

Home is where the Pin is ©

By Jackie Buxton

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“Sandshoes,” I said. That was all it took. Would we need our sandshoes for the PE lesson in the hall with the piano, stage and non-sport related paraphernalia pushed to the side? I’d come from a middle school, you see. We had timetables and different teachers. And French. And we certainly didn’t have a hall-cum-theatre. Oh no! We had a gym. In our gym we wore sandshoes, unless we were doing gymnastics and then we had bare feet.

It seemed a safe question to me in this terrifying place that was Farndon Primary School, where, if people did understand what I was saying, they certainly weren’t letting on.

“Say it again without the ‘man’ in it,” one eleven year old ordered.

“It’s not ‘why aye’,” said another with more of a snarl, “it’s ‘yes’, just ‘yes’, you ‘dimler’.” This was Poe. He had white hair and tight blue eyes, thin lips which never really moved, even when he spoke, just rested on the slim gap between them. From that moment on, Poe ruled that I would be known as ‘Y Eye’.

Did we need to wear our sandshoes in the hall? Get it wrong and the laughter would start all over again. Had I realised that my question would be the cause of such mirth, pre-pubescent children writhing around in hysterics like the Martians in the Smash advert, I would have simply waited until the last minute, risked a telling off from Miss - considerably preferable to the ridicule of my peers - and taken my lead from others in the group.

I was only a day into my eight weeks with a class of children a year older than me; the only room in June to be found at the inn at this late stage in the season. My antenna for derision-inducing-dialect was becoming more proficient but it was still an imperfect model: more of an Apple 1 computer than MacBook Pro.

“Ignore them,” Sarah said, a lone voice in the cacophony of references to deserts, sweaty feet, beach towels and deck chairs. She was my buddy, assigned to look after me, and she rose to the challenge as best her eleven year old self could.

“Enough!” Miss said, “Goodness, not everybody’s from Farndon!” No, they weren’t but I wasn’t sure my classmates needed any reminding.

I don’t remember whether we did or didn’t need sandshoes that day but I can vouch for a ‘sandshoe’ being a ‘plimsoll’ ever since.

We’d moved to Newark from Northumberland. We’d lived in Wylam, a village of two thousand people, seven miles west of Newcastle. The posh people lived in South Wylam. We weren’t posh so we lived in North Wylam which was my understanding of the situation, anyway. I had three sisters, a part-time nurse for a mother and a teacher for a father. We weren’t on the breadline, I was once assured, but there wasn’t much spare. My parents spent whatever disposable income they could muster on activities rather than luxuries so I grew up thinking that being so darned close to that breadline wasn’t a bad place to be at all. We did gymnastics and Brownies and even piano lessons. We just didn’t have particularly nice clothes to do them in. Although back in the 70s, neither did a lot of people.

Posh, we certainly were not. With my short vowels and sing-song Geordie accent, this was an insult of the worst kind. Yet, in Newark, it was decreed that I was posh. I said ‘house’ with an aitch. Horrible, horrendous and horrific too, I shouldn’t wonder. And, along with ‘sandshoes’, ‘h’s were not acceptable. So I dropped them.

I also changed my writing from the italic script of my middle school and was extremely proud of its metamorphosis into a cursive which was considered acceptable. I was always experimenting, much to the amusement of Miss. She proudly showed the head teacher and a gaggle of governors my varying writing styles during a walk about one morning, only for me to sneeze all over my exercise book and be forced to leave the group of them standing by my

table while I ran off for a tissue and they pretended to be so deep in conversation that they hadn't noticed the diluted ink which now lay splattered over the once pristine page.

Two months passed and I was waving my new friends off to The Grove, one of three secondary schools in Newark, through hugs and tears and glottal stops. Even Poe didn't spit at me when he left, the replacement nickname of 'Credit', because our house was clearly bought on the Never-Never judging by the clothes I wore, muffled by the push to his head from Sarah who told him he was a 'dimler'. And by then, I knew what that meant.

It was the summer of '79 and time to meet my neighbour, Jeanette. She had just left a different primary school; another of my new friends to be born in 1967 rather than 1968 or 9. We spent every day in and around one of the two houses, playing Operation until the tweezers finally gave up, and having elocution lessons. We had a strict timetable. We stayed with vocabulary until I'd mastered, 'mardy', 'dordy', 'nesh', 'bewer', 'chinga' and 'geara' and then moved on to some old flash cards, with both of us taking the extraction of any movement from my pronunciation very seriously.

My Dad told me that the Newark accent was flatter because there were no hills in Nottinghamshire. In Northumberland, as people had to walk up and down hill to get anywhere, so their voices had developed a rise and fall. We'd lived at the top of a hill in Wylam. It sounded very plausible to me.

