

## The Prologue

### **Another Lennon-McCartney Original**

(January 1958)

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Jim McCartney would no more let Paul skip school than allow *that boy* in the house, so subterfuge was vital. Afternoon sessions, two till five, ended with a hurried wafting around of smoke and washing of dirty dishes . . . though by then they'd often written another song.

'He'll get you into trouble, son,' Jim warned Paul. Parents had been saying that about John Lennon since he was five – and rightly so, because he did. But this hadn't stopped a solid gang of pals – intelligent grammar-school boys, as Paul McCartney was – idolising him as their leader. And what high and hysterical times he gave them in return.

In 1956–7, when John was 16, he turned his gang into his group, the Quarry Men, and for a while they rode the skiffle craze, up on stage belting out rhythmic prison songs of the American South. John sang and played guitar, forever the front man. But he was – first, last, always – a rocker, and his group was now charging headlong in that direction; newspaper ads for the dances they played were already calling them Rock 'n' Skiffle, though actually it was rock all the way. And later, when John – now 17 and clearly the coolest kid on the block – generously invited Paul to join them, the 15-year-old was so keen to make himself indispensable that deceiving Dad was but the flimsiest of obstacles.

Paul was conscious of the age gap. To him, John was 'the fairground hero, the big lad riding the dodgems',<sup>1</sup> a grown-up Teddy Boy who swore, smoked, scrapped, had sex, got drunk and went to college, who strutted around with Elvis Presley sideburns, upturned collar, hunched shoulders and an intimidating stare (which Paul would soon learn was born of insecurity and acute short-sightedness). Lennon radiated a life-force that turned heads everywhere:

he was wickedly funny and fast with it, he was abrasive, incisive and devastatingly rude, and he was musical, literate and beguilingly creative. Whether painting, conceiving strangely comic poems, or committing cruel drawings and odd stories to the written page, he was a boy beyond convention and control, a lone ranger. He was everything his friends wanted to be, and said everything they wanted to say but wouldn't dare. John Lennon always dared.

He had long dispensed with one of the taboos of childhood, befriending whoever he liked even if they were younger. One of his closest pals, Ivan Vaughan, was born the same day as Paul McCartney in June 1942 (and Ivan had introduced them). Age didn't matter to John if the friend brought something interesting to the table. If anyone had a problem with a 17-year-old college student hanging around with a 15-year-old schoolboy it was theirs alone to deal with, though if they chose to voice it near him they were risking a thump. As for Paul, at their first meeting six months earlier he'd felt too young to be John's friend, the wrong side of 'the cusp'; he'd impressed the hell out of him though, and now, invited in, he wasn't going to let it slip. He would be – and was – sharp, sure and impressive enough to hold John's attention.

Paul had only recently sung in a church choir, arrived home wet from scout camp, and been allowed to wear long trousers to school – but, instantly, such things were history. From late 1957, he grew up fast. 'Once I got to know John it all changed,' he'd recall a decade later. 'I went off in a completely new direction.'<sup>2</sup> Paul had much to offer, and John had seen it. He had a great musical talent, an instinctive and untutored gift; he played piano and was a confident and characteristic guitarist who always knew more chords than John and was much better at remembering words. At 13, before rock and roll changed his life, Paul composed two catchy piano tunes, dance-band numbers like those his dad had played around Liverpool ballrooms in the 1920s with his own Jim Mac's Band. Then, when the guitar came along in 1957, Paul was hooked.

He was also a funny storyteller and mimic, a cartoonist and able caricaturist. The eldest son of particular parents, Paul knew how to behave socially. John, who'd also been brought up well, bothered less with social niceties. Paul liked to create the best impression and say the right things, exuding a breezy confidence and wanting people to think highly of him. He was charming, sharp, mentally strong and rarely outmanoeuvred. John saw it all and welcomed it: though he had to be dominant, he respected no one who didn't stand up to him. Paul did, despite being twenty months his junior; but John also knew that if Paul ever challenged his natural supremacy, at least before he was ready to abdicate it, he'd see him off.

The more hours John and Paul spent together the more they found these things out, uncovering humour and harmony right down the line. They'd both

read *Alice In Wonderland* and *Just William*, though Paul had read *Alice* once or twice whereas John still feasted on it every few months and had folded Lewis Carroll's vocabulary into his own. They also shared a strong interest in television, and knew BBC radio personalities and northern comedians, quoting current and vintage catchphrases. Both were consumed by *The Goon Show* and talked the talk familiar only to those who imbibed the lingo; they made each other laugh all the time and began to develop an attuned shorthand humour beyond others' comprehension.

Then there were girls. Paul, despite the age gap, matched John in his ceaseless lust; John was already a sexual adventurer, Paul wasn't far behind. Both had shed their virginity and were eager for whatever action they could get. Bird-spotting was a way of life and often now a combined quest. They also shared the same goddesses, the fantasy figures who kept men awake at night in the late 1950s, women such as Anita Ekberg, Juliette Gréco and Brigitte Bardot. The Parisienne Bardot, an actress as well as a model, was the ultimate in pin-ups. When *And God Created Woman* and *Mam'selle Striptease* were in the local cinemas, Liverpool could have been powered on the heat generated in the stalls. John and Paul were there. On the ceiling above his bed, John had the original French poster of *Et Dieu . . . Créa la femme*, a drawing of the topless Bardot, long blonde hair cascading over ample breasts.

But top of their hit parade, always, was American rock and roll music – hearing it and playing it. Two years earlier it wasn't known to them, now it was what they lived and breathed for. There weren't yet a hundred recordings to cherish but John and Paul knew them all, and when they weren't listening to or playing them they were talking about them, thrilling to the minutiae. 'Worshipping' is the word Paul has used.<sup>3</sup> They both revered Little Richard, the dynamic singer from Macon, Georgia, who, according to the weekly British music papers, had just given it all up and disappeared into the Church. But they would always have Long Tall Sally, Tutti Frutti, Slippin' And Slidin' and Lucille, and John was floored by Paul's uncanny ability to mimic that screaming and hollering voice. *Everyone* was amazed by it. Ian James, Paul's best friend before John came along, says Paul would often break into it without warning, as if Little Richard was trapped inside him and occasionally had to surface for air.

There were other heroes – Carl Perkins, Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran, Jerry Lee Lewis and more – but no one was ever greater, for either, than Elvis, who'd already cut the soundtrack of their youth. Elvis Presley was God, it was as simple as that. John and Paul listened to his records in the way only besotted fans do, catching and trying to analyse all the little inexplicable sounds, like the laugh he couldn't stifle at the end of Baby Let's Play House, and the muttered asides at the end of Hound Dog.<sup>4</sup>

Just recently, the Crickets had burst into their lives too, a breakthrough almost as essential. Under their leader Buddy Holly, the Crickets introduced the *group sound*: vocal, electric guitar, bass and drums. Three singles – That’ll Be The Day, Peggy Sue and Oh Boy! – had arrived in Britain at the perfect moment, their easy-to-play music encouraging thousands of bored skiffle groups to begin making the switch to pop and rock. It was the start of everything. John and Paul loved the Crickets (even the name had their regard) and were inspired to write songs in Buddy’s vocal and musical style. Towards the end of 1957, John wrote Hello Little Girl and Paul came up with I Lost My Little Girl; the similarity in their titles was apparently coincidental but both were steeped in the Crickets’ sound.

John and Paul’s passion for rock and roll wedded them heart and soul, and Liverpool Corporation’s education committee also played a part. Unless the Quarry Men had a booking somewhere, Jim McCartney’s disapproval of John meant Paul couldn’t see his friend at night. They had to be more shrewd. Situated up the hill from the city centre, Liverpool College of Art – where John, newly enrolled, was already proving himself a handful – happened to adjoin Liverpool Institute, Paul’s grammar school. The two buildings had been one, so with a quick dash through their respective exits John and Paul would arrive together on the same stretch of street at the same moment and were truants for the afternoon – ‘sagging off’. John would have his guitar ready.

From a stop on Catharine Street, they’d board the 86 bus, a green double-decker like those driven by Harry Harrison, father of Paul’s young schoolfriend George. They found their way upstairs and had a smoke, strumming strings while the bus bounced them out to the southern suburbs, along Upper Parliament Street – Toxteth, with its immigrant West Indian ghetto – past Sefton General Hospital to the roundabout at Penny Lane and then beyond to Allerton. Within thirty minutes of sneaking out, they’d be inside Paul’s terraced council house at 20 Forthlin Road, empty in the daytime. The McCartneys had only been here six months when Paul’s mother Mary died, and now Jim, 55, was trying to cope alone with their two teenage boys and maintain his wife’s high standards and principles. His brothers and sisters rallied round – they were a strong, close-knit family, the women big on motherly advice, the men strong on Liverpool wit and repartee, characters all. Paul’s Auntie Gin and Auntie Mill came over to clean, iron and cook for them on alternate Monday afternoons: Paul’s sessions with John were only possible Tuesdays to Fridays. There was the irony. It was only because Jim wanted Paul to stay away from the troublemaker Lennon that he was sagging off school, courting trouble like he’d never done before. (So it was ‘Dad’s fault’.)

They'd go into what the McCartneys called the front parlour, a standard, basic 1950s front room: a sofa with antimacassars crocheted by Paul's aunties, cotton covers hiding the broken springs of Jim's armchair, a tiny black-and-white TV in the corner, a record player, a piano, and threadbare runners on the wooden floorboards that did for a carpet. John and Paul would sit opposite each other by the fireplace. As Paul was left-handed their guitars went the same way and each could enjoy the mirror effect of watching the other's fingers shape the chords as if they were his own. Paul would later call these 'eyeball to eyeball sessions', and he'd be treated to something few witnessed: John put his glasses on. Only rarely did they leave his pocket, even though without them he could barely see a thing. Almost in each other's faces, John and Paul quickly gained an unusual closeness, little or nothing hidden. Paul noticed that 'John had beautiful hands'.<sup>5</sup>

Paul weaned John off the banjo chords taught him by his mother Julia. John had musical flair in his family line too, but it was more rough and ready than Paul's: John could play banjo, guitar and harmonica, often more with aggression than precision. Afternoons were whiled away playing guitars to records, singing, revelling in the joy of chords, finding out how almost every rock song they knew could be played with C, F and G or G7. They laughed over a sticker visible through the soundhole of John's guitar: GUARANTEED NOT TO SPLIT it said, and *by 'eck it 'adn't*. They toiled hours, weeks, trying to work out how Buddy Holly played the intro to That'll Be The Day, before John eventually figured it out, celebrating with a puff on Jim's spare pipe. They'd no tobacco, but a quick raid on the tea caddy produced a few pinches of Twinings or Typhoo; the pipe passed between them, each pulling hard while agreeing on its terrible taste.

Buddy Holly was the springboard to John and Paul's songwriting. As John later said, 'Practically every Buddy Holly song was three chords, so why not write your own?'<sup>6</sup>

Stated so matter-of-factly, it could seem that writing songs was an obvious next move, but it wasn't. Teenagers all over Britain liked Buddy Holly and rock and roll, but of that large number only a fraction picked up a guitar and tried playing it, and fewer still – in fact hardly anyone – used it as the inspiration to write songs themselves. John and Paul didn't know anyone else who did it, no one from school or college, no relative or friend . . . and yet somehow, by nothing more than fate or fluke, they'd found each other, discovered they both wrote songs, and decided to try it together. Paul recalls the method: 'We'd sit down and say, "OK, what are we going to do?" and we'd just start off strumming and one or the other of us would kick off some kind of idea and then we'd just develop it and bounce off each other.'<sup>7</sup>

It had only taken seconds to discover that both had strong and distinctive

voices for rock – in all its styles and tempos – and that they sounded great together. They could blend in perfect harmony, with Paul tending to take the higher key and John holding the lower. The Crickets' influence was again strong, and so too were the crafted melodic harmonies of the Everly Brothers, whose first record, *Bye Bye Love*, was issued in Britain the day before John met Paul, 5 July 1957. (Throughout this history, the timing of everything is always perfect.) Now, in the last week of January 1958, the bestselling chart produced by Liverpool's newest record shop Nems – published in *The Record Mirror* the same day John and Paul led the Quarry Men through some rock 'n' skiffle down the Cavern – had Peggy Sue by Buddy Holly at number 1, Oh Boy! by the Crickets at 2 and Great Balls Of Fire by Jerry Lee Lewis at 3. Here was inspiration on a stick.

Their first song was *Too Bad About Sorrows*. It was never properly recorded, possibly never completed, and John and Paul only ever let out the first couple of lines:

Too bad about sorrows, too bad about love,  
There'll be no tomorrow, for all of your life.<sup>8</sup>

They sang the vocal in unison, as they did most of these songs.

They called their second song *Just Fun*.

They said our love was just fun / The day that our friendship begun.  
There's no blue moon that I can see / There's never been in history.

They knew the final line was a stinker and left the song unfinished after failing to come up with anything better. Paul had a tendency to perfection but John was always restless to move on, keen to try something new.

Another number seems to have been called *Because I Know You Love Me So*. The words were about someone who wakes up feeling blue because his lover doesn't treat him right, but then reads her letters and finds she does care. It had appealing Holly-like changes and John and Paul sang it together in harmony like the Everlys, each encouraging good music from the other.<sup>9</sup>

These were not songs they played with the Quarry Men. The group's three other members (Eric, Len and Colin) never knew much about them: a rift had taken place, the front two getting together without their bandmates. Only certain people heard these new songs – select friends, Paul's dad, brother and a few relatives. John may not have played them to anyone but Paul liked to demonstrate them, enjoying the resulting praise. Their harshest critics were always themselves. Paul has said that the two of them never reckoned any of these

early songs, not even at the time; they knew they were unsophisticated, just a step.<sup>10</sup> John in particular was never slow to say if something was ‘crap’, even if it was his own.

John’s first two attempts at songwriting, a year earlier, had already vanished from his memory, never to return, so he and Paul knew they had to keep proper track of their ideas. They’d no means of recording them and neither could read or write music, so Paul appropriated a Liverpool Institute exercise book, maybe forty-eight feint-ruled pages, in which every new song had a fresh page. In his neat left-handed script, generally using a fountain pen, he wrote the words (they were always *words*, never lyrics) with chords shown by their alphabetical letter. Unable to describe the melody, they decided early on that if they couldn’t remember something the next day, they could hardly expect it to stick in the mind of anyone else, in which case it was ‘crap’ and deserved to go. But sometimes Paul wrote atmospheric directions. For one song it was ‘Ooh ah, angel voices’.

And on the top of every new page, above the song title, Paul wrote:

#### ANOTHER LENNON-McCARTNEY ORIGINAL

The influence for this wasn’t rock and roll so much as the great American songwriting teams of older generations, the likes of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Rodgers and Hart, Lerner and Loewe and other famous combinations who wrote for Hollywood and Broadway.<sup>11</sup> From the outset, John and Paul settled on Lennon-McCartney as a partnership, with that name order. Lennon came before McCartney alphabetically, and he was almost two years older, and it was his invitation, and, surpassing any other consideration, it was simply the way of things: John *always* came first. While equal in terms of contribution, Paul had to accept that one of them was just a little more equal than the other. Second billing wasn’t in his nature, though. Paul accepted it from his fairground hero and positively no one else. ‘We were really looking at being Rodgers and Hammerstein, and famous writing duos always had their name the same way. You didn’t hear “Hammerstein and Rodgers”, it just didn’t sound as good. So we always wanted to have people say, “Oh, that’s a Lennon-McCartney song.”’<sup>12</sup>

Neither planned to do anything with these songs (to send them off to singers, publishers or record companies) but they agreed – by actually discussing it, albeit briefly – that each could continue to operate independently, writing songs on his own and then bringing them to the other for approval and the joint Lennon-McCartney credit. ‘We decided on that very early on,’ says Paul. ‘It was just for simplicity really, and – so as to not get into the ego thing – we were very pure with it.’<sup>13</sup>

Competition was nonetheless an ever-essential component. John had complete admiration for Paul's facility with harmony and melody, his musicianship and invention; Paul respected John's musical talent and envied his original repartee. Yet while combining their skills as a team, they remained competitive as individuals, each trying to outdo the other. It became a vital artistic spur: John would call it 'a sibling rivalry . . . a *creative rivalry*', Paul spoke of 'competitiveness in that we were ricocheting our ideas'.<sup>14</sup> Each tried to impress the other out of sheer fear of what he might say in return. Both were rarely less than candid, and the thought that a new song might be branded 'crap' was usually more than enough to continually raise standards.

John and Paul had an abundance of ambition, and top of their lists was *to be rich*. John's Aunt Mimi, his surrogate parent since the age of five, told him 'possessions don't bring happiness but they make misery a lot easier', which was one comfort, but mostly John wanted money to avoid having to work.<sup>15</sup> Art college was only a means of delaying the inevitable another four or five years, though he was unlikely even then to have a clear idea how to earn a living. He could only ever see himself as a painter or poet or writer or musician and they didn't give out those jobs down the Labour Exchange. John Lennon and conformity were ugly bedfellows – he'd no discipline or desire for office or factory work, and had his own dismissive phrase for such jobs: 'brummer striving'.

