MY STORY by GLENN HILLING

My story may be a little different from others who lived in St Albans in the 50s and 60s as I am a Ten Pound Pom although I prefer to refer to myself as an Anglo-Irish mongrel as my father was English and my mother Irish. My parents were Norman and Mary Hilling and I was their only child. We immigrated to Australia on the R.M.S. Orontes of the Orient Line, arriving in Sydney in June 1954, when I was not quite three years old.

My Parents

My father had served with Royal Armoured Corps in India from 1943 and did not return home until early 1947. On 8 May 1947 he was discharged from the Army, but after three years in the tropics he had difficulty adjusting to English winters and finding regular work. One job he had was at the National Children's Camp in Surrey where he met an Irish lass working as a housemaid.


ORIENT LINE

DINNER

Velouté Solferino

Suprême of Brill, Soubise

Cromesquis, à la Russe

Side of Veal, Lemon Sauce
Roast Duck, Anglaise

Boiled and Nature Potatoes
French Beans

Cold Sideboard Roast Mutton Preserved Beef

Raspberry Jelly
Coffee Cream Ices

Oranges

Coffee will be served in the Public Rooms

R.M.S. "Orontes" Saturday, 15th May, 1954

"I"


ORIENT LINE

SEATS AT MEALS

Please note that a seat has been reserved for you at Table No. 6

Name Mrs M. Hilling

Berth No. 6 24

SECOND SITTING

FORWARD SALOON

PLEASE BRING THIS CARD WITH YOU

A GONG OR BUGLE WILL BE SOUNDED TO INDICATE THE COMMENCEMENT OF EACH SITTING OF LUNCHEON AND DINNER

The seat allotted on this card is provisional only and every effort will be made by the Head Waiter to meet the wishes of those passengers who wish to change after the first day.

My mother came from rural Ireland, but with the advent of war there were employment opportunities for women that never existed before. She gained employment in England in an aircraft factory. This really annoyed the Germans and the Luftwaffe kept bombing the place. She survived all that to remain in England after the war. She lived a fairly nomadic existence working in a variety of jobs, generally in hotels. It was in the summer of 1949 or 1950 that she found work at the National Children's Camp where she met my father. It was a fairly short courtship and they married in London on 19 August 1950. I arrived on the scene about eleven months later.

Leaving England

While I was a baby, my parents lived in a gypsy caravan out the back of a pub in Crawley, south of London. It must have been a struggle in those days. My father could not afford the train fare to the south of England for a job offered there. This unsatisfactory arrangement came to a head when my mother accidentally set fire to the caravan. My mother saw no future for us in England and took advantage of the Assisted Passage Migration Scheme to immigrate to Australia.

Arriving in Australia

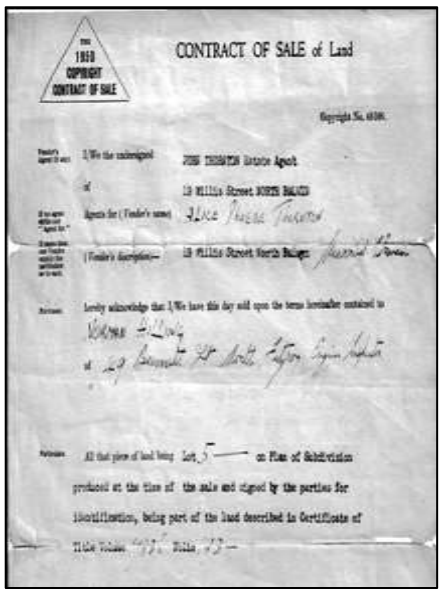
After arriving in Sydney we spent some time at the Cabramatta Migrant Hostel before moving around where work would take my parents. St Gregory's College at Campbelltown and a farm near Forbes were two locations I know of. My father got a job at General Motors Holden at Fishermans Bend so we moved to Melbourne and lived a short time in St Kilda and North Fitzroy. By 1955 my parents had saved enough money to put a deposit of £182 on a three-roomed bungalow in St Albans. The total price for Lot 5, Fox Street was £885.

The Wild West

These were pioneering days in Melbourne's wild west. Although only eleven miles from the city centre and linked by an electric rail service, St. Albans was at the end of the electrified line, an isolated place, an outer suburb with approximately a thousand inhabitants, most of whom were immigrants from war ravaged Europe. Sprawling across the flat, wind swept Keilor plains (fondly called the 'pleurisy plains'), houses were scattered here and there,

like islands in a vast sea of grass and weeds. Few trees had survived the farmers who had preceded the advance of suburbia and any trees that had the temerity to poke up above the grass were promptly pruned to ground level by the council. Yet artichoke thistles were allowed to thrive.

