Eric Austin

1914 - 20...

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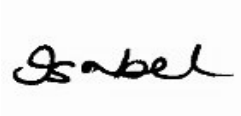
Foreword

W. ERIC AUSTIN

The larger part of this text is the transcript of a taped conversation held at Braeside, 30 Sutton Lane, Banstead, Surrey SM7 3RB on 20th April 2005. In close collaboration with Eric, it has been amended, where necessary, and a section entitled "How I met My Wife, Phyl" has been inserted from Eric's written text. Generally, however, the conversational tone has been retained, as this is essentially an exercise in oral history.



Isabel MacLeod

I was born on 9th December 1914 at 127 Melfort Road Thornton Heath. In those days, if husbands could afford it, wives had their babies in nursing homes, which, of course, they don't do now. I was born at the house. By the time my brother was born, on 15th June 1924, my Dad could afford a nursing home, so John was born at the Nursing Home in Brigstock Road. According to what my mother always told me I was a very sickly child so that once, when she took me to the doctor, she was told "take him home, wrap him up in cotton wool, put him in front of the fire and he may live." Here I am in my 91st year.

My grandfather died when my father was 8 and my grandmother was a widow for nearly 50 years. They went to live in Stuart Road in Thornton Heath: round by the Clocktower. My Dad bought a house in Melfort Road, then his sister bought a house in Melfort Road, then his brother bought a house in Melfort Road and his other brother bought a house in Dalmeny Avenue. So, we all lived within a few hundred yards of each other. We used to walk up to the top of Streatham Common on a Sunday morning through the brickfields, no houses in Green Lane in those days. My grandmother used to take me out on Mondays to get me out of my mother's way, so my mother could do the washing on a Monday morning. Grandma took me out across the fields, with all the cows. My Dad had an allotment in Melfort Road opposite Braemar Avenue, where all the houses were later built.

Photographs of my childhood don't seem to show that I was ever really very ill, but when I was due to go to school, my parents wouldn't let me go to Winterbourne Road School. There was a little private school opposite where we lived in Melfort Road, run by Miss Rosa and Miss Louie Brooks. In the wintertime my mother used to put leather leggings on me, which you had to do up with a button hook, just to go across the road, and poor Miss Louie had to undo them all, and then she put them back on when I had to go home, just across the road: my needs being looked after so well. It wasn't until 1923 that I went to Winterbourne Road School, which was

through the Rec down Winterbourne Road. There, I met the man called Mr Swift, who was the Woodwork Master. He transferred to Selhurst Grammar School in 1925 – the year I won my Scholarship. He always had difficulty to equate the scruffy little schoolboy away from Winterbourne regularly with his asthma, with the teenager playing scrum-half in the Old Boys' First XV many years later. I sat for my Scholarship in March or April 1925 when I was only 10 and 3 months. The Scholarships for Selhurst Grammar School, and all the schools in Croydon, were awarded by Croydon Education Committee to pupils from the primary council schools who had been to one of those schools for two years. For Selhurst Grammar School there were 10 scholarships, which were eligible for boys or girls who had not been at a Council school long enough, so I got one of those.

I turned up at Selhurst Grammar School in September 1925, I was only 10 years and nine months, and there I met Raymond Carter on my first day. Mr H A Parkinson was the form master; a very good man to deal with little boys, but in my memory of him, he was very sarcastic. You had to improve your reading, so we had to read. We went round the class in turn to read a paragraph. I used to stammer, but not at that time. When it came to my turn, I picked up the book and went on reading gaily until I came to this word b l a c k g u a r d – I had never seen it in my life, so I rode straight ahead and said black-guard. All the form boys dissolved into laughter, and I felt most embarrassed and Mr Parkinson said, "Eric Austin, it's better to keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool, than to open it and remove all doubt".

I didn't do very well in that Winter Term, or the Spring Term, because I was invariably away with my asthma. Did a little bit better in the Summer Term, I think 1926 I finished up about 10th, so I was moved up to the Second Form, still with Raymond Carter. I was hardly ever at school in the Winter Term 1926. I was always away with my asthma. Then, in 1927, there was an epidemic, in Croydon, of diphtheria and scarlet fever. Two boys who sat in front of me, the late David Cooper, the late Bert Scrivener and Eric Austin, we all went together. There were boys from Whitgift, Whitgift Grammar as it was called then, Whitgift Middle, Stanley Tech, John Ruskin - with the result that when we were convalescing we were all allowed out in

the playing field adjoining the hospital to play football, so we had 11 a side. It was fantastic.

That hospital was the isolation hospital in Waddon, where the A23 now goes round. It was for scarlet fever and diphtheria. I was a real Mummy's boy; I hated it, no matter how much I was suffering. I didn't know the matron was allowed to read your letters. One night she came to me and said "What are you doing writing all this to your mother", so I was duly humbled. There was a boy in Selhurst, I don't think he was in my form, called Ron Severs, his father was in the grocery business and he used to supply one or two dozen fresh eggs every week. We never saw any, she pinched them. They got wise to what she was up to and they gave her the sack. I was away nearly the whole of that term, so come the Summer Term when the exams were to be held, I didn't have a chance (I haven't got the school report now, I expect Raymond has got all his) I think I was 27th out of 30 boys. Mr Bentley was my headmaster, he reviewed my case, and I was probably the youngest boy in the form, and he said I could stay in the Second Form for a second year. So, in 1928, I stayed my second year in the second form and Johnny Wedd was my form master. From then on I always did very very well. I was always in the first 10.George Kinch, who was a very well known Old Boy and was my daughter's tutor at Manchester University Institute of Science and Technology, was in my form. He was a very clever boy.

That was the first time that SGS put the reports in book form. The first page was my first report and I had to take the book home to my Dad, he had to sign it and then I took it back to school. I always got a very good report for work, but I wasn't such a good boy really. I always had the bad luck to catch the duster or the chalk when it was being thrown round the room, and the master came and caught me. So, there came a time when I got a Head Master's Report which said, "work excellent, conduct calls for immediate reform". Those were the days when, in the Register, if you were naughty, they put an initial against your name – C for conduct or W for work. If you got two Cs or 3 Ws in one week you were put on report for the following week. You had to line up after Assembly on the Monday morning and get a form. You had four lessons in the morning and three in the afternoon, Mondays, Tues-

days, Wednesdays (not Wednesday afternoon because that was for sports activities), Thursdays, Fridays and Saturday morning and you had to get it signed by *every* master. If you didn't get a good report you were in trouble. The result was that one day the Head Master had me up and said, "Eric Austin, if you come before me again this term, I will recommend the Governors to withdraw your Scholarship". I doubt whether he would have been able to do that. I was on my best behaviour all that time.

You probably dare not write the next bit. Mr Hollinrake was our Geography master. We gave him a bad time. When he entered the class, we were always banging our desks. I remember one day (the Geography Room was down the other end of the Junior playground) I had the bad luck to do something wrong and I was sent out to stand under the clock. That was right outside the Head Master's study where, whenever he came out, he saw all the boys, and he brought you in and gave you two, four or six of the best on your backside. I didn't dare go there. I hid in the Junior cloakroom, amongst all the coats and hoped the Head Master wouldn't see me, because he used to walk round the cloakroom to see if the boys were hiding. Eventually, some of my chums in the form said, "Don't worry Eric, the Head Master hasn't come to school today and Mr Hollinrake just left school on his bicycle, so you can go home". There was worse to come. When I looked at the Form Register, I saw "Austin: C for conduct" signed by Tubby Hollinrake. Thank Goodness, he wrote it in pencil, because I rubbed it out. That's quite a story amongst my young grandchildren – they think it's a great to-do. I was scared stiff.