Before she died, Mary McCartney had wanted Paul to become a doctor; Jim hoped he'd go to university and become a teacher or writer . . . but Paul wanted to be a star and had the confidence and talent to shoot for it. And with stardom he'd be rich. About £75,000 would cover what he wanted. As he later said, 'If you'd asked me for my fantasies when I was 16 years old, standing at a bus stop waiting to go to Garston on the 86, I'd have said "guitar, car and a house", in that order. That was it – the entire thing.'<sup>16</sup>

These would have been among the thoughts crowding Paul's mind as he walked from Allerton to Woolton to visit John. By road it was one and a half miles, but on foot or by bike there was a short-cut across Allerton Municipal Golf Course, emerging from the greens on to a bank above Menlove Avenue, diagonally opposite John's house. Both boys rode bikes to get around, but usually walked if carrying their guitars, not having cases. A long way from streetlamps, the golf course was pitch-black after dark. When Paul was heading home on late winter afternoons he'd try to steady his nerve by playing guitar and singing at the top of his voice. If anybody came along he'd immediately stop and pretend it hadn't been him, but on one occasion he was halted by a policeman. Paul felt sure he'd be arrested for a breach of the peace but the cop asked him for guitar lessons.<sup>17</sup>

John's house, on a busy dual-carriageway, was a semi-detached suburban villa given the name Mendips by its previous occupants. Paul came here less frequently than John's covert visits to Forthlin Road, turning up mostly on weekends. Conditions at Mendips were different: there was no need for stealth but Mimi made clear what could and couldn't be done in her house. After the first visit, Paul knew not to use the front door but to walk down the side and knock at the back, which led into the kitchen. (The front was rarely used.) Mimi would call upstairs, 'John, your little friend's here.' She had always been patronising about his friends, telling him in plain language if she considered them lower class or in some other way not good enough for him. When Mimi said this the first time, John assured Paul, 'That's just the way she is, you mustn't be offended.'<sup>18</sup> Paul watched the two of them with a curious fascination.

I thought John and Mimi had a very special relationship. She would always be making fun of him and he never took it badly; he was always very fond of her, and she of him. She struck me as being an honest woman who looked after John's interests and would take the mickey, but she would also say these [belittling] things, purposeful put-downs. I never minded it, in fact I think she quite liked me – out of a put-down I could glean the knowledge that she liked me.<sup>19</sup>

Mimi's husband (John's Uncle George) had died, and as the combination of a modest rental income and her widow's state pension was barely going to fund John's feeding and raising, she took in lodgers, students from Liverpool University. There was always at least one in residence, sometimes three or four, and their need for quiet study meant that Mimi frequently had to remind John to keep the noise down. Also, like her nephew, she was a gluttonous reader and relished peace and quiet.

Mimi didn't deny John and Paul space to play their guitars, but insisted they used the porch. It was standing room only in here, another breath exchange, one boy with his back to the front of the house, the other with his back to the internal front door.<sup>20</sup> (Despite Mimi's 'little friend' jibe, Paul and John were the same height, almost fully grown.) The porch was no hardship because with its high roof, art nouveau leaded windows and black and white check tiled floor it provided highly prized echo. Budding rock and rollers would do anything for that reverb, to be at least close to the heavenly slap echo sound of the great Elvis records. But for the traffic noise from Menlove Avenue – buses and cars speeding past – they could have been in Sun Studio, Memphis, Tennessee.

It was in the porch ('vestibule' in Paul's vocabulary) that John and Paul

cracked the chords to Elvis's Blue Moon, one of his first and best Sun records. In a sudden moment of joy, they found it was the same as Paul Anka's recent hit Diana, C–A minor–F–G, known to them from this point as 'the Diana chords'. Presley's cover of Rodgers-Hart's Blue Moon was an eerily minimalist blues and lent itself perfectly to the tiny echoing space. The porch was also good for whistling; Paul, who whistled well, appreciated anyone else who could do it tunefully and John was one of the best around. He often blew as accompaniment to Paul's singing or playing.

When Mimi went out shopping they would steal up to John's little bedroom – the 'box room' over the front of the house – and play records. By early 1958, John had amassed a fair collection (some bought, others stolen) of Elvis and Lonnie Donegan. Paul remembers how they spent time trying to anticipate the next music trend, so they could write a song in that style. Convinced that rock and roll would die at any moment, corporate America was trying to kill it, to save time, by kicking off the next kooky craze. John and Paul gave it some thought too, conjuring odd fusions like Latin-rock and rock-rumba and . . . then gave up. They learned that forcing an idea never worked, that songs had to come naturally. Plenty did: they hoped to write at least one in every session, and in this early period amassed perhaps twenty.

Few are known beyond their title. I've Been Thinking That You Love Me, If Tomorrow Ever Comes, That's My Woman, and Won't You Please Say Goodbye. A song called Years Roll Along ('It might have been winter when you told me . . .') was never completed. One that was, which they both recognised as the best of this first batch of Lennon-McCartney Originals, was Love Me Do. Paul would recall it as a 50:50 effort with John, written in the front parlour at Forthlin Road, but John said it was almost entirely Paul's. No recording of Love Me Do exists before the song changed shape and musical direction after four years had rolled along, but John and Paul both said how everything they wrote in this period was heavily influenced by Buddy Holly, including the vocal style.<sup>21</sup>

Another early number, written mostly by John, was I Call Your Name, which he would describe as 'my effort at a kind of blues'.<sup>22</sup> It went down in the book as ANOTHER LENNON-MCCARTNEY ORIGINAL but Paul's contribution may have been confined only to constructive criticism; he remembers working on it in John's bedroom.

Mendips was a window to another world for Paul. John used a portable typewriter to hammer out song words and also his poetry, and because he was a punchy and impatient typist, keystroke errors inevitably added to the jokes.<sup>23</sup> John had been writing for years, creating his own cartoons, comics and newspapers with wild wordplay and ideas; songwriting was merely a recent addition to his locker. He ran the two on parallel tracks with no crossover – it was *these*

ideas and words for the printed page and *those* ideas and words for the songs. Paul, who knew no one else with a typewriter and counted no other poet among his friends, was heavily impressed. John was *deep*, and there were few higher compliments. Paul would never forget (and always laugh at) the final lines of ‘The Tale Of Hermit Fred’, a poem John let him see, published in the Quarry Bank school magazine just before he left.

I peel the bagpipes for my wife  
 And cut all negroes’ hair  
 As breathing is my very life  
 And stop I do not dare.

The McCartneys had always lived in council houses, cheek-by-jowl with the working classes. It gave them a usefully solid grounding in that particular reality, although Paul’s strongly aspirational mother made sure they considered themselves a cut above. By Paul’s personal definition, John was middle-class, and though there was much about his friend’s domestic situation he didn’t yet know or understand, this was how Paul saw and admired it. ‘John’s family was rather middle-class and it was a lot of his appeal to me. I’m attracted to that type of person, particularly in the British. John had relatives up in Edinburgh and one of them was a *dentist* – none of us knew people like that. So I was attracted to that. It wasn’t a social climbing thing, it’s just that I find it attractive.’<sup>24</sup>

Paul spotted several other signposts to indicate John’s higher standing. In Mendips’ front room was a full bookshelf that included Sir Winston Churchill’s four-volume *A History Of The English-Speaking Peoples* and six-volume *The Second World War* – ten leather-bound folio editions John said he’d read, and had. They didn’t just have cats, they had *pedigree* cats. Paul had aunties, but Mimi was John’s *aunt*. Then there was Mendips itself – ‘a house with a name, that was very posh; no one had houses with names where I came from, you were numbers’.<sup>25</sup>

It was all irresistibly magnetic, but Paul’s predicament never changed: his dad didn’t approve. This wasn’t going to stop him, but he loved his dad and valued his own good reputation too much to openly rebel like John. It made John mad, and all the more determined to be the troublemaker Jim said he was.

Paul always wanted the home life. He liked it with daddy and the brother . . . and obviously missed his mother. And his dad was the whole thing. Just simple things, [like] he wouldn’t go against his dad and wear drainpipe trousers. He treated Paul like a child all the time, cut his hair and telling him

what to wear, at 17, 18. I was always saying, 'Don't take that shit off him!' I was brought up by a woman so maybe it was different – but I wouldn't let the old man treat *me* like that.<sup>26</sup>

Through sheer force of personality, John Lennon changed others' lives, and many went willingly on the journey. For Paul McCartney, who had a fundamental need to be noticed, stepping forward with John was a natural move – he was aligning himself with someone people couldn't avoid, and who thrust two fingers up to things in a way he envied but would rarely do in full view. At the same time, Paul could apply gloss, where needed, to minimise John's trail of damage. Their musical group was formed in John's image and driven ever onward by his restlessness, but without Paul he would have upset too many people too many times to make the progress they both craved. Paul's other strengths were his great talent, his burning ambition and his high self-regard . . . and when John felt them becoming overbearing he'd pull him down a peg or two, as only he could.

And so Lennon-McCartney stood shoulder to shoulder as equals, connected at every level, their considerable talents harmonised, their personalities meshed, their drive unchecked, their goal in focus. They were a union, stronger than the sum of their parts, and everything was possible.

**OLD BEFORE OUR BIRTH**



## **In My Liverpool Home (1845–1945)**

The significance of the location was unknown to those present that murky day in 1962 when four lads stood in front of a huge tea warehouse by Liverpool's dock road, having photos taken to publicise their first record. John Lennon certainly had no idea that the clearing of land on Saltney Street on which he was standing was where his family began their life in the city, just a few among the hordes of starving and mostly illiterate Irish fleeing the potato famine in their homeland.

At least one and a half million stricken Irish men, women and children sailed into Liverpool between 1845 and 1854. Plenty travelled on again, to America, Canada, Mexico and Australia, but a vast number stayed and few of those went very far: Saltney Street was hard by the docks of this great global seaport, ocean liners steaming up and down the River Mersey right at the end of the street. It's still there today, though the horrors of its cholera-infested housing have been swept away. In Liverpool, history is everywhere you look.

### **John Lennon – family background**

James Lennon was the first to put down roots. Born about 1829 in County Down, one of the nine counties to form the province of Ulster, he was married in 1849 on Scotland Road, the slum-ridden heart of Liverpool's immigrant Catholic community. He fathered at least eight children before his wife died in the act of delivering another, and probably the third of these, in January 1855, was John Lennon, grandfather.

John (sometimes Jack) Lennon grew into an intelligent, happy-go-lucky soul

who sang loud and often in ale-houses, worked mostly as a freight clerk, and led an intriguing life of mysteries, dead-ends and deceptions. After marrying twice, his longest relationship was with a Protestant woman, Mary 'Polly' Maguire. Their first seven babies all died, and of the seven that followed, the fifth was Alfred Lennon, born in December 1912 at the family home in Copperfield Street, Toxteth. After this, they got married.\*

When cirrhosis of the liver killed his father in 1921, Alf was eight. Malnutrition had visited rickets upon the lad, a common condition among the poor, and he wore leg-irons for a considerable part of his childhood. Three years later he was offered a place at the excellent Blue Coat School, in the district of Wavertree, the city's oldest charitable foundation for the free education of orphans and fatherless children. There was one proviso: Protestants only, and several certificates were sought to prove a half-truth. Alf received a fine education here, and like every Blue Coat boy was regularly marched down to Bioletti's, the barber's shop at the nearby Penny Lane roundabout, for a severe scissoring.

On leaving in 1929, he was found an office placement with a shipping company, and three weeks later, while ambling with his slightly unsteady gait through Sefton Park – one of Liverpool's many fine green spaces – he met 15-year-old Julia Stanley.

John Lennon's maternal family was essentially Protestant. His great-grandfather, William Stanley, born 1846 in Birmingham, had moved to Liverpool by 1868. He and wife Eliza (born in Omagh, County Tyrone, another of the Ulster counties) set up home in Everton, in the north end of the city, and in 1874 gave birth to their third son, George – the 'Pop' John Lennon would know until losing him at the age of eight.

By 1898, George Stanley, a merchant seaman, had united with Annie Milward (born Chester, 1873) and begun to produce a family. For reasons as inexplicable as John Lennon and Polly Maguire's situation at the same time, they did this outside of marriage, and their experiences were similarly tragic – their first two children died. The third lived, however: Mary Elizabeth Stanley, known as Mimi, was born in Windsor Street, Toxteth, in 1906, just a shout from the Lennons on Copperfield Street.

John Lennon isn't known to have been aware that both his father and his Aunt Mimi, key figures in his life, were, in the literally used word of the day,

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\* The first of their fourteen children was another John Lennon, born 1894, died of diarrhoea 1895. John and Polly claimed marital status right down the line, yet there appears to have been no impediment to their tying the knot before they did, beyond the usual (considerable) problem of mixing Catholic and Protestant.

bastards. What he did know is that the Stanleys always believed they were several notches above the Lennons, claiming better breeding, education, nationality, religion, refinement, resources and aspiration, at least some of which is debatable.

Post-marriage, four more girls were born to George and Annie, all to live long and to create, with Mimi, a posse of five sisters whose allegiances would prove strong in the decades that followed, and whose influence on John Lennon would be of great significance. The third of that final four, Julia – born in March 1914 on the proverbial eve of the Great War – was John’s mother. She was given licence within the family as the wild one, free-spirited, her notable wit and pranks enjoyed by all. Her father – the girls called him Dada – taught her banjo and she was talented, able to pick up tunes by ear. She was soon plucking and singing along to popular songs of the day, like *Girl Of My Dreams* and *Ramona*, which came across from America in 1927 as sheet music and then via three inventions that progressed rapidly during these years: the wireless, the gramophone and the talking pictures.

Julia left school in 1929 and met Alf Lennon soon after taking her first job. He wasn’t the kind of young man to object if someone found him funny. Creating an impression was the thing, even if he was being laughed at, which he was. ‘You look silly’ were the first words said to him by Julia, naturally drawn to the daft. ‘You look lovely,’ he replied, and a relationship was born.

At the start of the 1930s, Alf left his office job and became a merchant seaman, beginning a long and highly colourful nautical career. Generally known to his shipmates as Lennie (sometimes he was Freddie; he mostly called himself Alf), the sea was for him. The comradeship of his sailor pals was wonderful, there was a thriving black market to make extra loot on the side, he really did get to see the world, and the work was something he did well enough to earn several promotions: shipping records show that he went from bellboy to silver room boy, saloon steward, assistant steward and other, similar positions.

Alf’s best decade at sea was the first. His close friend Billy Hall laughs as he recalls:

He was a rascal. An *absolute* character. You wouldn’t think of going out anywhere without dragging Lennie along. He was always part of the fun – and if there wasn’t any, he’d make some.

He was an ale drinker, but once he started drinking he’d drink anything. If there was a bottle, he’d stay with it. He was a happy drunk, he just did stupid things on the spur of the moment. Most times he’d get away with it and laugh like hell.<sup>1</sup>

Alf had now reached his full adult height, 5ft 3in, and compensated for cat-calls by being the comedian. He whistled, played harmonica and loved to sing; he particularly enjoyed *Red Sails In The Sunset*, except he did it as 'Red suns in the sailset, all blue I feel day', having found that twisting words would winkle another laugh.

Though only sporadically back in Liverpool, Alf always claimed he was faithful to Julia. She, however, was nonplussed about his absences, scarcely reacted when he left, and never went to the docks to see him off. He'd recall how, even though he wrote to her, she never wrote back; and how, when he was home in Liverpool, she treated him coolly. He appears to have been her plaything, an amusing friend repeatedly ambling back into her life and then going away again, at which point she – a rebel spirit with a strong allure to men and a playful, vivacious character – did whatever she pleased. With their higher opinion of themselves, most (or all) of the Stanleys saw Alf as 'low', and there was also the religious schism, Protestant against Catholic, a gulf that violently divided Liverpool in these years.

Julia worked through the 1930s as an usherette at the Trocadero, one of several sumptuous film palaces newly built in the centre of town. With her lively personality, iridescent appeal to men, and a job that brought her into constant contact with many of them, it's not credible (though it's been claimed) that Julia resisted all male overtures because Alf was her one true love. When they married, it was for a dare, a lark. He'd later recall how Julia goaded him, claiming that, through sheer cowardice, he'd never propose.<sup>2</sup> That did it. Alf popped the question and Julia said yes. He fixed the wedding for Liverpool register office on 3 December 1938, just before he had to sail off to the West Indies. Their first married hours comprised an afternoon at the pictures (watching an awful Tommy Trinder comedy called *Almost A Honeymoon*), then Alf took his wife back to 22 Huskisson Street and went home to 57 Copperfield Street.\*

The news was poorly received at the Stanleys, as Mimi later remembered: 'We were all shocked. She just thought it was clever to defy the family. She soon regretted it when she realised it was not so clever. Julia was a beautiful girl, headstrong. I loved Julia. She was so witty and amusing, always laughing. We all make mistakes. Julia's was not realising the seriousness of a defiant "prank". The only good thing that came out of it was John.'<sup>3</sup>

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\* The Stanleys had moved to Huskisson Street in recent months from 71a Berkley Street.

