

Living at Mount Zion – the impressions of a ten year old child

Ken Jenkin

The brightly lit bus was a five-minute trudge behind us, along a road unlit except for a single gas lamp. As we looked around us in the darkness the outlines of a cottage and some farm buildings could just be made out against the sky. Another gas lamp was to be seen further along the road. The familiar sights and sounds of Ovenden, with its shops and houses, full of noisy neighbours, were a world away. This was an alien universe overlaid with a star-filled sky.

The rusted churchyard gate creaked as it was slowly pushed open. Moonlight shone on the wet flagstone path leading through shadowy gravestones, darkening as rainclouds swept across the sky. The rising wind moaned through the trees as a few early autumn leaves fluttered against our faces, like bats greeting our arrival.

I was ten, and this was the entrance to my new home. I didn't know what to expect. The journey here had been an adventure, riding on the top deck of a bus with my Mum and two younger brothers, Richard and Alan. Dad had new job, and it meant moving house. Uncle Arthur, with his red wagon, and Dad had moved most of our furniture earlier in the day, so we only had our bags to carry, together with food and drink.

The hamlet was quiet, only a few dim lights showing the nearby cottages to be inhabited. The single gas-lamp lit only a small patch of ground opposite the cottages. We walked forward slowly up the stone path, leaving the road and looking around us at the gravestones which were seen dimly as the clouds swept over.

A dim oval of torchlight lit our way, flickering as the batteries gradually died, inured to Dad's muttered curses. My brothers and I huddled close to Mum, stumbling as we made our way up the flagstone path. We could make out the silhouette of a building against the starlit sky during the frequent gaps in the clouds, the group of us slowly getting to the porch of a tiny cottage attached to the looming mass of the chapel, whilst trying to ignore the crooked tombstones and the now heavy drops of rain. The wind moaned as it swept over and through a nearby small copse of elms.

At last Dad managed to unlock the unfamiliar door, leading us into the Stygian blackness of a narrow passageway. "Hold on a minute" he said, "There are some candles somewhere". We could hear him fumbling, then a muffled crash as something fell to the floor. More cursing, and a scratching as he lit a match in an attempt to find the elusive candles. Then a gentle glow as he lit first one, then a second wax candle.

We looked around at the heavy wooden door through which we'd entered, now closed and secured with a solid iron latch, and shutting out the noise of the wind and the rain. Alongside that, within an alcove, a solid marble chest-high (to me) shelf from which the candles had fallen. And then the passageway itself, stretching into the darkness beyond.....

Dad picked up a lit candle and moved out of the porch, ducking his head as he entered the passage through a low second doorway, presumably the original external entrance. He flicked a light-switch on the right-hand side, but with no effect. "They mustn't have connected the electricity yet" he said. We followed him, Mum carrying the second candle, along the passageway. A closed door on the right, what looked like cupboards immediately in front of us, then a dogleg and forward to an open doorway on the right. I glimpsed the bottom of a stairway on my left as well as a curtain in front, as we turned and entered what was the kitchen.

This room felt cold and empty, even with us all crowding the entrance. There was a kitchen table in the middle, with chairs around. As both Mum and Dad placed their candles on the table, there was a draught of air which immediately extinguished the candles. My youngest brother squealed, and I gripped Mum's hand. "It's alright" said Dad, and fumbled for his matches again. "It's a good job I smoke and carry plenty of matches with me". He lit the candles again. "Now where did I put that Tilley lamp?"

In the corner of the room I could see a sink and draining board facing a small window. The Tilley lamp, a curious device with a bulbous metal base and a glass globe above with what looked like a wire frame and a handle hanging down, was on the draining board. Inside the glass globe was a tube ending in a curious white sphere. Dad placed it on the table, and, while we boys sat on the chairs around, proceeded to pump a small piston in the side of the base. Having done that several times, he lifted the glass and put a lit match near the white globe. There was a spluttering sound, and Dad pumped the piston several more times, when the globe began to glow with a bright white light which lit up the room.

