Lives in Architecture

Nigel Coates

RIBA

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For Fearless

Preface

Cities are among man's greatest achievements, except in a pandemic. In the spring of 2020 London was tense, empty, eerie. I've lived in the metropolis most of my life and reimagined it passionately in the hope of raising its game. But in those months of sociopathic isolation, London's freedom was reduced to confinement. The city was not only suffering from the pathological effects of Covid-19, but the new anthropology of distance working, the nightmares conjured by the march of climate change, not to mention the dogged, damning effects of Brexit. Britain as we knew it was on notice. London's unique cosmopolitan alchemy seemed to be at risk.

Exercise was rationed as well, becoming an activity more suited to life in jail. My partner John and I would stroll tentatively up to Hyde Park, giving a wide berth to any other pedestrians along the way. Dashes to the local supermarket were made during the 7am slot; at home groceries were ritually washed, even the packaged vegetables. We dreamed up many versions of an imminent escape – but I had a book to write, and where better than our place in the Italian countryside?

Travel, we were told, must be essential or not at all. Airlines were in enforced hibernation, and would undo their schedules as the two-week deadline for cancellation neared. In an attempt to nail our tickets, I double-booked on successive days. Eventually we had confirmed seats to Rome on 3 July. Hallelujah! With fields stretching out around our Italian house, there was a real prospect of freedom of the spirit and a healthier balance between pleasure and deprivation. The train journey from Rome to Chiusi had never been quite so charged.

I am reminded now of another flight – from pestilence in Florence, as recounted in early Renaissance masterpiece the *Decameron*. We were not eight storytellers, but two. London rather than Florence, Siena rather than Fiesole. Like the risk-averse posse of accidental friends in Boccaccio's fable, we were heading for the hills.

That was a long 18 months ago. At times we've felt like the last humans alive, outnumbered by the wild boar and roe deer. We've watched our surroundings mutate in slow motion. Summer came, and slipped into autumn. As wine-red and blazing orange leaves fell from the trees, a raw and naked landscape appeared. The sun rose later and set behind hills more eastwards. In the winter the cold gets into your bones, and we wondered when it would ever end. Then bulbs began to shoot and trees to sprout, and rival gangs of birds got louder and friskier. One spring morning the *rondini* were circling over the house, fresh in from their winter break in Africa. And all the

while, I had this book swirling in my head. I haven't stayed put anywhere for this length of time since I was a teenager at school in Malvern.

I've been accompanied on this journey by John Maybury, as we kept each other on the right side of madness. He has patiently read and re-read the manuscript and helped it to be what it is now. His acute observation has lightened and enriched my storytelling. I am grateful to Helen Castle and Ginny Mills for the commission and, with Liz Dalby and Caroline Ellerby, for their sympathetic editing that has been both as broad brush and detailed as necessary. On the visual side, I'd like to thank Maria Cicirello for her patience, her keen eye and for bearing the responsibility of researching the images and working beyond the call of duty. I am also grateful to Caroline Wood at Felicity Bryan for key advice that gave me the confidence to embark on this project. Thanks also to Ludovico Einaudi and Frank Ocean whose intoxicating music has accompanied me during days of writing.

Although my career has hardly been a conventional one, it would have been even less so without the massive contribution of Doug Branson, whose conviction and professional acumen is inherent in all the built work that Branson Coates Architecture made a reality. I would like to thank the long-term collaborators at BCA, including Chris Haine, Anne Brooks, Allan Bell, Gerrard O'Carroll, Christophe Egret and Guy Dickinson. And at Nigel Coates Studio, Ace Morgan, Andrea Mancuso, Filippo Castellani, Andrea Finelli, Luciano Ragno, Maria Cicirello and Elizabeth Murphy.

Indeed, I'd like to extend thanks to all the fine people who have worked with me over the years, who've taken on and believed in my imagination, challenged it and turned it from a frenzied sketch into reality. They not only include studio collaborators, but students, tutors, critics and clients. I am not just thankful to those who contributed directly to the serpentine story I'm about to tell, but to all those who, as a consequence, have been inspired enough to do their own thing, and in their own ways have added new turns of phrase to what we did together.

Nigel Coates
Pergomeno
January 2022

All Roads Out

I must have been six when I first noticed the architecture books left casually around the house like sweets. There were ones on Modernist houses, Le Corbusier and ancient Rome. I'd turn the pages of black-and-white illustrations and ponder these wondrous achievements. My mother and I conspired that one day we'd go to Rome and see the Colosseum together – travel plans that, when I think about it now, played their part in the long passage of growing up. I coveted the idea that architecture could shape my destiny.

On our trips to the lending library in Malvern, I'd go for *The Chronicles of Narnia*, but she'd quietly pick up books on buildings. Books fascinated me, or at least the illustrations did. At home one of my favourites was an encyclopedia of everything; I can picture now the Corinth Canal with a Greek soldier in tights and a skirt crossing the bridge foregrounding a view along its brutal cut through solid rock. There were weird trees in Africa, buildings like termites' nests, and a giant redwood with an arch cut out of the trunk for trucks to drive through.

