

Chapter 1

Childhood, early Oxford days

1922–1935



1922

Peter's father, Arthur Hewett was the youngest of a very large family and the only one of them to go on to any kind of education after the age of fourteen when he started at the Camberwell School of Art. He was very proud of being related to Charles Dickens, who was his great uncle. His father had been encouraged by relatives at the age of nine to write to his famous uncle, who wrote back to say it was a pity that at his age he had not learned to spell. Arthur married above himself. Florence's father Mr Jennings was editor of *The Builder and Decorator*, lived with his American wife Jenny and daughter Florence in an expensive house in Dulwich and kept a cook and housemaid. Arthur decided never to paint another picture but to make a fortune for his bride. Having been the runt of his own family physically, and beneath his wife socially, he was determined that his children should have a good education come what may, although being a totally incompetent businessman he was never able to provide his family with enough money.

After his demobilisation before the end of the Great War with suspected TB, Arthur got a job in London designing show cards, joining his family only at weekends. But by autumn 1922 they owed so much money that they had to flit – hence the move to London, leaving behind everything they could not carry.

1922–23

When the eight-and-a-half-year-old Peter found that his father had lied to him; that he was not on an unexpected holiday to London, but was there permanently, he was heartbroken. He had left behind everything he cared for – the Hampshire countryside where he had been free to roam – the butterflies, birds, flowers – his museum, his books, his dog. Peter didn't really forgive his father until he wrote *Owslebury Bottom* after retiring from teaching in 1974. Then, as he wrote, he began to understand why it had all happened.

At eight, though, he thought nothing could get worse. He was wrong. The family moved to a basement flat in the Hammersmith slums. At night there were screams and thuds as the man upstairs beat up his wife. Joan, Peter and Bill, the three children, were sent to Brackenbury Road Elementary School, where some of the big boys carried knives. Everything was dirty, rough and horrible. Peter was terrified.

In the dusty yard which was called a garden was a shed belonging to one of the upstairs tenants. Under it lived a feral cat whose front paw was permanently caught in its collar. It, too, was savage and no-one could approach it to release it from its torment.

Florence did what she could, but with hardly any money, and none of the fresh vegetables, eggs and fruit from Owslebury, she had nothing to cook, and they lived on faggots and chips from a shop down the road.

However, Joan did get her scholarship to a very good school, and in his turn Peter won his to Latymer Upper School. Meanwhile,

Arthur managed to get a slightly better job and they crawled out of absolute poverty, moved to a slightly better flat, and even had the use of a little garden. Peter and Florence shopped in the market for some bedding plants which Peter lovingly planted out. Each day he went out to measure them to see how they had grown...but the soil was so poor that they shrank over the weeks and eventually died.

Now Arthur received a regular wage they could afford proper food again. That Christmas, Arthur came home with an expensive paint box...for his boss's daughter. There was still not enough money for proper presents for his own children. Joan, who longed for just such a box, found his attitude difficult to understand.

For a while, Arthur worked reasonably well and life for the family was "ordinary". There was enough regular money coming in to allow a feeling of security. But he was not satisfied as he hated working for a wage. How could he make his dear wife a fortune that way? He began to spend much of the time when he should have been working playing whist with his friends. But to the family at home it seemed like the light at the end of the tunnel.

1928

Here is an extract from a diary Peter kept for a few days during a summer holiday in 1928 when he was fourteen:

August 28th: Up at about 7.50. Billy goes back to school today. Arthur [*not Peter's father, but a school friend*] arrived just before 9.30 am. We spent the morning partly in the garden making Japanese gardens on our rockery in the sunken garden. We made little paths, steps, etc. and grew tiny plants along the sides. We also made a pond of a dish-cover upside down with rocks all round the edge. Started making a long path of red brick. We spent the rest of the morning writing up the metal nickel in "The Book of Everything" (2 pages) after having made rough notes for the Universal Encyclopaedia, Donington Pears Encyclopaedia and "Chemical Arithmetic" by Sydney Lupton MA. After dinner Arthur rearrived and we continued the Japanese garden. It's looking jolly decent. Arthur did not stay to tea today. In the evening I drew a sketch of my father, from a photograph five years old. Mrs Pinnerch came over, but mum had gone to the pictures to see "The Unknown Rider". I started studying the Greek language and can already say the alphabet off by heart. Another fortnight before school. Got to bed pretty early 9.50.