I was a very very nervous child, but I played rugby. I must mention I was in Gamma House – Alpha Red, Beta Green, Gamma Blue, Delta Yellow and we had House Rugby, which we played on the field behind the Girls' School. In those days we were allowed to play rugby over there for the house matches. I remember Beta were supreme. They had nearly half the first XV. One day, I was the only boy in Gamma House who could play rugby, we were scheduled to play Beta and we were going to get walloped about 50 nil, but they were so cocky, we won. It was fantastic. Bob Craven, Lubber Little, Ward all these boys were excellent rugby players, so I played House Rugby. Then we used to have matches up on the old playing field at Waddon

– I think it's now a school or something [IM Was it Heath Clark?] Yes that's right I think it was. One day I was being watched by the Games Master, Mr Stanley. I think I got about 50 points that day for Gamma. I was good at scoring tries because I was a stocky little chap who could run fast, and I was good at converting tries too, and in those days I played for the School third XV. Once or twice a week we played schools - on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Mr Stanley used to put up the teams in the Senior corridor, which is the corridor which runs down to the dining room. One day I was out in the Senior playground when my friend said, "Eric, you're in the first XV" I said "Don't be daft, you must have got it wrong". I went and looked and there I was. I was ¾ in the first team of the school. I couldn't believe it, and from then I was a permanent fixture in the school team. Jack Woodcraft and K J MacDonald were in the same team and I played for the Old Boys', got my colours two years running, which entitled you to buy the special blazer, which you could wear like a big shot.

Dennis Stiles used to be in my class at Selhurst Grammar School. He used to live in Warwick Road, and he had to pass my front door to get round the Rec and go home. One day I took his cap off and threw it in the bushes. He didn't recover it, silly boy. His mother came roaring round the house making me buy a new cap for her son. I tell you I was a harum scarum.

IM [How old when you left school] I was 17. I took Matric in July 1931 and much to the horror of the Head Master, and all the staff, I failed. I got distinctions in Maths and in Latin, but I failed and they couldn't understand why. You had to pass English and Maths. I only got about 45% for English. I still haven't any imagination. You ask me to write an essay on daffodils and I wouldn't know where to start. I was good at grammar, paraphrase and parsing, but I hadn't any imagination to write an essay. The Head had my papers re-marked – unsuccessfully – and so I returned to School for one more term. I came back to the Vth Form and I was given a room to study in and I took External Matric again in January: Maths, English, History, French and Heat Light & Sound, and I passed. The essay I wrote could have been a History answer. [IM More factual?] Yes that's right.

I had a friend, David Hart, he couldn't understand Maths and I wasn't any bloody good at English. He used to come round to my house and he tried to encourage me in English and I helped him with his Maths. In those days we did trigonometry- is that right? [IM: Yes?] arithmetical progressions, is that trig? [IM; I don't know! Maths was never my strong point] There's three kinds of progressions: arithmetic, geometric and something else. Sammy Chambers was our Maths master and he'd say, "Boy, come to the board". He asked David Hart to stand, and David said the wrong thing. Poor David, when he did the Matric he was allowed to take the alternative Lower Maths paper, as long as he took a sixth subject. He used to come to my house. My father used to call him "copper knob" because he was ginger.

I might think of some more if we carry on a bit. Poor you, you've got to edit this [IM: I'll do my best] Might think of some more to tell you, then you can add a bit!

[IM: Where did you buy the uniform?] I'm really not sure how I got my school uniform – cap, tie etc, but I think they were sold by the School Secretary – Miss Cayford – from her office in the school. And we bought our Old Boys' stuff up in George Street - Leonard Lyle, later Pickford and Newton. I think we bought them somewhere else before that. When you come up Tamworth Road, go straight across to the bus depot, Poplar Walk. At the other end of Poplar Walk there was a sports' outfitter. I used to buy my rugby boots, rugby jerseys, everything there. That shop was completely destroyed during the War. There is the big West Croydon Bus Station there now. [IM: Apparently the Girls' School used to order everything from a manufacturer in Yorkshire (?) and it was sent in a trunk. It just used to arrive] Very posh.

In my time Miss Wellman was the Head Mistress. We left school at quarter to four; the girls left school at 4 o'clock. So we waited at the top of Bensham Manor Road for the girls to come up Whitehorse Road to see us. She didn't know of course [IM; No. She'd gone by the time I was at school, but we still left at different times: it was staggered] You didn't go to school Wednesday afternoons. You had to go and play sport, or you got the time off. Of course, I played sport. I did know Kitty Line; she was a pupil at Selhurst Girls. She lived in Lucerne Road with her four brothers. In

those days all the girls wore heavy black stockings, but Wednesday afternoon, when they had the afternoon off, Kitty Line always wore silk stockings. That was quite a thing in the 1931-32 era. We backed on to Thornton Heath Rec, and at the bottom of our garden was a lovely seat and I used to sit on there with Kitty and put my arm round her. My Dad said, “I saw you, I saw you. You don’t want that girl– she’s got false teeth!” I didn’t realise that. I met her years later on London Bridge Station when I came back to live in England. I went to look up Binder Hamlyn and Co. I said, “Hello Kitty, how are you”, but that was it.

Tubby Hollinrake was a lovely man. One boy, one desk, you didn’t need to take your books home in those days. Bang! Bang! Bang! Contrary to that, H A Treble, Sammy Chambers, the Baron, F T B Wheeler, – when they entered the classroom you could hear a pin drop. We used to call Wheeler, “pouffant” because, when he cleared his throat, he made that noise. Ever heard that before? They called him the Baron; well he was a Baron wasn’t he. You never knew it, but he was a Mason. He was The Grand Master for Surrey, and he looked the part. I’m not a Mason, but *he* looked the part. He taught Latin and History. He’d say “You! Boy at the back. You sleeping? I don’t want to cast my pearls before swine.” “Boy, come here. Boy, stand back, don’t blow your filthy germs down my throat”. He was famous for that. Some boy made a rude noise and he’d say, “Boy, open the window, some boy has made a pig of himself” – that’s true! Is this being recorded?

Sammy Chambers was a fantastic Maths master. He lost his hand in the First World War, so he had a hook. He used to come into the class and sit down “Austin come to the board, draw any triangle”. Same with Hollinrake in the Geography Room, (down the playground at the first wall, where we go into our AGM) he used to come in and go to the board, and he’d draw a map and say, “Let this be Australia”. He’d draw a map of Australia. “Now where’s Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane…”.

What a load of lovely masters. Johnny Wedd really understood me as a poor little boy who was always ill. He became great friends with my parents. My father ended up with arthritis in both hip joints. He was locked. Johnny Wedd had the same thing. My Dad had a Faradic Battery (I think you can still buy them) I ought to have one

but I've no-one to fit me to it. You put things on to make your muscles work. He had my Mum to help him. He sent one to Johnny Wedd. When I left the Grammar School, Johnny Wedd gave me a book: a French book, I've still got it somewhere. And I gave him a book. He thought, probably rightly so, that the boys I was hob-nobbing with weren't suitable for me. One boy was Norton. We used to wait at Bensham Manor Road for the girls to come and Johnny Wedd used to see me. We had parents' meetings. He told my mother not to let her son mix with that boy. "He's no good". [IM: Was he right?] I expect he was.

I matriculated eventually in January 1932. In those days the idea of going to a Grammar School was to matriculate and if you were very clever you could go on to University. If you just got the Matric, that was the entrance to professional examinations – Institute of Bankers, Insurance Institute, Chartered Secretaries etc etc. So a lot of boys left to work in banks and the Civil Service. My father decided he wanted me to enter in his business, so I was sent to Pitmans College in Croydon and there I did extremely well, as any Matriculated Grammar School boy could have done. When I sat the Royal Society of Arts Stage ll Arithmetic Exam, it was *so* easy. I passed and was awarded the Society's Bronze Medal – first place in the British Isles. My son's got the medal now. By the time I left Pitmans I had a R.S.A. Stage ll Group Certificate (five subjects – Shorthand, Typewriting, Arithmetic, Accounting and Commercial French) and a £5 Prize for Second Place in the British Isles. The Student who came first was from Northern Ireland! I suppose I was an above average student at Pitmans, but that didn't mean very much. But you could be guaranteed a good job because Pitmans College had an Appointments' Bureau up in their Head Office in Southampton Row (I think it was). I eventually got a job at a firm of Chartered Accountants – Binder Hamlyn and Co - where I was the typist, now called a PA, to the Investment Department, at a salary of £3 5s 0d a week. That was very good in 1932 because most boys got jobs at 30 bob a week.

You couldn't get articles at Binder Hamlyn unless you were the son of a partner. I would love to have been a Chartered Accountant and had articles, but you couldn't get them. My father couldn't afford them. My boss, A.G.A. Mackay was a Scottish CA, a delightful man. He knew Bob Boothby, he knew Lord Keynes - all those

famous people. One of the articled clerks came down from Cambridge. In those days, if you graduated from Cambridge you could do three years' articles in Chartered Accountancy. One of these boys, A G Burney, with whom I kept in contact for many many years, eventually became the Chairman of Debenhams.

