

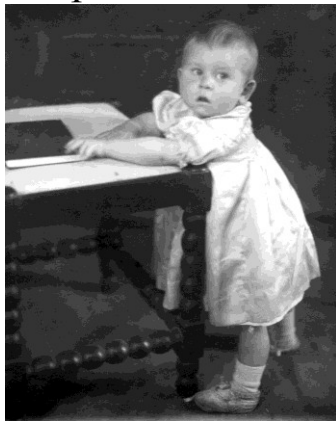
George Ferard

Early Years: August 22nd 1932-1945

I have only a few memories of India - vivid recollections isolated from context. I cannot put them into a meaningful sequence and there is now no one left who can do it for me. I remember being in hospital in Rawalpindi - white sheets and dark nurses, and my mother



looking down at me in my little bed (I was very ill with bacterial dysentery). I remember my ayah taking me for a walk to a road with cannons spaced along it, and every cannon had a pyramid of cannon balls beside it (regimental lines in Rawalpindi). I remember playing with my first snow which I pretended was sugar - my parents were on trek camped beside a deep nullah full of snow and they sent down a bearer to



bring me some up in a basin. I remember being carried in a "dandy" on trek (a sort of crib with projecting poles resting on the shoulders of bearers at front and rear), and I remember my mother going frantic when she found me flicking a scorpion with my finger, which kept striking and just missing me. I was ill at the time, and my mother always SAID that IF it had stung me I would have died.

Sailing home on the SS Somersetshire, I remember getting into trouble for throwing other children's toys and furry animals into the Red Sea, but not what made me do it. Apparently whenever I appeared on deck (aged four), children older than me would run crying to their mothers hugging their teddies.

I was born in Murree in (what was then) the NW Frontier Province of British India. My father was a captain in the Royal Artillery - keeping the peace on the borders of the Empire. My sister Monica, 5 years old, when told she had a baby brother, is reputed to have said "but I would sooner have a baby elephant" - a nice welcome from one's sibling! I went back to England for nine months when under two (my father was attending a gunnery staff course before being promoted major) - and then back to India until 1936 when we came home for good. Sometime during this second spell, I became very ill with bacillary dysentery - apparently from eating part of a contaminated mango given to me by my mother who was also ill - and was at death's door. Indeed my recovery was quite unexpected, and attributed to Brands Essence - I had not eaten for weeks in hospital, but (so her story goes) my mother put some BE on her finger and I licked it off, and that was the turning point. Full recovery was slow, and I was not allowed a normal diet until about seven.

On our return we briefly rented near Swindon. I have hazy memories of a house near a railway line, and of an incident on a bus (which I suspect my mother embroidered as she could never resist a good story) where she made me disgorge from my pockets numerous items I had shoplifted from Woolworths, apparently much to the amusement of the passengers. I do remember a pair of nutcrackers which I was allowed to keep. I had become a fanatical collector of crockery and kitchen utensils.

After Swindon, we lived in Formby for a year, where I went to infant school, and fell in love with Jennifer, also four. Although she liked me, she never returned my adoration, and I had to look elsewhere for solace. I found this on Formby beach, collecting dead crabs in lonely outings to the "crab line". I don't know why so many dead crabs washed up on the tide mark, but they fascinated me, and all my leisure was spent amassing them. I sorted the little corpses by size and type (none were large) and

laid them out in rows in a potting shed at the back of our house ("Pennell"- not far from the sea). One day I found a dead edible crab ten times larger than anything else I had found - it was so big I had a struggle getting it back home. It became the star of my collection, and I recollect showing it to my parents and kindergarten friends with enormous pride. I still remember the sense of shock and loss when I went to view my crabs one day to find it missing. I ran crying into the house to tell my parents, and when my mother said she had thrown it out, I was speechless with rage. Unlike the other small crabs which were dried mummies, this big crab had gone bad and was smelling horribly, but I still felt a deep sense of betrayal and loss.

We next moved to another rented house in Alverstoke (Portsmouth) - 1937 - I was five. My crab collection had gone, and there was nothing much of interest on the shingle beaches. I did have an enormous kitchen assortment by now including two mincing machines, and I remember starting to collect caterpillars - yellow and black cinnabar moth larvae from waste ground ragweed.

