An Overview

My name is Orian Brook. I am seventeen and am studying for my 'A' levels in the sixth form at John Roan School. I first got involved with the Age Exchange Theatre Company when my head of year asked if anyone would be interested in going to a reminiscence group on Thursday afternoons. A few of us went along, and I kept going.

I was very unsure exactly what the group would be like. I was also very unsure exactly what my role would be — I thought I was far too young to remember anything that they would talk about. However, I need not have been worried. Although it is easy to have preconceived ideas about pensioners, particularly because of the age gap, I found that when I actually spoke to them the age gap narrowed considerably. The group were all very friendly and extremely interesting. They did not seem to think that everything nowadays was worse, nor that the young these days had it easy, nor that I was a rude young thugette, whose opinions were of no value or importance. What is more, their wit and perception had certainly not been dulled over the years. They wrote some very funny and interesting pieces about life then and now. Neither were their views on 'modern society' as 'old-fashioned' as you might expect.

As for my role; I had no clear defined one, which was refreshing. I could just sit, and listen, and comment when appropriate. Strangely enough, I had more to say when they were talking about their adolescence than when they were talking about their present lives, although the latter was no less interesting. When they were talking about their lives when they were my age, it was interesting to contrast my life with theirs.

One of the most striking differences between their lives and mine is that I and most of my friends are all at school, whereas they were almost all working at my age and younger. One lady described working in a tea gardens when she was 14, and others talked about when they were in service. It seemed incredibly hard work. The men talked about being butchers and baker boys, and messengers. My life and that of my friends is almost governed by homework and lack of money. Although they were certainly not rich, they seemed to have more money to spend. Their social life was much more organised — not necessarily by adults, they organised their own trips too, but a lot of their activities were organised by the church, youth club, or Sunday school, or by their place of work. My friends and I tend more to have very casual, disorganised social lives.

They seem to have been much more enterprising and active than we are today. I suppose it is true that they had to make their own entertainment. For example, they organised country rambles once a month, and often seemed to take themselves on trips to the country and the sea-side. They talked about cycling to Brighton, something we would only contemplate doing now in order to raise money for charity.

They even got up early in order to go cycling in the country before work.

I love cycling, and I love the countryside, but I don't think I would have the energy to do that.

Their romantic lives were obviously much more marriage-orientated. They would go out with someone a few times, and very quickly decide whether this was the person for them, even though it might be years before they finally got married. If they decided they were not interested in marrying this person, they would stop seeing them.

Nowadays people can go out with one another for several years with no intention of getting married. The group did not seem to think that this was altogether a bad thing.

There was also an interesting comparison between the postal service then and now. The girls could write to their fiancés in the morning, and receive the reply at tea-time, something which you certainly could not imagine happening now.

The discussions about their lives today, and in particular their feelings on retirement, were fascinating. Some seemed to see it as a chance to slow down and take things a little easier, while others began a new lease of life, and seemed busier than they were when they were at work. Interestingly, many of them did not seem very sad to be leaving their old work places, and felt that the great rigmarole of speeches and presents on their last day was rather false.

It was amusing, when they talked about how old people from 65 to 90+ are all lumped together when in actual fact there is easily a 20-year age gap between many of them. This was particularly relevant with regard to the holidays specifically designed for OAP's, such as SAGA and Golden Circles.

I have definitely enjoyed going to the reminiscence group, and it has taught me an awful lot. It is interesting to see history not just as a lot of dates, or Acts of Parliament, but as the way in which people really lived. I know that if I am as witty, interesting and intelligent as these people when I am their age I shall be very proud.

The Age Exchange is a theatre and publishing company working with London pensioners on shows and books which record their life experience and their current concerns.

It is a feature of all these books that the contributions come from many pensioners, are lively and easy to read, conversational in style, and lavishly illustrated with photographs and line drawings of the time. All the stories are told in the original words, from transcibed tapes, or pensioners' written contributions.