So I got this nice job at Binder Hamlyn, now called BDO …. [IM: Stoy Hayward?] Yes that's it, I'm not sure whether it's DB or BD.I rang them up recently and had a chat to them. I had two very successful years there. My boss used to write regularly to the famous economist John Maynard Keynes, who was the financial adviser to the British Government. He was also director of three insurance companies. Their investments were managed by my boss. We talk about insider dealing (you shouldn't put this in) John Maynard Keynes was the first insider dealer. They were always gilt-edge in those days. He'd tell Mr Mackay to sell four million of 3% Funding and buy three million of 4% Treasury dated stocks and make his profit. Then he'd go back the next day and advise the British Government what the Treasury should do, having already dealt on behalf of his Insurance Companies and made a nice profit for them.

I stayed at Binder Hamlyn for two years. We had staff parties. Bernard Heymann Binder being the Senior Partner. He eventually became President of the Institute of Chartered Accountants and he had a lovely country place at Ashford. There was a big summer party there. We played croquet, we played tennis, we had lovely lunches, lovely dinners. He laid on transport from London to bring us back and everything.

Once I had been there two years my Dad decided I'd had enough of that, and I should go and help out in an office of a friend of his with The Syndicate Trading Company in Southampton Row. The Syndicate Trading Company of New York were a central buying organisation which purchased throughout the world, goods for any one store in any one town. They couldn't have more than one store in one town – Boston, Lincoln, Cleveland and so on, an office in London, one in Paris and one in Zurich. I was shovelled off to work for the manager of the London office. Well, I gained a lot of experience in what I wanted to be in.

At that time, because of my great friendship with the Head Master of Pitmans College, Croydon, Mr W G Johnson, he encouraged me to try for the Chartered Secretaries, which was what was open in those days. So, I enrolled with the City of London College in Ropemaker Street, which was destroyed during the War, and I used to go there in the evenings to attend the lectures, but when I had to move from River Plate House in Finsbury Circus up to Southampton Row I couldn't continue my studies at the City of London College, so I went to Regent Street Polytechnic. After I had been working for this firm for two years, they said to my Dad "Look, you'll have to take Eric back. We must find someone else because we're interfering with his studies, he doesn't leave work till 7 o'clock at night, he can never get to his lectures". So, I had to leave and went to my father's firm. Matriculation exempted you from the Preliminary exams, and I passed the Intermediate with no problem, and I finally sat the Final in December 1937. There were only about 1500 candidates but only a maximum of 10% passed. I was No. 115 when I passed my Final in December 1937.

Then, when I was 21, I was determined to have a 21st birthday party. If my Dad wouldn't give me one I would do it myself. But my Dad said, "No, I'll do it for you". I had my 21st birthday in a little hall in Winterbourne Road, a proper building next to Winterbourne Road School. We had a lovely celebration at which Simpson (an Old Croydonian) came and performed his tricks, an old Boy came to sing us a song and my Dad hired a radiogramme, to play dance music, and we danced. The big thing that night was that my Grandma who was born in 1844, she came to my party. She died in 1937 aged 93 and a bit. They had a car to bring her and a car to take her home. You had to finish at midnight – Lord's Day Observance Society, no mis-behaving after midnight. That was my memories of my 21st birthday party. My Grandma lived on the Strand in the late 1890s [tape ended]

I went back into my firm [IM: What was the firm?] Austin & Young. You might want to put this in somewhere. My father was called up in 1914 to go to War; my mother was six months pregnant with me. Dad was sent home. He was told "You're no good for the PBI (Poor Bloody Infantry). You can go into the Ministry of Information." Dad had damaged his toe playing football– he always had his boots and shoes made for

him. He couldn't go in the Army, so he went into the Ministry. Prior to that, my father always worked in International Trade with big Indian merchants. There was Andrew Yule of Calcutta, David Yule etc. While he was in the Ministry he got to know Mr Young and Mr Yanisch. In 1919 they formed a partnership of Austin Young and Yanisch. Young couldn't get on with Yanisch or vice versa and Yanisch left. Young and Austin were left to carry on Austin and Young. Yanisch eventually became the General Manager of Lines Brothers, makers of Pedigree prams. Mr Young didn't do much according to my Mum, but of course she would always say that wouldn't she? He died in 1927 and my father was left to carry on.

When they first formed their partnership my father became a manufacturers' agent. He became the agent for various firms and he went round selling things. One agency was Peck of Leicester. They made men's and ladies' sweaters. Previously, in about 1920, my father had agreed to finance a coal mine in Russia, then the Bolsheviks came and we lost the lot. My Dad sold £1,000 of sweaters to a man he would have given his shirt to, and this man absconded and never paid. When it was in the hands of the police, it turned out he's been doing it to everybody. He was committed to the Old Bailey and was given seven years on Dartmoor with penal servitude. None of the stuff they have today.

My father was a Manufacturer's agent. He was agent to Pecks of Leicester and he couldn't pay £1,000. He wrote to them and asked for time to pay, offered to pay all the interest. He paid the whole thing up and for years after they offered him a sweater whenever he wanted one. They always sent six and said give the rest to your family.

My Dad was so true. He sold to confirming houses who acted on behalf of their overseas principals, like South African Breweries for whom Meyerstein & Company of London Wall were their London agents. Breweries sent their orders to their agents; their agents scoured the markets. They asked the Germans, the French, the Dutch and the Belgians and we got a lot of the business. During the War my Dad ran the mine, and we had the business with the American firm.

1924, *this* is the real story. My father found out that the Siemens glassworks of Dresden, which was subsequently in Eastern Germany and Neusattl, which was in Czechoslovakia, wanted a London agent to market their bottles in this country. Those were the days, do you remember beer bottles with a screw mouth. No you're too young. My Dad, in 1924, got on a train at Victoria Station and two days later he turned up at Siemens Glassworks' Dresden office. He said he wanted to be the agent in London. They told him that if he had come all that way to get the job, he could have it! From then on, until 1931, we were the sole agents in Britain to import German glass beer bottles. We sold to Ind Coope Allsop, Mann Crossman Paulin, Watney Coombe Reid & Co. We didn't own anything. We rented the wharf; we rented the lorries, anything to do with importation. Then, in 1931, Great Britain abandoned the Gold Standard. At that time we were a Free Trade country. Anybody could send their goods free of import duty, but at that time the situation was so dire that the British Government, Tory, Conservative Government (I think) put an import duty on all imported bottles. No more German bottles, no more Dutch bottles, no more Czech bottles, no more Belgian bottles. It was finished. We couldn't compete. That was when United Glass Bottles Manufacturers, the famous UGB, took off. Look where they are today. They had the protection of a 15% import duty. But we still had our export business. Any export business that came through London for glass bottles such as from Australian Breweries, South African Breweries, New Zealand Breweries, from Dr J B G Siegert & Sons Ltd, proprietors and bottlers of the still famous Angostura Aromatic Bitters. These firms sent their orders to their London offices. My father dealt with their London offices and got the business. We were competing with the Dutch and the Belgian, French and Czechs. Then the war came and that ended that. We had lots of ships on the way to South Africa with our German bottles. We sold cash against documents. Cost, insurance and freight. We would present the signed documents and the other country's Agents had to pay us. The ships mostly landed in Northern Spain. The diamond business was an ancillary really. That kept my Dad going during the war. He ran the diamond mine.

How I met My Wife, Phyl (Phyllis Olympia Smith).

Phyl was christened with the second Christian name – Olympia – after a Portuguese friend of her Mother, one Olympia Suarez. She was the third child of Mr & Mrs W T Smith (a sister, Christine, the second child, was born in the years between herself and her elder brother Don – Donald). Unfortunately, Christine died of meningitis before Phyl arrived in March 1916.

At the time, Mr Smith, a Mechanical Engineer who had worked on timber plantations in Canada, was working with the Beralt & Wolfram Tin Mines, Belmonte, Portugal – now a part of the Menorca Group.

When the Smiths returned to England in 1920, when Phyl was four years old and her brother Don was eleven years, they rented a property in Crayford, Kent (120 Dartford Road) and Mr Smith was employed by the then well-known Engineering Firm – Frazer & Chalmers Ltd.