September 4th: This morning I was up at 7.30 am. Arthur arrived at 9.30 am. We set off for Wimbledon Common at 9.45 am. We went by bus from Hammersmith and took our lunch. We arrived there (Joan, Arthur and I) at about 10.20 am and walked about a mile. We gave part of our egg sandwiches and 6d to some poor blighter who had had no grub for two days (so, at least, he said). Walked miles and miles through ripping country and woodland, and sat down several times to have some grub and fruit. I did a bit of sketching. We saw a windmill, fields and fields of heather and some splendid moss (some of which we took home to plant in our Japanese garden). Arrived home very tired at 6 o'clock and went to the Guild of Servers monthly meeting at 8 o'clock. After the short service ate refreshments, read "Humorists" and played whist with Mr Belcher, Mr Smith (the curate) and Brown. Got home at 10.45 pm and to bed, very tired.

Bill followed Peter to Latymer Upper, paid for by his godfather as he did not win a scholarship. I think Bill suffered all his life from being the younger brother of the pride of the family, Peter. Arthur and Florence were becoming convinced that Peter was special, and Arthur confidently began to expect that he had sired a second Dickens.

They had had a worrying shock when he was twelve and went down with rheumatic fever – Peter didn't remember all that much about it except the impression that his pillow was made of rock.

By the time he reached the Sixth Form Joan had left school and was taking a secretarial course. England was in the middle of a recession. Business was bad and Arthur lost his job. But a good friend of the family who was reputed to have become a millionaire in America came over on a visit. He was shattered to discover the straits the Hewetts were in, and insisted on making Arthur a large "loan" – just in time. After a long search they found a house in Bexleyheath behind which was a small single storey factory. To Arthur's delight he was to set up for himself again – the fortune was just round the corner. He bought two enormous machines with which to manufacture – print, colour and cut out – the precious show-cards which packed flat but could be assembled into a three-dimensional standing advertisement to go on shop counters – "Players Please" – "Stephen's Inks", or was it "Steven's Inks"? – and so forth.

Joan could work as the firm's secretary! Bill, at fifteen, was given the option – to stay at school and try for Matric. or leave and work as his father's salesman. You can guess which he chose! Peter was left behind in Hammersmith with friends to take his Higher School Certificate and try for university.

1929–30

Peter had been writing poetry since he was sixteen, although I don't know if he ever confessed as much to his school friends. Here is one written in 1930.

On a Tram-waiter

Roads sombres
smokeyness greys the yellow-grey heavens
shoddy clotheshops scarletrams brutal chrome-and-purple
posters gloomy sameness of passers by
women white faced and crimson-mouthed
men white jowled and crimson-pimpled
Lust and Greed struggling for supremacy:

horrors of overdressed sluts parading as humans
herding in vehicles, cattle-like, men ogling
bold-looks-returning, men arming their concubines
gripping their waists with dirty-nailed hands,
unshaven men jeering, hobbling of deformed monsters,
redolence of dust, grease, and fish-and-chips –

And in the midst, she lovelinessing.

He had obviously been reading Hopkins whose poems had been issued in a popular edition in that year.

Encouraged by his father, he had decided by then that he was going to write, and he filled notebooks with descriptions as he had tried to develop a style. I won't include much that he wrote during the next two years, as, like a pianist practising, he wrote similar descriptions over and over again until he satisfied himself.