## Paul McCartney – family background

McCartney isn't an English name, but efforts to establish when this specific line of the family arrived in England have proved fruitless, so many are the possibilities. Genealogists ascribe the name's journey to a start in Scotland as the Mackintosh clan, followed by a migration to Ireland, during the course of which they switched from Catholic to Protestant.

A clear and traceable line in Liverpool begins in 1864 when James McCartney (Paul's great-grandfather) married Elizabeth Williams, he the son of an upholsterer who may have fled the Great Famine, she the daughter of a boilermaker. They lived on Scotland Road, that heaving thoroughfare with Catholic and Protestant immigrants packed into dingy properties, from airless cellars to gusty rafters, unturned cheek by bloodied jowl. Their first child was Joseph (Joe), and by the time he came along, in 1866, they'd the misfortune to be in the despicable court housing on parallel Great Homer Street.

From the leaving of school until the leaving of his life, Joe McCartney worked for Cope Brothers & Co, importers of tobacco and manufacturers of all its related products. He was a journeyman cutter and stover for almost fifty years – hefty labour in hot conditions. A quiet and likeable man, teetotal, he blew the huge E-flat bass tuba in his works' brass band – warm and nurturing north-country music played at church fetes and on park bandstands. Joe was the first in the still-continuing line of male McCartney musicians to perform in public.<sup>4</sup>

In 1896, Joe married Florence (Florrie, Flo) Clegg, whose family were from Onchan in the Isle of Man, and they settled in Everton. There was the usual heartbreak: two of their nine children died in infancy. Paul McCartney's father, James – known to all as Jim – was the fifth, born in July 1902. The McCartneys were a no-nonsense, close-knit family and would always remain so. The seven surviving children – known as Jack, Jim, Joe, Edie, Mill (or Milly), Annie and Gin (or Ginny) – lived and looked out for one another and spoke with down-to-earth Liverpool wit and wisdom. Several could sing well, and Jim's favoured instrument was the piano. Around 1916, the McCartneys bought a secondhand upright from a nearby music shop called Nems, and Jim – self-taught, and despite being almost deaf in one ear – had natural flair, good rhythm and the ability to pick up all the popular tunes.\*

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\* Nems will play a huge part in this history. At this point, however, it was not yet owned by the Epstein family. Paul bought back his father's piano in 1981 (it had previously been sold) and still plays it. Jim got his hearing problem when, as a child, he fell off a wall in the narrow back alley ('jigger') behind their house at 3 Solva Street.

Jim McCartney exuded courtesy and civility all through his life, being someone to whom charm came naturally. (Paul remembers him habitually raising his hat to women at the bus stop and bidding them ‘Good morning’, and insisting Paul raise his school cap similarly. ‘Oh Dad, do I *have* to?’ ‘Yes son, you do.’<sup>5</sup>) A keen reader, and a self-schooled whizz at crosswords, he entered employment at 14, doing well to get work as a sample boy for A. Hannay & Co, cotton brokers annexed to Liverpool’s great Cotton Exchange.

It was at a Hannay’s staff soiree that Jim first played music for the public. The year was 1919 and the latest musical explosion in America, ragtime, had crossed the Atlantic, landing first in Liverpool because this was where the great ocean liners came and went. The immense popularity of ragtime, swiftly followed by jazz, fuelled and fed a boom in dancing and the evolution of the gramophone record into a standard format – typically ten-inch, made of shellac and spinning at 78 revolutions per minute (rpm), so harnessing the length of a song to about three minutes. Together with family and friends of family, Jim Mac’s Band played Merseyside’s many dance/music venues until 1924, though not very often. Were they any good? Jim had a pat and typically self-deprecating answer. ‘Band?’ he’d say. ‘Band? I’ve seen better bands around a man’s hat.’

They played all the great tunes coming out of New York’s gold-laden Tin Pan Alley, and also a more modest piece of music Jim made up, the first ever McCartney composition, an instrumental piano shuffle he called Eloise. A wife for Gentleman Jim, however, was not so easy. He went through his teens, twenties and almost all his thirties before finding her.<sup>6</sup>

Paul McCartney’s mother was Mary Patricia Mohin, born in Fazakerley (north Liverpool) in 1909. She was of strong Irish stock, Roman Catholic on both sides; though she married outside her kind, Catholicism was significant in her life.

On her father’s side, the genealogy is almost comical, undergoing three arbitrary changes of a similar-sounding surname in rapid succession. Her father, Owen Mohin, was born Owen Mohan, and his father before him was Owen Moan. Born about 1880 and known as ‘Ownie’, Owen Mohin was one of nine born into a poor rural farming family in County Monaghan. At 12, the boy escaped and got to Scotland, where he lived in a Glasgow inner-city tenement and worked as a coal delivery boy, which must have been exceedingly rough. In 1905, he married Mary Theresa Danher in an RC church local to her home in Liverpool; how they met isn’t known. Born in 1877, Mary was the daughter of John Danher, who’d arrived in England from Limerick (on the west coast of Ireland) in the 1860s.

Ownie and Mary brought four, almost five, children into the world. When

giving birth to the fifth, Mary succumbed to pneumonia and died with the baby. Mary Patricia was the second. The distress of losing her mother at the age of nine was then compounded by her father suddenly taking her and her two brothers to Ireland, where he made a failed attempt to get back into farming – and when they all returned to Liverpool, broke, he had a new wife and stepchildren, all of which was strongly opposed by Mary and her siblings.

The first time the Danher and McCartney families got together was in 1925, when Mary's cousin Bert (one of Jim Mac's Band) married Jim's sister Annie. Mary and Jim must have met at the wedding, but it would be another sixteen years before they began their relationship. Mary knew all the McCartneys and liked them as they liked her, and by the end of the 1930s she'd moved in with Gin, the youngest of the breed but soon to become matriarch. Now in her twenties, the daughter of an uneducated and poor man, Mary was determined to work hard and elevate her station in life. Set truly on the path of self-improvement, she went into nursing, with midwifery her speciality. She reached 30 as a ward sister and what people always called 'a spinster'.

## George Harrison – family background

Down the male line at least, the Harrisons were Liverpool English through and through: Protestant, bright, labouring class and, from the end of the nineteenth century, citizens of Wavertree. Once a self-governing authority, with its own history and fine Gothic municipal buildings, it bridges factory and greenery and has a foot in both. Though much of the housing was drab and basic, there were plenty worse places to live in Liverpool.

Despite being illiterate – like many others, his mark was an X – Edward Harrison (George's great-grandfather) was an artist with his hands, practising the trade of stonemasonry on public buildings. In 1868 he married Manchester girl Elizabeth Hargreaves and they had a substantial family; one of the boys was Henry, known as Harry, who also went into the building business. As his grandson George would appreciatively explain, 'My father's father, who I never knew, built all these great Victorian, or maybe Edwardian, houses in Prince's Road in Liverpool, which used to be where all the doctors lived. And in those days they knew how to build: good masonry, good bricks, good timber.'<sup>7</sup>

When Harry was killed, fighting for his country in the Great War, it didn't only forestall the continued Harrison imprint on Liverpool architecture, it widowed a wife, robbed seven children of a father and caused them all great financial hardship. He'd married Jane Thompson in 1902, whose father was Scottish and mother from the Isle of Man; the fourth of their seven offspring,

born at home in Wavertree in 1909, was Harold Hargreaves Harrison, father of George. With no assistance for bereaved families, everything was threadbare.

Harold, known to all as Harry, was by nature quiet and resolute, with a dogged strength and wry sense of humour. After leaving school at 14, he lied about his age and joined the merchant navy. From 1926 he was a steward with the White Star Line, plying the same routes and doing the same job as Alf Lennon. He first visited the United States in 1927; America was seen enviously as ‘the land of plenty’, because it was, and the Harrison household soon began to accumulate American gear, including a radio, wind-up gramophone, records and a guitar. Then, at home between voyages, Harry met a vivacious 18-year-old called Louise French, and by 1930 their lives were entwined.

On George’s mother’s side the influence is Irish – the known history stretches back to the Norman knights who sailed from France to Ireland around 1169 and settled as powerful Catholic landowners in County Wexford. The peasant locals called them French, which came to be misspelled Ffrench. These landowners received a brutal shock in 1649 in the form of the Parliamentarian invasion from London. When Oliver Cromwell’s bloody conquest was complete, and Ireland part of the British Empire, huge tracts of land had been confiscated, and for the next 250 years the Ffrench toiled in the soil they’d once owned.

George’s grandfather, John French, was born in 1870 into a family that doesn’t appear to have been as destitute as those around them, or even too badly stricken by the potato famine. Still, he left and settled in Liverpool in the late 1890s, where he met the woman who’d share his last four decades.

Louise Woollam, the grandmother George knew until he was almost six, was Protestant, not Catholic, and hers wasn’t a Liverpool family but a Shropshire one, gardeners and farmers. Her parents lived rurally – in Little Crosby, north of Liverpool – and Louise, born in 1879, was their third child. From 1905 to 1924, she and John French had seven children, all raised as staunch Catholics, but they weren’t married. ‘Mr and Mrs French’, poor but respectable folk of Wavertree, were the proverbial dark horses, free to marry but not bothering. Born in March 1911, the fourth of the seven was named after the mother, Louise.

It’s not clear if all this was known to their offspring, but John and Louise’s efforts to keep their status secret had ramifications beyond the point where its origin was necessarily remembered. So concerned were they that their situation should not be exposed, they maintained a marked suspicion about ‘nosy neighbours’, guarding information about themselves. Their daughter Louise – George Harrison’s mother – always felt strongly about anyone knowing more about her family than she wished, and passed it down to her children.

Louise and Harry Harrison always said they married in 1930, putting distance between this and the 1931 birth of their first baby, another Louise. The actual interval between the two events was three months, and no doubt the domestic circumstances were heavy. The oil and water mix of Catholic and Protestant was always a major problem, to say nothing of the fact there had clearly been ‘relations’ before marriage. They put their name down for a Liverpool Corporation house but knew they’d have to wait, and in the meantime rented a tiny terraced house at 12 Arnold Grove, a standard British ‘two-up-two-down’ typical of all these lives: downstairs was a small front room (used maybe three times a year) and a kitchen, upstairs were two small bedrooms. No heating, no bathroom, and no toilet except the privy in the minuscule and draughty back yard.

Louise gave birth a second time in 1934, to Harold (known as Harry, maintaining a generations-long confusion of names), and then Harry quit the White Star Line in 1936 so his wife wouldn’t have to raise the children alone. He struggled for almost two years to find work: it was the Depression, and times grew very tough for the Harrisons. The guitar was pawned, never retrieved. At the end of 1937, though, Harry passed some exams to become a Corporation (‘Corpy’) bus conductor, and by 1939 he’d qualified to drive and was behind the wheel – a quiet, rock steady, punctual character flashing his genuine lopsided smile at those he met.

## Richard ‘Richy’ Starkey – family background

Above the last docks in Liverpool, on the streets that take the hill from the Mersey, the nineteenth century brought petroleum stores, gas works, factories, chimneys and a hundred different manufacturing eyesores, swiftly accompanied by block after block of narrow streets and alleys packed tight with cramped terraced houses built to poor specifications. The area was known as the Dingle. Not everything here was bad – there was an authentically strong community, people pulled together and took care of their own, and housewives were as houseproud as could be. But there was no hiding the infestations, the damp, the decay and subsidence, or the malnourished and barefoot children. A high proportion of the Dingle’s adult population – generally Protestant, few Irish, and entirely working-class – was jobless and penniless, drinking and singing their lives away in its many pubs. In Liverpool, where you’re never far away from a run-down area, the Dingle – the ‘South End’ – had a reputation for roughness and alcoholism all its own.

Richy Starkey’s family were Dingle through and through. Dot an old map with the addresses of his ancestors and they’re all within a square mile. On

official documents this isn't the Dingle at all but Toxteth, or Toxteth Park, Liverpool 8, and these places are within the same precinct of poverty as the Lennons on Copperfield Street and the Stanleys on Berkley Street . . . but the Dingle is just a bit further south and more depressed. That word 'Toxteth' wasn't used in everyday conversation. Lads were 'Dingle boys' – a phrase that could spark fear in others, such was the violence and vandalism of its gangs of deadbeat youths. Other Liverpoolians generally kept away.

A key distinction between Dingle men was those who were unemployed and those who were unemployable, the work-keen versus the work-shy. Richy Starkey's family, on both sides, were workers, and generally had some. His father's father, a journeyman boilermaker, was born John (Johnny) Parkin in 1890. At some point between 1903 and 1910, his mother took up 'living in sin' with a married man named Starkey, a situation considered so sordid that, to avoid difficulties and gossip, Ma Parkin switched her surname to that of her new man, and her son, to maintain the illusion, changed his too. Johnny Parkin became Johnny Starkey overnight, just like that.

Johnny Parkin's father was a seaman working a lightship at Formby, up the coast from Liverpool. He was also John Parkin, born in 1865, and he in turn was the son of a seaman born about 1823 in Hull, across the other side of England. This man, yet another John Parkin (there were at least three generations of them), was married to a Hull woman and they moved coasts to settle in the Dingle about 1862.

The young man who flipped from Johnny Parkin to Johnny Starkey was married in 1910 to Annie Bower, born 1889, whose father was a tinsmith. They had four children together, the second of them – Richard Henry Parkin Starkey – arriving in October 1913. Known as Richy, he was the father of the boy born twenty-seven years later who, against inconceivable odds, would force his way out of a dreary dead-end Dingle destiny in the most spectacular fashion.

Johnny Starkey would play a crucial role in the raising of his grandson, and by all accounts he was a full-on 'wacker' (a much-used word for working-class Liverpool men and boys), being a drinker, labourer, gambler and brawler. No pushover herself, Annie was something of a twentieth-century witch, invoking the name of the devil and concocting her own remedies and potions when tending the sick. The Starkeys' was quite a household – noisy and poor. Their boy Richy became a confectioner, making sweets and cakes, and it was while working in a bakery in 1935 that he met the woman he'd marry, a doughty Dingle girl by the name of Elsie Gleave.

The Gleave had been in the Dingle over fifty years before Elsie's birth in October 1914. They lived in all the same streets and her family line was

also steeped in boilermaking, that dirty but vital ancillary industry in a city of ships. Her father John was one, his father too, and his as well, by which time the documents have stretched back to the middle of the nineteenth century.

Elsie's mother provided a little more variation. Catherine 'Kitty' Johnson was of Dingle parents but her father was the son of a mariner born in the Shetland Islands, off the north coast of Scotland, and her mother was the daughter of a gardener from Mayo – the only trace of Irish in this genealogy. They could have been Catholics, but it's unlikely: the Gleaves were street-marching Protestants in Liverpool, Elsie included.

John and Kitty married in 1914, and of Elsie's seven younger siblings, three didn't survive infancy. Life was grim for the Gleaves, especially after John went through front-line trench action in the Great War; Elsie was in the care of a grandmother for at least part of her childhood, and was out of school and into work at 14. She had a variety of jobs, one of them in the bakery where worked Richard Starkey.

In the throes of a chaotic time in her life, Elsie was receptive to Richy's offer of stability through marriage, and in October 1936 the bells rang out at St Silas Church. He was 23 and she 22. With nothing set aside, they moved into the cramped and boisterous Starkey household at 59 Madryn Street, and, like all the generations before them, tried to make the best of things.

Everyone knew a war with Hitler was coming, and everyone knew Liverpool would be devastated, but the city's preparations were poor and inadequate. Not that the first bombs to explode here in 1939 were German. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) began a fresh wave of mainland terrorism that summer, and – in spite of its vast Irish population – Liverpool was a repeated target. On 3 May, a tear-gas bomb exploded under a seat in the Trocadero cinema. It wasn't designed to kill and there was no loss of life, but this was only realised later; there was a loud explosion, a great panic, and fifteen people were rushed to hospital. The *Evening Express* ran a photo of three usherettes in their matching uniforms and pill-box hats receiving first-aid on the street outside. Julia Lennon isn't in it, but it's likely she was on duty and among the shaken staff who, with admirable calmness, ushered patrons to safety. The *Daily Mirror* headline the next day was 3000 FLEE FROM IRA GAS.\*

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\* The trade magazine *Kinematograph Weekly* reported (11 May 1939) that when the gas had cleared and the Trocadero resumed its programme, the organist struck up *Dancing With Tears In My Eyes*.

