**The Paper Round**

**By**

**Dave Taylor-Jones**

Every day at 5.30 am our round, green, metallic alarm clock would ring and Steve and I would get up. Steve, my older brother, had been doing this for a year already, while I had the luxury of lying in bed until 7.30 am and then getting up to go to school. Steve, being older, was the first to have a paper round delivering newspapers for Farr’s Newsagents, which was also a Post Office and Tobacconists, on the housing estate at Carpenders Park where we lived.

Steve’s round was Carpenders Avenue and included a delivery to Brazier’s Milk Farm situated on Oxhey Lane and to some other people who lived on their property. His round ran to about one hundred and ten customers, who ordered their newspapers from Farr’s and then had the pleasure of reading them over their breakfasts before starting their day, thanks to Steve getting up at that unearthly hour to deliver them. Steve explained that the Milk Farm delivery was conveniently located half way through his round, as he walked up Carpenders Avenue to Oxhey Lane. The first day when he approached to deliver the newspaper to the farm house, he found his way blocked by a massive Alsatian dog, who lowered his head slightly, ruffled the fur on his back and gave him a terrible growl. Steve was petrified and knew the dog was only defending what he saw as his territory, but he did not feel like challenging him, so he stood still. Fortunately, a farm worker appeared and called the dog off,

“Hey, Henry, let him pass. Come forward young lad and let him sniff you, after that he’ll know you every day and let you pass.”

Steve gingerly approached Henry and was formerly introduced by extending his hand to the dog’s nose. This was met by a big wag of the tail. After these formalities Henry accompanied Steve to the cottages and caravans behind the farm to complete the newspaper deliveries. As the years went by, Henry never missed his rendezvous with Steve every morning, and eventually took to accompanying him for the rest of the route back down Carpenders Avenue to the paper-shop. One weekend he even followed Steve back home to our house and sat outside our back gate waiting to be introduced to our Mum and me. Steve was obliged to get on his bike and take him back to the farm. Mum told us that some days he would show up after we had gone to school, and give her quite a shock by silently appearing, patiently waiting at the back gate for his mate.

“Shoo Henry, he’s gone to school, be off with you,” she would tell him.

Now that I was twelve years old I had managed to get the newspaper round on the road next to Steve’s. My round was mainly Penrose Avenue, with part of the next road included too, the lower part of Greenfield Avenue - about one hundred and five houses in all. I first started my round in March 1957. The streets were still dark, it was usually raining and the temperatures were around freezing. English winters in the suburbs of London are fairly grim - dull, wet with a damp cold brought by the east or north winds.

Awakened by that alarm clock we would pull on our clothes, I was still in short trousers – no long ones until thirteen by my mother’s rules - and without breakfast we would get on our bikes and cycle down the hill to the newspaper shop. We usually arrived at about 5.50 am, when the paper delivery van dropped off the newspapers in big bundles tied up with string. We, along with the other newspaper boys, would lug these nearer to the shop. Sometimes the van was late or the shop was not yet open, and then Derek Clarke, John Nansen, Paul Bitmead, Judy Harding and Steve and I would try and stay out of the rain in the shop doorways, waiting to start work. We parked our bikes beside the road, supported by the pedals pressing down on the top of the kerb.

On these early mornings the shop was run by a kindly man of about sixty who we called the Guvnor – I never knew his real name. He had the keys to the shop and opened up while we lifted the newspaper bundles over from the kerb-side. Then we would bring the newspapers inside and he would cut off the strings and we would arrange them in stacks on a big area that was normally reserved for laying out displays of magazines. The lights in the shop were not very bright, the Guvnor would light up his second cigarette of the day and the delivery boys would laugh and curse amongst themselves as they made up their rounds. On those dark mornings in the neon lights of the shop we must have resembled hobgoblins hopping about.