It was Jeanette who introduced me to the bus stop 'over the road', just in front of the Travellers' Rest pub, scene of the infamous reversing lorry performing a highly dubious manoeuvre as it backed up the main A46 artery between Newark and Nottingham. My mother's face twisted in horror as we waited to cross, her hand clutching one from each of my younger sisters ever tighter as the lorry careered backwards into the car park. The tyres smoked, the door swung open and out sprang a tiny man dragging off his sunglasses as he ran, arms outstretched and straight into the embrace of an equally excited woman. We never

did find out the story behind their reunion but I remember my ever sensible, level-headed and above all, law-abiding mother saying, 'Well, I think we can forgive him, in the circumstances.' We all crossed the road together and she told us not to gawp any more.

Today, Jeanette and I were taking the bus together for the first time, headed for the fairy-tale of British markets: Newark. We'd packed our pennies in our purses, stuffing them into the bottom of the felt bags we'd made that morning, complete with embroidered seams in garish colours.

Newark Market was vast and colourful and so unlike anything I'd ever seen in Wylam that I felt a surge of pride about living so close to something so, well, busy. I liked the feel of the cobbles through my T-bar sandals and the identical pink and blue hoods of the stalls. I listened to the stall holders calling out, 'Three pairs for a parnd,' and wondered if the customers of the morning minded that the treacle tarts were now only 5p. You could buy anything from Newark Market, not just apples and pears, but socks and legwarmers and ribbon and books, even records. We'd hardly heard of any of the artists but we flicked undeterred through the cardboard boxes of LPs, shouting out the name of the odd one we recognised. I went on to enjoy every bright, spangled fashion of the 80s thanks to Newark Market Place, bought jeans of every shape and width and the cotton to 'take them in'. We had skinny jeans then, we just called them drainpipes.

Jeanette and I were so entwined in each other's lives that I was left behind when my family set off for a holiday in Filey. It was, 'just a few minutes,' my Mum will always claim, but I suspect the family were a little closer to the seaside than they care to remember. I have some sympathy. We had an Avenger Estate back then which may sound quite roomy but with four children on the back seat, wellies, board games, pillows, and blankets at our feet, it would be quite easy to mislay a child or similar sized object. I didn't mind. In fact, I couldn't quite believe my luck. When Jeanette's mother called her for lunch, clapped eyes on me and

said, ‘Cripes’ (I’d never heard that word before, I thought it was wonderful, very onomatopoeic) ‘they’ve gone without you!’ I simply wondered how much longer it would be before they realised and how much longer Jeanette and I would get to play.

September arrived and off Jeanette went to Sconce, the second of the secondary schools in Newark, looking terribly grown up in her blue uniform. I had another year before I would be wearing uniform again. We lived in a peculiar sort of ‘no-man’s land’, half way down the stretch of the Fosse Way between Farndon and Newark, and subsequently had the choice of all three schools. I would go to Magdalene, like my older sister, and no, there was no chance I could persuade my parents into letting me go to Sconce. I didn’t want to go to Magdalene because it was full of posh people. That’s what the eleven year olds in Farndon Primary School had told me, anyway.

Three decades on, and mother to two daughters, I can attest to relationships being the be-all and end-all in an eleven year old girl’s life, not her geographical location. My elocution lessons had taken the ‘uh’ out of ‘mug’ and replaced it with the requisite ‘oo’. The precinct in Wylam, home of many a roller skate tumble, had been exchanged with Farndon park, trips ‘down by the river,’ and ‘Newark On The Bus’. Six months into my emigration and finally, that pin had been firmly pushed back into the map of friendships. ‘Y Eye’ and ‘Credit’ had been confined to a transitory blip in my social education. I’d got used to plimsolls and single classrooms and generally pretended that I couldn’t count to ten in French.

I still struggled with ‘man’, however. ‘Man’ at the end of most sentences between friends or loved ones, either in exclamation or incredulity, was a term of endearment where I’d been brought up. It was like saying, ‘you’re alright, you are’ at the end of every sentence; similarly to ‘love’. And just as some people do not care to be referred to as, ‘love’, I can testify that children in Farndon did not like being called, ‘man’ when they were clearly a boy or indeed, a girl.

‘Man’ was the last thing to go from my past and then my reincarnation was complete.

I set off for Magdalene, on my own again, petrified, and fearful of that strange breed, the Posh People. I needn’t have worried. Soon after meeting the girls from Barnby Road, I wouldn’t have been anywhere else.

I don’t remember ever playing with Jeanette again after she left for secondary school but I would never forget our summer of ’79 when she introduced me to a town I could love and taught me that we can build friendships wherever we live and however we speak.

Years later I remember meeting Sarah again, quite by chance, in ‘Tarn’. We exchanged hugs and desires to meet up even though we knew we wouldn’t. It’s funny how one town can be home to so many strong, yet different and unconnected, communities.

Another time I saw Poe. I held my head up high. I wasn’t scared of him anymore. He told me I was still ugly, I told him he’d got ugly and he smiled and said,

“Nah, you’re alright. Shame you don’t say ‘man’ anymore though, it was dordy.”

ENDS