Four months later, on 3 September, Britain stood up to Germany's aggression and declared war. The Merseyside time signal – the 'one o'clock gun' fired every day at Birkenhead – was silenced. From the outlying quarry village of Woolton to the slums of Scotland Road, from Toxteth and the Dingle to Everton and Wavertree, all of Liverpool – as shockingly ill-equipped and under-prepared as she was – held their collective breath and waited, more or less unprotected, for the Nazis to come and bomb the hell out of them.

The British government's National Service (Armed Forces) Act compelled the call-up of men between the ages of 18 and 41, but as a merchant seaman, bus driver and cake-maker respectively, Alf Lennon (26), Harry Harrison (30) and Richy Starkey (25) were in 'reserved occupations' and excused duty, and Jim McCartney (37) was spared because of his impaired hearing. He became a part-time fire-watcher, and Harry Harrison may have gone into his works' Home Guard. Richy Starkey's access to the means of production meant his family had sugar, tightly rationed for everyone else.

Elsie fell pregnant about four weeks after war was declared, after which she and her husband moved out of Ma and Pa Starkey's at 59 Madryn Street and into a place of their own. Despite the certainty of heavy bombing right here – the adjacent docks were a clear target – they didn't go far: they carted their possessions just twenty-five houses along the terrace to a rented house at number 9.

George and Annie Stanley also moved when war was announced, renting a terraced three-bedroom house at 9 Newcastle Road, Wavertree, an area generally referred to as Penny Lane because of the nearby bus and tram terminus that took the name.<sup>8</sup> Their three at-home children made the move with them – unmarried Mimi and Anne, and Julia, now 25, whose husband – 'that Alf Lennon' – was at sea. It was Mimi's home for so few days it's doubtful she unpacked: she numbered among the many who rushed to marry when war was announced. On 15 September, age 33, she pledged herself to George Smith, a Woolton cowkeeper, 36, whom she'd known ten years. In one move, Mimi broke away from an imposing father, gained a devoted husband, moved into an inherited small cottage in Woolton, and had a little cash in hand – new and understandably welcome experiences in uncertain times.

Mimi would later remark that Julia swiftly regretted marrying Alf, and accepted that she'd allowed defiance of her family to cloud her judgement, but it was unlikely to have been for the sake of defiance that Julia conceived Alf's baby. The *Duchess Of York* was in port between 5 and 13 January 1940 and Alf had removed his waiter's white gloves for a week of unabashed revelry in and around 9 Newcastle Road. Always one for candour, he'd later boast how they made the baby on the kitchen floor.<sup>9</sup> Then he set sail again, helping to maintain the increasingly dangerous North Atlantic trade route. What just years

earlier had been an enjoyable job had turned into a hellish nightmare, U-boats lurking in the deep.

Ten minutes into Sunday 7 July 1940, in an upstairs bedroom at 9 Madryn Street, Elsie Starkey gave birth to a boy. He was a week overdue and the delivery was tricky, but he appeared to be a healthy, podgy ten-pounder screaming his lungs out. Fourteen days later, Richy and Elsie were back at the scene of their wedding, St Silas Church, to have their son baptised Protestant, Church of England. In working-class tradition, they named him after his father, so now there were two Richards, a Big Richy and a Little Richy.

Having babies now was tricky, as Louise Harrison was also finding out. In July, she gave birth to her third, Peter . . . and then, shortly after midnight on 17 August, the Germans finally began their attack on Liverpool. The first bombs fell on the southern docks, and when the sirens sounded Elsie and Big Richy jumped out of bed, grabbed the baby and panicked through the black-out to the pathetic shelter of the tiny under-stairs cupboard. It was only when the baby wouldn't stop screaming that Elsie realised she was holding him to her shoulder feet first. Years later, when he was old enough to understand, Elsie would tell her son the Second World War had started because of his birth – it was the only way it could be celebrated.<sup>10</sup>

Julia Lennon didn't give birth in an air-raid. Wednesday 9 October 1940 offered a rare window of respite from the falling bombs. Her baby was born in Liverpool Maternity Hospital on Oxford Street, Mimi as companion and the first to appreciate it was a boy – very welcome in a female-dominated family. John Winston Lennon's arrival was registered by Alf on 11 November. The name John might have been Mimi's suggestion, one that Alf, the informant, could have changed had he wished – but maybe it was his idea. It was, after all, his dad's name, and so the infant connected him to the memory of Liverpool's original John Lennon, 1855–1921. The middle name was in honour of Churchill at this time of fervent patriotism – the Stanleys, certainly Julia and Mimi, are said to have loved Britain's wartime leader – but the timing of the registration may also have been an influence: 11 November is Armistice Day, always a sombre date in Britain, when everyone wears a poppy and remembers the Great War dead. Now, in the midst of another do-or-die struggle against the Germans, the occasion had a focused poignancy.

Home for baby John was Newcastle Road with his parents (although Alf was about to sail away again), his Aunt Anne and his grandparents (Pop and Mama), with a dash for the shelter when the air-raid sirens sounded, and already frequent visits to his Aunt Mimi and Uncle George two miles away in Woolton, where the not-so-young newlyweds, stable adults with no children of their own on the horizon, were already forming a singular attachment to this one.

In the north end of town, in Norris Green, Jim McCartney too was seeing plenty of enemy action. He spent every night as a fire-watcher and, when called to duty, fireman. Day to day, though, his life was in turmoil. The British government's sudden wartime decision to nationalise the buying of cotton forced the closure of the Cotton Exchange; all work there ended and a new job had to be found. Matters were suddenly moving in his personal life too. Mary Mohin was visiting Florrie McCartney one night when the sirens sounded and she was forced to stay over. Jim and Mary had talked together many times, but if there was ever a spark of interest between them, it hadn't much ignited. This time, chatting for several more hours, it finally did. How long they courted isn't known, but relationships accelerate in times of war, and, as their loved ones were doubtless pointing out, neither of them was getting any younger.

On 15 April 1941, two weeks after losing his job, Jim Mac married Mary Mohin. He was 38 and she 31. He was Protestant by birth and agnostic by choice, but because religion was important to Mary, they married in a Catholic chapel. Jim found work at a factory making piston engines for British fighter planes, then he became a lathe-turner on a production line. They lived in a rented house at 10 Sunbury Road, Anfield (next door to a couple called Lennon), and Mary worked on the maternity ward at nearby Walton Hospital.

All Merseyside continued to suffer heavily from the bombs, especially in the Blitz week of May 1941, when Germany attempted to obliterate Liverpool, to wipe it off the map as a prelude to a land invasion. In that one week, 3966 people were killed and 3812 seriously injured; 10,000 homes were destroyed and 184,000 damaged – as if many of them weren't decrepit enough to start with. Liverpoolians, for whom tough times were a way of life, buried their dead, swept the rubble into piles and carried on. They couldn't be extinguished any more than their humour. One street-corner chip shop ('chippie') simply put up a sign – 'Owing to Hitler, our portions are littler' – and kept the home fryers burning.

The ensuing months were quieter, however, and in the middle of the pause, in September, Mary McCartney fell pregnant. As maternity ward sister at Walton Hospital she was accorded the luxury of a private room there when giving birth to a boy on Thursday 18 June 1942. It was just as well, because there was a complication. Interpreting signs that the delivery would be difficult, the midwife (who'd trained Mary) summoned the urgent assistance of a doctor. In the terminology of the time, the baby was born in a state of White Asphyxia, a condition that typically required direct cardiac massage and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. It was an emergency, but a brief one: the infant suddenly began screaming and all was well. Jim and Mary named him James Paul – the first from Jim, the second, maybe, from Jim's grandad, Paul Clegg (c.1815–79). To

avoid the kind of confusion common in many households, they called him by his middle name. He was baptised Catholic, but on King Billy's Day (12 July), the most important date in the Protestant calendar, when Liverpool was full of marchers.

A month or so before these events, Louise Harrison fell pregnant once more. She and Harry were still in the tiny house at Arnold Grove, the one they'd rented pro-tem eleven years earlier. Though they'd no intention of adding to the army of local families squeezing ten or more kids into a room, they wanted Peter to have a sibling around his age, just as Louise and Harry had each other. With Liverpool now free of bombs, and those elder children back from a temporary evacuation to Wales, bus driver Harry Harrison's house had room for just one more on top.

The baby was close to three weeks overdue when he emerged into the cold front-upstairs bedroom ten minutes into Thursday 25 February 1943.<sup>11</sup> No one could sleep through Louise's labour pains, and each in turn was invited to see the latest and last addition to the family, another boy. The strong similarity between father and son wasn't lost on Harry, who later said, "There he was, a miniature version of me. "Oh no," I thought, "we just couldn't be so alike."<sup>12</sup> He trooped off next day to register the birth. He and Louise hadn't discussed a name, so Harry gave it some thought as he walked the short way to Wavertree Town Hall. When he got back, Louise asked what he'd chosen. 'George.' 'Why George?' 'If it's good enough for the King it should be good enough for him.' The baby was baptised Catholic, and after a spell in his parents' bedroom a place was found for him in the children's – he had a small wooden cot, Harry and Peter now shared a single bed, and Louise had another. Along with a small chest of drawers, nothing more could possibly be squeezed into the tiny space.

Paul and George were fortunate to have a settled home life. The same could not be said for young Richy Starkey, whose parents split up some time after his third birthday. They'd been married seven years and it was over. There was no divorce (yet), just a parting of the ways, the child sticking with his mother. While Johnny and Annie Starkey would always maintain a close relationship with their daughter-in-law and grandson, their son provided his estranged wife and child with little support and Elsie was forced to raise Richy on whatever shillings she could scrimp. From 1943 she was taking any job going, but they remained firmly on the breadline. Elsie later said that Little Richy didn't seem too upset about it all, though he did complain about lack of company. 'When it was raining he used to look out of the window and say, "I wish I had brothers and sisters. There's nobody to talk to when it's raining."<sup>13</sup>

John Lennon was also feeling the effects of marital discord. The longest period he spent within a standard family unit was probably about two months,

when Alf was home for a spell and Mimi and George let him, Julia and John stay at their place, 120a Allerton Road, the cottage George had inherited from his father. It was spring 1943, after Alf had completed a succession of voyages to and from New York on the *Moreton Bay*. John was two and a half.

Alf would later say how shocked he was to find that, during his time at sea, Julia had been going out most nights to local pubs and to dances, mixing and singing with men of the forces, a married woman enjoying the life of one unmarried. And his next absence was much longer, because Alf got himself into trouble: first he deserted one of his ships, and then, on his next voyage, he was arrested for possession of broached cargo, landing up in a naval court in Bône, north-east Algeria, where he was sentenced to a month in prison. Back in Liverpool, Julia may have had no idea of her husband's fate. Down at the Mercantile Marine Offices there was no pay ('family allotment') to collect, Alf's letters home stopped, and all went quiet. Here ended whatever vestiges of marital fidelity she still maintained.

It's not difficult to imagine what a hit Julia was when she took a job as barmaid at the Brook House pub on Smithdown Road. She soon began a relationship with a soldier from Wales – history records his name only as Taffy Williams – and he evidently spent a fair bit of time at Newcastle Road, in John's company, because John would remember him. He'd also keep a particular memory of Julia at this time, when she sang to him I'm Wishing from Walt Disney's animated film *Snow White And The Seven Dwarfs*. 'Want to know a secret? / Promise not to tell? / We are standing by a wishing well.' It could be something she sang in the pub, because, like Alf, Julia enjoyed providing saloon entertainment.

The following November, when Alf knocked on the door of 9 Newcastle Road, it was eighteen months since he'd gone away. 'Give us a kiss,' appealed the guileless wacker, suggesting his long absence could be put behind them with a kiss and a cuddle and a roaring great yarn about Algeria. But Julia stopped him short and announced, 'I'm in the family way.' Out tumbled a tale to explain her pregnancy (she was two months gone) by Taffy Williams and a domestic scene blew up involving all parties, which the four-year-old John witnessed and would remember but never fully understand. Mimi watched ever more anxiously from the sidelines, concerned about the impact of events searing into her nephew's fertile mind.

That December, Alf took John away to Maghull, ten miles north of Liverpool, to stay with his brother Syd, his wife Madge and John's cousin Joyce. They left after about three weeks and then suddenly made a surprise and, in John's case, indefinite return: Joyce says he lived with them for several months – maybe three – staying in their small semi-detached house at 27 Cedar Grove.

He was here long enough for Madge to seek his admission to the local school in the coming September, and for she and Syd to form such an attachment that they hoped to become his legal guardians. Julia never came to see him, which left them a long way short of impressed. Then, probably in April 1945, Alf came and took John away. Joyce, who'd been getting along great with her younger cousin, never met him again. She remembers, 'My parents were devastated when he left – and not only for themselves. They knew John was going back to being dragged from one parent to the other.'<sup>14</sup>

The McCartneys, meanwhile, had begun a succession of short-term lets; Jim had found new work in an armament plant, and Mary had fallen pregnant again. Paul gained a brother in January 1944 – Peter Michael, known as Michael or Mike, and to his parents as Mick. The age gap was one and a half years, the distinction of older and younger brother always clear. Mary then became a municipal midwife for the Corporation, delivering babies around the north end of the city, which enabled the family to rent a reserved tenement flat in Everton.

VE Day, Victory in Europe. Little Richy Starkey, who'd lost a parent but not as a result of the war, sat down to a few severely rationed treats at an open-air party in Madryn Street, and George Harrison, youngest in a family of six, did the same in Arnold Grove.<sup>15</sup> Alf Lennon, back in Liverpool between voyages, was with his mum on Copperfield Street, his bizarre marriage in tatters. Julia had charge of their four-year-old John and was about to pop with another man's baby.\* Mimi and husband George had taken out a mortgage on a semi-detached house on Menlove Avenue, a leafy but busy boulevard in Woolton. For the McCartney family, VE Day would be ever tinged with sadness. Just a few hours before, Jim's mother Florrie died from a heart attack. Paul and Mike would never remember her, and with her passing they lost their last grandparent. In their stead, they had aunties, uncles and cousins galore to provide them with the most energising and memorable of family lives.

Much of the Liverpool in which all these people lived was in ruins, the city fathers having made distressingly few efforts to bandage its open wounds during

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\* A girl, Victoria Elizabeth Lennon, was born in June 1945 in a Salvation Army maternity home in the Mossley Hill district, a short walk from Penny Lane. Julia then allowed that organisation to arrange an adoption and the baby was assigned to a local woman and her Norwegian-born seaman husband. She spent her childhood just north of Liverpool and never met her mother, father or half-brother John. Her identity was made public in 1998 – her name had been changed from Victoria Lennon to Ingrid Pedersen, adopted daughter of Peder and Margaret. They show up in 1950s phone directories at 88 The Northern Road, Crosby, Liverpool 23.

the four post-Blitz years – certainly nothing like as much as Britain's other bombed cities were doing. But on this great day, the 8th of May 1945, everyone put the trauma of the six-year war behind them and looked forward to a brighter future. Schoolchildren were given the day off, streets were bedecked with bunting, flags were waved, and crowds gathered outside Liverpool Town Hall to hear the BBC broadcast by Winston Churchill and an address by the Lord Mayor – a great mass of people the like of which wouldn't be seen again at this place for about another twenty years.

## **Boys (1945–54)**

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Not long after war's end, Julia Lennon found herself a new man. She'd taken a job at another big local pub, the Coffee House at Wavertree, where she met customer John Dykins. He'd been spared active war service because of a lingering childhood chest complaint, since when he'd developed a twitch and was often nervously clearing his throat. He worked as a door-to-door salesman and was also involved in the local black market. He and Julia began an affair – confusingly, she called him Bobby – and again her family frowned on it. As before, John Lennon was often looked after by Mimi, who was expressing grave concern for his welfare.

Three miles away, in the Toxteth end of the Dingle, Johnny and Annie Starkey were helping care for their grandson Richy (or Dicky, or 'that bloody Noddler', as his grandad called him) – especially when he was ailing. Annie would make him either a bread poultice (slices of white bread soaked in boiling water, wrapped in muslin and applied to the skin) or a hot toddy (a spirit, usually whisky, with hot water). Richy especially loved the hot toddies, not to mention all the fuss that went with being ill. Annie was shocked her little grandson was left-handed; she announced he'd been possessed by witches, or the devil, and took it upon herself to exorcise it. Over a long time, but persistently, she defeated the evil, forcing the child to ditch his natural tendency and use his right hand instead. Not for nothing, and never without love, would Richy come to describe Granny Starkey as 'the voodoo queen of Liverpool'.<sup>1</sup>

Having been conceived about four weeks after war began, Richy started school ten days after it officially ended, on 25 August 1945. He was enrolled at St Silas, a large red-brick Victorian building annexed to the now bombed-out church where his parents had married. Elsie walked him there and said, 'On

your way, son.’ He instantly hated it. Elsie would tell the story of how he walked home at dinner-time and announced they’d all been given the afternoon off, and how she gullibly believed him until she saw other kids walking past their window, returning to school. He had nearly conned her, and there’d be hundreds of times when he did.