I mention this because F & C designed and built the first diamondiferous treatment plant for Austin & Young which was sent out to the Mine in the Gold Coast in the late '20s/early '30s.However it was a "wash-out" of poor design and it had to be abandoned. It was then that A & Y commissioned two new plants from Mr A W Campbell of Coldstream, a bit of a drive west from Berwick-upon-Tweed. He was a recognised designer of diamondiferous treatment plants and at that time had already supplied the mighty Consolidated African Selection Trust, Akwatia, Gold Coast (A Subsidiary of Selection Trust, a big mining conglomerate with substantial mining interests throughout South Africa) with their plants and was building them some more.

I mention this, not only as I feel it may be of interest to future generations but also because Mr Smith, as I got to know him better, realised that the young man who was associating with his daughter Phyllis was also associated with the firm of Austin and Young. He knew all about the Frazer & Chalmers 'disaster'.

One of the happiest memories in my early life is when I said goodbye to him in May 1938 prior to my first visit to the Gold Coast (He passed away in August of that year while I was still in Africa), and he said to me 'if ever you and my daughter do get together you have My Blessing'. Still today such a Happy Memory for me.

And now I will come to the main story of 'How I met Phyl'.

It was in August 1936 that I decided I would go on my Annual two weeks Holiday to Shanklin, Isle of Wight, where I had booked into a small Private Hotel. I don't remember the name of the Hotel or the locality. I think it was £7.7.0 (seven guineas) a week and I don't remember whether it was Full Board or just B & B. I do remember that it was a very, very small room right at the top of the Hotel – I suppose you could call it an attic room – but it was quite okay for me.

So I took a first-class ticket from East Croydon to Shanklin via Portsmouth Harbour and Ryde – 18 shillings Return – 90p in today's 'funny money'. I wasn't used to travelling first-class daily to and from London so I installed myself in a luxurious (for me) compartment which I had all on my own and proceeded to order coffee and biscuits when 'the Attendant' arrived to ask my needs.

Alas, we don't have 'Em nowadays although on some trains I believe we still have Restaurant Cars!!

I finally arrived at Shanklin without incident and installed myself in my accommodation.

I had already decided that it was going to be a 'no-girl friend(s)' Holiday. I had not had a real girl-friend since, I guess 1932, when one, Lucy Clack, (brother of C H E Clack, Old Croydonian) sent me a card from Clacton-on-sea, where she was on holiday with all her family, telling me she had met someone else and it was 'all off'. That new chap in her life lasted about 5/6 weeks and then she met and eventually married a Selhurst Old Boy, the late Billy Dear, the athlete and a great friend of my cousin the late Herbert Austin, who was a member of the OCs. Lucy is now 90, is

still alive, and lives in Leatherhead. The last time I saw her was at her brother Ted's 70th or 75th Birthday Party in his daughter's house in Old Lodge Lane, Purley.
So, sitting in my little attic room I decided that I would go and buy cards and stamps, prior to proceeding down to the Pier on Monday to write them and send them off to my Mother, to my brother John, etc.

I think it cost 3d to go on to the pier. Right at the very end, there were seats all round, joined on to the actual pier. They were free and were in the main used by the fishermen fishing off the end of the pier who used them to accommodate their spare fishing reels and their tins of bait, flies, etc. At that end of the pier itself there was also a café which you could walk round, and outside around which there were deck chairs which could be hired by the more wealthy for 1s 6d (7½ p in today's 'funny money') a session (mornings, afternoons or evenings).
I was occupying one of the free seats, minding my own business, writing my cards and quite oblivious to my surroundings, when suddenly to my right two women whom I can best describe as "fish-wives" started up a loud conversation which eventually enthralled everybody within earshot. They were going at it hammer and tongs – "I says to 'er I says. I 'aint gonna' pay all this money for this accommodation". "I don't blame you, me dear, I wouldn't pay it either". And so they went on back and forth until all the people on the end of the pier were silenced, wondering what expletives would be coming next.

It was then that I looked up from writing my cards and what did I see? There in a north easterly direction, sitting in a deck-chair outside the café was one of the most gorgeous young ladies I had ever seen (Rene) and opposite her with her back to me was her friend (Phyl). Rene had the most wonderful hair. I can best describe it as between titian and blonde and lots of it, dancing in the breeze. I feel that is NOT quite correct but she WAS something to behold.

So, forgetting my 'holiday resolution', I decided that discretion WAS NOT the better part of valour for once and, putting my cards in my pocket, I went over 'apologising' for the two ladies and their noisy discussion and suggesting that the girls might like to join me for a coffee in the comparative peace of the café.

Rene jumped at the idea. Phyl told me some time later that when Rene looked at her for the okay, she shook her head vigorously to indicate her disapproval. But to no avail. Rene has already advanced into the café. I ordered the coffee and we exchanged the usual introductions and courtesies.

Rene enquired whether I was on holiday on my own or perhaps had a boy-friend with me. I explained that my ex girl-friend was on holiday at Ventnor, just along from Shanklin, with her brother and her parents who had rented a house and so I got Ted to come along and meet them.

He was, however, 2/3 years our junior and did not really appeal to Rene. You know what young ladies are like with boys who are younger. Perhaps not so in 2005?? But I think she put up with him and we went about together most of the time.
In those days, the main attraction at holiday resorts was The Show (Revue) in the Theatre on the Pier and, of course, the cinema. Every resort had its band-stand on the promenade or in a Park where a Military Band played daily, providing enjoyable entertainment sitting in a deck-chair for which the charge was normally 1s 6d (7 ½ p in today's 'funny' money).

The holiday passed all too quickly and uneventfully apart from the Friday night before we were to return home on the Saturday. That evening when I walked Phyl back to her Hotel I decided to pluck up courage and, for the first time during the entire holiday, ask her if I could have a kiss. She turned tome and pointing her forefinger to the right side of her cheek, she said 'Yes!! Kiss me here!!' There was gratitude for you. She really was a LADY who did not lightly dispense her favours. So I guess I 'retreated' with my tail between my legs.

That evening I discovered that Rene and Phyl were scheduled to return to London on the same train as I had booked. So I excessed their tickets and they travelled up to Waterloo with me. There my friend John Shirley met me with his MG Sports Car and they went over to Waterloo East for their train back to Dartford.

We had exchanged telephone numbers and I took Rene out a few times but it was soon clear that Phyl WAS the girl for me.

I worked for an American Organisation with their London Office in Southampton Row and she worked in The Empire Stone Company's Accounts office in Fleet Street (their Factory was in Narborough, Leicestershire). She had a boy-friend at the time who played Rugby for Warlingham. I knew him when the OCs played them. He had ginger hair and his name was Charles Lowen. However I think he disappeared off the scene pretty quickly because whenever I invited Phyl to join me for the Theatre or come to my home for a week-end, my invitations were always accepted. And, of course, we lunched regularly at the Plum Tree Café on Southampton Row. I visited there a few years ago. It is still there as a Pakistani-run coffee shop and on the street-level – not in the basement as it was when it was a Restaurant seventy years ago. Then the meat and two veg lunch cost 1s.6d., with 9d. for the Peach Melba sweet, or you could have what I called the Rock of Gibraltar 'Suety Pudding and Treacle' for the same price.

Phyl used to come at week-ends and watch me playing rugby for the Old Boys on their fantastic Sports Ground in Purley Way – the ground we had leased from the Air Ministry who could not 'make a go' of it. The lease provided that the ground would be taken over by the Government in the event of War and indeed we had to give it up when War was declared in September 1939.Two other girls watched too –Queenie who married Jack Woodcraft and a girl named Maude who married Stan Selby. They both supported along with Phyl on the touch line. It was only seventy years later that I found out that Maude is the sister of the late Sidney Burdett's deceased wife!!! What a small world.

I must mention here that that Sports Ground was really state-of-the-art, after playing rugby at Monks Orchard, Elmers End where we had to clear the worst of the 'cow-plops' from the pitch before the game started and then, at the end of the match, we washed off in 40-gallon drums full of COLD water...Phew!!! So, the Purley Way pavilion with ALL the facilities was really something very special and up-market. After all it WAS commissioned by the Air Ministry for their staff who just didn't give

it the support it deserved. It gave us a lot of pleasure entertaining visiting rugby teams after the match.

There were two rugby pitches, one football pitch, three well-maintained hard tennis courts and an excellent cricket square. There was an Athletic Club who, I assume, used the pavilion and the OCA. had a Badminton Club who were allowed the use of the School Gymnasium at nights.

