

Growing up in Malahide 1939-1952

Ian Glass (isg@alum.mit.edu)

I was born as the oldest of three children in a nursing home in Dublin just two days after the start of the 2nd World War in 1939. However, our actual home was in Malahide. My parents had around 1938 bought their house, then called “Glendaloc” but now “Four Seasons”, on the Dublin Road. It had been built by an architect called Cahill, probably in 1936. It is thought to have been a design from New Zealand. He had sold it for £400, apparently without telling his wife, in order to raise money to take part in the Spanish Civil War (on which side I do not remember). It had a garden of about an acre and was situated in the belt of trees that surrounded the demesne of “La Mancha”, the scene of a notorious multiple murder in 1926.



Our house “Glendaloc”, on Dublin Road, around 1939, when the garden was newly planted. In the late 1940s an upstairs with dormer windows was added.

One of our neighbours was a retired Church of Ireland clergyman called Hodges and he baptized me privately at St Andrews Church (Church of Ireland) when I was about a year old. I still have an original edition of “Harry Lorrequer” that he bequeathed to be given to me when I grew up.

I am told that my first word was “ish”, which meant “light” and may have come from the Kish light that we could see in the distance. One of my early recollections is of the Kish foghorn.

My father was an Ulsterman and my mother came from South Africa, of Northern Irish and Northumbrian parents. They had seen a bit of the World and tended to be slightly alien in their outlook. My mother wore slacks and was known locally as the “lady who wore trousers”. This was when she briefly took up golf on the Links. Nevertheless, they came to know quite a few people in Malahide and my father took part in a coastal watch during the War. This involved cycling (I think) to Portmarnock, having a drink and then returning.

Mainly because of the War, my parents cultivated a lot of vegetables and we had apple trees as well as raspberries, blackcurrants and other fruits. My mother made jam. Sugar was among the items that were rationed and had to be saved up for this purpose. We also had a few beehives. An old Irish-speaking neighbour, Mr O’Donnell, sometimes came to help when there was a problem with swarming bees. Mr O’Donnell came from the West and was said to have won his house in a magazine competition before the War. He was a widower and lived with his sister who he would talk to in Irish when he did not want little me to overhear what they were saying.

A curious thing happened towards the end of the War. Mr Cahill (the architect) re-appeared and asked if he could fetch something that he had left behind. He went to the hot press and lifted up the floorboards to retrieve some guns that he had hidden there years before!

Somebody had persuaded my father that he ought to have a .22 rifle during the War but all it was ever used for was to shoot some of the noisy crows that abounded in our trees. He had also been given some concrete blocks and corrugated iron by a concerned friend to build an air raid shelter but instead he constructed a “little house” for us to play in. We had a “fuffy slide” (pulley) between two of the trees in the

part of the garden that we called “The Wood” and a swing, both also constructed by my father.

We had a number of large beech, sycamore and ash trees and once or twice during the War my father got a permit to cut one of them down for firewood. Some tree cutters would come from Swords and the felling of a tree was a very exciting occasion. When we had no wood we burned turf and our garage was used for storage. My father had a car but because of the lack of fuel, it was stored “for the duration” at McAllister’s garage in the village. Both parents had bicycles and my father’s one had a little extra saddle fitted to the crossbar for me. I think my sister sat on something similar fixed to the carrier at the back.

My father was very practical and had a workshop in our garage. Toys were virtually unobtainable during the War but he made things like a cart, a doll’s house and a model airport for us. He made a large number of wooden Tommy guns that made a clacking noise when a handle was turned and these were popular birthday presents for our friends.

The bottom part of our garden was flooded during the very wet winter of 1947 (I think) and my father had to dig some trenches through a bank to release the water. In the meantime we improvised some boats to paddle around in.



The house, much as we left in in 1952, from a sale leaflet dated 1989.

At some point my father constructed an upstairs to the house to give us some more bedrooms and an extra bathroom. He acted as

the main contractor himself and most of the work was done by a temperamental and rather unreliable Spanish carpenter called de Renzi.

Our neighbour on one side was Garda McMahon and on the other Stef Murphy who had a tobacconist's just off College Green in town. Another neighbor was Father Sexton, a portly retired priest that for some reason we were a bit afraid of. We had a little wooden statue of a chubby man above our cuckoo clock that we children privately named after him!

