid reader. When he was a bit

bigger he discovered he could climb over the playground wall into Nelson Street and once or twice he ran home at 'playtime' and got a treacle butty.

The whole of Harold's school life was spent at Grange Street School in classes of up to fifty children. After the infants he moved to the block for the older children, the girls on the ground floor and the boys upstairs. The headmaster, Mr Ashton was not well liked. A rigorous disciplinarian, usually dressed in a smart navy blue suit and white shirt, he frequently used a leather strap as punishment for even quite minor misdemeanours. When the boys left school the only advice he gave was 'keep out of trouble'.

On one occasion Harold felt particularly resentful of him. A local charity, the White Heather Fund arranged for all the Manchester schoolchildren to visit Heaton Park, a very extensive and natural area and popular venue for relaxation and enjoyment, four miles north of the city and owned by Manchester Corporation. Many hundreds of children were driven to the park in fleets of double-decker buses for a memorable day out. Afterwards the children had to write about the trip and two entries from each school were sent to be judged by a panel. The writer of the best account would be awarded a gold medal. Harold and a boy called Cyril were picked as the best two from Grange Street. They were taken to an empty classroom and sat on either side of the room to re-write their essays for submission. The whole time they were doing this Mr Ashton sat by Cyril and kept helping him and making suggestions about improving the content while Harold was left to work unaided. The judges picked twelve winners from all the schools. Grange Street did exceptionally well with Cyril being awarded the gold medal. Harold was among the runners up who were to be presented with books signed by Dame Sybil Thorndike, a renowned actress of the day. The medal winner and the runners up were invited to a tea with the Lord Mayor at the Town Hall to be presented with their prizes by Dame Sybil. His dad took Harold there but although parents were invited to this presentation Thomas, who was out of work at the time, would not go inside as he was too ashamed of his shabby clothes. It was an unforgettable occasion but forever after Harold felt that Mr Ashton's behaviour was grossly unfair not only to himself but to all the others who had submitted their efforts, presumably unaided.

A teacher who greatly influenced Harold was Mr Johenson, the class teacher of Standard 7, the top class of the school. Harold spent three years in this class before leaving school at the age of fourteen. Mr Johenson taught well and specialised in science. In spite of the school being in a poor area there was a good science laboratory with benches, Bunsen burners and other equipment. Woodwork and Joinery, taught by Mr Martin, was one of Harold's favourite subjects. There was a separate well-equipped block for this with full sized benches and all the necessary woodwork tools. For the rest of his life Harold was grateful for the excellent instruction given in this subject. The lady teacher of Standard 4 was 'Fat Frawley' who impressed Harold (whose father was a keen Labour Party supporter) by turning up on Election Day wearing a bright yellow blouse and saying 'Guess who I'm voting for?' The only music taught was the weekly singing lesson where the boys stood in rows and sang a lot of meaningless and uninspiring songs accompanied on the piano by Mr Clarkson. While he was still at school Harold was taken to a concert by the Halle Orchestra at the Free Trade Hall. The things that most impressed him were the two large harps that stood at the front of the platform. There was not much in the way of Physical Education. The boys stood in lines in the playground and did exercises known as 'drill' on the timetable. There was an enclosed area close to the school, the remains of an old industrial site. This had been surfaced with asphalt and the boys played football and cricket here. When he was older Harold had a free pass to the local swimming baths. Many lunch times he would rush through his meal so that he could go for a swim before returning to school. In a sport that did not require good vision Harold was able to excel and quickly became an accomplished swimmer and won several awards for swimming and for lifesaving.

Three times Harold sat and passed the scholarship examination for entry to the local secondary school but he did not take up this offer. Neither he nor his parents could see any sense in staying at school until the age of sixteen when a boy could be earning at fourteen and contributing to the family income. Also it was harder for sixteen-year-olds to get work because employers were reluctant to take on older workers as they had to pay insurance for them. Harold's eldest brother, Arthur, had been to secondary school until the age of sixteen and had been unemployed for a long time until he got a menial poorly paid job helping in a greengrocer's shop.

When they weren't at school the children spent much time in the street playing ball games, marbles, hopscotch, chasing and other pastimes using improvised equipment such as bits of rope, boxes, old pram wheels and other junk. Sometimes they got up to mischief but there never seemed to be any serious trouble. The older children would walk long distances to the outskirts of the city to find an area of green country in which to play.

On Sundays the children were sent to the nearby Methodist chapel Sunday school. One Sunday afternoon, a gloriously warm and sunny one, Harold and his two older brothers were wending their way to chapel. At some point they decided it was certainly not the sort of afternoon to be spent sitting indoors and that a much better plan would be to visit their secret 'blackberry cave'. Turning about they trudged up the Ashton New Road for a couple of miles or so until they reached the point where the lane led up towards open country. Here they followed a familiar route to reach a little stream that meandered between high grassy banks that led to an area where thickly growing shrubs and bushes overhung to form their secret 'blackberry cave'. Having crept inside, at one point Harold evidently stood too near the edge of an overhanging bank and fell into the water below. His shoes and stockings and the lower part of the short trousers of his best Sunday suit were soaked. For the rest of the afternoon he tried to amuse himself in the open air where the sun would hopefully dry off his sodden clothing. He gorged on the luscious blackberries which were growing in profusion. Then he noticed that the surrounding vegetation was covered with beautiful, crawling caterpillars – some bright green, some orange and black striped, and some lovely furry backed ones. Having no container in which to collect them he used the breast pocket of his Sunday best Norfolk jacket. After spending a considerable time on these activities his clothes were more or less dry and the brothers eventually made their way home. As usual after tea it was off with the best clothes and up to bed. Harold lay thinking about the pleasurable afternoon he had had when his reveries were shattered by a piercing scream of horror from downstairs followed by an angry demand 'Harold! You come down here this minute!' During Mother's careful brushing and folding away of the boys' best clothes she had made an unpleasant discovery. Having inserted her hand into Harold's pocket to withdraw the lining for brushing she got a handful of something she did not expect and did not very much like. While he was being very soundly scolded he perceived on the table a wriggling mass of caterpillars which he was firmly instructed to gather up promptly and take out to the bin in the yard. Loath as he was to do this he was given no alternative. After more reprimands he was firmly ordered back to bed.

The highlight of the Sunday School year was Whit week. First there were the processions with large ornate banners being carried through the streets with the children attired in their best clothes. Later came the eagerly awaited 'Treat' when charabancs took everyone to a beauty spot somewhere outside the city where various sports, games and competitions were organised by the Sunday school teachers. This was followed by tea, when the children sat on benches to trestle tables and consumed vast quantities of sandwiches, jelly and blancmange and sponge cakes washed down with mugs of tea before returning to the city, tired but happy.

When he was a little older he was able to earn some money at the morning service at the chapel by pumping the organ. In between pumping he sat reading Boys' Own Paper, The Magnet or similar publications. Very occasionally he would become so engrossed with his reading that he let the bellows go flat to the great annoyance of the lady organist who would rattle the pedals furiously until some more air was pumped.

In the summer on their way home from Sunday School the boys would often go to Ashton Hall where the brass band from the nearby works were playing. They would sit for an hour or more enjoying the music.

Very occasionally the family spent a day with the grandparents at Ketley. They would catch an excursion train from Manchester's London Road station to Wellington. Harold became very familiar with this area when he was about eight or nine years old. At that time his mother was rather worried about his health and thought a holiday in the country away from the grimy atmosphere of Nelson Street would be beneficial to him. For a couple of summer holidays, carrying a small cardboard attaché case he was put on the train, in charge of the guard. Grandma Harris met him at Wellington Station. First she took him to Wellington Market to buy him some new clothes and then they walked the couple of miles or so on almost traffic-free roads, including what is now the A5, to Rose Cottage.

What a contrast this was to the house in Manchester. There were two or three other well-spaced dwellings up a hilly lane. Rose Cottage was the last and was almost completely covered in ivy and Alexandra roses with tiny windows peeping out through the dense vegetation. It was end on to the road and facing a long garden with colourful flowers and fruit bushes growing in wild profusion. Because of the small windows the inside of the house was rather dark. There was no gas or electricity and at night the rooms were lit by oil lamps and candles. There was no tap in the house and the water had to be carried from the 'brewus', a lean-to washhouse where the grandparents brewed their own beer. The water came from a well, a short distance from the front of the cottage. It was piped from here to the 'brewus' where there was a hand pump. The well itself could not be seen as it was smothered in sweet peas and other plants.. There was a constant warning from Grandma to Harold not to go

anywhere near that well. Some little way from the house was a small square shed with hessian sacking across the doorway. Inside was an earth closet toilet, a wooden boxed-in structure with a hole in the top. This was periodically emptied by granddad with his spade from the other side of the hedge where he had access to the cess pit by The Mount. Sometimes the wooden toilet seat was covered in tiny frogs.

Grandma was kind but strict and liked her own way in the house so that grandpa had to stick by the rules. He had to go outside and sit in his little tool shed to smoke his pipe. He spent much contented time here away from his nagging wife.

Harold was very happy to play imaginatively on his own exploring the large garden. Sometimes, unbeknown to Grandma, he would slip out of the back gate and climb up The Mount by the nearby iron works. Another favourite spot was the long hen coop at one side of the garden which was covered with wire netting. Inside was a horizontal perch, formed by a tree branch nailed to an upright at one end. Harold used to go into this coop and sit quietly on the perch, the hens taking little heed. One day unfortunately the perch snapped under his weight which was considerably more than that of one or two hens. Harold was precipitated to the ground creating a tremendous squawking and fluttering of startled hens. This brought Grandma rushing from the cottage and Harold was in deep trouble.

Sometimes they would visit Auntie Gerty and Uncle Harry who lived close by at Horsehay. Uncle Harry used to brew the beer for the village inn. This was called 'The Labour in Vain' and bore a sign of a curly-haired 'nigger boy' in a tin bath being vigorously scrubbed by an elderly lady. Uncle Harry was reputed to have a secret cure for making warts disappear. He also kept ferrets which he used to catch rabbits.

Although Harold enjoyed these long holidays he was happy to return home to his family and friends in Nelson Street and to go back to school.

### **Chapter 3 Teenage years**

When he left Grange Street School, with his headmaster's useless advice ringing in his ears, Harold was determined to get a job. Because he had done well in written work and arithmetic he hoped to get a job in one of the many offices in the city. He walked round the city centre knocking at doors inquiring if they had any vacancies.

He was eventually given work by a manufacturer's agent which was run solely by one man, Gilbert Moffatt. He dealt mainly with firms manufacturing linens, hessians, tarpaulins etc. Harold was employed as a general help, delivering orders to local firms, typing correspondence and various other tasks. He enjoyed the work and continued his education by attending evening classes at the Manchester School of Commerce where he studied accountancy, shorthand, English and Maths.

After working here for a few years this job ended sadly and dramatically. One morning arriving at work, he found the door difficult to open at first and thought there had been a heavy post which was obstructing it. He gave a push and dashed across to answer the phone which had just started to ring. It was Mrs Moffatt enquiring whether her husband was at the office as he had not been at home all night. Just then Harold became aware of a strong smell of gas. He told Mrs Moffatt to hold on a moment and went over to the fireplace where he discovered a bundle of coats on the floor and a pair of shoes showing beneath them. On lifting a coat to his great horror he saw the face of his employer, his hand clutching a gas tube to his mouth. He was obviously dead. Quickly Harold turned off the gas and opened the windows wide before returning to the phone where Mrs Moffatt was waiting. He couldn't tell her of his gruesome discovery but said her husband was very ill and suggested she come to the office immediately. He cut the call off abruptly and then dialled for an ambulance. Knowing there was a policeman close by directing traffic at a very busy road junction, Harold rushed into the middle of the road to tell him of the incident and urged him to come quickly. The policeman, in a dazzling white 'traffic coat' immediately dropped his arms, and quickly followed Harold, leaving the traffic to sort itself out. Later, after making a statement to the police, Harold spent the remainder of the day writing to the manufacturers with whom the firm dealt, informing them of the situation before going home feeling very shaken and upset. A verdict of suicide was given at the inquest where Harold was the key witness. Apparently Mr Moffatt, according to his wife, had been fearful that he was suffering from cancer.

His next job was in the accounts department at Manchester's famous Bellevue Zoological gardens and Entertainment Centre. The work may or may not have been particularly interesting but the environment certainly was. The zoo was one of the finest collections of animals in England at that time. Harold often chatted with the keepers and learned much about their charges. He was especially fascinated by the elephants that were looked after by Phil Fernandez, a Malayan, who, when on public duty dressed in exotic eastern clothing.

Each morning on his way to the office Harold would pass 'Monkey Mountain', a large mound where scores of monkeys could run freely. There was a moat round it to keep the animals contained. One icy winter morning Harold arrived in the Park to find monkeys scampering everywhere – the water in the moat had frozen. When their keeper arrived he was at his wits end trying to recapture all the animals and make them stay on the 'mountain' now there was nothing to restrain them from escaping.

When on early morning duty Harold would often cycle round the extensive grounds. On one occasion when passing the cheetah cage he was startled by a great crash. The occupant, apparently just awakening from a sleep, made a great attacking leap at Harold on his bike. He hit the bars of his cage full force and probably suffered a bad headache for the rest of the day. Another day he was surprised by a hippopotamus who suddenly surfaced with a great whoosh, sending up a large spray of water.

As well as the zoo Harold was able to enjoy many of the attractions for which the Bellevue was renowned. Kings Hall, which had seating for vast crowds, was the venue for many events, including brass band contests, wrestling and boxing bouts, circuses, ice shows etc. Harold once had the job of working the spotlight at one of the ice shows when he sat in a box high up in the roof directing the lights.

One of the things that made a great impression on him were the fabulous fireworks which were staged on the island in the lower boating lake. The spectacular display was enjoyed by hundreds of viewers in high stands on the lakeshore, from the lakeside itself and from the outdoor dance floor.

Two of the most popular attractions in the park were the Scenic Railway and Bob's Coaster. The latter, even by today's standards, was a hair-raising ride. Each morning the manager would check the ride by giving the cars a trial run and occasionally Harold would sit in an empty car while it made the circuit.

From about the age of eleven Harold had been keenly interested in cycling. His first bike was handed down from brother Arthur who had bought himself a new one. Harold found himself a map of cycle routes and was soon off exploring the district. On one occasion he rode all the way to Southport, a distance of over 40 miles, without telling his parents who would certainly have forbidden the trip. His route took him via Wigan on cobbled surfaces practically the whole way. He had taken no food or drink with him and had no money. When he reached Southport he rode along Rotten Row to Birkdale where a year or so before he had spent a week at a camp for the 'Poor Children of Manchester'. On the way back he began to feel very weary and at one point seeing a couple standing at their garden gate he asked for a drink of water. Meanwhile, back at Nelson Street, when it began to get dark and there was still no sign of Harold, Clara and Thomas began to get extremely anxious. When eventually, an exhausted boy arrived home they were so relieved that they refrained from giving him the scolding that he deserved. For the next day or two his wrists and hands ached badly from all the juddering received from that long ride over all those cobbles. In a year or two he purchased a better bicycle and eventually became the owner of a specially hand-built Sisset.

Harold's greatest friend, his cycling and camping companion was a cheery lad, George Fenton, whose parents had a second-hand furniture shop in the next street. Harold and George were to remain friends throughout their lives and kept in touch until in their nineties even though George had lived in Canada since 1954.

At the age of fourteen Harold and George bought themselves a tent, a green canvas Bukta, about 4ft 6in high and 5ft wide. They had to save every penny they could earn to buy this and the necessary gear to go with it, especially Harold who had only just left school. George had left the previous summer. It was early 1933 and they planned to spend the Easter weekend camping near Charlesworth in Derbyshire. George had managed to acquire a large wooden box from his place of employment. It was roughly six feet long and two feet square. Having lugged this home from the city they started to proceed with the packing. As well as the tent and poles there were blankets,

groundsheet, a crude paraffin stove, kettle, frying pan, saucepans, mugs, tin plates, cutlery etc. By the time they had finished it was obviously a very heavy load, almost impossible to move. Undeterred, they found a steel axle and two pram wheels which they fixed to the box. They then trundled this to the local railway station to be taken by train to the goods yard near Glossop. Before leaving it they took off the wheels and axle, stowed them inside the box and then fastened it with hasps and padlocks. The next morning, Good Friday, they cycled over to Glossop and were dismayed to find the goods yard was closed because it was a Bank Holiday. However, they called at the nearby station house and told the wife of the stationmaster about their disappointment. She fetched her husband who kindly came and unlocked the building for them so they could retrieve the box. They then unlocked it and pulled out the wheels and axle which they fixed on before setting off for the campsite at Charlesworth, about three miles of laborious uphill slog. Happy to have reached their destination, they had a brief rest before setting up camp. They pitched their little tent and used the box as a table and storage unit. They spent the rest of day getting things in order and looking around the site. There were only two or three other tents. They chatted with the two lads in a tent close by, Ted Cummings and Tom Brady, who were to become good friends.

That night Harold and George snuggled down happily in their blankets on 'mattresses' made of sacking stuffed with prickly dead bracken from the barn and after the day's exertions were soon asleep. However, they were awake at 5am because of the extreme cold. They went outside and lit the paraffin stove to get some warmth and prepare breakfast. They dare not use it inside the tent as it was rather unpredictable and liable to flare up without warning. They fried some eggs and bacon but by the time they got them to the cold enamel plates the eggs froze on the surfaces. It was a somewhat unappetizing meal but it appeased their hunger and warmed them a little. The sun rose in a cloudless sky but it was bitterly cold. That day they had a wonderful time climbing from Bankbottom Farm, where they were camped, along Coombes Rocks and exploring, what seemed to them, an amazing area. They were fascinated by this gritstone horseshoe with its dramatic slabs of rock, interspersed with dead bracken where there was still evidence of quarrying at one time. From the top there were breath-taking views of Manchester to the west and the Peak District hills to the east. Up and down the rocks they clambered, continuing to be enchanted by the wonders of it all. Back in their little tent that evening two contented boys felt highly satisfied with life.

However, during that second night under canvas they were to experience another aspect of camping when they were awakened by a fierce wind howling round the tent. The canvas walls billowed alarmingly and then, to their dismay, one corner began to rip. Harold knelt on the freezing ground, clutching the torn edges tightly, while George ran up to their neighbours, Ted and Tom, to get help. Somehow they made a temporary repair. After the weekend they took the tent home to mend it properly.

That year they cycled across to the camp most weekends. They were always pleased to meet up with Ted and Tom who were both keen members of the harriers and introduced Harold and George to cross-country running, a sport which Harold thoroughly enjoyed. He later joined the Manchester and Salford Harriers and participated in many events. On one occasion, on the front of the Daily Express, there was a photo of him, clad in just singlet and shorts, running through a gate in mud and snow, watched by spectators who were all heavily muffled against the icy wind with hats, scarves and gloves. One weekend Ethel, the girl who lived next door to Harold in Nelson Street, cycled across to visit him. Harold, however, would not forego his run and left Ethel to be entertained in the tent by George, who decided that was a better proposition than slogging around in the cold.

After two weekends they were tackled by the site owner because they had no latrine. Apparently he had received complaints about pollution of the stream which ran through the campsite and which fed a small reservoir in the village. So that week they purchased a latrine bin and made a tent with poles and hessian. Harold constructed a seat with a hole to fit the bin and the following weekend set off on his bike with the seat tied across his back. Unfortunately it was quite a windy day and he had great difficulty keeping his balance and several times was almost blown over but luckily he got the contraption to camp without mishap. They erected the homemade tent, placed the latrine inside and the site owner was satisfied.

They stayed on this site for two seasons and managed to save enough to buy a bigger, stronger tent and a Primus stove to replace the unreliable paraffin one. After this they decided to go to a different area and, together with Ted and Tom, they moved to a farm near to Bollington in Cheshire. The big advantage of this was that the farmer gave them the use of a loft above his bakery and cowshed where they could camp in wintry weather and where they could store their tents and equipment. There were no other tents in the camp field which was grazed by cattle. They had to build a fence around the tents to avoid damage from the animals. Besides running a farm, the owner, Mr



Harrison, had a confectionary business in Macclesfield where he sold the produce from his bakery at the farm. In winter time the bakery and the cowshed attracted rats. When they slept up in the loft the lads were aware of the rats running around close by. One night Harold was awakened by a great yelp from George when a rat ran across his face. In spite of these nocturnal disturbances they very much enjoyed this camp. They had a good relationship with Mr Harrison and his family. Other friends joined them regularly, Len, one of George's workmates, who was a keen cyclist and Ronnie, another workmate of George, who lived in a vicarage where his parents were caretakers. Ronnie's father also ran a car-hire firm with three very smart cars. There were two friends of Ted, Paul and Frank, who also became part of the group.

Harold joined the National Cyclists' Union and became a fervent reader of their quarterly magazine. He spent hours poring over maps planning tours he might undertake some day. For two or three years Harold, George and Len had cycling holidays, staying at Youth Hostels much of the time in Wales and the Welsh border. On the first tour they went south from Manchester to Warwickshire and stayed at a hostel at Stoneleigh. Next they headed west into Worcestershire, over the Malverns and on to Ledbury, Ross-on-Wye and Hay-on-Wye. In the thirties the roads were comparatively quiet and the little towns were charming and picturesque. They crossed the Wye via a toll bridge at Welsh Bickner. It was 10 pm when they arrived there and they had to knock up the gate-keeper who was none too pleased at being disturbed so late especially as it was raining heavily. Even more disgruntled was the sombre warden of the near-by hostel where they were staying and where they were the sole occupants that night. They were grumpily directed to a dormitory on the first floor. In the morning they were bemused by a notice instructing them to 'shake blankets at Front Door' but on enquiring they found the 'Front Door' was on the floor where they had slept because the house was on a steep hillside. From Welsh Bicknor they cycled up Symonds Yat, a steep climb of 1:3. Harold was the only one of the three who managed to cycle all the way to the top. They stopped at a farm near Erwood and were intrigued by the farm produce hanging from the beams – strings of vegetables, great sides of ham and other meats. They then journeyed on northwards to the River Mawddach where stayed at a hostel up a wooded hillside not far from Penmaenpool and then went westwards towards the coast at Barmouth and beyond. Little did Harold think that one day he would make his home in this area.

Sadly, all this carefree life of camping and cycling came to an end in 1939. Harold and a girl friend, Mary, were touring in Wales on a tandem, staying at some of the places he had visited with George and Len in previous years. They had cycled from Bala over to Trawsfynedd up on to the moorland on an unsurfaced track which climbed steeply for miles. Many years later, when a nuclear power station was built at Trawsfynedd this would become a well-engineered A class road but when Harold and Mary were there it was exceedingly remote and seemed never-ending. Eventually they came to a gate with a sign – ARMY FIRING RANGE – NO ENTRY IF RED FLAG IS FLYING. Luckily for them there was no flag and they went through the gate and cycled wearily on. They passed a deserted farmhouse with two upright shells painted on the front, framing the name – DANGER FARM. The area was eerie and creepy and they were anxious to be off this track. It was getting late as they started to descend. The sun was setting, painting the rock faces of the surrounding mountains with a red glow. Thankfully they arrived at last in the little village of Trawsfynedd, found a welcome café and ordered a meal before going on to their destination. Harold asked the Welsh waitress which was the way to 'Harleck'. She looked puzzled and shook her head so he tried again but she was still perplexed. She went into the back kitchen to make enquiries and a minute later she came back with a beaming smile on her face. "Ah" she said, "You mean 'Harlech'", trilling the 'r' and breathing the 'ch' from the back of her throat in true Welsh fashion. She happily pointed out the road and they were soon on their way. The weather was fine and sunny and they spent several days exploring the area around Harlech and Porthmadog before turning inland to Dolgellau.

It was in the village of Carno when they were having their supper that their landlady came into the dining room. She was close to tears and asked them if they wanted to go into her parlour and hear the radio. They knew that the situation in Europe was becoming ever more serious with Hitler, having marched into Czechoslovakia, now threatening Poland and that war seemed inevitable. However they hadn't seen a newspaper or listened to the radio since leaving home. It was a surprise therefore to hear that German troops had invaded Poland that day and that there was a State of Emergency in Britain. The following day they saw crowds of evacuees arriving by train from London for it was expected that when war was declared the capital and other large cities would be bombed. Harold decided they ought to return home without delay. They cycled all that day and much of the night until, overcome with exhaustion, they lay down on the grass on a hill not far from Ketley to have a nap. They slept soundly and

when they awoke the sun was beating down on them causing Harold's bare legs to be painfully sun-burned— he always cycled in shorts. And thus it was they cycled back to Manchester and finished their holiday.

#### **Chapter 4    Wartime**

At the outbreak of war the army commandeered Bellevue to accommodate and train soldiers so Harold was once more out of a job. He wasn't unduly worried as, having had a medical for military service, he was expecting to receive his papers any day. Brothers Wilf and Jim had signed up in the Territorial Army some months previously and were called up for full-time service immediately war was declared. After waiting some weeks with no summons forthcoming Harold became impatient and took himself to the local recruiting office to find out when he could expect his call-up. The officer in charge made a few enquiries but when he looked at Harold's papers he found that he had been graded 3 on account of his poor eyesight. 'We won't be needing you unless there is a serious emergency' he was told. 'You had better see if you can find employment in a factory doing war work.' Feeling somewhat frustrated, Harold started to look around for a job and eventually went to work in the accounts department at the Ministry of Aircraft Production at the Rootes Car Factory at Coventry and found living accommodation there.

However, the following May the 'serious emergency' that had been mentioned at the Recruiting Office occurred when the British troops were evacuated from Dunkirk and it seemed almost inevitable that England was about to be invaded by the Germans. Harold received a letter telling him to report the next day to Bellevue camp, Bradford in Yorkshire. (He was a little surprised at the strange coincidence about the names Bellevue, where he had recently been employed, and Bradford, the name of the district in Manchester where he had spent his childhood). He was one day late arriving as he had first to return to Nelson Street to take back his belongings from Coventry including his bicycle and collect what he needed for the army.

When he arrived at Bradford his company had already moved to Shipley, a few miles distant so he had to spend one night on the floor of Bellevue barracks, with only one blanket, amongst a crowd of 'squaddies' who were awaiting the medical board for discharge. He was warned to sleep with any valuables under his body as those around were by no means trustworthy. The next morning he walked to Shipley to join about 300 others who were to form the Pioneer Corps Company. They all received a number of injections in both arms so that spending another night sleeping on a hard floor was extremely painful.

Next day they were formed into a column, made up of several platoons, marched back over the cobbles down into Bradford. On the way, during one of the breaks (10 minutes in every hour) an elderly lady came out of a tiny corner shop, her arms loaded with packets of cigarettes, which she gave to the soldiers. It must have been at considerable cost to herself and was typical of the kindness and generosity shown by the Bradford people. On reaching their destination they had to collect their uniforms and other essential military gear. Items were flung over a counter so the fit of the clothes was a very hit and miss affair – in more ways than one! This was followed by another march back up to Shipley where they spent some days in a new grammar school doing various drills and route marches.

In the evenings many of the lads trudged down into Bradford and moped around for a while before returning to barracks. There was little for them to do in Bradford as they were very short of money. At that time a Private's pay was one shilling a day. But as they had already discovered, with the lady with the cigarettes, hospitality and friendliness were prevalent among the Yorkshire folk. One evening Harold and a friend were strolling along a dingy street in a poor part of the city when they were accosted by two pretty teen-aged girls and invited to go down a street with them. The soldiers looked uneasily at each other. It seemed suspicious but they decided to see what awaited them. It became even more dubious when on the way a gentleman came running up the street and called to the girls "Take them in; I'm going to find some more!" However, they found they had nothing to fear from these innocent lassies who ushered them into a Methodist Church hall where a concert was in progress. The concert was followed by refreshments and Harold and his friend spent a pleasant, convivial evening.

On another evening they were standing on a corner wondering what they could do when they were approached by a gentleman who invited them to join him and his wife for a meal. They were taken to the Spinks restaurant, a smart eating place in the Wool Exchange where they were given a sumptuous three-course meal. Harold gathered that his host was a regular customer – the waiter brought him his own personal silver tankard. Before parting they were invited to visit these generous folk at their home for an evening meal a few days later. The house was a spacious villa in a picturesque valley just outside the town and they had another fine meal.

The time at Bradford was mostly spent doing intensive route marching and building butts to serve on some of the makeshift firing ranges. When the preliminary training was finished Harold was drafted to Taunton and then to Chard in Somerset where once again he found himself doing office work in the orderly room. For the next few months, while Coventry and Manchester were suffering devastating air-raids, Harold was living a comparatively peaceful life in this pleasant rural town. Most evenings were spent socialising in the pubs and dance halls. Nearly all the local men were away in the forces so there were plenty of girls to partner. As with other pursuits Harold was quite a perfectionist in ballroom dancing. He had somehow managed to acquire an army dress suit complete with brass buttons which had once been used in the Bellevue firework pageants, and a smart peaked cap to wear instead of the uniform forage cap. This was quite illegal and if discovered he could have found himself put on a charge. Each week he would take his washing to the local laundry – no DIY launderettes in those days. There were a number of attractive girls working there but unfortunately as soon as Harold went inside, the warm, damp atmosphere caused his glasses to steam up which put him at an immediate disadvantage.

But Harold's army career did not last long. At the end of one evening spent happily dancing Harold and the girl he had been partnering emerged from the brightly lit hall into the Stygian darkness of the blacked-out street. Neither of them realised there was a flight of steps at the end of the road and they both plunged down to collide with a post at the bottom. Luckily, though shaken, they weren't badly hurt but Harold had a nasty gash on his forehead. A nurse patched him up temporarily but in the morning he had to report to the RASC MO to have the cut properly dressed. This officer had not seen Harold before and when he looked through his medical record expressed great surprise at his very poor degree of vision. He said Harold had no right to be in the army and could go home at once. Harold did not feel particularly pleased at this news - he'd been spending a pleasant time doing his National Service – but when he spoke about his doubts to his colleagues they were astonished that he didn't grab this chance of immediate release. Harold felt that if he stayed he would never live it down. So reluctantly he left the army and returned to the MAP factory at Coventry where he spent the rest of the war

He was put in charge of the National Savings bank of the factory. The hours were long and by the time he had cycled home after work, there was not much time for leisure activities. He had a number of good friends at his work, including a Jew, Frank Alfred, who in private life owned a number of tailors' shops, some of which had been destroyed in the Blitz including his home. Another good friend was Bill Fawson, who worked in the Cost Department and who was largely responsible, for the way Harold's career was to change after the war.

During this period he became very friendly with an attractive girl, Win. They began to meet regularly and before long this association became serious and in July 1943 the pair married. They had very few common interests but in June 1944 Malcolm was born. He brought them both great happiness and for a while the relationship was cemented.

At this time there was an acute shortage of housing all over Britain. The government's solution to this was an emergency programme to manufacture temporary homes in kit form that could be erected quickly and were expected to last about ten years. Although small, these houses were comfortable and well equipped and had many amenities which older buildings lacked. Harold and Win were fortunate to be allocated one of these prefab houses in Leamington. The house had a small garden and for a while Harold became a keen gardener and enjoyed producing his own vegetables.

## **Chapter 5 College and Beyond**

Harold sometimes thought regretfully about having to leave school at fourteen. He would have liked to continue his education had circumstances been different. Then one day, shortly after the end of the war, his chance came. Bill Fawson told Harold that he was applying to train as a teacher under a new scheme launched by the Government. Because of the great shortage of teachers following the war, potentially suitable candidates who had been in the forces or on war-work were invited to apply for admission to Emergency Training Colleges. In order to get new teachers into schools as quickly as possible the course would be completed in twelve months instead of the two years that it normally took to train a teacher. In actual fact the amount of time spent studying at these new colleges was equal to that on the traditional courses because there were far less holidays during the year, just four weeks, instead of the long breaks at Easter, Christmas and Summer. Also lectures went on until about seven thirty each

evening and there were lectures on Saturday mornings. Many of the applicants were highly qualified, holding professional posts before the war. Others had had their education interrupted. Bill suggested that Harold might think about this as a possible line for his own future employment. Shortly after this Bill was called for interview and was accepted. He was sent for training on the first of these courses at Alnwick Castle in Northumberland.

Harold was very doubtful about Bill's suggestion in view of his limited education but decided to give it a try and was most surprised to be called for interview. He sat before a board of about five people chaired by a pleasant lady and was asked many penetrating questions. Although the majority of the board seemed to be extremely concerned about his poor eyesight and lack of qualifications the lady in the chair was apparently very impressed by him and evidently swayed the opinions of her colleagues and Harold was accepted for training. Eventually he received official notification and was directed to a college in Staffordshire. During the war this had served as accommodation for workers at a nearby munitions works. There were several such hostels close by as the factory had employed thousands of workers, and both a railway and bus station had been built to cope with transporting employees and munitions. Drake Hall, where Harold was sent, housed 185 men plus staff in half of the building. Later they were joined by a similar number of women students. Having started after the men their course was run separately but they amalgamated for some social activities.

Thus Harold began his further education and found himself enjoying it immensely though he had to work extremely hard as he had so much ground to make up. All the other students, apart from one, had had secondary education and many of them much more. Some of the subjects were quite new to Harold and he still had occasional doubts as to his suitability. He requested an interview with the principal who assured him that his work was satisfactory and that he had no qualms about his aptness. So each day there were lectures to attend from nine in the morning until half past seven in the evening. After the evening meal there were essays to write. On the few evenings when he joined in any social activities he would return to his study/bedroom and complete any outstanding work before getting to bed in the early hours of the morning. Fortunately he received some help in certain subjects from fellow students but mostly it was a case of pure hard work and perseverance to try to lessen the gap between himself and the others.

During the year there were two periods of school practice when the students were sent to local schools to take complete charge of a class for a month. The first was in a smoky industrial spot in the heart of the Potteries in the exotically named Vale of Etruria. The junior school was situated by a Dunlop tyre factory, a busy railway siding and various smoky pottery works. Nevertheless it was a seemingly happy school and Harold, who had prepared his lessons well, found his introduction to teaching a pleasant experience and had no difficulty in controlling his class and holding the pupils' interest. At lunchtime the children were marched from the school, across a main road and down an earth track to the Dunlop works canteen where they had their school dinners. They sat at trestle tables at one end of the room. The teachers collected the dinners from a hatch and carried them to the children. Harold can remember his great embarrassment on one occasion when his leg caught the end of a bench and the plates he was carrying went skittering across the floor much to the amusement of the children and also to the Dunlop workers who gave a loud cheer.

