Money on the Table

GRIT, WORK AND FAMILY PRIDE

True Stories from the Boys and Girls of the Manufacturing Heartlands of Britain

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An extract from
September Publishing

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First published in 2017 by September Publishing

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Typeset by Ed Pickford

Printed in Denmark on paper from responsibly managed, sustainable sources by Norhaven

ISBN 978-1-910463-54-3

September Publishing
www.septemberpublishing.org

Preface

Nottingham: The Heartland of England

Nottinghamshire, 1930. A county in the Midlands right in the centre of England, bounded by Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Leicestershire and Derbyshire. A rural county, yet with a heavily industrialised city at its heart. Nottingham was known for its tightly-packed, soot-encrusted, red-brick back-to-back terraced houses; smoke curling over cooling towers, barges on canals, trams and buses cutting through cobbled streets. Narrow lanes led to industrial yards and huge factories, and teemed with street sellers, and horses and drays led by cloth-capped workers. People made their way around town on foot or pushing sit-up-and-beg bicycles.

In the thirties, when this book begins, Nottingham was renowned for its manufacturing, and for three household names in particular: Boots the Chemist, Players cigarettes and Raleigh bicycles. There were other industries as well, names like Avery, Austin Reed and – in nearby Derby – Rolls-Royce. It was the heartland of England and chimed with national pride.

The Industrial Revolution transformed Nottingham from a graceful garden town in the 1750s to a place of dark satanic mills. Partly due to its geography, Nottingham became rapidly overpopulated and crowded. Built on a network of sandstone caves (locally it is known as the City of Caves), Nottingham had soggy meadows to the south and a sandstone crag to the west, upon which Nottingham Castle had been built after the Norman conquest. Established in 1796, the Nottingham Canal brought coal and other heavy goods to the city. In the 1820s alone, 3,000 back-to-back artisan dwellings were built. In a time of Empire and world export, Nottingham could produce and produce. However, it was often at the cost of the worker's health and welfare as working and living conditions were cramped and dangerous.

Industrialisation increased with the advent of steam. In 1829, George Stephenson's *Rocket* hailed the railways, and Netherfield, north of the city, became a railway frontier town. Steam engines were used in factories to speed up production, too, as mechanical looms replaced traditional hand weavers – who had worked at home around rural Nottinghamshire in this poorly paid domestic industry for two hundred years (William Lee, in Calverton, had invented framework knitting in 1589, and in 1750 there had been 1,200 frames), churning out lace, hosiery and textiles.

The rapid expansion of mid to late Victorian Nottingham gobbled up the surrounding countryside and

villages, and turned them into factories with more badly housed workers. Slums were created in places that had once been rural idylls. In 1897, Nottingham became a city with nearly 250,000 inhabitants caught in an increasingly rigid class structure of owners and the owned.

And this is the Nottingham we remember (after Robin Hood and his band of Merry Men). We think of cricket at Trent Bridge, a gentleman's game enjoyed also by the working man. We think of whirring pit heads with black-faced miners, *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence, lace and textile factories, boot and shoe makers, munitions works and blacksmiths, brick makers and steelworks. It is a hive of industry, a mass of shops and market stalls, with hardy workers toiling endlessly to earn a crust.

Nottingham remained a heavily industrialised city during the two world wars as it produced steel, iron and munitions. Women were commanded to take over men's jobs and then were returned to the hearth once the wars were over. Great poverty and hardship ensued for the women who were widowed or remained forever single.

Between the wars, the 1926 General Strike and the Great Depression of the 1930s hit Nottingham extremely hard. Two or three hundred starving men lined up for one job or walked miles to Leicester or Derby to try to get work. It was a desperate time for ordinary working people, who had no welfare service or reliable contraception to

help keep their families healthy and small. Religion and pubs provided some comfort, although many people were Methodist teetotallers, who preached abstinence when it came to the demon drink.