My father was a Presbyterian and took us to church, then in the ground floor of a house in Killeen Terrace. One room was set out as a church with pews, a pulpit and a harmonium and the other was a Victorian dining room where the Sunday School took place. The minister was Rev McCaughey, shared with a congregation in Howth, and his wife ran the Sunday School. Some of the congregation would leave directly after church for the landing stage to be rowed across to play golf on the "Island". We knew the Dickies, who were leading members of the congregation and sometimes used to go to their farm on the estuary to buy potatoes and have tea and cakes. Major Drummond of the seed company was another member and I remember getting a lift home from him in his sports car, driven at a reckless speed for those days!



With Margaret in May 1942.

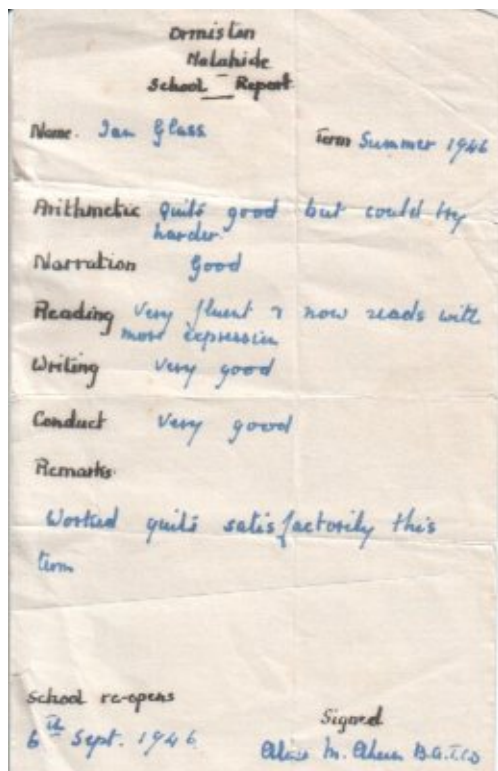
We had a nursemaid called Margaret Reilly, from a Malahide family. She would sometimes take me to her parents' house near the bottom of Old Street and "mother" would give us delicious pieces of newly-baked soda bread. Her brother was the milkman, Bernie, who measured out the milk from large churns. Her aunt Bridget lived in the gate lodge of La Mancha and we

often visited her there (the site of the burned-down mansion itself, whose occupants had murdered, was regarded as haunted and few dared to go near it at night). On the way to “mother” we would pass the St Sylvester well, which was then boarded up. Sometimes we would drop in to St Sylvester’s church. My mother remembered Margaret telling that I was impressed by the large numbers of lit votive candles that I denounced in my shrill little voice as “sheer waste” to the amusement of some old ladies busy with their prayers. Margaret left us around 1950 to get married and my mother stayed in touch with her for many years afterwards.

I first went to school at Miss Ahern’s, “Ormiston”, about opposite St Andrew’s Church, on the Hill. For the first year or two Margaret would take us there. Later I had to walk alone or sometimes with neighbouring children, the mile or so. We had to pass the Catholic National School where we were called names by the children and called them names back. My first year teacher was a Miss May and the classroom was at the very top of the house. I already knew how to read and was probably a bit of a nuisance. We had religious education, mainly in the

form of gruesome passages from the *Pilgrim’s Progress*, read by an ancient retired clergyman. Later, one moved to the main classroom on the first floor, taught by Miss Ahern herself. She was careful to reward effort rather than achievement and all children got a prize at the end of each year. She was said to be one of the first female graduates of TCD (1914).

An early report from Miss Ahern’s school.



She was quite short and she dressed in Victorian style, always wearing a large brooch. She usually had one or two younger helpers. Though a Catholic, unusually for the time, both religions were catered for as well as both sexes. She would walk between the desks, handing out sums and checking progress. French classes were held downstairs in the dining room, a heavily decorated

Victorian room with small family photographs all around the walls. Sometimes there would be an art appreciation class, when a colour reproduction would be put up, and we had to describe its features. Her elderly brother lived somewhere in the house and we children were called occasionally to help push his car out onto the hill. Once a year there would be a sports day with running races, down an area about the size of a tennis court and such items as three-legged races, jumping, and sack races also featured.

