

James Day

Born 19.4.1935. A life in computer services.

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This life story was contributed to Lives Retold by the author, James Day, in March 2021.

1. My Parents

I was born on 19 April 1935 and christened James Trelawny Day. My sister, Ann, had been born eighteen months previously on 9 September 1933. At that time my parents were living in Junction Road, Norton-on-Tees.

After my father had left the Royal Navy he had obtained a position in 1925 as ADC to the Governor of the then Gold Coast (Ghana) at a salary of £450 pa. At that time the Gold Coast was a diplomatic backwater and he used to describe his role as running errands for the Governor's wife. He resigned after eighteen months and thus found himself back on the dole in the middle of the depression. Shortly afterwards he married Clodagh Kennedy on 31 March 1928 at St Saviour's Church, Chelsea. He and my Mother had met through a family introduction. One result of this is that my Mother and Father, although not related, had a mutual first cousin, Joanna Kennedy. My Mother's father's brother had married my Father's mother's sister and their child was therefore a cousin to both!

At this point my Father had applied to the Navy resettlement board. One of its members was Captain Gerald Dickens, later to become Vice Admiral Sir Gerald Dickens KCVO, CB, CMG. He had been approached by his brother, Philip Charles Dickens, at that time Secretary of the newly formed Imperial Chemical Industries at Billingham, for a suitable candidate to undertake the role of Establishment Officer. My father and two other candidates were put forward and my father was offered the job. So in 1928, at the age of thirty, married and on a salary of £400 per annum, he found himself launched on a career in industry on the North East coast. For someone born and bred in the south whose whole life had been the Royal Navy, this must have been quite a culture shock.

Philip Dickens, who was eventually to become my stepfather, was the son of Sir Henry Dickens, a QC and Common Sergeant of the City of London, and a grandson of the author, Charles Dickens. Sir Henry was the youngest child of Charles Dickens and the only one to gain any academic achievement. He attended Trinity Hall, Cambridge as did three of his sons and two grandsons. This was the start of an association with the Dickens family which was to influence my early life.

Through Philip Dickens I could not help but feel the influence of Charles Dickens without at that time having read any of his books! Philip, or 'Pip' as he was known to his friends, after the character in 'Great Expectations', made a significant contribution to the early culture of ICI. He had been head hunted from accountants Peat, Marwick and Mitchell to become the first Secretary of the newly formed ICI in 1926 at the then impressive salary of £1000 pa. Educated at Eton and Cambridge, where he had read

Natural Sciences, he had been lucky to survive the First World War in the Welsh Guards, when a bullet had passed through his left side and shattered his left arm. He was a great polymath, - there was nothing he was not interested in art, science, music, sport, politics - later on he was to become a significant influence in my life.

One of his first actions as Secretary of ICI had been to buy Norton Hall, facing Norton village green, for the Company and convert it into a guest house and club for senior staff. In many ways it resembled a gentleman's club with a squash court, tennis courts and extensive grounds, which included a large lake and waterfall. It contributed in great part to generating a sense of camaraderie amongst the early recruits to this new Company. He also bought the adjoining Georgian house in the High Street, "Ivy Cottage", and turned it into the Company Secretary's house.

2. The Outbreak of War

I was too young to appreciate the outbreak of war in September 1939. By then my father had been promoted to Company Secretary at ICI Billingham, and we were living in the company secretary's house, 'Ivy Cottage', on Norton Green. In October 1939 my father was recalled to the Navy in the rank of Lieutenant Commander. It was thought that the ICI works at Billingham would become a target for German bombs and our proximity to Billingham would make Norton vulnerable. It was therefore arranged that the rest of the family, including Ethel the most loyal maid, would evacuate to the Lancashire coast, where there was no question of German bombs reaching us. This evacuation was to be done in conjunction with some great friends of the family, Ken and Winifred Gordon.

Ken Gordon was a brilliant chemist who, from humble origins, had won a scholarship to Oxford where he obtained a first class degree in Chemistry. During the war he was in charge of ICI's government sponsored program for obtaining oil from coal and subsequently worked on their early atomic energy program.