When my sister Rosalind came along I had an accomplice, and we'd go adventuring all over the adjacent common land, gradually extending our territory like adolescent cats. We'd survey the countryside that stretched out beyond the garden of our house and marked the outer limit of the Pound Bank council estate. There were a few farms nearby, and a derelict manor house with a moat. There were always streams to be dammed, trees to be climbed and thickets to be negotiated.

I guess our innocence masked the fact that not everything was sweet between our mother and father, Doug and Peg to their friends and family. My father worked at the government radar laboratories in Malvern, at that time called the Telecommunications Research Establishment, or TRE. In 1941, when he joined as a young engineer, he was just 17. Radar was crucial to the war effort, which meant he narrowly avoided conscription.

Malvern is a picturesque spa town in Worcestershire, with an impressive range of granite hills that concealed the ministry laboratories by virtue of the geological shadow they cast. These hills rise from the west side of the Severn Valley, and define a natural barrier to Hereford, and Wales beyond. There the TRE's important work on radar could expand in relative safety. It was never bombed. The genteel reputation of the town afforded another kind of protection; its huge granite houses once hosted fashionable hotels whose guests would take the waters. Malvern water is so pure it has

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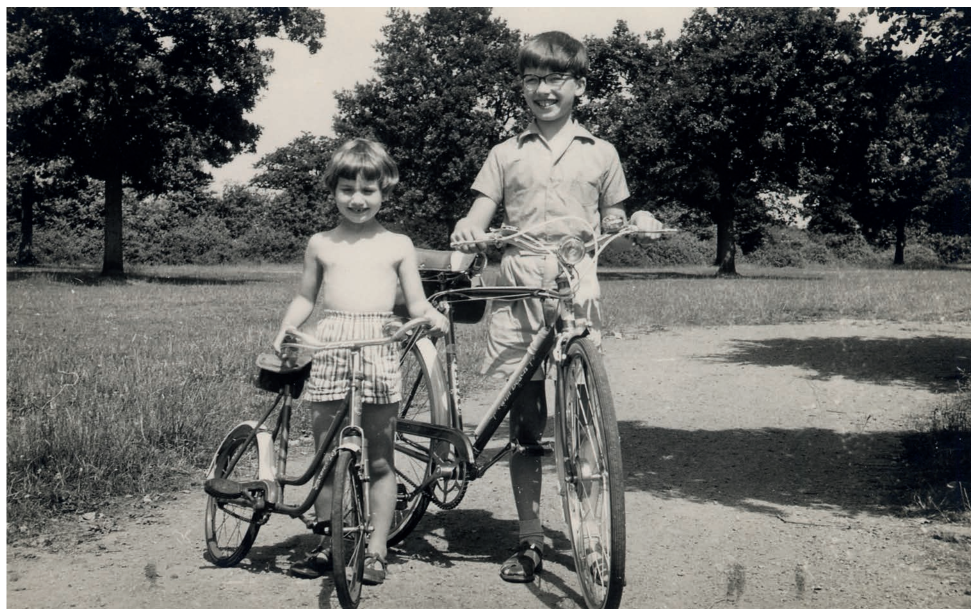

My sister Ros and I with our first bicycles. They equipped us to explore the surrounding countryside with its wildernesses, landmark trees and streams.

nothing in it – no minerals, no bubbles – and it is said to be the preferred diluent for whisky, which is why it used to bear a Royal Warrant. Great Malvern railway station, with its magnificent pair of curved platforms, was aggrandised to receive Queen Victoria and other visitors, who would take rides in a tiny carriage along the web of paths crisscrossing the hills.

Doug and Peg must have met around 1942. It is obvious from the family photographs that they were the best-looking couple at the TRE. They beam youth and optimism into the Brownie lens. Besides, they were in a community of smart young scientists in a charming town well away from the Blitz. Social life stemmed from the interaction of the mostly male laboratories and the predominantly female support in the tracing office where Peg worked. One photo I remember, now lost, says as much; some 20 men and 20 women pose at a cross-dressing party. Entertainment had to come from their own resources.

As with many wartime romances, circumstances brought them together before they'd explored who each other were; in reality, they were unsuited. My father had a fervent, practical outlook, was naturally curious and a keen sailor, and had an aptitude for drawing. But his profession relied on his scientific side. Whether it was boiling water or peeling a hard-boiled egg, he exercised a rational approach to everything. My mother on the other hand was first a dreamer, always aiming her thoughts in artful directions. She wanted to be modern, but was always subtly reined in by my father. Peg, formally Margaret Trigg, a gentleman farmer's daughter, was also traumatised by losing her mother at the age of 17.