In contrast to the school in Etruria his second School Practice was at a senior school at Golden Hill, Stoke-on-Trent, where there were extensive views – to the south were the smoky Potteries and beyond, while the Northern aspect was across the Cheshire countryside as far as Mow Cop. Again, Harold had prepared his lessons well and after a day or two he found that the class teacher trusted him to be left on his own with the children. He enjoyed teaching these older ones though some of the girls developed quite a crush on this smart young student and would sit gazing at him with starry eyes instead of concentrating on the lesson. Until then their teachers had mostly been of an older generation.

At the end of this year of enjoyable hard work and studying Harold found to his great pleasure that he had qualified as a probationary teacher. It would only be after two years of satisfactory teaching and further study that he would be fully qualified.

The next task was to find a post. He applied to Warwickshire County Council hoping for a job in the Leamington area and had interviews at several schools. He sensed immediately that one or two heads were antagonistic towards these 'pseudo' teachers - how could they possibly have learned how to teach in such a short time? However, St Paul's at Leamington, the junior school to which he was eventually appointed, proved to be a most happy place to

start out as a teacher. The headmaster Bert Baldwin, and the other staff all made him feel very welcome. Although he only spent about two years here he made several good friends some of whom kept in touch for many years.

The building itself was old and cramped. There was no hall and each morning two partitions were pushed back so that assembly could be held. Harold found himself with a class of 49 nine and ten year olds. There was only room to seat 48 children so there was some difficulty if the attendance was 100%. Some afternoons his class combined with another one and the girls of the two classes were taught needlework by Alice Neale while Harold did craftwork with the boys. In spite of the lack of space and the large classes things appeared to run smoothly thanks to tremendous enthusiasm and good organisation from Bert Baldwin. As usual Harold worked diligently and had a good relationship with, and understanding of, his pupils. He tells of one occasion in an arithmetic lesson when he asked the class a question and was surprised when one lad, who was not among the ablest, eagerly shot up his hand. "Yes, Ronnie?" said Harold, pleased to think that he had at last imparted some knowledge into one of his weaker pupils. "Please sir" said Ronnie shaking with excitement, "There's a sparrow building a nest in the gutter just outside the window!" To his credit Harold did not reprimand him for inattention but showed interest and had a laugh.

During the two summer holidays that Harold was at St Pauls, Bert Baldwin organised a holiday at Broadstairs in Kent for about sixty of the children. He arranged for some of the parents to help with the supervision and feeding arrangements and also the wives of the staff. Win was among them and took three year old Malcolm who no doubt enjoyed his first trip to the seaside. They were housed in part of a large convent on the cliffs – the nuns were living in a separate area of the building. As well as playing on the beach and swimming, visits were organised to various places of interest in the district including a trip on the Romney and Dymchurch Railway.

Harold served his probationary period and had no difficulty in obtaining his full qualification. In his second year he had charge of the ten and eleven year olds. However, it soon transpired that his teaching career might be at an end. In 1949 he began to develop increasing problems with his sight. Twice he was hospitalised and operated on for detached retinas. This was in the days before Laser treatment and the retinas were repaired by diathermy, a delicate procedure, which required a follow up of two weeks lying completely still and flat. The operations were only partially successful and the prognosis was not good. In the hospital he was told that his eyesight had deteriorated to an extent that he would be registered as Blind. Although this was devastating news for a thirty-year-old, Harold looked upon it as a challenge. Where would his life lead to now? He was put in touch with a Home Teacher of the Blind who offered to teach him Braille. The first lesson proved most frustrating. Harold was left with just ten letters to learn. These he had mastered in about fifteen minutes and he had a week to wait before the next lesson! However, the teacher soon got the measure of Harold and his determination and it wasn't long before he had mastered the system, not only learning the letters but the contractions. Soon he was reading Braille, if not fluently, at least enough to comprehend. In good light and with the aid of a magnifying lens he could still read sighted print but he knew he was soon going to need Braille as a means of communication

Back at school his colleagues were all most upset to hear his news and like Harold himself, they wondered how he could earn a living now. Someone casually mentioned teaching in a school for blind children and around that time there appeared an advertisement in one of the teaching periodicals. An additional member of staff was required at Condoover Hall in Shropshire, a school for multi-handicapped blind children which had opened about two years previously. Harold applied for the post though not very hopefully. He was surprised to be requested to attend Birmingham University for an interview with Professor Wall, a leading educationalist of the day and then went to visit Condoover and Mr Myers, the Principal. To his delight he was successful in obtaining the post. He would need to acquire a further qualification to become a teacher of blind children within two years. This could be done while he was in the job.

## **Chapter 6 Condoover Hall**

Since 1931 the National Institute for the Blind had been running a school in Devon with approximately 30 blind children who had additional handicaps, both physical and mental, and who were unable to be educated in ordinary schools for blind children. In 1946 places were needed for a further 30 pupils so it was decided to close the school in Devon and open one elsewhere for 60 children. Thus Condoover Hall, a large Elizabethan mansion built in 1590, was bought by the NIB to cater for the education of these children. The Hall stood in large well-kept grounds on the outskirts of the village of Condoover about five miles south of Shrewsbury. Some adaptations were made inside the main building and the stables and garages were converted into classrooms and craftrooms. Oscar (Mike) Myers was

appointed as Principal in 1947 and the school was opened the following year. It soon became clear that there were even more blind children with additional handicaps than had been estimated. Condover House, a large dwelling in the village was purchased and a further twelve pupils were accommodated. This further intake was admitted in January 1950 and Harold was taken on as an extra teacher.

The school was residential and the staff lived in accommodation in the Hall and the grounds. Harold was allocated a pleasant flat above the classrooms in what had once been the Bothy where the men who worked in the stables were housed. Harold, Win and Malcolm moved in.

So now, as well as learning to live as a blind person, Harold had to acquire skills that would enable him to teach these severely handicapped children. He was going to need a completely different approach from the methods he had used when teaching in a normal junior school. Mr Myers was always ready to give help and advice when asked but he mostly preferred his staff to develop their own ideas and solutions. Thus Harold found himself faced with about nine youngsters of very mixed abilities and handicaps. Some were totally blind while others had a useful degree of vision. Some had serious physical difficulties. All were below average in intelligence and some had serious behaviour problems. On the other hand most of the pupils had good social skills and it was easy to form relationships with them.

Harold also found himself teaching maths to four other groups besides his own. It was nothing like the arithmetic lessons he had given in the past. Number here was basic with a very practical approach. Harold busied himself making suitable equipment for these lessons. Before long he had a wonderful array of brightly painted cotton reels threaded on wire, sets of tactile measuring sticks painted black and white and marked with studs or grooves, a classroom 'shop', where the children had to use real money – cardboard and plastic money was no use to blind pupils. There were balances with weights. There were several number games including bagatelles, one with different sounding bells by the pins each note denoting a different value, while another had holes in the board with metal tubes suspended beneath which sounded different notes when a ball went through a hole. The classroom soon began to take on a very attractive appearance where each child was able to work at his own pace according to his own ability.

Another subject for which Harold had a special aptitude was Nature Study, particularly in the recognition of birdsong. Although it was something fairly new to him this was a skill he was quick to acquire and enjoy now that hearing was becoming increasingly necessary for independence.

The teaching staff at Condover all had additional tasks to do beside teach. The 72 children were split into families of twelve with a housemother in charge together with other members of staff, both teaching and caring staff who played a major part in family activities. Domestic and kitchen staff, handymen and drivers were also allocated to a specific family so that everyone in the school was involved with the children in some way. Harold was in the 'Marsh' family with Freda Marsh being the housemother. The teachers all had a duty day each week as well as one at the weekend. The Marsh family staff were on duty each Thursday. Harold and David Griffiths, the other teacher in the family, would start work at 7.30 am on those days. First they would check round the dormitories, where the housemothers were helping the children with their washing and dressing, in case there were any problems. Then they would go to the office where the newspapers and post were being sorted. The more able children in the Marsh family delivered these to the staff in the Hall and in the houses in the grounds. Throughout the day David and Harold were responsible for all the children apart from the time spent in lessons, with maybe a short break either at lunch or tea. After tea there were various clubs and other activities for those who wished, otherwise the children were free to follow their own interests, in the Hall or outside in the summer. Duty staff had to keep track of everyone and remind him or her when it was time to go upstairs and prepare for bed. Bedtimes varied according to how competent each child was at undressing and washing and bathing. Later bedtime was a privilege that each child could apply for in the weekly Family Meeting and the request was considered at the Staff Meeting when the house staff and others could comment on whether or not a particular child was ready for this.

Weekend duty also started early. In the morning, some of the children had choir practice with Mr Slee, the music teacher, and on Sundays those who wished could attend the local church. Otherwise they played and occupied themselves in the house or outside. The Duty Staff had to keep track of everyone and perhaps organise activities. During the afternoons a complex system of walks was organised. The less mobile children and those in wheelchairs

had short walks around the village, while the others went on longer walks – up to 5 miles – or went a short distance in the school bus and then did a walk, often on the Shropshire hills.

Some of the children were on Mobility training where they could apply for training to achieve privileges. Harold and David were much involved in organising this when on weekend duty. The first stage was for Shop Privilege which involved walking along paths in the school grounds for a short distance, crossing a public road and going to the village shop. The second stage meant walking a further 200 yards, with another road crossing to the post office. The third stage known as Short Distance Privilege was concerned with journeys to neighbouring villages, a round trip of up to four or five miles. For safety and convenience pupils travelled in twos and pupils helped to train each other. It was much helped by shop-keepers and householders in the villages who signed a card brought by the pupil and indicated the time of arrival. There was also a fourth stage where one or two older and able children went on the bus to Shrewsbury. It was a somewhat anxious time at the end of the afternoon waiting for everyone to return.

After tea the duty staff had a welcome hour's break. On Saturday Mr Slee had the children for a 'sing-song'. On Sunday Mr Myers held a special weekly service. Although he held no formal religious convictions he felt he had a duty to the children and their parents to present some form of Christianity which would be understandable to the children and not offend his own feelings of honest lack of convictions. There were hymns, Bible readings and simple prayers and an "address" of an "ethical" nature mainly devoted to school and personal behaviour, often elaborating on items discussed in Staff Meeting and announced in Assembly. Also the School Diary was read giving advance information of events, visitors, etc.

Mr Myers had a profound influence on Harold as he did with most of his staff. His democratic attitude to life in general and especially to the running of Condover made a great impression. He insisted that each pupil, however seriously handicapped, counted as a person, was 'educable', could achieve social skills and live as a full life as possible. He encouraged the children to have freedom of choice whenever they were able. He made no secret of his Socialist leanings but he listened sympathetically to other views and was fair in his dealings with staff, children and parents.

There were very few disciplinary problems at Condover. A reprimand in the weekly Family Meeting for unsatisfactory behaviour was usually enough, or perhaps a withdrawal of a privilege. Praise was given for progress even in the smallest achievements such as learning to fasten buttons and tie shoe laces.

Harold found he was totally in agreement with the free way the school was run which supported the socialist principles he had always held. In spite of the fact that his eyesight was rapidly failing, he was enjoying all the challenges that his new circumstances had forced him to take. He had become reasonably fluent in the use of Braille and was studying hard for the examination of College of Teachers of the Blind which he would soon need to sit if he was to remain at Condover. Before long Harold was more or less completely blind and he could only tell light from dark.

Sadly Win could not settle. She and Harold had few interests in common and there were frequent quarrels and disagreements. She missed her friends and relations at Leamington and at the end of the first year she left Condover to return to Leamington taking Malcolm with her.

Harold's parents were still living in the little terraced house in Manchester where they had brought up their five children. The family had all married by now and left home so Clara and Thomas were no longer cramped and could at last enjoy a less stressful life. During the war and beyond Thomas was able to work and bring home a regular wage and they could sometimes have days out or go for a holiday staying with some of the family. Unfortunately however, the work that Thomas did, at a nearby steelworks, had a devastating effect on his health. He developed chronic bronchitis and in January 1951 he died of bronchial pneumonia. Clara was heartbroken. After many years of hard toil and worry and just when it seemed their life was easier she now found herself alone.

Maybe it was fortuitous that her bereavement and the breakup of Harold's marriage occurred at about the same time. She was able to come and stay with Harold in the Bothy flat and busied herself with seeing to his needs, though she kept the house in Nelson Street and would go home from time to time to check that things were all right there. For the first time in her life she was living in a house where there were modern amenities such as a vacuum cleaner and electric kettle and which had central heating, hot water on tap, a bathroom and an inside toilet. It was an easy house

to keep clean and tidy. There was no daily chore of cleaning out the fireplace and bringing in the coal, no pavement to scrub and whiten. With the clean air of the countryside the curtains seldom needed washing. In the grimy atmosphere of industrial Manchester the curtains had needed washing very frequently. She prepared the meals, shopping at Youngs, the village shop, and at the market garden just across the road run by Mr and Mrs Kelsall. The milk was delivered daily from Cartwright's farm. Clara soon got to know these local people, who were all very friendly and helpful. There were two school guest rooms in the flat and one of the cleaners from the school would come and clean these rooms when they were needed and they too would chat with her. Mr Slee, the music teacher, and his wife lived in the flat across the landing and were always happy to give advice, so although still grieving greatly for Thomas, she did not feel quite as lonely as she might have been.

However the greatest advantage was the tremendous help and support she was able to give to Harold. They would both go for long walks through the quiet lanes and became very familiar with the neighbourhood. Clara was thrilled to be living in the Shropshire countryside in the county where she had spent her childhood and where she had worked until her marriage. Before she came Harold had tried to explore the area, studying the map with a powerful magnifying glass. At first he had used his cycle, stopping at the signposts and, leaning his bike against the post, would stand on the pedal to read the directions on the arms. At that time there were few vehicles using the lanes but after one or two narrow escapes Harold reluctantly decided it was time for him to give up cycling. In order to discover more of the area he would sometimes take the Slee's dog for a walk. One evening they took a wrong turn and became hopelessly lost. Darkness fell and it began to rain heavily. Eventually around midnight, a passing motorist stopped. He was a doctor from the nearby Crosshouses hospital, about four miles from Conover. When he heard the sorry tale he took the soaking, bedraggled couple back home greatly to the relief of Bert and Amy Slee, who were in a panic and were on the point of alerting the police.

Clara was able to read to Harold, not only his mail and suchlike, but also the books which he needed to study for the coming exam. Much of this must have been boring and fairly incomprehensible to her but it was a tremendous help to Harold. He would have found it a somewhat slow and laborious task had he been forced to read the books using his newly acquired skill of Braille. She also assisted him with the equipment he was making for his arithmetic classes, painting the cotton reels and other bits and pieces.

Occasionally some of the family would come for a few days. Ellen and her miner husband, Jack, together with their twin boys, Kenneth and Norman came from Yorkshire. Jim, in his strange 'homemade' car, came from Ipswich, with wife Jean and son Keith. There was plenty of room to accommodate them for a few days and they enjoyed the Shropshire countryside.

When he moved to Conover, Harold was becoming increasingly interested in music and decided he would like to learn the piano. This would prove to be another great challenge. He had had no music instruction at school so had no idea of the theory of music which would all need to be learned through the medium of Braille. Although he was now reasonably competent with this medium he found Braille music incredibly complex and of course, everything deciphered had to be committed to memory before it could be played. This meant not only the notes but also the key, time, expression and all the other things shown on a sheet of music – a daunting task indeed. However, he first needed a piano! Bert Slee had willingly agreed to take him on as a pupil, and he and Amy went with Harold to Birmingham to look for a piano. After looking at several instruments they decided on a Brinsmead. This firm had been making pianos since 1836 and had a high reputation, at one time making pianos for the Royal Family. Once the piano was in place in the flat, Harold, with his customary diligence, quickly made progress and was working to enter examinations of the Royal College of Music and reached Grade 5 within two years – a remarkable achievement.

## **Chapter 7 Harold and Rene**

In September 1952 Harold took the examination of College of Teachers of the Blind and achieved a very good result so he was now fully qualified for teaching blind children.

At the same time something happened which was going to affect the rest of his life. Rene Wagstaff joined the staff at Conover. She too had been to Emergency Training College and had been teaching for three years at a junior school at Southend, where her parents lived. Although she was keen to play a full part in the life of the school and to



learn how to teach these very handicapped children she decided she should also find some outside interest. She thought it would be good to learn another language and therefore enrolled at an evening class at Shrewsbury Technical College for Beginners German. In conversation with Harold she told him what she had done and he showed great interest. Now that the work for the CTB exam was over he felt he would like to carry on with some kind of study and learning a foreign language seemed a possible idea. He tentatively asked Rene whether he could come with her to the classes and thus began a friendship that would develop into a deep and lasting relationship.

As well as going to Shrewsbury together each week, Rene went regularly to the Bothy flat so that they could study the next week's lesson. They soon discovered that they had a number of common interests. They were both exploring the world of classical music so, as well as doing German, they would often listen to records or the radio. Rene also liked walking and they had some long walks on the Stretton Hills together, catching a bus to Church Stretton. On one occasion they were caught in a snowstorm. On another memorable time a thick mist rolled up when they were up near the gliding station. They were dismayed to hear voices just above their heads and hoped the glider wasn't going to land on top of them. Once when Jim was visiting he took them in his car to the far end of the Wrekin and dropped them off to make their way back to Conover. After ascending the Wrekin, traversing the long ridge and climbing the smaller hill beyond, they walked back home through the lanes, about 18 miles.

One day stands out from all the rest. It had been a perfect day on Long Mynd with the two of them relishing the beauty and tranquillity of the Shropshire landscape, completely happy in each other's company. At the end of the walk, by the gate leading off the track into the lane leading down to Leebotwood, Harold took Rene in his arms and asked if she would marry him when he was free and was overjoyed when she said yes.

In the school holidays he went to stay with Rene at Southend. From there they visited brothers Jim and Arthur who at that time lived with their families at Ipswich. They also went to Blackpool to stay with Harold's old friend George who now lived there with his wife, Mary and their two young children.

By now their lives were very much intertwined and in 1954, when his divorce came through, they were married at Bellevue Methodist Church, Shrewsbury. They went for their honeymoon to Barmouth where they spent much time swimming and exploring the area. They made two attempts to climb Cader Idris. On the first occasion they ran out of time but they made it the next day. They hadn't done any mountain walking before and were poorly clothed and shod but luckily the weather was fine. Rene had just passed her Driving Test and Harold bought a second hand car – a three year old Vauxhall Wyvern – and the trip to Barmouth was one of the first long journeys made.

In the meantime, Clara moved back to her house in Manchester. Both Harold and Rene said they would be pleased for her to continue living with them in the Bothy flat but she insisted that the newly-weds would be better on their own. Harold and Rene went to visit her and Rene was able to see Harold's childhood home that she had heard so much about. When they went for the first time, as they approached the city centre Harold was instructing Rene about the route and said 'Take the next right' which she did. Then, to his horror, he remembered that Portland Street was one-way and they were going the wrong way. 'Stop!' he yelled frantically but was astonished when a car overtook them and then discovered that the one-way system that he recalled from the past was now reversed and they were travelling quite legitimately. When they arrived at Nelson Street, Clara had arranged for them to park the car in Madge's Ice Cream yard across the road for back in the nineteen fifties not many people left their cars parked in the road outside their house all night. The following evening Harold got tickets for a concert in the Free Trade Hall by the famous Gewandhaus Orchestra from Leipzig – a wonderful experience.

Shortly before their marriage Harold had been to see Dr Dorothy Campbell, the Eye Consultant at Coventry Hospital, who had performed the operations for the detached retinas in 1949. When she examined his eyes she found that cataracts had formed. Although nothing could be done for the left eye she suggested that if the one on the other eye was removed there might possibly be some sight there. She wondered if he would care to have the operation. At that time cataract removal entailed being in hospital for over a week and was not the comparatively simple process that it was soon to become. After thinking about it and discussing it with Rene he decided to have it done. The eye remained covered for several days. When the bandages were removed to Harold's joy he found he could see a little – not very much, but he could discern objects and colours though not with any clear definition. It was a great thrill for him and for Rene that he was able to make out her features. Back home at Conover he once more enjoyed the beauty of the countryside and found day to day tasks easier but sadly this improved vision did not last and within a few months he was again having problems. He suspected the retina had again become detached and

when he went to see Dr Campbell she confirmed his fears. Nevertheless she said she would another try at diathermy if Harold was willing and thus he had a further stay in hospital. After lying flat for about ten days he was able to sit up but to Harold's great disappointment when the bandages were removed this time there was no happy outcome – indeed, things were worse than before as he now had barely any light perception. Once more he courageously faced up to the fact of his blindness. At least now he had a satisfying job and had mastered Braille and had the confidence to move around independently.

In 1955 the couple returned for another holiday in Barmouth staying at a different seafront hotel where once again they enjoyed swimming, walking and exploring the beautiful area. It was while on this holiday that they met Leslie and Florence Astin, a warm-hearted and somewhat eccentric couple and their children, David and Christine. They lived in Birmingham but originated from Lancashire. Harold found himself intrigued by the after dinner discussions, the unusual slant on life that Leslie held and the variety of interests he had. Following the holiday Leslie and Florence visited Conover and Harold and Rene had a weekend with them at Birmingham and thus began a friendship with the Astin family which was to last through the rest of their lives.

From time to time Harold and Rene would drive over to Dawley to visit Clara's two sisters, Florrie and Elsie who lived on the edge of the town in a primitive little cottage. Inside, conditions were much the same as those Harold knew when he visited his grandparents' cottage at Ketley before the war, with no electricity, no radio, no mains water and with a kitchen range that dominated the living room and needed black-leading regularly. The house was kept spick and span which must have entailed hours of very hard manual work. These aunts, probably only around seventy, seemed as old as Methuselah. They dressed in many layers of thick clothes always topped with spotless pinafores. They got up about 5am each day to go and clean at a small iron works at Horsehay, a short distance away. The garden was small and shady because it backed on to a rock face. It consisted mostly of grass which they kept trimmed with hand shears and scissors. Their evenings were spent sitting at the table and reading the local paper or 'Women's Weekly' and similar publications by the light of an oil lamp. Harold and Rene were a welcome family contact. Elsie had never married and Florrie had tragically lost her husband in a motorcycle accident quite early in the marriage so there had been no children in their lives apart from the son of their brother Frank, also called Frank. He lived nearby at Horsehay close to Gertie and Harry. At the time when Harold and Rene started visiting, Telford, was being planned. This 'new town' was going to take in Dawley and Horsehay. Before long a school was built opposite their cottage and an estate of new houses. The aunts hated this and thought it was an invasion of their privacy and imagined people were spying on them. Eventually they were moved to a modern bungalow in a sheltered housing scheme with a warden but they found it difficult to settle and never really came to terms with 'mod cons'. The bath was used as a functional storage place and was filled with neat piles of magazines with boards across the top. It could never have been used for its proper purpose.

For a while Harold and Rene went regularly to the Shrewsbury Theatre where a repertory company staged a different play each week. They enjoyed these outings and sometimes took some of the other staff with them. These plays were varied and well acted on the whole. However, on one occasion, Harold and Rene had taken with them Mary Bonham, one of the teachers, and Mercy Griffin, a teacher who was on secondment from Australia for a year. These two were both blind. By chance, one of the principle characters in the play was a blind man. The play's author and the company seemed to be completely ignorant of blindness and of how even the most helpless blind people could cope with living without sight in much that they did. This poor character had to be assisted to do the most basic actions, had his cigarette lit for him and placed in his mouth. Harold and his companions could not control their laughter to the astonishment of the audience and cast who wondered how people could be so callous.

Soon after their marriage Rene gave up her job at Conover and went to teach at a junior school in Shrewsbury. It meant travelling by car each day and that year there were a number of very snowy days. The car was garaged at Conover House and several times Harold had to walk to the garage with Rene in order to fix chains to the wheels. At that time the roads were not cleared as they are now so chains were fastened round the wheels so that they could get some purchase on the snow and ice. It was a clumsy method but it appeared to work though it probably was not very good for the tyres and if one got to a road where the snow had cleared the noise was horrendous and no doubt the chains had a deleterious effect on the road surface..

It was here that she met Beryl Heyes, who introduced them to the Shropshire branch of the British Naturalists' Association (BNA) and also the Shropshire Ornithological Society (SOS). They joined both groups and attended talks and went on many field trips. Their lives were much enriched and they enjoyed the companionship of the other

members, one of whom, Harold Walker, became a very close friend of Harold's. Harold W was a carpenter by trade, a keen cyclist, a superb photographer and above all, a delightfully kind and modest character.

In January 1956 Harold and Rene went for a week to the Field Studies Centre at Dale Fort in Pembrokeshire on a Bird Course. This was a memorable week. Each day, the group, about ten in all, went out all day to a different location, listing all the birds seen. Some days they were led by John Moyses whose maxim was 'never pass a bird without identifying it'. Other days they went out with the principal of Dale Fort, John Barrett, a well-known all-round naturalist, who had written a number of reference books and who had set up the Pembrokeshire Coast Path. The weather was bitterly cold all the week and on one day it snowed but it did not deter the infectious enthusiasm of the leaders. The group explored the lanes and headland around Dale, went in the minibus to Haverfordwest and walked along the banks of the Eastern and Western Cleddau Rivers. Another day they walked on the cliffs at St. David's headland hoping to get a sighting of choughs, members of the crow family which were once widespread around Britain but which were now only to be seen on a few western coasts. They thought they were in luck when someone in the group spotted a distant black bird on the cliff which apparently had red legs, but on closer inspection through binoculars it turned out to be a jackdaw feeding on a piece of raw flesh. Harold remembered that disappointment when, many years later, he was to become very familiar with choughs and their distinctive calls. In spite of the wintry weather and lack of suitable clothing for these expeditions, they thoroughly enjoyed the week and learned a great deal. It was the first of many similar courses which Harold was to attend for the next fifty years or more.

At Easter that same year Harold and Rene went on an even more remarkable trip when they spent a week on Skokholm, an uninhabited island, about one mile long and less than half a mile wide, two and a half miles off the coast of south west Pembrokeshire, home to many seabirds.. This island was made famous by Ronald Lockley, an ornithologist, especially famous for his work on puffins and shearwaters, who wrote many books featuring this island, where he lived and researched for many years. He established Britain's first Bird Observatory there in 1933 and lived there until war broke out. In the nineteen fifties the Field Studies Council took small groups there to help with the ringing and recording of the birds and Harold and Rene joined one of these groups.

This was an unforgettable experience for Harold. Firstly there was the passage in the small open boat to the island, from Dale Fort and round St Anns Head through the fierce tide-rips. The living conditions on Skokholm were primitive with no electricity, water pumped from the well, and no direct communication with the mainland. The observatory was staffed by the warden, Peter Davies and his wife Angela, together with Ann, the cook. The visitors were put into groups to assist the staff with their daily chores, preparing vegetables and washing up etc. Harold and Rene were with two pleasant and enthusiastic teen age lads, Julian and Quentin. Each day, after doing these duties, everyone would wander round the island, which was riddled with rabbit burrows which were used by nesting puffins and shearwaters. There was a pond and a bog and many sheer cliffs and crags. They recorded all the birds seen and alerted the others if there was something unusual so that it could be driven into one of the traps where it was measured, weighed and ringed before being released. After supper the group would assemble in the common room and discuss what they had discovered during the day.

One evening just after nine o'clock, with the day's recording finished, Peter suggested a shearwater ringing expedition. At this time of year, as darkness fell, thousands of these birds would land on the island looking for suitable nesting burrows. Once outside, Harold found himself taking part in one of the strangest events of his life. The air was filled with an unearthly shrieking noise; people with torches were stumbling and groping around, trying to pick up shearwaters that seemed to be everywhere. These birds can cover vast distances with their effortless gliding flight. On land, by contrast, they are awkward birds able to move only with an ungainly shuffle. Once someone had hold of a bird they would shout for Peter or Angela, who were qualified ringers, to come and ring the bird or read the ring if it was a recovery. Harold stooped to pick up a bird he could feel shuffling round his feet. He got hold of it but promptly dropped it when it gave his hand a sharp peck so he then put on his glove. Everyone else had gloves on but Harold had thought as he couldn't see the birds, he would do better with bare hands. The group worked frantically for nearly two hours before calling it a day and retiring to the wheelhouse for hot cocoa and bed.

As the week progressed Harold was feeling a little disappointed at the recording session each evening when he and Rene, although having a good tally of birds seen, were never the first ones to see something unusual. However their moment of glory came on the final day when they spotted a hoopoe. In great excitement they ran to the house and sounded the ship's bell to summon the others. The rest of the day was spent tracking this handsome migrant and

trying to catch it for ringing. It was spotted many times but, despite all attempts, refused to be driven back to the house and the Heligoland trap. In the afternoon Peter put out a mist net hoping to trap it but with no success even though it once flew right into the net.

Perhaps the climax of the week was the day for return. The wind, which was quite brisk, was in an unfavourable direction for the boat to get into the landing place at South Haven and there was some doubt as to whether it would come. People were looking anxiously across the water towards the mainland. Eventually the little boat was spotted. It soon became obvious that rather than risk going into South Haven it was making for North Haven where it was more sheltered. This landing place was only a small sandy slit in the north facing cliffs. Everyone clambered down the grassy cliff with their luggage. Harold felt rather foolish carrying a portable radio, approx 12in x 9in x 4in, which he had not listened to all the week. Warps were thrown from the boat which were held by the lighthouse keepers (who had come to collect their post) and the waves carried it to and from the cliff. The group arriving for the coming week had to jump from the deck to the land when it was close enough. Then the supplies and post were thrown ashore – one or two tins fell in the sea. Then it was time for the returning passengers to make their leaps from the cliff to the deck. One just had to watch for the when the boat was close and then jump aboard but, of course, Harold could not gauge this. He would just have to obey the command ‘jump’ and hope for the best. He did it successfully though one worried lighthouse keeper who was helping him was reluctant to let go and partly fell in the water. The return passage, though choppy, was made without incident.

In his Nature Study lessons back at school Harold was able to make excellent use of the knowledge he was gaining. He taught his pupils about the birds that they heard but could not see and they quickly became expert at recognising many bird songs and calls. Harold realised that this skill was one in which these blind children could far surpass almost any of the sighted people they were likely to meet. It was an ability that they might well be proud of in later years. As well as the wealth of birdsong to be heard in the grounds of Condover he would sometimes take the group to different habitats, up in the hills or by one of the meres. The children were also able to visit the museum at Shrewsbury where they were able to handle some of the large collection of stuffed birds there and thus get some idea of what a particular bird was like. At the Eisteddfod that the school held annually, as well as the classes for singing, reciting, instrument playing etc, a class for Bird song recognition was introduced.

In August 1956, Harold was overjoyed when Rene gave birth to a son and he was once again able to savour the joys of fatherhood that he had missed so much since his first marriage broke up. As the baby came a fortnight earlier than expected Clara had not arrived to help out and Harold found himself acting as ‘assistant midwife’ to Nurse Gittins, the village nurse. She came to the flat when Harold went to alert her in the late evening and stayed all night. She had a happy reassuring attitude which inspired confidence. Much of the night she sat calmly knitting in a corner of the bedroom. Harold and Rene found it an unforgettable almost ethereal occasion. The baby was born at 8am and Harold hurried across to tell David, his duty colleague, who lived in a bungalow close by. David and his wife Dorothy were surprised and delighted to hear the news. Nurse Gittins was no stranger to them. She had been the midwife who attended the birth of their three children. David immediately went back with Harold and helped him tidy up and get the house in some sort of order, while Nurse Gittins was seeing to the baby and Rene. The boy was named Julian, with memories of the happy lad who worked with them on Skokholm. Clara duly arrived having been met by David at Shrewsbury station. She greeted her thirteenth grandchild, and then busied herself with household tasks and seeing to the meals while Harold adjusted to all the disruptions to everyday life that one tiny baby can make. She stayed for a couple of weeks by which time some sort of routine was established though it took a while for Harold and Rene to become accustomed to disturbed nights.

Just before Christmas 1956 Harold had the chance to move from the Bothy flat to accommodation that was more suitable for a family with a baby. It happened that in July 1956 one of the teachers, Clifford Nock, died. He and his family had been at the school since the start and had moved to Condover House when the school numbers were increased in 1950. He and his wife Pat were responsible for the twelve children in the Kenny Family, (housemothers Miss Kenny and Miss Antrobus) who lived there. In November this vacancy was filled by David and he, Dorothy and their three children moved into Condover House. Harold, Rene and Julian then moved into The Bungalow which had been part of the stable buildings when Condover Hall had been a private residence. It adjoined High Windows which now housed a small group of deaf- blind children. These buildings probably once housed the horse tack and equipment and were built around the stable-yard where there was now a sandpit and paddling pool.

It was good to be going to a house with a garden, where the baby could be outside for long spells and where the pram did not have to be manoeuvred up and down stairs. But the move had some disadvantages. The flat had been centrally heated with a large walk-in airing cupboard. The Bungalow had two fireplaces, one in the lounge and a triplex stove in the kitchen, and two fires had to be kept going throughout the winter. Convector heaters were used in the bedrooms. One feature that delighted Harold was that he was able to have a workshop. Outside the back door were two out buildings adjoining the house. On one side were a fuel store and outside toilet and room to house the pram, while on the other side there was room for Harold to set up a workbench. Since his schooldays he had loved working with wood and tools but until now there had never been enough space for him to indulge in this hobby as he would have liked. He began adding to his tool store and most weeks he would make another purchase. He set up shelves and hooks so that everything was tidily stored. By now Harold Walker was a frequent visitor and was a great help in getting the workshop arranged.

They could not now get on quite so many bird outings with the BNA and the SOS, but sometimes they would put the pram, which, unusual for those days, had a body which detached from the wheels, into the car. One or other of the members would escort Harold on the walks while Rene and Julian stayed nearer to the parked cars. On other occasions when it was a longer trip Rene would stay at home with Julian while Harold went off for the day with the group, a number of whom by now were becoming good friends.