On the way back from school we would stop at Sammy Well's factory shop where we had to enter the door and press a button on the counter to buy a "penny bag" of sweets. Nearby was the cinema, owned by Mrs Walsh, but we almost never went inside because of some argument my father had once had with her. An unusual feature was that its walls were covered with papier-maché egg crate separators instead of proper acoustic tiles.

Our doctor was Harry Michael who we occasionally went to see. I remember one occasion when he came to the house when all three of us children were sick, possibly of measles, and had to line up for him in front of the fire in our living room. His daughters, like most of those whose parents could afford the fees, went to Miss Ahern's also. One little incident I remember was about Penny, his youngest child. She was too young to go to school, unlike her sisters, but one day she went anyway and refused to go home. There was a great

deal of wailing as her sisters persuaded her to leave! She became the wife of the rugby player, Willie John McBride.

My friends of those days, probably all dead by now, were neighbours like Peter Stafford, Dick and John Watson, the Gilberts and Niall Connery. Another was Reginald Bretland who lived in a large old house called Seapark near the Malahide Hotel. Tony French is another name that I remember. We went to the parties of other children who attended Miss Ahern's. My sister remembers going to one of Gail Price at Abbeville, the house later lived in by Charles Haughey.

We went to the beach at Hicks's Tower. My parents knew the Hickses but I never saw inside. We also liked going to the Estuary beyond Yellow Walls. The "Short Deep" near May's Bungalow was a part of the beach that we were very much afraid of since it was said to be where people went to commit suicide. On a few occasions we were rowed across to the "Island" for a picnic in the dunes.

Not long after the War I remember being on a family drive along the coast near Robb's Wall when we were stopped by the garda and told that a bomb disposal team was busy on the beach dismantling a mine that had washed up. We were told to drive by as quickly as possible!

One of our neighbours was a Mr Byrne who had a small sailing boat, converted from a lifeboat. He took us sailing around Lambay Island on one memorable occasion.

On the Swords road was the small farm of Toss McMahan where we sometimes bought eggs. He lived with his sister and they specialized in selling day-old chicks that they hatched with the aid of incubators warmed by paraffin. Toss spent large amounts of his time trimming the hedge along

the road, mainly it seems because it gave him the opportunity to talk to the occasional passers-by.

One of my somewhat older cousins was interested in fossils and we went on occasion to the quarry at Feltrim, where we could find lots of them.

A favourite drive was along the road beside Collinstown airport where we would stand on the roof of a wartime bunkhouse to watch planes taking off and landing.

I was obsessed by plumbing and electricity as a young child and I remember a trip by bicycle with Tommy Burke who took us to the wells on Swords road where the water supply came from as well as to the waterworks at the top of the hill. On another occasion we went to the (manual) telephone exchange and watched the operators at work. Our phone number was 54 when I was very young, then 254 a bit later. I think my parents told me it started as 4.

Near us was a postbox of pre-independence vintage with a British coat-of-arms that had been painted green. The postman was an oldish man called, I think, "Jem", and he rode a bicycle with an acetylene lamp that I was intrigued by.

We bought our groceries from Findlaters, since it was a protestant company. My mother used to phone in her orders and they would be delivered and carefully checked for quality. Nugent was the butcher and Bassett, the chemist used to make a delicious cough mixture that was a pleasant compensation for having a cold. Margaret would sometimes take me into Hogans, the Catholic grocer. I remember that there was always a huge lump of butter on the counter from which portions would be cut off and weighed. There were sticky strips for catching flies hanging from the ceiling.

The Malahide Horticultural Society used to have an annual exhibition in the village library. I once entered a pot of jam that I had made from yellow raspberries and won a prize for it.

Malahide Castle with its Lord was very remote to us and we hardly ever entered its grounds except for C of I church fetes and sometimes to buy vegetables that were sold from a walled garden. Of course, we knew all about the Abbey and Maud Plunkett who was “maid, wife and widow” on the same day. Across the road from us was a wooded part of the Castle demesne and I remember people being upset when the last Lord Talbot to live there decided to cut down many of the mature trees to raise some cash.

At one stage I had a fox terrier that I was very fond of called “Smut” who caused trouble by chasing game in the demesne of the Castle. We therefore tried to keep him tied up on a long rope at night but he eventually disappeared without trace and must have either strangled on his rope or been shot.