In 1938 we moved to The Sheiling, Swaines Rd., Bembridge in the Isle of Wight which was our home until we went to Ireland in 1946. It was a large rambling house with six bedrooms on two acres with a tennis court, orchard, attractive lawns and a servants' bungalow in the grounds. I have many happy memories of Bembridge.

At six I stopped collecting pots and pans (my mother gave me a florin and put the whole lot in a church jumble sale) and got seriously hooked on carpentry instead. My father gave me a few old tools, I had a table in my large bedroom where my collection was laid out, and all my (6d/week) pocket money was spent enlarging it. There was a rambling hardware store on the hill down to the harbour where I spent hours examining tools and wondering what I should buy next - I can still

recollect the smell of oil and wood and the thrill of buying my first small plane (2/6d - so 5 weeks savings).

I didn't actually make many things - my kicks came from handling my tools and sharpening my chisels. But I soon decided that I desperately needed a woodworker's bench with rack and wooden vice - I had seen one in a magazine for 17/6d and started serious saving in Crabby (my crab shaped money box). I also started earning. In the summer of 1939, I persuaded my mother to pay me one penny per basket for dandelion heads or threepence per basket for (dug up) whole dandelions. And from early August I set wasp traps in the orchard, getting one penny for every twenty dead wasps - my mother had always hated wasps, and I should have driven a harder bargain. When I had saved ten shillings, my parents made up the difference and I can remember the thrill of unpacking the workbench and putting my tools in the rack. And my Uncle Primal (my godfather - an old army friend of my father's) gave me a rabbeting plane for my seventh birthday - an expensive and quite unsuitable cabinet maker's tool with lots of attachments. I never understood how to use it, but it had pride of place on my bench!

At six I was a lonely delicate and obsessive child, content with my own company. I don't remember having friends. My sister was never a playmate but a bigger person who always knew best and put me down. I (was told I) had problems with flat feet; I had to do exercises, and all my shoes were built up with wedges. I developed a stammer which I did not completely overcome until about fourteen. I had a lot of milk teeth pulled out because of abscesses and dreaded my frequent visits to our dentist, Mr Hargreaves, in Ryde. I attended Sunday school at Bembridge Church and remember being very upset when I missed a religious stamp (we got one every week for attending) - we had gone away for a weekend which was not my fault - but despite making a scene the Sunday school mistress would not give me my stamp and so spoilt my

set. I travelled by bus to a P.N .E. U school in Sandown every day - I remember the bus ride, the school (but not my teachers or schoolmates), and playing marbles in a bare area of the grassy garden.

The Sheiling was filled with family pictures and furniture - the two Griffier paintings in the drawing room were my particular favourites - I always thought of them as the giant and the elephant. Uncle Charlie had no children, and my grandfather Uncle Harry - Charles Cotton's third son - died in Bournemouth in 1936. So when Aunt Evie (Uncle Charlie's widow for fifteen years) died at Ranelagh Cottage, Bracknell in November 1937, everything passed to my father - much of it originally from Ascot Place.¹ He sold Ranelagh Cottage and bought The Sheiling in early 1938 which was near his work - an experimental gunnery unit on Culver Cliff, near Sandown. I remember going to Aunt Evie's funeral and overhearing complaints about her companion, Ablett, who apparently made off with many small valuables.

I have no recollections of family ever coming to stay in Bembridge - surprising as my father had nine Ferard uncles and aunts. My aunt Peggy was working in London (and did not get on with my mother) and her younger sister Janet was in South Africa. Aunt Ida (my grandmother, uncle Harry's widow) had moved to a cottage in Oxted with a companion (Miss Shaw). My mother's parents stayed at Ballynegal throughout the war and she did not get on with her brother Tommy or his wife Mercy. My father's Uncle Arthur (Agnes' father) and Uncle Johnny were alive, and I have a blurred memory of meeting the latter once at Limpsfield where he lived. Uncle Reggie (Jimmie Ferard's

¹ Uncle Charlie insisted that all family antiques etc, houses and money should pass to the oldest brother with male heirs – that cut out Arthur Ferard [...]

grandfather) had died in 1934 and his son Dick was in India (ICS). My father's married aunts (Emily and Lizzie) had died, and his three spinster aunts (Kate, Margaret and Louisa) were too old to travel. My father may have occasionally seen his cousins Agnes (Reeve), Kitty (Fagan) and Lorna (Derry) when in London, although I don't remember meeting any of them until after the war.

