

Father's Shed

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One of the big advantages of moving from the old cottage to the council house was that there would be room in the very long garden for father to build himself a shed. This he duly did and the fact that it was still standing over fifty years after I helped him to build it gives me a quiet pleasure.



Father's shed, at the time the picture was taken it had been there over 50 years

There was nothing special about the shed, not to look at that is. But it was special to me. It was quite small, no more than eight feet by eight feet, with a corrugated, galvanised iron roof and walls, but no windows, just a door, and no concrete floor, just compacted earth. And it had that unforgettable special musty-shed smell.

I say that I helped to build it with some reservation. All I actually did, and very reluctantly at that, was to hold each of the railway sleepers that supported the galvanised iron down all the years as near upright as I possibly could in the holes my father had previously dug. As I did so, he rammed large stones about their base to hold them in position. *'Over thic way a bit....no, no, not too much..... back a bit.....now push en thic way.....hold en tight.....kip still.....'* and so on as he eyed each one, all seven of them, from all directions until he was satisfied. That they remained as upright down all the years as when I held them as a boy must surely be an indication of how well I held them, in spite of all the bad-tempered grumbling.

His grumbling, not mine. I didn't dare complain. Oh, the agony of it! What a waste of a morning when I could be up the rec having a kick-about with my mates!

When all the sleepers were in position and no longer likely to fall, I was free to go, and I didn't waste any time going. So I don't know how my father managed single-handed to get the walls and roof in place and nail the corrugated iron to the sleepers, or hang the door, but I realise now that it must have been a bit of a struggle for him. He made a good job of it though for the roof never leaked and not one sheet of cladding ever parted company with the sleepers. All the maintenance the old shed ever required was a lick of paint from time to time and a repair to the bottom of the door.

Few sheds, I venture, were ever more useful. Tool store, bike shed, coal shed, potato store, anchor point for a clothesline, support for a rabbit hutch, and so on.

There was a shelf alongside the far wall on which rested an old biscuit tin full of rusty nails and screws. Alongside there were assorted hammers, screwdrivers, pliers, pincers, gimlets and the like. There was even a shoemaker's last because my father used to repair our shoes. Saws and sickles, shears and secateurs hung on nails protruding from the sleepers. There was a gin for catching moles, and a cage-type rat trap. In the corner were spades, forks, Dutch hoes and mattocks. There was a battered bucket or two, a galvanised watering can and a small round drum of chicken meal for the chickens we kept in a run further up in the garden. Golden onions spent their winter nestling in an old cycle basket hanging on a string, spurting green shoots in the spring as though in protest at having been ignored for too long. And there was an old kitchen chair, minus its back, with a neatly folded sack on it where father used to sit to rest to pull off his muddy boots.

Then there were the bikes. We kept four, perhaps as many as five of them in the shed, Raleigh and Hercules, the leading makes of the time. They were used every day; we cycled just about everywhere. Mine had drop handlebars and a Sturmey Archer three-speed gear change. And I had a front-wheel dynamo which placed me at the cutting edge of technology at the time since most people had battery-powered lights; there were even some people in the village still using carbide gas lamps that involved dripping water onto sodium carbide, thus producing a flammable vapour that was set alight using a match.

By the end of each summer about half of the shed was devoted to storing coal. There must have been more than half a ton in there by the time the days grew colder. It was held in place by a makeshift partition, itself held in place by iron stakes driven into the earth floor. As the coal was used, every fortnight it was topped up by a regular delivery from the Co-op, a couple of hundredweight at a time. Cardboard boxes perched on top of the coal held logs and kindling wood.

In the autumn, room also had to be made for storing potatoes, some four or five one-hundredweight bags, obtained in bulk from a local grower. They were carefully covered with sacking to protect them from the frost and woe betide anyone who left the shed door open! Oh, what a fuss there used to be.

One Christmas time - I must have been about 14 years old at the time - it was not the frost that got at the potatoes, but a rat. It took up residence in the corner underneath the coal. Telltale damage to the sacking, and rat droppings everywhere, alerted father to its presence.

The cage trap was set, but without success. So on the Boxing Day morning the shed was emptied of everything except the coal, and father proceeded to dig the rat out. I was posted

at the shed door, armed with a garden fork. Father dug away at the coal, laboriously heaving it from one end of the shed to the other. Right at the last minute the rat made a run for it, straight under the several hundredweight of coal that father had just shifted.

The air was blue with expletives as my father set about shifting all the coal back again, only this time he erected a wooden barrier so that the rat couldn't pull the same trick again. I was still on guard at the shed door, not quite sure how I would respond if the rat made a run in my direction. If I failed to kill it, scorn would have been heaped on me. But I needn't have worried. As the pile of coal steadily reduced so that only a small heap remained, father took the fork from me and drove it repeatedly into the coal. The rat eventually squealed in agony and it was all over.

But I have more pleasant shed memories than that particular one. I mended my first puncture, the first of many, in there and I tried my hand at being an electrician by installing a battery-operated light - a switch by the door, a bulb holder midway along one wall, a little shelf for a front-light battery, and all neatly and carefully wired. It worked beautifully until the battery ran out.

My best memory of all, though, apart from that special musty-shed smell, is the pleasure of lying in bed on stormy winter nights and dropping off to sleep listening to the rain rattling down on the old shed roof. Bliss!



My first bike – equivalent to today's teenager getting his first car

In these pictures can be seen the remains of the old Hitchen track leading to the cluster of cottages. Also the Elim Four Square chapel