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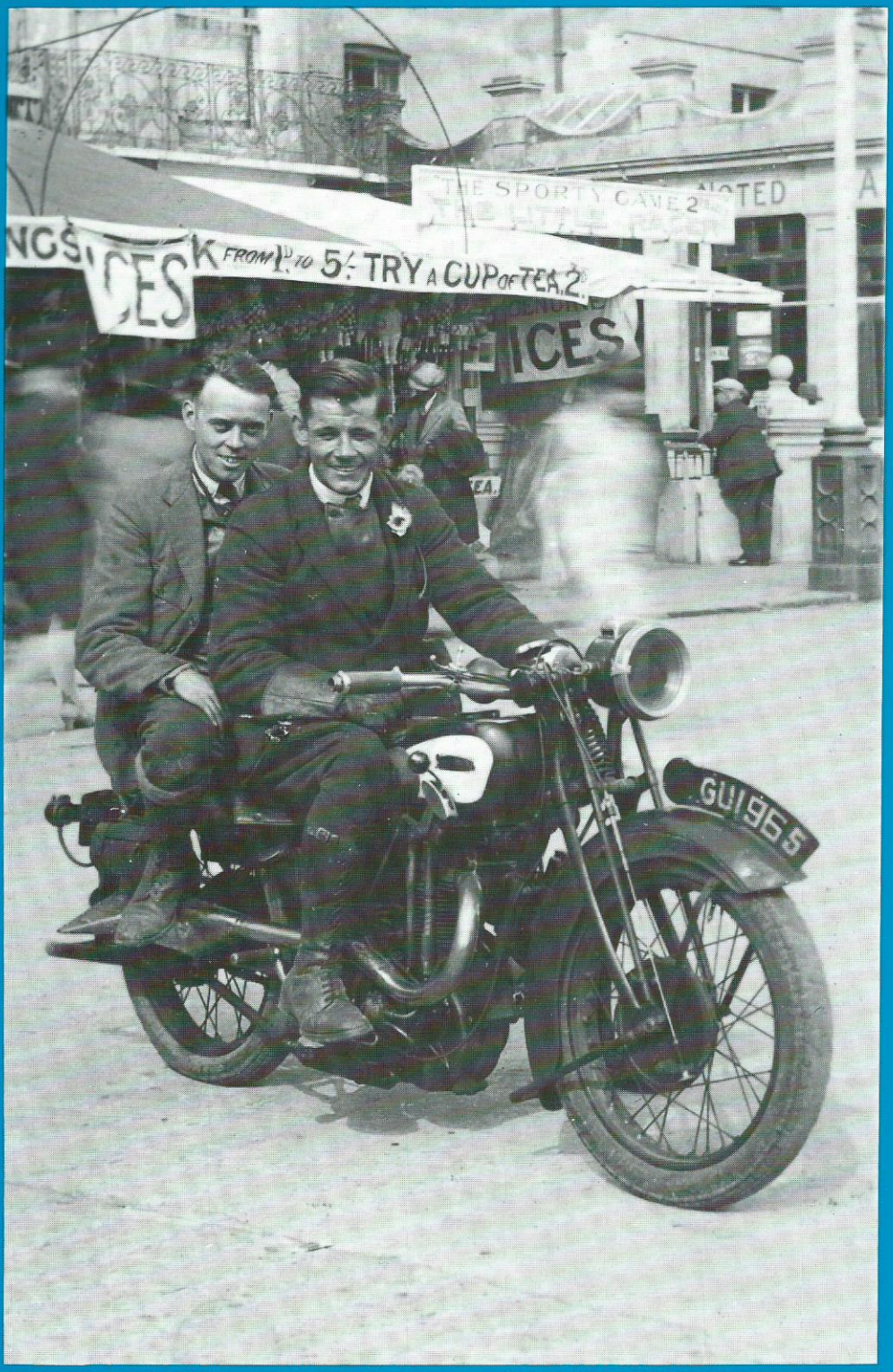

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