Each paper boy, or paper girl in Judy’s case, had a book for their round which listed their road’s house numbers and the corresponding newspapers that were to be delivered. The book was also arranged into the days of the week, because although the customers took the same newspaper every day, there were magazines that people purchased on certain days which had to be included and delivered. The deliveries for Monday to Thursday were of a similar weight, but Friday was a really heavy day because of the inclusion of the Radio Times for BBC radio and television programmes for the next week, and later the TV Times for Independent Television programmes. These were bulky papers, which many people bought, and they added greatly to the weight of newspapers in your bag.

Saturday was also quite a heavy day, with weekly magazines and comics included like the Beano, the Dandy, the Eagle, etc. But the heaviest day was Sunday. The British Sunday newspapers are twice their normal weekday size, and because of this increase in weight you could only take half of them in one go, and then you would have to return to the shop for the second half.

My first day started on a Sunday, a bit later than normal at 7.00 am, as there was no school to attend. It took me ages to write the number of the house on the top of each newspaper, and then to stack them in the order of delivery. I took the first lot, placing the papers as the Guvnor showed me into my green waxed stiff canvas bag. I set off at about 7.45 am.

The week-day paper round was made by starting on one side of the road, delivering to the customers on this side of the road until you got to the bottom of the street, and then you turned around and completed the other side. The first paper on the top was for the first house, but on a Sunday, so as not to finish this first half of the round far away from the shop, I cycled, with the bag perched precariously on the handlebars, to the bottom of Penrose Avenue and started the round at its halfway mark. I left my bike padlocked against a fence and prayed that it would be there when I finished.

It was difficult to walk with the laden bag, thrown over one shoulder with the open flap to the front. I staggered off, comforted by the thought that it would never be like this for the other days of the week. Slowly the bag emptied of papers, and I kept a good eye on the house numbers to be sure that I didn’t deliver number 93’s to 95. At Carpenders Park roads have odd numbered houses on the left and even numbers on the right, as you progress numerically, so I did the evens on the right side first and eventually at about 8.30 am I arrived back at the shop. I was really surprised to see that all the other experienced paper boys had already finished their rounds and that I was only halfway.

I was delighted to see that the Guvnor had already marked up my second half of the round, so stuffing it in my bag I went off to finish. I finally finished the first day at 9.00 am, found my bike and cycled back home for breakfast. Steve kindly told me that I would soon get the hang of it and that he had memorized the complete round (after a year) and didn’t need to actually mark up the newspapers with the house numbers. I would do this too. This saved a lot of time, but even when you had memorized the complete route for all the days of the week, it still required the Guvnor to let you know of updates and cancellations for you to record them in the book.

If it was just cold and icy I didn’t mind so much – I could get along with this. But when it was pouring with rain, the only solution was to wear a yellow plastic bicycle cape over your clothes, which covered the paper-bag too. This was a dreary soaking wet way for a boy to start his day. The rainwater would run down your collar and soak the top part of your shirt and get into your shoes, requiring a change of shirt and socks to go to school. However, there was no getting out of it, you had to go. I mean, there were twelve shillings and sixpence to be earned at the end of the week.

I quickly got used to the routine of deliveries and found it was not long before I too, could completely memorize my round for all the days of the week. The Monday to Thursday deliveries became a breeze. From Monday to Friday the important thing was to finish the round in time to get back home for breakfast at 7.15 am and then be ready to catch the train to secondary school in Watford. At first this was a bit touch and go for me on Fridays, with the heavy delivery, but I managed it and as I grew a bit more every year, I became stronger and better able to cope with the Friday, Saturday and Sunday heavy days.

It was great getting paid every Saturday. I opened a Post Office savings account and put the money in there to save up for summer holidays, when Steve and I went camping in Cornwall.

At this time the weekly daily newspapers that we delivered were:

The News Chronicle (my Mum’s paper)

The Daily Express

The Daily Mirror

The Daily Sketch

The Daily Herald

The Daily Mail

The Manchester Guardian

The Times

The Financial Times

The Daily Telegraph

The Daily Worker

The biggest paper was the Times and when this was folded up, some letter boxes were just too small for it to go through. The best you could do was to stick it in a bit, so that it hung down outside and hope that it didn’t fall onto the porch floor. It seemed the people who wanted highbrow papers like this, always had letter boxes that were too small. However, the Mirror and the Sketch were small papers and these sailed in through the letter boxes with a satisfying thump on to hall floor. Fortunately, it seemed there were not too many people who bought the Times in Penrose Avenue – the Mirror and the Express were by far the most popular.