A trip which thrilled him was a chance to walk from West Kirby in Cheshire across to Hilbre Island a mile distant. This had to be carefully planned in order to catch the tides. The route involved walking across the sands at low water, and on reaching the island, sitting for about three or four hours watching the waders being driven in by the rising tide, before returning to the mainland when the tide had dropped once more. It was an eventful day. The coach was delayed on the way to West Kirby so the group had to start somewhat later than intended and a good pace was going to be needed to reach Hilbre in time. Unfortunately one member, Dennis, had had a motor cycle accident the previous year and had lost the lower part of one leg. He had been fitted with an artificial limb and had soon learned to use this, but walking on sand was not like walking on a hard surface so his progress was slower than that of the rest of the party who reached the island just ahead of the rising tide. When those on the island looked back they saw to their horror that Dennis, and Tom who was walking with him, were not going to make it to Hilbre. Already the fast rising water was up to their thighs. Tom, who was a policeman, so not a stranger to dealing with emergencies, realised that they were close to Middle Eye, an island roughly a quarter the size of Hilbre, so they made for that, wallowing through the waves with the water up to their waists to get ashore. There was great relief for the main party when they saw that the two were safe. Dennis and Tom had to do their bird watching from this spot, waving to the others from time to time. Luckily the day was fine and they were able to dry off somewhat. The return walk was able to be made at a more leisurely pace and the group had good views of many seals basking on the sandbanks. Harold was fascinated to hear them 'singing'.

Seventeen months later Harold had another chance to act as 'assistant midwife' when his daughter Lynda was born.. This was far from the blissful affair that Julian's birth had been. It happened one bitterly cold snowy Thursday evening in January. Harold arrived home about ten o'clock after a tiring day's duty with the prospect of another duty day on Friday, when Rene greeted him with the news that she thought she had labour pains. This was a surprise as the baby was not expected for another five weeks. At this time they had no phone so Harold had to trudge through the snow to High Windows to use their phone to alert Nurse Gittins. Back indoors he then had to stoke up the two fires for this was the coldest night of the winter – in fact it turned out to be one of the coldest January nights on record. The nurse was unable to get her car out through the snow so had to struggle the three or four hundred yards through the grounds carrying her equipment. The night was one that Harold would never forget. He had to get to the phone several more times. He contacted the doctor in Shrewsbury but he too was snowbound. The fires needed to be built up again and again and extra heaters put in all the rooms to try and keep up the temperature in the house. Julian was asleep in his own bedroom and luckily did not wake. The birth itself was not straightforward because the baby had turned into breech position but eventually this tiny scrap made her way into the world. She did not appear to be breathing but Nurse Gittins would not accept defeat. She strove desperately to apply resuscitation and to her relief the baby began to breathe and was wrapped in blankets and put in the cot. She then got in touch with the doctor in Shrewsbury because normally a premature baby weighing less than four pounds should have been taken by ambulance to the premature baby unit at Birmingham. However it was almost impossible for this journey on such a treacherous night. The doctor arranged for an ambulance incubation car to take her to the children's hospital in Shrewsbury but they no idea how long even this comparatively short trip would take. Then Julian wakened and

began to cry. Harold and the nurse were frantically trying to clear up and get the bedroom in some order so there was nothing for it but to put Julian in bed with his mother where he soon quietened down though he was aware of the cot in the corner and kept saying 'baby, baby' – he had been told he was soon going to have a baby brother or sister. Soon he fell asleep again and was put back in his own bed. After what seemed an age the hospital car arrived. Nurse Gittins said she thought the baby had a fifty-fifty chance of survival and it was with heavy hearts that Harold and Rene said good-bye to their little daughter. Before the car came the nurse had quickly 'christened' the baby 'Mary' so that she would have a name on the hospital records.

In the morning Harold was feeling completely exhausted, but managed to send a message to Rene's mother who was supposed to be coming to look after them when the baby was born. He then reported for duty! When he told David and the other staff about the harrowing events of the night he was sent straight back home. Mrs. Myers came down to the bungalow as soon as she heard the news, told Harold to go to bed, and immediately set about getting breakfast for Rene and Julian and somehow things seemed much better. Later on Harold got in touch with the hospital and was told that the baby had been put in a steam tent and was making progress. Things seemed to be more promising though he and Rene dare not raise their hopes too much. After a snowy rail journey Rene's mother arrived the next day. David met her at Shrewsbury station. The following day Harold Walker came to lunch. He was supposed to be going with Harold and Rene to see some white-front geese. He wasn't told that the baby had arrived and Harold kept asking him 'Do you notice anything?' expecting him to notice that Rene's shape had changed since a week or so ago. But to everyone's amusement, being a naive bachelor, he did not spot anything different.

In a day or two Harold and Rene were able to visit their tiny daughter, now called Lynda Mary. She was still in the steam tent and was cocooned in blankets so that all that could be seen was a little head, about the size of a tennis ball. She looked like a beautiful baby doll. The doctors were satisfied with her progress and dad, mum and grandma were all delighted. Harold and Rene visited her each evening. After a few days they were told she could go home. Usually a premature baby would be kept in hospital for much longer than this in case of any setbacks but there were some very sick babies in the same ward, mostly with chest infections, and there was concern that Lynda might succumb to one of these infections. They were given strict instructions about the special care that would be needed until she had gained weight. The bedroom must be kept at a constant temperature of 76° day and night, the baby kept warmly covered in the carrycot, and only cleaned by washing with olive oil. And so this frail little being was taken home. Harold could at last hold her in his arms and realised how light she was – scarcely more than a bag of sugar. When she was uncovered for the daily 'oil' wash it was somewhat shocking to see and for Harold to feel the rest of her body with arms and legs like sticks in contrast to the sweet doll-like head. At first she had to be fed frequently from a special premature feeding bottle. As the clothes that had been prepared were much too big Grandma was given the task of hurriedly knitting something more suitable. She used a pattern for dolls' clothes and got busy, first making bonnets then vests and jackets. She had crocheted an exquisite shawl when Julian was born and this was now put to constant use.

Slowly her weight increased and her body began to look more normal though it was some weeks before she had outgrown the dolls' clothes. She was able to be given a proper bath albeit in a washing up bowl on the kitchen table and soon, as the outside temperature began to rise, she was taken out in the pram and proudly shown to the other inhabitants of Conover. When Harold finished work each day he helped look after the children and spent much time playing with Julian and often bathed him and put him to bed.

By now, Harold had become much involved with the Shrewsbury Labour Party and regularly attended their meetings. He would take himself there on the bus and walk from the Barker Street Bus Station to the Morris Hall and was eventually elected branch chairman. He and Rene became very friendly with Grace and Albert Roberts who lived in Bayston Hill. They made frequent visits to each other's houses. Albert had been a gardener all his life and for many years thereafter helped and advised Harold with various gardens. He had a gentle, contented personality. During the World War 2 he served with REME in North Africa and Italy and had had some frightening experiences just behind the front lines. He never spoke about these distressing times but Harold learned of them many years later when Albert was nearly ninety and his family urged him to write a book of his memories. It made Harold realise how different his own time in the army had been. In 1957 Albert, Harold and Jim Cannon, another teacher at Conover, took part in a Public Speaking Contest, organised by the Labour Party. Albert acted as chairman, Harold was the speaker with the subject 'Labour's Aims' and Jim proposed the vote of thanks. Having won through constituency and area rounds they went to Birmingham where they were the winning team for the Midlands area and were awarded the shield. Harold was very amused one day when he discovered the children playing a game with all

their toys sitting in a circle being given little plates and cups. When he asked them what they were doing they told him they were having a 'Labour Party'. They had the idea that Daddy was off to a party every time he went to a meeting.

A few months after they had settled in The Bungalow an indoor swimming pool was built next door. This was wonderful for the pupils, especially those with physical handicaps and the physiotherapist was able to give hydrotherapy treatment which was extremely beneficial. The temperature of the water was higher than that usually found in other pools because many of the children were not very mobile. The staff and their families were able to make use of the pool out of school hours and as it was so close Harold, Rene and the children took full advantage of this. Every evening, instead of the children having their customary bath, the family would go to the swimming pool. Lynda was only a few months old so Rene would take her into the shallow paddling pool end and splash about and play with her while Harold had great fun with Julian who was like a duck in the water and 'dog' paddled happily around. He had no need to be taught how to swim – it just came naturally to him like walking. Sometimes Harold would pick him up and throw him in the water. He quickly bobbed up again laughing and asking for more. After about half an hour they would go to the changing room and the children were dressed in their nightclothes, ready for bed. Then, wrapped up warmly, they would return home for their nightly bedtime story, a happy family ending to the day.

## **Chapter 8 Caravanning at Llangwnnadr**

Despite being blind, life seemed good to Harold at The Bungalow. With a satisfying job, two lovely children, and plenty of interests and friends outside school what more could he wish for. He wondered what they could do as a family to make the most of the long school holidays. They read somewhere about 'dormobiles' - motorised caravans that were becoming increasingly popular. If they had one of these they could go where they pleased and stay as long as they liked. Harold was quite taken with the idea. Maybe they could swap the car for one of these.

They mentioned this possibility to Leslie and Florence when spending a weekend with them at their house at Erdington. Florence happened to notice in the local paper that there was a Caravan Exhibition at Woottonwawen in Warwickshire, only a few miles from Erdington. Perhaps there would be some Dormobiles on show there. So everyone piled into Leslie's car, four adults, two children and two babies – goodness knows how they all fitted in, but this was in the days before seat belts - probably three in the front, three in the back and the babies on laps. When they got to the exhibition they discovered that the makers of caravans and motor caravans had nothing to do with each other so there were no Dormobiles. As they were there, they thought they might as well have a look round anyway and were intrigued with a very small caravan, only eight feet long, which could sleep four people. Rene said 'Perhaps we could tow something as small as this, and then we could still have a car'. Next to this tiny van was a slightly larger model, a Bluebird Skylark, which was ten feet long. They went home having decided that this was what they wanted and put in an order.

In the meantime, Harold had already arranged for the family to have a caravan holiday at Pistyll, at the foot of Yr Eifl mountains near Nefyn on the Llyn Peninsula. The lady who ran the Girl Guide company at Conover had had a caravan there for some years and offered him the use of it for a week at Easter. It was on its own on a farm by the edge of the cliff, a fantastic site with views across the Irish Sea to Anglesey. Without two little children, Harold and Rene could have had a marvellous holiday, exploring the beach and cliffs and climbing the mountains, but it was unsuitable for such tiny children. There were rough narrow sheep tracks which went steeply down to the beach – Harold had to carry Lynda up and down and Julian, only two years old, needed some help. Lynda was miserable because she did not like the strong breeze blowing. After struggling with this route for two days they decided to take the car to Nefyn where they could park close to the beach and enjoy playing on the sands. As they would soon have their own caravan, Harold thought it would be good idea to investigate the sites on this peaceful peninsula and see if there was somewhere with easier access to the beach than that at the site at Pistyll. They gradually worked their way down the coast and eventually arrived at Llangwnnadr. First they went to Penllech Uchaf, on the cliff where there were four or five caravans and with a footpath down to Penllech Bay, over a mile wide, with a fine expanse of sand and groups of rocky pools. Surely this would be a perfect spot for a holiday with small children. While

daydreaming about endless happy days they might have on this idyllic beach they met with Mr Griffith, the site-owner, who was busily shovelling a pile of manure. He proffered Harold a large mucky hand in greeting. Harold enquired whether there were any vacancies on the site but Mr Griffith's command of English was poor so conversation was difficult. In the end Rene gave him a note of their name and address asking him to write if a vacancy occurred. They drove on further and found themselves down a lane leading to Porth Colmon. Just opposite a small pink-washed cottage, Llain Fatw, was a neat field with about half a dozen vans. This site belonged to Griff Jones, a one-armed man who was working in the field. Conversation with him was no problem. Although not as close to the beach as Penllech Uchaf, Griff assured them it was only a short walk down a track and took Rene and Julian to show them while Harold stayed in the car with Lynda. The path was reasonable and it would be possible to wheel a pram down to the beach, even if it was somewhat bumpy. When Harold asked about the site rent, Griff thought long and hard before he said £10 for the season. They arranged with Griff to bring the caravan to his site shortly and see how things worked out.

There was room to park the van outside the bungalow on the path that led to the swimming pool and the scouts' camp field to prepare it for use. Harold made one or two extra fittings and adaptations while Rene got crockery, cutlery, cooking utensils and other necessary equipment. Sleeping bags were purchased as well as several ex-army blankets. Harold carefully cut out a ten inch square section of the floor and managed to get an aluminium box with flanged edges that would fit in this section. This would be used to store perishables such as milk, butter etc to keep them cool, using the cut out floor section as a lid. The box could also be used as somewhere to leave their money when they went to the beach. The Vauxhall Wyvern car had to be taken to Shrewsbury to be fitted with a towing hitch and the electrical adaptation for the indicators and other lights. They planned to make the journey to Llangwnadl on Harold's next free weekend. Rene was somewhat uneasy – she felt unsure about being able to manoeuvre the caravan should they find themselves in an awkward spot, but Harold, as usual, was full of confidence and could not understand why she was worried. Fortunately all went well and the 100 mile journey was without incident. It took some time to get the caravan into place on the field with much backing – Rene found it difficult to understand the steering needed to do this – but eventually, after much shouting from Griff and Harold, the little home was in place. A surprising discovery was made while doing this – the electrics had been wired the wrong way round. On the journey from Conover every time Rene had signalled right the left indicator on the caravan would have flashed and vice versa. There must have been some puzzled drivers following behind. When they managed to overtake and noticed a woman at the wheel there were no doubt some caustic remarks about Women Drivers! Harold went cold when he thought what might have happened.

Having unpacked and sorted out a few things, they got the children ready for bed and put them in their sleeping bags on the side bunks. None of the other caravans seemed to be occupied. By now it was dark – really dark, for as yet Llangwnadl had no electricity. They lit the gas lights and then went to find the toilet. Griff had said he would be building proper flush toilets very shortly but in the meantime there was an earth closet down the bottom of the field. Harold led the way as Rene had forgotten to bring a torch and they came up against a wooden shed that smelt like a toilet! Rene felt for the latch and gave the door a push. To their astonishment there were some angry grunts – they had disturbed a large pig! Hurriedly they shut the door. They gave up the search and 'bobbed' behind a bush before returning to the children.

They had one or two quiet weekends at Llangwnadl before the summer holiday. Thankfully the promised toilets had been built. However they were in for a shock when they arrived in late July to find their quiet field full of tents. The population of the site must have increased at least tenfold! The queues for the two toilets were horrendous made even worse by campers from another of Griff's sites up the lane also coming to make use of them. The toilets malfunctioned from overuse. Nevertheless they had an enjoyable time. Luckily, after the second week the numbers decreased rapidly because at that time the Bank Holiday was at the beginning of August and after this the season soon tailed off. The weather was fine and warm and each day they would make up a picnic, put Lynda and any luggage in the pram and spend all day on the beach, which in spite of all the campers, was far quieter than most beaches in August. Because it was such a long stretch of sand, families could usually find their own little nook. Harold had told Julian that now he was such a good little swimmer he would really love it in the sea. Father and son ran happily down to the water's edge but Julian's laughter rapidly turned to shrieks of horror when he discovered the temperature was not like that in the swimming bath at home. Nothing would persuade him to try again and it was a year or two before he would venture into the 'icy' waves, but because of the long stretches of sands when the tide receded there were often big shallow pools left and these were much warmer than the sea. Children could play and



splash safely in these to their hearts content and it was here that Julian and Lynda spent much time. Julian also liked exploring the rock pools and seeing what catches he could make.

Harold, a strong and able swimmer, delighted in the vigorous exercise he could indulge in when in the water and the freedom it gave him. Rene had to keep a watch on him and the children. One day while he was swimming Harold was stung on the arm by a large jellyfish, *Chrysaora isosceles*. At first it didn't seem too bad and felt like a nasty graze on his arm but after a while his whole nervous system was affected. He developed severe 'fidgets', and couldn't stop moving his arms and legs. He kept pacing around the caravan and had almost no sleep that night because of the dreadful restlessness. The next day he sought medical advice and a locum from the local surgery called. He prescribed some antidote tablets and in a day or two Harold had recovered but he remembered that nasty experience for the rest of his life and whenever swimming in the sea was very wary if he thought there were any jellyfish around, even the harmless ones.

Each evening when they returned from the beach, after having a meal, the children sat outside in a galvanised bath where the sand and salt water was rinsed off before they were put into their nightclothes and tucked into their sleeping bags. Harold and Rene, after tidying up, would spend a quiet evening reading and listening to the radio. By now they had become acquainted with some of the other people on the site and sometimes Harold would be invited to go with them to The Lion at Tudweiliog.

In September they packed up the caravan and towed it back home. This time they made sure the electrics were the correct way round. That winter they thought much about caravanning and Llangwnnagl and decided they would return there the following summer. They also looked for another caravan, something a little larger and one that had an oven instead of just two burners and a grill. At Gailey, on the A5, there was a large caravan retail park, so Harold suggested they had a look round. It so happened that there was a second-hand caravan, a Sprite 15ft, that had been used for only one season, which at once took their eye. The owners had taken it to the south of France for the previous summer and had ordered it to be sprayed to match their car, a rather strange shade of salmon pink. Its fittings were superior to those of the Bluebird. The front section could be screened off at night by a folding wooden partition, thus making a separate private bedroom. In the centre part there was a pull-down double bed, a small wardrobe and drawers. There was also a small solid fuel stove which could be a great asset in the Easter holiday when temperatures could be low. The kitchen was divided from the rest by a work-surface bar with a cupboard beneath, a sink by the window and a small oven. There was also a separate tiny wash room. It did not take long for Harold and Rene to make up their minds that this was the one for them. They took the Bluebird to Gailey and brought back the Sprite. Harold thought it would be a good idea to give it a little run before taking it to Llangwnnagl and suggested they drove it to a lay-by near Cressage. This was about halfway between Conover and Dawley. They could unhitch the car and go and pick up the aunts and bring them to the caravan for lunch. Rene wrote saying she would collect them for a little outing but didn't mention the caravan so when they arrived at the lay-by they were flabbergasted. They inspected the little house and had a cooked lunch before being taken back to Dawley. The unexpected outing probably gave them something to talk about for days.

At Easter they went to Llangwnnagl with the Sprite and found it was a great improvement on the Bluebird. The oven meant they could have a proper cooked meal and the stove made it very cosy and comfortable in the evenings. That season they spent several quiet weekends there. Because of the extra space in the caravan, they were able to take Clara with them for one weekend, and another time Rene's mother came with them. Although the site was again crowded at the start of the summer holiday, it didn't seem as bad as the previous year and this season the toilet situation was slightly better as there were no extra campers from up the road. Griff had sold the plot to someone who wanted to build a house there. As in the previous year almost every day was spent on the beach, playing and swimming. The car was rarely used, all the shopping being done at the local shop and Post Office, half a mile up the road at Pen y Craig. They became friendly with a family who had a caravan on the neighbouring site at Moel y Berth, Jack and Joyce Wilson and their two sons, John and James, slightly older than Julian and Lynda. The four children were happy playing together, especially with their fishing nets among the rock pools. Harold much enjoyed the company of Jack, whose early years in the industrial northeast, were somewhat similar to his own childhood. Like Harold, Jack had done well, in spite of a poor start in life, and was now a lecturer in Engineering at a college in Birmingham. Jack was a keen walker and used to take groups of students walking in Snowdonia. Sometimes he and Harold would go for long walks on the cliffs.

On the journey back to Condover at the end of the season they had a mishap near Beddgelert when the caravan came to a jarring halt. One of the springs had broken. The road was not very wide but there was just room for other traffic to pass. Harold unhitched the van and Rene drove to Beddgelert to try and find a garage while Harold and the children sat at the side of the road eating their picnic. Harold tried to look nonchalant although he realised he must be getting some strange looks from motorists who were probably commenting what a stupid place that was to park a caravan. Back in Beddgelert Rene found only one garage which was being looked after by the owner who was busy selling petrol. It was a pleasant Sunday afternoon so there were many people having a drive round Snowdonia enjoying the sunshine. When Rene explained the problem the man said he was on his own so wasn't able to leave the garage. However he could lend her a jack so that Harold could get under the caravan and perhaps make a temporary repair. Rene told him her husband was totally blind and she didn't think he would want to try that. When he heard the sorry tale the owner took pity on Rene and said he would close the garage shortly and come and see what he could do. Rene went back to where Harold was anxiously waiting. After a while the garage owner came along in his Land Rover. He jacked up the caravan and crawled underneath and before long had fixed a thick piece of wood along the broken spring and fastened it securely with wire. He thought that this would get them home provided Rene drove slowly, about 20mph! He said he would follow for a mile or two to make sure things were all right. Harold was extremely grateful for his kindness especially as he had no doubt lost a fair bit of trade while his garage was shut. The rest of the trip went without incident though they were worried whether the repair would hold for nearly 80 miles. Rene felt embarrassed about the long line of traffic that kept building up behind them and wished there was some way of explaining why they were crawling along. It was a great relief to get home. They had the caravan repaired during the winter. The next year they decided to take the caravan to Llangwnadl again and henceforward leave it there permanently.

## **Chapter 9 Rushton Hall**

By 1960 there was no decrease in the number of blind children with additional handicaps in the UK and there was not enough room to cater for them all at Condover Hall. To ease this problem the Royal National Institute for the Blind decided that Condover should become a senior school and that a junior school should be opened elsewhere for children between the ages of seven and twelve and in September 1960 Rushton Hall was opened. Like Condover, this was a magnificent structure, built mainly of local stone, dating from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, by Thomas Tresham, a catholic merchant, whose son, Francis, and was involved with the Gunpowder Plot. It was scheduled by the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works as an Ancient Monument and was situated in the little village of Rushton in Northamptonshire about 4½ miles north of Kettering. It would provide education for 45 children.

A headteacher, Mrs Kate Brunton, was appointed and the RNIB advertised for a deputy. One or two people suggested to Harold that he might apply for this position but he wasn't keen on the idea. He was very happily settled at Condover, the work was satisfying, and he had many friends and outside interests in the area and did not relish the thoughts of a big upheaval. Then one evening, Mary Bonham, another blind teacher at Condover, had been invited to supper at The Bungalow. The subject of Rushton and the Deputy Headship came up. When Harold told Mary why he wasn't applying she urged him to think again. She thought it would be a good thing for the new school to have a blind teacher on the staff. Mrs Brunton, although well-qualified in many aspects, had no experience of teaching visually handicapped children. It would be advantageous for her to have someone to give first hand advice on the difficulties that might arise. Also Mary thought it would be excellent for the image of blind people if a sightless person was able to hold a responsible position like this. Harold thought about what she had said and discussed it with Rene and after much consideration decided to make an application. He had some first-rate testimonials from Mr Myers, Mr Baldwin (headmaster of the school at Leamington) and from the principal of Drake Hall Training College. By the end of term he had been offered the job, to start in the Summer Term 1961.

Harold had already met Kate Brunton when she had visited Condover. She was highly educated, pleasant and friendly and anxious that Rushton should be run on similar lines to Condover so took much advice from Mr Myers. Harold had never had a woman 'boss' before and had some misgivings but once he met Mrs Brunton he didn't think he would have a problem. Harold made arrangements for the family to have a weekend at Rushton Hall. They arrived at Rushton one cold, wet Friday evening in January. In spite of the weather, after driving up the long winding drive, they were at once impressed with the imposing and graceful appearance of the building. The entrance was through heavy timber doors. A stone figure of Plenty sat above whilst either side of the entrance was a carved armed knight. This opened into a tiled gallery which went left to the splendid reception rooms or right to the

workrooms and kitchen area. Mrs Brunton made them very welcome and they spent two days looking round what was soon to be their new home and workplace. Only about twenty of the forty-five pupils were there, the rest would be starting after Easter when Harold and some more staff would make up the full complement. As at Conover, the hall's interior was of grand style, stone and timber fireplaces adorned many rooms with ornate plasterwork and wooden paneling. The Great Hall was truly magnificent with its huge stone fireplace and large window alcoves. The building surrounded a courtyard where there had once been a small pond and fountain. Again, as at Conover, the classrooms were scattered around the splendid building and not altogether suited to purpose.

They were shown their living accommodation which was going to be in a large old stone building, the Bailiff's House, full of character, two or three hundred yards down the drive from the Hall. It was older than the Hall itself and it was thought that it had originally been a coaching inn, outside the grounds. No doubt it had a most interesting history. It was being converted into three flats and during this work an old axe head had been discovered hidden in one of the walls. Had there been some dirty deed committed there? Also it was found that in one of the rooms the walls had been packed with corn – possibly stored there to evade tax or as a safeguard in time of shortage. As the conversion work was not yet complete, Harold and family would be living temporarily in one of the flats that was already finished. This flat was on the first and second floors. On the first floor there were two well-proportioned, good-sized rooms with casement mullioned windows, a large kitchen and a bathroom with a big free standing bath, which would need a lot of water to fill it. On the second floor there were two rooms with low sloping ceilings. Harold and Rene decided that they would all sleep on this floor. It was not an ideal arrangement and the children would not have the same freedom to play outside as they did at The Bungalow but as it would not be many months before they could move into Flat 1, which they thought would be a most attractive home, they would make the best of it.

As Julian would be starting school after Easter, they went to see the school and the headmistress, Maidie Dunmore. She was pleased to add another name to the school roll because with less than thirty pupils the school could be closed at any time.

Harold also had the chance to meet some of the other Rushton Hall staff. Molly Hanson, the matron, and her husband Phil, caretaker/handyman and driver, lived in a flat at the top of the building with their two children. Shirley Kimble, the housekeeper, and her husband Roy, a visually-handicapped teaching assistant, lived in one of the lodges by the gate. The other lodge was occupied by Trevor Larking, the gardener, and his mother who did some cleaning at the hall. All these people would be part of Harold's life for many years.

The weekend had been enjoyable and given them some idea of what to expect when they moved. Back at Conover there was much packing up to be done but all too quickly came the time for saying their farewells. They were sad to be leaving so many good friends and it was a somewhat subdued little family that started the journey to their new home. Julian kept muttering that he 'didn't want to go to *Russia!*' They hadn't gone many miles before Lynda was sick – the result of gobbling an Easter Egg that someone had thrust through the car window as a goodbye present. Harold tried to cheer the children and keep them amused for the rest of the way.

They arrived at the Bailiffs House before the removal van. The door to Flat 2 was open so in they went and up the stairs. What a cheery welcome awaited them. A large vase of flowers was by the fireplace, but what made the children shriek with delight were two special presents for them – a pedal car for Julian and a rocking swan for Lynda. They sat themselves in these and pedalled and rocked round and round the empty room. In the meantime, Shirley Kimble appeared with a home-baked sponge. At last the furniture van arrived and Harold was busy directing them where to put things. By early evening the essential things were in place, table and chairs in the kitchen, three-piece suite in the lounge and beds made up in the attic. The rest of the stuff could be sorted out in the morning. The following afternoon Molly and Phil took them to Kettering to give them some idea of the town where they would do their shopping. They also met Joan and Laurie Bright who had been appointed as teachers. They and their eight year old daughter, Jane, were living temporarily in the hall until the flats at the Bailiffs House were ready. When Harold moved to Flat 1 they would take over Flat 2.

Harold, of course, had to familiarise himself with the layout of Rushton Hall and memorise where the various rooms were. This was going to be more challenging than Conover as when he first went there he had had some sight so, later on, when he could no longer see, he was able to visualise the place. However, he seemed to have little difficulty in getting to know his way around this new school and was soon navigating himself round the complex building and

the immediate outside area. It was a marvel how he remembered it all. He did not use a stick and appeared to have a sixth sense when an object was in the way. He moved at the same speed as a sighted person and as his eyes looked normal, people seeing him for the first time would have no idea he was totally blind.

When the new term started he quickly got to know his study group and found them a happy and amenable crowd, all of them eager to learn. Harold was particularly pleased that nearly all the children in his class were musical, some exceptionally so, and he soon got a recorder group established. The school secretary, Margaret Hall, was very gifted musically, and enjoyed finding and adapting music for recorders. Harold was greatly enjoying his work and looked forward to each day.

Julian, however, was not. He had been told so much about school and what a wonderful time he would have there. He had picture books about school where everything seemed like fairyland and also he had sometimes been with Harold in his classroom at Condober, where there were toys and much colourful equipment. He was feeling very excited at the prospect of starting school. How disillusioned he was. Once again he discovered that, as with the swimming in the sea at Llangwnnagl, grown-ups were not always to be trusted with their predictions. The infants' class in the village school was in a rather dingy room – no toys or bright equipment to be seen - but what upset him most was the way the teacher dealt with the children. She was untrained and her method of keeping order was a quick slap. Julian had never been physically punished and found it upsetting to see children treated thus. Each day there was a great scene when it was time for school. Rene had to tear herself away from him and leave the teacher struggling to hold him and she and Harold were worried and unhappy at the situation. The problem was sorted in a few weeks. The teacher concerned was expecting her second baby very shortly, and would soon be leaving. Her first child aged two had accompanied her to school each day. When Rene casually asked Mrs. Dunmore who was going to replace her she was told they had been unable to get anyone. Rene wondered whether Harold would mind if she applied for the job, providing she could take Lynda with her. He said it might be a good idea so application was made and one teatime the chairman of the school managers came to the Bailiffs House and offered her the job. So each morning, Harold would make his way to the hall while Rene and the children walked up the village. Everyone was happy once more. Rene found herself with a class of twelve children, two of them her own. The school ran on a very meagre budget but the individual attention that could be given more than compensated for any lack of equipment.

They were impatiently waiting for the time when they would be able to move into Flat 1. They had plenty of time to choose curtains and carpets and decide on colour schemes. There was a lot of white painted wood and Mrs Brunton thought red carpet would look good in the main bedroom and on the stairs so they went along with this suggestion. However they later regretted it as the bed had an attractive white candlewick bedspread and the towels by the bedroom basin were also white. Consequently the carpet always seemed to have little white bits on it which did not come off easily even with the vacuum cleaner. The children were excited about their bedroom which was a large square room with four casement windows and there would be plenty of room for their toys. They chose pretty nursery wallpaper covered with rows of toys and animals. There was linoleum on the floor but Harold made a large rug with a Noah's Ark and animals on it and two smaller rugs, one with poodles and one with a cat, each with the children's names on to go by their beds. He also made an attractive semi-circular rug to go in front of the fireplace in the lounge and designed a bookcase unit to fit into a recess at the side of the fireplace. This had to be specially made because, owing to the age of the house, none of the walls were square. The hall had a stone floor and they chose reed matting to go on it. They purchased a small attractive carved oak table to go in the hall. Harold said they should furnish this house with things of good quality because this would probably be their home for at least twenty years – how wrong he was! The dining room had an all-night burning stove which made it cosy and the kitchen led from this room. Opposite the back door were some outbuildings consisting of an outside toilet, a fuel store and, to Harold's delight, a good sized room where he could install his workbench and tools. It had been one his main regrets when leaving Condober that he had to lose his snug workshop. When he first arrived at Rushton he discovered there was a cellar beneath the Bailiffs House and wondered if he could use that to do his woodwork but it was found to be full of dry rot, it reminded one of stalactites and looked almost beautiful. It had to be treated and the place was not going to be suitable for working in. At last the day came when Flat 1 was finished and they were in their permanent home. Harold felt very satisfied with their new abode.

There were two attic bedrooms on the second floor so there was ample accommodation for visitors. When Clara first came they had all retired to bed when she called in alarm for Harold. On going upstairs he found her white faced and trembling on the landing. 'There's a bat flying round the room' she cried. Harold opened the window wider and tried

to persuade the creature towards it but without success. He shouted for Rene and she came up with a large towel. After flying round for a few minutes the bat settled in a corner and Rene smothered it with the towel. She managed to keep it contained while she took it downstairs and released it in the garden. Clara made sure she kept the window shut after that. Other visitors came to stay, including George Fenton and family who had emigrated to Canada in 1954 and were making a short visit to England.

Life in the Bailiffs House was very pleasant. Teatime was a happy occasion. The children would eagerly wait for Harold to come home so that they could tell him the day's happenings at school. After tea most days they would clear the table and get out board games. As well as the usual favourites like Snakes and Ladders and Ludo, there were others like Round Britain Rail Race and Formula One. Harold could join in using his Braille dice and some of the games had been adapted for blind players. At seven o'clock it was time for bath and bed. They missed their nightly trips to the swimming pool but there were plans to build one very shortly at Rushton.

Christmas was a particularly happy time at the Bailiffs House. The children were at the delightful age when Santa Claus was very real. Lynda wanted a doll's cot so Harold got busy in his workshop and made a sturdy cot which would last for many years. One Christmas in particular stood out in Harold's memory. Julian had asked for a train set, perhaps prompted by Harold who would have loved to possess one in his impoverished childhood. Having purchased a second-hand set with engines, coaches and many accessories, Harold constructed a large plywood table and fastened the track to this. There was storeroom on the attic floor of the house and this was where Harold would put the table. There was room to walk all round. After weeks of increased anticipation at Rushton Hall and at the village school, Christmas Eve came at last. The house and tree were decorated, the kitchen cupboards bulging with Christmas fare, Rene's mother had arrived to spend the holiday with them. When two very excited children had hung up their pillow cases and at last fallen asleep, Harold set up the tape recorder on the landing. Early on Christmas morning he switched it on and made a wonderful recording, starting with snuffles and rustles from Julian and a shout of "Lynda, wake up – he's been!" There then followed squeals of delight as they found their pillow cases bulging with parcels. "Put your slippers on," Julian instructed Lynda, "You know what Daddy said", before they rushed across the landing into Harold's and Rene's bed where they frantically began tearing off the wrappings to see what Santa had brought them. Rene tried to insist they read the labels first so she would have some idea of who gave each present. Their delight at even simple things was heart-warming as one treasure after another was discovered. Grandma was recorded as she appeared in the bedroom with cups of tea and joined in the excitement. When, at the bottom of his pillowcase, Julian found a note telling him to follow a piece of string leading upstairs, his excitement knew no bounds when, in the box room, he discovered the present he had especially asked for. For many years after Harold listened to this tape recording with pleasurable nostalgia, recalling the happy innocence of childhood and the rewarding joys of family life.

Harold thought that maybe it would be an idea to move the caravan to the east coast so that they could get away for occasional weekends in term time as they had done at Conover. They spent a couple of weekends exploring the area which they found attractive in some ways but it did not appeal to them in the same way as Llangwnnadr and the sites that they investigated seemed crowded. So the van stayed in Wales and it was back to the familiar spot for their holidays. It was a good decision as David and Dorothy Griffiths had visited the site the previous year and they too had fallen in love with the place with its beautiful sands and had bought a caravan on the same site. They all spent long carefree days on the beach, swimming, chatting and picnicking while the five children played happily together. Most days they were joined by Jack and Joyce Wilson and their two boys. If the weather was too poor for the beach they would sit in each other's vans drinking endless cups of coffee and the children would play board games. Several times Jack took them all walking and they climbed the hills of the Llyn, Cefn Amwlch, Boduan, Madryn and some smaller ones. Even though these were of no great height, on a clear day it was possible to see far down the Welsh coast to Aberystwyth and beyond and if the evening was very clear the Wicklow hills in Ireland were just visible. Eventually they climbed the highest hills on the peninsula, Yr Eifl with its three pointed peaks, the highest of which is 1850 feet.