A decade or so after we left Malahide I was roped in by some history student friends to help show people around the Castle on an open day and on that occasion met Lord Talbot and his sister, the Hon Rose. The latter talked to us about their ancestor, “Dirty Dick” (Richard Earl of Tyrconnell). The student group was under the leadership of Prof Otway-Ruthven of TCD and I remember her joshing with Talbot as to whose family was the oldest. I was intrigued to learn later that many of James Boswell’s papers had been found in the Castle (Another interesting person associated with Malahide was the Cambridge physicist George Gabriel Stokes who used to spend his holidays at 4, Windsor Terrace).

We also sometimes went to buy vegetables at Auburn, further out on the Dublin Road.

I liked to watch the Great Northern Railway trains. The "Enterprise" used to hurtle through Malahide station, pulled by smart blue steam engines and the coaches had dark blue sides with GNR crests on them. Once I managed to get a ride on a shunting engine that was working a bit up the line from the station. The station master's name was Meneer but we children used to call him "Mr Manure".

Later on I joined the cub pack that had just then been started. Following that I was in the scouts for two or three years. We camped at weekends on a part of the Castle Demesne and had summer camps away in such exotic places as the Isle of Man and Westward Ho in Devon. The troop meetings were held at the protestant National School. We had a "Bob-a-job" week and I remember being exploited by the minister of the St Andrews Church who got a whole day's work of weeding for the bob he paid me.

Our whole family went to South Africa, I think from about October 1948 to April 1949, so that our mother could visit her parents who she had not seen since before she got married in 1937. This was a disruptive experience for us children since by the time we got back our friends had found others to play with and we had been forgotten! We travelled by boat by the B & I line to Liverpool and then by train to London where we stayed overnight in a hotel that had been partly destroyed by wartime bombs and had a short tour of the city by taxi. The next day we went to Southampton to join the Capetown Castle, a Union Castle liner. Not to mention numerous taxis in between. It must have been a nerve-wracking experience for my parents. Our father said goodbye at Southampton as he could only take three months off. He came out later by flying boat, taking several days.



Malahide cub pack around 1949, probably just after it was founded. I am in the back row, third cub from left. The 4th from left was Jeremy Gilbert and the second from the right in the front row was Reginald Bretland.

My mother used to tell a story about going to the Garda station to fill in a passport application form for this trip. At some point she had to write down the purpose of the trip and she put "to visit parents". But somewhere further down she was required to produce her parents' marriage certificate which of course she could not easily do, She was advised to simply write "parents deceased". Notwithstanding, she got her passport!

In 1949, after Miss Ahern's school, I was sent to Mountjoy School which had just moved out from Mountjoy Square to a Victorian property called Mount Temple in Clontarf. This school was run by the Incorporated Society for Promoting Protestant Schools and in my interview the headmaster (WR Tate) was very suspicious that I was jewish and asked a lot of questions about our background! This was a typical small protestant school of the time, with about 200 or so pupils. I was at first in a junior class under a Miss Dickinson. A new

set of buildings were being added to the original manor house and were not yet ready for occupation. I remember several of the teachers. Mr Marshall taught mathematics, Mr Simmons (known as "Ghandi") was the English teacher and the Irish teacher was nicknamed "Puck".

To get to school I usually got a lift from my father on his way to work but I had to catch the bus number 42 to get home. I sometimes walked a stop or two towards Malahide (to save a penny!) and had to run the gauntlet of Catholic boys who bashed me up on at least one occasion, giving me a bloody nose. I remember a kindly old lady taking me into her cottage in Artane and cleaning up my face.

Sometimes waiting for the bus I would meet CB McCusker, an English physicist who lived nearby and worked at the Institute for Advanced Studies. It is partly due to him that I got interested in cosmic rays and ended up as an astrophysicist.

In 1952 my parents decided to move to Castlepark, Rathfarnham, much to the regret of my brother, my sister and myself. I am not sure what motivated them to do this. It also involved me in a change of school to St Andrew's College, then in Ballsbridge. My father then managed the Irish branch of an American firm that supplied cinema equipment and had offices in Lower Abbey Street in the City. Just after the War the road traffic was very light and he could park quite near to his work. Part of the decision to move may have been the increase in motor traffic but also my sister had by then to go to a secondary school. Inevitably we lost touch with nearly all our Malahide friends except for a few that went to the same secondary schools or university.

Cape Town, 6 July 2017