1932

Here is one, written on July 11th 1932, aged 18:

A landscape of immense significance – expansive serenity its main virtue. The sky the palest blue-grey and extraordinarily wide, Hamlet's "wide and majestic canopy of heaven". A few fluffy swirls of feathery clouds thrown here and there – carelessly and unpicturesquely, but the main mass of evening cloud abreast. The sky edged on the horizon with a slightly greenish-blue wash – irregularly fitting into a nebulous watery suggestion of salmon mauve shading into an internally bright lemon-yellow. etc. etc.

It finished:

The first time I have felt mentally at ease and physically happy for two years. The whole of nature so immense and friendly that one both sinks and realises one's personality in touch with its entity.

It is easy to see the influence of his father on Peter's self-conscious work at this age. I have left out enough of the overblown description to make it possible to read – just.

Latymer sent Peter to try for an Oxford Scholarship at Christchurch and he was astonished but overjoyed to hear that he had been awarded one. It was for a small amount of money but Kent Education Committee agreed to top it up with a loan to be repaid after graduation. When he rejoined the family in Bexleyheath he found that, under Arthur's inexpert management, the new business was not doing well. The slump still meant that people were not spending money on advertising. Peter found it difficult to kit himself out with a few suitable clothes in which to go up to college, generally called "The House", where thirty-two members of his year had titles. Somehow, it was more or less managed, and in October 1933 he went up.

1933–34

He had been much influenced by his history teacher at schools who was a Marxist, and he soon joined the Student Communist Party – and fell in love with a St. Hilda's student two years older than he was, Peggy Moxon. Peggy was tall and also a Communist, sturdily built, well dressed, also reading English and blessed with a glorious head of red hair which she wore long. By her last year and Peter's first they were together, jointly leading the Student Communist Party and running the October Club. Life was almost perfect – but not quite. Arthur's business finally failed in 1934 and the family went bankrupt. Peter sent his scholarship money home to save their furniture. And Peggy was also being courted by

an older, richer and cleverer student, Arthur Wynn, who already had two first class honours degrees and was on his third. He had been studying in Germany when Hitler came to power in 1933 and had married the leader of the Young Communist League there so that he could bring her out of Germany and so save her life. Peter said she was a terrible woman who used to throw plates, and the divorce was going through. Peggy was quite unable to make up her mind which of the two, Arthur or Peter, she loved most.

1935

In 1935 she got her degree and went down, leaving Peter to start the next academic year as *the* leading Communist student. When the members of the Bullinger Club, an aristocratic drinking club at The House, wrecked his rooms and he complained to the authorities, he was told, “But that is what you want to do to *them*, isn’t it?” Every Saturday, a gang of ex-public school boys at his college would get drunk and go round the college breaking windows, and every week the cost of repairs was put on the bills of all the students. Peter was not amused.

He missed Peggy very much and wrote her a poem [see page 7].

I find it amazing that only three years separate the self-conscious juvenilism written when he was eighteen from this beautiful love poem written at twenty-one. I suppose now he was writing in the grip of real emotions rather than because he aimed to be a “WRITER”!

This Way Out

Times flash rush gush by us
tear gash our love in fragments segments
what crept, flies; dawdled, hurls; drawled, gabbles;
with our tiny joy in the midst of sorrow
love tonight work tomorrow
logic is pitiful thought no comfort
in the cracked world only us two
you, me; I, you.

So I can tell you nothing, give no help
sound no solution
the echo a blank
only this I bring
my love
love, my love for you
hare's love, lions love
is yours, this is for you.

Keep it for me, my only good
and hold it gently for a while
it is mine like my eyes
yours like your beauty
and when you go I shall go too
slip through the turnstiles while you look away
I shall be watching you and being there
long after I am gone.

Amputated I shall remain in woods or street
seeing you in the rain or sister's motion
for long and long
no choice.

So take my tiny signature as talisman
its will bound up with yours, and have your day
envy is superficial love is real
perhaps has found its way.

I see you as clear as tower in light
square on the skyline, solid where it stands.
I see my shivering, my hands
weeping for you throughout the summer night.