My first memory is the sudden appearance of my mother's half-brother Michael. I was three, and we were living in a ministry prefab in Steamer Point, Malvern. Uncle

Mike came to visit, bringing with him my first experience of wonder in the shape of a 'Twopence Coloured' toy theatre he'd built himself. The gaudy stage shaped from printed cardboard drew me instantly into its magical frame. But despite Mike's generosity of spirit, my mother was always quite wary of him and would never leave us alone together.

There were as many arty genes on my mother's side as there were rational ones on my father's. Doug's father George had worked with Logie Baird on the invention of the first television. They conducted experiments in a room above what is now Bar Italia on Frith Street, Soho. Meanwhile Peg had a feel for poetry, and she and her sister Dorothy cultivated a lively interest in drawing and painting. They were both passionate about contemporary art – Graham Sutherland, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth – but never had the opportunity to become artists themselves.

My mother's taste for Van Gogh came under particular attack at home: 'Oh, you would like him, wouldn't you? He was mad.' As my sister and I grew up, Mum's confidence was gradually being eroded. She'd attempt home improvements she'd seen in *Woman's Weekly* or *Vogue*. Slightly make-do versions would appear at home, knocked into shape by my father. In particular I remember a 'divan', which materialised in our living room complete with a bookshelf that bridged one side – a gesture towards the fashionable idea of merging functions. Tension in the family hinged around money, of which there was never enough for both domestic bills and the weekly spend on food.

Peg's arty interests certainly didn't extend to the kitchen. Meals were basic and frequently went horribly wrong. We'd often awake to the rasping of burnt toast being scraped with a knife. Sausages got burnt too, and fried eggs turned to leather, especially when my dad was breathing down her neck. Insults would fly, and nervous tension put paid to another Saturday.

Top: My parents, Doug and Peg, on their wartime wedding day in 1943.

Bottom: My paternal grandfather George with Logie Baird in his laboratory on Frith Street, Soho, conducting their first experiments at television.

On one such day a row flared up about a number one record, Perry Como's 'Catch a Falling Star', which my mother desperately wanted to own. This desire to connect seemed to unleash feelings of resentment in my father, and accusations of profligacy. In the end he gave in, and we all trooped into the local record store to buy it. Weekend upheavals would usually be saved by a family day out to a local beauty spot or historic pile; a pretext for Dad to spruce up his car.

Doug was fanatical about cars. During the war he had a Morgan three-wheeler. In particular he loved his Jowett Javelin, which was a miniaturised Brit version of an American gangster car: all black, sleek and duck-arsed, with big chrome bumpers. My mother learned to drive in it and, years later, so did I. Sunday outings took in many architectural or natural wonders – castles, valleys, woods and rivers. I remember stopping once at Stonehenge, in those days as open to visitors as to the sun and the rain. The Wye Valley was a favourite, home to the amazing ruined Tintern Abbey, a Gothic shell with a spooky outline fit for a Caspar David Friedrich landscape. There was also a weekend jaunt to the network of reservoirs in the Elan Valley – of as much interest to my father's engineering instinct as to mine for the vast architectural sweep of the dams.

The visit that leaves the deepest impression is Witley Court, an 18th century cum early Victorian mansion that was burnt out in the 1920s. In those days the ruins were accessible if you were willing to pick a path over brambles and barbed wire. The giant portico of the house still stands, as do the vast steel structures of the hothouses. The largest of two Baroque fountains in the grounds was particularly inspiring, and although at the time it was dry, I could easily imagine the arching sprays of water that once animated it. And the chapel adjacent to the house, which survived the fire, was fully loaded with Italian frescoes and plaster putti. All of this stoked the imagination with an indelible after-image. I visualised the scale and extravagance of the house in its heyday, and wondered how its former glory could be revived.

My mother would get behind with the bills, which she'd have to pay from an inadequate weekly budget. Little by little, the family was falling apart. Dad became increasingly frustrated and resorted to bullying tactics. My mother was deeply unhappy, and felt belittled and claustrophobic. She'd talk to my sister and I about 'leaving': 'We could strike out for a better life.' The reality turned out to be somewhat different. In the spring of 1959, when I was 10 and my sister six, the front door slammed for the last time. She'd relocated to the Friends Meeting House she'd hired to start a childcare business. But she had no substantial means of her own, and when the divorce came, my sister and I were made wards of my father. My mother had no option but to start again, so she and her new companion Richard, who'd been waiting in the wings, took off for Cornwall.

She and Richard metamorphosed into a model 'beat' couple; they dressed in sloppy joes and took up arty pursuits

My father in his Austin 8 Military Tourer soon after the war. He truly loved cars, especially convertibles.

like photography and modelling for artists. Despite the court having ordered her to stay away from her children, she kept in touch by sending occasional parcels that, strangely, never reached us. Attracted by the scene around Barbara Hepworth, they were living in St Ives, as far from Malvern as possible.

Our grandmother came to my father's rescue – she sold up her cottage in Surrey and moved to Malvern, sacrificing her own independence for her spurned son. She was in her early sixties but suffered from rheumatism and had a heart condition. Meanwhile, my father struck out for pastures new, as witnessed by Gran with some dismay. He was in the market for a new wife, and was determined to play the field.