Elsie was scraping together around £3 a week through no end of toil – scrubbing steps and serving in a greengrocery, doing anything decent to bring in the pennies – and it was around this time that her estranged husband quit his parents’ house and left the area, probably moving to Crewe, about forty miles south of Liverpool. He saw very little of his Richy again, would retain few sympathetic memories, and stopped supporting his wife and child altogether. Unable to meet the rent on 9 Madryn Street, Elsie loaded their possessions on to a cart and wheeled them across High Park Street, then down the narrow ‘play street’ that was Admiral Grove to their new home – a tiny ‘two-up-two-down’ in a terrace which, Richy would always say, had already been condemned for ten years. He’d recall sitting on the back of the cart, his legs dangling over the side, as his earliest memory.<sup>2</sup>

Rented at ten shillings a week, 10 Admiral Grove had a wooden V (for Victory) sign only recently affixed over the front door . . . but there wasn’t much in the way of celebration going on inside. Elsie was angry with her husband’s behaviour and didn’t hide her opinions from their son, who’d later use the word ‘brainwashed’ to describe his intake; he expressed pain incoherently when he expressed it at all.<sup>3</sup> There were pubs at either end of the street and Elsie worked as a barmaid in at least one of them, needing the company and the laughs.

Home life was much steadier for Paul McCartney, now aged three, and also a natural left-hander (left unchallenged). Jim and Mary seem to have quickly established the kind of balanced domesticity experienced by only some families: Jim was mild-mannered, softly spoken, even-tempered and attentive; if he was cross, he kept it inside. Mary – quiet, firm, presentable, respectable – was more serious but also more demonstrably affectionate, though not overly so. She’d smack Paul or Mike if the need arose, but her biggest threat would be verbal: ‘You’ll get a smacked bottom from your father.’<sup>4</sup>

George Harrison was also being nurtured within a strong family, led by the indomitable Louise and steadfast Harry, Liverpool-sharp with decency. Harry had become an official with the local Transport & General Workers Union (TGWU), active at his bus depot. Though people considered him a quiet man, every so often he’d be up on a soapbox telling his worker brothers his thoughts and beliefs, and how he felt their lives could be improved.<sup>5</sup>

Still waiting for the Corporation to give them somewhere bigger to live, the Harrisons spent much of their time in Arnold Grove’s cramped kitchen. There

was usually a fire in the grate, with its adjacent oven where Louise baked bread; mantle-lights were lit by gas fed through a shilling meter; and the cooker was a two-ring burner on top of an upside-down tea-chest – from which lucky equipment, and using the government’s scanty rations, Louise somehow made three meals a day for six. Once a week here (as in Madryn Street, Newcastle Road and some of the places the McCartneys lived), a zinc tub would be brought into the kitchen and everyone – adults and children in turn – would bathe or be bathed with hot water poured from a jug into their ‘bungalow bath’. Photos of George at this age show a blond-haired boy, podgy-cheeked and with his father’s lop-sided smile, and every story of his childhood paints a picture of a lad singlemindedly self-reliant. ‘George was always a very independent child,’ Louise would explain. ‘He liked to do things by himself, no one to help him. He was also very intelligent and fun-loving, and helped a lot around the house.’<sup>6</sup>

John Lennon started school on 12 November 1945, at Moss pits Lane Primary, a suburban establishment typical of its kind. It was a short distance from Newcastle Road and Julia walked him there in the morning and collected him in the afternoon, working the Coffee House lunchtime session in between, and sometimes singing from its stage. Like Richy Starkey at St Silas, John began in the nursery class; unlike Richy, John saw clearly how he stood out from the crowd. He was exceptional, being advanced at reading, writing, drawing and painting, as well as at thinking creatively and communicating. But this gifted and lively mind was set in perpetual whirl by the adults around him. Problems beyond John’s ken and control had been hurtling at him since the womb – and now came the decisive episode.

At the end of March 1946, Julia moved in with Bobby Dykins, and took John with her. It wasn’t only a one-bedroom flat in Gateacre Village (close to Woolton), it was a one-*bed* flat – one double-bed in which Julia and her man were sleeping with her five-year-old son.<sup>7</sup> Considering with what fervour and frequency newly cohabiting couples usually enjoy sex, John’s intimate exposure to such a situation was truly shocking, no matter how discreetly the adults may have been behaving. Mimi went straight over to express her view, Dykins ordered her out, and she returned with a senior official from the Public Assistance Committee. This department of Liverpool City Council – the Social Services of its day – played everything straight. It wasn’t in the business of separating a mother from her child unless there was good reason, but an unmarried couple sharing a bed with a young infant was one such. As a consequence, for the time being at least, Mimi found herself John’s primary carer. He moved in with her and his Uncle George at their house on Menlove Avenue.

While all this was going on, Alf finally accepted he’d been taken for a mug.

His next engagement was on the RMS *Queen Mary*, the great Cunard White Star flagship sailing from Southampton to New York – another 1600 GI brides exchanging ration books for endless bounty. But this was in stark contrast to his own predicament. Before leaving, he placed an advertisement in the *Liverpool Echo* – ‘I, Alfred Lennon, recently of 9 Newcastle Road, Wavertree, Liverpool, will NOT be RESPONSIBLE for any DEBTS unless personally contracted<sup>78</sup> – which as good as announced that the extraordinary seven-year marriage of Alfred Lennon and Julia Stanley was over. Not a single photograph of them together is known to have been taken.

One of Mimi’s first actions was to remove John from Mosspits Lane and enrol him instead at Dovedale Road infants school – records show that he began here on 6 May 1946. The *Queen Mary* was back in England three weeks later; learning that his son was living with Mimi, Alf paid a visit to Menlove Avenue, one that seems to have been reasonably cordial. The next day, he said he was taking John out to the shops, but he didn’t: they took the train to Blackpool and stayed there. The school ‘withdrawal book’ at Dovedale Road records the fact: ‘Left district 31/5/46’.

Alf went to Blackpool because this was where his merchant navy friend Billy Hall lived, with his parents (the house is still there, 37 Ivy Avenue). Born in 1923, ten years younger than the man he knew as ‘Lennie’, Hall has for a long time been the only living witness to what transpired here, and the only person to relate the events impartially. (He calls John ‘Johnny’ because this was how Alf introduced him.)

Every account of Alf and John’s time in Blackpool has turned on the vital fact that Alf brought his boy here prior to emigrating with him to New Zealand – the plan being that Billy’s parents would emigrate and take John with them, to be joined later by Alf who’d work a passage there. This, insists Billy Hall, is fantasy.

There’s no truth at all in that. I said I would go to New Zealand, and Lennie said he might too, and also another mate of ours, and at some point it was mentioned that it would be a great place to raise Johnny – but no plans were ever made. Not only were my parents not planning to go, they didn’t even know I was.

The only actual plan that involved Johnny was that maybe he’d stay with my parents for two or three months until Lennie got something sorted out. But my mother was born in 1894 – she was already fifty-two. Though she looked after Johnny for the short time we were there, she didn’t want to be responsible for a young kid at her age, and Lennie had to go back to sea. He *had* to go back. We were only on leave.

The final scene – probably 22 June 1946 – is painted vividly in John Lennon docudramas as the ultimate heartbreak moment for the youngster, the blameless participant in a devastating tug-of-love, forced to choose between his mother, who'd come up from Liverpool to fetch him back, and his father, who was about to sweep him off to New Zealand. Legend has the tear-stained infant first choosing Alf and then changing his mind, running in cinematic slow-motion down a Blackpool street as Julia walks dejectedly into a sepia sunset. Billy Hall recalls what actually happened.

Lennie's wife came up with her boyfriend. I'll always remember him: he looked like a spiv, a wide-boy, with a trilby hat at a forty-five-degree angle, and a very thin moustache, like a smaller version of Terry-Thomas. He was probably there in case of trouble.

They needed privacy, so we let them go in the front room – which normally no one went into, and which my mother kept spotless. They talked maybe half an hour and then Lennie came out and said, 'I'm letting Johnny go back with his mother – she's going to look after him properly.' I remember him saying 'properly' because Lennie felt pleased that he'd fixed it. There were no raised voices – had there been, I would have rushed in because I didn't know this Terry-Thomas character and my pal Lennie was only small. I really can't remember if Johnny was in there too, maybe he only went in later, but there was definitely no tug-of-love scene. Lennie's wife didn't leave the house until Lennie came and told us what they'd decided.<sup>9</sup>

John's 'choice' was not between his mother and father, it was between his mostly absent dad's friend's parents – in whose lives he had no place – and home and school back in Liverpool. There was no choice at all. But there was a goodbye, John parting decisively from his dad. From opening time that afternoon until closing time that night, Alf got hammered. Then, on 29 June, he sailed out of England on the *Almanzora* and continued life's riotous adventure ... while Julia and Bobby went back to Liverpool, and Julia (who was pregnant again) handed John over to Mimi and there was no further question, ever, about who would raise him.

John Lennon was now a child of Woolton, this self-sufficient village that was the least Irish, and so most English, suburb of Liverpool. Along with many other local children, he was enrolled in Sunday School at the handsome church on the hill, St Peter's; the sandstone that made it came from Woolton Quarry, from where excavating explosions regularly shook the area.

Like Mary McCartney and many others, Mimi Smith was trying to climb

away from unvarnished working-class roots. George was now employed menially and on low pay, as a cleaner of trams and buses on the night-shift at Woolton depot, but they'd got a house that bordered on the affluent lower middle class – a semi-detached with a bathroom and indoor toilet, a telephone, picture rails, a couple of leaded-glass windows, and front and back gardens with lawns, trees and a shed. The previous occupants had pretensions of grandeur: not only did they give the house its name, Mendips, they called the middle downstairs room 'the morning room' and installed servants' bells – electrical fixtures that remained on the wall, but out of use, in the years John lived here. The Smiths had taken out a mortgage, and finding the monthly repayments was a stretch, achieved partly with rental income (from letting out a cottage George had inherited – it was now home to Mimi's sister Harriet and family) but mostly through prudent budgeting. Adding a child to the household was something Mimi had to manage with resourceful pragmatism. Though she gained John's ration book, she was never given the means to support him: there's no known indication that Alf or Julia helped foot the ongoing costs of their son's upbringing.

From June 1946, then, Mimi was the principal parental influence on John Lennon. Her character, which helped shape his, was later assessed by Mike Hennessey, a journalist who knew her:

Aunt Mimi is a remarkable woman. Slender, dressed with severe simplicity and regarding the world with warm, brown, inquisitive eyes, she somehow communicates great inner strength and resolution and an independence of spirit, all mellowed by an irresistible sense of fun. She comes, she says, from a family of incessant talkers and certainly [she holds] free-flowing and intelligent conversation ... She is extremely well-read, utterly self-sufficient, defiantly unsentimental and is sometimes mischievously irreverent. Her bookshelves are thick with biographies. She has a special regard for Osbert Sitwell but no time at all for slushy love stories. 'I couldn't possibly read that rubbish,' she says. 'If I read a book I want to be wiser afterwards.' Books are her only indulgence. She eats one simple meal a day, has never been to the hairdresser in her life and never wears make-up or jewellery. 'But if I go into Smith's, that's the end. I just can't resist books.'<sup>10</sup>

Already a keen reader, John became a bookworm at Mendips, digesting all the best juvenile literature and, while still a child, progressing to classic fiction, biographies, memoirs and histories – plus two daily papers, generally the *Daily Express* and *Liverpool Echo*, delivered and devoured. (John's reading skills were initially sharpened by Uncle George sitting him on his knee and poring over the

*Echo.*) John and Mimi often read the same books and discussed-argued their content. Mimi was fierce, stubborn, openly snobbish, pointed, bluntly uncompromising, nobody's fool – and John was never not aware of it and always 'gave back'. Though she might suddenly break into a Charleston dance to make him laugh (which he often copied), she was never demonstrative in her love, concealing it behind a coded series of verbal scoldings. She never hit him: her worst punishment was to ignore him, because he always had so much to say that needed to be heard. When she did, he'd plead, 'Don't 'nore me, Mimi!'<sup>11</sup>

She was never 'mum' to John, just Mimi or (when needling her deeper) Mary – and he stayed Lennon, never becoming John Smith. But he knew where he stood. He benefited enormously from her determination to provide what he'd never had in his tempestuous life to date: stability, assurance, certainty. She said she'd always be at home, that he'd never return to an empty house; she said she'd never go out in the evenings and subject him to the care of a child-sitter; and she got him put back into Dovedale Road school, where he shone, taking and fetching him every day. Her aim was to raise him as an individual. Both were as sharp as tacks, he exasperated her and she infuriated him, but theirs was always an earthy two-way relationship in which both could grow.

For a while, Julia came to the house and saw John, but then the visits stopped and Mimi encouraged distance to develop between the child and the woman he'd always call Mummy. Whether her judgement was right or wrong is subjective, but her motives were beyond question. If she was going to be the rock in John's life, she could not, at the same time, subject him to more of the emotional earthquakes he'd already suffered. This must have been traumatic for Julia at times (and Mimi too), but she never made any legal move to take him back, and none of their three voluble sisters made any noise about it either.

Mimi was one of two adult anchors in John's new life, because Uncle George was also important. Only three years older than his wife – 43 to her 40 – he seems somehow ancient in the photos, elderly before his time. He was tall, with a good head of silver hair, a kindly chap who, having served in the army, had seen a bit of the world; he could talk about things, sitting back to light his pipe and consider his view; he enjoyed salty jokes with his beer, and made Mimi's budgeting all the harder because he liked a 'flutter' on the horses. He and John formed a close bond and shared unimportant little secrets. He taught the boy to ride a bike and tried to demonstrate the finer techniques of cricket and football, though John had little aptitude for ball games. He also allowed affection: John insisted on giving him 'squeakers' – his word for kisses – before George put him to bed.

That Christmas of 1946, Mimi, George and John took the bus to Lewis's department store in the city and each sat for a series of Polyfotos. There's a

physical ease about John Lennon here that is extraordinary considering his stormy life. Comfortable in front of the camera, in a school blazer and cap, he smiles naturally and appears happy.\*

John's network of Woolton comforts also included family and friends. Running behind Mendips was Vale Road, where he found Pete, Nige and Ivan, his closest childhood pals – Masters Shotton, Walley and Vaughan. He formed them into a gang, four junior reprobates who persistently and sometimes dangerously terrorised the community for years to come. John was leader, because *he just was*. It was a position divined through natural unspoken process, by force of personality and, where necessary, by scrapping. Pete Shotton, a blond curly-haired lad, had the brazen guts to constantly challenge this and so became John's best mate. John Lennon liked to be confronted; by his code, if he found you were a pushover he'd push you over.

All three boys were younger than John, which was another reason he was the leader, but this demonstrated a further aspect of his unusual character: if you were different – an original thinker, in some way unconventional – age wasn't a particular problem. John's chosen friends were also intelligent – Ivan exceptionally so – and eager to follow their leader wherever he took them.

In early summer 1947, Richy Starkey fell dangerously ill. He'd never been the most robust infant, now he was sick beyond even the efficacy of Annie's medicinal compounds. An ambulance blue-lit him to Royal Liverpool Children's Hospital and appendicitis was diagnosed, but when they opened him up the picture was far worse: the appendix had burst and caused infected peritonitis. Barely conscious as he was wheeled into the operating theatre, Richy asked the nurse for a cup of tea. 'We'll give you one when you come round,' she answered – by which time ten weeks had passed.

Three times, doctors told Elsie he'd not survive the night. Still working all hours in all jobs, she was on the bus to the hospital every day, sometimes only allowed to see him through a pane of glass. One of the three desperate nights was 6 July, the eve of Richy's seventh birthday. But the boy was a born fighter, and would not surrender. When finally he stirred from his coma, he spent possibly another sixteen weeks slipping in and out of consciousness, and once this passed, at the start of 1948, he finally began a protracted and painful period of convalescence.

He was restricted to a cot with high sides, to allow his surgical scars to heal,

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\* The Polyfotos are on display at 251 Menlove Avenue, the house authentically re-created by the National Trust and open to the public.

so it was a time of utter, numbing boredom; there was simply *nothing* to do. Despite having been at school almost two years his progress had been unstartling, and at seven he'd not yet learned to read or write, so he couldn't even lose himself in a book. The nurses' instruction – *don't move* – held good until the day Richy wanted to show a boy in the next bed a toy bus he'd been given. As he leaned to pick it up, he overbalanced, fell out of the cot and ripped his stitches open, setting back his recovery another few months. 'Always remember, the sooner you're better, the sooner you're out' were the words he heard over and over, more times than he could count.<sup>12</sup>

In August 1947, a year after John Lennon had been relocated deeper into south Liverpool, Paul McCartney arrived there. The switch – seemingly the first time any of the McCartneys lived outside the north end – came through Mary's work. Her employers, Liverpool Corporation's Municipal Midwifery Service, needed a midwife resident on a new housing estate, and a rent-free house came with the job.