He left ICI after the war and in 1952 became Director General of Ordnance Factories for the Ministry of Supply and was awarded a CBE. Although a major in the first world war with an MC to his credit and keen to serve again, his work was considered of too great importance to the national interest and he was transferred to ICI's Heysham plant on the Lancashire coast. Later on in my life he taught me sailing.

We evacuated to a large house called 'Cove Lea' about two miles outside the village of Silverdale. Here we all lived together, that is to say my grandfather, mother, sister and myself, Ethel, Ken and Winifred Gordon, their son Donald, and their maid, Eileen, not to mention two or three dogs! The journey across the Pennines in two old Vauxhall cars was memorable chiefly for frequent stops for car sickness on the part of my sister and myself. Car travel at that time was rare due to the lack of petrol for private motoring.

3. Return to Norton and Prep School

After eighteen months it was thought safe to return to Norton and we moved back to another company property in Junction Road, as my father was then still in the Navy. At this time my sister and I attended the small local village school on Norton Green. Somehow, about the age of seven, I managed to contract diphtheria which in those days was a very serious disease. As a result I was taken off to the local isolation hospital at Middlesbrough. This was a very traumatic event for me and I can remember to this day being taken off in an ambulance screaming my head off! I could not understand why nobody was allowed to come with me, or visit me for some time afterwards. Shortly after arrival at the hospital they decided that I also had measles and I was transferred to a private room. I also had very bad ear trouble which often accompanies measles. In those days there was no penicillin and altogether I was in the isolation hospital for nine weeks.

Soon after returning home I was packed off to preparatory school at Terrington Hall in a remote village in north Yorkshire. I was then eight years old. In this part of Yorkshire you would not have known there was a war on and I spent five very happy years there. The school had its own large kitchen garden, kept its own pigs, and butter and eggs were available from the local farms. With no petrol for private motoring it was difficult for my mother to visit me more than once a term. We would meet in York which was on the main London and North Eastern Railway line from Stockton, and spend the day walking the battlements or visiting York Minster or the Castle Museum, which was always a great favourite. Lunch at the Railway Hotel would be the big event of the day!

The head master of the school, Peter Clementson, or Clemmie as he was known, although strict, was surprisingly forward thinking for his time. A bachelor with a congenital limp and a mathematics graduate of Cambridge, he had taken over the school at the age of twenty five when the previous headmaster had run off with the matron and had built up the school to one of the best in the area. He was an excellent teacher of mathematics and I can remember double maths lessons in the summer when, as a reward for good work, the class would all pile into his car and be taken to Castle Howard, which was nearby, where we would swim naked in the lake. My mother had learned of the school from her friends the Gordons, whose son Donald had also been there.

4. London and Rugby School



James Day at Rugby.

From Terrington I took the Common Entrance exam to Rugby School and was the first boy from Terrington to go on to a public school outside of Yorkshire or Lancashire, which Clemmie considered a significant milestone!

At the end of the war my parents divorced and we moved down to a small two bedroom flat over a cleaner's shop in Marloes Road, London W8. This was a property which belonged to my grandfather and had somehow managed to survive the blitz. It was during this time that my Mother met up again with Philip Dickens whose wife had died and who had been promoted to ICI's head office in London.

Rugby did not leave such a strong impression on me although most of the time I was quite happy. I particularly enjoyed the music and art but not the compulsory games, apart from hockey, at which I was quite good. I specialised in Maths and Physics and applied to read engineering at Cambridge, being then the only degree course to which those subjects naturally led. In those days the Engineering Faculty at Cambridge did not care how many 'A' levels you had (although I obtained three and Physics a year early), what they required was for candidates to pass the Mechanical Sciences Tripos Qualifying Exam. This was a far more practical exam and unfortunately I failed the mechanics paper. This meant I would have to sit it again in October and also that I would not be able to go up to Cambridge until after National Service; although this turned out to be for the best because that was then the route that the majority of students followed. After attending a crammer school in London for six weeks during the summer holidays, in itself quite an experience, I passed the mechanics paper and thus secured my place at Trinity Hall.

5. National Service in the Royal Navy



James Day as a Midshipman in the Royal Navy.