Both my father and mother were born in 1923. At the time of the family shake-up, he was still a relatively young and handsome man with a shock of black wavy hair. He never completely got over the humiliation of having been 'left', but after a year or so he started dating, and there was no shortage of eligible young ladies. After he'd been out with each of them a couple of times, he'd ask my sister and I what we thought. 'Would you like her to be your father's new wife?' And, by implication, our substitute mother.

For months I was looking into the abyss, my stomach hollow. Nevertheless, my sister, father and I gradually closed ranks. We had to. In my search for focus, I kept training for my 11-plus with mock exam books my uncles gave me. To my surprise I got into the local all-boys grammar school, Hanley Castle, which was a ritualistic seven-mile bus ride away in a village of the same name.

I managed at school, but compared with the others who were all taller than me, I felt like a slight, sissy runt. I enjoyed humanities subjects more than sciences, and absorbed more than my exam results seemed to indicate. Apart from art, no subject stood out. Weirdly, I was persuaded by my father to drop art from my roster of A Levels – maths, physics and chemistry. With a shocking lack of insight, my careers master suggested that if I didn't make it to university, I'd be a very good bank clerk.

A memorable episode at school was when I organised a one-day strike in protest at the slurry served up for lunch. When the bell rang for the boys to pile into the dining hall, not a single one of us went in, much to the dismay of the head, or the Bock, as we called him. In the sixth form I also came up with my first magazine, *Recoil*, a Roneo-printed satirical take on the events at the school from the boys' perspective based on *Private Eye*. Neither of these events were exactly career moves, which may explain why I was the only boy in my class not to become a prefect.

Ever since primary school, art had been my strongest subject. I learned early on to use it to detract from my weaknesses in other areas, including any sport involving a ball. My ability to draw seemed to mesmerise my classmates, who would gather around my 'Chinese landscape' or 'vase of flowers'. I'd glow with pride as if I'd scored a goal.

This skill failed to rescue me when the choice of New Mummy was finally settled by a young woman of only 20, who came from a smart, connected family. Her father was an editor at the evening county newspaper. Via finishing school and au-pairing in Switzerland for a well-to-do French family, the Delafonts, she had cultivated forthright views on respectability. Rather than the crooners of the era, she idolised the Queen and her sister, and studied everything about them, from their hair to their jewellery. Hardly a prince himself, my father had not only been married but had two children

in tow, so romance came with substantial baggage. But apparently Doug was the one she'd been waiting for, and my sister and I were to be reshaped into a new family unit.

Whinray Greatwich lived with her parents at what seemed to me a very grand home, a mansion almost, on one of the smartest roads in the town. Mowbray House had very high gilded ceilings and a huge sweeping staircase. Spellbound, I imagined fitting our council house into their stairwell. Exceptionally large Easter eggs were produced. We were all on our best behaviour. It was odd attending your stepmother and father's wedding.

Some months after their wedding day, Whinray's mother Jean noticed the discord and began to take me under her wing, in part perhaps because she'd never had a son. She equipped me with a new set of manners. Despite Whinray's air of authority, Jean knew her daughter was out of her depth. When trouble blew up at home, she would take me aside: 'Do you know the meaning of "tact"?'

With her French connection, Whinray thought it would do me good to stay with them in Paris. Around New Year 1962, for two weeks I would stay with the Delafonts at their apartment in the 7th arrondissement, and be introduced to Parisian life by their son Fabrice. It was a brilliant opportunity, and my first exposure to a real city. My father, sister and I set off on Boxing Day for Heathrow in the Javelin, and on the way, it began to snow. In those days there was a viewing platform on the Queens Building, where Dad and Ros could see the turbo-prop Viscount, which stood on the tarmac for what seemed like eternity with me behind one of the teeny windows. This was my first experience of flying, but as the snow intensified, de-icer vehicles were driven out, spraying first one wing and then the other. Eventually we took off for Le Bourget with both wings covered in ice.

Paris, the Eiffel tower, the Louvre, all that blatant grandiosity. Madame took me on a few introductory journeys around town in her Deux Chevaux. First a market, then the baker. I'd never tasted bread that good. As we circled the Place de la Bastille, some poor fellow threw themselves off the top of the column, landing on top of one of the lion sculptures. Everything was so different – the food, the language, the socialising, and the apparent danger, too. On another occasion I was exploring the Champs de Mars solo, expecting it to be as benign as the Winter Gardens back home, only to come face to face with a soldier with a machine gun. It was the time of the Algerian War, so armed guards were everywhere.

Whinray was only 20 years old when she married my father in 1961. I was 12 and my sister was 8. It was a proud, if surreal, moment and a new beginning.