My mother liked cats, and in 1938 we got a tom-kitten - Tibby. He turned into a large handsome long-haired black cat who we all worshipped. He was a lovely friendly cat, and I cried buckets when he got killed - I think before we went to Wales. We had no dog although we looked after a friend's over-bred red setter called Flo for a few months - a nervous delicate and smelly animal which spent most of its time sleeping or snuffling in the morning room. We were glad to see Flo go!

I remember my parents calling me into the drawing room to hear Chamberlain announce that we were at war. Monica and I were quickly packed off to a small school in Branton, North Devon (The Traill's), which took both boys and girls from six to twelve, although M soon moved on to the Royal School, Bath, already evacuated to Longleat. I remember learning (with difficulty) to ride a bike, and then being given a new Raleigh which I was very proud of. But it was too big for me and I crashed it on the hill down into Branton which damaged both the bike and me. I was more concerned about the bike, and very upset that the hinged lid on the oiling point had broken off. I learnt to knit - twice a week we had a book read to us while we knitted endless mufflers for the troops using rewound scrap wool. I often wondered if they were ever worn. We went for walks, and I became interested in flowers. In a den deep in a box thicket two friends and I made arrowheads, daggers, and knives from the soft local stone until we were discovered and stopped. At nearly nine, I was sent to Westbourne House, a private preparatory

school which had been evacuated from Folkestone to a mansion called Upcott standing in large grounds two miles outside Barnstable.

The Isle of Wight was a wonderful place during the war. There was no development, no trippers (although we did have evacuees) and only residents and those with security passes were allowed back and forth on the ferries. Miles of steelwork were erected along the beaches to impede landing craft. We had an air raid shelter built in the garden which we scuttled into when the siren went - I remember several nights down there and sometimes being allowed by my mother to stand in the garden to watch the searchlights and flaming onions and listen to gunfire and distant falling bombs. We were not a primary target, but German bombers going to Portsmouth and Southampton came directly overhead, and sometimes if things were made too hot for them, they emptied their bomb bays on us when heading home. My mother told me that any Luftwaffe pilot returning with bombs aboard was shot, although I wondered how she knew! She joined the WVS where she established a reputation for getting things done - she was energetic and never overawed by top brass or bureaucrats. She became deputy-head of Ryde WVS, but I think really ran the show. She hated "The Boche"! She always said that she would take at least one with her if they ever invaded and kept a rapier in the hall for that purpose. One day an evacuee mother and her six children that she had billeted half a mile down the road were all killed by land mine and she had to break the news to the father who had stayed in London.

The beach was only half a mile down the road. Although my father hated clubs and refused to join the smart Bembridge Sailing Club, home of the celebrated Redwings, he kept a 14 foot Bermuda rig dinghy down at the harbour and sometimes took us out to sail and (with his Seagull outboard engine) catch mackerel. One day we got caught in a storm, the outboard would not work, and my father had a fearful job beating

upwind against the tide - it took six hours, and my mother and I got very cold and frightened.

This put me off sailing and I turned to prawning. I had caught my first prawns two years before in Connemara and had watched adult prawners at work on the Bembridge reefs. So I bought the biggest net I could manage (I was just eight) and was soon bringing home decent catches which we had for tea. Prawning could only be done during the summer about two hours either side of low tide - spring tides were best. I was away in summer 1941, but earned a lot of money during the next two summer holidays. I did a deal with Mr Reynolds, the Bembridge fishmonger who paid me 2/- per hundred boiled and ready to sell (he charged double that). I could normally get 150 -200 saleable prawns per tide (my record was 400) which was invested in my new mania – stamps, which had displaced carpentry. After the Reynolds deal my family rarely saw a decent prawn - just those undersized or carrying roe - although I do remember keeping back the odd monster (like a big Spanish gamba) because Reynolds would not pay extra for whoppers. By eleven I was reckoned the best prawner at Bembridge and people used to ask my advice. I wore shorts and sand shoes and looked like a native by the time I went back to school.