Carpenders Park is an estate consisting mostly of semi-detached bungalows and nearly all of them had porches to protect their doorways. They also had front and back gardens, so you often had a nice little gate to open to the front garden and a path to the front door. Some people looked after their gardens and the paths would be lined with lovely rose bushes. The only problem with these was that, in the summer, spiders would spin their webs across the path during the night and if he was not alert, the paper boy walked straight into them. The best approach was to remove the newspaper from the bag at the gate, fold it up ready to post, and hold it before you like an Olympic Torch to bat the spiders’ webs out of the way. Otherwise you could quickly be covered in rather large Diadem spiders.

It seems that when the Carpenders Park houses were designed in 1933, the front door choice was endless. Every front door seemed to have the letter box in a different place. It could be in the middle, on the side or, worst of all, at the bottom of the door.

One of the paper boys had a story he used to tell of a guy who woke up in hospital swathed in bandages, just like the Invisible Man.

“What happened to you?” asks the man in the next bed.

“Well” he says, “I was in bed with my wife one night and just about to make love, when she said, ‘Just a minute, I can hear someone down stairs – we’re being burgled.’”

So the guy, stark naked, dutifully gets up and goes downstairs and looks through all the rooms to find nobody there. He was just about to go upstairs again when he hears footsteps crunching on the gravel pathway leading to his front door. He had just installed a new front door which was a big sheet of glass fitted into the wooden frame, with a letter box right at the bottom. So in the altogether, he bends down and opens the letter flap to peer through the letter box. Just at this moment his Alsatian dog, Rex, comes padding up silently behind him and affectionately licks him right between the legs, causing him to jump right through the glass front door. Oh, the dangers of the bottom letter box.

One day Steve was so ill that he couldn’t get up to do his round, so I had to do it, as well as my own round. This was really asking a lot. I couldn’t start any earlier because the newspapers were only delivered at 6.00 am. After explaining the emergency to the Guvnor I raced off on my round, while he marked up Steve’s. Then I had to do his round at top speed. At Braziers Farm first of all I had to get by Henry, who when I arrived amazingly seemed to know me, and then deliver to the people living in caravans, which nestled under the trees of an old apple orchard, and did not have numbers. I managed to find somebody awake who pointed me in the right direction and I made the deliveries as best as I could. Then I raced back to Carpenders Avenue to finish the odd numbers’ side. I got back home at about eight o’clock, changed into school uniform, wolfed down my breakfast and raced to catch the train. Happily we were both hardly ever ill, but I think I remember he returned the favour later, when I was down with the flu.

Many people had pets at home and I have to say I never had a problem with a cat on my paper round. Dogs were something else though, as they wanted to guard their homes. Some dogs would wait until you placed the newspaper in the letter box and then launch themselves at the inside of the door, with a massive thump, growling and biting and pulling the paper through. The news must have been in tatters every day.

There was one house on my round that was really strange. The complete bungalow was covered in a sort of green ivy creeper, so thick you could not see the tiled roof, and the house looked like it was wearing a green canopy as a hat. The creeper extended into the front garden, which was completely overgrown with hazel bushes and other trees. A narrow tunnel path had been hacked out of the foliage to allow deliveries to be made to the front door. Even in summer, this tunnel was very dark and seemed the ideal place for bats to hang out, fed on an exclusive diet of massive spiders. When I first saw this house I was quite unnerved and felt like leaving their paper at the gate. But the ‘Newspaper Boy Rules for Delivery’ absolutely prohibited this sort of scared, chicken approach. If someone near this house had been up at 6.45 am they would have seen a small newspaper boy clutching his green delivery bag, transform himself into a whirlwind and race at top speed through the gate, slam the Manchester Guardian through the letterbox and be back out in about two seconds flat. I don’t think I ever got used to it.