Fabrice was different, too – so suave, even at the age of 14. He and I went all

over town – the zoo, the Pantheon, the Louvre, Montmartre, the wax museum. I'd also mastered the Metro system and the trams, and found it very hard to stay home. The only formal dinner I remember celebrated Epiphany. We ate from 'gold' plates and finished the meal with 'kings and queens cake', which yielded a bean to decide who should wear the paper crown: miraculously it came to me.

My trip not only introduced me to the excitement of Paris, but to all things European. I wanted to speak French, and even dress French. Fabrice gave me a pair of his cast-off chisel-toed shoes, and at last my Clarks were no more. I listened to French music; in fact, my first ever album was by Françoise Hardy. Back at school I determined to try much harder. My accent was complimented by the teacher, but grammar remained a challenge.

Outside of school, I'd take refuge in one of my fads, of which there were many. As a child I'd painted Chinese characters on to a surplus roll of silk, and had a special brush for the job. On the physics side I assembled a chemistry outfit in the coal shed. The garage became a makeshift theatre, for which the corrugated overhead door doubled as a curtain. My friends and I built a hut in the garden out of wire fencing and willow branches. These obsessions usually lasted a season, unless they were particularly enthralling, like the model theatre I built along the lines of the Festival Theatre in the town. I'd been backstage on a school visit and was captivated by the mechanics behind the proscenium.

I came by a small hardback book that contained instructions for building a model theatre out of hardboard, complete with a segment of the auditorium and a fly tower. It was a big box that came up to my chest, and the stage was about the size of our black-and-white television. My father built me a control box with dimmers for the various lights – on battens, footlights, and even a front-of-house chandelier made from scraps of diamante – all of which could be activated independently. Rather than staging plays – for that I would have needed stick insects as actors – I was much more interested in scene changes. The sets I would transform by raising or lowering a few pieces of scenery and adjusting the lighting.

The cinema was almost as enticing as the stage. The fleapit in the town was the bookend to the Festival Theatre, with the entrance to the Pump Room in between. The Picture House stank of cigarettes and had chewing gum under the seats, but I loved the coloured light on the scalloped silk curtain. At age 15, that's where I saw *A Hard Day's Night*. I wanted nothing more than a pair of Beatle boots and flared jeans, a silhouette I'd picked up from the pages of *Fabulous* magazine. Clothes were an obsession. I can still feel the frisson of a super-tight pair of white jeans I bought from an outfitter in Malvern. They transported me into a proto-erotic forbidden territory.

I was in my stroppy teenager phase, and things didn't improve at home. My father would try to maintain the peace, but if ever my mother came up in conversation she was dismissed as irresponsible, immoral even. The scarlet woman had left for an alternative life, and while my sister and I had suffered the trauma of abandonment, I realise now that in some perverse way it gave me hope. Perhaps my mother's departure from Malvern, and all its bourgeois conventions, was proof that escape was possible. For all the hallowed beauty of Malvern, it was a trap.

Meanwhile advice, or instruction, on how to behave, how to be a 'real man', repeatedly caught me off-guard. The word 'pansy' was bandied about as the most shameful outcome of a decent upbringing. Every adolescent is unprepared for the huge changes they are undergoing, but when prejudice is added to the mix it only stokes the confusion. School was training us for hetero-normality, and that outlook was also being piled on at home. My mother had belatedly proved herself a rebel and incapable of taking responsibility, and some of that judgement was subtly being passed on to me. I was presumed at risk of indecent character, even though I didn't know it.

By that stage there were two other members of the family, my sister Sarah and my brother David, both of whom were brought up on a diet of TV and fishfingers. My fads became more and more involved; coin collecting gave way to tropical fish, with my ever-larger tank occupying a place of honour in my bedroom on top of the old kitchen cupboard that contained my reclaimed radio and hi-fi.

Whinray's younger sister Diana was known in the family as Dido. She was a tomboy, and we became conspirators and adventurers. She also was keen on tropical fish, and we'd go together to aquarist conventions in Worcester and Birmingham. We cycled everywhere, and there were plenty of places to go in the countryside near home or on the Malvern Hills. We were particularly fond of exploring ruined houses, like the 'Psycho' one in a quarry near West Malvern. Treading over broken glass, up creaking stairs or through jammed doors was like trespassing in someone else's story.

Malvern is the hills, not only the town where Hyacinth Bucket presides. With well-to-do origins – its grand granite houses (now mostly schools), its Festival Gardens and theatres, the Perpendicular Gothic Malvern Priory – the spa town occupies the slopes on their eastern side, but the sun sets in the west, on the side that looks towards the Welsh Black Mountains. I still prefer the western slopes. They make me feel open. Whereas everything to do with family felt oppressive.

At home, things became sufficiently stressed for a trip to be organised that would give our stepmother a break from my sister and me. Dad, Ros and I took off in our newly acquired VW camper and headed for Switzerland. My father had a calendar over his desk at work and dreamed of visiting the landmarks featured. The camper was duly prepared, with provisions filling every hidden space – tinned tomatoes and baked beans were stashed under the front row of seats where the three adventurers sat in a row as we snaked across Europe towards Geneva.