Post-Second World War Nottingham was all about modernisation. Although the city had been bombed, many of the old factories and landmarks were still standing. From the 1950s onwards, there was a plan to sweep away the Victorian slums and replace them with high-rise buildings. Sadly, although people got indoor toilets and electric light, they lost the city's industrial heart when it was replaced by one-way systems, retail parks, concrete and glass, all in the name of progress. The destruction of whole areas of Nottingham, such as St Ann's and Radford, dismantled whole communities. Streets, churches, social centres and pubs were swept away and flattened. The landscape, culture and community were changed forever, tipped into new-build anonymity. Joan Wallace, a local writer, describes the traditional, vibrant, working-class Nottingham life in her book *Independent Street*, a depiction of her home in Radford pre-demolition. It's tough and rough, but there's a feeling of interconnectedness and community despite poverty and deprivation.

In 1958, Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* shocked the country with its realistic portrayal of factory life. Based on the author's time working at 'the Raleigh', it depicted the hard-drinking, womanising,

godless life that ensued from being a man chained to the production line. The book encapsulated industrial 'alienation'.

Nottingham is now a post-industrial city of the digital age. There are no mines left and only one 400-year-old lace framework factory: G.H. Hurt's in Chilwell, which recently supplied handcrafted shawls to Prince George and Princess Charlotte. The lace factories are gone, and museums (especially the Museum of Nottingham Life) are the only reminder of its glorious, fine-filigreed past.

Raleigh bikes were outridden in the marketplace by the Chinese, Taiwanese and Koreans, and the factory closed in 2002, moving production to the Far East. Players cigarettes also choked in 2014, laying off its last 544 workers in 2015 after the nation gave up nicotine or took to vaping. Boots the Chemist, still a high-street name, was bought by American giant Walgreens in 2014.

Nottingham's story epitomises that of industrial Britain in its shift from being a jewel in the Empire's crown to being a warehouse and importer of goods from elsewhere. Nottingham still has some light industry but, like the rest of the UK, it is focused more on service industries now. In a post-Brexit world, it would be hard-pressed to produce goods to export as it did in the nineteenth century.

However, there are still some amazing older people in Nottingham who can speak about their lives and times

working in the now disappeared factories. This book is about their gritty stories and we follow a portion of their lives, from 1928 to about 1960. They have a lot in common: they all grew up in hardship, the nature of which we can hardly imagine today. The toilet was at the bottom of the yard, they had no running water, no central heating or even electricity in some cases, and certainly no TV, phone or other mod cons. It was a time of deprivation and hard work, but it was also an era of community, of sharing and caring, and learning to make do on very little.

In 1930, Boots had their main, purpose-built headquarters in Beeston, Raleigh had a huge factory in Lenton and Players was in Radford. Each one had thousands of employees working in their main plants, warehouses and other outlets throughout Nottingham and beyond.

Labour was cheap and plentiful. The six men and women we'll meet were used to hearing about jobs on the social grapevine (street corners, local shops, the pub, at the work bench, family gossip), and many workers would leave a job one day and get another the next. The hunt was on constantly for that little bit of extra pay. For the six in this book, they knew they had to bring home money to add to the family coffers. There was no credit, they had to earn hard cash and save it, spending it mindfully and frugally. 'Make Do and Mend' was espoused by the government in the Second World War, but it was also the motto of these workers. There were no fancy foreign holidays – simply a

day off in Skegness, a couple of days at Mablethorpe or a week at Great Yarmouth, if they were lucky.

All the events in this book are based on recollections of real-life events. Where necessary, I have recreated scenes and dialogue, but always with the aim of conveying the individual's life as truthfully as possible. I have changed names and other details to protect privacy and Bob Cox is a pseudonym.

The men and women in this book were resilient and faced life with good humour, despite experience of challenging events such as war, disease, disability, inequality, poverty and the death of loved ones. Hearing their fascinating stories is to be brought into direct contact with a way of life in the city now forever gone.

The Workers

Derek Happs (b. 1923) Now ninety-four, born in Hoyland Common, Barnsley, he moved to Nottingham once apprenticed to Boots.

Betty Allsop (b. 1926) Born and raised in the Meadows, Nottingham, and worked as a machinist (shirt maker). Betty is ninety years old.

Albert Godfrey (b. 1936) Albert worked in factories and became a gentleman's outfitter for Austin Reed. Now eighty, Albert was born and raised in Bulwell.

Pauline Braker (b. 1938) Born in Colwick, Betty worked at Boots, Players and other retail outlets, including becoming a corsetière. She is seventy-eight years old.

Doreen Rushton (b. 1944) Now seventy-two. Doreen was born in Netherfield, worked at Boots and fought her way to be a nurse.