When I was fourteen years old Judy Harding, who was the same age as Steve, decided that she would call it a day delivering newspapers to Greenfield Avenue and a new girl called Sandra Smith took her place. Sandra had been in my class in Primary School, and was a slender, dark-haired girl, who started using make-up at an early age. Sandra did not possess a bike, so the Guvnor, in all his wisdom, decided that as her round was next to mine, I should carry her bag up to the start of her round. Initially this meant hanging around for Sandra to finish marking up her papers and then putting not only my bag, but hers also, on my bike and pushing it up to the start of our rounds. Sandra seemed to take an age to complete the marking-up task. I wasn’t overly pleased to be forced into this gentlemanly gesture. We did not talk, not a word was said. For two years.

The weather changed throughout the year and I have to say that, once the wet winters were over, I really enjoyed being up early in the spring and summer months delivering newspapers. Few people were about, except those men off to catch an early train to work. The sun came out earlier every day, the day-time lengthened, and the garden lawns used to sparkle with early morning dew. I would watch the garden flowers slowly progressing from the first snow drops and crocuses of March, to the daffodils and hyacinths of springtime and finally all the summer annual plants like purple aubrietia, stocks, gladioli and of course all those English roses making a heavy scent in the early morning. Walking along the street, nipping up the paths to the houses at this time of the day, it seemed that the morning belonged exclusively to me.

Just before Christmas 1958, Steve was amazed to learn that Judy Harding had collected over six pounds in Christmas tips from making an evening tour of her paper round and wishing her customers Happy Christmas. It took a woman to have the gall to do that. However, we were not far behind.

On the evening of December 23rd, I felt some trepidation at the first house on my Penrose Avenue round, as it happened to be Mrs. Hopkins, one of my mother’s best friends. I rang the bell and her daughter Marcia appeared and asked what I wanted. “I’m your paperboy and I have come to wish you Happy Christmas,” I trotted out glibly. Marcia whisked around and went off into the bungalow to tell her Mum and Dad. A few minutes later Mr. Hopkins appeared and pressed a half-a-crown into my hand. I could not believe it. My smile from ear to ear must have shown him my immense gratitude, and mumbling my thanks I backed off the porch step, nearly falling into his pyracantha bushes. After that I was off on a mission. I don’t think anyone refused me a Christmas tip for getting up and delivering them their morning newspapers. The amount ranged from sixpence to half-a-crown. Every year I made £4 - £5 in tips. Of course it never beat Judy Harding’s total – she always received the most, but then I didn’t have her rosy cheeks, neat plaited hair and nice bum in blue jeans.

Of course the most difficult house to collect a Christmas tip from was the Ivy Clad Bungalow, which, when I approached it one evening, showed dim lights on in the lounge. The dark path through the jungle garden was very foreboding. Was it worth it? Should I just miss out on this one? I decided to add a new addendum to the Newspaper Boy Rules for Delivery on the subject, and gathering my wits I blundered up the path, shone my torch on the door and found the bell. I waited trembling in the dark and heard a shuffling approach from someone in the hall way behind the door. The door swung open and a man with a beard peered out from the twenty watt lighting.

“I’m your paperboy and I have come to wish you Happy Christmas,” I stuttered.

“Well well,” he said, “just a minute.” He wandered off and came back grinning. “I suppose you don’t really like delivering papers to this house, do you? Must be a bit scary on the early morning dark days?”

“It’s OK,” I said putting on a brave face. “But why don’t you trim back the creepers a bit?”

“Well, I was in Burma in the Second World War, lost in the jungle for about a year, walking away from the Japanese. I really got to like the jungle, as it looked after me and now, safely back in Blighty, I just love to have this vine covering my house. It makes me feel secure, sort of close to nature. I live alone, and like this, I feel more looked after.”

He gave me a two shilling piece, and I didn’t have the temerity to ask him about the bats. I felt a bit sad for him living alone, but the house didn’t scare me anymore. It takes all sorts doesn’t it?

St Blaise, July 28th 2013