New experiences came in waves. At the mountain chalet where Whinray had spent a summer with the Delafonts, we saw cows with cowbells and cartoon-sized ants. The multiple levels and bridges of Lausanne made a fascinating palimpsest of stairs, roads and shortcuts. The Château de Chillon had a beach next to it, and paddling out on an airbed, I discovered what it felt like to be sunburnt.

We burrowed away at sites high and low, mountains, glaciers, lakes and valleys, slowly ticking off the pictures on the calendar. Leaving behind the French-speaking Cantons, in Lugano the language changed to Italian. The lakeside promenade sported palm trees, a sign of Mediterranean air. The next day my father agreed to make a detour towards the next lake, Lago Maggiore, the southern tip of which is in Italy.

Hugging the coast, we drove south on the lookout for a convenient campsite. With the mountains receding, we passed faded, crumbling buildings and voluptuous garden-like displays of nature. We drove past the fanciful apparition of Isola Bella – and sadly, it remained an apparition. We needed a spot for the night, and settled on a campsite near Arona, a small town at the southern end of the lake. Installed among the chestnut trees with the other camper vans and tents, Dad was warming to the Italian mood and cooked pizza in the pressure cooker with the lid off.

Swimming in the lake was a must, as were the squatting loos. Everything was delightfully different, including the people. Two girls, who were splashing in the water, overheard my sister and me. 'You is English?' Before long we were strolling with Laura and Donatella along the main road, taking the occasional bite on giant slices of watermelon. It was a far cry from sodden summer holidays in Wales. Laura and I became pen friends, and I wanted nothing more than to visit her home town, Milan, not that I had the means. My father called home; everything was 'fine'. But there had been a terrible accident: the thermostat in the aquarium had gone wrong and all the fish were dead. I stifled my resentment.

All my mates had a paper round or worked in a shop. In my case, from the age of 16 I became a Saturday boy at the Young Man's Shop in the Shambles in Worcester, the only outfitter in the city with a nod towards men's style. We sold Levi's jeans, polo shirts and some quite sharp tailoring. I soon graduated to suits and jeans on the first floor. When you made a sale, you had to write out the bill and send it with the money down a suction tube in a brass capsule. I was good at my job, sold lots, and enjoyed measuring up customers and folding their prized purchases.

A trip to Milan to see Laura was planned for the following summer, 1965; I would have to save up for the long trip by train from Malvern to Milano. With an exchange of postcards, we decided we'd meet at Stazione Centrale next to the head of the train wherever it drew in. She did a little sketch of me standing next to the locomotive. On the journey I gazed out at the shifting landscape, slept in my seat, and occasionally would open the impenetrable *Teach Yourself Italian*.

My interest was sparked as the train wound through the tunnels and valleys in Switzerland. The Swiss flag seemed to stick out annoyingly from every other building. What a relief to emerge into the southern foothills of the Alps and be in Italy again, with its muffled atmosphere of excitement, the shouting of the panini vendors on the platforms, the scrambled tracks and cabling of the railways, the crumbling plasterwork and general picturesque decay.

Laura's family lived in a modest apartment block on the Corso Garibaldi to the north of the city centre. It was August, hot, and by all accounts the city was half empty. Laura's father was a dentist and her mother maintained the home with a Milanese precision. Laura's job was to sweep the floor after every meal. I loved them from the outset. I was cajoled into eating huge plates of the primo, spaghetti al pomodoro. '*Mangia, mangia!*' One Sunday Laura's mother spent the morning preparing gnocchi by hand. Was I perhaps the son they never had? Every night after dinner Laura and I met up with those friends who hadn't abandoned town for the seaside; without any particular destination, the objective was always to accumulate as many friends along the way as possible. On average we'd reach 15 or 20, and would finish up in some nominated gelateria.

On his day off, Laura's father took me pillion on his prized, bright red Moto Guzzi. We set off for the Lombard plains, made a flash visit to the Certosa at Pavia, had lunch at his old aunt's house, and spent the afternoon fishing by the majestic River Po. The aunt was a lesson in herself; half my height and dressed head to toe in black, she lived alone in one of those enormous farms that once were thriving *fattorie*, with dozens of rooms for the extended family as well as umpteen barns and stores.

Each bedroom had a huge iron bed and an even larger wardrobe, and that was it – nothing like the artful, wall-to-wall clutter of the average English home. Lunch was served in the massive, gloomy kitchen where the aunt stirred a huge pot over the fire, the contents of which she tipped out on to a tea towel. When the polenta had cooled slightly, she unwrapped it, and cut each of us a thick slice which she topped with homemade tomato sauce. This was workers' food. The aunt didn't eat with us, but stood back in the shadows as a country woman apparently should.