Speke was Liverpool's southernmost point and already the location of a small airport and industrial area; now it was to accommodate a vast new public housing project, effectively a whole new town. When the McCartneys moved into 72 Western Avenue they were among the earliest families to arrive: the road was still being constructed, grass verges were being sown and trees being planted ... but none of its much-vaunted British Utopian brightness would ever transfer from the architect's drawing-board. It was, instantly, *an estate* – nothing to do, nowhere to go, troubled.

Mrs M. P. McCartney SRN [State Registered Nurse], SCM [State Certified Midwife], her name etched on a brass plate on the gate, was a valued member of Speke's growing community. Paul had just turned five, and his earliest memory is of someone bringing her a plaster dog: she was brought gifts by many of the mothers she helped. Mary worked all hours (babies being no respecters of the clock), and, though the job was not well paid, she was dedicated and professional. Her attitude, Jim said, was never less than overly conscientious.<sup>13</sup>

The move more or less coincided with a welcome lift in Jim Mac's life: a return to cotton. He got a job at the reopened (though much-neutered) Cotton Exchange, and was even more fortunate to find himself back at Hannay's. It really wasn't like the old days though, and he had to accept what was called 'half-money', earning only about £10 a week before deductions. He felt acutely the 'shame' of not being a better provider for his family (a feeling imposed by no one but himself), but he was, nonetheless, back in his chosen career, a suited and courteous gent among friends in the business district.

Mary timed the move to coincide with the beginning of Paul's schooling. Jim didn't want him to go to a Catholic school, feeling they dispensed too much religion and not enough education.<sup>14</sup> Speke had a new Church of England school, Stockton Wood Road infants, and it was just behind the McCartneys' house; Paul began here as soon as they were in.

Things came more or less easily to him. He was naturally one of the brightest children – alert, upbeat, smart, gifted, funny. At the same time, since Speke was already a haven for young toughs, he could take care of himself, fighting to maintain position. Paul's only real difficulty was when anyone told him what to do. He was always one of the friendliest and keenest contributors, but the moment anyone – teacher, parent, friend – used the word 'should' or 'ought' to direct his actions, there'd usually be only one result: he would do the opposite, never doubting his right or ability to do so. As Paul says, 'I've never liked "ought". The minute I hear someone say *you ought to do this* I want to go the other way.'<sup>15</sup>

Sundays were the best days, at home, when Mary would whistle her way through making the best roast lunch rations could provide, and Jim would sit at his Nems upright piano, pipe in mouth, and allow his hands to find the melodies of old – some from those Roaring Twenties days of Jim Mac's Band, others more recent. The effect on his young sons, on Paul especially, was electrifying and permanent. 'I'd lie on the carpet and listen to him playing things like Stairway To Paradise or one I loved called Lullaby Of The Leaves, and a couple he made up himself. He'd just noodle around and it was lovely to listen to. He had a mate at the Cotton Exchange, another salesman called Freddie Rimmer, who'd come around and play as well, so there was always a musical atmosphere in the house.'<sup>16</sup>

Jim was reluctant to teach Paul the piano, so as not to pass on untutored bad habits, but it didn't matter because Paul listened and watched and *imbibed*, and his fingers did the rest. 'I started off with three fingers in the chord of C – C and E and G – and then I realised that if you moved the whole thing up a tone you got D minor, and if you moved it all up again you got E minor, and if you moved it all up again you got F, with the same shape.'<sup>17</sup>

John Lennon played his first instrument about the same time. The unsupported cost of raising him caused Mimi to take in lodgers at Mendips. Beginning autumn 1947, she had an ongoing arrangement with Liverpool University to accommodate students. They came usually in pairs, slept in the spare bedroom and used the ground-floor dining room for meals and quiet study. Because of this, John's youthful years were witnessed first-hand by a succession of bright young adults. They paid £3 a week for breakfast and evening meals, and Mimi asked for veterinary students because she had a dog and two cats (pets John adored) and they treated them free, needing the practice.

It was one of the first pair of house-guests, Harold Phillips – ex-Royal Navy, back in college as an English Lit student – who ignited in John the musical spark. He had a harmonica which John would not leave alone; one day Phillips held out the instrument and said John could keep it if he could play a tune by the following morning. The odds were narrow, but this boy had musical talent in his blood. Did he even know his dad and all his Lennon uncles played harmonica – or ‘gob iron’ to use Liverpool slang? John learned *two* tunes by the next day, and Phillips was as good as his word.<sup>18</sup> The instrument was now the boy’s, although Mimi made him wait for it until Christmas. John could always tap into the excitement of waking up that Christmas morning in 1947: ‘I felt the stocking and there was a mouth organ in it. A harmonica. That was one of the great moments of life, when I got my first harmonica.’<sup>19</sup>

A year after almost dying three times, by the summer of 1948 Richy Starkey was ready to convalesce at home. Elsie was thrilled to have him back and naturally more possessive. To Grandad Starkey, he was no longer just ‘that bloody Noddler’, he was Lazarus, the boy who’d cheated death. When finally Richy went back to school, however, he was hopelessly behind all the other children, and there wasn’t much accommodation of the fact. Left to sink or swim, he sank.\* It was much easier to ‘sag off’ than turn up: Richy and some pals would drift into nearby Prince’s Park, or scamper down ‘the Cazzy’ (the Cast Iron Shore) and be *deserters*.<sup>20</sup>

Richy’s decisive education in English came not from teachers but from a friend, Marie Maguire, four years his elder. Her mum Annie, newly a widow, had been Elsie’s best buddy for years; the Maguires lived at 10 Madryn Street, opposite Elsie and Richy’s former house at 9, and Marie always helped take care of the boy. Painstakingly, over a period of time at the kitchen tables of 10 Madryn Street and 10 Admiral Grove, even when Richy would *not* pay attention and threw things at her, Marie went over and over the *Dobbin* horse storybooks with him, pointing out each word and explaining how the letters formed sounds. Though he’d missed out on his education, Richy certainly wasn’t stupid, and he also spoke better than many in the locality, not dropping letters from words and not adopting the Liverpool ‘Scouse’ accent; he just needed this extra tuition to get off the ground. His reading ambition would remain limited – he didn’t progress much beyond comics for years to come, and his spelling was never good: he tended to write words phonetically, confusing ‘wood’ and

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\* After he’d spent several months in hospital, the school may have believed he wasn’t coming back: the St Silas admission register records ‘21.11.47’ as the date he left through ‘Sickness’.

‘would’, and ‘stake’ and ‘steak’ – but, through dedication and perspiration, and thanks to Marie, he’d made a vital breakthrough.

Like the generations before him, Richy’s life was bound up in the Dingle: home, family, friends, school, church, recreation. When he grew too big for a ‘bungalow bath’ in front of the fire, he’d scoot around to Steble Street baths and pay a few pennies for a hot tub. Music didn’t yet feature much. A photo shows him holding a small accordion, but he didn’t play it. His Starkey grandparents played mandolin and banjo (or ukulele) at family sing-songs and gave him the instruments, but he’d no interest. At seven, he got a harmonica – same result. There was even, says Richy, ‘a piano at home which I *walked on*’. The trigger came at the pictures, when he watched Gene Autry, on his horse Champion, singing *South Of The Border*, his three Mexican compadres adding the *ay-ay-ay-ays* as he rode along in a white cowboy hat, big wide-open prairie spaces all around. This eureka moment in Richy Starkey’s life came together as sound and vision. He’d never forget it, and would call Autry ‘the most significant musical force in my life’.<sup>21</sup>

From Autry onwards, Richy was and stayed a big fan of cowboys, of America and Americana, of country music, and of maudlin or melodic songs that tell the story of love lost and found. He harboured the dream of so many Liverpool sons: to become a merchant seaman and sail away to the USA, *the promised land*.

For a British boy intrigued by American country music, Liverpool certainly was the place to be. Merchant seamen (some known as ‘Cunard Yanks’) were bringing back goods unobtainable in British shops – cowboy boots, hats, jeans and records not issued by the companies in London – and that led to a small but vocal following of country and western (C&W) on Merseyside. The first guitar John Lennon ever saw was in the hands of ‘a fully dressed cowboy in the middle of Liverpool, with his Hawaiian guitar . . . He had the full gear on.’<sup>22</sup>

Country music was also a great influence on George Harrison – the first guitar recordings he heard were *Waiting For A Train* and *Blue Yodel No 4 (California Blues)* by Jimmie Rodgers, America’s original country star, a yodeller popularly known as the Singing Brakeman. The wind-up gramophone and records Harry brought back from New York in his ‘merch’ days bridged an ocean of magical discovery for his children. George’s impressionable mind was spinning at 78 with Hank Williams, Stéphane Grappelli, the Ink Spots, Cab Calloway, Hoagy Carmichael and Josh White, and all the Harrisons loved the records they bought in Liverpool shops by George Formby, the toothy, north of England, banjulele-plucking star of music-hall and film comedies. These were real English songs of rhythm and sauce, and George was hooked. ‘Those George Formby songs were always in the back of me life,’ he’d explain fifty years later.

‘They were either being played in the background or my mother was singing them when I was three or four.’<sup>23</sup>

John Lennon also loved Formby, and saw him on stage at Liverpool Empire in the 1948–9 pantomime season. An annual trip to the Empire panto was one of the two big treats he was allowed each year by Mimi and George, the other being a summer visit to the pictures to see Walt Disney’s latest. Mostly, though, John read. In 1965, he was invited to list the books that had made a forceful impression on him, and for the period ‘up to the age of eleven’ he specified Lewis Carroll’s *Alice In Wonderland* and *Alice Through The Looking-Glass* and Kenneth Grahame’s *The Wind In The Willows*.<sup>24</sup> John was given the *Alice* books as birthday presents and re-read them once a year – though he never bothered to find out if Carroll wrote anything else. He was also in love with Richmal Crompton’s *Just William* books, identifying himself with William Brown, the scruffy, rascally gangleader.

On the art front, John’s favourite was Ronald Searle, creator of the St Trinian’s School books. Searle’s character-full cartoons catapulted John deeper into drawing, which took up great chunks of his time from about the age of eight. Though difficult to categorise, his work fell into two broad areas. The first was to draw, in careful detail, and then colour in, good copies of established art, like all the *Alice* characters and other fictional and historical personae; he used these to illustrate poems he was writing in the style of Carroll’s *Jabberwocky*.<sup>25</sup> Another category was the Searle-like cartoons that gave a rough but dead-eye impression. In these, John hardly ever went into detail but would deliver the decisive feature – and most especially the humour – in a few speedy fountain-pen flourishes that cut to the core, saying everything in a few lines. He drew them fast and then moved on to the next.

Mendips’ student lodgers would get used to the sight of John and Mimi quietly together in either the front room or ‘the morning room’, she reading, he reading or creating. John had to wear glasses, having become short-sighted by about the age of seven (just like Julia). Mimi took him into town and had him tested for a pair of ‘goggles’ issued free by the new National Health Service, round and wire-framed, with a curly circle of flex to run behind the ears (and abrade the skin). Julia’s short-sightedness had been unaided for twenty or so years now and John started out in much the same direction: his glasses were for *inside* use only, as his friend Nigel Walley remembers. ‘He didn’t want to be seen out in them, and kept them in an inside pocket along with his mouth organ. He might slip them on to see something, but he’d whip them off again very quickly.’<sup>26</sup>

In August 1948, John went up into the junior section at Dovedale Road school. The infants had been mixed gender but now it was boys only and John

wasn't slow or shy in ensuring a necessary dominance, fighting whoever wouldn't listen to reason. He also told Mimi she couldn't take him there any more, that he'd go alone ... and virtually these same words were also being said, at the same place and time, by George Harrison to his mum. Louise had sent her first two children to Catholic schools but let her third and fourth go Church of England. Peter was switched to Dovedale Road in April 1948 and George went there too, to start his schooling – though because of the age gap (and juniors used a different playground to the infants) he and John didn't know each other. Later, though, they'd have the same teachers and similar experiences to remember.

In Peter, George already had someone to take him to school and fetch him home again in the afternoons, and he didn't want his mum doing it. She took him the first day but then he put his five-year-old foot down: the scene at the gate was not for her. As Louise would recall, 'George was always against nosy mothers, and he used to hate all the neighbours who stood around gossiping.'<sup>27</sup>

Julia Lennon, Bobby Dykins and the child they'd had together – Julia Lennon, aka Julia Dykins, born March 1947 – had long since left the one-bed flat in Gateacre and been living back at Newcastle Road. Then George Stanley (John's grandad) died and they had to move. They applied to Liverpool Corporation for a council house, and as Julia was pregnant again at the time were given priority and assigned a pleasant three-bedroom semi-detached house on the Springwood estate, near Garston, at 1 Blomfield Road. It was under two miles from Mendips, though it's said Mimi kept this from John. To get the house, Julia and Bobby had to pretend they were married, and there was little chance of this becoming anything other than a deception because Alf Lennon wasn't minded to grant her a divorce, and wasn't around to discuss it. They show on the electoral roll as John Dykins and Julia Dykins, and no neighbour thought them otherwise. Also, while Julia's real husband was a waiter, on board ships, her 'husband' had chucked in door-to-door selling and become a waiter in a Liverpool hotel.

Julia was now settled for the first time in years. Giving birth to John hadn't stopped her leading a merry life, and her second baby had long gone for adoption, but at the third stroke she gave up work precisely to become a housewife and full-time mother. Her character remained unquenchable, of course: she still made people scream with her repartee and singing, and she went out shopping in six-inch stiletto heels, walking down the street like a petite doll. When, inevitably, a man gave her a wolf-whistle, she'd wolf-whistle back or shout 'Not bad yourself!' – although, with her poor eyesight, she'd no real idea what her admirer looked like.<sup>28</sup>

Julia had a bedroom to spare at Blomfield Road but John stayed at Mendips. He did see her though – there are photos of a summer 1949 family gathering at his Aunt Anne’s house in Rock Ferry, ‘over the water’ (across the Mersey) from Liverpool: two shots of John with his cousins and half-sister, and one of him with Julia. It’s the only known photo of John and Mummy. He’s in short trousers, laughing as she tickles him under both arms, and she’s wearing a baggy dress under which she’s four or five months pregnant. That October, she gave birth to her and Bobby’s second baby – Jacqueline Gertrude Lennon, aka Jacqueline Gertrude Dykins – so John now had two infant half-sisters, actually three.

It could have been because of Julia’s past predicament that Mimi supported the Salvation Army’s residence for the children of broken homes. Strawberry Field – Strawberry Fields most called it – was a Gothic mansion with turrets and towers, a rambling great edifice of Woolton sandstone, set in substantial private grounds.<sup>29</sup> Fun was had, and funds were raised, at its annual garden fete, an archetype of British summer life. Girls from the home – known as ‘Strawbs’ – went around the district in their summer striped-blue dresses, selling tickets door-to-door. Come the day, a brass band played, the children staged dancing and gymnastic displays, and there were stalls with little games, secondhand ‘jumble’, and homemade refreshments subject to rationing: tea, lemonade and cakes. Mimi always took John, until he went independently.

He knew the place well. To John, Pete, Nige and Ivan, Strawberry Fields meant the private grounds, not the big house. It was one of their prime hang-outs: they’d scamper over the wall in Vale Road and disappear into the trees, with infinite opportunities for trouble, adventure, danger. One known peril was the groundsman – John called him ‘the Cocky Watchman’, or ‘Cocky Watchtower’ – a sour and sometimes vicious individual who hated all young trespassers, that Lennon gang in particular. He wouldn’t think twice about giving them a good hiding, but had to catch them first. ‘I suppose you realise this is private property!’ he’d shout as they hightailed it into the wind . . .

The Liverpool of all these childhoods was in a sorry state as the 1940s turned into the 1950s. Little had gone right here in decades, just depression layered on downturn. Viewing it as would a stranger, a *Liverpopolitan* magazine writer noted, ‘What I saw made me almost ashamed of my home town. Once progressive and proud, the city is now dilapidated and dirty; shabby and down-and-out.’<sup>30</sup> True, the sounds of the place hadn’t altered – the reinstated ‘one o’clock gun’ that reported every lunchtime, the seagulls, the foghorns, the laughter pouring from pub doorways – but its look had: the landscape was full of still-unrepaired bombsites, open lesions that had become children’s playgrounds (‘bommies’)

or eternal temporary car parks. The old place had plenty of fine public buildings, but everything was black with encrusted soot; ruined shops were riddled with police-dodging barrow boys; and people queued for almost everything, standing in long lines. The air was damp even when it wasn't raining – and instead of it being healthy air, fresh from the Irish Sea, it was (as the Liverpool novelist John Brophy noted in 1946) 'laden with smoke and soot and grease, and with smells from tanneries, breweries, oil-cake factories, margarine factories, smells from the engine-rooms of ships, from dockyards, from thousands of warehouses where every sort of cargo is stored'.<sup>31</sup>

Outsiders who had dealings with Liverpool were losing patience. A travellers' journal published by the great Thomas Cook & Son tried hard to apply gloss but it really wasn't easy. 'Let it be allowed that Liverpool took a tremendous pounding in her blitz week. Other cities took a hammering also, but somehow Liverpool never seems to have risen from the count.' In the London newspapers, Liverpool had become a word as dirty as its blackened buildings, and even *Liverpolitan* had to admit that the many charges against it were accurate – 'slovenly city, filthy tram cars, dilapidated buildings and dingy streets', the people 'ill-mannered savages', its women 'dowdy, shabbily dressed and carelessly groomed'.<sup>32</sup> But then, let them say what they like: Liverpudlians didn't like or trust Londoners anyway – they were 'soft' and 'bloody southerners'. Two fingers to the lot of 'em.

