

# **Occupation Hazards**

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## Occupation Hazards

Joe Rowe was a heavily built man. His features were like that of an African native but he was white. His nose was big and wide and his ears were crumpled, which we termed 'cauliflower ears', acquired through boxing in fair ground booths.

It was before the war that my father met Joe in one of these boxing booths. Participants were paid a guinea, which was 21 shillings, for the winner and ten shillings and six pence (10/6) for the loser - about 52.5 pence today. My dad nearly always took the 21 shillings home. Apparently Joe lost most times; dad used to call him Rembrandt because he was always 'on the canvas.' He was a married man but lived with two young girls both of whom were pregnant by him, or so it was believed, not without justification I might add. The girls seemed to be attracted to him although he would never admit or deny it. He appeared to be a loser but he always had a bob or two.

He worked as a labourer for a building firm renovating shops along the Barking Road in East London which had sustained extensive bomb damage during the War. It was here I met him. It was 1946 and I had just left school. My first assignment with the firm was on housing repairs in Silvertown. This was to be my second assignment for a period of four months when it was believed that the firm would send me away to college to become a commercial artist. This was my dad's dream and his arrangement with the employers, although the 'apprenticeship' was not indentured and the agreement was thus not binding by either party. As an employee of the firm my father completed his negotiations on my behalf with the company directors with a handshake, his word was his bond and he expected the same from others.

So it was my father and I were sent to work on a parade of four story buildings in the Barking Road, each with its own shop on ground floor. My job was to assist the painters and decorators and prepare tea and sandwiches for the lunch break, which I hated. I was sat in the front window of the shop cutting bread and cheese

## Occupation Hazards

and boiling the water for a large tea urn in complete view of the public, much to their amusement. I was housed in a purpose made 6x4 feet plywood box with a 2x2 feet-serving hatch so it was difficult to see who I was serving. The lads paid sixpence (2.5p) for a sandwich and tuppence for a mug of tea, so I'd see the hands come into the hatch, pass over the money in exchange for the goods and that was that. It usually went well, except when Joe came along. He would just reach in and grab the food, I would yell to the foreman and Joe would disappear and treat it all as a big joke. All the lads thought it was funny and some of them tried it on too. Anyway I knew Joe by the rings on his hand. So one day he reached into the hatch and I was ready for him. I swiftly brought the serrated edge of the bread knife down across the back of his hand. He let out an almighty yell, blood appeared but the wound was minor. The foreman said his hand was as thick as his head.

Joe never pinched the food anymore, he kept showing his hand to everyone. He got no sympathy from the foreman and he showed it to my dad and said, "Ere Ern' look what your son did to my 'and." He got no change there either. Joe never held a grudge, although he sometimes had a few choice names for me, but in the end laughed it off.

He was always playing practical jokes. One time he put a bucket of whitewash at the bottom of a ladder just when one of the men was descending. Naturally the man stepped into the bucket past his ankle. He let out a volume of curses. Joe had disappeared, but he knew who the culprit was and made a beeline for Joe. There was an almighty row with both men pushing and shoving each other. It almost came to blows but for the intervention of Bill the Foreman. Another time he would put a strip of roofing felt covered with wet rag over some of the doors, using the old trick with the door slightly open anyone passing through would get smacked on the head with dirty sodden rag. Only Joe thought it funny.

## Occupation Hazards

The shops were four storeys high and most of the floorboards had been removed. So it was easy to see the first floor from the roof. Well, on one glorious sunny day some of the men decided to have their lunch break on the roof. There were no staircases on the upper floors and access was via external scaffolding with ladders between each level. The front coping stone was high enough to prevent anyone falling into the street and the scaffolding gave added protection. The roof was the valley type but the slating was incomplete so there was an element of danger there. The Foreman said if anyone fell it was not the responsibility of the firm but if Joe fell, just get out of the way. Well, the men carried their sandwiches up the ladders and each carried an empty mug. It was my job to fill the mugs with tea at roof level.

“Bloody hell”, I said, “How am I going to climb up the ladders and scaffolding with a big pot of tea, a bottle of milk and a pound of sugar?”

“You’ll manage” said Bill the Foreman.

I admired Bill’s confidence but that didn’t help me get up the ladder. Anyway he tied a small bag around my middle and put the milk and sugar in it

“Now all you got to fink about is the tea pot; don’t fill it to the top and ‘ave a rest at each level, simple ‘aint it? Come down and fill it up again when it’s empty”

I must have looked doubtful “Got it?” said Bill.

I nodded without conviction, “Thanks Bill” I said, rather sarcastically. In due course I was on my way. The first floor was easy, the staircase was still intact so I could use both hands to hold the pot without holding on. But the next floors were more difficult. I couldn’t hold the pot with one hand for long, so I had to keep resting on the ladder rungs. Eventually I made it to the roof amid ironic cheers and comments like, “Where the hell ‘ave you been?” and “Did Lyons café keep you waiting?”

“I made it myself” I answered, missing the leg pulling.

## Occupation Hazards

I was filling the mugs when my leg disappeared through the roof, the tea pot went flying. And who got the last of the dregs over his trousers? Well, it was poor old Joe. "You did that on purpose, you sod" screamed Joe, due to the hot tea Joe was jumping up and down and pulling his trousers away from his private parts.

"I'll get you for this" he said, but fortunately he was laughing so it wasn't serious.

