

<sup>A</sup>  
IN MEMORIAM

**Gilbert Harold Metson**

My name is Hubert Graham Cook, and at the age of 10 years I entered Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School, Barnet, Hertfordshire in the Autumn of 1917. This School was founded on a Charter from Queen Elizabeth I granted to the Earl of Leicester to provide a School to teach poor local boys Latin. The existing Tudor Hall was built in 1573 and contains the original Charter, the Borough Council having changed it into a museum. The Victorian School building at the rear where we were educated having been demolished, and a new School erected on the playing field about a mile distant. We were very proud of our School.

Some years later I met Gilbert and we became close friends. Although my middle school memories are rather misty, I can recall an incident in the English class. The Master, Mr Houson, a Quaker, who had driven an ambulance on the Western Front in the First World War and had a powerful physique became very annoyed with Gilbert and myself who had been holding a long conversation on some private matter during his class. "Cook and Metson, I give you a choice, a page of History or two beats with the cane!" Your talking is intolerable." We looked at each other and said simultaneously "The cane please Sire." Two from Houson were worse than six from the Headmaster, Mr Latimer, (I should know, I had had plenty). Our backsides stung for weeks.

I must mention that I admired Mr Houson and enjoyed his English lessons. He used to set essays and the boy who wrote the best one in any session had to read it aloud to the class. I managed to gain this honour on one occasion, closely followed

by Gil's block-buster tale of daring-do concerned with villainous bandits whose headquarters were centred on an ill famed inn, known as "The Fighting Rabbits."

We were in different school Houses, Gil's was Underne and mine was Leicester, and the rivalry was intense. In my last year, I dearly wanted to win the mile race on sports day and break the School record. This had been held for ages by a boy called W.O. Cook, (no relation), he was in Gil's House. Gil entered the race to help W.O. by pacemaking. I may say Gil's "pacemaking" was sensational. He ran alternative laps at a very fast pace, in between marking time in slow motion. The result was W.O. won in record time and I came second although also in record time, but Gil assured the victory for his House.

Eric and I both secured a place in the Rugby Fifteen in our last two years, and in our last year were given a much sought after place in the Cricket Eleven, captained by Gil. During his career he made a century and was presented with a bat by a parent, Mr Hobday, whose son had previously been the Captain of Cricket.

I kept wicket, and really wanted to gain my Colours, but Gil opposed this on the grounds that a little more ability was required apart from keeping wicket. Fortunately for me, the master in charge, Mr Ruscoe, overruled Gil, and at the last match of the season I was given the coveted honour. Gil was always absolutely straight, and said what he thought without fear or favour and in whatever company, and once he had made up his mind on any matter, he never moved away from the point.

Out of School, in the early years, Gil organized a private cricket team, hired a field at Cockfosters and played various local clubs. We all paid what we could but rather unevenly, the bulk of the cost being borne by Gil and his family.

After leaving School in 1927, every Easter, Whitsun and sometimes in August Gil devised a specialized type of holiday. We pooled what money we had, bought a "banger" packed it up with camping gear and set off through the night to Devon or Cornwall.

We had some weird cars. I remember an 11 HP Citroen, a flat twin Clover Leaf Rover, a Coventry-Premier and a Seebrook. The last named Gil found in a field in Surrey apparently burnt out. Gil said to me "We'll get it back to the "Limes", New Barnet and Eric and I will repair it for the holiday". I shall never forget that nightmare journey. After breaking the tow rope three times in Gil's car, we changed over and managed better, with Gil doing the towing and I steering the Seebrook, but getting through Hammersmith Broadway gave us premature heart attacks.

One day on our way to Cornwall, we had a close shave. The Seebrook's brakes were not very good, and only Gil's skill in avoiding a certain collision with an oncoming vehicle saved our bacon. He drove across the road and dodged the seeming inevitable. Another fraught experience was when through the night we had twelve punctures between Exeter and the coast. In the end, we were like a gun team. "Bang. Jump out, jack up, wheel off, tyre levered off, inner tube cleaned, sticky patch on, tyre refitted and inflated, wheel on, jack lowered, and climb in ..... Ad nauseum!

After the holiday the car would be sold. Gil's younger brother Geoffrey always came on holiday with us. He was very clever with cars, was a great rugby player and was articled to a Solicitor who had a prosperous business dealing in corn futures. Geoff did very well. On another occasion, W.O. Cook, a guest member of the party nearly drowned himself in a rough sea in Cornwall, by insisting on swimming out of his depth. Fortunately Gil rushed in fully clothed and helped me bring him ashore. I must have forgotten his victory in the mile.

Everyone had fun at "The Limes", Mrs Metson used to have Saturday evening dances in the winter. Not the least of the attractions was the lovely Una and some of her friends. The favourite quick-step was "Blaze Away" and we wore out the record. I was very keen on dancing, and Gil would remark "Well H.G. that's one thing you can do!" In summer, tennis parties were held at which I was a prize rabbit, but I remember Eric being of star quality. One afternoon I knocked over a plate of sandwiches and before I could say a word Gil said "I am very sorry Mother" and he hadn't been near them. But I do not think Mrs Metson was deceived. We played Billiards and as my father had a table, I could keep my end up. Also we played the newest craze, "Contract Bridge". I vividly remember being soundly ticked off by Mrs Metson for my lack of understanding in playing a no trump hand. It made me keep quiet about my possession of "Culbertson in 20 Minutes", the latest best seller. Gil's father, Captain Metson, was very kind to Gil's friends. He gave me my first Sherry, making me feel very grown-up.