The closest town was Albion, four miles of gravel road running parallel to the railway line through paddocks. To the north Keilor was also not far away, but it may as well have been in another state. The journey up and down the dreaded Green Gully and past the rubbish tip was a major impediment to regular travel. Beyond that there was farmland. Occasionally we had cattle being herded up Fox Street. There was one occasion when a farmer got our permission to tie his horse up to our front fence so that the beast could feast on the verdant growth of grass on the nature strip. The horse much preferred the roses on the other side of the fence. This did not please my mother at all, but she did admit later that it was the best bit of pruning those rose bushes ever received. It was indeed the “Wild West”.



CONTRACT OF SALE of Land

1959 COPYRIGHT CONTRACT OF SALE

Our blue weatherboard and fibro cement house stood on Fox Street, which for many years was merely a gravel road. The drains were open ditches on each side of the street bearing a delightful green scum on the surface which emitted a lovely aroma. The toilet was an outhouse and on cold, windy nights it was a frightening journey to the toilet for a child with a vivid imagination. Each week the dunny man replaced the pan and every morning I was pleasantly woken by the clip clop of horses' hooves and the clink of bottles as the milkman did his rounds.

One of the first actions we took when moving in was to plant potatoes in the backyard. I’m sure this was the Irish thing to do. It not only provided food, but was intended to break up the heavy clay soil. I do not think it succeeded in the latter task.

Purchasing this property was a great achievement for my parents as they never looked like owning their own home in England. My mother was really proud that she had a place she could claim as her own; a pride that blossomed when the final loan payment was made and she obtained the deeds in May 1964.

In those early years at 33 Fox Street we had no immediate neighbours, the nearest houses being two or three blocks away. We had power and a reticulated water supply, but no sewage and no hot water system. Water had to be heated in a basin when it was required. Over time, houses were built

on the surrounding blocks and we acquired immediate neighbours, a house on one side and flats on the other, and finally a kindergarten was built across the street. The other significant event was the extension of Fox Street beyond Lesley Street. This meant our address changed from 33 Fox Street to 79 Fox Street which caused havoc with our mail for a while.

The summers seemed to be hotter and longer then. The house was uninsulated, with little shade outdoors, roasting on hot summer days and freezing on cold winter nights. The only saving grace was that it did cool down quickly when a cool change arrived after a heat wave. During winter heating was assigned to a kerosene heater which emitted a terrible smell with little warmth. In the relentless heat the water supply invariably failed. The water tower for the town was placed on a low hill about half a mile from the house (near the corner of Arthur and Biggs Streets if I recall correctly). In the searing heat my mother and I would trudge up the hill to collect water from the tower and bring it home.

My father loved his TV and we were one of the first families to own a television - it was 1956, an Astor on tall, spindly legs and it cost £240. At night the house could be unbearably hot so we would take the television outside on an extension lead. Sometimes, neighbours would join us. If it worked in the heat, we would watch television with the accompaniment of moths and a myriad of other buzzing insects obstructing our view. Sometimes the valves would overheat and the screen would go blank. My father had some replacement valves handy. He would delve into the back of the TV, replace the offending overheated valves and restart the TV, by which time we had probably missed an essential segment of whatever we were watching. I do recall a night when the horizon around us was aglow with bushfires.

If any profession looked forward to redundancy, it would certainly be the dunny man and this happened when the sewage was connected in 1976. The toilet moved inside and with it, the expression "the call of nature" lost a lot of its meaning. Finally, the street was asphalted and concrete kerbs and gutters installed. We no longer had to put up with the dust, corrugations and smell.

The Little House That Grew

The original bungalow was not particularly well built which was not surprising. In those days there was a shortage of builders and a building boon was taking place, so any person who could operate a hammer and saw could build a home. It only had to comply with Council requirements and they were pretty lax. Even with just three of us, life in a three-room bungalow was crowded. It was imperative that the house be extended.

The extensions were D.I.Y. projects when funds were available. First was an ‘utility’ room at the back and next, a kitchen and bedroom at the front. Finally, a lounge and another bedroom at the front. These extensions highlighted deficiencies in the original building. Nothing was level and straight, and my father tried to compensate, not always with great success.

The extensions were done on a low budget, mainly by my father with a little help from my mother and me, as well as any neighbours we could commandeer for heavy work like lifting wall frames. My father had watched builders at work on other houses in the area and from this worked out how to construct the extensions. It was hard work with all the timber cut by hand and rebates chiselled manually, and it was all in hardwood.