One day when the weather was fine and settled Jack suggested they might like to climb Snowdon. The Griffiths and Joyce opted out so the expedition consisted of Jack, John and James together with the Hayes family. They left the car in the car park at Pen y Pass and set off up the Pyg Track. They made good progress at first but after a while Lynda began to tire – she was only four – and Jack carried her on his shoulders. By now the wind was blowing more strongly. One of the boys wanted to stop and have a bite to eat so Jack rather unwillingly brought the party to a halt. Someone opened a pack of sandwiches which promptly blew away. Jack gave everyone a brief respite to have a

drink and a snack and then started off once more. It had been a mistake to stop for they felt chilled and Lynda was not at all happy. They had almost reached the junction of the Pyg Track and the Miners Path and realising that he wouldn't be able to carry her far because the path was now becoming steeper and rockier, Jack suggested that Rene and Lynda go down the scree of the Miners Path and pick up the easy track by the lake back to the car park. The others began to climb the steep zig-zags leading up to the railway. Harold was tagging along behind Jack at a good pace. It was hard going and when they got to the top he felt exhausted. Suddenly he wondered where Julian, who was only just six, was on this difficult stretch as he hadn't heard him for a while. But he needn't have worried for there was Julian close behind, coming up on his hands and knees. From there it was a comparatively short walk up to the summit itself. They didn't stay long as the weather was deteriorating and on the way down it started to rain. Rene and Lynda were waiting for them at the car. Harold felt he had had a satisfying day and wished he could climb more mountains.

## **Chapter 10 Dinghy Sailing**

In 1964 the Griffiths sold their caravan and did not come to Llangwnnwdl. Harold and Rene missed them very much and found they were becoming a bit bored with sitting on the beach on their own. Rene would read bits out of the newspaper and one happening that interested them that year was the Observer Single-Handed Trans-Atlantic yacht race which had started in 1960 and was held every four years. From when he was quite a small boy Harold had always had an interest in sailing ships. At Nelson Street there was an old book on the shelf, *Boys Book of Boats* by W.H.G.Kingston. It had been published in the mid nineteenth century and was beautifully bound with the pages edged in gold. It was full of intricate line drawings of various craft from all over the world. It showed different rigs, sectional drawings of boats, knots and many other nautical objects. Everything was explained in great detail but was nevertheless easy for a boy to understand, for this author had travelled much and was a well-known writer of adventure books for boys. Harold never tired of studying this book and committed much of it to memory. When he left Nelson Street he took the book with him and kept it for the rest of his life. Thus he became quite absorbed in the reports of the 1964 Trans-Atlantic race.

The beach at Penllech, besides being excellent for safe bathing was also good for dinghies and other small craft which could be launched at almost any state of the tide. During the summer season there would be a number of boats at the foot of the cliffs, mostly belonging to people on the Penllech and Moel y Berth caravan sites. Harold had felt envious when Rene described the activities of these dinghy sailors. He wondered if might be possible for them to get a boat and learn to sail. It would certainly give them some purpose for being on the beach now that the Griffiths had left. The previous year someone from Penllech caravan site had introduced himself to Harold. He was Gil Batson and was a rep with a firm of woollen manufacturers. He called regularly on the menswear department at Lewis' store, Manchester, which was managed by Harold's brother, Wilf. Harold's name and Llangwnnwdl must have somehow come up in conversation and Gil said he would look out for him. Gil, his wife Edna and their family had started caravanning in the area about the same time as Harold and Rene. They owned one of the dinghies at the foot of the cliff – a 16 ft Wayfarer – a beamy, stable boat. Following this meeting the Batson and Hayes families were to become great friends for many years. When Harold told Gil he was thinking of getting a dinghy and asked him for advice, Gil mentioned the possibility of a GP 14, there were already two or three of this class of boat on the beach. He said he would think about it. In the meantime Harold and Rene went to Pwllheli for a sailing lesson which something of a joke. After showing them how to rig the boat, a Twinkle 12, the instructor took them for a sail round the harbour. The boat was ill-equipped, the under benches buoyancy needed inflating and the vessel was leaking and did not appear to have a bailer. They learned the different points of sailing and the process of tacking. Coming away Harold decided that if they got a boat they would probably be able to teach themselves. A day or two later they met Gil, who told them of a dinghy that he thought would be eminently suitable – a Leader. This was 14 ft long and like a scaled-down Wayfarer. It was lighter than a GP and therefore faster. Unfortunately though, unlike the GP, it was not a large class, and therefore there might not be many second hand ones for sale.

Back at Rushton they started to peruse the 'For Sale' columns of sailing magazines, looking for GP 14s and Leaders. Imagine their surprise when, hardly had they begun their search, they came across an advertisement '*Leader Dinghy for sale. Almost new. Been used as demonstration boat for one season only. Many extras.*' It was being sold by The Boat Showrooms of Birmingham. They made enquiries and arranged to go and view the boat. It seemed too good to be true –virtually new and at a very favourable price. They made the purchase there and then with a few more extras including a Seagull Outboard engine. As the Ford car they now owned did not have a towing hitch one of the parents from the village school, who had a car with a hitch, kindly offered to go with them in her car and bring the

boat back to Rushton. Harold had use of one of the garages in which to keep it but first of all he parked it on the lawn in front of the Bailiffs House so that he could step the mast and try out some of the rigging which caused some interest and amusement to the other resident staff.

It seemed a long time to next year when they could sail it at Llangwnnagl so, in order to get in some practice, they joined the Oundle Boat Club. This club was based on the River Nene and had a good selection of craft, rowing boats, canoes and others which members could use as well as using their own boats. There was an outside compound where boats could be stored. There were a few sailing boats and occasional races were arranged. So one Saturday, having got a towing hitch on the car, off they went to Oundle, about twenty miles from Rushton. The first sail caused a few problems, especially to Rene who lacked Harold's confidence. There was a very light breeze blowing and, having launched the boat, Rene cautiously steered it along the cut. It was drifting placidly down to the main river when the mast became entangled with the branches of one of the trees which lined the bank. Harold shook the rigging and rocked the boat from side to side, a few bits of tree snapped off and fell in the river and eventually the boat was moving again. After that Rene looked up as well as ahead when there were trees about. The river wasn't very wide so, unless the wind was aft, they had much practice in tacking from one side to the other and 'going about'. After a while they found it was a pleasant, gentle experience, sailing peacefully through lush meadows. There were only one or two small craft on the river, mostly rowing boats and canoes. One of the rowing fours from Oundle School was having a training session. The only other people about were fishermen sitting quietly on the banks with sundry equipment spread under their large umbrellas. How tranquil it was. Suddenly, there came an irate shout from one of the fishermen, 'You've got me bloody float!!' Unbeknowningly Rene had sailed over his line and it had become tangled round the rudder. Harold was astonished when Rene turned the boat about, leaned nonchalantly over the stern and managed to free the line and toss it back in the water shouting her apologies before continuing their sail as though she had been doing that manoeuvre for years. Harold had named the boat '*Bliss*' (where ignorance is) – which Rene thought was very apt!

That winter Harold purchased a canoe kit and built a two-seater wooden boat which they took to Oundle to use on the river. The family had much fun with this and became adept at paddling this as well as sailing the Leader.

With a few more river sails that autumn and again the following spring they were beginning to feel confident about handling the boat and the next July they took it to Llangwnnwadl to join the little fleet of boats that were tucked up under the cliffs for the holiday. The farmer from Moel y Berth, Pierce Thomas, towed it down the rough track on to the beach with his tractor. As well as being a farmer Pierce was also a fisherman, mainly for lobsters, and had a boat at Porth Colmon. Most days the dinghy sailors would see him out checking on his pots.

Harold and Rene quickly became acquainted with the owners of the other craft. Besides Gil and Edna with their Wayfarer, there was a GP14 belonging to Douglas and Betty West, who were to become close friends over the years. Their daughter Angela had a Dabchick. There was another GP14 owned by Bob and Celia Chapman who later on would be Harold's neighbours. Joan Adshead also had a GP. She was a formidable lady who belonged to a sailing club and, when not at the seaside, sailed her boat on an inland reservoir where she took her racing very seriously. There were two Albacores, one belonging to Tom and Jean Groves and the other to Tom and Margaret Colclough. Bernard Horton had a Fireball, a tender fast boat from which he often skilfully managed to fish. A few other boats came and went and there was a good camaraderie among these folk. The children of these families were good friends and played happily together while their parents were out on the water.

Unlike sailing on the river, where the water was usually calm and flat, at the sea, unless there was no wind, there was always movement from slight ripples in light airs to white horses in moderate to fresh breezes. At the sea's edge there were waves which could sometimes make launching difficult especially when the wind was onshore when it would occasionally be almost impossible to get going. Harold would stand in the water holding the bow, trying to keep it head to wind and waves while Rene clambered over the stern and took the tiller but often '*Bliss*' would be knocked sideways by a wave. When the boat began to respond Harold would fling himself over the gunwale and tightened up the jib sheets. It wasn't a very tidy manoeuvre but, in the circumstances it was the best they could do. Sometimes, when the waves were really big, most of the sailors would decide to wait until it calmed down a bit, but Joan Adshead, undaunted, would launch herself single handed and with a pair of oars row fiercely into the waves until she was beyond the surf.

Harold will always remember the first sail on the sea. The launch went quite well and they enjoyed reaching to and fro across the bay in company with some of the other dinghies. When they decided to return to shore the plan was for Harold to get out as soon as it was shallow enough and take hold of the bow and guide the boat in. However, just as he got out of the boat into the water there came a big wave. Harold fell backwards and, to Rene's horror, it looked as if he was going to be crushed under the boat. Harold somehow had the presence of mind to kick out with both legs and fend off the boat and get to his feet once more. It was a chastening experience but he had learnt his lesson and never again did he disembark ahead of the boat.

One of the main differences between sea sailing and inland sailing was the necessity of knowing the state of the tide at any particular time. Harold had to remember that however good the progress made on a point of sailing one should always know what the tide was doing and make allowances. It was essential to have a tide table and know how to use it. On Penllech beach the water at high spring tides in certain weather conditions could lap the foot of the cliff where the dinghies were parked. One had to know when these tides were due and sometimes the boats had to be staked to higher ground or even lifted on to the cliff. On more than one occasion Harold found himself on the beach around midnight to make sure the boat was safe. He also had to learn about the various currents, eddies and tide rips that affected that part of the coast. There was a strong race off Porth Colmon where there was usually breaking water especially when the tide was at its strongest. He found study of the tides a fascinating subject. Sometimes when the wind died they found themselves at the mercy of the currents but they carried the Seagull engine under the thwarts, as well as oars and paddles so they could always get back. From time to time in the summer sea fogs enveloped the coast. These could drift in quickly and unexpectedly and Harold would find his 'look-out helmsman' wondering how to get back. His sense of hearing then came in useful and they found themselves navigating by beach sounds, children's voices, dogs barking etc. Although he would have liked to take the helm he didn't often do so. Harold steered by the feel of the wind on his face but this was difficult when the wind was very light. When the wind increased and he could clearly sense its direction '*Bliss*' became more lively and would heel over so that the tiller needed a careful hand if the boat was to stay on course. However, he was always very aware of what the boat was doing and how to get extra speed.

Harold was delighted with the way the Leader handled and was grateful to Gil for recommending it. One thing that really pleased him was the ease with which, by backing the jib and releasing the tiller, the boat could be made to 'heave-to'. When the weather was settled, they would take a picnic in the boat in order to stay longer out at sea and 'heave-to' for lunch. Harold also began to fish from the boat using feathers to lure mackerel and the occasional pollack. While Rene sailed he would trail a line and usually it wasn't long before he felt a tug and would haul in the catch, sometimes three or four at once. He would unhook them into the cockpit and Rene would collect them in a bucket, before the line was thrown over once more. Fresh mackerel for supper and for breakfast became the norm. They were also able to distribute fish to other caravanners. When they caught a pollack this was usually given to Griff Jones who preferred that fish to mackerel.

Often *Bliss* would sail in company with some of the other dinghies. One day before they had become familiar with the coast either side of the bay, Tom Groves came in the Leader with Harold, Rene and the children to point and name the little coves and inlets. Sometime later on, Gil suggested taking their families and both boats to Porth Ysgadan, a small inlet about two miles up the coast. When they got there the beach was strangely deserted apart from a dog who was lying by an empty boat trailer obviously 'on guard' while his master was away. As the boats got to the edge the children jumped out and ran eagerly up the shingly, weedy beach. The dog, enraged by this invasion, flew at the children, barking furiously and unfortunately bit Lynda on the leg. There was no serious damage but the expedition had to be aborted as the children were all scared to be on the beach while that fierce dog was there. The dog had been the reason for the quiet beach – people had been forced to retreat behind the rocks. Harold later made a complaint to the Police who found the dog's owner and gave him a warning. Very occasionally they sailed to the beach at Twyn, Tudweiliog and to Port Oer (Whistling Sands).

Once or twice the boats had sailed up the coast towards Porth Dinllaen, about eight miles from Penllech Bay but had disappointingly run out of time or tide to get all the way. However, one day when conditions seemed just right, Gil and Edna in the Wayfarer and Harold and Rene in the Leader, set off in bright sunshine with a gentle reaching breeze and were very satisfied when they rounded the beacon and sailed into the moorings. They beached the boats and relaxed on the sands below the attractive inn, Ty Coch. After a short while they hoisted the sails once more and started on the return journey. As soon as they left the beach they realised that the wind had increased and when they approached the beacon which marked the shoals off the headland the water was disturbed with many whitecaps



making it difficult to control the boats. They went back to the beach. Gil decided to leave the Wayfarer at Porth Dinllaen and go back to Penllech for the Landrover to take the boat back by road. Harold, who prudently carried the smaller cruising sails on these trips, said he would change sails before setting off once more, reasoning that once they had rounded the headland the going would be easier. When they reached the beacon they sailed into the breaking water. It was a frightening experience and, contrary to their hopes, there seemed to be no let up to the rough conditions. The wind had changed direction and was now against the tide and once round Trwyn Ddinllaen they had to sail close-hauled with the boat well heeled. One minute the boat would rear out of the water and the next crash down into the waves. Rene was terrified. Harold was also frightened but tried to reassure her. He realised that were they to capsize in these conditions it would be almost impossible to right the boat. He decided to try and get closer to the shore and hug the coast where the tide would be less strong. They managed this and the sea became slightly calmer but progress was painfully slow. They had to tack out to round the small promontory of Cwm Mistir and here again they found themselves in another fierce tide rip. There were no other craft to be seen on this desolate stretch of coast and they felt very much alone. They were shivering with cold and wondered how much longer before they reached home. As they neared Porth Ysgaden they could see another tide race to be negotiated but by now they were beginning to have confidence in their sturdy little boat which was behaving admirably in these adverse circumstances. Slowly, slowly they crept towards Penrhyn Melyn, the northern headland to Penllech Bay. There was even breaking water off this usually benign cape. At last the beach was in sight. By now all was quiet on the sands, the other dinghies were tucked up under the cliff for the night and everyone had gone for their evening meal. However, as Bliss approached the shore two figures could be seen. Douglas and Betty were waiting to help them drag the boat up the beach and pack it up. What a wonderful welcome that was especially as they had a flask of hot tea, which was just what the two weary sailors needed. How grateful they were to their thoughtful friends.

## **Chapter 11 Cruiser Sailing**

Following this chastening incident Harold decided that if he wanted to extend his sailing it might be a good idea to have a bigger boat, one intended for day sailing rather than a dinghy. First he thought they should have some tuition in coastal cruising so the next season they booked a week's course with the Scimitar Sailing School at Holyhead, owned by Captain Tony Harris. The family stayed aboard *Cliperau*, the cruising yacht used by the school and moored in Holyhead harbour. This was a Golden Hind class, sloop-rigged yacht, 31ft 6ins long and 9 ft beam. It had bilge keels which enabled the boat to take the ground when drying out. Their skipper for the week was David Owen, who lived at Holyhead and was the National GP14 dinghy champion. Holyhead harbour is in a well-protected position, east of Holyhead Mountain and with a splendid breakwater 1.5 miles in length. During the week, as well as learning about the rigging and parts of the boat and using charts for navigation, they would sail her each day. Harold quickly became familiar with the boat. He practised picking up the mooring, handling the sails and steering the boat by the wind. At first they stayed in the harbour, but after a day or two went outside the breakwater and a short distance along the Anglesey coast. Harold enjoyed the week but would have liked to have gone further afield. At the end of the week Harold asked Tony Harris if they could charter *Cliperau* with a skipper the following year with the possibility of cruising to Ireland.

Thus in 1969, the family again boarded *Cliperau*, this time for a two week cruise to Ireland. Their skipper was to be Tony Bond, a recently retired Major from the Royal Artillery who had an extensive knowledge of sailing and had started working for Tony Harris a few months previously. They left Holyhead for Ireland on a pleasant sunny day in July and all seemed to be going well though there appeared to be a problem with the heads (seagoing term for the WC). The skipper also thought the rigging wasn't quite right and the engine not functioning properly. What Harold did not know was that Tony Bond had been off sick a couple of weeks earlier. Tony Harris thought he had recovered or he would not have let him undertake this trip. They arrived at Dun Laoghaire and tied up alongside in the Coal Dock. They were greeted in true Irish fashion by Charlie Blackmore, the harbourmaster, a cheery helpful character, well-known to everyone in Dun Laoghaire.

Next morning the family were totally stunned when Tony said he was returning on the ferry to Holyhead. Harold and Rene should stay with the boat until someone came from Scimitar. This was not what they had been expecting.

They wondered if they had done something to upset Tony but couldn't think what. However they made the best of a bad job and went ashore and took a train to Dublin to wile away a few hours. Once back at *Cliperau* they made a meal and the children got ready for bed. They were pleased when Charlie Blackmore came aboard. He had somehow heard of their plight and came to see if he could be of any help. He suggested that he came back shortly and would take Harold and Rene across to Motor Boat Club, a kind of poor man's Yacht Club, on the other side of the dock, where they could have a drink. Very soon he was alongside in his motor boat and ferried them across to the club where everyone was avidly watching the TV. The first men had landed on the moon that day. Charlie kept plying his guests with drinks – Harold was dismayed to find his whisky glass being refilled time and again. Rene, who didn't really drink, had asked for a lemonade shandy and her glass never seemed to empty. At last, to their relief Charlie said he would take them back to *Cliperau*. By now it was dark but the moon was almost full. It seemed strange for Harold and Rene to think of those two Americans up there while they were having their own little adventure on Earth.

In spite of their somewhat worrying situation, and perhaps because of the drinks they had had at the club, they were soon asleep. Suddenly they were rudely wakened from their slumbers by a banging and shouting up on deck. Someone had come aboard. Before they had time to grab some thing to fend off any invaders a familiar face was framed in the hatchway. To their astonishment and pleasure Bill Tack had arrived. Harold had met Bill briefly the previous summer when he was employed as an instructor at Scimitar Sailing School, having been a sergeant in the Army for many years. This year he had been promoted to Bosun and was responsible for maintaining the craft belonging to the school. He was a rough and ready Cockney, full of energy and good humour, and was popular with all his pupils when he was instructing. To Harold and Rene he appeared as an angel from heaven that July night. Tony Harris had been horrified when Tony Bond arrived back at Holyhead, looking ill and troubled, and had been told that the Hayes family were left stranded in Dun Laoghaire. He asked Bill to take the ferry to Dun Laoghaire and give the stranded clients the choice of either taking the ferry back to Holyhead or sailing back on *Cliperau* with Bill. Alternatively they could continue their cruise with Bill as skipper. Rene soon had the kettle boiling and while they sat in the saloon with mugs of tea, Bill put Tony's propositions to Harold who immediately opted for continuing the trip. After sitting and conversing for a while the skipper decided they should all get some rest. Rene moved into the fore cabin with the children while the men bedded down in the saloon.

Despite the disturbed night Bill was up early the next morning with cups of tea for everyone. There was much to be done in the day ahead. While Rene was preparing breakfast Bill investigated the problem with the heads. The lavatory was badly cracked and would need replacing so after the meal Bill, Harold and Julian went ashore to seek out a chandlery that had some in stock. They were lucky in their search and walked back through the streets carrying the lavatory basin, unwrapped, much to Harold's embarrassment. Bill soon had it fixed in place so that was one important thing solved. He then went up the mast in the boson's chair to make sure the rigging was OK. He started the engine a few times – it appeared to be all right, so *Cliperau* was ready to resume her voyage.

The tide and wind was right to go south down the coast to Wicklow, just over 20 miles from Dun Laoghaire. By the time they reached there it was nearly dark. There was a commercial vessel tied up alongside the quay and Bill put *Cliperau* against the harbour wall just astern of this boat as he was hesitant to enter this unknown harbour in the dark. It was just as well, as next morning they discovered that the boat had a mooring rope right across the harbour entrance and one or two yachts were trapped inside until the bigger boat left. They also found that the boat was unloading fertiliser and *Cliperau* was gradually getting covered with a layer of fine powder. As there wasn't much chance or incentive to explore Wicklow it was decided to sail further down the coast to the little port of Arklow, a few miles further on. It was a pleasant easy trip – they caught one or two mackerel on the way – and they tied up alongside some other yachts. Bill went ashore to see the Harbour Master and to send a message back to Holyhead. He could not use the ship's radio except in emergencies as he had not yet taken the test for his radio-telephone licence. He came back aboard with two pretty Irish girls whom he had invited aboard for a drink. They seemed pleasant enough but, on hearing some hymn singing taking place on the quayside, Harold never forgot the venom in her voice when one of them commented spitefully, 'Och, it's only the Protestants!' It came to his mind frequently in troubled years that were soon to follow in Northern Ireland.

Harold asked Bill whether it would be possible to sail to the Isle of Man on their return journey to Holyhead. Before the war, he had once had a wild holiday there with his friends George and Ronnie. They made an early start and headed in a NNE direction. There was a steady breeze and Harold helmed for much of the morning. They made good progress and around lunchtime they were close to the SW corner of the island, hoping they would soon be in

harbour at Port St Mary. Unfortunately, just as they could vaguely make out the Calf of Man, visibility became very poor and this plan had to be aborted. When the boat was put on the other tack it was apparent that the wind had freshened and *Cliperau* surged through white topped waves heeling at a considerable angle. Harold put on a harness which he clipped to the mast, and helped Bill put a couple of reefs in the mainsail and change to a smaller jib while Rene helmed and soon the boat felt more comfortable. They set course for Holyhead and made good progress under this reduced rig. However, Bill had under-estimated how much leeway *Cliperau* made in fresh winds when reefed down, and in poor visibility he past Anglesey's north coast. Darkness began to fall before the mist lifted and they recognised the lights of the coast of North Wales. The wind was increasing and *Cliperau* was buffeted by the waves, which occasionally broke over the boat. Harold and Rene sat anxiously huddled in the cockpit. Where would they spend the night? Everyone was tired after the day's long sail. Harold sensed that Rene was frightened and tried to reassure her. He had great trust in Bill's ability, even though he had only known him as skipper for a few days. Eventually they tied up at 1am at the pier at Llandudno just as the piermaster was putting out the lights. He shouted above the noise of the wind that they could not stay there as the Isle of Man ferry was due in at 6am. Bill yelled back asking to be reported to Holyhead, where Tony Harris would be wondering about their whereabouts. He then motored a short distance out into the bay which was reasonably sheltered and they dropped anchor and thankfully went below to their bunks for some much needed sleep. Bill went up on deck several times during the night to make sure the anchor was not dragging but the others slept soundly.

Thankfully the next morning the wind had decreased considerably and after breakfast they hoisted sail and, leaving Llandudno bay, set course for Anglesey. The day was warm and pleasant with a very light wind, very different from the previous day, and they idled along contentedly. Harold put a line over and caught several mackerel. It was evening by the time they reached Point Lynas, the NW corner of Anglesey and the wind had almost died. Bill started the engine as *Cliperau* slowly sailed past the north coast of the island. Soon it was dark but Bill was familiar with this area and its various rocky outcrops and overfalls. They listened to the shipping forecast while eating fresh mackerel sandwiches and drinking mugs of cocoa and before long they entered Holyhead harbour and picked up *Cliperau's* mooring.

In the morning Bill went ashore to report and to tell Tony that they were thinking of spending this last day of the charter to make a passage to Penllech Bay. The tide and wind were right and they could do the return journey in the day. Once more they left the harbour, sailed past the lighthouses of North Stack and South Stack, and set a course to the SW. Soon they could make out the familiar Llyn peaks of Yr Eifl and Garn Fadryn. Keeping the latter fine on the port bow, before long they were sailing into waters they knew well. Some of the dinghy sailors were curious to see this yacht which was coming into the bay instead of making a passage to Bardsey Sound as was the usual course. One or two of them recognised Harold and Rene and escorted *Cliperau* towards the beach. They anchored close to the shore and a few bathers came to greet them and to hear about the week's charter. But they could not linger long and were soon heading back towards Holyhead. There was still a little excitement to finish the week. When they approached South Stack there was a fierce tide race and the boat was tossed about wildly. Suddenly the shackle holding the tack of the jib snapped and the jib broke loose and tangled itself around the forestay. Bill dashed up to the foredeck and struggled to untangle the sail and fasten it once more, leaving Rene on the helm. She found with her limited strength that it was impossible to keep on course and the boat was slowly being pushed onshore. Harold grasped the stout helm as well and together, with all the force they could muster, they managed slowly steer away from the cliff. At one point the lighthouse keeper blasted the fog horn as a warning to get further out. Eventually, Bill sorted out the jib and they came into less troubled water. Then after passing North Stack they entered the harbour for the final time and so ended a memorable week. Harold felt he had learnt much and was eager for more. Before they left Holyhead he made a request to charter *Cliperau* for a two week cruise the next summer provided they could have Bill as skipper.

The 1970 cruise was to bring Harold a brief period of 'fame'. On arrival at Scimitar Sailing School once more, they were met by John Watney, a free-lance writer and photographer, who specialised in writing about and photographing small craft. He had been at the school for a short period doing a series of articles for Practical Boatowner about safety at sea. When he heard about Harold and the forthcoming cruise, he wondered if he could accompany them for part of the trip with a view to writing an article for the *Sunday Times* Colour Magazine. Tony rang Harold at Rushton and it was agreed that John could sail with them. This year the family were joined by a nurse from Rushton Hall, Sue Wilson. She had done very little sailing but was keen to learn and so there were five adults and two children at the start of the voyage.

The weather forecast was not good, force 6-7 with possible gale force 8 later. There was some doubt as to whether they should set out but Harold said if they waited for the gale to arrive they could be stuck in harbour for days so at 8.30pm with a storm jib and several reefs in the mainsail they left harbour to make a dash for Port St Mary on the Isle of Man. It proved to be a grim night with the boat, sailing on a broad reach, wallowing in the rough seas and spray breaking over her. Harold helmed for much of the way, using his Nova Pal radio as an automatic pilot. This allowed him to steer an accurate course. Everyone was feeling seasick from time to time, some more than others. Even Harold had to make a quick dash to the side at one point much to his surprise and shame – he had never been seasick before. It was wet and cold in the cockpit and everyone took turns to go below and rest and warm up a bit though the movement was even more unpleasant there. Chicken Rock light on the Calf of Man was sighted around 3.30am and about three and a half hours later they picked up a mooring in the harbour at Port St Mary where it was raining steadily. After a breakfast of bacon sandwiches and mugs of tea, seven exhausted sailors turned in and slept soundly until midday.

Later on, in bright sunshine, they all went ashore, apart from Bill, and had a meal. Even before they had left Holyhead John had been taking photos. All through the rough night he had been getting various shots and now he was still at it. Almost everything Harold did was recorded on film, even getting out of his bunk or eating a cream cake. When they got back to the boat John requested that they go for a short sail so that he could take pictures of Harold helming, hoisting sails, reefing, fishing etc. etc. Altogether, during the brief time he was with them he took over 120 pictures.

Next morning just after 7am they left Port St Mary in dull weather with the wind blowing NW 4-5 hoping to make southern Scotland by evening. They were soon in brilliant sunshine, sailing briskly up the coast, passing Douglas around midday. Then the wind began to increase. Harold and Bill reefed the mainsail and changed to a smaller jib. Soon the wind became force 8 and Bill decided it would be wise to take shelter in Ramsey harbour. Several more reefs were put in and the storm jib hoisted but eventually he thought it looked too hazardous to go into Ramsey so the boat was turned about and they made course back down the coast towards Douglas. The next few hours were ones that Harold would never forget. The wind became a strong gale, Force 9. Even under the lee of the shore *Cliperau* was doing a fantastic speed, touching 9 knots at times, spray breaking continuously over the boat and those in the cockpit. Their oilskins afforded little protection. There were huge following waves astern threatening to swamp the boat. Down below everything that was not securely fastened fell on to the cabin sole. Great was everyone's relief when they arrived at Douglas at 7.30pm. Someone was waiting on the harbour wall to take the lines and help tie up the boat. It transpired that this kind friend and his wife had been anxiously following the boat's progress from their car most of the way from Ramsey. They recognised *Cliperau* as, by strange coincidence, they had been pupils at Scimitar Sailing School some months earlier. The wife then offered to go and buy some fish and chips, which were eaten ravenously before trying to make some semblance of order down in the cabin. Everyone was cold and soaked to the skin but very much relieved to be safe in harbour.

In the morning John left to catch the ferry to Liverpool. He had plenty of material and pictures for his planned article. It was sunny but still windy so it was decided to stay at Douglas for the day. It was a chance to tidy the boat and dry things. Harold's notecase had been in his pocket during the rough sail from Ramsey and his money was sopping so he pegged his banknotes very securely to a line he rigged in the cockpit and they were soon dry as were various items of clothing draped all round the decks. The rest of the day was spent exploring Douglas which was a pleasant relaxation after the traumas of the previous day. Bill stayed on board and got things really shipshape and had a much needed rest.

The weather forecast being favourable they decided to have another try for Scotland the following day. After motoring across the harbour to take on water they once more set sail. It was sunny with a fresh wind and the boat was sailing close-hauled, ideal conditions for Harold take the helm. Setting his Nova Pal radio to a station of his choice all he had to do was keep on that station. If the station started to disappear he just had to move the tiller until the station was tuned again and he knew he was back on course. On that day the station he chose was transmitting the Test Match. It seemed to him to be the next best thing to heaven – glorious sailing, warm sunshine and fascinating cricket all at the same time. The others left him to it, almost forgetting that he couldn't see so that he had to call for someone to have a look out from time to time. Luckily this was a quiet area of water and they saw only a few other vessels. Altogether he was on the helm for nearly nine hours. Early in the evening they rounded Barrow Head and the Isle of Whithorn was in sight. Bill had some difficulty spotting the narrow entrance but seeing a

dinghy going in, he followed it into the small harbour and they were soon tied up by the wall. Here came a pleasant interlude in their eventful voyage.

Isle of Whithorn was a small village where David Astin, son of Florence and Leslie, was spending part of his summer holiday with his girl friend Sally James. Her parents, Gordon and Pat, owned a cottage here. When they went ashore it didn't take Harold and Rene long to find the James' residence where they were given a great welcome. The whole party was invited to a meal and to avail themselves of hot baths. It was arranged for the James family and David to have a short trip in *Cliperau* the next morning to do some fishing. The day dawned very misty so they didn't go far off shore. Gordon and David brought along rods and lines, hoping to catch a cod, while Harold, Bill and Julian trailed mackerel lines. It proved to be a chaotic occasion. Quite often they caught each others' lines and spent time sorting out the tangles. Some of the line was lost altogether. The total catch was one cod, one tope, one dogfish, one red gurnard, one garfish and about seventy mackerel! The boat had drifted way down tide and it was a long slog under engine to get back into harbour. On the way the fish were gutted and filleted which attracted a vast number of gulls. As on previous occasions the cockpit had to be thoroughly hosed as well as the fishermen! Once back at the house, Pat, assisted by Bill proceeded to cook the fish and ten people sat down to a sumptuous fish lunch followed by cream cakes. The visibility was still poor so it was decided to stay in harbour for another night.

They made an early start, pushing the tide and beating against a westerly wind across Luce Bay towards the Mull of Galloway. Once this point was rounded Bill hoped to catch the flood tide up the Rhins to Portpatrick. It took longer than estimated and by the time they reached harbour it was dark. It was a tricky entrance trying to follow leading lights which were hard to distinguish from the street lights of the town. At this particular time Portpatrick was an uneasy harbour to be in. Owing to a national dock strike it was being used by 'buccaneer' craft from Ulster who were delivering dairy produce to be taken by lorries all over Britain. There was a continuous stream of these boats, entering and leaving harbour. It was very crowded and there was a tense atmosphere with much shouting of threats and one or two scuffles breaking out. Bill skilfully managed to get *Cliperau* tied up by the wall where they spent a night disturbed by boats coming and going and by the sound of winches unloading the cargoes. However one thing which really thrilled Harold was the discovery that black guillemots were nesting in holes in the harbour wall, very close to the boat. From early morning he could hear them calling outside the holes, presumably they had young in the nests. During the day another yacht, *Fana*, tied up alongside. The owners, Alan and Chris Davidson, were on their honeymoon which the newly-wed wife did not appear to be enjoying – she had been seasick for much of the time. They were on their way to Aran and, as Portpatrick was such a volatile place to be at that time, it was decided that *Cliperau* would keep them company and so both boats left on the midday ebb tide.

With *Fana* using her engine as well as sails they managed to keep together as far as the spectacular 1100ft rock, Ailsa Crag, which stands at the entrance to the Firth of Clyde. Harold helmed for much of the time but soon they were among quite a lot of shipping so he gave the tiller to Rene and put the mackerel feathers over the side. Then *Fana* started to drop behind. When Bill took *Cliperau* back it transpired they were having engine trouble. Bill passed them some engine oil but Alan still could not get the engine to fire and as evening was approaching *Cliperau* gave *Fana* a tow for the remainder of the way to Aran. It was dark by the time the boats anchored side by side in the sheltered waters of Lamlash Bay. Next morning Alan took them ashore in his dinghy to get provisions and then it was time to bid farewell to Alan and Chris and set sail for Northern Ireland. Harold and Rene kept in contact them for a year or two and they once visited Rushton.