Bob Cox (b. 1947) Bob was born in Radford and apprenticed to Raleigh, where he worked most of his life. He is now seventy.

Derek Happs

Derek mixing medicine at Boots pharmacy.

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Trouble at t' Pit

On a cold, twilit evening in Hoyland Common, South Yorkshire in 1934, eleven-year-old Derek Happs peered anxiously down the cobbled street of stone-faced, back-to-back terraced houses. Two men were half-dragging, half-carrying a slumped figure with a bandaged head. Derek hovered by the peeling black front door, which led straight on to a short front garden path, while women in aprons and men in caps gathered on nearby doorsteps, arms crossed, silently watching the grim procession. Some raggedly dressed children ran to the three men as they lurched towards Derek's family home. A dog barked in the distance as Derek made out his father as one of the two men carrying the injured man, but he didn't recognise the other.

His mother Margaret stood patiently by the door with a white enamel bowl of water and a clean rag in her hands. 'Come away from the door, son. Yer'll only bother yer father.'

Obediently, Derek stepped back inside the dingy room and watched the proceedings through a small window.

His young sister Joan had crept into the room and was sitting at the bottom of the stairs, watching the scene with saucer eyes. Derek recognised the injured man from his square, muscular body and brown corduroy trousers. It was Dennis, his older half-brother, in a dazed, semi-conscious state. Ordinarily, Derek was wary of Dennis as he was usually threatening, shouting or using his fists to 'teach yer little booger a lesson', and his silence felt ominous. Yet, however free he was with his slaps, Dennis was his brother and Derek didn't want anything to happen to him.

He heard his father's voice on the doorstep. 'Ayup, easy, lad. That's it, bring 'im in 'ere.'

Derek retreated back further into the unlit kitchen-cum-living-room, and stood by the butler sink and wooden drainer under the window. Dennis was deposited heavily onto the cold stone floor. Margaret knelt by her son's body and carefully unwrapped the bandages, revealing a huge horseshoe of blood on the back of his head, which oozed constantly. Derek shivered at the sight; not only at the blood, but also at seeing the usually vital Dennis so prone. How serious was it? Derek felt fear grip his intestines.

'Reckon 'e'll need a stitch,' Margaret whispered as she wiped the blood away, 'but it'll cost.'

Tiptoeing from the sink to just behind his mother, Derek watched the proceedings. 'We can tek it from 'ere,

Josh,' Thomas, Derek's father, said to the other man. 'You tek care of y'sel' now, lad.'

Now, in the half-light of the room, Derek could see that Josh was not much older than him, probably just twelve or thirteen, but his workman's clothes, belt, braces and boots, and his filthy face and rough hands, marked him out as a working man from the pit. Derek became self-conscious of his primary school uniform, with its navy pullover and grey shorts. Josh looked Derek up and down with a superior air, then doffed his worsted cap to Derek's mother – 'Mrs 'Apps' – before swaggering out the door like a proper grown up, making Derek feel very uncomfortable indeed. Derek was bookish and shy, and had a stutter, and was used to the local lads ribbing him, but he felt small and useless in comparison to Josh.

A groan from the body on the floor brought Derek back to the scene. Thomas, standing hands on hips and covered in grime, stared at Dennis, as if mesmerised by his battered state. 'It were a rock fall, a real bad 'un. Right after dinnertime.' Thomas's voice was hoarse with suppressed emotion. He wiped his face with the back of his hand, smearing coal dust and sweat over his face. 'We hadn't got a chance. Some died, many were injured … it were chaos, utter mayhem … it's the third fall this year …'

'He'll need a stitch,' Margaret said softly again, still wiping the wound with care. The white bowl on the stone

floor was now dark with blood. 'We'll need to fetch the doctor.'

Derek didn't know what he should do, but the kitchen was becoming ever more gloomy as darkness fell, so he went to the black iron range in the alcove and lit a taper from the oven, ignited the wick of a paraffin lamp, then held it above his mother as she ripped up one of his father's old pit shirts to make into a fresh bandage. The lamp cast a ghoulish glow over the proceedings, and Derek watched in helpless fascination as his parents tended to their injured son. What if Dennis died? What if he was damaged permanently or needed constant care? He feared his brother, but he feared life even more without his wages, which had become essential to the household.