I think I have this right because if this information is finally printed in The Old Croydonian I don't want to get letters from any 'Vintage' Old Boys still alive to-day protesting that I have not got it quite correct.

So, to continue with 'My Story' I had known Phyl less than two years when my Father sent me to The Gold Coast where, apart from the Diamond Mining Company in which A & Y only controlled 50% of the shares, they also had a wholly owned interest in three trading stations my Father had in 1934 agreed with the Paramount Chief, from whose State we leased the Diamond Mine, to finance and to whom we would ship merchandise, e.g. cotton prints, sugar, cement, tinned evaporated milk, etc.

I sailed from Liverpool on the 18th May 1938 and returned home some time that November when I resumed working in A & Y's London office. Just less than one year later I had to return to The Gold Coast but that is another story.

By that time my friendship and my relationship with Phyl had blossomed and after wooing her for over three years I had at last persuaded her to marry me, and we came to an agreement that we would become engaged in June 1941 when I was due to return again. Alas, for reasons which have been written about elsewhere, that became impossible; so my parents, who lived in Thornton Heath, gave a small party for Phyl and a few close friends, at which my Father presented her with a single stone diamond engagement ring which he had obtained from one of the Hatton Garden Brokers through whom we sold the output from our alluvial diamond mine

in West Africa. We did not have to buy from any jewellery retail shop which meant Phyl had a really lovely diamond.

I finally got back to the U.K. on the 22nd December 1942 (That is also another story) and we were married in The Roman Catholic Church, Braunstone, Nr Leicester, on the 20th February 1943.We spent our Honeymoon in Falmouth but only one week as it was war-time and Phyl's boss in Empire Stone would not allow her longer.

A three-year tour in West Africa was unheard of for any European but Phyl waited for me. For the entire three years I sent her a dozen red roses every month. I had an arrangement with a florist in Leicester.

I think that's all I can say about the Miracle of 'How I Met My Wife Phyl' with a few extra comments I hope will be found interesting.

I was working in London when my father thought some overseas experience would help develop my character, and that was the reason that, in 1938, I was despatched to the Gold Coast to manage one of my father's investments out there. I don't think I'll tell you all this story, it's not relevant. [IM: Interesting though] My father financed a mining engineer in the late 1920s to prove the value of some ground that he was allowed to prospect on the Gold Coast, and he became very friendly with the Paramount Chief. Prior to 1934 we mined by hand, using shovels, pickaxes, wheelbarrows and jigs and shakers. My father went out, in 1934, to install a new accountancy procedure because we had turned over from mining by hand, to mining by machine, and we had to have properly 'listed' labourers to dig away the overburden (top earth), to dig the gravel, to push the wheelbarrows etc (we later converted to mechanical haulage using diesel locomotives drawing the trucks, on light gauge railways, the trucks containing the diamondiferous gravel, down to the Plants for washing, etc – there were two Plants costing £20,000 each). All labourers were called 'boys'. We employed educated 'boys' as clerical staff. My father made a great friend of the Paramount Chief, who twisted my Dad's arm and said, "I'm very fond of my eldest son, I understand you've got a firm in London that exports goods, will you finance my eldest son?" Dad said, "Yes". These stores were one in Accra,

a second one in Koforidua and the third one in Kibi where the Paramount Chief lived in his 'Palace' – a vast rambling 'building', mostly a series of mud huts with corrugated iron sheets for the roof. He WAS the KING of his State – Akim Abuakwa – not any old 'small boy'. He was revered by his subjects.

By 1938 this Paramount Chief owed us £20,000 and he wasn't paying up. That was why I first went to the Gold Coast. When I came back I made my report. We had some hold over the Paramount Chief because he'd got 6 ¼ % of our audited profits. The firm sent him a cheque, he endorsed it back to my father's firm and we got part payment that way.

By the time war broke out he owed us £40,000, which wasn't a small sum of money in those days. My Dad said, "You've got to go back and see. We can't afford to lose this money". So I went back to the Gold Coast. Up to that time we employed four or five engineers on that mine: a manager, three engineers and a spare man to carry on when anyone was on leave. Three of our chaps were reservists in the Armed Forces, so when the War broke out in 1939 they were summoned back to England to join their units. We didn't have any say in the matter. So, by October 1939 we had a manager and one European, Mr Newman was his name. Dad said, "You'd better go out there, and, also, we understand that out new manager is sick. Go and find out what's the matter".

So I went out to the Gold Coast and I had to go up to the diamond mine. I was met by the European Medical Officer, Harry Chenard, who eventually became the leading gynaecologist in the Gold Coast in British colonial days. He said, "Mr Austin, doesn't your father have these men examined properly before he sends them out to the Gold Coast? This chap of yours, he's only got one kidney. He shouldn't have been sent to the Gold Coast. If you don't repatriate him, and he dies here, your company will be in big trouble". I sat down and sent my Dad a cable - there was no telephone in those days, 1938/39- "Regret Forsyth seriously ill. MO recommends immediate repatriation. Please instruct." I was a young boy of nearly 25 and the reply was, "Put him on the first ship. You take over." *Me*, take over – 400 Africans, and only one other European left by that time! So I grew a moustache to show them

I was the boss. If there was a dispute amongst our employees they didn't go and fight it out in the local chief's court because they charged the earth in fees. We lost their employment for so many days, so it fell to the Manager to be the judge in all respects. It was just like being a District Commissioner. They came with their complaints, and whatever you decided, they accepted with equanimity. I couldn't believe it. So, soon after I'd taken over, I sat on my bungalow and they all queued up to lodge their complaints. It was always rape, or seduction, or stealing, or something like that, but whatever I decided, they all said thank you very much and went back to their work.

At the time of Dunkerque, every able bodied British citizen world-wide was called up to fight for the country. So, all the Europeans from the mines everywhere were marshalled up to the recruiting office and investigated. I was asked what I did, so I explained, and I was told, "You'd better go back and mine the diamonds". On the 5th September 1941 I was issued, under Section 5(1) of The Gold Coast Compulsory Service Ordinance No. 15 of 1941, with a Non-Combatant Service Notice requiring me to remain in the employment of my company as the Acting Mine Manager. The non-Combatant Service Notice was evidence that I was in a Reserved Occupation should any of my family ever ask me "What did you do in the war?" Africans were not called up. The Paramount Chief, who was 100% Anglophile – he loved England – he was knighted by the UK Government in, I think it was, 1932 – provided the African Troops from the Gold Coast (The RWAFF – Royal West African Frontier Force). They comprised men from all four West African Colonies and fought with great distinction in Burma during the Second World War.

At that time, the area we mined was over 2 ¼ square miles. We had a European compound in which the European engineers lived, and over the other side of the hill we built an African village. We built 49 little houses, four-roomed hutments, one room for one employee and one four-room block for the senior Headman. There were also twelve two-bedroom bungalows with a verandah for the clerical staff and the artisans i.e. a surveyor, a lathe turner, a blacksmith, a dispenser and the carpenters and plant fitters (one employee per 'bungalow' which consisted of two separate rooms as those employees were deemed to have two wives). The Com-

pany built the Dispensary at which free medical attention was provided weekly by a non-resident European M.O. whose salary we shared with the three other Mining Companies.

But, by the time I got there, no-one had bothered about the dogs, and the place was running wild with dogs with owners, with dogs with no owners. I said we had to clear the mess up. I put out an edict that any owner of a dog was to lock up the dog that night, because any dog found wandering was liable to be shot. We got rid of them.

In those days well-heeled Africans lived to acquire three things, a Raleigh bicycle, a Singer sewing machine and a two bore shot gun. Amos had a two bore shot gun. I said, “Get rid of the dogs”. I don’t know how many he got rid of, but in one night we cleared out all the dogs. Believe it or not they were eaten by one of the tribes from the Northern Territories, the Fra-Fra. They had a whale of a time, they really loved it!