Once again it was a lively sail, long, cold and mainly under storm jib and heavily reefed mainsail. They crossed the North Channel making for Donaghadee. Darkness fell and they had to battle through a nasty race before reaching the harbour. At one point Harold was trying to untangle the log line and dropped it overboard which meant they would now have to estimate the distance covered instead of having an accurate measurement by which to navigate. The harbour was crowded and not as sheltered from the strong wind as they would have wished. Bill had to adjust the anchor several times as *Cliperau's* stem kept swinging towards another craft. It was a noisy night as some of the 'egg and bacon' boats were running from here to Scotland. In the morning Bill was told they could not remain anchored in that spot so he and Sue went quickly ashore and got some water before setting off for Portavogie, a small fishing port further down the coast which Alan had recommended. The place was not marked on the chart and they only had the latitude and longitude from the Irish Cruising Club's sailing directions. The wind had abated somewhat and it was a pleasant sail with Harold doing a bit of fishing to pass the time. They reached Portavogie about five o'clock and followed some fishing boats into the entrance to this tiny harbour. This again was full of the 'egg and bacon' fleet and it looked as if there would be no room for them here but there was a small space by the

wall just a bit longer than the boat and after much manoeuvring and throwing of ropes to bystanders on the quay, about twelve feet above them, they eventually tied up. Bill inflated the dinghy and Julian and Lynda went off to explore the harbour while a meal was being prepared.

There was then a dramatic occurrence which might have had grim consequences. Rene was lighting the 'Primus' stove when it suddenly flared up, setting fire to the front of her anorak. She screamed and Bill leapt on top of her to smother the blaze, but unfortunately he knocked over the open bottle of meths which spilled on the floor and burst into flames. Bill tried to stamp them out and his trouser legs caught fire. Harold, Sue and Bill managed to quell the conflagration and luckily there was no great damage done though Rene had a nasty burn on her face which was going to need medical attention before long. When all was over the bilges had to be thoroughly bailed out as there were dangerous fumes being given off. Next day Sue and Rene went ashore to seek medical advice about Rene's burn. There was no doctor in Portavogie only a district nurse who said they should go to the nearest hospital at Belfast, about 25 miles away. They did not know how they could travel there and in any case, they did not like the idea of being in Belfast where the Irish troubles and unrest were beginning. Back at the boat it was decided to return to Holyhead to get Rene to the hospital there and so after lunch they put to sea once more.

There was a strong south westerly wind blowing which meant a hard beat to windward. Harold helmed for most of the afternoon and evening and by eight o'clock they were off the Isle of Man, near Ramsey. They followed the west coast of the island down as far as Chicken Rock and then set a course for Holyhead. It was dark by now and as there was very little shipping about they set the boat to steer herself and everyone went below. Someone went on deck about every fifteen minutes to look-out for any other craft and to ensure they were still on course. They were awake early the next morning to find *Cliperau* still happily steering herself. The weather forecast was not good - gale force winds and fog banks - but they hoped to be in Holyhead within a few hours. However luck was not with them and during the morning they ran into thick fog so that there was no visible point on which to take a fix. Bill managed to take a radio fix but this did not help much as there was only one satisfactory beacon which was on the Skerries so he was unsure which side of the beacon they were positioned. At one point they glimpsed a British Railways Ferry through the mist which could have been bound for either Holyhead or Liverpool. They were either north of Anglesey or to the south west of Holyhead. Bill started the engine and sailed on the same course for about an hour. Then to their relief the fog lifted and they recognised Great Orme at Llandudno. Bill contacted Scimitar School of Sailing on the radio telephone and reported they were going to make for Moelfre on the east side of Anglesey and requested that they send transport to take Rene to hospital. So after thirty hours of sailing they thankfully dropped anchor in the tiny bay. A car was waiting on shore and Rene and Sue were taken to the Pehrhos Stanley Hospital at Holyhead. However this was only a small cottage hospital with just two or three nurses in charge one of whom examined the burn, which was not serious and seemed to be healing, and put on a fresh dressing. Then Rene was taken back to Moelfre to rejoin *Cliperau* for the final leg of their eventful trip.

Even now their trials were not over. Gales were again forecast the next day and Bill was anxious for them to leave Moelfre where they would be unsheltered so they set off, once more under heavily reefed mainsail and storm jib, hoping to reach the Skerries at slack water before the formidable races were running. It was a good, lively sail along the north coast of Anglesey, with Harold on the helm. However when they reached Middle Mouse there was a strong current and the water was becoming very confused so Bill took the tiller. Once beyond Carmel Head they found that the tide had already changed and was against the wind. As they passed the various rocky outcrops- Harry Furlong, Ethel Bank, Victoria Bank and the Platters - the seas became horrendous with waves up to twenty feet high. When the boat hit one of these monsters she came to a jarring halt and huge sheets of spray cascaded down both sides of the boat. Everyone was frightened - even Bill was unusually silent but they came through safely. At last they entered Holyhead harbour and sailed down to the mooring they had left nearly two weeks ago. They had covered over five hundred miles and encountered four gales. It was certainly a voyage Harold would never forget.

As mentioned earlier this trip was to bring Harold 'fame' for a short while. One Sunday morning a week or two later, when the family were still at the caravan at Llangwnnagl, they were surprised to find a small queue of people knocking at their door. John Watney, the photographer who had accompanied them when they left Holyhead, had had his article published in the Sunday Times Colour Magazine and some of the caravanners and campers were asking Harold to autograph their copies. When Harold and Rene read the article they thought it was a reasonable account apart from Harold being quoted as saying he would one day like to sail to Israel. What he actually said was the Azores but as John was recording this when they were down in the saloon during the gale off Ramsey perhaps he could be forgiven for getting this wrong. Back at Rushton there were a number of repercussions from the article.

Someone in Nairobi who had read the article sent Harold a cassette recorder and player with a selection of cassettes. These were all recordings of Classical music, mostly Russian, which were much to Harold's taste. Cassette players, which would rapidly become the most popular way of playing and recording music during the next few years, were only just beginning to come on the market. Harold had not seen one before and was very pleased with it. It had been sent anonymously so there was no way of thanking the donor for this gift which was to bring Harold much pleasure. Another outcome of the article was a request from the television company, HTV Wales, for Harold and Rene to appear on their programme 'Good afternoon, Wales', where each weekday a selection of personal interviews and features of interest were shown. They went to Cardiff, where they stayed at the Castle Hotel overnight. Early next morning they were taken to the studio where they had a rehearsal for the afternoon programme together with a rather charming lady who was demonstrating table etiquette and a gentleman talking about British Wines. For Harold's item a fully rigged Enterprise Dinghy had been brought into the studio. Harold, wearing a smart suit – he would have looked much better in casual shirt and flannels- stood by the bow of the boat and answered questions and pointed out different parts of the boat and rigging. It was interesting to see how casual and transient things were in a TV studio and not at all how they appeared on screen. Harold also gave an interview on 'In Touch', the BBC programme especially for visually handicapped listeners. One rather bizarre request came from a small film company who had the idea about making a comic movie about a blind sailor. Harold did not think much of this and when he mentioned it to his superiors at RNIB they advised him to have nothing to do with it.

That was the last cruise Harold had on *Cliperau*. Once or twice Bill sailed her to Porth Dinllaen with his Coastal Cruising students and Harold and Rene drove across to meet up with them. On one occasion he anchored close to the beach in Penllech Bay and Harold and Rene rowed out through quite a big surf and went aboard for a drink. They were given a bucketful of fish which some of the crew had caught. Unfortunately on their way back to the beach the boat was capsized by a large wave. Harold and Rene were all right apart from a soaking but, alas, they lost all the fish.

One night in March 1972 there was an item of news on the radio about a life-raft with three bodies that had been discovered in the Bay of Biscay. It was thought to be from a yacht sailing from Gibraltar to the UK. When Harold heard this he at once thought of *Cliperau* as he knew the boat had spent the winter doing courses in Gibraltar. He had uneasy thoughts but dismissed them. There must have been other sailing boats in that area at that time. Alas, in the morning his suspicions were confirmed when the raft was identified as that belonging to *Cliperau* and even more devastating was the news that one of the bodies was that of Bill Tack, who had been taking the boat back to Holyhead with two crew members. *Cliperau* was never found. Tony Harris, the owner of Scimitar Sailing School, was overwhelmed by the loss of two members of staff, particularly Bill who had contributed so much to the success of the school. In the following months he tried to put together how the disaster had occurred. He wrote a book, *Master under God*, in which he told the story of *Cliperau* from the time of her inception to her last known moments. One chapter was about Harold's experiences on the boat. Harold grieved for Bill who had taught him so much and with whom he had shared exciting, anxious and blissful experiences and often he remembered every detail of *Cliperau*.

## **Chapter 12 The Island Cruising Club**

Harold had read about the Island Cruising Club in a number of yachting magazines. It was an organisation based in Salcombe, where members could learn to sail all types of craft from dinghies to large yachts. There was also the chance to go as crew on their larger boats and sail to France, the Channel Islands, Scotland and other places. Harold was attracted towards making a passage on one of these and in 1971 they joined the club and became part of the crew of the 50 ton schooner *Hoshi*.

When they arrived at Salcombe they left Julian to do a seven day dinghy sailing course with the club while they went aboard the magnificent wooden 85 feet long vessel which had been built in 1909 and had once belonged to Earl Beatty, a well-known admiral in World War 1. Their berths were in the roomy State cabin, which spanned almost the whole width of the hull. It seemed a great contrast to the cramped accommodation of *Cliperau*, with plenty of places to store their luggage, but it must have been uncomfortable in rough weather with so much space and so few handholds – though during their week aboard they were going to have no chance to experience this. In the roof of the cabin, which was flush with the deck, there were skylights which also gave ventilation, though these

needed to be shut when the weather became rough. Even then apparently water could sometimes come through as there were 'shower curtains' that could be pulled across the bunks to keep the bedding dry.

The next morning Richard Purser, the skipper, gave instructions and told everyone the duties that would be required of them. Harold and Rene were in B watch together with Andrew, a young policeman from London. They sailed out of Salcombe after lunch taking a southerly course to France. At first there was a light breeze but this gradually died so that the engine had to be used. Marie-Anne, the cook, made a delicious and filling supper, but most people were suffering varying degrees of seasickness and did not venture down to the saloon. Harold and Rene sat at the large gimballed table which intrigued them. It swung about, keeping perfectly level so that nothing fell to the floor even though the boat was rocking from side to side. One minute their plates were level with their chins and the next down to their knees. They were tempted to hold on to the table but they knew that would cause a disaster. They both ate a hearty meal, remembering that Richard had told them that a full stomach can often prevent seasickness. They both felt sorry that Marie-Anne had cooked all this food and that there were so few people partaking. However, as ship's cook she must have been well used to that.

They sailed on through the clear, starlit night. B watch came on duty at 2100 hours and had the uneasy experience of crossing the busy shipping lanes of the Channel, looking at the numerous lights and trying to make out the speed and course of the vessels and wondering whether *Hoshi* needed to take any avoiding action. Harold was unable to do any of the helming as the wind was so light. In any case *Hoshi* was not steered by a tiller such as he had always been accustomed to but had a splendid wooden wheel, with a diameter of over three feet. Andrew and Rene took turns at the wheel, though often Andrew had to hand over the wheel to Rene while he made a quick dash to the side to be sick. However, he staunchly continued to stay on watch. Harold tried to contribute by giving moral support to the other two. At midnight they thankfully handed over to the next watch and went to bed though sleep was difficult with the engine throbbing constantly.

B watch came on again at 0600 hours. It was a fine sunny start to the day but there was still very little wind. Land was sighted at 0700 hours – the lighthouse on Isle de Batz – and they anchored off Roscoff about 1100 hours. Richard did not fly the Q flag (requesting pratique before going ashore). He said the French officials got quite annoyed if they had to break off from whatever they were doing to come and inspect a boat. After lunch they all went ashore and explored this interesting small port. That evening there was a noisy and colourful fair on the seafront. The following day dawned warm and sunny again. At first there was no wind at all and the sea was like glass but by mid-morning there was a gentle breeze from the NW which continued for most of the day. Everyone spent the day sunbathing on deck while *Hoshi* sailed lazily along in an easterly direction. That evening they anchored at Les Sept Isles, a group of islands uninhabited apart from the lighthouse keepers, and one of which was a bird sanctuary. As *Hoshi* arrived the last of the day visitors were catching the ferry back to the mainland. Before the evening meal some of the crew rowed ashore to explore and some had a swim. It was a peaceful and idyllic anchorage apart from the gulls who called incessantly.

They left Les Sept Isles about 1030 hours. At first they were heading the wind and were against the tide so made very slow progress but when the tide turned the wind veered and also freshened. Richard thought this was a good time for Harold to take the helm and so he took the bench behind the big wheel, grasped the spokes, and, in no time at all, was steering this big boat as efficiently as the other members of the crew had done. He had the helm for the rest of the day even when B watch were off duty. The approach to the Tréguier river was complex but once in the river, *Hoshi* very gently sailed the four or five miles upstream to the town of Tréguier. She must have looked a graceful sight from the river banks. Any spectators would no doubt have been surprised to know that the helmsman was totally blind. At one point they passed a small open boat and were flabbergasted when a grizzled old fisherman, clutching a bottle of beer, shook his fist angrily at them shouting "Bloody British!!!" He certainly held a grudge against Britain. Richard turned towards him and made a rude gesture and *Hoshi* sailed smoothly on. They were soon anchored off the charming old town and after supper rowed ashore. It was almost dark as they climbed up the steep cobbled street to the magnificent fourteenth century cathedral with its fine spire. They were enchanted to hear beautiful music coming from within and, following Richard, they discovered a side entrance and gate-crashed their way in. They found themselves in a vestibule behind an orchestra performing Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons'. They squatted on the floor in their sailing clothes and listened spellbound. The cathedral was lofty and the acoustics were perfect. Through a small gap they could glimpse the audience, all smartly attired in evening wear. No doubt they had paid a good price for tickets but they could not have appreciated the glorious music more than bunch of sailors listening for free. Emerging from the cathedral with the music still ringing in their ears they returned to the dinghy.



Here they were brought down to earth with a bump – the tide had receded and the dinghy was high and dry in the mud. They had to wade through thick, black ooze to get to the water. Feet, shoes, socks and trousers were all covered. On reaching *Hoshi* everything - bodies, clothes and dinghy – had to be hosed off before anyone was allowed to go below. Still, it was a small price to pay for a wonderful evening. For Harold, the whole day had been one that would be etched on his mind forever.

It was now time to think about crossing The Channel once more. They sailed down river with a light southerly wind to help but when the river mouth was reached the wind became northerly, not the direction needed to get them back to England. They kept sailing for a while but as darkness fell the skipper realised they were being swept up-channel by the tide and were getting very close to the Channel Islands and so reluctantly the engine was started again and was going for most of the night. Next day was sunny once more with a gentle favourable breeze. Richard insisted that the boat was cleaned and tidied so that she look spick and span when entering her home waters. Also any leftover wine and spirits had to be drunk if it were not to be impounded by the British Customs Officers who apparently took their duties much more seriously than their counterparts in France, so the crew were happily sitting in the sun, swigging the remains of the bottles. When they entered Salcombe Harbour sure enough, as predicted, a grim-faced C&E Officer came alongside and boarded the boat. After filling the necessary documentation he followed his usual practice of asking to inspect one or two people's belongings. Harold was highly amused when Rene was one of those selected, especially as she herself only rarely had a drink and would be the last person to try to smuggle anything. Once the officer was satisfied there was no illegality taking place, *Hoshi* was sailed to her mooring and people were ferried ashore and said their goodbyes. It had been another memorable week of sailing for Harold.

He had a further trip with the Island Cruising Club in 1975. This time he and Rene drove to Oban to join *Irina*, a 25 ton Bermudan Ketch, 54 feet long, that had been built in 1935. She had sailed up from Salcombe to Oban to cruise the Western Isles. The boat was moored alongside some fishing boats at the South Pier so there was a long walk from the Columba Hotel at the North Pier where they had met up with the rest of the crew. Fortunately there were plenty of hands to help carry their luggage, far too much! This luggage gave them a problem once they were aboard. They were given a double cabin which sounded grand but was, in fact, very poky. There were just two narrow bunks, the top one lying-down room only. The stowage space was minimal with one or two cubby holes beside the berths. There was space below the bottom bunk but over half of this was taken up by the cook for storing dry foods. There were no portholes, just a circular dead light in the deck head. Ventilation was through a small opening through to the forecabin which was covered by a plastic curtain as another crew member, Simon from Newcastle on Tyne, was sleeping there. The other crew members were Harry from Manchester, Viviane from Paris and Thomas from Hamburg, a typical blond and blue-eyed German.

Roger Downham was the skipper. Glenys Drake, the cook, was a descendant of Sir Francis Drake. (Her brother was also called Francis Drake and was at that time in charge of *Royalist*, a training ship for young people). The first evening Glenys served up an excellent meal. Unfortunately they were short of fresh water until the tank could be filled the next day. Harold and Rene were exhausted after their long day, they had left Rushton at 3am, and in spite of their cramped conditions they slept soundly. There was panic when they awoke in the morning - the bilges were flooded because someone had left the stopcocks open in the heads. Everyone had to pump furiously before they could have breakfast.

After the meal Roger gave instructions about the various watches. B watch consisted of Harold, Rene and Viviane. That morning they were on deck duty and had to clean the decks, mainly of seagull droppings. Later on, when under way, they had to scrub the fenders which had collected a lot of oil and dirt from the fishing boat that had been moored alongside. They also had to peel the potatoes for supper. They spent the morning waiting for a sail maker who had been repairing one of the sails so they were not able to leave Oban until 1300 hours. There was no time to fill the water tank. It was a dismal start with heavy rain and rapidly deteriorating visibility. The wind was non-existent so the engine had to be used. Fortunately as they entered the Sound of Mull the weather began to improve. By the time they were in the centre of the Sound there was enough breeze to hoist the sails. The wind was behind them so they were shown how to boom out the jib with the massive booming-out pole. Then the sun came out and everyone shed oilskins and sweaters and sprawled on deck enjoying the warmth and stunning scenery. Harold was able to build up a picture in his mind from the vivid descriptions people gave. B watch came on duty early so that they could have a turn at the helm – the tiller was huge and required quite an effort to move. At 1800 hours *Irina* tied up at Tobermory pier and all were enchanted with this attractive place with its houses scattered up the hillside

and the pleasant seafront with its stone and colour-washed buildings. Church bells were playing a carillon before evening service. Harold, who was not a lover of church bells, had to admit that the sound added to the charm. At last they got some fresh water in the tank and enjoyed another excellent meal.

Heavy rain set in again later in the evening. Two fishing boats tied up alongside. Sleep was disturbed by these vessels leaving noisily in the middle of the night. Next morning Harold and Rene went ashore briefly after B watch had completed their duties below deck. Then it was time to leave this delightful spot and set course towards Ardnamurchan Point, the westernmost point of Britain's mainland. After a drizzly start the sun came out and with a light wind dead astern the sailing was very agreeable. There were gannets, guillemots, many shearwaters and a few puffins and also some seals. Ardnamurchan Point was rounded at 1300 hours. Harold and Simon fished for mackerel for much of the day but caught nothing and lost two good weights. Later Harold had a long spell at the tiller. The wind became light and variable during the afternoon and eventually rain set in. About 1700 hours they dropped anchor off the SE end of the tiny island of Eigg in a violent thunderstorm. Harold found this rather disquieting when he thought of *Irina's* mast, the highest point around. After tea some of the crew rowed across to the island to explore.

It was an early start the next morning in order to catch the tide. They weighed anchor at 0545 hours and headed north with a freshening wind and deteriorating visibility. B watch was on duty from 0600 to 0900 hours. The rest of the crew went below for another couple of hours snooze. Harold was on the helm as they passed the Point of Sleat on the Isle of Skye and entered the Sound of Sleat. At the end of the watch the three were glad to go below to warm up and have breakfast. Rene made a rough chart for Harold using an embossing tool on a sheet of acetate – these sheets were discarded X-ray plates. He would now have some idea of this complex area of coast. Soon the wind increased more and backed and it was an exhilarating sail tacking across the Sound towards Kyle of Lochalsh. As they approached they were surprised to find the training schooner *Captain Scott* tied up at the pier. Harold was even more surprised to discover that Richard Purser, who had been skipper when they sailed on *Hoshi* in 1971, was the mate of this big vessel. Built in 1970 and with a length of 144ft, a breadth of 25ft and a displacement of 380 tons, the schooner was one of the largest wooden boats built in Britain in the twentieth century. Roger greeted Richard and skilfully tied up alongside. When Richard discovered that Harold and Rene were sailing in *Irina* almost his first words to them were “Do you remember that glorious Vivaldi concert we heard in Tréguier Cathedral?” After lunch *Irina's* crew were given a quick tour of this fine ship and were most impressed – there was even central heating and running hot water. Back aboard their own boat, which seemed very cramped after the spacious accommodation on *Captain Scott*, they set off once more and soon entered Loch Carron. The wind became very light and visibility was down to about half a mile – a great pity in such beautiful scenery. Later they anchored at Plockton, an attractive small village on the southern shore of Loch Carron and went ashore for a drink. Waiting on the shore for the inflatable to take them back to the boat Harold and all the others experienced being attacked by the dreaded Scottish mosquitoes that are at their most vicious in July.

In the morning B watch was on deck duty, busy scrubbing the decks and topsides and enjoying this most peaceful anchorage. There were many birds to be seen and heard. Deer came out of the woods and on to the rocks down to the water's edge. At 1100 hours they hoisted sails and began to beat out of the loch into a chill westerly wind. In the distance they caught sight of *Captain Scott* again, now under full sail. Roger altered course to close with her in order to get some photographs. He came right up astern of the schooner and Richard came aboard *Irina* which sailed a little way off so that he too could take some pictures of the boat looking splendid with its square-rigged sails. After about ten minutes he climbed expertly back to his own boat amidst clicking of many cameras from both vessels. That afternoon there was very little wind and *Irina's* crew spent a pleasant, idle couple of hours drifting about at the start of the Raasay Sound, studying wildlife. Glenys hooked a rock on her fishing line which had lots of seaweed attached. Simon playfully attached some of this to his face like a beard. While he was being photographed he was horrified to discover that it was alive with large, hairy spiderlike creatures and also a sea-slug which squirted bright pink fluid! At 1800 hours Roger decided to down sails and start the engine as mist and drizzle were beginning to roll in. Eventually they anchored in a tiny bay on the eastern side of Skye for a quiet night.

At 0600 hours next morning they weighed anchor and were interested to find a sea urchin and a starfish attached. The starfish fell off but the sea urchin was put in a bucket for a while. It was cold and sunny as they beat up Raasay Sound, passing Raasay Island and the small island of Rona to the north and sailed across to Loch Torridon. The temperature quickly improved and it was another beautiful sail. At one time they glimpsed *Captain Scott* in the distance. After another day of glorious sailing amongst breath-taking scenery they anchored at Sheildaig. Close by

was an island which was a nature reserve. Everyone spent the evening on deck, entranced by the peace and beauty all around where the only disturbance were sounds of sheep and many birds. The sun shone until almost ten o'clock and as it set the sky was transformed into a kaleidoscope of splendid colour. Soon the moon arose and the surrounding mountains were indigo silhouettes against the starry heavens. The following day they left this tranquil haven and sailed gently out of Loch Torridon, still listening to the nonstop calls of birds. After sailing past several islands, including Gruinard Island where landing was forbidden because of contamination with anthrax from scientific experiments during the war, they entered Loch Broom and dropped anchor at Ullapool. Although a pleasant enough fishing village, designed by Thomas Telford, it seemed noisy and busy compared with the anchorages *Irina* had had since leaving Oban nearly a week ago but they needed to fill the water tank and replenish stores. In the morning they went ashore where Harold was able to visit a chandlery to buy some new oilskins as his were no longer waterproof. At midday, with replenished food supplies and water tank filled, they set sail once more. They spent a relaxed afternoon sailing out of Loch Broom. Glenys washed Harold's hair on deck and one or two others. Roger was hoping they might make a night sail to the remote island of St Kilda, the prospect of which pleased Harold as he had read and heard much of the abundance of birdlife there. However there was a gale forecast so it was decided to make for Tanera Mor, the largest of the Summer Isles and wait for the gale to pass. Simon and Harold at last caught some mackerel - enough for the evening's supper. That night's anchorage was in a large bay on the east side of Tanera Mor where they were sheltered by a big hill when the forecasted gale arrived. It was another serene spot with striking views of the mountains of northern Scotland. Once again the only sounds to be heard were sheep and birds.

The promised gale set in during the night and at 0600 hours the skipper and some of the crew let out more chain as the anchor was beginning to drag. The day was bright and sunny but remained very windy so everyone went ashore and climbed over the hill to the other side of the island where there was an adventure centre though only the warden was there. He allowed people to have a shower - what luxury! - and do some washing. The gale did not abate so Roger did not get his night-time sail to St. Kilda as he had hoped, much to Harold's disappointment, and *Irina* spent another night sheltering under the hill. There was still a gale warning for sea area Hebrides in the morning but it was time to get down south again so they left Tanera Mor at 0745 hours with five rolls in the mainsail, three in the mizzen and with the storm jib. Everyone was ordered to don oilskins and harnesses because it was going to be hard-going to windward. B watch was the first on deck duty which wasn't too bad as the island still afforded a bit of shelter but by the time they went below for breakfast the wind was really piping up. They then had the difficult task of washing up. Everywhere in the cabin was chaos and it was almost impossible to do anything except lie down and listen to the water surging by and the shouts of those in the cockpit, struggling to keep the boat on course. The wind was now blowing a full gale and more reefs were put in the main. Then the rain began to lash down and when the wind increased still more Roger took down the main sail and kept going under jib and reefed mizzen and sailed into Loch Ewe where they anchored at the south end of the Isle of Ewe and found some protection from the storm. What a relief it was for everyone to go below and get dry and warm. Glenys managed to dish up a sumptuous lunch. The afternoon was spent reading and snoozing - there was little else to do as the island was uninhabited and it was over a mile to the nearest town, Achibultie, on the northern shore of the loch. After another delicious meal they spent an amusing evening playing 'Consequences' before turning in for the night, thankful to be cosy, well-fed and safe.

Everybody was up at 0500 hours ready to leave. There were still gale warnings all around but the wind was somewhat easier. B watch returned to bed as they were not on duty until 0900 hours. By then the weather was much better and there was bright sunshine as they sailed back into Raasay Sound with the wind westerly force 3. But the sunshine did not last and by 1630 hours when they anchored at Portree on the Isle of Skye it was raining heavily. Harold was amused to hear that Thomas, the German, produced a smart umbrella with which to protect himself on the trip ashore in the inflatable. Portree, in the rain with the crowds of noisy tourists, did not impress them and everyone was pleased to leave after lunch the next day. The wind was variable at first but soon it steadied and when Harold had the helm the boat was sizzling along on a close reach - a point of sailing on which he felt most confident. Harold loved this 'sizzling' sound. Then the wind veered and went lighter once more. The anchor was dropped just before the Kyle of Lochalsh to wait until the tide was right for the Narrows. Roger then discovered this was not until 0200 hours. He was still keen to make a night-time passage but most of the crew threatened mutiny so he had to motor down the Narrows before anchoring for the night in a quiet little bay on the east coast of Skye. The crew compromised and agreed to make another early start so at 0530 hours B watch found themselves on deck. It was cold and raining and there was a headwind forcing them to tack to and fro across the Narrows. The wind strengthened and backed enough for them to hold one tack. It was good to get below at the end of the watch and

have breakfast. Then it was a similar morning to the one three days previously. The boat was very well heeled and it was a great struggle to wash-up. Then there was nothing to do except lie on a lee bunk listening to *Irina* screaming along, the wind in the rigging and the gear creaking. The wind increased to near gale and it was particularly rough off Ardamurchan Point, with fierce tide rips, but when they turned into the Sound of Mull the seas became somewhat smoother and the sheets could be slackened a little. It was a thrilling experience to be sailing so fast on relatively flat water. At one point, near Tobermory, they were sailing amongst a regatta race of big yachts which were beating hard to windward across the Sound. Their crews were hanging backwards over the gunwales, endeavouring to give advantage to their particular boat. It was a thrilling sight. The wind was soon blowing Force 8 and eventually *Irina* was sailing just under storm jib. They saw a small car ferry battling against the wind. There were about a dozen cars on deck which were continually being swamped by spray. Finally Roger turned the boat into Loch Aline and as the wind was dead ahead he started the engine. Here, at the head of the loch, they found welcome shelter from the gale, close to a tree covered hill with waterfalls rushing down –once more a charming, serene anchorage.

Next morning the gale had blown itself out. The water was flat calm and there was almost no wind. After breakfast they motored across to a pier to take on fresh water before sailing on the final stage back to Oban. Soon there was enough wind to sail gently out of the Sound. They had a peaceful lunch anchored off the west side of the small island of Kerrera where there were many grey seals lying on the rocks, before motoring round to the station pier at Oban and tied up with numerous fishing boats and yachts.

The eventful cruise of the Western Isles was over. Harold would never fail to remember the experiences of the two superb holidays he had had with the Island Cruising Club.

### **Chapter 13 Owning a Cruiser**

At last Harold decided it was time he and Rene had a cruiser of their own. He thought they were now capable of having a small boat moored at Porth Dinllaen, in which they could explore the Llyn and Anglesey coasts. He was unsure which boat to get – there were many to choose from – so he wrote to Des Sleighthome, the editor of *Yachting Monthly* for advice. Des suggested a Leisure 17. Later, when he discovered Harold was totally blind, he realised that sailing was a sport that was eminently suitable for blind people. He ultimately set up a scheme which was to enable hundreds of visually impaired persons to experience the pleasure of handling boats. With this in mind he used Harold as a guinea pig to try out some of his ideas – an embossed chart, automatic helming device, etc. Later he and Harold were asked by the BBC to discuss the subject on *In Touch*.

Acting on Des' advice, Harold placed an order for a Leisure 17 with a firm owned by the two Meerloo brothers who were based at Braintree in Essex. When they found that Harold was blind they asked if they could use him in one of their advertisements and invited him and Rene to come to Braintree in order to take some photos. When they arrived at the factory they found the boat on its trailer in the yard with its sails fully rigged. The sail number was 1000. A picture was taken of the two of them standing in the cockpit and was used in their advertisements in all the yachting magazines for several months.

It was arranged for the boat to be delivered to Abersoch Boatyard who would transport it to the beach at Morfa Nefyn for launching, from where it could be sailed the short distance across the bay to Porth Dinllaen. Harold had contacted Tom Moore, the Harbourmaster, who was also the lifeboat coxswain. He had a mooring for the boat, *Gwylan Fach*, and agreed to meet them at Morfa Nefyn to sail across with them. The day of the launch was sunny with a light breeze and with Tom's help the boat was soon afloat. With her turquoise hull and tan sails she looked a pretty sight. There was a bottle of champagne from the Meerloos for the launching, but Harold kept this for drinking rather than smashing it over the bow! The engine, an Ailsa Craig outboard, was used for this maiden voyage. The children's original little boat, *The Tub*, a 7ft sailing dinghy which Harold bought for them in 1966, was towed astern to be used as a tender to get to and from the shore. *Gwylan Fach* was soon fastened to her mooring. As the wind was from the NE which blew directly into the harbour the boat was rocking unpleasantly. Harold had been hoping to do a number of jobs but this proved to be impossible so the three of them rowed to the beach and the jobs had to wait for a calmer day. Tom and some of the lifeboatmen became good friends and support during that summer.

That first summer they became familiar with the coast, sailing down as far as the start of Bardsey Sound and up to the entrance to the Menai Straits according to the state of tide and the wind direction. Harold was pleased with the boat which behaved beautifully for such a small craft. If the wind was steady, with the tiller lightly lashed, *Gwylan Fach* would happily sail herself while Rene cooked lunch and Harold fished. Several times they sailed into Penllech Bay and sometimes picked up some friends to accompany them back to Porth Dinllaen. The two of them became adept at picking up the dinghy on the mooring. This they mostly did under engine with Harold in the bow, lying flat on his stomach with his head and shoulders through the guardrails, his hands ready to grasp the dinghy while Rene shouted the distance left to get there. Sometimes he missed it and they would have to go round again and repeat the process. On the whole it worked well though it must have looked and sounded a bit strange to anyone who was unaware that Harold was blind. The procedure became more complex if they were returning to the mooring when it was a low spring tide. Although the Leisure 17, with its twin bilge keels could sail in very shallow water, at these tides Rene had to watch the echo sounder and would shout out the depth of water as well as the distance. Occasionally they would run aground before reaching the dinghy and Harold would go over the side and wade across to try and locate it with Rene shouting directions, but usually it was a case of being patient and waiting for the tide to refloat the boat.

One day Tom Colclough and Doug West came for a trip. Tom was a skilled sailor of dinghies and larger craft so Harold was happy to let him take charge for the day. They sailed into the Menai Straits, had a long struggle against the tide and went into Caernarfon Yacht Basin. Then as the wind had increased they had a fast sail back to Porth Dinllaen. The following week Tom and Douglas came again and also Angela West. This time they sailed the boat in the opposite direction towards Bardsey Sound. It was sunny with a moderate to fresh breeze. They arrived at Braich y Pwll and sailed into the Sound. Tom had hoped to sail right around the island but the wind increased and there was much broken water so he turned back to Braich y Pwll. Here they encountered big seas, very disturbed by the strong currents. Harold put two reefs in the mainsail which made things easier. The wind remained fresh and they had a fast beat back to Porth Dinllaen.