"That's better," said Dad. "Now we can see what we're doing." Next to the draining board was a gas cooker, and Mum promptly filled a kettle and put it to heat up. Across the room was a fireplace with a tiled surround set into the corner and facing it a wingback armchair. The makings of a fire had already been laid with coal on top of firewood kindling on top of screwed up newspaper. Dad knelt down on the rag rug in front of it and lit the newspaper, while Mum said "I'll just go and make up the beds" and disappeared up the stairs across from the kitchen, taking a lit candle with her.

Gradually, the room began to warm with a fire now crackling in the hearth. Mum came back and announced that the beds were made, and we could have cocoa before bedtime. Mum and Dad sat down next to us and had cups of tea whilst

quietly discussing plans for tomorrow, Dad taking out his pipe and beginning the ritual re-filling, tamping down and puffing as he held a lit match to the tobacco. We boys kept quiet, apparently engrossed in playing with the Dinky toy cars which we had brought with us but secretly wanting to delay bedtime as long as possible. But as the room warmed, my youngest brother's eyes began to droop, and Dad told us it was bedtime.

Mum found hot-water bottles, boiled a kettle and began to fill them. Whilst my brothers argued that they weren't tired, I quietly got out the book that I was reading. "It's no good starting to read" Dad said to me, "You are all going to bed together, since it's the first night in a new bedroom". Alan, at five years old and the youngest of us, had already nodded off again, and Mum started to dress him in his pyjamas. Dad carried Alan, and Richard and I followed Mum up the stairs, which we hadn't been up before.

Opposite the kitchen door, and across the hallway, two steps led up and then a flight of stairs went to the left parallel with the hallway. At the top there was another bend in the stairs into the bedroom above the kitchen whilst two more stairs straight forward led into a larger bedroom which was going to be Mum and Dad's. Our bedroom had a pair of bunk beds which were for my brothers, and a single bed for me. Curtains were drawn across a window, and there was a rug between the beds.

Suddenly there was a rattling from behind the curtains, which made us all jump, and the curtains flapped. We looked at one another, and Richard started to cry. Again, the rattling and the curtains moved. "Don't be silly" said Dad, as he drew the curtains back to show six small rectangular windows, three in one row and then three directly above. The two in the middle were sash windows, and Dad demonstrated that they were loose enough to rattle in the wind which we could now hear clearly, along with the noise of rain lashing against the window. "I'll get a wedge of paper to stop them rattling" he said and went back downstairs.

Mum said goodnight to us all, Alan already being asleep, and went back downstairs. Dad returned and jammed a wedge of folded newspaper between the two windows which were rattling. The noise immediately subsided, although we could still hear the wind gusting against the windows, but a constant background susurrantion sounded eerily against the spatter of raindrops hitting the panes. "What's that funny noise?" I asked. "What's it like?" responded Dad. "It's like the noise a lorry makes when the road's wet" I answered. "Oh, that" said Dad, "It's the noise of the wind blowing through some big sycamore trees at the back of the house. We'll go and explore tomorrow, and we'll see what else is out there. Night night, sleep tight" And off he went, leaving Richard and me with our thoughts. The background noise of the wind and rain became gradually familiar, gently soothed us, and we dropped off to sleep.

This was my introduction to our new home in October 1958. Dad had been appointed sexton and caretaker of Mount Zion chapel and Sunday school in the

tiny hamlet of Upper Brockholes, and this was to be our home for the next six and a half years. The job of sexton and caretaker had been advertised at Mount Zion Methodist Chapel. Mum and Dad discussed this, involving me in thinking about what it would mean to move away (about two miles) from everything I knew. The result of this was that Dad applied for the job - and was rejected "because it was thought that he didn't have the required experience"! Well, Dad was a quiet and I guess fairly mild-mannered man, but this really made him cross. So he sat down with Mum and devised a letter outlining all his credentials - his Dad was a monumental mason carving and setting gravestones, Mum's Dad had been a caretaker for years, they'd both been involved in chapels for many years, Dad was organist and choirmaster.....and so on. Well, Dad got the job....So Dad got the job, and Mum did some of the work. She cleaned both the Chapel and the Sunday School, she made wreaths at Christmas, and planted graves in the summer and was, I think, very happy at Mount Zion.