The doctor was only fetched in the direst of circumstances, but this was clearly a serious emergency. 'The Doctor Man' came round on a Friday, collecting money as a kind of medical insurance. Derek's mother paid into it, as did most of their neighbours, as doctors were expensive. Lots of people in the village resorted to traditional remedies made from herbs to treat illness and wounds. Dennis's injuries, however, seemed more serious than what old wives' tales and natural remedies could fix. Derek looked from parent to parent, keeping quiet while they worked out what to do. They always sorted things out between them, in a calm and equitable way.

Dennis moaned again, and his eyelids flickered.

Thomas dropped heavily to his knees and put his hands together. 'Oh, Lord Jesus, hear my prayer.' He sounded desperate and exhausted. 'Please save our Dennis, and bless the poor souls of the others who were taken from us, this dark day.'

Thomas's voice cracked, and he looked up at Derek, gesturing that he, too, should kneel in prayer.

Joan had crept over to join the family and was standing behind her mother's skirts, peeking out at Dennis. Derek put the lamp on a rickety chest of drawers, and knelt beside his father. His mother and Joan joined them, and all four clasped their hands and closed their eyes, over Dennis's groaning, prone body.

'Oh Lord, please guide the pit bosses to mek us safe, and heed our demands. Please save my dear brothers, and my dear son, who were crushed this very day …'

Derek opened an eye only to see his father had a tear running down his soot-encrusted face, so he pressed his hands together as hard as he could, and screwed up his eyes, knowing his father meant every single word with all his heart.

Although life went on the same in the days and weeks after the pit fall, the course of Derek's life was set to change. Dennis was off work for two weeks, having seen the doctor, and had twenty stitches. Luckily, he healed rapidly, so started work again, as he was not the kind of man to lie

about at home, especially as the family needed the money. Eventually, the only reminder of the incident was a horseshoe shape on the back of Dennis's head, where his hair never grew back properly. Meanwhile, the daily 'Knocker Upper' still came round as early as 5am, and rapped on the door to get Thomas and Dennis up for their shifts.

At the time, there was no welfare state, no compensation for injury or allowances made for disabilities caused on the job. It was expected that miners lived a rough and tough life and took what came in their hardy stride. The 1926 General Strike, followed by the Wall Street Crash in 1929, had led to the Great Depression and over two million unemployed in Britain. By 1934 there was a National Government made up of all three parties, headed up by Ramsay MacDonald, the ex-Labour prime minister. Derek would listen to his father preach about 'The State of the Working Man', and the importance of community, sacrifice, love and tolerance, especially in times of hardship. At his darkest point, Thomas had applied to emigrate to Australia but, despite getting a paid passage for his family, decided not to go as he felt a loyalty to his community and to his calling.

Thomas had been a miner for nearly thirty years. Miners like him were the backbone of the economy and kept the nation ticking over with their hard-hewn coal, so there was pride in the work, despite it being incredibly dangerous. The pit never closed, as coal

was produced twenty-four hours a day, and the wheels of the pit shaft never stopped turning. Thomas and Dennis worked a range of shifts: either from six in the morning to two in the afternoon, or from two in the afternoon to ten at night, or worst of all an 'all nighter', from ten at night until six in the morning. Often, Derek and Joan would be going to school just as their father or Dennis slumped back in, exhausted; or they'd be going to bed as their father or Dennis went out briskly into the night.

The men took a quart bottle full of water with them (other men took beer, but the teetotal Methodists refrained), plus a 'snap' of bread and lard sandwiches; the snap got its name from the tin box the men used with a distinctive snap fastening. Margaret's job was to stay at home, to do the housework; the washing, the shopping and mending – all with no mod cons – and to tend to her family as they came and went to work or school.

One Friday night, soon after Dennis was back at work, Thomas was in the kitchen, putting on his one and only double-breasted navy blue serge suit. He had showered at the pit, which offered a communal hot wash for the men, and had donned a white, Robin-starched collar, fixed by a stud at the back of his best white shirt. It was all finished off with a sober black tie. While his father gave his boots a shine with Cherry Blossom, Derek was at the kitchen

sink, he had propped up his book on the wooden drainer and was reading by the light of the window.