Having been in the Naval Section of the Combined Cadet Force at school, (principally to avoid tedious drills!), I was able to join the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve and thereby undertake my National Service with the Royal Navy. I joined Victoria Barracks, Portsmouth as an Ordinary Seaman in October 1953 on pay of four shillings a day, or less than £1.50 per week! After basic training I applied to take a Commission and became an Upper Yardman, so called because in the days of sail the best sailors were always picked to man the upper yards. Upper Yardmen wore a distinguishing white band underneath their cap band and so could easily be picked on by the regular seamen, who used to refer to us as f-----g upper dustmen!

I think my father was secretly proud that I had followed in his footsteps and joined the Navy. In November 1953 he wrote me one of his rare letters:

My dear Jim

Was very pleased to get your letter as I rather thought from what you had said previously that you might be somewhere in the Navy.....

I expect you find it strange and much that seems pointless, but I hope you don't find it too irksome; you'll meet a mixed crowd I expect too. Glad to hear you passed your Cambridge Exam. I expect you can carry on with your studies during your two years service (some hope!), but

I shouldn't miss going abroad if you get the chance; it's the cheapest and best travel you may ever get.

I am afraid all I have got left which is any use is a sword when you reach the gilded rank and may need one for ceremonial occasions!

Pity we are so far away we would like to see Pompey again. Anyway let me know how things go.”

He was right about the travel and during my two years I travelled to Portugal, Gibraltar, Ireland, Scotland, Norway, Denmark and Sweden, none of which I had been to before. Many of my contemporaries were even luckier and travelled to America or the Far East.

After three months of rigorous potential officer training on the training aircraft carrier, HMS IMPLACABLE, I passed out along with my class mates as a Midshipman in the spring of 1954. My pay as a Midshipman more than doubled to the dizzy heights of £3.15 per week! My first appointment was to the Royal Navy Cadet training carrier, HMS TRIUMPH, with half a dozen colleagues from IMPLACABLE, where we all lived in a cramped Gunroom in relative luxury after our previous experiences. As RNVRs we were somewhat looked down on by the Royal Navy cadets. The Gunroom on a large ship is the traditional mess for Midshipman, usually situated right aft. Midshipman in the Navy is a strange rank, between the so called lower deck and that of officer. You have the privileges of officer status without the full responsibility and therefore if you make a mistake the consequences are not too dire. As such it is a marvellous training role for young officers.



HMS Altham.

After three months I was posted to a small Inshore Minesweeper, HMS ALTHAM, 100 tons, based in an artificial harbour at Harwich, which had a complement of three officers and eleven men. The Midshipman was the navigating officer, so life began to get more serious. Because Inshore Minesweepers were so small and therefore uncomfortable, the crew qualified for an extra one shilling (5p) a day 'hard lying money'! During this time I can claim to have circumnavigated England, as we were amongst the few warships ever to have passed through the Caledonian Canal and Loch Ness on the way to an exercise off the north west coast of Scotland in February. I can still picture the scene of three small minesweepers steaming in line ahead across Loch Ness at dusk. The Monster did not dare show its head!

My final posting was to the aircraft carrier HMS BULWARK as an Intercept Officer, having done a short course in aircraft direction at HMS HARRIER, a shore base in Wales. An Intercept Officer was responsible for directing one's own fighters onto the incoming enemy by means of radar. Given the state of early radar, the great test was not to lose track of one's own aircraft, - the pilots could get very upset, especially if they were over the horizon and the carrier was no longer in sight. HMS BULWARK was the first carrier to have an angled flight deck, deck landing mirror and steam catapult and at that time was engaged in deck landing practice for all sorts of different naval aircraft. After National Service, because the Navy had spent so much money on training you, one had to stay in the Reserve for at least another three years. During this period I rose to become a Temporary Acting Lieutenant!

6. Cambridge and Marriage



James Day when an undergraduate at Cambridge.

My mother was remarried to Philip Dickens in January 1947, and we moved to an old Tudor house called Walnut Tree Farmhouse, near Charing, Kent for ten years, before my parents eventually returned to London. National Service was followed by three years at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, reading Engineering.

At first it was difficult to settle back into academia after the active life of the previous two years but, as most students were in the same boat, the fact that we were all two years older and had experienced 'life' made for a very interesting and enjoyable time. Despite spending too much time rowing and socialising I obtained my BA degree, which in those days used to convert automatically into an MA. When anybody asked me about this I always used to say that it was because a Cambridge degree was so much better than anywhere else!