Mount Zion chapel was originally built in 1772 and opened in 1773. The idea of building a dedicated chapel followed the slow development of "Methodism" after a visit to the area by John Wesley in 1748, and the subsequent week-long stranding of a visiting preacher in a local cottage due to a snowstorm. Wesley visited again and stayed in the adjoining cottage on 22nd April 1774; he preached one of his last sermons in the chapel in 1790, needing assistance to get into the pulpit. His horse was stabled downstairs - this was the kitchen when I lived there - and he slept in the room above, which almost 200 years later I shared with my two younger brothers.

Although we had only moved a few miles from our previous house in Ovenden, life seemed very different. The house in Ovenden was at the side of Keighley Road. Although this was not a very busy road - there was little traffic in 1958 compared with today - our new house was in the middle of a graveyard in a hamlet of two farms, about 15 houses and a tiny shop. Bread was delivered twice a week, still warm from the bakery, and milk came straight from one of the farms. Although we now had a bathroom, the toilet was still outside although only a ten-yard walk to the outhouse instead of about 70 yards. Despite being closer, visiting the loo seemed even more precarious. The clean white porcelain bowl, close-fitting toilet seat and flushing cistern had been replaced by a wooden seat above a metal tub, periodically splashed with evil-smelling disinfectant by my Mum; the tub emptied on a fortnightly basis by the council men with their "honey-wagon". Keep well away on a summer's day!

Our "neighbours" in the graveyard were very quiet, but the sound of the wind through the branches of two large sycamore trees close to the house seemed very loud. Situated high on the hills near the edge of open moorland and virtually surrounded by open fields, the wind had nothing to break its path or velocity. Not long after we moved in, we were terrified by the sight of the centre of the living room carpet lifting six inches above its surroundings. We were convinced there was a ghost or poltergeist, and then realised the wind was in a different direction

and was blowing through an air grate in the outside wall and thence under the floorboards where it came through the gaps and lifted the carpet.

In winter the wind blew from over the nearby moors and I would fall asleep to the (to me) soothing sound of rain pattering onto windows which themselves rattled in their frames. On some mornings the frost was thicker on the inside of the bedroom windows than on the outside – you learned to get dressed very quickly.

I don't remember meeting Chris; he was just there when we moved to Mount Zion. He thinks we knew one another at Moorside school, but the first image I have is of a diminutive boy on a bogey. No, not something that came down your nose, but a small four-wheeled device for a boy to ride on. When we lived at Keighley Road, Dad had made me a barrow from an orange box and a pair of old pram wheels which I pulled or pushed everywhere, but this was something different. Wood (and splinters!) to sit on, and wheels that steered. These were wooden constructions with a base on which to sit with a narrow plank extending about 18" in front, at the end of which was fixed a swivelling piece of wood. A pair of old pram wheels were fixed to the base, a second pair of wheels fixed to the swivelling crossbar.

Originally this was made so that one person could sit on the base, with his feet resting on the crossbar; in this way the whole carriage could be pushed by another person whilst being steered by the driver. However, the long-protracted disputes over who should ride first, how long each person's turn had taken, how quickly (or slowly) the device should be pushed meant that a revised (and improved) version was swiftly devised. Providing the driver could, instead of sitting on his bottom, sit sideways with one leg tucked under his bottom, the other leg and foot could be used to propel the vehicle. Steering could then be facilitated by stretching forward so that the driver's hands rested on the crossbar. This arrangement, however, was again modified (Mark 3) when it was realised that under extreme pressure the driver's hands could be trapped under the forward facing narrow plank.

Mark 3, consequently, was developed to have a short piece of rope (Mum's washing line carefully and surreptitiously trimmed) fastened at each end of the crossbar and thus providing a steering mechanism. Dad was OK about us using his saw (don't cut your hand) and hammer (don't hit your thumb), but was adamant that we were not to use his nails. So we became adept at taking old nails and hammering them straight. Recycled wood was in abundance, usually Victorian sideboards being broken up for firewood. I can't remember how we acquired a nut and bolt to fix the swivelling crossbar (probably best to not enquire too closely!)