There was I, running this mine. You don’t have to be a mining engineer to be in charge of an alluvial diamond mine. It’s just like market gardening – if you know what to dig, and how deep down to dig: that’s all you need, and the African headmen knew all that. The diamonds were laid down in the flood plain of the Birim River about a million years ago. It was the opinion of the Director of Geological Survey in 1921 (I’ve got his report) that the diamonds were laid down then. You have to fell the forest, then you have to dig up all the overburden, or earth, on the top and then you come to the gravel, or the blue clay as they used to call it in South Africa. And then, when you dig down that blue clay and feed it on to trucks to go to the plant, you had to be sure that you didn’t go too deep - and that you didn’t leave any behind, because the diamonds could be found in little pot-holes. The headmen knew where they were. Although I say it myself, I was a pretty good administrator because I really cleared that place. I cleared all round the boundary and we planted crotons and cannas. Crotons, you can buy small in supermarkets for £3.50, but we had big ones. The cannas were lovely - purple leaved with a red flower. They were right round the perimeter and beyond there was the forest. It was quite a sight. We used to cut the grass.

I was supposed to come home in June '41.I was going to get engaged. But we couldn't get any, weren't allowed any, more staff – my father couldn't even get any engineers to come and do relief work. My father bought the ring, and had a little party at home, and I got engaged to Phyl. My father applied in London, said, "I've got to have some staff to relieve my boys out there. They've been there three years now. What are we going to do about it?" So the Colonial Office sent a cable to the Governor General, and the Governor General would get on to the Provincial Commissioner, at a place called Cape Coast, and said, " Cayco (London) Ltd (Cayco being Came, Austin, Young Company – Came being the Engineer financed by Austin and Young), want some more staff". He said, "No, they're all right. They don't want anything". He was a man called Duncan Johnson, finally called Drunken Johnson. He was proud to be a friend of Hitler. It was later suggested that he was really trying to sabotage the war effort. In those days, in the Colonial Service, if you were a naughty boy they didn't sack you, they promoted you to a better job. Anyway, they got rid of him. Then, one day (we weren't on the telephone) the next mine to us were on the telephone, and they got a call from Duncan Johnson's successor, Johnny Loveridge. "Get me Mr Austin on the telephone, I want to have a word with him", so they sent their car through to pick me up. When I spoke to him, he said, "I understand you are in trouble". "I've been here three years and when my colleague went on leave we had to send him [only] to Northern Nigeria because we wanted him back". "Don't worry we'll cable the Colonial Office in London to give your company a permit to engage two more staff". You couldn't just engage people, put them on a ship and send them to work in Africa because there was a War on. Everybody in the war effort.

Having arrived there in October 1939, I finally got on a ship from Takoradi Harbour in November 1942 to come home and get married. That ship took about eight weeks to get to Liverpool. Instead of going up through the Bay of Biscay, which was infested with submarines, we went below the Equator up to Norfolk, Virginia, which still is the big American naval base. I have never ever seen so many warships of all descriptions. The place was lousy with warships. Having got there, the first thing the purser did was go ashore. He bought bags of fresh food. He requisitioned all the food for the ship, and then we went out with a lot of ships in convoy to New York.

We had the protection of barrage balloons. I never found out why they had barrage balloons because there weren't any aeroplanes to bomb the ships.

The Manager of the American firm I worked for, after I left Binder Hamlyn & Co, was a woman, Norah Dalrymple Burns, MBE. During the war she and her mother were killed. They were found under the stairs, unharmed. Must have died from shock in the bombing. My Dad had to send a cable to Mr Gensel in New York asking what to do. My Dad took it over. We had another string to our bow. We bought all the British goods, and shipped them out to America. We did the freight and insurance and everything and they gave us 5% commission.
When I arrived in New York in 1942 on the way home, I was met by Mr Gensel in New York, put in his lovely car, driven back to his wonderful house. It was the first time I had seen up and over garage doors - 1942. As you went down the drive you pushed a knob on the dashboard and the garage opened. He had a fantastic house, air-conditioned. He had a basement where he showed me the plant. All the air was sucked through and re-delivered. He had a fantastic emporium: Gensel's Furniture Store. They'd sell a room, deck it out and you'd buy the whole room – decorations, curtaining, everything. As I was going home to England I didn't have any winter clothes, warm suits, so I went to his shop and bought an overcoat, shoes, socks, everything. They owed us money, so they could knock off what they charged me from what they were going to pay us. It worked two ways. When I got to England we had clothes rationing. I'd come from the tropics. I hadn't got any warm clothes, I was given clothing coupons. I got bags and bags of coupons - all went to Phyl. She never lacked for nylons throughout the whole War! When I had to go back to Africa, of course I didn't have any tropical kit. You've heard of Gieves in Piccadilly? Griffiths McAllister of Regent Street? I got more clothing coupons to buy tropical kit. I gave them to Phyl!

Then, in New York, they had assembled the convoy to come across the North Atlantic. The story had it that the Germans used to attack one convoy, sink as many destroyers and merchant ships as they could, and then go back to Bremerhaven or Hamburg to re-fuel and come out again. In the meantime, that let one convoy through. The convoy I travelled on from New York to Liverpool was 107 ships. We

were commodore ship. If you want to believe that the earth is round go up the Mersey River, look out towards the horizon, and you suddenly see the ships coming over the horizon. Wonderful!

When we got to Liverpool I was met by our forwarding agents, W H Nott & Co. They looked after me and asked where I wanted to go. I was going to see my fiancée in Leicester. They put me on a train. They put me on the *wrong* train. There was an LNER (London North Eastern) and the LMS (London, Midland & Scottish): I ended up on the wrong station. I had a suitcase that weighed a ton. It was full of souvenirs, heavy wooden souvenirs. I wanted the first train to Narborough. The station was a mile away, so I had to lug the suitcase. The first train was at 5.15. My Phyllis thought I'd get there about 11.00. I put my heavy baggage in Left Luggage and walked down the road, and banged on the door, twenty past six. Poor girl came down in her nightie, hair in curlers. She wasn't expecting me. I'll never forget that day.

Pre-War, she worked for the Empire Stone Company, who provided all the paving slabs and balustrades for Waterloo Bridge, which was built in about 1933 or 1934. When the War broke out she was living with her mother in Chiswick. They said, "Miss Smith", she was in the Accounts office in Fleet Street, opposite the Law Courts, "if you'd like to work at our works, we'll pay all your removal expenses". We got on a train to Leicester, to look for somewhere for them to live. We rented a house at 8/6 a week in Narborough – No 4, No 6 Victoria Street. It was a tiny little house. It had two rooms downstairs; a front room and a back room, a kitchen range, and you went out the back door and round the corner to the loo. Upstairs there were two and a half bedrooms. When you wanted to have a bath, you got out the big galvanised iron bath and had a whale of a time. Phyl loved bathing in front of the hot fire. She had to bath in the kitchen.

I came home in December '42, and was married in February '43 at Braunstone near Leicester. You know Braunstone, near Leicester? [IM: I do] I was married to a Roman Catholic. When I first met Phyl she was a Protestant. She converted to Catholicism. I didn't mind. She could have been a Moslem, a Hindu or a Sikh. She was mine. Then I went back. I had about four months' leave due to me and, finally,

I went back to the Gold Coast in 1943. We sailed from the Clyde, three ships in convoy – Duchess of York, the California and a merchant ship, which was carrying out supplies. They were going out to Lagos to embark troops to go to the Burmese front, to fight the war in Burma. Wonderful sight. I remember it vividly going down the Clyde, in convoy, with all the work going on on both sides. It was a great ship building area in those days.

By that time the British authorities had conquered the submarine menace in the Irish Sea, so we went straight down through the Bay of Biscay. We were just off Casablanca and suddenly, one night when I was playing solo with three of my colleagues and I had a Misere Ouvert, the ship's bells started ringing. Back to our cabins. I picked up all the money. There was 1s 4d in the kitty. I shared it out when we got to Casablanca. There were these three German aeroplanes at 10,000 feet. It was high level bombing. We just zigged and zagged. The three aircraft took one ship each and dropped bombs down, and then turned and came back, did a lot more damage and then flew off under cover of darkness back to their bases. I had three chaps in my cabin. I wore a cap. At the first salvo it removed the cap from my head, and the wardrobe was skew-whiff and the top bunks fell off. I thought I'd see what was going on. There were outside cabins and inside cabins. The California was a big ship of 19,000 tons. I walked from my cabin down the corridor and past the purser's office, where a lot of people were congregating at the top of the stairs outside his office. He said, "Go back, there's no order to abandon ship". Being taught by Mum to obey instructions, I went back to my cabin and the next salvo took that staircase away completely with all the people on it. And I could have been one of them.