I tried two other money-earners. In late summer I used to get up at first light and cycle out to Bembridge Airport (a derelict airstrip on the Sandown road) to collect mushrooms and horse-mushrooms which I used to sell door to door. I managed to tie a three foot wicker clothes basket to the back of my bicycle, and on a good morning could fill it. I had established a customer round at Bembridge before my parents found out (from someone calling at our



house to order more) and they rather grudgingly let me carry on. I also tried to develop a trade in hazel nuts collected from Steyne Woods in September but this was less successful. When my mother was out, I set up signs down the road offering "specially tested hazel nuts" (I had floated out the duds), and she found me on the front lawn with her scales making sales when she returned in the evening from WVS duties. She made me shut up shop and we ate the rest of the nuts!

In early 1941 we went away for a year and a half following my father's postings. He was by now a lieutenant-colonel in charge of coastal defences firstly in North Wales (we rented a house in Llandudno) and then in South Wales (Porthcawl). I quite liked North Wales. We had a family outing climbing Snowden, and visited Conway and Caernarvon castles. I collected seashells and gathered winkles with two friends which we sold on the sea front. I remember touting for business in the officers' mess and informing the mess sergeant that my father was the C.O. - a junior officer eventually bought a 3d bag of winkles to get rid of me. The story reached my father who expressed displeasure, although I think he was secretly rather amused.

I sometimes went fishing for dabs and flounders with my mother in the Conway estuary (she hired a little rowing boat) and we came back one afternoon to find the beach swarming with (my father's) troops on an exercise. Since we were not carrying our identity cards, we were "arrested" and - to my mother's furious protests - taken off for questioning. However I tripped over an anchor rope as we were escorted across the estuarial mud, and gashed myself badly over an eye with the edge of the metal bailer I was carrying. I poured with blood, an officer was summoned, I was rushed off to have stitches, and we were released without further ado! I had unsuccessful private swimming lessons at Llandudno - I remember being cold and miserable and feeling a failure.

Monica told me she had learnt to swim at six! I taught myself the following summer back at Bembridge and became a strong swimmer.

Porthcawl, where I had one spring holiday, was unmemorable, and we were back at Bembridge for the summer of 1942. My father had been posted to Felixstowe and my parents decided that it was time to stop camp-following, particularly as the east coast was no safer than the Isle of Wight. From ten to fourteen, I saw very little of my father, who was eventually promoted full colonel - I was only at home for the holidays, which did not always coincide with his leaves. I missed him - he was a considerate and logical man who made time to listen and thought before he acted; he added ballast to the family and could curb my mother's occasionally misguided impulses. I remember one particular incident which would not have happened if he had been at home. By the back door of The Sheiling we had a lobby where galoshes and gumboots were kept. One day when I was eleven, my mother found a triangle of rubber and backing material apparently cut out of the upper part of one of her gumboots. She accused me of doing it, on the grounds that no one else would have - quite wrongly and unjustly. I hotly denied it. Not only would she not accept my word, but went on to say that (since only a nutcase would have done it) I must be mentally unstable and should be taken to a psychiatrist! Although I was not punished, the injustice of the accusation made me boil and impaired our relationship for some time. With hindsight I think that she was under stress from her WVS work and that the hole in the gumboot was possibly accidental -the rubber tearing down the line of the backing weave.

By 1943 I had made two good friends of my own age at Bembridge, - Peter Evans-Lombe (who lived opposite) and John Hyde-Smith. We started fishing together from Bembridge Pier, which fitted in well with my prawning - one could only fish when the tide was IN. Unlike prawning, it produced no income, and many of the fish we caught

(wrasse) were not worth eating. However we also got plaice, and occasionally a really delicious big bass. In 1944 prawns did not appear in normal numbers, and I gave up prawning to spend more time with my friends. At low tide we dug for bait and set trot lines which increased our haul. We also biked around the island and went swimming. Once my father (home on leave) took the three of us out with a boatman to fish for conger eel. It was a memorable day. Congers are normally caught at night, but as luck would have it conditions that day were ideal, and we caught several large ones and a very big dogfish, longer than I was - see photos.