Liverpool's brain-drain, running since the 1930s or before, was accelerating now. Plenty with talent and ambition got out and made their lives elsewhere, while those who couldn't or wouldn't retreated further into the Liverpudlians' protective shell to keep them in and the rest out, Liverpool an enclave unto itself, nowhere else like it, its backside to the rest of the country, its people tightly together and, though sharply self-deprecating, acutely sensitive to an outsider's criticism. Deep down, pretty much everyone knew why people left, but those who stayed would disparage and hold a grudge against those who did.

Even its dream new housing estates, like the one at Speke, were soon plummeting in ambition; and it was here on New Year's Day 1950 that the Harrisons became the first residents at 25 Upton Green. It was eighteen years since Harry and Louise, then with one child, applied for a council house – so long ago that the child had grown up and gone. All the participants in the move – Harry (40), Louise (38), Harry (15), Peter (9) and George (6) – had lived their entire lives in Wavertree, compact but cosy. Quickly, having so long hankered for someplace else, they wanted to move back.

The novelty of being in a new house held good for a while – 25 Upton Green had no heating but it did have electricity, plumbing (an indoor loo at last, and

even a bath), front and back gardens and, though the place was small, what seemed to George like *space*. He'd recall, 'After [living in] a two-up-two-down terrace house, you could go from the hall to the sitting-room then into the kitchen then into the hall again and back into the sitting-room. I just ran round and round it all that first day.'<sup>33</sup>

The main problem in Speke – as the McCartneys were also finding out less than a mile away in Western Avenue – was the undesirability of some of the neighbours. Upton Green was a close, a large oval bordered by identical estate houses; young kids played on the grass in the middle, older kids hung round the garden gates. When Louise tried to grow things, delinquents wrecked them – plants murdered in their beds. That got to George. As he'd later explain, 'As soon as we got to Speke we realised we had to get out of there, fast. The place was full of fear and people smashing things up. We got on another list.'<sup>34</sup> As for school, Louise decided against having George transferred to Speke, so he stayed at Dovedale Road, necessitating a long bus journey every morning and afternoon.

Alf Lennon didn't begin the new decade very well either. The *Dominion Monarch* docked at Tilbury before Christmas, after which he tomfooled around London with a few shipmates, waiting for it to sail again in mid-January. Alcohol was surely a fixture, opening time to closing with bottles between sessions, and late on Sunday 8 January they were laughing and shouting their way along Oxford Street when they stopped in front of a ladies' gown shop. A moment or two later the window was smashed and Alf and another Liverpool sailor, John Murphy, were dancing down Oxford Street with beautiful expensive dresses ... and waltzed right into the arms of the scuffers. The next morning, after sleeping off their drunkenness in the cells – Alf had probably cut himself too, because records show he needed a doctor – the Marlborough Street magistrate looked sternly upon Lennon and Murphy, both of 'no fixed abode'. Pleading guilty to a charge of breaking and entering, and stealing two gowns to the value of £42 8s 6d, they were each sentenced to six months. The ledger at the west London prison Wormwood Scrubs details Alf's incarceration: he arrived there from court on 9 January and was transferred to Brixton, south London, on 13 February, where he lived until gaining early release in the second week of May.<sup>35</sup>

This wasn't unknown behaviour for Alf – it was at least his third time in the clink. Always one for a laugh, the ale led him a merry life over which he exercised no apparent control. Friend Billy Hall remembers being with him in New Zealand in 1944 or '45 when they'd been drinking and Alf was shouting about smashing a jeweller's shop window. They didn't, but they did nick a bicycle and

were making whoopee around the streets of Wellington until police stepped in and let them off with a warning.<sup>36</sup>

When the *Dominion Monarch* put to sea, Alf was marked down as AWOL. He was unable to explain himself until after release from Brixton, when the Merchant Service – taking a bleak view of events – dismissed him from duty. After twenty eventful years at sea, Alf Lennon was a sailor no more, beached at the age of 37, high but rarely dry.

His brothers despaired for him, but Alf received understanding and support from an unlikely source: Mimi. Using his best Blue Coat-educated grammar and script, and calling himself ‘Alfred’, he wrote to her (quite properly calling her ‘Mary’) and confessed to his situation. He corresponded first from prison and then from Copperfield Street, and Mimi – despite her consistent and now reinforced opinion of ‘that Alf Lennon’ – not only replied in kind but enclosed the first of at least two letters from John, friendly and chatty words from a nine-year-old lad to a dad he’d not seen in four years. She also enclosed some recent photos, so Alf could see his boy again. What Alf called ‘white lies’ were necessary between the adults, to prevent John discovering a certain embarrassing predicament, but it’s clear from the letters that Mimi was trying to bring father and son closer. They were, at this moment, four miles apart, Toxteth to Woolton, but it was a wish that prompted Alf’s retreat. Soon afterwards, he heard there might be a job going at Middleton Tower – a summer holiday camp in Morecambe, just up the coast from Liverpool – and went after it. He was on ‘KP duty’ (kitchen porter), up to his elbows in sudding dishes. And when the season ended, in September 1950, Alf hit the road and became an itinerant, going where the brew blew him.

The boy Lennon who had this sudden, unexpected contact with his dad had two still-evolving characters now, one for inside the house – reading, writing, drawing – the other for outside, a boy Mimi scarcely saw or would have recognised. This was the John Lennon of larks and dares, scraps and scrapes, games and guffaws, everything for laughs. There was plenty of boyish cruelty, verbal more than physical (though John was never shy to use his fists), and it was great to be in his gang even when he forced you to steal. John was now petty-thieving whenever and wherever he could. He called it ‘slap leather’, and all the gang had to do it. Shops were fair game, toy cars or sweets slipped into pockets with shopkeepers none the wiser. If there was trouble, though, if a Lennon plan went awry, he had the knack of disappearing. The gang members would turn around and their leader would be gone.

John’s ‘outside’ vocabulary was now awash with swear words, instantly learned and put to inventive use, and he also adopted the lexicon of many a Liverpool kid, the local argot that Mimi Smith (and Mary McCartney and

others) frowned upon but which Lennon, Starkey, McCartney and Harrison all used – where something good or great was ‘gear’, and stupid was ‘soft’, and out of fashion was ‘down the nick’; and when taunting or teasing someone you’d shout ‘Chickaferdy!’; and if someone was spineless they were ‘nesh’; and you said ‘Come ’ead!’ (‘come ahead’, for ‘come on’); and ‘Eh oop!’ had many uses, from ‘hello’ to ‘let’s go’, and ‘lad’ was ‘la’; and an interesting person was a ‘skin’ – so ‘Eh la!’ and ‘Eh oop, la!’ and ‘E’s a good skin’; and where (though swearing was muted on the street because people got upset if they overheard it) ‘stupid get’ (‘stupid git’) or ‘yer daft get’ were OK . . . and then you said goodbye to your mates with a wacker’s ‘Tarrah well!’

John was the first of his pals to pick up some ‘facts of life’, information he readily passed on, and such was the way he conducted his life, adults swiftly singled him out as an undesirable. Each of his gang, and plenty of other boys in the district, heard the same words: ‘Keep away from that John Lennon, he’ll get you into trouble’, or ‘he’s a bad influence’, or ‘he’s a wrong ’un’. Many did, but some simply couldn’t. As Nigel Walley says, ‘He was a good buddy to have beside you: he wasn’t a loner, he liked company, he was funny, he was generous, and he always supported his mates.’<sup>77</sup>

Three miles south, in Speke, Paul McCartney was now well established at Stockton Wood school, if not top of the class then certainly capable of it. Home life was settled, and he had a devoted playmate in his younger brother Mike. Paul led, egging ‘our kid’ into situations in which there could only ever be one casualty. In September 1950, Mary brought her midwifery career to an end, wanting a job where she was home nights and weekends. Paul and Mike were growing up fast and needed the benefit of closer attention. This meant relinquishing 72 Western Avenue, the house that had come with the job.

She was instantly appointed Speke’s health visitor, administering advice and care around the district. Another Corporation house was found for them, deeper into the estate at 12 Ardwick Road – at least the seventh place Paul had lived in his eight years; it was rented, not free, but the McCartneys had two working adults. The worst thing about moving was that Paul and Mike had a longer walk to school. As they made their way back to Stockton Wood each day they’d pass close to Upton Green, which George Harrison was leaving to catch the bus up to Dovedale Road, he in his school cap, blazer and short trousers, they in theirs, passing as strangers. The *best* thing about Ardwick Road was that they were just half a mile from the eastern edge of the estate, beyond which it wasn’t Liverpool any more but real Lancashire: different accents, woods, fields, farms and cliffs down to a more rural River Mersey. Years of happy adventuring lay ahead.

George rose from the infants to the juniors at Dovedale Road in August 1950 and would always remember being happy here. He reckoned himself a swift runner and liked playing football and cricket. He was comfortably bright, and he could take care of himself. Like a certain Dovedale boy two years his senior, George wasn't shy to use his fists. In the lingo of the day, he was 'handy'. The school's Punishment Book records the date he was caned for 'Disorderly behaviour in lines, despite repeated warnings'. It was 8 May 1951, when he was eight. A new teacher, Mr H. Lyon, administered a single stroke on George's hand. To what would be Lyon's regret, his aim was slightly askew; the cane thwacked across George's wrist and brought up a weal. As George would recall, 'When I got home my dad saw it, and the next day he came down to the school, got Mr Lyon out of the class and stuck one on him.'<sup>38</sup> Harry Harrison, the quiet man bestirred when he saw a wrong, was a hero to every child, but it wasn't the punishment he objected to, only Lyon's aim.

Richy Starkey was also fighting – he had to, where he lived. He won only rarely, and even then might have to face the retribution of his victim's big brother. Richy longed for a big brother who'd take care of the ruffians who picked on *him*, though Elsie certainly never fought shy of taking it to the opposition: 'My mother had many a fight for me. If anybody bigger picked on me, she'd be down knocking on the door and would deal with them.'<sup>39</sup>

Richy could have taken the Eleven-Plus exam in spring 1951 but St Silas didn't enter him. There was a Review, a filtering process, and it proved that the boy, so far behind in his education, had no chance of succeeding in such a test. Like most local kids, at 11 he ended up at Dingle Vale, a secondary modern school for the academically unexceptional, where boys and girls were segregated and streamed into A, B, C and D levels depending on ability. Richy was put in C, pretty much a no-hoper. His curriculum included gardening. The cane and slipper were liberally applied, and no GCE O-Level exams were taken: any child considered capable of sitting them was transferred to a technical or grammar school; all the others would leave empty-handed (some empty-headed) at 15, fit only for manual labour. Even the headmaster had to admit that the process had 'a deadening effect'.<sup>40</sup>

Richy's most-told memory of his years here is of going out on to Dingle Lane with mates Davy Patterson and Brian Briscoe and spending Elsie's 'dinner money' not on the school-provided meal but on a small loaf of Hovis bread, four penn'orth of chips and five Woodbines ('Woodies') – the cheapest brand of cigarette, the working man's fag. Like generations before and after, he'd scoop out the dough from the loaf, stuff it with chips (so making 'a chip butty', only without the butter), then return to school to eat, smoke and talk shit while lolling on the swings. Richy was a smoker from about 11.

Though he could make the best of not very much, Richy had experienced little real joy for a long time, so it was a great relief when, perhaps towards the end of 1951, Elsie suddenly had a man in her life again and the boy gained a father-figure, a dad like he'd never had. He was Harry Arthur Graves, born in Romford in 1913 – a year older than Elsie. Harry was a cockney, a West Ham supporter from the East End of London who, fantastically, forsook the slightly warmer climes and better living conditions of Romford to go and live in Liverpool 8. His explanation for the move – that he was ill and his doctor had suggested a change of air – warrants more questions than answers.<sup>41</sup> More likely he was getting away from a failed marriage: Harry was hitched in 1937 to a Romford girl and it hadn't worked, then in 1946 he arrived in the Dingle and rented a house on Jacob Street. (Harry and Elsie themselves couldn't marry yet because she was only separated from Richard Starkey, not divorced.)

Harry made friends fast. Liverpudlians never ceased to remind him he was 'a bloody soft southerner' and 'a cockney bastard', but most accepted him because he was a nice man, a sweet and gentle soul, softly spoken. Everybody liked Harry. 'All animals and children loved him,' Richy would say, adding, with touching respect, 'I learned gentleness from Harry.'<sup>42</sup> He was certainly a great and welcome ally for the lad. Employed as a painter and decorator for Liverpool Corporation, he was part of a team of men maintaining public buildings – respectable manual work; one job they had was out at the US Air Force base at Burtonwood, and Harry delighted Richy by bringing him back some highly desirable DC comics. They also went to the pictures together two or three times a week. Harry indulged the boy: when Elsie said he'd been giving her cheek and needed disciplining, he'd just shrug his shoulders and smile conspiratorially. Richy needed and welcomed such a man in his life.

Dingle people actually had much in common with cockneys. Both were poor and working-class, both were predominantly English/Protestant, both suffered terrible bombing at the hands of the Germans, and both liked a good drink and boozy sing-song. One big reason Harry fitted right at home in Liverpool 8 was because he liked nothing better than to go to the pubs and clubs, get a few ales inside him and sing. He had a good voice and music in his ancestry. Harry's favourite songs, for which he earned a decent local reputation, were *Night And Day*, *Star Dust*, *Bye Bye Blackbird*, *Dream*, *That Old Black Magic*, and *Moonglow*. His musical tastes, and the gentle way he exposed Richy to singers such as Sarah Vaughan, Billy Daniels and Billy Eckstine, were a tremendous influence on the boy.<sup>43</sup>

The scene would be a pub – perhaps the *Empress*, yards from the house at the end of *Admiral Grove*. Elsie, Harry, relations, friends and workmates would drink and sing through the evening until closing time, and then, well bevved,

tumble into Elsie and Richy's tiny terraced house where the party carried on – more singing, more drinking, more swearing, Johnny and Annie Starkey on banjo and mandolin, the steam rising ever higher into the night. Most people in Liverpool had a 'turn', a party piece, and Richy had two. One was a song he sang in duet with his mum, the swing-jazzy *Someone Like You*. The other, sung solo, was *Nobody's Child*, a maudlin country tearjerker about a lonesome blind orphaned boy. Elsie's young Lazarus would look her square in the eye as he sang it, adding to the chorus line so it went 'I'm nobody's child, *Mum*', and she'd laugh or cry or both and affectionately instruct him to 'bugger off' or 'piss off'. The boy would always remember singing at home 'not in front of a coal fire but in front of a bottle of gin and a large bottle of brown', emphasising the point that, as many children have experienced down the years, the bond of good-time music and booze was significant. Years later, he would admit, 'My parents were alcoholics and I didn't realise it.'<sup>44</sup>

Many a Liverpool party included a punch-up – without one, people said, it just wasn't memorable – but an exception was the McCartney family's annual New Year's Eve knees-up, held usually at the Aintree house of Paul's Uncle Joe and Auntie Joan. These were great musical landmarks in his life – chaotic and raucous gatherings of uncles, aunties and cousins of every remove, with the adults getting bevvied and everyone singing happily. Jim played the piano, which showed Paul that a pianist would always get invited to parties, be the centre of the action and never have to buy a drink; glasses were lined up for him on the lid. Paul's much-loved aunties – Edie, Mill, Gin, Joan and others – sat around the room singing the old songs, 1920s favourites like *Baby Face*, *When The Red, Red, Robin Comes Bob-Bob-Bobbin' Along*, and the one that gained the biggest cheer of the night at every McCartney party, played at *just* the right moment, *Carolina Moon*, at which point everyone would be standing and swaying and drinking and singing, a family united in harmony.