I got back safely and thought I better have another look. I went back up the gangway and one of the ship's officers asked if there were any ladies down there. I said there were four nuns in the next cabin. Terrified. They were going out to Sierra Leone as missionaries on their first ever trip. He said, "Leave me the ladies and you get up on deck as fast as you can". By the time I got back to my cabin the flames were licking through the floor boards, and one of the fellows got out through the port hole. I was too fat; I couldn't get out through the porthole. I went up on deck and went to find

my life boat, which had been loaded without me. All hell was let loose. I thought we were being fired on, but it was our anti-aircraft guns, Oerlikon machine guns, which could only reach 3,000 feet. So that was no use for aircraft at 10,000 feet. What am I going to do? Don't ask me how I did it, but I got up on the rail of the promenade deck and I jumped. Sea down there, and I jumped into my lifeboat. How I got the strength, God alone knows. By that time I was full of cordite and being sick. I couldn't do anything in that lifeboat. I was quite useless. We were rowing around and another destroyer came up. We had four naval ships protecting us. The Duchess of York was in flames, and all the distress flares were going off like a firework display. I was put aboard a destroyer. We were all lined up on deck with our lifejackets. I got a billet in the Petty Officer's mess, so I got eggs and bacon for breakfast.

We hadn't been on there long when orders were given "enemy action imminent". We thought it was a submarine, but it was porpoises. On deck there was a gun which fired torpedoes. I stood there while they loaded it, pulled the trigger and I saw the shell going across the ocean to hit the Duchess of York. Because it was ablaze, they sank it, because they didn't want the Germans to know. But they *knew* where we were. One of the escorts had enough fuel to go at 21 knots to Casablanca. Our destroyer hadn't much fuel left so we went slowly.

When we got to Casablanca I had never seen anything like it. The Americans were in charge there. They had a staging post. They assembled planes in Africa, brought the aircrews over by sea to fly the planes to the North African front in Oran. The staging post was empty. First of all they unloaded the wounded off the ships. As far as you could see were trucks, big 5 ton trucks, twenty or thirty in a line and they took 24, 12 each side sitting down, and we went off to the staging post. When we got there it was all prepared with tents in lines, 6 people in a tent. It was so well organised. Then we were invited to queue up for a mess kit – mug, tin plate for food, blankets: it was cold at that time. I think we got one of those mats so that you don't get the damp through [IM: Groundsheet?] Yes, a groundsheet. We were allowed to go and get a razor blade, a razor, a flannel, but, believe it or not, by the time it got to our turn the British crew boys off the Duchess of York, which had come out of

Glasgow, had queued for a second time, so our lot had to have one blade each and one razor per tent. Then we queued for food – organisation was out of this world.

We were hanging around and we had some big shots on our ship, like the local managers of big companies and we made a deputation to go and see the Commandant. He was horrified. He didn't know we existed. They got the British Consul down, I signed a chit for ten quid, which I eventually had to pay back, and we were allowed to go to the PX, which was the American NAAFI to buy what we wanted. I had a forage cap. They sent a ship from Oran to pick us all up and we went down to Freetown, Takoradi, Accra, Lagos and – I travelled up by train to our mine. 132 miles: took eleven hours on the Gold Coast Railway.

That was good - only been married three months, but I was still alive. By the time the Germans were well into North Africa, the authorities thought they were liable to come across the Sahara Desert and capture the diamond mines. They were very short of diamonds. Stupid – they couldn't have come across the Sahara desert. So we had to have high level meetings at my place to decide what to do. We ran all our machines with Marshall steam engines. We agreed that if the Germans came we would pull all the fire out of the fireboxes and put fire all round the boiler, so that would set the whole lot on fire, it would burst the tubes and they could never get any more steam out of them.

Eventually, I came home in 1945. In those days women were not allowed in Africa - not because they were afraid of hanky panky, but for health reasons. By that time the mining companies had just started to allow them out for the first time. We had four ladies in the big mine next to us. When I came home I said to my Dad "I know your company says no women, but I'm not going back unless you allow Phyl to come with me. I'll come back to Austin and Young and you'll have to get a new manager to run your diamond mine". He persuaded his co-directors that I had to be allowed to have Phyl and I went back in 1945. I left Phyl behind because she had to look after her invalid mother. We got her into a nursing home in Limpsfield Road, Sanderstead. There was a lady there who they say fell in love with me. She was an

SRN and just starting up a nursing home and she was going to have two per room, but she gave Mrs Smith the front room all on her own with her own furniture. She had old age TB. It was during that leave we brought Phyl's mother down from Rednal and then I went back to Africa.

In February 1946 my gorgeous wife came. Then ladies had the permanent wave bubble hair cut. There weren't any hairdressers in the Gold Coast. My son was born nine months later. We came home in 1947. Anthony was ill on the way home with middle ear catarrh. We had to get off at Freetown and go up to the European hospital, which was run by Dr. Strisiver, the MO. They admitted Phyl and my son and I went to stay with one of my engineers who had gone to work in Sierra Leone. We were lucky that the ship was long enough in Freetown to unload (they were not big liners, as they had all been sunk) They were cargo boats, only took 12 passengers and we were lucky that we got back on board that ship. We had to go ashore and risk all, with our baggage on board. The ship stayed long enough in Freetown harbour to allow us to get back on board. I was sitting in my ex-colleague's bungalow when the ship's sirens were going and it was for me. When we eventually got down there, the ship had sailed. They provided a tender and put us alongside, they put the gangway down for me and Phyl. With this little boy in my arms, I had to jump on to that ladder with one arm and pull myself up with my baby in my arms. Phyl nearly had a heart attack. We had a lovely time.

I had to go back again in 1947. Phyl was to join me but her mother became very ill and was admitted to Purley Cottage Hospital, where she died. After Mrs Smith died, Phyl wanted to come back and join me. She came out in 1948 and we came back home in 1949. So, I worked in the Gold Coast from 1938 to 1949.

After the War our turnover, in about 1957, was down to about a quarter of a million a year. So, I went to Africa in 1957. I got on a plane from Heathrow to Kano, Kano to Ibadan, Ibadan to Lagos, Lagos to Port Harcourt, back to Lagos, back to Gold Coast… ended up in the Gambia where my brother was the Director of Agriculture. He was on holiday at the time, so I stayed in the Atlantic Hotel. A Lebanese woman

came to see me one day and asked me to be her confirming house in London. She said I must not ship to any other importer in this market. Her husband was a man called Salim Khoury We used to ship 50 tons of sugar a month. At the time of the Suez Canal crisis the price of sugar was going up by leaps and bounds. I knew that he wanted 50 tons a month, so I booked forward. I still charged him the price I had paid. I should have charged him the price when I shipped. Honest Joe. He made so much money out of my sugar; Eric Austin was the cat's whiskers. I had a Lebanese into my building, Mustapha Shaban, the son of the great Ali- Mustapha Shaban of Freetown. All these fathers were fantastic bosses, honest as the day is long. My Dad said, "You've had your commission, you do a good deal, let them have the profit".

[IM: Did you live in Africa again] No. It was in 1957 that I started to go abroad to get business. I had a friend called Olive Hennessy; she worked in Nigeria in the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation. Eventually, she was Lew Grade's Secretary in television in London: Lew Grade was the ATV boss. She knew all the big shots in Nigeria. She got us an introduction. We banked with the Bank of British West Africa and they would give us a letter of introduction to all their managers at the various branches. They'd send letters to the Managers saying, "Mr Austin, of Austin & Young, is coming", so they'd give you all their assistance. The Bank Managers would get out their Bills' book, to see who was importing what, and then give you all the names. You went round to these firms, to see if they would do business. Jeff was my man in London, my partner. I had a portable typewriter, and I'd sit down up to 2 in the morning typing where I'd been, writing "this one wants prices for wine, this one for sugar…". It was in London that they did all the work. That's how we built up a clientèle in Nigeria; I didn't go near Liberia (we were all advised to avoid it).

The first time I went to Liberia, we had shipped some cement to a firm who didn't want to pay, and I went to get our money. The plane stopped down in Liberia and one other man got off besides me. He was a Lebanese who was acquainted with what you did. Robertsfield Airport is twenty five miles north of Monrovia, and you had to go by taxi. He negotiated everything. £15 to go to town, and when you got

there they charged £30. I didn't want this mob killing me, and the taxi we hired belonged to the Airport Manager. First of all there wasn't any petrol, and when we went to the petrol station the mob hemmed us in on all sides, wouldn't let us out. I found it rather terrifying. Thereafter, when I want back to Monrovia, I told all my clients. That was the *wrong* thing to do. The next time I went to the airport they were *all* there to pick me up!