Our main problem was the village boys (we were all prep school). They shouted at us and one day a gang waylaid us, knocked us off our bikes and beat us up - the leader was about our age but much tougher and called Doggy. My father (during the same leave as the conger outing) went to see Doggy's father, actually met Doggy himself, and told me to my utter amazement that "Doggy was not really a bad lad"! However although abuse continued, we were not attacked again, and we went on swimming fishing and walking together until 1946 when I left. By then, Peter was at Wellington, and he went on into the army. I still get Xmas cards from John Hyde-Smith (he came to stay once at Caragh Lake) who went to Cambridge and had a career in Bulmers.

I have few sharp memories of Monica during these later years at Bembridge, although she was around for holidays. She had her circle of friends, and we went our own way. Strangely enough her best Bembridge friend, Val Cobb, was the very young aunt of my friend Peter Evans-Lombe, and lived with Peter and his mother (her sister) across the road (Peter's father had gone down with his ship). Val later married a naval officer known to Hugh and I think Monica is still in touch. One incident Monica and I both remember was going to the circus at Bembridge! We were sitting together at the top of the staging when it

collapsed and both fell about twelve feet with several others. We were winded and bruised, and the circus manager ushered us to the best front seats. I suffered no lasting harm, but Monica maintains that it was the start of life-long back problems.

Eventually we got another cat, or more accurately we were adopted by Fluffy, a beautiful but small and thin long-haired lady tabby. From 1944 Fluffy used to regularly trot through the orchard to our house from the market garden beyond, and we all became very fond of her. My mother told the story of asking the market-gardener (who kept Fluffy to keep vermin down) why she was so painfully thin, to which he replied "She gets like that - eats string". "My word," my mother said, "I'm not surprised she's thin" - no doubt thinking of Henry King². The market gardener meant "each spring"! In 1945 he gave us Fluffy who came to Ireland with us.

After the end of the war my mother got a letter from her father suggesting that, as Cecil was retiring, we should leave Bembridge and live with them at Ballynegal. My father would help Hawk to run the estate and I should inherit. My parents would be given a large suite of rooms for the family and could bring over all their things. I know that my father was not keen on the idea - he would far sooner have sailed and gardened at Bembridge. And bearing in mind that my mother hated her

² Hilaire Belloc, 1907: *'The Chief Defect of Henry King / Was chewing little bits of String./ At last he swallowed some which tied / Itself in ugly Knots inside. / Physicians of the Utmost Fame / Were called at once; but when they came / They answered, as they took their Fees, / 'There is no Cure for this Disease./ Henry will very soon be dead.'* / His parents stood about his Bed / Lamenting his Untimely Death, / When Henry, with his Latest Breath, / Cried 'Oh, my Friends, be warned by me, / That Breakfast, Dinner, Lunch, and Tea / Are all the Human Frame requires...'/ With that, the Wretched Child expires.' [ed]

father Hawk, one would have thought that she would have rejected the proposal out of hand. But instead she worked on Cecil until he agreed to go. She always said she was thinking of me and my inheritance, but I am inclined to think the attraction lay in disinheriting brother Tommy and of some day becoming mistress of Ballynegal (see my note on the latter).

Although I went to Winchester from Bembridge in the autumn of 1945, nearly a year before my parents moved to Ireland, I only cover memories of my prep school in the note below.