The following summer there were two days that Harold will always remember, both times when returning to the mooring after a pleasant day exploring the coast of south west Anglesey. On the first occasion they were using the engine as the wind was very light. Suddenly the engine started to splutter and then stopped. To his dismay Harold discovered the fuel tank was empty and they had no reserve petrol. The boat wallowed about with the sails flapping idly. Rene went below and cooked some mackerel that Harold had caught earlier though neither of them felt much like eating. They kept hoping for a breath of wind but none came. Darkness fell and a full moon rose over the silhouetted peaks of Yr Eifl, with the occasional headlights of cars on the road to Caernarfon. It was eerily quiet with just the sounds of a few birds swimming close by. The temperature was still quite warm and it could have been an enjoyable experience except for the thought that people might be concerned about them. Perhaps the coastguard would be alerted; perhaps the lifeboat would come searching for them. By now *Gwylan Fach* was slowly being carried back towards Llanddwyn Island by the flood tide. Harold tried to keep position by using the paddles. Sometime after midnight there came a gentle breeze, enough to fill the sails and slowly, slowly the boat crept towards Trwyn Dinllaen. Unfortunately when they crossed Dinllaen Bay they were too far out and in order to reach the moorings had to go inshore of the beacon with the tide running strongly against them. Perversely the wind had now picked up and was blowing from the NE, always a difficult direction when among the moorings. This time the mooring had to be picked up in the dark and under sail but somehow they did it and with great relief they tied up at 3.30am. They were surprised there was no one on the beach looking for them. Next day Julian said he realised they had not returned, but as there was no wind assumed they were not in any danger and so went to bed!

Just a week later there was a similar occurrence, though Harold made sure that never again would they be caught out without a reserve of petrol. Once more when leaving Llanddwyn Island with Harold fishing as usual, the wind almost died, so it was decided to use the engine – but the engine would not start. Harold pulled the cord many times, changed the plug but to no avail and eventually he had to admit defeat. They had a very slow passage back to Porth Dinllaen with the wind fluctuating in all directions. Finally, when they thought the tide was going to sweep them past Trwyn Dinllaen, the wind increased rapidly to easterly force 5 and *Gwylan Fach* went tearing into Dinllaen Bay like a rocket. It was almost dark as they went scorching into the moorings but they managed to find the dinghy, luff up and blow on to it. It was 9.30pm. so there was time to go into Ty Coch and unwind before going home. Next day Tom Moore and his mate Owi, took the engine for repair.

Gil and Edna Batson sailed with them once or twice. Gil was so impressed by the boat that he ordered a Leisure 17. He called her *Seren y Llyn* and also had it on a mooring at PorthDinllaen. Sometimes *Gwylan Fach* and *Seren y Llyn* sailed in company but this did not happen often. Gil and Edna had a large family and by the time they had seen to them they would arrive at the mooring long after Harold had set sail.

Once or twice Harold and Rene slept aboard at Porth Dinllaen. It was pleasant having a hot meal in the Ty Coch and then rowing out to spend the night on the boat and making an early start the next morning, often eating breakfast under way. Leisure 17s were said to be 4 berth but it would be hard to imagine four persons living and sleeping aboard. There was barely room for two in the tiny cabin. Harold thought if they had a bigger boat they could perhaps spend more time aboard and possibly invite one or two people to accompany them. With this in mind they began to look at various possibilities and at the Earls Court Boatshow the following January decided to get a Macwester Rowan, which with a length of 22 ft was a more realistic 4 berth and had a proper 'heads'. It also had a 5 horse power Stuart Turner inboard engine. Harold and Rene, together with Gil and Edna, went to Littlehampton where these boats were built and had a trial sail. They agreed it was the craft they had been looking for so they put in an order and arranged for it to be delivered to Vowells at Pwllheli in April. Vowells would put the boat on the water when Harold and Rene were ready to sail it around to Porth Dinllaen. They called this new boat *Wennol Mor*.

The maiden voyage needed careful planning. It was almost forty miles with the tricky passage through Bardsey Sound to be negotiated. Julian was persuaded to come as extra crew and Bob Chapman, good neighbour as always, took the three of them to Pwllheli at 4.30am where they rowed out to the mooring by the light of the moon. They intended to get to the sound at slack water. There was a light NE breeze blowing which increased as they left harbour and they had an exhilarating goose-wing run down the SE side of the peninsula. Harold was busy exploring his new boat and finding numerous jobs to do down in the cabin. He could be heard hammering and whistling – he was a happy man that morning. With this fast run they arrived at Bardsey an hour earlier than planned but Harold remembered reading that the young flood tide begins to make early close inshore between the mainland and Carreg Ddu – a rock pinnacle about 200 yards offshore – so decided to try this inshore passage. Now on a close reach they made fast progress and at 10.15 am they were off Braich y Pwll at the other end of the Sound. The difficult part of their journey was over - or so they thought. With any luck they would arrive at the Ty Coch in time for a pub lunch but, as so often before, they were over-optimistic.

Harold, reluctant as always to use the engine with such a good breeze, calculated that if they did one long outward tack for about an hour with the tide almost slack, an inward tack, with the help of the flooding tide, should take them straight into Porth Dinllaen. Harold had a short spell at the helm but found that the boat was so well balanced that it sailed itself perfectly so he went back below to continue his drilling and tidying while Julian and Rene huddled down in the cockpit and dozed in the sunshine stirring themselves occasionally to scan the empty sea. However, before long they realised that they had made a miscalculation in the tides They should have remembered, from sailing along this coast in previous years, that the tide always seems to change later than predicted when nearing Bardsey and today the flood was probably held back even more by the fresh breeze. They were heading well out to sea but making no northing. They went about and sailed on the inshore tack. After a while Rene took another fix only to find they were back almost where they were an hour before and, as there was a possibility of being swept back into the Sound, Harold started the engine.

How long and tedious the day was beginning to feel. Would they ever reach their mooring? They seemed to have been looking at Bardsey Island and Carreg Ddu for hours but, slowly, with the help of the engine they began to make progress as the tide turned in their favour. Then things changed again. The fresh breeze was increasing in strength and was opposed to the tide. As they got closer to the shore the sea became confused and wild, but *Wennol Mor* seemed well able to cope and they found themselves enjoying the switchback motion, climbing the big waves and sliding down into the troughs. Surprisingly very little water came aboard though their faces were encrusted with salt from the spray. Then suddenly the snap-shackle at the clew of the jib came adrift and the jib blew out like a huge burgee, cracking madly in the wind. Harold crawled on the foredeck trying to find hand-holds and clip-on points for his life-line on this yet unfamiliar boat. Rene and Julian watched tensely as he battled to retrieve the sail, and having captured it, fumbled feverishly to secure the shackle. They tacked outward again, encouraged now by their progress. The engine was no longer needed. Then the burgee halyard came adrift from its cleat – certainly not fastened by Harold whose fastenings seldom, if ever, came undone at the wrong time – and flew high astern like a streamer and quite out of reach.

By now they could see Trwyn Dinllaen and their spirits began to rise as they tacked inshore again but it was not enough to get them round the headland and off they went on another outward tack. As they neared Trwyn Dinllaen Rene told Harold that the sea was again very confused in the race off the point and once again he started the engine to help them round the headland and make harbour. What would the harbour be like he wondered with the north-east wind blowing straight in? On they sailed past the Chwislin beacon and into more placid but still lumpy water. Harold took down the sails before approaching the mooring and the buoy was picked up without too much difficulty but once made fast the boat pitched and rolled in all directions making every task difficult and tiring. The next puzzle was how to get three people and luggage ashore in the two-man inflatable they had on board. Obviously two trips would be necessary and although the dinghy would quickly reach the shore, rowing back against the stiff breeze would create quite a problem. There were only three other boats on their moorings so early in the season, all unoccupied, and the beach appeared to be deserted. Should they motor to pick up one of the moorings closer inshore, or use the inflatable and hope to find someone ashore who would lend them a hard dinghy in which to row back? They decided on the latter. Julian and Rene reached the shore at 1800 hours and had the good fortune to meet Briony, the publican's wife. She kindly lent her dinghy so that Julian was able to row back to the boat and ferry Harold and the luggage safely ashore. And so *Wennol Mor* was at last on her summer mooring.

The season was pleasant and interesting and though there were no ambitious trips, Harold felt confident with *Wennol Mor* and was highly satisfied with the way the boat would sail herself when the sails were correctly set. Several times they took friends and family out for the day. It was much better now that they had a roomy cockpit and proper toilet facilities. Even Jean came with Jim and the boys, though she got very scared if the boat began to heel. Gil and Edna came frequently, having helped Harold choose the boat at Littlehampton. He thought he would also like to exchange his Leisure 17 for a Macwester Rowan. Once or twice Harold was unable to start the engine with the electric start button. Ken Fitzpatrick, the lifeboat mechanic, came aboard and gave a few demonstrations of how to start it by hand. Harold managed to do it a couple of times but did not find it easy and skinned his knuckles. One day, at the mooring, Harold had the misfortune to drop the winch handle overboard. He hoped he would find it in a few days when the boat would almost dry out on the low spring tide but the water did not get shallow enough so he had no luck. However, a day or two later Ken Fitzpatrick was around in his wet suit adjusting one of the moorings. He obligingly dived from *Wennol Mor* and managed to recover it.

The interior of this boat was so much more comfortable than the cramped quarters of the Leisure and it was pleasant to sleep aboard some nights especially after supper in Ty Coch. Breakfast in the cockpit, among the sounds of the harbour, was always appetizing particularly if they were eating fresh mackerel. Llangwnnadr church always held a coffee evening in August. Bob Chapman wondered whether Harold could catch some mackerel on that day that could be sold fresh in the evening. It was a reasonably calm day and Harold managed to catch 111 fish and take them to the church hall where they were quickly sold.

The summer of 1976 had been particularly hot and dry with not much wind and almost every day was spent pleasantly drifting up and down the coast. There were numerous forest fires in many places because the foliage was tinder-dry and one day when they were becalmed off Nefyn Rene described to Harold a spectacular fire on Boduan Mountain. It seemed strange to be viewing this dramatic sight from the sea.

For the return sail to Pwllheli at the end of the summer Harold asked two of Julian's friends, Nigel Modern and Ed Curry, to accompany them. They were both proficient dinghy sailors and Harold had plenty of confidence in them. The trip was easier than the one at the start of the season, though the wind was stronger than it had been for weeks and the sails had to be reefed for most of the time. They reached Pwllheli in record time though it took a while to find a trot where they could tie up.

During the winter and early spring Harold was able to do one or two maintenance jobs while the boat was on the hard at Pwllheli and every year the bottom had to be painted with anti-fouling.

The next two summers were spent in a similar fashion and although Harold did not make any long voyages he was very happy with *Wennol Mor*.

In 1978 Harold sold the boat as he would soon be retiring but that comes later in the story.

## **Chapter 14 Headship**

In the midst of all this sailing activity there had been significant happenings at Rushton. Since the school had opened Kate Brunton had been experiencing an increasing number of health problems and Harold found himself in charge on several occasions. A few years before coming to Rushton she was involved in a horrific road accident in which her husband was killed, Kate having been the driver. Probably she was under much mental strain from this traumatic event. She found the Rushton pupils, with their numerous and varied handicaps, were very different from the children she had been used to and sadly, in spite of support and help from the staff, found herself unable to cope. During the 1964 Christmas break, after another absence, she handed in her resignation and Harold found himself temporary head. RNIB now had the task of finding someone to take on the job.

As the new term progressed school seemed to be functioning as usual but the staff was becoming increasingly restless about the appointment of a new head. Weeks went by and the RNIB seemed in no hurry to advertise the post so Harold, unable to give answers to all the enquiries, went to the RNIB headquarters in London to see Michael Colborne-Brown. As RNIB's Education Officer he had known Harold for many years at Conover and at Rushton and was well aware of his teaching abilities and the determination with which he had faced the challenge of losing his sight. He had also found Harold a capable deputy head since his time at Rushton. He asked Harold whether he thought a blind man could take on the Headship. After some thought and out of loyalty to other blind professional people Harold answered 'Yes'. Harold felt flattered to think he was being considered for the post but had reservations. The job involved far more than the ability to teach well. The head was accountable not only for what the children did in the classroom, but for what they did in their family groups and in their leisure time, in fact for their whole development. He also had the responsibility of a large staff - teachers, house mothers, nurses, kitchen and domestic staff, handymen, gardeners etc. There were parents, medical personnel, and education authorities to be dealt with. Each year there was a complex budget to be drawn up and kept to. The administration was a daunting prospect especially for a totally blind person. Harold talked it over with Rene who had even more doubts. She knew, like CB, what a good and conscientious teacher he was but was unsure whether he possessed all the other skills necessary for the post. She suggested she might give up her job at the village school and join the Rushton staff but Harold was adamantly against this idea. He said he had heard of headmasters who had wives on their staff and that other staff members were uncomfortable with this, suspecting that things might be reported back to the head. He had further discussions with CB and was eventually offered the job which he accepted.

This would involve yet another move which seemed a pity as the family were happy and settled, but there was a large flat in the Hall itself where the head was expected to live. A compromise was made that they would eat separately in the flat rather than join the pupils and staff in the school dining room. Julian and Lynda were miserable at the thought of leaving the Bailiffs House but were soon won over by the promise of a television set. The family had never had a TV and at the village school they were always the odd ones out when their classmates were relating all the wonderful programmes they had watched the previous evening and felt very envious. Thus in the spring of 1965 the family found themselves residing in this sixteenth century stately mansion with an elegant panelled lounge, large stone fireplace with an intricately carved wood surround, moulded ceiling and chandeliers and two circular bay windows with a view over the fishing lake and beyond. The dining room was similarly panelled with a unique moulded ceiling depicting the signs of the zodiac and a hatch through to the kitchen. There was a large window which looked down the long drive. The headmaster's study, a panelled room overlooking the courtyard, was on this floor. The upstairs bedrooms were reached by a magnificent oak staircase. The flat was on the first and second floors and was reached by wooden semi-circular staircase up and down which, in future, Harold was going to dash many times a day, often two steps at a time. He must have often smiled wryly when he thought of the difference between his splendid new home and the little house in Nelson Street where he had spent his childhood and youth.

One of the first tasks Harold had to do was, with CB's approval, appoint Laurie Bright as the new Deputy Head. His wife Joan had now gone to work in a junior school in Kettering. There were a few other staff changes and appointments but the school began to achieve stability once more and Harold found he was well able to cope with the additional work and responsibility. The school was developing satisfactorily along the lines that Mike Myers had so successfully set up at Conover. Perhaps the hardest part of the job was not being able to be 'off duty' unless he got away from the Hall. Otherwise, whenever he put foot outside the flat he would come across a member of



staff who had some pressing dilemma that seemingly required his attention, whereas if he wasn't there would have to be sorted in some way or another. At weekends he was often buttonholed by parents if they happened to catch sight of him going to or from the car. He would have loved to have had some free time for a quiet wander around the extensive grounds or maybe just sit outside in the sun but instead found himself 'trapped' in the flat. It wasn't that he disliked the job – far from it – but he needed some time to unwind.

To alleviate this problem he bought a new caravan for Llangwnwadol - one with a separate end-bedroom for the children - and had the old one moved to a site at Felmersham in Bedfordshire. This was a small village on the River Ouse, about 20 miles from Rushton. They could take the *Tub* and the canoe and explore that stretch of the river. Now he would be able get right away from Rushton for a day or two occasionally. As there were no toilets at this site Harold got busy making a little shed to house an 'Elsan' chemical toilet. He was able to use the workshop at Rushton to construct this out of shiplap planks and spent a number of evenings there until almost midnight. Once or twice he was so late coming to bed that Rene became worried that he had had an accident with the tools, but all was well – he just got carried away with his work. He made the shed big enough to house a few other things as well as the toilet. It was soon ready to be transported in sections to the caravan. Harold had so enjoyed this project that he made a similar shed to take to Llangwnwadol.

Since coming to Rushton, Harold had been concerned about the lack of mobility training that the pupils were able to have. The children could be taught to find their way around the complex inside of the building but they were very limited as to where they could go outside. Apart from the drive, the terrace and the circle in front of the Hall, there was nowhere. With the increasing amount of traffic on the roads it was not safe to send the children to the village on their own and in any case, the roads in Rushton were busier than those in Conover. With all the grounds that belonged to the Hall it seemed a pity that the only paths were grassy tracks which were difficult to follow by feel. What Harold wanted was for these paths to have a tarmac surface where the children could learn to find their way. Harold and Laurie set about planning a network of paths and Laurie made a tactile map for Harold. The plan was submitted to the RNIB Education Committee but it was turned down as being too expensive. Nevertheless he wasn't going to be put off and tried again, once more to be refused. But Harold would not give up and continued to make his request. Twice he went to London to meet up with Mr. Dayborne, the RNIB's Estates Manager, and with CB to press his case. He heard later that the subject 'Hayes' Paths on the Agenda time after time became something of a joke with the committee. In desperation, he proposed that John Cotton, the maintenance man, assisted by Ray North, the caretaker, and Trevor Larking, the gardener, could do the job if some machinery could be hired and materials purchased. This was agreed to and at last his persistence was rewarded and, in 1966, the paths were constructed. In a few weeks the children were learning to find their way around this system. The different paths were given names, Yew Tree Hill, Summerway, Lower Walk, Lakeside and others. A roundabout was placed alongside one of the paths and one or two benches and other items so the children would have some objectives to aim for. Now, when playing outside, instead of everyone all crowded together around the grass circle at the front, the children were dispersed around the grounds.

In 1968 it was announced that Princess Margaret would be coming to Rushton in her capacity as patron of Sunshine Homes and schools for Blind Children. There had been a previous royal visit in 1961 when the Duchess of Gloucester came to officially open the school. Everyone had been impressed by her quiet charm and her empathy with the children but Princess Margaret was a different kettle of fish and had a reputation for sometimes being difficult and unpredictable. Harold was not happy about the visit. With his strong socialist background he had always been an anti-monarchist, but it would be part of his job as Principal of Rushton to ensure that everything went well. Lady Juliet Smith, a lady-in-waiting to the princess, came and had tea with Harold and Rene some weeks before the visit. Ostensibly she came to see Rushton Hall as she was writing a book about old buildings of Northamptonshire but no doubt she also came to vet the place before the royal visit. She was a delightful person with no airs and graces, very simply dressed and most easy to talk with. Harold enjoyed the afternoon. Meanwhile plans were going ahead for the visit. The princess would see the school operating as on a normal day and would visit the classrooms in turn.

When the day arrived HRH was greeted by the Lord Lieutenant. A row of VIPs together with Harold and Rene were waiting in line to be introduced in turn. When she got to the end of the line, Rene did the mandatory curtsy and then said, as instructed, 'Do you wish to retire Ma'am?' – a euphemism for 'Do you want to go to the loo?' She then escorted the princess into the Hall, up the semi-circular staircase and to the bathroom at the top of the flat. One

of the domestics had been cleaning and polishing in here for days. Harold thought that afterwards perhaps there should be a plaque on the lavatory seat, *Princess Margaret sat here*.

Once back outside, the party proceeded to a marquee for lunch. After this they went to the Great Hall where chairs had been set out in front of a stage. Some of the friends and volunteers who helped at the school came to see a presentation to the Princess by two of the children, Seren Thomas who gave a sweet-scented pomander, and Jimmy Blythyn who gave a basket, woven by the children, containing eggs from their poultry project. This plan proved to be a disappointment as people had been expecting her to make a short speech but apart from 'Thank you' she said not a word.

Next came Harold's special contribution to the day when he had to conduct HRH on a tour of the classrooms where the children were busy with various activities. This would take about an hour. Harold took her from room to room trying to avoid touching her accidentally while explaining the aims of each class. The Princess listened politely but made little comment and said nothing to the children who had been awaiting the visit with a great build-up of excitement and anticipation. Harold could sense the frustration of the teachers who had spent some time preparing their lessons that day but there was nothing he could do until, just as they were leaving one room, he heard Cordelia, a totally blind girl, say, 'Has she been yet?' Harold then did something that should not be done when accompanying royalty - he tapped Princess Margaret gently on the arm and said, 'I wonder if you would mind saying hallo to Cordelia. She doesn't realise you have been in her classroom'. To his relief the princess turned and spoke briefly to the children.

The last place on the tour was the gym. It had been arranged for several hyperactive boys to be in here with Laurie. It would have been impossible to keep these children sitting down in a classroom for any length of time but in the gym, by keeping them very active, their disturbed behaviour would hopefully be kept in check. Harold was explaining the special difficulties encountered when trying to educate these children when the princess suddenly interjected 'But you can't really do anything with them. I mean they're dotty aren't they!' This remark made Harold seethe with rage and he contradicted her with great vehemence, something unforgivable when talking to a member of the royal family, but he just couldn't stop himself. 'Indeed they are not, ma'am!' he declared. He then tried to explain the many and varied difficulties of the children, something he had been endeavouring to do all the afternoon and suddenly the princess became interested and got into deep conversation with Harold, asking pertinent questions and listening carefully to his answers. The people responsible for the schedule were becoming impatient. It was time the party should be heading to the marquee for tea. Eventually the earnest dialogue came to an end. Harold hoped he had managed to convince her royal highness that something could be done. Thankful that his part of the visit was over he sought out Rene and together they went to a table at the back of the marquee for tea. No sooner was he seated when someone came to him saying, 'She is asking for the headmaster to sit by her.' He was then escorted to the top table where a place had been made for him next to HRH. . The discourse then resumed and she continued to question Harold, occasionally offering him an asparagus roll or some other delicacy. Meanwhile the programme was again being disrupted - a number of local people were lined up waiting to be introduced. At last Harold was dismissed and returned to Rene. Before leaving, the princess was taken to the recently opened swimming pool where one or two children were being instructed. Then it was time for her to get in the Rolls Royce and wave farewell to the children and staff lining the drive. 'Goodbye, gorgeous!' shouted Cordelia. Harold hoped that Princess Margaret had learned something from her visit.

Harold became accustomed to acting as host to many visitors. Some came to see the work being done with blind, handicapped children. One of these was the Duke of Devonshire who was a patron of the RNIB. He had lunch in the flat and showed great interest and understanding of the work being done and chatted with the children in a very natural way. Norah Gibbs, the child psychologist who visited regularly to give advice, became a great friend. She stayed in the flat and Harold always looked forward to an interesting evening of conversation after supper. Her successor also became a good friend. Sister John (later to become Sister Stella) was a nun from Liverpool but apart from wearing a veil and plain grey or navy clothes, seemed to be just an ordinary pleasant lady with a broad perspective of life. Harold, because he could not see her, often forgot she was a nun and came out with some remarks and observations that were perhaps an anathema to her religious views but she never seemed to take exception.

Harold enjoyed meeting the medical consultants who made frequent visits. Some of the Rushton children had rare

complaints that the doctors seldom came across in their day to day work and welcomed the chance to study these conditions at first hand. Harold felt privileged to sit in on some of these consultations even though he himself had no medical knowledge. The heads of some of the special schools in the area came to Rushton from time to time especially if they had a pupil with sight problems. Harold could often make suggestions of the best way to help these children. On Saturdays and Sundays there were often volunteers who came to help. They would assist the duty staff generally, playing with the children and taking them for walks – a benefit to all concerned.

During the early seventies there was a general inspection. The inspectors gave the school a good report. One of their recommendations concerned the classrooms. Both at Rushton and at Conover the rooms used for teaching were, on the whole, not suitable, especially for handicapped children. They suggested that purpose built classrooms might be constructed. RNIB compromised with a temporary solution of building a block of prefabricated accommodation with a life of five to ten years. Harold had much to do with the planning of this extension which led directly from the Hall itself. Teachers and pupils found that this made things much easier particularly for the children in wheelchairs.

It gave Harold great satisfaction to see the progress made by most of his young pupils during their four years or so at Rushton both educationally and socially. It was also pleasing to him that during his time as head a good number of the children were able to spend the weekends at home. He was able to suggest to some of the Local Authorities that they might help with the transport and some of the more forward-looking of them were pleased to comply. The children benefitted so much from this regular contact with their families.

## **Chapter 15 Christmas at Rushton Hall**

Rushton Hall was a marvellous place to be at Christmas. From the beginning of December there was mounting excitement. The great Hall was decorated with greenery collected from the grounds. Then a very large tree was delivered and placed in one of the bay window areas. When it was decorated and bedecked with lights it looked superb. On one afternoon there would be a concert when staff and children entertained each other with various musical offerings and sketches. It was usually an informal and hilarious occasion. An evening was always set aside for a visit from the Rothwell Salvation Army band who enjoyed their visit as much as the children and staff. Their joyful and rollicking music was greatly appreciated by the children who joined lustily in the carols. The musical items were interspersed by short and simple readings of the nativity story frequently interrupted by comments from the audience. Perhaps the highlight of the evening came when the service was finished and the children were able to inspect the different instruments and attempt to play them. Some could only manage to produce weird noises and gave shrieks of laughter but one or two were quick to learn the technique. Harold was delighted when two of the younger bandsmen wondered whether he would like them to come and teach some of the children to play brass instruments. It was arranged that they come each week – the band had some spare instruments which they lent to the school - and before long about half a dozen of the pupils were playing simple tunes. Harold himself thought he would like to be able to play a brass instrument in addition to the piano and recorder. Rene's brother, Ted, was an accomplished trumpet player, often playing with amateur light opera groups. He had an unused instrument which he lent to Harold and he was soon playing a number of melodies by ear. Although he did not take this seriously, he enjoyed it immensely. When he finished work each evening he found great relaxation by spending a quarter of an hour or so going through his 'repertoire', his favourite piece being the slow movement from Haydn's Trumpet Concerto.

Just before the end of term there was the usual traditional Christmas Dinner with all the trimmings but the climax came with the Christmas Party. The children knew that Father Christmas was coming and that they would all get a present but throughout the afternoon of games they became increasingly keyed up with the expectation of this visit. Harold had a phone put in the Hall and every now and again it would ring and he would answer it and then tell the children that it was Father Christmas, usually in some sort of dilemma - he'd run out of snow, one of the reindeer was lame, he'd got lost – to mention a few. Harold would then think of some plan to get Santa to the party and told the children what he had suggested. From then on there would be more phone calls which were relayed to the anxious children. Sometimes they were told the school bus had been sent to help out or perhaps one of the local tradesmen was able to assist, once they got the gardener to take his trailer to pick up some of the presents and

another time a local farmer took his tractor to pull him out of a ditch, but, at last when the tension was almost unbearable, the lights were dimmed and Santa arrived. He told the children of the troubles he had had (having been briefed by Harold!) and then came what they had all been waiting for, the distribution of presents. Each year Harold had the job of finding someone to act as Father Christmas. It was no good having a person who frequently came into contact with the children – they were quicker than sighted people to recognise voices. Once, before Harold was head, the Rector of the village church was asked to play the part. He had just the figure and bearing for Santa but his voice was unmistakable and as soon as he spoke several children at once shouted ‘It’s the Rector’. The headmaster of Desborough School where Rene now worked was a great success, especially as he was used to dealing with children. One Christmas Rene spotted an advert in the local paper for a ‘professional’ Father Christmas who could be hired for parties. Harold thought it worth a try. When he arrived for the party Rene took him up to the flat so that he could get changed into the rather splendid costume he had brought along. She then went back to the Great Hall to hear what fanciful tale Harold was telling the excited children so that she could tell Santa what had supposedly happened to him on his journey to Rushton. He acted the part splendidly – probably the best they had ever had. However, a few months later they learned from the Evening Telegraph that ‘Father Christmas’ was in jail having committed a number of burglaries from the houses he had visited! Luckily nothing appeared to have been taken from Harold and Rene’s flat although he had been left on his own there for a while.

After the children had gone home for the holiday Harold and family made preparations for their own festivities. Living in such spacious accommodation it was good to be able to invite people to spend Christmas with them. Rene’s mother, whose husband died in 1957, was always there. Two or three times the Astin family came to stay and for several years Douglas and Betty West with Angela and Linda spent three or four days there. On Christmas morning they would all sit round the large fireplace in the lounge, where interesting parcels had been appearing for days, and undo their presents. It took a long while as Harold liked to have a ‘feel’ at everyone else’s presents as well as his own. One year Harold bought Rene a bicycle and they abandoned the present opening for a while to take the bike outside where Harold proceeded to ride it round the grass circle in front of the Hall, just to show he had not forgotten his past skill. Then came the usual Christmas Dinner. After the meal, while the big wash-up was going on in the kitchen, Harold and Douglas liked to sit contentedly in the armchairs on the top floor landing by the window and chat about this and that, while the youngsters found ample ways of using up their energy. There were plenty of activities both indoors and outside – badminton, trampolining, handbell ringing, swimming, roller skating, walking. For those who were feeling less energetic, indoors there were plenty of quiet places to relax. One year it snowed and they were able to sledge down Yew Tree Hill. On Boxing Day they would usually walk up to the Thornhill Arms and have lunch there. At teatime they would often be joined by the Bright Family who were now living in Kettering. The evening would be spent playing games of which the favourite was ‘Murder in the Dark’. In such a large house it was very scary.

Harold, the family and his guests thoroughly enjoyed the celebrations, spent in such wonderful surroundings, with all the accompanying amenities. Christmas was never quite the same after they left Rushton.

## **Chapter 16 Ty Gwyn**

In 1962 Harold had bought a newly-built bungalow at Barnsley for his mother to live in so that she could be near to Ellen and family. Now in her mid-seventies, Clara had not been too well so it was sensible for her to be closer to some of her family. Also there was much redevelopment planned for parts of Manchester, and Nelson Street and the surrounding area were due for demolition in the near future. It was a wrench for her to leave the little house that had been her home for over fifty years and it was strange to be living in a modern house with a bathroom but she was pleased that Ellen was not far away. Harold and Rene went to see her frequently as it was an easy journey from Rushton to Barnsley up the M1. She lived here until her death in 1969 when Harold sold the bungalow.

A year or two after, Harold realised that sometime he would need a place of his own and, with house prices beginning to soar, he decided that property was the best place for the money accrued from the sale of the house. As most of their time when not working was spent at Llangwnadl he thought that would be a good place to have a house. They would spend all their holidays there instead of in the caravan and Harold could not think of a better spot to settle when he eventually retired from teaching.

A short distance up the road from Llain Fatw, where Griff and Blodwen Jones lived, was an old farmhouse, Muriau, an attractive stone building with a number of outhouses. The house had a short moment of fame in 1970 when it was used in a popular TV series, 'Family at War'. It was temporarily converted to a pub and some of the local residents were employed as extras. The owner of this property was Laura Jones, Griff Jones' aunt whom Harold and Rene knew well. Laura and her brother had farmed here for many years but when Huw died Laura rented out most of the land to local farmers for grazing. Every Easter, when Harold and family returned to their caravan, she made a great fuss of them and the other regular caravanners, saying how quiet the winter was in Llangwnnadr. Throughout the summer she let most of Muriau to holidaymakers and just kept two or three rooms for herself. In the garden was a well, an orchard with apple and damson trees and a large Dutch barn where some of the holidaymakers stored their caravans and boats during the winter. Once Harold put his small cruiser there but by the spring it was so filthy with dirt and bird droppings he decided that in future it would be better out in the open where it would have an occasional wash by the rain. One winter, when she was beginning to feel her age and was having some health problems, she went into Gorddwysfa, an old people's home on the seafront at Pwllheli, where she enjoyed plenty of company and where there were shops and chapel within walking distance. It suited her well for a couple of years and she returned to Muriau in the spring to prepare for her summer visitors. Eventually she moved permanently to the home and Muriau was put on the market. This occurred at the time when Harold was thinking of purchasing a house in the area. There were one or two others who, like him, had holidayed in Llangwnnadr for years and who were interested in the property but early in 1973 Harold bought Muriau and quite a lot of the furniture and arranged to move during the spring bank holiday. While she was in Gorddwysfa, Harold and Rene had visited Laura several times and she was delighted when she heard they were going to be the new owners of Muriau.

Part of the property included a large stone shippon where cows had originally been housed. When Muriau was sold this building was given planning permission so that it could be converted into a house. Harold was undecided whether to live in Muriau or to have the shippon converted into a modern house which would be much easier to maintain especially as they would not be living there for a few years. On the other hand the farmhouse had many features that he liked. A day or two after he moved in, while Rene was out shopping, he and a neighbour pulled down an unappealing modern fireplace in the lounge and discovered the original stone inglenook and chimney. If a fire-basket was placed here it would greatly enhance the appearance of the room. When Rene returned she was horrified at the mess though she had to agree that it would certainly be an improvement. Harold spent most of the holiday examining the house in detail and wondering what his best plan of action should be. Should he do the extensive alterations needed to make the farmhouse more habitable or should he have the shippon converted?

However, during the week something happened that was going to completely change the situation. Next door to Muriau was a large white dormer bungalow, Ty Gwyn, that had been built soon after Harold started caravanning at Llangwnnadr. It had changed hands three times and the present owner was a high court judge, Mr Jackson, who had been working in Africa for some years but had now come to live there in retirement. Harold and Rene had been invited in to coffee one evening the previous summer and the Jacksons had showed them around including the large upstairs area which was accessed by a slingsby ladder from inside the house or by an outside staircase. The area comprised three bedrooms and a washroom, which with the two bedrooms downstairs made this a five-bedroomed house. It had been well-built and planned and had a number of interesting features. Sadly, though, Mr Jackson had been diagnosed with cancer. The prognosis was not good though he expected to enjoy a year or so living there but on the Thursday of the bank holiday week the neighbourhood was shocked to learn that he had died the previous night. Harold and Rene returned to Rushton at the end of the week feeling very, very sorry for their new neighbour, Mrs. Jackson. She was a strong-minded person and said she would continue to live there on her own – her family were in Cheshire which wasn't too far away. Harold was therefore surprised a week or two later when Bob Chapman, whose cottage, Refail Bach, was the other side of Ty Gwyn, phoned him at Rushton to say that Mrs. Jackson was going to sell Ty Gwyn. Her family had persuaded her to leave Llangwnnadr and buy a house nearer to them. Bob wondered whether Harold would be interested in buying this desirable property. It was certainly very tempting – the house was less than ten years old, the decoration was good and would not need much maintenance. Providing they could sell Muriau there should be no problem. One thing worried Harold though – how to tell Laura Jones that they would be selling 'her' farmhouse so soon. After thinking it over for a day or two Harold decided to make an offer for Ty Gwyn which was accepted. Muriau and the shippon would be put up for auction as two separate properties. When they were at Muriau the following weekend they went to Pwllheli with much trepidation to see Laura. To their great relief she was not upset about what they had done. Indeed, she remarked that Ty Gwyn would be a much easier house for Harold.

The auction was held at the Tower Hotel in Pwllheli towards the end of August. Muriau was sold as a holiday home to a doctor and his wife and three young children. The shippon went to Dennis and Joan Udall from Birmingham. They had holidayed near Aberdaron for many years and knew the area well. Dennis planned to demolish most of the shippon and build himself a house to which they could retire eventually. Harold was most interested in this project and was pleased that he would have Dennis and Joan for neighbours. The house took many years to build and for a while they lived in a caravan. Dennis was a perfectionist and searched far and wide to obtain the right materials both for outside and inside. He planned the house to the last detail and did all the work himself. When Garreg Lwyd was finished it was a fine and unique building. The Udalls remained very close friends for the rest of Harold's life.