On 19 March 1960 I married Gillian Anne Harrison at St John's Church, Putney. We had our reception at the Hurlingham Club, of which my father-in-law was a member. We had met at the English Speaking Union in London, which I had joined as it had a reputation of being a good place to meet the opposite sex! Gillian's father, George Arthur Harrison, had gone out to South Africa as a young man working with Barclays DCO (District, Colonial and Overseas). Whilst out there he had met and married, on 28

November 1930, a second generation South African girl, Eva Louise Hageman, whose parents had emigrated from Germany prior to the First World War and at that time were living in Colesberg, Namibia where her father was the local doctor. Eva Louise always used to describe George Harrison, who had been posted to the bank there as a bank clerk, as her passport out of Colesberg! The Hagemans came originally from Sudlohn, near the Dutch German border. George Harrison, whose family had originally come from Ireland, worked his way up to become General Manager of the Cape Province. During this process he had been posted back to Barclays DCO head office in London for a period of ten years 'so that his two daughters could marry Englishmen', as his boss had jokingly put it.



The wedding of James and Gillian in Putney in March 1960.

7. Tube Investments and ICL

Our eldest daughter, Nicola Caroline, and son, Mark Trelawny, were born at Walsall, Staffordshire on 21 June 1963 and 28 May 1965 respectively. At that time I was working for Tube Investments in my first job and we were living in Walsall, Staffordshire. My salary on joining Tube Investments as a management trainee in 1958 was £700pa rising in instalments of £75pa for two years. In December 1960 I joined their Computer Unit, which had just started up, as a systems analyst and broke the then magic salary barrier of £1000pa. This was enough for us to afford soon afterwards to buy our first house, a new three-bedroomed detached house on a modern estate, - cost £3750!



The IBM 650 was the first mass produced computer.

At that time Tube Investments were using an IBM 650 valve computer with only 2000, 10 character words of drum storage, card input and converted tabulator output! Subsequently I worked for ICL for eighteen years, firstly in their Birmingham regional office followed by postings to Putney, Reading and Stevenage.

Whilst working at Putney we lived in Wimbledon and it was there that our younger daughter, Lucy Charlotte, was born on 3 July 1968. Soon afterwards I was transferred to ICL's manufacturing plant at Stevenage, and in September 1969, we bought a house in Hertford where we were to live for twenty years. 'Skerries', a large four bedroomed detached house cost £13,500. After adding a Granny annex and making other improvements, we sold it twenty years later in the middle of the housing downturn for £243,500! In 1981, when ICL were cutting back from 30,000 employees to around 20,000, I was made redundant. I subsequently worked for a couple of small computer consultancies in London before joining Data Sciences in 1985, which was taken over by IBM in 1997. I retired as a

principal consultant in 2000 having worked in computers for 40 years. Having got into computers at the beginning I was privileged to work on some very advanced and exciting projects in computer aided design and manufacturing.



The 1960s ICL building by Putney Bridge, re-developed as flats in 2003. James Day writes: ICL had three or four office buildings in Putney. I didn't actually work in that building but went there very often for meetings. Also the staff restaurant was on the top floor with a fantastic view of the river and Boat Race start!

8. Family

In August 1989 I was divorced. Nicola obtained her first degree in Biochemistry at Bath University and went on to do a PhD at St John's College Cambridge, followed by four years research at Ann Arbor University, Michigan and a further four years at the Medical Research Council, Newcastle. Mark took a degree in Engineering at Exeter University followed by two years computing and two years accounting which led on to a good job in computing, initially with the Misys Group. Lucy obtained a first class honours degree in International Management Science at Swansea and Lyon Universities and joined Commercial Union in a computing role after travelling round the world for a year. Having subsequently passed the exams for fund management in her own time, she tried fund management for a while before deciding to return to a career in computing in Chicago, but returned to the UK after four years.

My son Mark married Angela McManus on 15 May 1993 at All Saints, Hertford and settled in Berkhamsted. They now have four children, a daughter, Laura Eva, a son, Henry Trelawny, a son William George and a daughter Phoebe. My younger daughter Lucy married Paul Lee on 2 November 2012 and they now have two children, James Harrison Lee and Charlotte Rose Lee.