My father’s building skills attracted the attention of at least one passerby. He asked my father if he would be interested in joining him in a business building homes. My father declined the offer. It may have been a great business opportunity missed. I often wonder how things may have turned out if my father had taken up the offer.

The Chooks

Once we had a proper fence my mother decided to get some chickens. A chook house had been constructed in the backyard and it was time to buy some chickens. My mother wanted Rhode Island Reds as they do not scratch around much and they are good layers as well as good to eat. I’m sure we bought the chickens from a poultry farm in Greensborough, and my mother and I travelled by train. I remember a long walk on a gravel road to the poultry farm and on the way home I had a

cardboard box on my lap with the chickens chirping away inside.

Amongst that lot was a rooster and in time we had more chickens. They just wandered around the garden by day and retired to the chook house in the evening. Each morning my mother would collect the eggs and then they would follow her out to be fed. I recall one year when we had a plague of earwigs. We would go around the garden with the chooks in tow, turning over stones and pieces of timber and the chooks would hoe into the earwigs.

The chooks were also a source of protein. Those who were not good layers got the chop. My father was the executioner and my mother did the gutting and plucking. The sight of headless chooks in their death throes and the smell of boiling carcasses prior to plucking put me off eating chicken for a while.

Over the years the population declined and the few remaining chooks became pets. They lived out their lives without the fear of the axe. They were allowed inside the house and despite their advanced age, they would surprise us with the occasional egg.

The Marauding Dogs
A hazard in those early days were the dogs. These were neighbourhood pets and strays, forming packs at night for hunting excursions into the farms. This included attacks on chook pens like ours and those of our neighbours. The local newspaper reported that these dogs had also been aggressive towards people.

My father approached the local policeman to see what could be done about this dog problem. The conversation went along the following lines.

Policeman: 'You were once in the Army and you know how to use a rifle?'

My father: 'Yes.'

Policeman: 'Well, get yourself a rifle and shoot any stray dogs on sight. Just be careful and if there is any trouble with the dog owners just refer them to me.'

On this advice my father purchased a Spalding .22 calibre rifle. This was in the days when rifles were readily available at sports stores and a licence was not required. As there were empty blocks along our eastern boundary, it was reasonably safe to shoot in that direction. It just so happened that was the route the dogs took on their hunting forays. Thus armed, I remember my father getting up some nights to shoot at the dogs. In the darkness his chances of actually hitting a dog was remote, but they would be dispersed. I do believe he achieved a kill early one morning. It had the desired effect. The hunting expeditions ceased and as far as we know, nobody ever complained to the police.

My father was keen to teach me firearm safety and how to shoot. We went to the tip that was at the base of Green Gully and would shoot rats. I don't think I ever hit one, but we sure scared the living daylights out of them!

Snake Tales
Snakes were abundant in the area and we lost two cats to snake bite. Then there was the morning when the dunny man almost dropped the can when he encountered a snake in the driveway. Alerted to the danger, my father, dressed in his pyjamas, dispatched the serpent. I also had some close encounters.

Snakes were also an unwelcome visitor to our chook house located in the backyard, well away from the house. Although the snakes were not a threat to the chooks (in fact, they enjoyed the cosy confines the chook house as they lay in wait to ambush the rodents looking for eggs) on some mornings they did surprise my mother when she went out to collect the eggs. My father would respond to her call for help by emerging from the house with his .22 calibre rifle or an axe and execute

the snake. Fortunately, my mother was never bitten,

Primary Schools
I started my schooling at St Albans East Primary School and it did not start well. On the first day my mother gave me a dink on her bicycle and dropped me off at the school. I decided to run away. I do not know why I did this. I hid in an empty block near the school with no idea of my next move. My dilemma was solved when my mother found me and took me back to the school. I suspect she saw me running away and cycled back to retrieve me.

I was in the initial intake at St Albans North Primary School in 1960 which was handy as it was a short walk from home. My lasting memories of this school was regularly getting the strap in grade 3 and getting into trouble in grade 6 for arriving early and celebrating Geelong's 1963 premiership on the blackboard.

Street Cricket
We were fortunate in Fox Street that there was so little traffic that we could play cricket in the street rather than backyards without the fear of being killed. Same rules as backyard cricket applied and a game that may have started with four players would grow as others joined in. We did have a problem when the ball was hit into the long grass and we had to search for it. Often, we only had one ball and if it could not be found, that was the end of the game. One game was called off when one boy came across a tiger snake when looking for the ball.

Secondary School
I was a student of St Albans High School from 1964 to 1969. My time at St Albans High School was more distinguished by my modest sporting prowess rather than my academic achievements. I was a lazy student and more interested in sport than study. I probably was not helped by my father who did not rate highly 'learning from books'. I do not know why I chose subjects like Physics and Chemistry as I was not suited to those subjects. I should have pursued the humanities subjects.