'Ahm going t'reckon, son,' said Thomas, 'will't come? You can play t'organ fer me, if you like.'

Derek knew this was a weekly ritual at the pit head, where the miners' gang leader shared out the week's wages to the men standing or squatting in a semi-circle. Afterwards, most of the men headed for the Hare and Hounds, the Keys or the Star to quench their hard-earned thirst, but Derek's father, now in his best suit, would be off to lay preach in local chapels. Thomas took real pride in looking scrubbed and respectable for his lay-preaching appointments.

Derek closed his book, washed his face and hands at the tap, and slicked his hair down with some water and a comb. From the age of nine Derek had been learning to play the organ with his uncle Cyril, Thomas's brother, who lived nearby, and found he had a real feeling for music. He loved playing hymns and popular songs, and now played regularly at chapel, even though he was still a young lad. He would get a few pennies or even a shilling or two, which would go into the family's coffers, so he felt he was doing his bit. He also loved hearing his father preach, as his heartfelt words and prayers, and people's reactions to what his father said, always filled him with pride. However, just before they left home, there was a rap at the front door, and Derek opened it.

'Evening Mr Styan,' said Derek politely to the squat, dark-haired man on the doorstep.

'Ayup, lad. It's time we had my tape measure round you again. My, you've grown.'

Derek looked down, self-consciously, at his grey school shorts – which had already been let down twice – hovering way above his knobbly knees, and just smiled weakly at Mr Styan, not sure of what to say. Meanwhile, Margaret was delving into the Lyons tea tin in the kitchen cupboard, and came forward proffering the weekly sum for the local tailor. ''Ere yer 're, Mr Styan.' This was the only way the family could save towards a new preaching suit for Thomas, a shilling or a few pennies at a time.

Then father and son set off through the cobbled village streets at dusk and passed a local man on a bicycle lighting the street gas lamps with his long pole with a hook at the end. 'Evening, Maurice,' said Derek's father.

'Evening, Thomas.'

There were no cars, and only a few bicycles. Some locals still had ponies and traps or carts, but most people still went by 'Shanks's pony' – on foot. After visiting the pit head, the pair strode on in silence towards Chapel Street. Thomas said, 'Yer a bright lad, son, and yer good at yer books. D'yer think yer can pass?'

Derek knew his father was referring to the eleven-plus exam, which the headmaster of Hoyland Primary, Mr Brodie, had suggested he sit. There had been a long

discussion about Derek trying for the prestigious local grammar school, but his parents had finally, and sadly, concluded it was just too expensive in terms of bus travel, school uniform, sports equipment, trips and so on. Derek thought hard for a moment: he loved reading, he loved history as he wanted to know about ancient civilisations and languages, and he loved facts, especially medical and scientific ones. He'd absorbed as much information as he could, poring over the school's *Pears' Cyclopaedia*.

'I d–d–do, F–F–Father,' said Derek, thoughtfully.

'Well, yer mother and I have thought again, lad, and we think yer should have a go fer't grammar.'

Derek's eyes widened and he looked sideways at his father, who was striding ahead briskly in his smart suit and tie, with his best worsted cap pulled low at a jaunty angle over his forehead and steel-rimmed glasses.

'B–b–b–but—' started Derek.

'No buts, lad. The Lord will find a way. Ah don't want yer down the pit, like me and our Dennis. Yer can do better, I know yer can.' They reached the plain door of the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel with its windows glowing invitingly in the semi-darkness. 'After the pit fall I thought about it afresh, son. Ah don't want yer to work there, with the dust and gases, lung diseases, let alone the rock falls … If yer work hard, son, ah know yer can mek something of yersel'.'

Derek felt a lump come to his throat, a mixture of fear

and excitement. He had harboured a secret passion to try for the grammar along with another boy, Simon Arkin, in the village, who was also top of the class. Simon was set to go, as his parents could just afford it, but Derek had ruled it out. The cost had seemed an impossible barrier to Derek, and he remembered his parents talking at length in the yard about it. 'B–b–but the c–c–cost …' said Derek, looking at his father's calm face.

'We'll find a way,' said Thomas, straightening his tie and smoothing his hair. 'The Lord will provide. Yer just focus on yer books, lad. Now, let's get on. We've a job to do 'ere, the Lord's work. 'Appen that's quite important, eh, lad?'