I think my work ethic (management speak or code to describe whether or not someone gets on with doing things...) was formed at Mount Zion. At first the difference when we moved there was that I had to go to school and back again on a bus. So, I guess I started to become fairly self-reliant then. By the time I'd gone to high school, Mum and Dad had settled into a different way of working. Instead

of Dad leaving in the morning to go to work and coming home in the evening for his tea, Dad was now at work as soon as he'd got up, had his breakfast and opened the front door. Instead of me getting a bus to junior school, I now had to walk to high school, a distance of about a mile, dressed in my school uniform (too big but "you'll grow into it"), carrying a leather satchel full of books, and remembering to keep my school cap on (only sixth formers allowed to dispense with the cap!).

On coming home, having walked for another mile in all weathers, I had my tea, then I had to do homework, then I had jobs to do and only when all that was over was, I allowed to play.

The jobs to do were many and varied, dependent especially upon the time of year. During the first year we were there I had little to do as Mum and Dad got to grips with the work involved. As I got older, jobs included sweeping the hall in the Sunday School with a three-foot-wide brush, having first scattered disinfectant-infused sawdust everywhere. Dad didn't tolerate random sweeping, so I soon learned to do this in a methodical way. Similarly, I had to clean out the boilers after each weekend during the winter. These (one each for the Chapel and the Sunday School) were coke-fired, and as well as creating ash also generated "clinker" which I think was material in the coke which didn't burn but melted into a hard mess and which, when cold, stuck to the grates in the boiler. As well as this, the coke was delivered and left in a pile which had to be shovelled into the boiler-room. This was via a shaft with a door at the bottom. Ideally the shaft would be filled ready for the time when the boiler was to be lit, however it was possible to make it look as though the shaft was full when in fact it was only partially full. Short-term gain, though, as Dad would find out quickly and then demand that the job be done properly.

Sometime after we'd moved to Mount Zion, Mum and Dad were looking for ways to increase their income and Dad asked the Trustees for permission to build a greenhouse on a patch of land that was used for growing vegetables. My impression is that the Trustees were a crusty lot of old men who didn't like giving permission for anything. Chief amongst them was "Hoppy" Horner, who was a miserable soul perhaps partly because of his gammy leg which gave him his nickname. After much discussion about why and how big and where, and infinitum it seemed, permission was given. So, Dad bought a cedar-framed greenhouse which had a storage area at one end; he got a second-hand pot-bellied stove and some pipes which would allow hot air to circulate and heat the greenhouse. This meant that he could germinate plants early in the season, so he could then offer to tidy up and plant out graves for people, so the graves looked well-tended throughout the summer.

Super - especially since he had a ready-made scavenger who could crawl under the rhododendron bushes getting leaf mould to use as seed compost, and then a willing (??) helper who would water the graves daily during the warm dry summers that we had.

Carrying two five-gallon galvanised watering cans full of water up and down the paths of the cemetery was probably my first introduction to weight training. Winter brought relief, albeit still a job to be done, as Mum and Dad started to make Christmas wreaths, again to make graves look well-tended. My job was to go scavenging on the nearby moors for spagnum moss (in the days before it was protected) which was wrapped around a circular wire frame and held in place with short lengths of thin wire. These were also used to fix holly to the moss and hence form the wreath.

Sometime early in 1963, probably in March, my Dad was ill in bed which in itself was unusual and later had to be admitted to hospital. I think Dad was in hospital in Leeds for about five months, and during all that time Mum travelled to Leeds and back every day.

Whilst Dad was in hospital, people were still dying and needing to be buried. Two people helped Mum and did all the physical work - Grandad and "young Arthur". More of young Arthur later. Grandad was organised and methodical. He'd obviously worked out the most efficient way of doing things, so after collecting together all the tools and planks and cement, sand and bricks required, we had to pause for a moment to mentally check what we'd need before trundling the handcart down the cemetery.

When doing jobs his mantra was "Sam up, lad", which was a phrase I'd never heard before, but which I soon learnt meant "Tidy up" and the lad was me. Tidying up as we went along was important, because when you'd finished the work sometimes you were tired and having to face a mammoth task of clearing up was just not acceptable. It might get forgotten or just left and that didn't fit in with Grandad's way of working. That obviously had an effect on me, because I still want to concentrate and finish one job before starting another.