Glenn Hilling in Form 1 1964

For a language it was either German or French. I chose German and on the first day I found that most students in the German class spoke German or a related language at home and could conduct conversations in fluent German. I basically gave up and struggled from then on. In my last year I dumped German for Economics. This subject was in English and I was much better at it.

Glen Hilling, Form 5, 1968 (second row from back, second from right).

I believe that St Albans High School started deteriorating in 1968/1969. I accept no responsibility for that. There were some troublemakers who made life difficult for teachers. I recall a new maths teacher who had come straight out of university. She was not much older that the students she was teaching and could not control the class.

In my last year we had Mr Maplestone as a Physics teacher; when he decided to turn up. First was the knee injury playing hockey. This required surgery and a long spell of sick leave. Then he got married and with that came another extended period of leave. There was no replacement teacher. The class tried D.I.Y. Physics, but after a few weeks that descended into chaos. Mr Maplestone reappeared towards the end of the year and we spent the swot vac period catching up with all the Physics classes we had missed. I still failed the subject and Matriculation in general.

I excelled at English Expression and English Literature. It probably helped that I was an avid reader and I liked the teacher, Mr McLeish. He was also our football coach. His classes were full of discussion about politics, sport and sex. He often digressed from the curriculum and every now and then he would check the curriculum and find that we had not touched on a prescribed book. On short notice we would be told to read certain chapters on the weekend and discuss them at the next class. My lasting impression of Mr McLeish was at that start of a new year or new term and I was standing in an assembly area. Next thing I was 'shirtfronted' and lying on the ground. Standing over me was Mr McLeish. He wanted to know if I would be playing football that year. It was nice to know that I was needed.

In all those years I can only recall one school excursion and that was to the Mornington Peninsula.

Athletics
I first represented St Albans North Primary School in tunnel ball as I was pretty quick at getting from the back to the front of the queue. My best performance was in the under 12 long jump at the District Sports at Selwyn Park, Albion on 23 October 1963. It took a District record to beat me.

In my latter years at St Albans High School (1968-69) the school wanted to improve its status at interschool athletics. This was a tall task as the district had some of the best sprinters in the country and I was a sprinter. Nevile Sillitoe was a teacher at Maribyrnong High School and he coached some of the best sprinters in the country including Peter Norman who won a silver medal in the 200 metres at the 1968 Olympic Games (remember the raised fist protest on the podium?); Bill Earle, a 1964 Olympian and a great coach as I found out later when I joined the Abion Amateur Athletics Club, taught at Sunshine West High School and I believe Altona had close connections with the Powerhouse Amateur Athletics Club.

To pursue this ambitious target, those selected to represent the school were given privileges including skipping classes to attend training sessions. This suited me fine as one of these training sessions coincided with a German class. This programme also uncovered a lot of hidden talent.

The school performed well in those years and one 4 x 100 metre relay team made it all the way to All Schools competition before being beaten. In my age group I encountered Murray Goldie from Maribyrnong High School, the State champion, and some other good sprinters, but I was competitive, managing top three placings in some events in 1969.

Football
I remember well my first game of football. It was an interschool game for St Albans North P.S. played somewhere in Sunshine. The ground was a quagmire. The ball was kicked in my direction on the forward line and I ran towards the ball. I was expecting it to bounce so I hung back a bit, but no. The ball just went splat in the mud and was not going anywhere. In the ensuing scuffle to pick up the ball I was awarded a free kick. I fancied myself kicking a goal and although it was a strong accurate kick, the ball fell short. That was my first kick in a football match and the only kick I had in that game.

I played football for St Albans High School, but it took me a long time to realise that I was not footballing material. It had been a painful experience with a broken wrist, broken teeth and a displaced septum to show for it.

Cycling
It was near the end of my time at primary school that I got my first bicycle. It was a ‘hand me down’ bicycle, hand-painted in yellow with 24-inch wheels and it was on this I learned to cycle. I learnt to ride on the grassy soccer ground a short distance east up Fox Street where falling off would be less painful. I do not recall falling off, but I do remember on one big push from my mother and I found myself pedalling along unassisted.

St Albans High School was about a mile (1.6 km) from home and I had grown out of the 24-inch bike, so I received a Malvern Star bicycle with 27-inch wheels one Christmas. It was a heavy steel, single speed model in green and gold and cost my parents £24/19/6. My parents offered to pay £3 extra for a three speed Raleigh and I should have chosen that model even if it was only available in red or black. The quality of the Malvern Star was woeful and it suffered frequent mechanical problems. The paintwork was so thin that it wore off just cleaning it. At some stage, I had a three-speed Sturmey Archer rear hub fitted. It was a reconditioned unit and I rarely ever got three gears. Either just first and second gears or second and third gears, and no amount of adjustment could get all three gears to operate. I should have taken the British built Raleigh.