Back in the relative bustle of Milan in August, trams squealed against their rails and people were returning after their holidays in Rimini or Bellaria. We visited all the main sites, including the Castello Sforzesco, the Duomo, the Galleria Vittoria Emanuele and Leonardo's *Ultima Cena*. Much as I had loved Paris, my Italian host family was warmer, more thoughtful. Although I had studied French, my desire to speak Italian was much more pressing; I wanted full immersion and, come what may, I would dive into all things Italian however long it took.

As well as trips to Italy, by my mid-teens there was usually a summer destination. One year it was Bournemouth, where two friends and I spent six weeks trying our luck in the catering industry. At the beginning we were sleeping rough in between beach huts, but got scared off by police patrols. I was working as a cashier at the Overstrand Café on the beach, and at night the three of us shared a big bed in a single rented room. I wondered if after all these years I could hook up with my mother, who I'd heard had an engraving business in Swanage, a town just a few miles along the coast. I sent a postcard to her stall on Station Road, Swanage; a shot in the dark to say the least. Would she like to meet me in Bournemouth? I proposed a date the following week.

On the appointed evening I was sitting on the grassy slopes near the coastal road when I noticed a little car, an Austin A35, or something similarly rounded and pale blue, driving slowly along the beachside road. We hugged each other like old friends. Six years of estrangement was a long time, but since we'd last seen each other I'd become a young man. The mood was right, and my mother and I were equally overwhelmed if outwardly we didn't show it. This was the first of many meetings.

My sister and I spent the following summer in digs in Swanage. I was working as a cook in the local Wimpy Bar, until I mistakenly emptied the chip fryer and flooded the restaurant floor with oil. In her new life my mother called herself Maggie. We'd meet on the beach for breakfast and, after supper at home, would tour the bars and the promenades frequented by locals like us. My earnings were pitiful.

Maggie and Richard saved enough money from their toils to buy their first house in Trowbridge, which cost the princely sum of £2,000. She'd avoided putting down roots for so many years, and with a subsequent sequence of houses, the nomadic lifestyle stayed with her. I've lost count of how many times they sold and bought. Whenever the neighbours got too friendly, they'd talk about selling up.

In the grown-up world of the sixth form, my choice of subjects shook down to maths, physics and chemistry. I wasn't much good at any of them, and achieved disappointing results, especially in chemistry. It was decided I'd repeat the year, dropping chemistry and tacking art on to physics and maths. There was no one at the school who could teach art, but they agreed to me switching the games slot on Wednesday afternoons for a weekly class at Worcester Art College. It was a long way to go, but so worth it. I instantly felt the part.

The teacher taught us to mimic Cézanne – to sketch a painting in ultramarine blue and build up the colours from dark to light, finishing with highlights of white. Back at school I was the only student in the sixth form to sit for A Level art. The exam required three distinct works – I chose to do a freeform painting, a still life and an example of calligraphy. With the obligatory fruit and bottle, I set myself up solo in the exam room. The still life was conventional enough, but the freeform was one of my stock apocalyptic scenes of naked crowds edging towards a yawning cleft in the Earth's surface. The calligraphy piece was a signpost 'To The Greek Theatre', which I executed with a red vase frieze I'd practised painting at home below the wording and the arrow above it.

Social life loomed, especially as a result of learning to drive. My first car was a Standard 8; it had the annoying habit of overheating, which it did on a trip to London with Laura when she came to stay. My friends Peter, Ewan, John and I would choose a pub for a Friday get-together. Most of my classmates could drive, and there would be a mix of parents' cars and old bangers like mine assembled at the elected establishment in the depths of the country. One of our favourites was the Monkey House, a cottage near Cradley that only served cider. There was a big barrel of the stuff in a shed, and it would be served up on a narrow shelf attached to the door. Rumour had it that a rat was always thrown into the barrel for good measure.

In my last year of school, January to be precise, I had a eureka moment. I'd dump civil engineering for architecture. That was it: I'd always wanted to be an architect and here was my chance, just in time. But

Top: Modelling the kipper ties my mother made for Liberty's in London. Maggs, as she liked us to call her, was enterprising and always had a fundraising scheme on the go.

Bottom: Caught off-guard when staying at the house Maggs and Richard owned briefly in Worcester. No sooner would they buy a property than they'd be thinking of selling it.

my ambitions were to receive a body blow – Whinray was totally against the idea. ‘Architects are the sort of people who wear black shirts and white ties.’ How wrong she was; architects wore Hush Puppies and polo necks. She was right about me, though. What she really meant was that I might turn out to be a fairy. But my mind was made up.

The UCCA form was duly completed and universities nominated. London seemed too big, too intimidating. I was accepted at Nottingham and Oxford Brookes, and opted for the former. In September 1968 I took off for uni, and as a send-off, my father gave me a cheque for £200. From then on, I’d be on my own, and was happy to be. I took to university life with ease. My digs were at Lenton Hall, a student residence on the north of the campus, and a 20-minute walk to the Architecture Department, which occupied the top two floors of the Engineering Tower. Our first project was a measured drawing – plan and elevations – of a rather mediocre modern armchair designed by one of the tutors. Not exactly a rip-roaring start, but before long I was doing well at almost every project. I was learning photography, the art of technical drawing and the gift of the gab, and soon acquired an exotic and fearless circle of friends.