Grandad was usually able to help, but on one day he wasn't able to come and so I had the morning off school in order to dig a grave. I'd helped Dad before, but never done everything by myself. First I had to dig the hole six feet six inches long by three feet six inches wide and probably five feet deep. The depth depended upon how many people were ultimately going to be buried in the grave, usually three but sometimes two or four. The soil was difficult to dig; a kind of loose sandstone and clay.

The technique was to loosen a patch of soil with a pickaxe, then dig the loose soil out with a round-nosed shovel. It was important to have vertical sides to the hole – not easy to achieve. The soil was piled up near to but not next to the grave so that the undertakers could stand next to the grave and lower the coffin down. When the grave was deep enough, then a brick wall surround was built inside the hole, leaving enough room for a coffin to fit in what would become an enclosed space.

Each sixth course of bricks was laid slightly out of line, so that after the interment flagstones could rest on the lip produced, thereby separating each coffin space. Around the grave scaffolding planks were laid to provide a level and stable platform on which the undertakers, the minister and some mourners would be able to stand. These planks were covered in an artificial green “turf”, and in the bottom of the grave would be scattered wood shavings. More “turf” was then laid over the mound of soil to disguise the harsh reality of a burial. After the burial service, flagstones would be placed on each lip to separate each space, including on the top which would be about six to twelve inches below the eventual ground level. The planks and “turf” would be removed, and soil returned to the grave leaving a mound which would eventually settle, possibly to be finished off with gravestones and a headstone.

Whilst this was the method for digging a new grave, when a burial was to be in a previously constructed grave, then the grave had to be “opened up”. All the soil within the gravestones would be removed, again leaving a mound of soil a short distance from the grave. At some point would be found the top layer of flagstones, to be lifted and placed on one side for future use. The grave records held in the chapel would indicate how many spaces were left, and in theory you would know how many layers of flagstones should be removed. Occasionally the records would be wrong, and Dad would lift a flagstone to find a coffin beneath in some stage of decay.

On one occasion at least, on lifting a flagstone out of the grave, the next layer of flagstones on which Dad was standing were rotten and Dad went through onto the rotting coffin beneath. Mum said he’d never jumped out of a grave so quickly, nor so speedily gone for a reviving cup of tea!

When Dad was ill, as well as Grandad helping with the graves, Young Arthur also helped out. He was a bit older than me, and was a weightlifter at the gym in Halifax, so was a bit like a mechanical shovel! He dug graves faster than anyone I knew, and sweated buckets. He asked Mum for a glass of water one hot day, and when Mum came to the door with a glass and a jug of water, he simply took the jug and drained it.

The winter of 1963

I remember January 1963

Our hamlet at Ogden was cut off from the main road for six weeks with snowdrifts filling the roadway from drystone wall to drystone wall. As the bad weather started, my friend John Brown and I went on to the main road from Halifax to Keighley where cars were struggling to keep moving through the two-foot drifts. We helped, pushing cars through the deepest snow, occasionally digging snow out of the way, gratefully accepting the sixpence or shilling proffered in thanks, and then just as assiduously filling in the tracks so that the next car would get stuck!

The following day we went walking around, gazing at the snow sculptures carved by the wind. Rocks Lane had a snowdrift about 10-12 feet deep, completely filling the roadway. All of the side roads were completely impassable, whilst one lane of the main Keighley road was being patiently dug out by one man and a JCB, with the wind just as patiently blowing snow over his work behind him.

I don't remember missing school – perhaps the odd day – because we walked to school anyway and the wall-tops were clear of snow. Milk came from Harold Crabtree's farm across the road, and after a day or two the baker again started providing warm one-pound uncut loaves from his delivery van. Mum already had a one hundredweight bag of potatoes in the larder, and life went on.

Hard winters were viewed with equanimity in the Jenkin household at that time. Hard winters meant old people struggling; that meant more people dying; that meant more funerals and that meant an increase in the weekly income. It was harder work digging graves when the soil was frozen, but when you got down a few inches it was OK again. The paths had all to be cleared, but that meant more pocket-money for me and my brothers, and we made it fun.

We'd early on in our time at Mount Zion built "bogies". By 1963, these devices were quite sophisticated, and capable of being converted into our version of a snow plough with additional wooden constructions at the front. So, clearing the paths sounded like a fun thing to do, and so it proved, although using a spade or shovel would probably have taken half the time.