

Trailer Trials and Tribulations

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Buster was keen to go on the camping holiday to Hullbridge. I on the other hand had reservations. The last time we tried it the pots and pans kept falling off our bikes and it was hard to pedal with a sleeping bag wrapped around the crossbar. It meant your knees were poking out almost at right angles to the crossie, not to mention the tent strapped to the saddle bag. Alright then, I won't mention the tent strapped to the saddle bag. Our clothes or what little clothes we carried were no more than a pair of socks, a shirt and a pair of trousers if ever we needed a change - after all we were only going away for a week. We had the clothes we were travelling in which consisted of white shorts and a R.N. singlet given to us by my uncle Alf after he was demobbed from the Royal Navy. Plimsolls and white socks were a must - trainers were not invented in 1947. We could always turn our socks inside out when they got dirty, this would give us a few extra days wear.

Most important, of course, was food on a camping trip, but we paid little attention to it. We had no money to spend on such luxuries, so we would take bread, porridge and anything we could get into a rucksack which was carried on our backs. We would take some bacon, if we were lucky, although on one occasion we forgot the frying pan and had to fry the bacon in a pot previously used for cooking porridge. It was a bit burnt but delicious. Thin strips of spam were very useful because they were light and kept reasonably fresh all week. Some foods were still on rationing so supplies were limited. We would rely on scrumping for our apples, raw carrots were a bonus.

Anyway I wasn't keen on this adventure because the bike weighed a ton and we couldn't take all the gear we wanted. Last time we attempted a long journey was to see Buster's brother Jim in Somerset. We travelled light and sent our clothes on to Weston-super-Mare by train and collected them after we settled in at Jim's farmhouse. Hullbridge was only about fifty miles away, a lot less than Somerset, besides we had no money for trains.

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The rest of the boys, about ten of us, couldn't wait to get going. Then Buster came up with this idea. "I know", he said, " Let's make a trailer."

I said " You can't get the wood you know" in my best impression of Henry Crun of the Goons. But Buster missed the joke.

"Yes we can", he said. "We can go down 'Smiffy's' and get some orange boxes."

"Just a minute, we need wheels," now I was Eccles. "Don't worry about that we got an old pram out back, that'll do"

So it was we embarked on the manufacture of an improvised trailer without the aid of a detailed drawing or Architects design. Buster's command of technical jargon was phenomenal

"We'll get some nails an' bash it togever," he said.

The local greengrocer Smith, or Smiffy as we knew him, was very helpful. He gave us three boxes which was a surprise - he normally charges for everything, even his specked apples were a penny each. Buster's carpentry was far better than mine; at school he'd build a sailing boat while I would be struggling on a tooth brush rack.

So we got some nails, dismantled the pram for the wheels, placed the axles on the upturned box and proceeded to 'bash in the nails' taking care to bend the nails over the axles like staples. Next we got some conduit from a bombed house and bent it into an elongated 'S', nailed one end into the underside of the box and the other end was wired under the saddle of Buster's bike.

"Now let's try it " he said, "Do you wanna ride the bike or sit in the box Keith?"

"I'll sit in the box," I said, which was a mistake. I gingerly sat myself into the very unstable box. Buster was on his bike

"Ready?" he said but without further ado or kiss me elbow he gave one almighty lunge down on his pedal and with that the bike surged forward and I fell out the back of the box. The box-wood was very thin and the nails were projecting upwards through the bottom of the box into my bottom, the box shattered into a number of pieces which was accompanied with a tearing sound and a

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yell from yours truly; not only had the nails torn my trousers they had penetrated my 'deri aire'.

"Bloody hell" I shouted, " That nail has cut my arse and look at my trousers"

There were a number of people in the street sitting on their window sills. This was usual on a summers evening. Nobody had gardens in Silvertown, just yards at the back of their houses - not a place to sit in. So our antics were being observed all the time.

So there was I, lying on my back in the middle of the road (there were no cars about in those days), and Buster had fallen off his bike and was laying in the gutter. I said in my best 'Bluebottle' voice "I've fallen in the water." We were all laughing so much that tears were in our eyes. People at the top of the street came down to see what all the fuss was about.

Joycie Waites lived at the top end of Barnwood Road and she had come down the street to see what all the commotion was about. She was quite old, about thirty something we thought. She was always talking to people and interested in their problems. I often wondered if she became one of those counselling people; if she did I bet she's worth a lot of money now.

She said, "Orange boxes are no good for a trailer, there're too flimsy. What you need is one of those fish boxes that old Hoppy Manning has his fish delivered in."

She thought she could get one off him at a small price.

"But we ain't got any money" said Buster "'Sides it will pong a bit."

"Don't worry about that ,we can wash it out. Now come on let's chop up these orange boxes and sell them for firewood," said Joyce.