The move into Ty Gwyn took place during the October half term holiday. It was an easy move. They had bought the furniture that was already in Ty Gwyn together with the curtains and carpets. These were all of good quality so the house was very comfortable. They brought in one or two things from Muriau including a large slab of slate that was in the orchard about the size of a grave headstone. Harold stood this on bricks and it made an attractive and useful outside table. With a house of his own Harold now began to think of alterations and improvements he would like to make. One thing he particularly wanted was to have a dining room leading off the kitchen and sun lounge. He arranged for a local architect, Elisabeth Williams, to draw up a plan for him. He then engaged a builder to come and do the work. Eurwyn lived just up the road and was another relative of Griff and Blodwen – in this small place all the Welsh seemed to be related. Eurwyn had a very good reputation and was likeable and friendly, sometimes arriving about 9 o'clock in the evening, having just finished his day's work, to discuss the plans but Harold became impatient when he arrived several weekends to find that the work had not been started. He took the matter in his own hands and began to dig out the foundations himself. Eurwyn took the hint and before long building commenced and soon it was done.

Harold was pleased with the completed room with its large picture window and sliding door leading outside. Now he turned his attention to the garden – it was no use having a big window if there was not much to be seen from it. Although the view didn't matter to him he liked to know that other people were enjoying it. There were already a flower bed and one or two shrubs hiding the manhole cover that gave access to the septic tank. The curved shape of the bed seemed just right for the boundary of a pond. He and Rene read up about pond construction and drew up a plan. Julian and several of his friends came along to help with the excavation, a liner was installed and the pool was filled with water. Harold made a surrounding path using pieces of York stone which he cut to size. Behind the pond he built up a small rock bed and Albert Roberts, his old friend and gardening expert from Bayston Hill, advised him about suitable plants. With the addition of one or two small decorative shrubs the area was soon looking much more attractive. Harold constructed a bird table which could be seen from the dining room and the sun lounge and this was a focus of interest particularly at meal times. Each morning Harold would put food on the table and top up the nut and seed feeders. He had a terrace built beyond the sun lounge and then set to work building a low stone wall bordering the terrace which he topped with more pieces of York stone. There was a break in the centre of the wall where he made a crazy paving step of the same stone, leading up to the garden.

When they had purchased Ty Gwyn the property included a field at the back, about an acre in size. The Jacksons allowed a local farmer to keep sheep here but there was nothing written in the deeds about the grazing rights. Over the years this was to be a source of great annoyance to Harold who would have dearly liked to use the field for his own purposes but with nothing stated in writing this was seemingly impossible. However when he first moved in he was ignorant about these unwritten rights and took in part of the field to enlarge the garden. He moved the wire fence back and planted a cypress hedge. The farmer must have been astonished though he did not say anything at the time. This new area of garden they called the Paddock and planted it up with shrubs and a few fruit trees. At one side they dug two vegetable plots and later on had a greenhouse and compost area there. During the next few years Harold made a slab path leading up the garden, a path between the vegetable beds and a paved area by the compost bins and greenhouse. Very soon the garden looked lush and mature.

Harold also made some alterations to the upstairs accommodation. In the wash room he had the lavatory moved to a different wall to make room for a shower unit so that when the family or other visitors came to stay they had no need to come to the downstairs bathroom to bath or shower. He and Rene then tiled the room.

There was no end to the number of interesting things to do.

## **Chapter 17 Retirement**

In 1979 Harold was sixty and decided to take early retirement and go to live in Llangwnnadr. They no longer had the children to support. Julian was working for the Ministry of Agriculture in Staffordshire and Lynda, who was now married, was teaching in Coventry. If he went on until he was sixty-five Harold knew would have a bigger pension and also be able to get the state pension but he was finding the work at Rushton Hall, although satisfying and enjoyable, was becoming a strain. It was a big responsibility even for a sighted person and he felt it was beginning to affect his health. Living in the Hall had many advantages but it was a 24 hour job. He was able to get away for a weekend at Ty Gwyn about once a fortnight which gave him a complete break and rest but invariably when he returned late on Sunday night there would be a pile of messages left on the table in the flat and he often went to bed worrying about some of these. It took away much of the benefit of the weekend. He discussed it with Rene. She would have to give up her teaching job and would be unlikely to find work in Gwynedd where education was through the medium of Welsh. She would retire on a much reduced pension and was not due for a state pension until 1986. They concluded that by living carefully for a few years they would be able to manage and so at the end of 1978 Harold told RNIB that he would like to finish at the end of the next Summer Term. There was no need for such a long period of notice but Harold thought it was only fair for them to have plenty of time to appoint a successor.

The rest of the staff were not told of his retirement until the end of the Spring Term, apart from his deputy, a young teacher Rick Neal who had been appointed a year or two previously when Laurie Bright became deputy head of Conover Hall, and the matron, Liz Mc Nay, and also Jan Green, the secretary. There was great surprise at the news and also regret. The school was functioning well and staff and children were happy with the status quo.

On the weekends they travelled to Llangwnnadr they now began gradually to take their belongings to Ty Gwyn. Harold bought a small trailer and that and the car were well loaded for their Friday evening journeys. He wondered how his piano would be transported to Wales and thought he would have to use a removal firm. However, he mentioned it to Dennis Udall when they were at Llangwnnadr one weekend and Dennis offered to come to Rushton and collect it. He had a small van and at one time he and his father had been in the removal business. He and his son Martin came with the van one Friday. Harold was worried that they would have difficulty getting the piano down the semi-circular staircase. It had been a struggle for the removal men to get it up these stairs when they moved from the Bailiffs House, so it was decided to take it out of the dining room, across the gallery roof and into the room the other side and then down in the lift. They managed this though it was not easy, and the piano and one or two other pieces of furniture were loaded in the van and transported to Ty Gwyn.

At the start of the summer term Harold was dismayed to receive a phone call from RNIB head office to say that he and Rene had been invited to a Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace in July. When he said he would think it over he was told that he must go. It was a royal command and it would reflect badly on RNIB should he refuse. It also meant that they would have to delay leaving for Ty Gwyn for a couple of days. He accepted with bad grace and they decided to take the opportunity to visit Rene's mother in Southend for a day or two. He also discovered there was a lovely concert at the Royal Festival Hall in the evening after the garden party so they arranged to meet up there with Ted and his wife, Chris.

At school, arrangements were being made, largely by Rick Neal, to give Harold a big send-off. Rick asked Rene to recommend something that Harold might like as a leaving gift. She made a list of items so that they could choose a present which they thought would be suitable. She made a number of suggestions – a radio, a lounge chair, a workmate bench, a large bath towel, a chainsaw. Invitations were sent out to staff who had left, colleagues from Conover, representatives from RNIB education department and many other people who had had contact with Harold during the time he had worked for the Institute.

The weather on the chosen day had been hot and sultry which slowly changed into one of those perfect July evenings when all the doors and windows could be opened allowing the pleasant sounds and scents of the tranquil grounds into the building. To commence the proceedings Rick had arranged for some musicians to give a short concert. One of the items was the slow movement from Mozart's Flute concerto and whenever Harold heard it in the future he would remember that happy summer evening. After the music came the presentations. To Rene's

astonishment instead of selecting one item they had bought everything which was on the list, apart from the chainsaw. Rick and the others thought that, should Harold have an accident with this, they would feel responsible. Harold was amazed to receive all these gifts. Indeed he was dumbfounded by the whole evening - he had never expected a send-off such as this. There were one or two other personal presents as well. Roy Kimble had made a beautiful pottery table lamp. Another teacher, Pete Almond, gave a woodcut picture of the ornate front door to the Hall. Sister John, the psychologist, had woven scarves for Harold and Rene. Mary Tugwell, for a joke, presented them with a bean slicer, knowing that they intended to grow their own vegetables at Ty Gwyn. Refreshments followed including a magnificent iced cake depicting a sailing boat made by one of the housemothers, which Harold had to cut ceremonially. He kept the iced boat for some months. The evening finished with dancing in the Great Hall. It was truly an occasion to remember.

Despite his annoyance at having to delay the date of leaving for Ty Gwyn, Harold quite enjoyed his afternoon at Buckingham Palace. Again it was a lovely summer's day and it was exciting to go through the gates with hundreds of other guests all arrayed in their finery, and be shepherded into the Palace itself and then out into the 'back garden'. This was pleasantly green and leafy, similar to most of the London parks and a refuge from the noise and bustle of the busy streets. Somewhere a band was playing a selection of light music. They strolled about leisurely among the crowds when suddenly they were astounded to find themselves face to face with Betty Shearman. She had been Matron at Rushton Hall for several years and still lived in the village. She now spent much of her time doing voluntary work with deaf-blind people and it was in that capacity that she was among the guests, bringing with her a deaf-blind lady from Peterborough. Harold had never expected to find a familiar face in that throng of people. He was pleased when Betty commented that she thought the grounds at Rushton were better than these at the Palace. They left Betty and her companion and continued wandering among the trees and shrubs. When she thought no-one was looking, Rene snipped off one or two small pieces of shrubs and secreted them in her handbag hoping to grow them as cuttings at Ty Gwyn. (They failed to grow!) By now they were feeling rather warm and weary so sat down in the shade by one of the large lakes. Rene went off to the marquee where refreshments were being served and collected some tasty nibbles and some cups of iced coffee. They found these drinks most welcome on this hot afternoon and returned for 'seconds'. Presently they were aware that something was happening, people were on their feet and making their way across the lawns towards a small stage where the Queen and Prince Philip were going to meet some of the guests. Harold was not at all interested in this and continued lounging under the trees while Rene went to get a glimpse of the couple.

At the end of the afternoon they emerged from the Palace out into Buckingham Palace Road to make their way to the underground station. The traffic was dreadful, all speeding along non-stop at about 30mph. There appeared to be no crossing points and they stood helplessly on the kerb. A policeman motor cyclist spotted their plight and turned his bike broadside on to the traffic. Everything immediately came to a stop as if by magic and they thankfully crossed the road. They met Ted and Chris at the Royal Festival Hall and enjoyed a wonderful evening. During the interval they stood on the balcony sipping glasses of wine. The sun was setting and the city looked beautiful. The last item of the concert was Symphony No.7 by Dvorak, a fitting end to an interesting day. They said goodbye to Ted and Chris and set off back on the train with the strains of the symphony ringing in their ears for their last night at Rushton before retiring to Llangwnnadr.

Next day they packed the rest of their belongings in the car and trailer and set off on the familiar journey that they would not now be making very often.

### **Chapter 18 Life at Llangwnnadr**

There was much sorting to be done at Ty Gwyn but there was no great rush. It seemed strange to think they would not be returning to work. It was the usual August holiday for Harold, with the family making their customary visits. The boat had been sold the previous year so he could now concentrate on doing some of the things he planned for the house and garden. At the end of the month came their Silver Wedding celebration. This however, was a quiet occasion as Harold's sister, Ellen, died unexpectedly and they spent the day at her funeral at Wombwell. Harold was pleased they had been to see her shortly before leaving Rushton.

Once most of the holiday makers had left, Harold began to settle to his new life which proved to be even better than he had anticipated. The house slowly began to take on some sort of order and there was always something to do in



the garden. Most days he and Rene would walk the beach at low tide. There were only a very few people to be seen – that was how Harold liked it. He soon knew every nook and cranny of Penllech Bay. One or two places had names – Carreg Felyn, Berth Aur, Penrhyn Melyn – and Rene allotted names to some of the other features so that Harold would know where he was. There was Penultimate Bay, The Shop, Jackdaw Cliff, Malcolm's Rock, The Arch, Cannabis Bay, Halfway Rock, Sleeper Bay, to name but a few. They all meant something to Harold for various reasons. He was always intrigued to examine Halfway Rock, a sloping slab, the height of which varied greatly according to how much sand had been washed up or taken away by the state of the sea especially if had been stormy. Sometimes Harold found he could rest his chin on the top and at other times it was way above his head so that he could barely reach it with his fingertips. It made him realise the enormous power of the sea. The far end of the beach could only be accessed at low tide and just occasionally they found themselves cut off and would have to scramble over slippery rocks or climb the cliff. Sometimes, if there had been heavy rain, the small streams that cascaded down the cliff on to the beach, would be deep and fast-flowing and would be difficult to cross. There was nearly always driftwood and other treasures to be found especially at the far end of the bay and rarely would they come back empty handed. They would struggle back to the house with heavy loads. Harold would always take a sack for the small items and fasten planks together with ropes, making handles for them to carry between them. If there was a quantity of wood he would stash it away on the cliff and take the old boat launching trolley the next day to bring it up to the house. Harold loaded the wood with great precision and fastened it with rope that itself had been found on the beach. There were often useful fish trays, bottle crates and buckets. If the buckets were without handles he would make one out of plaited rope when he had it back in the garage. Sometimes there were buoys and lobsterpots which he would thread with rope and carry over his shoulder. The pots he usually gave to Pierce Thomas, the farmer across the road, who fished for lobsters from Porth Colmon throughout the summer – some of them probably belonged to him anyway. If he found a piece of net he would take it home and in the evening unravel it while sitting happily by the fire (burning mostly driftwood) and make the string into hanks which he stored in a bag hanging in the garage. It was all very pleasant and relaxing. He was so glad he had taken early retirement.

One very memorable occasion was on a November day when, among the rocks, they discovered a large, yellow canister with lots of wires attached. It was marked M.O.D – DANGER- DO NOT TOUCH – INFORM POLICE. When he got back to the house Harold rang the Police and was transferred to the Coastguard who in turn put him in touch with RAF Valley. The Officer in charge said he would send a helicopter the next day to collect it. In the meantime could Harold drag it higher up the beach so that it would not be carried off by the next high tide. In view of the warnings painted on the object Harold was rather worried about moving it but the officer thought it would be all right and arranged for Harold and Rene to rendezvous with the helicopter on the beach at low water the following afternoon. Back they went to the beach and cautiously dragged the object above the tide line. The next day was breezy and the wind gradually increased. They went to the spot at 3.30pm by which time the wind had almost reached gale force and it was difficult to hear anything apart from the wind and waves. They sheltered behind a rock and waited. The light was beginning to fade and they doubted whether the helicopter was coming. Suddenly, it appeared, flying low round the rocks adding to the tumultuous noise. Harold and Rene rushed out from their shelter, wildly gesticulating and the machine came lower and hovered a foot or two above the sand. Two mechanics jumped down, ran across the beach and followed Harold and Rene to the canister. No conversation was possible with all the noise. Harold noted dourly that before the men touched the thing they tested it with some instrument they had. It must have been deemed safe enough to handle as they then picked it up and carried it across to the helicopter. Before they flew off they indicated that they would like to have Harold's address and Rene wrote this on a card. Then, with a wave, off they flew back toward Anglesey. It was almost dark as Harold and Rene made their way back to the relative peace and quiet of home.

A similar, less dramatic, incident occurred some months later when they came across a small white rocket- like tube at the far end of the beach. Again it was marked DANGER – DO NOT TOUCH- INFORM POLICE. They phoned again, telling of their find. When the policeman heard where it was he wanted to know could he get his van nearer to the spot. Harold said there was a track to a derelict farm not far from the cliff edge. The policeman suggested he come and pick up Harold and Rene and drive round to the farm track and go with them to find the article in question. Harold wondered what the neighbours thought when they saw the two of them being driven off in a Police Van. They parked at the farm and scrambled down the cliff. When the Policeman looked at the rocket he could see it had already been discharged so there was no danger. He picked it up and took it back to the van and then drove the 'beachcombers' back home.

One February morning they came across a lamb at the foot of the cliff. It had obviously been born very recently because the afterbirth was still attached. There was no sign of the mother around. If left there it would very soon die or be eaten by predators. Carefully they wrapped it in a woollen scarf and climbed the cliff where they took it to the farmhouse. The farmer, Mr Williams, was most grateful. While walking back home they met another farmer, a neighbour of theirs, and told him about the lamb they had rescued. The following day, just as Rene was dishing up lunch, they were dumbfounded when a policeman came to the door wanting to know where exactly they had discovered the lamb. Apparently their neighbour had related the story of the lamb while he was in The Lion at Tudweiliog the previous evening. He was overheard by a farmer who also grazed his sheep on the clifftop and who claimed that the lamb belonged to him. He demanded the lamb should be given to him but Mr Williams refused to let him have it and so the police were called in to try to settle the argument. Rene pointed out on the map the place where the lamb had been which was immediately below the field in front of Mr Williams' farmhouse. To her and Harold it seemed obviously to belong to Mr Williams. They never discovered how the argument was settled. Lynda, who happened to be staying at Ty Gwyn at the time, was highly amused and remarked 'It's just like The Archers!'

Harold was always thrilled at the birds that were heard and seen on these beach walks. There were always gulls of different sorts, which he could recognise by their calls, lots of oystercatchers piping stridently, redshanks, turnstones, ringed plover, mallard, curlew, whimbrel and many more. Often they saw and heard a pair of ravens that always nested on the cliff just round the headland, with their deep croaking calls and tumbling flight displays. Harold felt privileged to hear frequently the onomatopoeic cries of the chough, a bird only found on a few western coasts of the British Isles. Occasionally they came across a bird corpse that had been savaged by a predator or had been caught in an oil slick. A few times they found an oiled razorbill that was still alive. They would put the bird in a bucket and take it back to the house, where they would try to wash away the oil and then put it near the heater to keep warm, sometimes using the hair dryer. But it was difficult to feed these casualties. They tried giving them tinned sardines forcing the food in the beak with tweezers. They prised limpets from the rocks but these were difficult to open and meant much effort for little result. Sometimes, if the bird had not been too badly oiled, it recovered and they would return it to the shore but, sadly, they usually died.

Once a month they went to Pwllheli for a big shop. Other than that, they used the car very little, remembering that for a few years, they had to watch their expenditure. They had a large chest-freezer in the garage so could buy in the food they needed from town and store it. There were two shops in Llangwinnadl at that time which they used for a few things but there was not a wide range of commodities and the prices were rather high. However they enjoyed walking to these each week and chatting with the shopkeepers. Ann and Robin Hughes, who ran the Post Office which was the more distant of the two, were extremely friendly. This shop, just over a mile from Ty Gwyn, was quite close to the cottage that Gil and Edna Batson had bought as a holiday home some years previously, and whenever they walked to the Post Office on a Saturday morning, Harold would insist on walking the extra distance to see if Gil was there for the weekend but it was usually in vain. They didn't get there often – Gil was running his own business and with that and their large family they led a complex life – but when they were there it was nice to go in for a long chat and catch up on the news.

Harold felt he was very fortunate to have such good neighbours at Ty Gwyn, especially Bob and Celia at Refail Bach who by now had become very close friends. They always loved entertaining people and Harold and Rene were frequently asked in to coffee. Just opposite Ty Gwyn was a small stone cottage, Cae'r Odyn. It was rented out for holiday visitors but the property was run down and neglected and most of the visitors were dissatisfied. The elderly owner, George Snow, eventually put it up for sale and it was purchased by Don and Eileen Curtis who were retiring from Surrey. Don had been a taxi driver. He, like Dennis Udall, was keen on DIY and very soon the cottage was transformed. Both he and Eileen were enthusiastic gardeners and took over the greenhouses that had once belonged to George when he ran a Market Garden business. They were a lovely couple, always interested in everyone and everything in the neighbourhood, and they too soon became good friends. Eileen always had a cheery laugh and was a great animal lover, having two dogs and two cats. The animals were well trained and cared for and were never a nuisance. Harold got on extremely well with Don, who was always ready to give just the right amount of assistance with the various projects and jobs that he was undertaking without taking over the task completely as some 'helpful' people tended to do. If ever something in the house or garage went wrong or broke Don usually came up with an ingenious solution. Eileen and Don were also very kind to George who was nearly ninety, no longer very mobile, but still alert mentally. He was fond of his whisky and most evenings they would spend an hour or two with him having a drink. Harold quite often joined them though he didn't particularly enjoy too much drinking. George

and his wife had both been teachers but had retired many years ago to set up a market garden business in Llangwnnadr. He had many tales to tell about happenings in the village.

One advantage of having a large house was that, with three bedrooms and a shower room upstairs they could entertain visitors without too much upset. Friends and family came frequently. Harold very much enjoyed seeing more of his brothers and their wives and each year it became a tradition to have 'Hayes Week' in the middle of June. The eight of them fitted well round the dining room table but sometimes during the week nieces and nephews would turn up as well. Each morning after breakfast, Harold would try to organise them into doing something positive but they mostly preferred to sit in the sun lounge gossiping and reading the paper and he would get exasperated at their inactivity. The exception was Wednesday, when they would all be up early to go to Pwllheli market. Harold and Rene would not go near the place in summer when it was jam-packed with people from the nearby Butlins and nowhere to park the car so they were pleased to have a quiet day to themselves before the others returned to display all the bargains they had bought. There was no end to the talking and in the evenings they would go on happily reminiscing until well past midnight. As Harold did not see them at Christmas time, one evening was set aside for a Christmas Dinner when there would be turkey and all the trimmings, Christmas pudding, crackers etc. followed by a few games. As the years went by changes came as, sadly, first Wilf died soon followed by his wife, Joan, then Arthur, Jim and Jean. The numbers did not lessen much though, because the nieces and nephews and their families continued to come for some years. Harold was happy that he was part of such a large family and that they had kept in touch over the years.

Much of Harold's time was spent working in the garden. He soon found that the drainage was poor and during the winter and early spring some of the ground became waterlogged. To remedy this he set about digging a complicated system of drains that criss-crossed the garden. He bought himself a special trenching spade with which to dig narrow trenches in the bottom of which he put a layer of small stones (these had to be carried up from the beach in buckets). He then laid perforated pipe on top before filling in the trenches which had to slope gradually down to the bank at the edge of the garden. Then he bored a hole through the bank to take the ends of the pipe so that the water could flow into the ditch. Of course, he became unbelievably muddy doing this job but he was undeterred. At the end of the day, after stripping off his filthy clothes, having a hot shower, and then relaxing by a blazing log fire with a glass of sherry, no-one could have been more content.

Another messy occupation that Harold took on in those early years of retirement was that of insulating the house. He paid to have the walls cavity filled with foam but most of the rest of the work he undertook himself. He installed secondary double glazing in the windows, though some years later, when the sun lounge was renovated, replacement windows were put in all round the house. There was already some fibreglass in the roof but it was only of minimal thickness so Harold bought some rolls to lay on top of the original and climbed up into the loft and carefully crawled across the joists to put on an extra layer. Knowing the dangers of working with this material he wore coveralls and a mask. There were one or two cavities where he could not use the fibreglass wool and these areas he filled with Microfil. He felt very satisfied when this job was completed and he hoped there would be a saving of fuel used in the winter.

Soon they were able to enjoy some of the produce grown in the garden. Harold constructed a fruit cage for the blackcurrants and gooseberries and made frames for nets over the strawberries and raspberries. There was a large Victoria plum tree in the garden which cropped prolifically most years. Once or twice the crop was so heavy that Harold had to make props to support the boughs which otherwise would have broken under the weight. There were also four apple trees. In the vegetable plots they grew produce with varying degrees of success. The runner beans, for which Harold erected a cane structure each year, always cropped well. Leeks and onions did quite well and also courgettes. With some of the other things it was a constant battle with the pests such as blackfly and caterpillars. There was a good crop of tomatoes in the greenhouse every year. They also had a flourishing grapevine here. This had been grown from a cutting which Leslie Astin brought them from his house at Erdington. Much of the produce was put in the large freezer to use in the winter.

With plenty of fruit available, Harold decided to turn his hand to wine making. This made good use of the plums and apples. For many weeks they had to live with a number of demijohns in the lounge while the wine was fermenting, this being the only room in the house where the temperature was more or less constant. Harold constructed a wooden wine rack to go in the broom cupboard for when the wine was bottled. Every spring they would collect elderflowers to make elderflower champagne, a pleasant and refreshing drink with a bit of a sparkle.

Unfortunately this 'champagne' would often have a secondary fermentation after it was bottled and sometimes they would come home to a strong sweet smell. On investigation they would find a shattered bottle and a horrible sticky mess and broken glass all over the broom cupboard. After a while they stored these bottles outside in the fuel store, covering them up with sacks to try and restrict the damage should a bottle explode.

Since retiring Harold and Rene spent several walking holidays with Ted and Chris. They walked the South Downs Way from Eastbourne to Petersfield – a distance of about eighty miles. They had a lot of fun and enjoyed a sense of achievement. The next year was slightly more ambitious when they did the Peakland Way in Staffordshire and Derbyshire. This was a circular walk of 100 miles, starting and finishing at Ashbourne. It covered a variety of scenery – limestone dales, gritstone moorlands and gritstone edges. They carried all their luggage and stayed at some interesting Bed & Breakfast accommodation. Harold started out with a Braille book in his rucksack, thinking he could have a relaxing read each evening. However, on the second day he parcelled up his large volume and posted it home which considerably lightened his pack. Anyway, he was too tired to read after a long day's walk!

In 1986 Nigel and Ruth Gainer asked Harold if he and Rene would like to join them on a Gîte Holiday in Normandie. Nigel was a GP in Thrapston in Northamptonshire and he and Ruth had been great friends of theirs since Lynda and their daughter had been at High School together. They had frequently visited Ty Gwyn and Harold and Rene often went to stay with them and their family in their large house at Thrapston where they were always warmly welcomed. A foreign vacation was something new to Harold and Rene although they had made one or two brief trips to France with Julian and his wife, Sue, when they were living in Winchester. Harold found the holiday an interesting experience. The gîte was in a very quiet country spot and it was lovely to explore the nearby small towns and to walk the tranquil countryside in company with friends. There were many buzzards flying around the gîte when they first arrived but Harold was dismayed to hear shooting the following morning and after that no buzzards were seen or heard. During the week they had some good meals in French restaurants. Harold enjoyed sampling the French food. The holiday was somewhat marred by the difficulty of getting a ferry home because of a strike by French seamen. They began to wonder if they would get on a boat but, after queuing for many hours they managed to get on to a very crowded boat on an overnight crossing. Harold had enjoyed the break but was pleased to get back to his busy life at Llangwnnagl.

From time to time Harold received information about the Snowdonia National Park Study Centre at Plas Tan y Bwlch, Maentwrog. There were interesting courses held here mostly based on outdoor activities. He particularly liked the sound of 'Mountain Walking for Senior Citizens' and 'Bird Watching'. One year he decided to give it a try and they enrolled for the Senior Citizens course. There were about a dozen people and each day they collected a packed lunch and were taken in the minibus to a different area to do a walk. The walks were comparatively easy and it was a good way to learn about and explore places to which they probably would not have gone to on their own. In the evenings there were lectures about Snowdonia. Harold especially liked the day when Peter Crew took them out. Peter was the Archaeology Officer for the Snowdonia National Park. At one time he had been a well-known rock climber and was named for some pioneer first climbs. He led one of the walks and showed them some of the experimental work that he had been doing on a recent course when they had been trying to smelt iron as it had been done in the past. Both he and Rene very much enjoyed the week and chatting with the other students and the lecturers and thought they would try some other courses. Thus it was that over the next fifteen years or more Plas was to become part of their lives. They attended more walking courses and one or two others but the highlight of each year came in April when they were regular participants in the Spring Bird Course. The tutor for this course was Twm Elias, fanatically Welsh and a great all-round naturalist. Over the years they got to know him very well and learned much from him. On the course they would go to a different habitat each day and by the end of the week they would have a list of around one hundred birds. Harold loved this time of year when all the summer migrants would be arriving. He was often the first in the group to notice these when he picked out their songs. He liked to get out before breakfast and walk the grounds hoping to hear some new migrant that wasn't yet on the week's list.

During these bird courses Harold made new acquaintances who were to have a lasting influence on him. He got to know other well-known ornithologists in the area who sometimes came to lead walks or give evening talks. One of these was Joan Addyman, a lovely, unpretentious elderly lady who lived between Maentwrog and Harlech. At one time she ran a greengrocery business and used to take her wares around the district in a horse-drawn cart. She was devoted to birds and ran a highly successful Young Ornithologists Club. The children, who spent much time in her house, built nest boxes and placed them on the oak trees in the woods above Llyn Tecwyn Isaf. These were nearly all occupied by pied flycatchers. Harold and Rene visited her house a number of times and walked through the

woods with her, a very pleasurable experience for Harold. One night in late June she invited them to come and listen to the nightjars that always nested on the marshy ground on the seaward side of the main road. They waited until it was almost dark and then went to the road and stood in a gateway to a marshy field and waited for the birds to appear. Nightjars only come out after dusk when the night-flying insects are abundant. The air was full of biting midges so Rene suggested they wore stocking masks over their heads to alleviate some of the discomfort. The vision of a man with two little ladies looking as though they were planning to commit a robbery must have startled passing motorists who caught a brief glimpse of the three in their headlights. Soon however they were rewarded by the sight of several birds gliding erratically over the field as they flew with open mouths to capture insects. Harold was thrilled to hear their wings clapping and even more delighted when he heard the extraordinary churring-jarring song from the birds on the ground, a sound he had last listened to when he was on a night-time outing with the Ornithological Society in Northamptonshire.

Harold and Brenda Dean from Cumbria nearly always attended the bird course and they were to remain very close friends of Harold for the rest of his life. Harold Dean was similar to the other Harold, Harold Walker from Shrewsbury. He too was gentle, patient and modest, was a skilled birdwatcher and photographer, and was exceedingly clever with his hands. He had built a scale model of a locomotive correct in every detail, which he would occasionally take to festivals with the track and give rides to children. He had once taken it to Condover Hall but after Harold (Hayes) had gone to Rushton. Harold (Hayes) was full of admiration for such perfectionist work and never tired of being in his company.

Harold and Rene loved going to Plas Tan y Bwlch. They knew all the staff and were happy to chat, not only with the tutors, but with the domestic and all the other people who worked there. Harold liked to talk with the gardeners and to find out how the gardens were being developed. They became keen members of the Friends of Tan y Bwlch, an organisation set up to encourage and support the work done at the Plas and for a time Harold was on the committee.

## **Chapter 19 – Llyn Ramblers**

When, in 1984, Harold and Rene joined Llyn Ramblers the years that followed were some of the happiest ones of Harold's life. Llyn Ramblers were mentioned each week in the 'What's On' column of the local newspaper. Harold made one or two enquiries and learned that the group had been started in 1979 by a small group of friends, living in Llŷn who used to walk frequently in the area and who decided to organise a programme of regular walks for themselves and anyone else who wished to join them. Walks were arranged on alternate Sundays, usually in Snowdonia and also on Thursday afternoons. A committee put together a varied programme of rambles to suit the different abilities of the group. There were strenuous climbs in the mountains, more moderate walks in the hills and easy strolls, mainly pastoral. At that time membership was around 25. Dave Mills was the chairman and his wife, Joan, secretary. Harold was very much attracted by the sound of this organisation but when he rang Dave he discovered that two of the members were registered blind persons with guide dogs. He thought it would be unfair to burden a small group like this with yet another visually handicapped person, albeit one as independent as himself. He did nothing about it for a while but one day in Pwllheli a short time later, he met Norman and Joan, the two blind people concerned. He knew them quite well by now and they told him they did not go out with Llyn Ramblers anymore because there was difficulty getting the dogs over some of the stiles and they were worried that the dogs might injure themselves. And so Harold and Rene became members and began to familiarise themselves with the countryside of the Llyn and beyond.

The first walk was in the Llanbedrog area. On the day in question the morning had been fine but when they arrived at the car park in Pwllheli it had started to rain – there was even some sleet. Several intrepid characters with rucksacks were waiting there and Harold and Rene introduced themselves. Harold naively asked if they walked if it was raining. 'Of course we do!' was the sharp reply – putting him in his place. They set off in the cars to the start of the walk and had a damp, muddy ramble along footpaths, lanes and beach. Luckily the rain abated somewhat and it was a nice walk in pleasant company.

The next Sunday walk was in Snowdonia starting from the hamlet of Nantmor. The weather was sunny and the scenery breathtaking as they climbed up Cwm Bychan past the many remains of machinery used when copper was mined in the area during the nineteenth century. Harold was able to examine some of the old cables and winches and to stand at the entrances to some of the adits. When they reached the top of the pass they meandered steeply down through rhododendron bushes to Llyn Dinas where they ate their sandwiches before following the lake shore for a short distance before climbing up through woods and fields and down to a quiet winding lane that led them back to Nantmor. They had walked about nine miles and by the end of this satisfying day Harold felt he was part of the group and had made a number of new friends.

A week or so later they went to the Christmas Dinner at the Moelwyn Cafe in Criccieth. At the end of the meal one of the members, Graham Hulse, made some 'presentations', much to the amusement of Harold. Joan Mills was given a pair of brake shoes to slow her up on the walks. Her husband, Dave, a keen supporter of the Labour Party and a Liverpoolian, was presented with a framed photo of Derek Hatton, the highly controversial Labour leader of Liverpool Council. There was an alarm clock for someone who invariably arrived late for the walks. Harold thought the funniest award of all was given to Joan Jones, who later came to be known as Joan Parsley to distinguish her from the other three 'Joan Jones' who were also club members. She was a very happy person, who had a passion for food, growing it, cooking it, eating it and talking about it. Many a hard slog was made easier by listening to her gardening tips and latest recipes. She was given a woolly hat with a stick projecting from the front. Dangling from the end of the stick was a scone – a ramblers' version of the carrot on a stick to encourage the donkey. For years afterwards Harold would remind her of this trophy.

Their next Sunday walk, an ascent of Moel Hebog, was a contrast to the previous one. It was a dull and murky morning with no wind – the smoke was going straight up from the chimneys. The start was from Llyn Cwmystradllyn and Joan Mills was the leader. As they climbed out of the woods and on to the bare, stone walled moorland the weather started to deteriorate. It began to drizzle heavily, cutting the visibility, the wind rapidly increased and by the time the summit was reached it was almost gale force making it feel cold. Harold pulled another sweater from his rucksack but had great difficulty removing his waterproofs to put on this extra layer. They descended a short distance before sheltering behind a wall to eat their packed lunch but did not spend long over this. The visibility was now less than a hundred yards and when Harold heard this he wondered how the leader was going to find the way down as there were no clear paths. He need not have worried. Joan's navigational skills were brilliant, as he was to discover many times during the following years. She used her compass and led them across field after field to the next stone stile and brought them back exactly to the cars. Harold was most impressed.