The McCartney boys switched schools in September 1951. Speke's authorities had misjudged the numbers, and Stockton Wood was now bursting with fifteen hundred infants; as it happened, a school in another district – Joseph Williams primary, in Belle Vale, just beyond Gateacre – was short of older children. Paul made the move and Mike went too; a special shuttle bus was laid on to take them all to and fro, and instead of working the standard nine-to-four day they began and finished half an hour later. Great larks were had on the bus, especially on the top deck, and the fifty or so transplanted Speke kids formed a bond others at 'Joey Williams' didn't share. A photograph shows them outside their new school, and Paul, aged nine or ten, is the one who catches the eye – intentionally so. The rest are the usual motley jumble of post-war British children in

varying degrees of ‘it seemed smart at the time’ raggedness; Paul is trim in a dark school cap and pulls a face while staring at an issue of the *Dandy*, the comic’s colour pages clutched in his hands. Everyone is looking at the camera, Paul isn’t, and he’s the most knowing of it. His performance naturally steals the attention.

Paul and Mike had to share a room at 12 Ardwick Road, and such was their bedtime squabbling, Jim had the bright idea of rigging a set of Bakelite ear-phones by each bed, connected to the wireless downstairs under his control. The boys could put the earphones under their pillows and drift off to the sounds of the BBC Light Programme or Home Service. A similar set-up was also in place at Mendips, where Mimi let the wireless run up to John’s bedroom (over the front door) by an extension speaker. The impact of radio on these fertile young minds was momentous. They all listened to the thriller and sci-fi serials and to the half-hour comedies like *Life With The Lyons*. This and others like it were conventional humour shows, funny if formulaic; but there was another comedy that operated in a world entirely its own and whose impact shaped the characters and personalities of many listeners: launched by the BBC in 1951, this was *The Goon Show*. These sensational half-hours broke every possible rule of comedy, of radio, of the *imagination*, and life was never the same again for its devoted fans. In Liverpool – on Menlove Avenue, Ardwick Road and Upton Green – schoolboys Lennon, McCartney and Harrison sat close to the speaker.

*The Goon Show*’s residing genius was Spike Milligan, a writer, humorist, musician and humanitarian whose flights of comic fantasy and invention knew no bound; his cohorts were Peter Sellers (a uniquely talented voice artist), Harry Secombe (an explosive Welsh geyser of mouth-raspberries and song) and also, initially, Michael Bentine (a brilliantly resourceful nutcase). Its preposterous comedy situations, like floating Dartmoor Prison across the English Channel to France, and attempting to stop a flood by drinking the River Thames, made it the quintessential product of radio, with Milligan conjuring ideas and mind-pictures far beyond physical possibility. Schoolboys loved it, imitating the voices and phrases – ‘you dirty rotten swine!’ – for the rest of their days; Lennon, McCartney and Harrison separately and hungrily adopted Goon humour and its punning wordplay as their own, where it nestled among many other influences, not least Liverpool’s own incessant comedy.

Milligan had no template – he was a true original – but he was everyone’s template thereafter, and his surreal visual cartoonery gave John Lennon vital creative impetus (‘My main influences for writing were always Lewis Carroll and *The Goon Show*, a combination of that’). Of equal merit, Milligan let John see that he wasn’t alone in living with a creative whirlwind inside his mind. Whatever else was going on in his world, tuning the dial to the BBC Home

Service week after week reassured John that *it wasn't just him* – ‘Their humour was the only proof that the WORLD was insane,’ he would say.<sup>45</sup>

And there was always *something* going on in his world. In 1949, the aunt John regarded as his favourite (not counting Mimi), the widowed Elizabeth, called ‘Mater’, had married a Scotsman and gone to live in Edinburgh along with her son, John’s older cousin Stanley. John’s new uncle was a dentist, Robert ‘Bert’ Sutherland, and he had money in the bank; they bought a comfortable, late-Victorian stone-faced house in Ormidale Terrace, very close to Scotland’s national rugby stadium at Murrayfield, and John spent the next six summers here. He travelled by bus, initially fetched by Stanley, and unescorted from the age of 13. (His trip in 1954 earned him a newer and better harmonica, gifted to him by the bus driver – another spike in his musical development.)

Edinburgh would always hold a unique place in John’s heart; he had only to hear pipers to fall into a romantic reverie. As well as the house here, Bert had a croft at Durness, on the north-west tip of the British Isles, and no Scottish holiday was complete for John without a stay at this remote spot through the mountains. These visits were a formative influence on his life, instilling an abiding warmth for Scotland, its people and their accents, which he imitated lovingly, and always amusingly, on several recordings in later years.

Given all this extra-curricular input, and his natural intelligence, John couldn’t help but shine at Dovedale Road. He was academically ready when the time came for the crucial Eleven-Plus, and aware of its importance. ‘They hang it over you from age five,’ he’d remember. ‘If you don’t pass, you’re finished in life.’<sup>46</sup> Mimi knew he would fly through it and had already decided which school would educate him for at least the next five years – hoping it would become seven or even eight, with John taking A-Levels, then going on to university and emerging with a profession. She considered Liverpool Institute, but George’s brother Alf was an English master there and Mimi didn’t want John creating problems at school that would reverberate at home.\* She opted instead for Quarry Bank High School for Boys; it was closer to home anyway, just a walk across Calderstones Park, and she’d be able to keep an eye on him. Before long, a letter arrived at Mendips indicating that John had indeed passed and that his place at Quarry Bank was confirmed, starting 4 September 1952.

John was delighted Pete Shotton would be with him – they’d not been at school together before. Theirs would be a Crazy Gang act through the Quarry Bank years: partners in crime, laughs all the time, standing and sinking together,

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\* A. J. Smith, although respected, was the kind of teacher kids liked to mimic: he spoke with pronounced sibilance and was somewhat effeminate; his ‘Inny’ nickname was Cissy.

scrapping with each other when they weren't fighting others, cycling together to and from Menlove, so inseparable that some called them LennonShotton or Shennon and Lotton. As Pete reflects, John needed to be in a partnership: 'He always had to have a support. He would never have gone and performed on his own. He always had to have a sidekick.' Michael Hill, who like John came to Quarry Bank from Dovedale Road, says that though John and Pete were close, John was definitely the leader. 'It was always "Lennon and Shotton", never "Shotton and Lennon". Pete wasn't without talent of his own but he was an acolyte of John's. We all were.'<sup>47</sup>

It could have come as a nasty shock that Quarry Bank planned to educate them, that they were meant to work, and work hard, continuously for years to come. Opened in 1922, the school had a reputation for high achievement, sending boys to Oxford and Cambridge. The teachers were 'masters' and wore gowns, and some wore mortar boards; boys called them 'Sir' but themselves were known only by their surname. The place was run along pseudo public school lines – prefects had the right to hit boys with a tennis shoe, and, like the masters, could hand out detentions. The headmaster, E. R. Taylor, was a lay preacher who did everything with 'strong Christian values', including the caning. The school motto was *Ex Hoc Metallo Virtutem* – more or less 'From this quarry, virtue is forged'. The school's founder, R. F. Bailey, its only head before Taylor, wrote the words to *The Song Of The Quarry*, the school hymn every boy learned and sang once every term and also at the annual prizegiving at Philharmonic Hall in the city. The sheet music says it must be sung *vigoroso*, and the opening verse runs:

Quarry men old before our birth  
 Straining each muscle and sinew.  
 Toiling together, Mother Earth  
 Conquered the Rock that was in you.

First-year boys weren't streamed, but how they performed in those initial ten months governed where they stood afterwards. John did some excellent work, but by the end of the first year, while first in Art, he'd picked up plenty of detentions – twenty in the summer term alone – and finished twenty-third out of thirty-three. He failed to make the 'A' stream for the following year – he would be in IIB. Shotton slipped down with him.

What had happened? On top of his usual behaviour, two things in particular. First, John experienced an early onset of puberty and found other things crowding his mind. Sex would consume his waking and somnambulant thoughts from now to the end of his days; he would be a sexual being to the extent of cursing it.<sup>48</sup>

Second, John had formed another gang, an inside-school outfit to run in parallel with his Vale Road posse, and he was determined to set an example. 'I wanted everybody to do what I told them to do,' he'd explain, 'to laugh at my jokes and let me be the boss.' Michael Hill recalls John as 'the chief clown. He could have the whole class in tears of laughter and the teacher in tears of pain. Looking back on it, it was awful. The teachers had to maintain discipline, but if we were given an inch we'd take a mile.'<sup>49</sup>

The biggest cloud on a boy's horizon in the 1950s was the call-up, conscription, National Service. You could say it different ways but you couldn't avoid it: everyone between 18 and 21 was expected to serve a two-year spell in the armed forces – eighteen months in active service and six more in reserve. Call-up papers would arrive soon after an 18th birthday. An army officer came to Quarry Bank to lecture on it; John Lennon, and also Richy Starkey, both born in 1940, were already wondering how to dodge it.

John's plan was to skip the country: 'I was always thinking I could go to Southern Ireland if it came to it [but] I didn't know what I was going to do there, I hadn't thought that far.' (He would have faced prison on his return.) Richy was also desperate to avoid the dreaded letter – 'The last place I wanted to go was in the army' – and surely would have done so on medical grounds. George Harrison was soon swearing to evade it any which way: 'I made up my mind when I was about 12 that I was not going in the army.' Paul McCartney was hoping to avoid it but consciously preparing for it. In the woods down by the Mersey, he climbed trees to spy on people, he used a stick for a bayonet and imagined himself running another man through, and he killed frogs and hung them on barbed wire, calling them 'Johnny Rebs' in the language of American Civil War films. Paul took Mike there to see them and he was horrified.<sup>50</sup>

This was a key period in Paul's life. He took the Eleven-Plus in February 1953 at Liverpool Institute. It was a daunting experience to step up to its great sweeping entrance then walk through wrought-iron gates into a marble-pillared hall, but he passed the test and would be an 'Inny' pupil come September.

Around this time, Jim and Mary were keen for Paul to have piano lessons, to build on his innate musical talent. To begin with, the teacher came to Ardwick Road, but neighbouring children were always knocking on the door to ask Paul out to play, so Jim said he should go to the teacher's house instead. Being made to go somewhere he didn't want to go, to do something he didn't really want to do, applied the brakes. Paul was happy playing piano his way, not somebody else's; he wanted to pick out tunes, not be forced to read music; and he certainly didn't want to bother with 'learning dots'. The end came when he was set homework. School homework was bad enough but it was compulsory, music

wasn't; Paul abandoned the lessons after four or five weeks, saying the teacher's house 'smelled of old people'. Jim would reflect, 'He always seemed to know exactly what he wanted and usually knew how to get it.'<sup>51</sup>

Paul also failed an audition to become a choirboy at the Anglican Cathedral. It was Jim's idea he should join the Liverpool Cathedral Choristers' Guild – he felt sure his son's voice was good enough – so there Paul was in April 1953, dutifully lined up with other boys, waiting to audition one by one for choirmaster Ronald Woan. Jim later found out what happened: Paul failed not because he couldn't sing but because 'he deliberately cracked his voice'. It was subtle defiance – but, as it turned out, for the best. Had Paul passed, all subsequent events could have turned out very differently, for being in the choir involved a busy calendar of commitments for at least three years and possibly longer.<sup>52</sup>

Then came 2 June and the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, which prompted the McCartneys to rent their first television, also the first in the street. All the neighbours and their children were invited to watch the seven-hour BBC coverage. Paul won a Liverpool Public Libraries prize for an essay anticipating the London spectacle ('after all this bother, many people will agree with me that it was well worth it') and collected it in a ceremony at Picton Hall, the splendid circular reading-room opposite the Empire Theatre. It was a prestigious event, and when the Lord Mayor announced 'And in the under-eleven age group, from Joseph Williams primary school in Gateacre, J. P. McCartney', and he had to walk up on the stage, his knees were 'rubbery'. 'It was my first ever experience of nerves,' he'd remember. 'I was shaking like a jelly.'<sup>53</sup>

Paul began his new life and new daily journey on 9 September – he was heading into town. The Latin motto at Liverpool Institute High School for Boys was *Non Nobis Solum Sed Toti Mundo Nati* – translated as 'Not for ourselves but for the whole world were we born'. Clearly, this was a school that took itself a mite seriously. Mary had high hopes Paul would become a doctor, Jim thought he'd become a scientist, but first Paul had to find his way around what *Liverpool and Merseyside Illustrated* called 'an overcrowded and ancient building'.<sup>54</sup> The school opened in the year of Queen Victoria's accession, 1837, and it was a confusion of dark dank passageways and staircases. Charles Dickens addressed a gathering here in 1844. Next door was Liverpool College of Art; it had been the same school until 1890, when doors were sealed up and they were separated. The headmaster was quite literally a Victorian: John 'Jack' Edwards, known to boys as The Baz, a feared individual, strict and humourless in his determination that every Institute scholar go on to Oxford or Cambridge. A number did, but those who didn't could be scorned as a waste of everyone's time.<sup>55</sup>

Pupils were in the 'Lower School' for the first three years – and began in what was confusingly called 'the third year'. Paul started in form 3C, an

arbitrary decision, after which the forms were streamed according to ability. In his first year he was middling, ranked around twelfth – an impressive achievement considering his classmates were among the city’s brightest boys and he was always one of the youngest in his year. He was popular too. Naturally funny, he showed a good talent for vocal mimicry by impersonating the masters, and drew witty cartoons that were passed around the class for laughs. Some pals called him Macca – the nickname stuck on many a Liverpool child whose surname starts with Mc or Mac. One boy he made friends with was John Lennon’s close pal Ivan Vaughan, sometimes nicknamed Ive or Ivy. He was at the Institute solely *because* of John: his mother decided he couldn’t go to Quarry Bank as ‘that Lennon’ was bound to derail his studies. Another boy starting at the Institute in September 1953 was Neil Aspinall, nicknamed Nell, from West Derby, north Liverpool. He too was in 3C, but on only nodding acquaintance with Paul at this time.

Paul’s overall impression of the Institute was succinct and truthful: ‘I didn’t like it very much, but I didn’t dislike it; and I quite enjoyed bits of it. What I didn’t like was being told what to do.’<sup>56</sup> One particularly appealing aspect was its location. Until this time, Paul’s life had played out in the suburbs; now he’d landed at the heart of the action. The school was in one of the best parts of Liverpool, just off Hope Street, a handsome thoroughfare with the Anglican Cathedral at one end, the Philharmonic Hall concert venue halfway along, and an art-house cinema, Hope Hall, at the far end. Very close by was Canning Street, the ‘artistic quarter’, peopled by the bohemians who studied or taught at the art school or did nothing very much at all except drink in the local pubs. Strides down the steep hill took Paul to the city’s main streets: it was a thrill for him to spend solo time here, enjoying the spiel of the St John’s Market traders, watching the escapologist wriggle his way out of chains on a ‘bommy’ opposite the Adelphi Hotel, and catching Codman’s Punch and Judy show, a constant fixture by Lime Street station for decades.

George Harrison first went to the Liverpool Institute in February 1954, to take his Eleven-Plus. Though he’d done well at Dovedale Road, no one was sure he’d make grammar-school grade. His sister Louise had, his brothers Harry and Peter hadn’t. The next day, when his Dovedale teacher asked who in the class felt they’d passed, George didn’t put up his hand. But he had, and he’d be Institute-bound from September for at least five years, perhaps seven or eight.

The blond hair George had had since birth was now turning brown, and there was a major battle every time Harry tried to trim it: George always put up a fuss when forced into a haircut. He was growing into a self-sufficient and opinionated lad. Children were often being told to ‘respect your elders and betters’ but George didn’t always feel they’d *earned* it. He was a born sceptic with

a reasoned disregard for some of his schoolteachers, and was experiencing a rapid loss of faith in the Catholic Church owing to the way it was trying to control him. Louise had been sending George to mass on and off all his life at Our Lady of Good Help, in Wavertree, where he'd also been going into the confessional box from an early age, coming clean to the priest about his latest 'sins'. At 11, he'd taken part in the Communion ceremony; but by this age, as he'd explain, he already 'felt that there was some hypocrisy going on'.<sup>57</sup>

George observed the way supposedly God-fearing people carried on – how, for instance, the men forced to go to church would far rather have been away drinking somewhere: 'When I was about 11 I was sitting in this church with all these people who could well have been in the Red Lion.' He'd overhear grown-ups commenting on alleged infidelities: 'I always remember [adults] saying, "You'll never believe that Mrs Jones – she's running around with Mr Badger. She's a dark horse!"' And he also saw how, when priests came to Upton Green, knocking on doors to collect money for the building of a new church, many (and sometimes the Harrisons) would pretend they were out, lying low, turning off the lights and maintaining radio silence until God's messenger had gone.

George was becoming dismissive of organised religion as he knew it, but he kept the door ajar for God. 'The only thing that came across to me in the church was these oil paintings of Christ struggling up the hill with the cross on his back. I thought, "There's something going on there." But as to the rest of the building and the priest and the people, I just thought it was stupid. [I thought] "I can't get anything out of this!"' Though he was meant to be confirmed after his Communion, George dropped out. 'From then on,' he'd say, 'I avoided the church.'<sup>58</sup>