But what was serious was my leg stuck down the hole in the roof. I expected to drop four floors any minute. My other leg was stretched out along the roof tiles, so I was literally 'doing the splits'. Joe thought that was funny. I expected his helping hand to be more like a push, but Dad was behind him and he knew it. So without further ado Joe pulled me out and laughed again as I inspected my private parts for damage. Apart from a few scratches, I was okay. So it was down the ladders for more tea. This time Joe said, "No thanks, I've had mine."

Mr. Silman, a Jewish tailor, was the owner of one of the shops. He would arrive at about 5 pm every evening to "inspect the works" as he put it. Unfortunately this was the time we all packed up for the day and Benny 'the key man' was invariably delayed locking up the premises for the night. Naturally he would complain about this at tea break in the morning. "Guess what time I got away last night?" he'd sound off. "Six o'clock, would you believe it? Six o'clock! Old bloody Silman didn't leave 'til 6 o'clock".

Someone said, "That means you didn't get away 'til 6 o'clock"

"Too bloody right" Benny went on, "and I didn't get no overtime eiver, I got 'ome about seven an me dinner was cold and me missus said,"Serves you right".

"Can you believe it? She thought I'd been in the pub. I said to 'er "Come on smell me breaif, come on smell me breaif." Benny had a habit of repeating himself.

She said, "I don't need to smell your breath I can see you have

## Occupation Hazards

been drinking by your big red nose."

"That was because I was 'anging about waiting for that git 'an me nose got red in the cold"

One of the lads who lived local offered to lock up for him but Benny was having none of that. He got an extra sixpence a day for locking up and an opportunity to nick material to repair his outside toilet which he had supposedly been working on for the last six months.

Joe said, "Why don't you lock him in?"

The room went quiet while they considered that. Someone thought it a good idea; others said you are asking for trouble - Silman would get on to the office. So a plan was conceived. Benny and Joe would lock up the shops promptly at 5 pm while Mr Silman was still on the premises. The two scallywags waited across the road grinning from ear to ear. The front hoarding on the premises was formed with six-inch wide timber planks set apart with narrow gaps between them. All was quiet for some time. Then Mr Silman let out an enormous scream, attracting some passers-by. The gaps between the boards were wide enough for a man's arm but not his body, but Silman a slightly built man had somehow got his arm, his leg and his head partly through the gap and had got stuck in an effort to escape the building.

"I vost a German prisoner. Help! Help!"

Joe and Benny let him sweat for a while and eventually came across the road laughing like drains and let him out. Mr Silman walked away, muttering to himself "I vost a German prisoner" much to the amusement of the passers-by. Arrangements were made by the foreman to allow him to visit the site at 8.30 in the mornings. Everyone was happy with that.

Money was tight in those days and some of the painters and chippies would do odd jobs for people to earn themselves a few extra shillings. Folk living in West Ham in those days couldn't afford much, so decorating their houses meant painting the walls

## Occupation Hazards

with Distemper (a cheap form of emulsion). The boys would always be looking to make a "cheap buck" as they put it.

It was noticeable that the end shop of the terrace was used as a dumping ground. It being situated on the corner of Star Lane, it was easy for people to throw rubbish over the garden wall. None of the owners were in occupation whilst the premises were being refurbished, so someone thought it would be a good idea to speak to the owner of the end shop and offer to remove the rubbish and clean up the garden for him - at a price of course. There were five of the lads involved including Joe, Benny and my dad. The price was agreed at £5, which was almost half a week's wages in those days. So they set to work on Sunday morning and cleared all the rubbish by noon, dumping it over the next garden. Then they contacted the owner of the second shop and made the same deal with him. The following Sunday they repeated the exercise and so on until they came to the last of the six shops and there was nowhere to dump the rubbish. It was necessary to bring in the firm's delivery driver to take to rubbish away at a cost of £5 so the boys made £5 each, except my dad because he gave his money to me. Was I guilty? Well sort of, I hadn't contributed a thing and it would have taken me four weeks to earn as much - I was over the moon.

One of the premises requiring renovation was an unoccupied shop on the end of the next terrace. The shop had no structural damage but needed redecorating, another job for the overworked painters and decorators. So Joe was instructed to assist but he was more hindrance than a help. In one of the bedrooms a large double bed took up most of the space, so the stepladders had to be either side of the bed with the planks between. Joe spent hours jumping from the planks onto the bed springs, back and forth until he hit his head on the ceiling and fell on to the whitewash pot spilling the contents all over the floor. Next he stepped on the light switch to reach the corner of the ceiling; the light switch was made of Bakelite and smashed into small pieces involving electrical work. Joe did so much damage by his antics that he was relegated to mixing sand and cement.

## Occupation Hazards

One windy day an attractive young woman was waiting at the bus stop opposite. The wind was playing havoc with her dress, blowing it above her head clearly showing her underwear, stocking tops and suspenders (remember it was 1946). Some of the lads were gathering on the scaffolding applauding and my dad was raising his hat and calling to her "Thank you very much lady"

Joe was in the room and the lads were calling "Come on Joe 'av a look at this."

Without another word Joe sprang onto the window ledge and onto the scaffold. Unfortunately in his haste he forgot to duck under the scaffold bar across the window opening catching it square across his forehead The sound was like a chime from Big Ben and for some time after the sound of rust particles could be heard falling down inside the poles. The force of the blow knocked Joe back into the room and rendered him unconscious. He was admitted to hospital. Although he recovered he never returned to site and work proceeded uninterrupted.

I never saw Joe again. The thing that annoyed me the most was the lads prevented me from seeing the woman at the bus stop. I was going on 15 years old, but they said I was too young, the rotten lot.

Oh! Well such is life!