He and Rene went on many walks with Llyn Ramblers over the years in a variety of weather conditions including some in snow and ice. They climbed numerous peaks in Snowdonia, including Yr Wyddfa by various routes. Harold recalled the time when Jack Wilson had taken him up there with Julian back in 1963. Harold soon found a number of good companions who were able to guide him with assurance over the more difficult sections. Soon he had in his mind a clear picture of Snowdonia.

The Thursday walks were less strenuous and explored many of the paths across the Lynn Peninsula. Sometimes they would have tea at the leader's house when the walk was finished. Harold seldom missed any of the walks and as they became more confident he and Rene led walks around Llangwnnadr, along beach, cliffs and lanes.

In 1994 Harold was elected chairman of Llyn Ramblers, an office that was usually held for three years. By this time the membership had greatly increased. There was a good mixture of Welsh and English and everyone got on well together, with no animosity between the two nationalities. On the walks both languages could be heard. Some of the English were learning Welsh and were able to practice their conversation skills. The Welsh ramblers were only too pleased to help. During the time of Harold's chairmanship the club flourished. They became affiliated to several other societies including the Woodland Trust and the Snowdonia Society. Each year the Christmas Dinner was held at Plas Tan y Bwch. With Harold's link with Plas he was able to arrange for one of the Plas staff or for an officer from the National Park to give an illustrated talk after the meal.

After his three year stint as Chairman, Harold was elected to be Footpath Officer of the group. Ramblers reported to him if they found problems with footpaths, such as paths being blocked, not properly sign-posted etc and Harold would approach the Local Authority to try and resolve the matter. Gwynedd Council were now employing countryside wardens, part of whose work involved looking after the footpaths. Harold got to know Guto, the warden

for Dwyfor, and found he was very helpful. The relationship worked both ways. A working party was set up and a few of the ramblers would meet regularly to help Guto with clearing some of the paths, repairing gates, stiles and bridges, making steps up some of the steep paths and similar tasks. Guto was asked to lead one or two of the Thursday walks. He set up three interesting routes 'Coast to Coast' across the Llyn and Harold was delighted to be one of the pioneers to try out these trans-peninsula walks.

When Llyn Ramblers first started, a few intrepid ramblers would sometimes go on trips further afield such as the Lake District or Pennines staying at Youth Hostels. These excursions were usually for those who liked long and strenuous A or B class walks. Those who preferred the more gentle rambles at a slower pace felt that they too would like to go on a group holiday and from the early nineteen nineties holidays were arranged for larger numbers using first the Countrywide Holidays Association and later HF Holidays Ltd. In 1994 Harold and Rene took over the organising which they did for seven years. These holidays became increasingly popular. Usually between 40 and 50 people went which meant the group could have sole use of the chosen house. The centres, used to catering for ramblers, were extremely well-appointed, with comfortable rooms and excellent food. Most days there would be a choice of three walks to suit various abilities with volunteer leaders from the group. Although the leaders could not usually reconnoitre the routes they could plan the walks from maps, and the centres had plenty of suggestions for walks in the area. The system seemed to work well. Harold and Rene found that preparing for these holidays took the best part of a year, what with writing and phoning the centres, making travel arrangements, holding group meetings to discuss the holiday, planning the evening entertainment, collecting money etc. etc. but it was worth all the trouble when everyone was so satisfied. Harold found the bond between himself and the ramblers was cemented still further.

One of Harold's walking companions once said to him that the best thing she had done in her retirement was to become a member of this group. Harold wholeheartedly echoed that sentiment. Never before had he had so many friends most of whom were to keep in touch for the rest of his life.

## **Chapter 20 Into the Nineties and Beyond**

As well as the big part that Llyn Ramblers and Plas Tan y Bwlch played in his life, Harold became involved with other organisations. He and Rene joined the Snowdonia Society, an environmental charity concerned with all aspects of the Snowdonia National Park. Members took part in practical activities to improve the environment and engage in campaigns to prevent inappropriate development in the Park. Esme Kirby, the society's charismatic founder (made famous by the book *I Bought a Mountain*), made a point of getting to know all the members personally and Harold was no exception. He enthusiastically helped to clear *Rhododendron Ponticum*, joined working parties to clear rubbish from beauty spots, did some footpath maintenance, gardened at the Society's headquarters at The Ugly House and worked on various other projects. The Society put on a programme of walks, talks and other activities.

One of these walks was a memorable one for Harold. It was described as 'an outing down an abandoned slate mine'. Harold thought it would probably be something like going down Llechwedd, the tourist attraction set up at Blaenau Ffestiniog, but without the electric lighting and waxwork figures, and decided to give it a try. When at the start, at Tan y Grisiau, Mike Cousins, the leader, gave everyone helmets, safety belts and ropes Harold began to wonder whether he had underestimated the expedition. In bright spring sunshine they climbed steeply to the highest adit into Wrysgan Quarry at 1390 feet. On the way they stopped to look at the strata in the rock face and examine the ruins of the early dressing sheds and some of the barracks and buildings. There were remains of old machinery and other engineering artifacts. At the top was a most spectacular incline which connected with the Ffestiniog Railway some 600 feet below, the upper part of which was in a skilfully constructed tunnel. There was little sound to disturb the pleasant morning other than the shrill song of a wren and the calls of a pair of chough in flight. Here they left the bright sunshine and entered the adit where they sat in a shaft of light beneath a 'window' to eat their sandwiches. Lunch finished, it was on with waterproofs, helmets and belts. After inspection and a few words of instruction and warning from Mike, torches were switched on as in line, they started the descent into the dark of the next level. The loose slate and dust slid beneath their feet as they glissaded downwards, sending small avalanches below. Some of the slabs were treacherously slippery. It was a little easier when they were able to keep by the rock face where there were one or two handholds but some of these were razor-sharp and care had to be taken not to dislodge rocks that could be supporting other rocks. It was a relief to reach level ground. The pieces of slate clinked loudly as they

walked over them. Then came another descent, this time there was a rope on the face of the rock for some of the way making it a little easier though there were some awkward boulders to clamber over. Sometimes they were creeping through tunnels and felt glad to be wearing helmets. At other times they were standing in lofty chambers. There were other passages leading off but many of these were now impassable because of rock falls. Harold was thankful that they had a reliable guide who knew the mine well. Then they came to a slope steeper and more eroded than those encountered previously and for which the ropes were needed. Mike belayed the rope to a large rock and one by one they made the descent. This was a new experience for Harold who had never abseiled down a rock face before. With a karabiner clipped to his belt and through the rope, he launched off, walking backwards and feeling for footholds down the slippery rock and holding the rope while Mike slowly paid it out. When he reached the bottom he released the karabiner and the rope from his belt so that the next person could descend. They then stumbled along more rough passages and had to negotiate some large boulders from a roof fall. In one or two places there was scarcely room to squeeze between the rocks. By now they were splashing through quite a lot of water and sometimes had to crouch low. They had been going for nearly two hours and were wondering how much more they could endure when Harold heard a shout 'Light at the end of the tunnel!' A few more minutes of splashing and bending and they were out. By now the sun had disappeared and it was drizzling heavily but, no matter, they were out in the open once more with the sky above them. The wren was still singing loudly and some sheep looked enquiringly at them – little wonder as they looked like chimney sweeps but covered in 'soot' that was grey instead of black. Harold had had an unforgettable day. It is doubtful whether many 79 year old men would venture on such a walk let alone one who was totally blind.

Harold also became a member of the Campaign for the Preservation of Rural Wales and of the North Wales Wildlife Trust and regularly attended their meetings and went on some of their walks. By now he knew so many people in the area that he was always meeting folks unexpectedly. Shopping, either in Pwllheli or further afield in Caernarfon or Bangor, was usually a happy social occasion. Even when going to the hospital he nearly always found someone he knew.

Another very pleasant experience for Harold was the opportunity to attend concerts and recitals. Every Thursday evening Bangor University put on a programme of music. Often it was given in the Powys Hall by the University Trio who played chamber music by the classical and romantic composers, greatly beloved by Harold, though sometimes a modern piece was included which he did not enjoy so much. Sometimes there would be a visiting artist and also there were regular programmes by well-known quartets which were recorded for broadcasting. Occasionally there would be an orchestral concert in the larger Pritchard Jones Hall which was broadcast live. Although Bangor was an hour's drive it was a pleasant, fairly quiet route over the mountain and they would arrive home with their ears still full of wonderful melodies. Similarly there were frequent concerts at Theatr Ardydwy at Harlech, also about an hour's drive. Bernard Roberts, a well-known concert pianist, lived near Harlech and gave many recitals here, including playing all the Beethoven Piano Sonatas. He was a delightful character and would give a little introductory talk before each piece. Harold and Rene liked to sit right at the front where they could forget the rest of the audience so that it seemed he was talking and playing just to them. Sometimes he was accompanied by his sons, one a violinist and the other a cellist and they would perform trios. From time to time there would be visits from small orchestral groups, often from Eastern Europe or from one of the Manchester Schools of Music. Theatr Ardydwy was very small, only seating about 250 people, but was ideal for these smaller groups. There were also regular visits from Mid Wales Opera, one of Britain's foremost touring opera companies. Again, because of the size of the theatre, the performances were intimate, without a chorus and with a very small musical ensemble. Harold very much enjoyed the concerts at Theatr Ardydwy, finding he knew a number of people in the audience, who were members of some of the societies to which he belonged. It was good to chat with friends during the intervals. One of these friends, Jim Watkins, he had first met some years previously at Plas Newydd, Llanystumdwy, when they had attended a one-day course about Mozart. Jim lived at Llannor, just outside Pwllheli. He sometimes held concerts in his house, when young music students would perform in front of about twenty of his invited guests. Harold found these evenings very agreeable.

When Lynda and family moved to Monmouth in the early nineteen nineties Harold discovered another place where he could go to enjoy music. This was at The Hill College in Abergavenny. Lynda showed him a brochure and among the courses listed was a weekend entitled 'Great Contemporaries of Mozart and Beethoven'. This interested him very much as Nigel Gainer had already introduced him to the music of some of these composers. He and Rene went on the course which they thoroughly enjoyed. The course was followed by several other similar weekends and Harold's music experience was broadened significantly. The course tutor was Derek Bissell whose enthusiasm for



his subject was infectious. As well as music he did courses on Etymology and the derivation of words and place names and Harold attended some of these which were fascinating. Over the years Derek and his wife Ena became good friends and remained in communication even when Harold no longer went on the courses. The Hill also did some courses by the one-time music critic of The Times, Kenneth Loveland, to which Harold and Rene went a number of times. They learned much about opera from him.

Like Plas Tan y Bwlch, The Hill became a familiar place to Harold. He and Rene enrolled on the Summer School walking holidays several times and began to learn about South Wales especially the Brecon Beacons and the Black Mountains. For two years they organised holidays for a group of Llyn Ramblers. John Newcombe, who was principal of the college, arranged the programme for them and led some of the walks. He also found speakers to give talks in the evenings. The ramblers much appreciated the chance to explore another part of Wales.

Living where he now did was, to Harold, like being permanently on holiday and, apart from the annual ramblers' holiday and the courses at Plas Tan y Bwlch, he never felt any great need to visit other places – indeed, with the many activities with which he was involved, he had little time. He had no desire to go flying off to distant places when there was so much to satisfy him at home. However he had two interesting and instructive trips when, in 1997, Joan and Dave Mills asked if he and Rene would like to go with the North Wales Labour Party to see the European Parliament. The first was to the attractive city of Strasburg, first stopping for a couple of days in Paris, where they were given a guided tour of the city including a boat trip on the Seine. When they got to Strasburg they were met by their Euro MP, Joe Wilson, who gave them a guided tour of the Parliament and then they sat in on one of the sessions, listening to the translation through headphones. In the evening Joe treated them all to a delicious meal at one of the restaurants in the Petite France quarter, a picturesque part of old Strasburg. While in the city they visited the cathedral, an outstanding masterpiece of Gothic Art with its famous astronomical clock. The following day the coach took them on a tour around the Saverne area of Alsace close to the Swiss border. Harold would have liked to have explored some of this quiet attractive countryside to listen to the birds there but there was no time. In the morning they set off on the long journey to Calais and thence back home.

In 1998 they went again with the North Wales Labour Party, this time visiting the Parliament at Brussels and going on to Holland. Harold rather disgraced himself by causing the group to miss the ferry because the Harbour Authorities at Dover insisted on seeing all passports and unfortunately his was in his case and had to be retrieved from the luggage compartment of the coach. Consequently they were very late arriving in Brussels. Next morning they were taken to the Parliament building and sat and listened to the business being discussed. Harold was impressed at the speed with which the work was got through and the efficiency of the voting system. Afterwards the party was given a talk by the other Welsh EMPs, one of whom was Glenys Kinnock. For a while she sat by Harold who was very charmed by her. In the evening Joe treated his guests to a meal in a Greek restaurant. In the square outside, preparations were going on for a marathon jazz concert to be held the following day and Harold was fascinated to listen to a group rehearsing. During the meal Joe was sitting by Harold and for some of the time they were deep in serious conversation about agricultural topics. When he first went into the place Harold had some misgivings about the noise. The owner was a virtuoso bouzouki player and a singer of Rebetika, a sort of Greek Blues. He and his assistants not only waited at table, but entertained for the whole evening, singing, dancing and playing between courses. The music was wild and passionate and the bouzouki player had a remarkably overpowering voice. When he discovered Harold was blind he let him examine his instrument. It was like a large mandolin but with a long neck and had metal strings which were plucked. The food was excellent and it was after midnight before they returned to the hotel.

The following day they set off for Amsterdam. They were soon in Holland where everywhere there seemed to be water courses, lakes, scores of bridges and lots of windmills. They stopped at the port of Volendam where they had an interesting fish (locally caught) and chips meal served at breakneck speed by big, bossy women in traditional Dutch costume. For the next two nights they stayed in a luxurious apartment in a high class hotel at Vinkeveen, just south of Amsterdam. They were told that the meals at the hotel were high quality, top cuisine and extremely expensive but for the first evening a special price dinner was provided for the party. Harold made quite a hit with the waitress who insisted on escorting him downstairs to reception to settle the bill. Before retiring to bed he and Rene had a walk outside the hotel along the waterside and through the reed beds, where there were some very vociferous frogs – probably marsh frogs. He wished he could have had longer to explore this unusual nature reserve in daylight hours. There was no doubt some interesting bird-life there.

Next morning the coach took everyone to Amsterdam where they had a cruise around the network of seventeenth century canals. After this there was a chance to explore the city which Harold found rather stressful - the noise, the crowds and the traffic. It was disturbing to hear constant warnings given over the loudspeakers to beware of pickpockets. Harold and Rene stayed close to Jerry and Beryl who knew the city quite well because their son lived there but at one stage even they were somewhat lost and found themselves wandering through the 'red light' district. Harold was bemused by the descriptions the others gave him. Some of the party returned to the city in the evening but Harold and Rene and most of the others went to an Italian Restaurant close to the hotel which proved to be a good decision as the food and the service were excellent. There was some hilarity when Rene was trying to find Harold a dish without bones but the Italian waiter did not know the word 'bone'. He went off to the kitchen and came back beaming, saying 'bone' and slapping his thigh. It made an enjoyable end to their stay in Holland.

Early in 2001 there was a crisis in the UK when there was a serious outbreak of Foot and Mouth disease. Most of the footpaths in England and Wales were closed and Llyn Ramblers had to cancel their current walks programme. Harold and Rene could not even go down the footpath to the beach. The only places they could walk were on some of the back lanes and even some of these were restricted. Once or twice they walked to Tudweiliog, about three miles away, and had lunch at The Lion. They very much missed the companionship always to be found on the rambles. The annual spring holiday that year had been arranged at Glencoe but this too was abandoned. The footpaths were eventually reopened about the beginning of June and everyone was happy to start walking once more.

As there had been no holiday it was decided to have a week in Austria. Some years previously, Anita, who had been born and brought up in Criccieth and who was friendly with some of the members of Llyn Ramblers, was working in the kitchen at Port Merion Hotel. She became friendly with an Austrian who was working there as chef at the time. They eventually married and went to Altenmarkt, a pleasant small Alpine town near Salzburg where they set up a guest house. In the winter Altenmarkt was a ski resort but in the summer it was a beautiful walking area with a backdrop of mountains and forests and fields bright with alpine flowers. Anita kept in touch with her Welsh friends and together with her husband, Heinze, came back to Criccieth from time to time. Some members of Llyn Ramblers had been to stay at their hotel and thought that the group who had missed their spring holiday might like a September break in Austria. Anita and Heinze were very pleased to give them accommodation – normally the guest house would be closed then in order to prepare for the skiing season. And so, on September 10<sup>th</sup>, about twenty rambles including Harold and Rene flew from Manchester to Salzburg. Apart from a couple of brief pleasure flights many years ago, flying was a new experience for Harold and he did not enjoy it. All the hassle at the airport, with the luggage handling, tickets, passports, security and endless walkways before they even got to the plane seemed a long and tedious business. The flight itself, sitting crowded together, had little interest for him, especially as the group seemed to be scattered so there was no one to chat with. They had to change at Frankfurt where there was a two hour wait before boarding the plane to Salzburg. It was raining when they eventually arrived. At the arrivals department someone quickly spotted Anita who was waving a Welsh flag. She escorted them to a coach and they were driven the 30 miles to Altenmarkt. By now it was raining harder and darkness was rapidly approaching. It seemed a dismal start to the holiday. Heinze met the bus at the bottom of the steep drive and drove the luggage and Harold and Rene up to the pension. Once they were inside things brightened considerably. They were given a warm welcome and had drinks in the lounge. Heinze showed Harold and Rene to a spacious flat on the ground floor which was to be their accommodation for the week. They didn't stop to unpack but went straight to the dining room where a delicious meal was waiting – cooked by Heinze. Everyone relaxed at last and sat chatting for the rest of the evening until weariness overcame them and they retired to bed.

The week was very enjoyable – good food and company and some delightful walks in beautiful woods and picturesque countryside, usually led by Heinze. They were privileged to be in Altenmarkt for the ceremony of bringing the cattle down from their rich summer pastures. Harold and the rest waited by the roadside and before long heard the resonant notes of the cattle bells as these gentle but magnificent creatures, bedecked with colourful garlands, were herded down the road. They were accompanied by cattlemen and also women in traditional costume who handed out little drinks and sweetmeats to the bystanders. A large marquee had been erected in the town where there was feasting and music for all to enjoy. Heinze was deputy mayor of the town so the group was invited to join the local people in their festivities. The celebrations continued the next day when there was a carnival parade with bands, equestrian acrobats, some skilful 'whip cracking', a variety of agricultural machines etc. It was a happy time in this pretty town with its attractive wooden houses all displaying vibrant flower-filled window boxes. One day Anita took them to Strasburg where there was lots of Mozart memorabilia. It was fun to visit Hellbrun Palace with

its trick fountains. Another day there was a coach trip to Bavaria to visit Berchesgarten, Hitler's famous mountain retreat.

However the day Harold remembered most vividly was the day when some of the ramblers climbed Lachenkogel, a conical peak SW of Altenmarkt, and which could be seen from their bedroom window. It was just under 7000ft, about twice the height of Snowdon, though, of course, they started from about 2800ft. Harold set off with Warwick as Rene did not think she could make it but soon she changed her mind and followed close behind. He felt a great sense of achievement when he, aged 82, stood with the rest on the summit, which was marked by a large wooden cross. As soon as they began the descent it started to snow but as they lost height this turned to rain and they got down without trouble. Next morning, when she looked out of the window, Rene told Harold that the mountain was snow-covered.

But the one thing that everyone would never forget about their holiday happened on the day after their arrival. On September 11<sup>th</sup> there were a series of terrorist suicide attacks in New York killing nearly 3000 people. Back at the hotel after their walk they sat riveted to the TV watching the horrific scenes unfold. The next day it was stated that airports in the US as well as a number of other parts of the world had been closed and many flights cancelled. The ramblers wondered about their return flight the following week and whether they would be stranded in Austria. In a day or two though, European airports began to open again though a lot of flights were cancelled or rescheduled with security being stepped up to a high level. This caused long delays as they found when they set off for home. The luggage was searched meticulously and many of the ladies had nail files and scissors confiscated but for some strange reason Harold did not lose the knife which he had dangling from his rucksack. When they boarded the plane at Frankfurt the seats seemed to have been allocated randomly and Harold found his seat and Rene's were some distance apart. Rene tried to explain to the stewardess that Harold could not see and needed her to escort him and tell him what was happening. Her pleas seemed to fall on deaf ears or possibly the stewardess did not speak much English but luckily a kind person overheard her plight and offered to change seats. Harold was very thankful when the plane touched down at Manchester. They found their coach without difficulty but there was another long delay before they could leave as one or two pieces of luggage had gone missing. By the time Harold and Rene reached Morfa Nefyn it was nearly eleven o'clock. Dennis was waiting to drive them back to Ty Gwyn after a stressful day. Harold decided that he did not ever want to travel by plane again.

For a year or two after this Harold continued to do all his usual activities but the pain in his back, which until now had been intermittent, was gradually becoming chronic. He tried various treatments – osteopathy, acupuncture, physiotherapy. They helped at the time but the improvement didn't last for long. He had an X-ray which revealed deterioration of the bones in the lower spine and the doctor said nothing could be done about this. He stopped going on the strenuous Sunday walks though he did most of the Thursday walks for a while but slowly he opted out of these also. He seldom accompanied Rene on her weekly shopping trips to Pwllheli. On his better days he tried to go down to the beach looking for wood and other treasures, which he would still insist on lugging back to the house. Soon, however, a walk down the road to Porth Colmon and back was as far as he could manage.

However, whenever he was able, he still did a lot of wood chopping and sawing in the garage and garden. When a large pine tree by the front of the house blew down in a November gale he was out with his saw and pruners to clear up the rubbish and salvage some firewood. On the Thursday afternoon Rene, somewhat reluctantly, went on the walk leaving Harold on some steps dealing with an enormous pile of branches from the fallen tree. She was relieved when early in the afternoon, it started to rain, thinking that he would be forced to pack up and go indoors. When she got home about 5 o'clock it was dark and still raining heavily. She was horrified to hear the radio playing by the tree (Harold used a radio as a beacon to guide him back to the tree if he left it) but she could not see Harold. Had he fallen off the steps? Was he lying injured beneath the tangle of branches? 'Harold' she yelled desperately. To her great relief when she approached nearer, there he was busily working with his loppers, ignoring the rain. The darkness made no difference to him. Similarly when a hole appeared in the shed roof Harold decided he could repair it himself and climbed on to the roof, cut out the rotten wood and put in new timbers and then re-covered the roof with felt. Rene was anxious about him perched up there but, as usual, he was confident and at ease and did an excellent job.

At least if his back became troublesome on these tasks at home he could soon go indoors and rest whereas if he was out on a ramble things would be more difficult.

## **Chapter 21 - Farewell to Wales**

In 2007, at the age of 88, Harold was having a great deal of back pain. It grieved him that he could no longer walk far and was increasingly unable to do all the things about the garden and house that he loved doing. So with many misgivings he decided it was time to downsize to a smaller property and also to move nearer to the family. Thus it was that they moved to a small retirement bungalow in Staffordshire which was only about five miles from Brewwood where Julian and Sue lived. The bungalow was part of a community for older people where there was a scheme manager and where, for the cost of a monthly service charge, all outside maintenance including gardening was provided as well as the use of laundry facilities.

The move from Ty Gwyn was terrible. As the decision had been made very quickly, there was little time to sort through the house, outbuildings and garden. Having had this spacious property for nearly thirty-four years huge amounts of items, some useful but many of them rubbish, had been stored away. Harold was one for saving things that might be needed one day and always stored these objects in a most tidy fashion.

The garage/workshop was a marvel to behold – a friend once described it as an Aladdin’s cave. The rafters were festooned with coils of ropes, old cans, lobster pots and floats, canes, nets for covering the fruit beds and much, much more. He had made racks and shelves to fasten to the walls. These contained tins of paint, bottles, jars, cans and plastic containers of preservative and suchlike. There was special rack for screws and nails, with boxes and old tobacco tins all stacked in order with Braille labels. His screwdrivers and similar tools were in special holders. There were ladders and steps fastened to the walls, one or two old doors and some sheets of plywood. The heavy workbench, with its clamps and vices, which he had had from when he lived in the bungalow at Conover, was his pride and joy. There were hooks along the sides of this to store his hammers, saws etc. Beneath were tea-chests with small lengths of wood and dowels. There were two tables, one of which was a solid old kitchen table that came from Muriau when they moved from next-door and which had some useful drawers in which he kept sandpaper, the other was the formica covered table they had in the kitchen at Rushton. One of his leaving presents from Rushton had been a ‘workmate’ bench, which he found very useful. Somehow he managed to fit in two free standing cupboards and a stool. Rene was allowed the use of one wall for a chest freezer, washing machine and tumbler dryer, but even these had buckets and bars stacked beside them and shelves above them. As for the car, Rene used to imagine the car breathed in to manage to get in the space that was left. She had to drive right up until she reached some old boat fenders hung on the rear wall. The car door would only open a little way so that she got in and out with difficulty. It was a good thing she wasn’t fat. Harold used the space beneath the car as storage space for some of his long planks of wood. From time to time when the car was out, Harold overestimated the distance between the car wheels when putting planks away and when she returned Rene would find herself driving on these pieces of wood much to Harold’s annoyance. Harold did permit Julian to suspend his catamaran from the roof above the car. There were a couple of boat trolleys, some rolls of old carpet. It was just unbelievable what was there. Rarely can a ‘garage’ have held so much and yet, amazingly, Harold knew where everything was.

At various spots around the garden he had numerous stores, mainly for wood. There were pieces of driftwood, carried or trolled back from the beach, some up to twenty feet long, one or two palettes, many milk crates and fish boxes, some of which bore the names of companies in Ireland and Scotland. Some of the wood was covered by two old dinghies which had once served as tenders to his yacht at Porth Dinllaen. He constructed two roomy shelters in which to stack the logs which he had sawn from tree trunks mostly washed up by the sea. These were roofed over with sheets of wood and covered with tarpaulins. In winter, part of each day was spent in bringing buckets of firewood from these shelters into the garage to be used on the fire. There were a number of old tyres and also several old traffic cones found on the beach which came in useful if anyone was strimming the grass verge outside the front gate. Two large plastic drums contained more wood.

When the hurried decision to move was made all this ‘junk’ had to be disposed of quickly for none of it would be of use in his new home. Neighbours came, some with trailers, and took their pick but even so there was much left that had to be burned or put in the skips which had to be hired.

Likewise in the house itself there had been much ‘stuff’ put to one side with the idea it might come in handy one day in the future. In the upstairs bedrooms were eaves cupboards stretching the whole width of the house. Into these went old curtains, bedding, cushions, rolls of paper, pots and pans, toys and much else. Access to these was not easy

and unless something was by the door was unlikely to be brought out again. Now it was all dragged out and most of it discarded and thrown in the skip.

There was also furniture to get rid of, for the bungalow to which they were moving only had five rooms. Rene made Harold a tactile plan of the new house and cut-outs of the furniture they wanted to take. He moved these cut-outs around to see where they would best fit. It was obvious that much of the furniture and other household effects would have to be disposed of. Some things would go to Julian's house for temporary storage. Many items went to the charity shop, Tenovus, and much more went in the skip or was taken away by a dealer. To Harold it was so sad to see these items disappearing. Many of them had been with him through much of his married life.

In the few weeks before moving day there was so much to be done and farewell visits made to many friends in the area. It so happened that there was a reunion lunch for Llyn Ramblers at Morfa Nefyn which they were able to attend. Speeches and presentations were made and everyone showed immense affection. Harold realised then how much he was going to miss all these friends who had been such a part of his life since he had moved to Wales.

When the moving day came Harold sat forlornly in a corner of the lounge while the furniture was gradually taken to the two removal vans, one of which was being unloaded at Julian's house. At long last the vans drove off. It had been necessary to saw some branches off the trees to get the vehicles in and out. Also the gate had to be removed from its hinges and unfortunately the removal men forgot to replace this. Harold struggled to replace this, with the help from a neighbour, and, much later than intended, they set off for their new home.

They slept at Brewood that night and early the next morning Julian drove them across to 15, Crompton Court, Bilbrook to await the arrival of the removal vans. The furniture was soon unloaded and placed in position in the various rooms according to Harold's plan but after that came scores of boxes, the contents of which had to be put into cupboards, drawers etc, a procedure which was going to take weeks. Harold's clothes and other bits and pieces were seen to first so that he would have an idea of the whereabouts of his belongings which would give him some feeling of independence. Trying to find places for the things in the rest of the boxes was a huge problem in this tiny house with no spare rooms.

After a month or two Harold became depressed, which was very unusual for him. He so much missed the freedom of the house and gardens at Ty Gwyn where he knew where everything was and could stroll around finding things to do both inside and outside. At Crompton Court there was no workshop and no area outside where he could wander freely. The other residents of the community were friendly and welcoming but Harold could not find anyone who had interests similar to his, who could converse on subjects familiar to him. How he missed all his friends and neighbours in Wales. Most days he and Rene climbed the stile and wandered along the meandering footpath by the tree-lined brook across the road but he was disappointed at the paucity of birdsong in this seemingly suitable environment. They walked to the local shops about half a mile distant but hated the noise of the traffic. They needed to stop every few hundred yards and find a low wall on which to sit, for his back was becoming more and more painful. Sometimes people were concerned that he had been taken ill but after an affable little chat they were reassured and following his brief rest Harold set off once more. Different painkillers were tried but did not do much except cause problematical side effects.

The various medicines were gradually stopped and, apart from the back, Harold began to feel better in himself and tried to make the best of his new way of life. As well as the daily walks he spent much time reading his Braille books and practised the piano each afternoon though he no longer had the patience to work through his Braille music to learn new pieces. Sometimes Julian or Sue would take them over to Brewood for a meal. Harold enjoyed sitting around in the beautiful garden at Kings Barn listening to the wealth of birdsong to be heard there, such a short distance from Bilbrook. There were periodic visits from the rest of the family, especially Lynda and Keith who found it a comparatively easy journey from Monmouth. There were occasional visits from friends. Harold was always delighted when any of his old acquaintances came to see him and give him news. There was another reunion of Llyn Ramblers in 2008. Gwenda, an old friend from Criccieth, offered them accommodation. After some consideration, though with one or two qualms, they decided to accept the invitation and stay for two days. They got a train direct from Wolverhampton to Criccieth where Gwenda met them. It felt good to be by the sea again and it was wonderful to chat with everyone but by the time they got back home Harold was very tired. That same summer they had another trip to the seaside when they went with Julian, Sue and Martin to their house on Portland. Harold was pleased to visit this at last – he had heard so much about it. It was a most interesting weekend and the weather

was fine and sunny but Harold found the long journey back very tiring and it was doubtful if he would get there again.

However, a most memorable outing took place in February 2009 when Harold celebrated his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. Harold and Rene, together with Julian, Sue, Lynda, Keith, Malcolm and Ann spent a night at Rushton Hall. The school had moved from here some years back and the building was now an exclusive Country House Hotel. The temporary classroom block was still there but had been converted into a luxurious suite for wedding receptions. What made it even more unforgettable was the fact that the rooms they had were part of the flat where they had lived for so many years. Harold and Rene slept in a four-poster bed in the panelled master bedroom which used to be the lounge when they were there. Their old kitchen was now the en-suite bathroom. The children slept in the bedrooms they had as children. It felt strange to be back in surroundings which were once so familiar and which held many memories. They had borrowed a wheelchair hoping to take Harold round the extensive grounds along the footpaths which he had planned. Unfortunately that idea had to be scrapped as there had been heavy snowfall during the previous week, but the family were able to explore all their old haunts and, as it was sunny, they got some beautiful photos. Everyone had a wonderful and luxurious time and enjoyed it very much, especially Harold.

Once in his nineties, Harold slowly began to deteriorate. Although he still read a great deal and played the piano, even these pastimes needed increasingly greater efforts. He went out less and less, just venturing into the conservation area if the weather was really favourable or sitting outside in the lounge chair, where other residents would come and chat with him. After a couple of mini-strokes in 2010, just before Christmas of that year he had a major stroke, which severely affected his speech and took away the use of his right arm. At the start of the New Year on January 4<sup>th</sup> he died very peacefully - he spent his last two days holding Rene's hand while listening to sublime music by Mozart, thanks to Radio 3's Mozart season and then he just seemed to fall asleep. It was a tranquil end to an amazing life.

He was cremated at Telford, close to where his mother had been born and where he spent his summer holidays with his grandparents at Ketley in the nineteen twenties. It was a private affair for just the immediate family. There was no service or hymns as he was not religious. It was an occasion for rejoicing rather than sorrow. His life had been a remarkable achievement. Some of his favourite music was played. Rene explained each choice before the pieces were played so that the family could picture Harold doing some of the many things he was happy doing instead of remembering him as he had been for the past couple of years. There were some smiles when they thought of him happily whistling in his beloved workshop or struggling back from the beach with great loads of wood. One of the pieces chosen was from Mozart's opera, *Così fan Tutti* when three of the characters sing a glorious trio as they wave goodbye to a sailing ship, 'May the winds blow gently'. Remembering how Harold had loved sailing it seemed a most suitable 'send-off'. The final farewell however was a joyous occasion when as a family they could remember a fulfilled life - one that had touched the lives of so many. Harold thought Beethoven was the greatest composer of all so what better way of saying farewell than the rousing and victorious finale from his Piano Concerto No 5.

Shortly after the funeral there were three celebrations of Harold's life so that his many relations, friends and acquaintances could come and pay tribute. One was held for the neighbours at Crompton Court, who had only known Harold for a very short period and had really no idea of the life he lived before they knew him. There was a special celebration for over fifty of his friends in Wales which was held on a beautifully sunny day at Plas Tan y Bwlch. The rest of the relations and friends, nearly sixty altogether, came to Julian's house in Brewood on another lovely sunny day. Keith and Lynda had made a very moving computer compilation from various photos showing some of the activities that Harold had done throughout his life and this was shown at on all three occasions. In just fifteen minutes it gave an impressive summary of a remarkable man.

His ashes were scattered in Coed Hafod y Llyn in the grounds of Plas Tan Y Bwlch where he spent many happy hours listening to the birds especially in springtime when he would be eagerly awaiting the songs of the spring migrants as they arrived each year. Perhaps now each year his spirit waits to hear the arrival of these welcome travellers.