Despite all these problems, I rode it regularly. For variety, I would sometimes take a detour on the way to school or give someone a ‘dink’ after school. I was once pulled up by the police for doing this. Got off with a warning.

There were hair-raising descents and leg burning climbs at Green Gully, a BMX style roller coaster track in a quarry north west of St Albans (I think it was at the top end of West Esplanade) and the cross country ride from McIntyre Road to the ‘quarter mile’ bridge on the Bendigo rail line over the Maribyrnong River. I rode the bike to Sydenham, Keilor library, Sunshine, Footscray, Altona beach and even got as far as the city. I remember riding as far as King Street and doing a U-turn for the ride home. It would have been a weekend afternoon as there was no traffic.

When the Calder race track was opened, a friend and I would cycle there, hide our bicycles in the bushes, sneak through the wire fence and watch practice sessions without paying, keeping one eye on the ticket inspectors.

I think it was on my last day at high school that the bicycle finally decided it had had enough. I strapped a bag full of books on the carrier and the top tube fractured at the junction with the seat tube. I managed to ride home on a very rickety bike. It was then banished to the shed and eventually to a hard rubbish collection. It was good riddance. The only consolation was that I learnt a lot about bicycle maintenance. It was to be almost ten years before I owned another bicycle and I vowed that it would not be a Malvern Star.

Family Transport

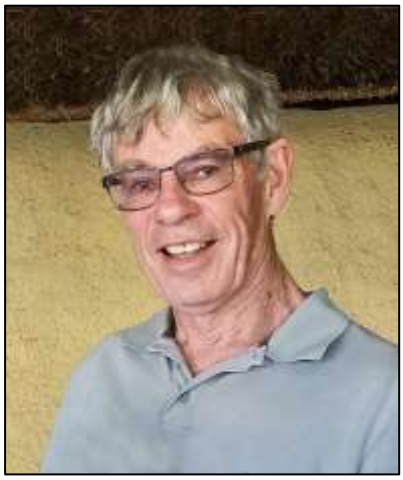
When we moved to St Albans our family transport was a BSA 500 motorcycle with a sidecar. My mother would ride pillion while I occupied the sidecar. I cannot remember how long we were ‘bikies’. As my father did shift work, a couple of winters of daily commuting in the cold, rain and darkness was enough torture for him and a more ‘civilised’ form of transport was deemed necessary.

This was a second-hand Morris Minor in almond green. The Morry was the sort of car that gave small cars a poor reputation at the time. Power (I use the term loosely) came from an engine that had its origins in the pre-war Austin 7. It struggled up hills, particularly if it got stuck behind a truck, and the cylinder head had to come off annually to ‘decoke’ the engine. The trafficators never worked and the starting handle was an essential item. But worse, it came with ‘tin worm’, a typical affliction of British cars, which eventually put holes in the chassis.

Not deterred and convinced that British engineering was superior to that of any other nation, my father purchased another B.M.C. product to replace the Morris - an Austin A95 Westminster, a six-cylinder car in white with red flashes down each side. The Austin certainly had some ‘get up and go’, easily outperforming Holdens and Falcons of that era, until it overheated, which it did regularly. Besides body rot, there was a problem with engine oil entering the cooling system. My father sought different solutions to this problem and the B.M.C. dealer in Footscray tried different fixes with no success. That was until the water pump failed. When my father removed the water pump he found a crack in the engine block and this was the entry point for the oil. The solution was easy. He got a somebody to weld the crack, refitted the water pump and disposed of the car.

With the realisation that maybe British cars were not the epitome of quality and reliability, the Austin made way for a 1965 Holden HD Station Wagon in a strange shade of blue. It may have been ponderous, but for the first time in his life, my father had a car that could go a whole twelve months without a breakdown and did not need a starting handle. It was in this Holden that I learnt to drive. Alas, like its predecessors it was susceptible to rust. Finally, with the Holden full of rot, he bought a Mitsubishi Colt, and this was the epitome of quality and reliability. Moreover, it showed no signs of rust.

It did not matter what sort of car my father owned; they all sounded the same. He would tinker with the carburetor until he got that truck engine sound he loved so much from his army days.



Article written by Glenn Hilling © 2026

Glenn Hilling (L) Albion A.A.C. Royal Park 1971

G Hilling (L) World Masters Games 2001