Except for one: a fellow resident of my hall was a gifted mathematician called Eddie. One night, sitting on my bed, he began crying uncontrollably and frothing at the mouth, and was hospitalised before the night was out. A few days later I went to visit him in the ‘asylum’ to which he’d been confined. The misery and fear of that place is forever etched on my mind; in the meantime, they were frying his brain with electrodes.

A few months later, I noticed a familiar figure pushing a mop around the university canteen. Could it be Eddie? It was, but not the friend I had known. His mind and soul had been mutilated. He smiled at me, but our friendship never returned, nor did his promising career in mathematics.

My posse of friends broadened out from fellow architects to include Sarah, Little Nige (I was big Nige), Jed, Jane, Caroline, Paul and Anita; most of us were serious about our studies, but our newfound freedoms consolidated into assorted passions and secrets, especially when it came to our tentative experiments with drugs, although I was relatively indifferent. Maybe my boyish demeanour helped me keep the dizzier experiments at bay. It was the time of the Arts Lab in London, and a profound overlap between underground culture, lifestyle and literature, especially with the alternative approaches to psychology as promoted by R.D. Laing and Timothy Leary.

Friends Paul, Steve and I rented a rather beautiful 1920s semi with an overgrown garden near the Goose Fair site in the city, in Forest Road East. It

Above: Finding my adult identity with the help of clothes and a floppy haircut. The Indian silk scarf was de rigueur among my new friends at university.

Right: Soaking up the detail with my ever-present Pentax on a university field trip to Copenhagen. Exposed rolls of film could be developed in the campus photo lab, but I’d do my own printing.

was cheap by any standards. We lived in the upstairs flat and two anorexic girls, also students at the university, lived downstairs. Steve opted for a tiny room on the top floor, and was very private. Although he read a lot – Huxley, Lautréamont – he hardly ever came out of his room except for a piss. I suspected he was stoned most of the time, and having admitted that, he extolled the virtues of opium. Paul and I on the other hand were on the cautious side of the mind-altering experiment, more interested in painting and playing house. I'd installed a double bed in my room, but unfortunately hadn't found anyone to share it with, despite a few unsuccessful dalliances with girls. The walls were enlivened by giant drawings on card of writhing boys and girls like a psychedelic album cover. I had the aesthetic if not quite the head or the desire. Sex was a boiling cauldron that I managed to bypass in a cloud of wistful naïveté.

There were about 100 students in the architecture department, which hovered above the Brutalist engineering sub campus; despite its Corbusian echoes, curiously this particular example of Brit-Modern wasn't once referred to. Our first-year tutor Mr Briars made it clear that the doors to design were wide open, as long as we designed buildings made from brick with flat roofs. The prevalent style was that ghastly local authority brick blocking, interspersed with vertical interludes of windows and clapboard.

I recall a project for a house on a hilly slope I'd done, perhaps in the second year. It was split into three similarly sized pavilions that stepped down the site with little corridors of stairs connecting them. The idea was fine, but my presentation drawings – executed laboriously in brown ink on beige board – made the blocks look as though they floated above the ground, a lesson I am not alone in learning late.

I survived well enough in crits, but despite reading avidly, never did well in exams. During technical lectures, my mind would wander. We were compelled to buy professional practice manuals, but I preferred to spend the money on books or clothes. Our history and theory tutor would wax lyrical about Le Corbusier and Louis Kahn, but the virtues of both washed over me. My friends and I were more interested in Pop Art and Japanese Metabolism.

Enlightenment came when several windows opened simultaneously on to Italian culture. I joined the film society in my second year, and each week we would be treated to a Neo-Realist classic. As well as Fellini and Antonioni, it was the Pasolini films that really got me. They ushered me into a world where my desires and feelings were legitimised. *Accatone*, *Teorema*, *Pigsty*, *Medea*, *Oedipus Rex*. The tales were beautifully told, and oozed sexuality, betrayal and ancient truth in equal measures.

Pier Paolo Pasolini often used non-actors, some of whom were his lovers. Dressed in a white suit, Terence Stamp was majestic as the messiah in *Teorema*; he disrupts the shallow respectability of an industrialist's family who live in a Liberty villa somewhere near Milan. One by one, he seduces each member into throwing off their conventions, and transcending their fears. In turn he succeeds in undoing every one of the family – the mother, the son, the father – ending with the maid, who finds herself hovering above the outbuildings of the farm where she was born. Given the chance, I'd be part of that family too.

The Beatles, the Who, Georgie Fame, Jimi Hendrix. But if anything, the effect of film was even stronger. *A Clockwork Orange* and *Midnight Cowboy* captured the frisson