[IM: sport?] I played rugby. I was due to skipper the Old Boys' A XV for the season 1939/40, but the War came. At School we had these little calendars, printed in red covers for Alpha, green covers for Beta, blue covers for Gamma and yellow covers for Delta. In it they had the form master, the form prefect, …, Austin, … …, Carter, Gooding, … … Lemon,… – I can remember a few of them. I've got a photo-copy of Form 1A 1925 because Raymond sent me one many many years ago. Raymond's house must now be choc-a-bloc with School and O.C. memorabilia. However I lost Raymond in the Second Form, because I had to have two years due to ill health.

Melfort Road was one and a quarter miles from the School so I walked in the morning, walked back for lunch, walked back to School, and walked back home. That was five miles a day. That was wonderful for an old asthmatic angel. That's where I met that girl Kathleen East. She was never my girlfriend, she was beautiful. East's ran the hairdressing salon in Brigstock Road, next door to Hartwell the butcher, who only packed up a few years ago, opposite Williamsons the paraffin shop and tools whatever you call it [IM: Hardware?] That's right. Joan Williams went to Selhurst Girls' School and was a friend of Kathleen East and she's still alive, so is Yvonne East who is John Hunsworth's sister in law.

[IM: Old Croydonians?] Raymond Carter virtually joined the Old Croydonians when he left school. I did join, but I didn't take any jobs because I spent all those years in Africa. A.J. Raynham used to send me the Magazine; he was the Editor before Herbert Cornell. I used to love getting my Old Croydonian out in Africa. I used to write. When I came back in 1949, I had always paid my sub and I always went to the Annual General Meeting.

In 1953 I went to the AGM and that was when we had four additional members. We still do have four additional members, like those two blokes we've got, Peter Francis and Norman Smail. At that AGM Mr Pritchard piped up "We've got Eric Austin here tonight, he's just got back from Africa, he hasn't done any work for the Old Boys' yet, I'll nominate him". I didn't get a shout. I became an additional member, then I became the Membership Secretary because of my staff - they did all the work. I used to write to every school leaver and try to persuade them to join the Old Boys'. There was a hotel in Elgin Road, near East Croydon Station. I arranged to meet them there once a month. I paid for all the drinks. I really wined them and dined them and they appreciated it but few of them joined up. Herbert Cornell did the Magazine and I did all the collating at my house in Carshalton Beeches. Someone used to deliver these bundles of papers to my house and I got a team up - Colin and Robin Vince, Bert Scrivener - and we collated them and put them in the pink covers, stapled them and put them in the envelopes. Someone posted them off. The Gestetner eventually broke down. Then Bert Scrivener took it all over at his house in Norbury Avenue. Bert was the man that sat in front of me when we had the scarlet fever. He did a lot of running off, over the years, until he gave it up. I think Bernard took it over after that.

I must also tell you about the Old Boys' Annual General Meetings from 1932 onwards. We had the A G M in the School Hall and we always had an act. Have you heard of a man called Simpson? He was a member of the Magic Circle. He was an Old Croydonian. He used to come along and do tricks to the school boys. I am sure Raymond will remember him. We also had a singer. Eventually we had an Old Croydonian, Norman Hayter, he is on the list of deceased Old Boys. He came and sang. Lovely occasions at our A G M, when we had Simpson as the conjuror and Arthur Martin as the singer- he was a great cricketer.

Ask me some more questions. I haven't given you enough about the school. [IM You've given me a different perspective of it] The Old Boys' had a stall up at the school sports. Roma Mauri used to sell her plants. [IM: At Duppas Hill?] They had an Old Boys' 220 yards invitation race and in addition an OCA Athletic Club 220

yards race. It was a quarter of a mile round the track. In the 220 yards Old Boys' Invitation Race, you ran in what you wore. That silly bugger Gordon Parr (a member of the Athletics Club) – as Mr Pritchard said "just like Parr"- decided he would be clever and run the reverse way round the track in an effort to race 'the oldies'. Instead of stopping at his finishing line, he ran into the on-coming Invitation Race and so he ran straight into me with the inevitable clash of heads which left the blood streaming down my forehead. And then he blamed me!! I should have got out of the way!!! Hence Mr Pritchard's comment. I finished up at my Doctor's to have my head stitched up. And I've still got the scar. [I hope you can make mine as interesting as Ray's...]

[IM: When did you retire?] I retired in 1997. Officially retired in '97. At that time I'd bring Phyl her breakfast in bed, I'd rest the car outside the bedroom window, blow her a kiss, drive down the driveway with my flashing lights on. One day, in 1996, May 2nd I agreed to do some telling for the Conservative Party. You know what telling is? You do it for an hour, but they couldn't get anyone, so I did it from 8 till 10. That morning Phyl was not feeling very well, so she said, "Don't get my breakfast, I'll get my breakfast myself. You promised to do the telling". I came back at 10 and she still hadn't had any breakfast. She only had two pieces of toast and two cups of tea anyway, and a paracetamol. She wasn't feeling very well, so I persuaded her to have a boiled egg for lunch. She didn't eat that either. I was very worried, so I decided to ring the doctor. "Dr James will come after surgery tonight". This seemed all right to me. We were sitting in that window: Elizabeth, me and Phyl. She went off to the loo and I was talking to Elizabeth. After a while Elizabeth said, "Mum's a long time". People our age don't lock the toilet door; remember that when you are older. She said she was all right, but didn't come out for some minutes. I went back, knocked on the door, but there was no answer and she was on the floor, dying. I told Elizabeth 999 quick. I went down to the gate to show them where we were. They came very quickly. When they came they realised it was more serious and rang for the paramedics. They asked me how old she was. I said, " 80". They couldn't get a stretcher round the bend to the bathroom in my bungalow. They put her in a chair. They said they would take her to Epsom Hospital. I said I would follow, but they would not let me drive.

Once I had locked the house up, my daughter drove. We went to A & E, and sat in a little room, wondering. Eventually, they came in and said they couldn't do anything. My wife was a Catholic, Elizabeth was baptised as a Catholic but went back to being an Anglican. She asked for the Anglican Chaplain. A gentleman came, Revd Vallins, and he saw this tie. He said, "Selhurst Grammar School". I said, "You wouldn't know that". He said, "I would, my uncle, George Vallins, was a master at SGS". [IM: the poet?] Yes, small world. We used to call him Charlie. He was a lovely man, so much the opposite of Eric Austin. I could learn poetry, but I couldn't express myself. I've got Palgrave's Golden Treasury, which I had for my Matric, with all my little notes. We had to explain Shakespeare's sonnets, and what he meant and all that kind of rubbish!

Additional Notes:

Eric has told me of the "torture" to an asthmatic of the annual compulsory cross-country run, in which he was reduced to a walk well before the end. The only "plus" was the point awarded to his house for running/walking at all. He remembers the occasion when he crossed the finishing line last with three like-minded companions.

Eric has a son, Anthony, who has four children, and a daughter, Elizabeth, who has two children. He also has three great grandchildren, one of whom is a son for Carol, the wife of his grandson James Austin, whom Eric hopes will ensure the continuation of the Austin dynasty.

Amongst his photographs, Eric has found some which include School trips under Mr K M (Smiler) King and his Scout Leader to Veyrier-du-Lac in 1931, a similar trip probably in 1933 which included scouts, schoolboys and Old Boys and also the disastrous trip to Suances, Spain, near Santander in 1935 or 1937. On that occasion it rained continuously and the party was washed off the hill-side camp site. They were rescued by the "Mayor, Town Clerk or somebody who kindly transferred them, lock, stock and barrel into accommodation in a School, or Church Hall. It seems that "Smiler" did not have a very good knowledge of Spanish, but fortunately his Scout Leader was fluent."

The first trip to France in 1931 cost Eric's parents £14.14.0 – Victoria to Dover by train, the ferry across to Calais, trains to Paris and then Lyon, Eric thinks, where they changed trains for Anneçy-du-Lac. The cost included two nights in a Paris hotel, and the stay at a campsite at Veyrier, alongside the lake. It was the year of the French Colonial Exhibition (Exposition Coloniale) and the fountains all across the River Seine changed colours every few seconds, a sight Eric has never forgotten. He bought some postcards to illustrate the event.