So there we were in the backyard of No. 5 Barnwood Road, chopping up the boxes into six inch long sticks and tying string around to make them into little bundles. When we had a sack full, Joycie said, "That's plenty now go round the streets knock on the

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doors and charge a penny a bundle. The first house we knocked on was Lenny Dales, his mum bought two bundles but thought they were a bit expensive,

"There's not many sticks in a bundle" she said.

People probably saw us coming and didn't answer their doors, that is until we got to Dummy Phillip's house - he couldn't talk and that was what us kids called him. Unkind I know but we never laughed at him - it's just that we had nicknames for every one. Hoppy Manning he had a bad leg and couldn't walk properly so we called him 'Hoppy' - not to his face, you understand. My dad said that Manning was the greatest wicket keeper he'd ever seen.

Now Dummy may have had a problem speaking but he wasn't stupid, unlike his daughter. She'd show her knickers to anyone and they were usually dirty - so I understood. Soap was not one of their family priorities. My mate Billy said he'd had her tits in his hands on many occasion.

"You dirty blighter, I said "Her tits had probably not been washed for weeks."

But he wasn't bothered. He said they were the biggest tits he ever seen and they weighed quite a bit too.

After a long pause Dummy answered the door

"Firewood," Buster shouted

"Penny a bundle" I added.

As far as we knew Dummy wasn't hard of hearing but we shouted anyway. He took the sack from us peered into it, which was still full as you recall we had only sold two bundles. He then turned on his heel and walked into the house with our sack. He returned, gave us a penny and threw the empty sack at us and promptly closed the door. We were dumbstruck (literally) we banged on the door for ages and shouted through the letter box. Then we saw him coming up the passage with a big bucket of water and it was time to make a quick exit - the trouble was how were we going to tell Joycie.

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As it happened Joyce already knew, you can't keep much from her, but she came up trumps and gave us a shilling (about 6p) between us and we got the fish box for nothing. The trailer was eventually finished in the manner as before, with nails, but this time I refused to ride in it. The wheels had to be kept on with nails through the axles we didn't have the proper pins.

Early Sunday morning we packed the trailer with as much gear as possible - we even managed a couple of pillows. I was to pull the thing to Hullbridge and Buster would pull it on the return journey. It was near 7 a.m. when we started up the Silvertown Way. We had been up since 5 a.m. Buster had called me about 4.45 a.m. the usual way by climbing over the back fence onto the outside toilet roof and banging on my bedroom window. Trouble was he always woke up my brother John too and he wanted to come with us.

Pulling the trailer was no easy matter. It would swing left and then right, jerking the bike and almost forcing the bike forward again when in line. We stopped many times along the way to tighten the rope holding the tow bar under the saddle, much to the annoyance of the rest of the boys who kept threatening to go on without us. The ride was very uncomfortable. Just outside Rayleigh the road to Hullbridge drops suddenly so when we reached this point we all stopped to contemplate the slope. It was agreed the boys would go on to the camping ground leaving Buster and I to freewheel down the hill, easy!

We started off well but Buster didn't have the trailer and was soon ahead of me; in fact in a matter of seconds he was out of sight, then as my momentum increased rapidly I could hear someone was coming up to overtake me.

"Bloody hell," I yelled, it was the trailer, the tow bar was at right angles to the road, the trailer was along side the bike, I was being pulled to the right by the tow bar and was losing my balance. I started to peddle like mad in an effort to overtake the

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trailer, I was having difficulty staying upright.

Then all hell let loose, both wheels came off the axles, one wheel disappeared to the right into stinging nettles and the other rolled down the hill about half a mile into some bushes. The trailer came to an abrupt halt by digging the axle and nails into the road and pulling me off my bike unceremoniously to the ground. My legs and hands were grazed and bleeding. There was a chunk out of my elbow. Worst of all my front brake and lamp were broken. I think my pride was hurt the most. I lay on the ground for what seemed an age. It was dead silent - as I said before there were no cars around immediately after the war. I got up slowly to inspect the damage. There was no sign of Buster. He eventually made an appearance and started to push his bike up the hill. It took us about two hours to find the wheels and repair the trailer and when we reached the bottom of the hill some of the boys had come back to find out what happened to us with a greeting.

"Where the bloody hell have you been?"

Not much happened after that except one of the boys left his plimsolls outside his tent one night because he couldn't stand the smell and a cow ran off with them in its mouth. It was hilarious watching him chase the cow around the field with a stick until the cow dropped the shoes. Oh yes, and on the way home the wheels came off twice and in the confusion I left Buster's haversack on a tree, someone was obviously watching us because we went back for it after only five minutes but it was gone - fortunately he only had a towel and dirty clothes in it, so he wasn't too bothered. It took us eight hours to do fifty miles on the way back. The rest of the boys had got home, had their tea and come out to look for us when we still had ten miles to go.

That was the first and last time we ever took a trailer with us. We had learnt a lesson and we never were charged for 'loitering with in-tent'.