In the summer of 1931, Gil and I agreed to walk up the Rhine, starting at Cologne. Independent as always Gil made his way to Cologne via Hawich – Hook of Holland, while I took the cheaper route, 8.20p.m. night travel via Victoria-Newhaven-Dieppe and then train to the German city. We met on the pavement outside a very seedy looking hotel (I felt Gil had had a trick played on him by an acquaintance) but it was getting late and we had no option but to take up our first floor room. What a night! I appeared that the hotel was "one of those places" and we had no sleep that night owing to the noise of people clattering up and down the stairs outside our door. In the morning, as soon as possible, we rushed off down to the river and embarked on a Rhine Steamer bound for Remagen, where we decided to commence our walk. What bliss, a super breakfast, comfort and cleanliness, superb scenery, what a contrast

with our unfortunate start. We left the boat at Remagen and set off walking along the river to Koblenz, a charming town at the very scenic merging of the Rhine with the Moselle. The inns were clean and comfortable and the food splendid and very cheap. Walking in Germany at this time was very good for visitors but not very good for the Germans who were in the throws of inflation and unemployment. Large groups of students used to walk around the country busking with guitars for a living. In the evening I used to sit with the students discussing politics, life and whatever. Their English was much better than my self-taught German but the talk went on into the night accompanied by the circulation of a loving cup of Rhine wine. Gil wasn't keen on this and retired early. On one occasion I caused his wrath by returning in a rather bad condition. He said "I had to deal with you last night, you were in a terrible state, ill, incapable and gabbling in German all the time!" I did not transgress again.

We proceeded along the river to Koblenz, where the Rhine and the Moselle merge. It was a beautiful spot. Eventually we reached Mainz staying at charming little inns along the way. Here Gil's holiday time ran out and he left for home. I walked on the Heidelberg, then to Karlsruhe and Strasbourg and then home by train via Paris.

We all went out different ways. Eric was articled in a Solicitor's office, Gil joined Standard Telephones and Cables Co., and worked on the factory floor to gain practical experience, while working in his own time as an external student at London University and achieving his B.Sc., M.Sc., and finally his Ph.D. Although in the latter case, he had had to rewrite his thesis from memory as the original had been lost in France. What an achievement!

Gil had a sailing boat moored near Hammersmith Bridge and invited me one morning to help him go for a sail. The conditions were not easy – gusting wind,

fierce flowing tide. High water and a not very wide river at that point. The result, to the amusement of onlookers on the bridge was that on casting off we were swept under the bridge and trapped there for a time. Eventually we managed to release ourselves without damage and spent a pleasant morning tacking up and down the river. But sailing in narrow waters is a difficult art, but Gil, true to form, was very proficient. As the years went on, we saw less of each other – he was Head of P.O. Communications in Northern Ireland, I was in Knightsbridge articled to King & King taking my examinations to be a Chartered Surveyor. Later I took an appointment with Drivers & Norris in Holloway (what a contrast!). Finally I joined the Civil Service with a view to eventually becoming a District Valuer, Inland Revenue, and was sent to Newcastle upon Tyne, Gateshead Office. But as soon as the War got going was sent back to Kensington to do a hush-hush job aimed at the eventual victory.

During the War, Gil called on my father at Oak Lodge, Galley Lane, Barnet. Gil had attained the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel and had been Mentioned in Despatches, and won the M.C. My father told me what great pleasure the visit gave him. He was delighted. He also came to see Winifred and me at our flat at Holland Park and we exchanged news over lunch. He was then engaged in secret research directed at discovering a method of turning enemy rockets round during flight. Unfortunately this problem was unsolved when the War ended. We had a V2 that landed near us and the reverse blast threw Winifred out of bed and the bedroom windows into the street. It demolished a block of flats up the road but mercifully all the inhabitants, including the porter were in the shelters and there were no casualties. I was on Fire Watch at my office in Old Brompton Road, South Kensington at the time. I was clearing up my papers prior to retiring at my office in Gower Street when I came across a letter from Eric's firm. I rang him up to exchange news and he said "You

can ring up Gil”, I did, and after a long talk he asked me to call on him at Harpenden with Winifred. As a result of this I last saw him, before he died in his home. He was engaged in helping his younger daughter fix up her marital home at St. Albans.

What a privilege to be able to call such an outstanding man “My Friend.”

If it is of any interest, I remember the School Song went as follows.....

“Queen Elizabeth sat one day

“Watching her Courtiers at their play

“Hits to the rail shall count for three

“And six when fairly over

“And if anyone comes and makes a fuss

“Send the radical off to us

“And we will tell him We choose it thus

“We and the bold Sea Rover. \*

\*A reference to Sir Francis Drake.