WESTBOURNE HOUSE, BARNSTABLE 1941-45

Westbourne House had a lot going for it. When war was declared the school moved from Folkestone to Upcott (Barnstable) which was a fine Georgian house surrounded by some 100 acres of fields and woods, all within school bounds. In the summer we were regularly taken to Saunton Sands and the lovely coves of Croyd, where we collected cowries. We were safe from the war. The food was not bad and every week we could choose our 2 ounce sweet ration from a little stall set up inside the school. Matron was efficient and we had teeth and ear inspections on the front drive every fortnight. And I guess, for a small school of perhaps 65 boys, the teaching must have been pretty good as nearly everyone got through common entrance and I passed into the right form (for me) at Winchester. The school was owned by the Headmaster, an imposing man in his late forties - Geoffrey W. Shilcock. He had an efficient wife and two tomboy daughters Ann and Jill, who worked with us in class (although they had their own bedrooms near their parents.) Ann became a well-known tennis player, competing at Wimbledon, and Jill and her husband eventually ran the school in the late 1950s after relocation to Chichester

I found GWS rather intimidating. He believed in Victorian values which he expounded at daily chapel. We were here to bear the white man's

burden - dominion over palm pine and lesser breeds! That meant discipline, and learning to take and give orders. And we must always keep a stiff upper lip - showing emotion was for sissies. He believed that boys should be kept busy in their spare time doing useful things in organised groups, so we were divided into four patrols (I was a Panther). Useful things meant keeping rabbits or sawing wood for the enormous fires which kept the Shilcock private quarters in Upcott warm throughout the winter. Rabbits were negotiable, and I refused to have anything to do with them - we ate the flesh (a tasty addition to our meat ration) but GWS really kept them for their skins, and the job involved feeding them and cleaning out their pens while they lived, and stretching and curing their hides after they died. I remember row upon row of sad little hutches in the courtyard opposite the chapel. Sawing wood under our patrol leaders was compulsory. There was plenty to saw in the 60 acres of woodland, and every patrol had its own base with sawing horses and cross-saws where its log pile grew through the term. The latter was judged at term end, and members of the winning patrol got an egg each for tea. I specialised in the collection of kindling wood for the patrol, which was permitted and suited me better than sawing - I could collect a lot quickly, which gave me time for other things.

The Patrol system pervaded all activities. Masters gave out stars (for good results in class or helpful behaviour out of it) and stripes (for the opposite) which were printed like raffle tickets in a little book. Every week our patrol leaders read out our individual and their patrol scores to the assembled school. If one did badly, one let down one's patrol (the champion patrol got an outing) and risked punishment. At the end of the weekly recital, GWS would announce that certain boys must come down to his study that evening - to be whacked through pyjamas with a gym shoe, which was very painful. Although with time and suffering I learnt the art of brinkmanship (just keeping outside the punishment zone), GWS never approved of me - I was not a good team player and deemed

likely to lead others into undesirable activities -we made garlic wine, climbed trees, and made dens in the wood. I showed little aptitude for boxing or team games (although I eventually made the soccer XI as a wing forward), was small for my age, and had a stammer - not good empire-building material. One result was that I never made patrol leader! However my reputation as something of a rebel made me fairly popular and I sometimes led dorm raids on the downstairs larder, a risky undertaking that could go painfully wrong. My main friends were Robin Eastwood (who went on to Bradfield only to be killed on a motor-bike at seventeen) and Patrick Ferguson (now living in Formby who wrote to me recently). The school's biggest "catch" was Lord North - a pasty faced boy with freckles and flaming red hair rather younger than me, whose father had been blown up by a mine shortly before he arrived.

Shortly after I came the school got a "riding mistress" (a girl of nineteen) - and my parents, both good riders when young, put me down for lessons. I was terrified. The horses were big and "lessons" consisted of galloping and falling off as we tried to keep up with our trainer. After about ten tumbles my parents let me give up riding, but the experience put me off horses for life. There were other complaints and riding came off the curriculum.

Stamp collecting - an obsession caught from my mother - occupied much of my spare time and cash. I loved measuring perforations and testing watermarks, and spent happy hours viewing approvals (from dealers) and swapping with friends. Mr Clapham, our maths master, was a keen collector and helpful with advice. Once a year we had a day's holiday when boys living nearby usually took a friend back with them, and when I was eleven Guy Trechmann asked me out to his home for the day. Guy's parents knew I collected and told me that they had a lot of stamps in their box room and that I could help myself. When I saw what they had, I was flabbergasted - there were dozens of mint sets of colonial

Victorian and Edwardian stamps up to the high values all in perfect condition in cellophane envelopes. I spent all day in the boxroom and the Trechmanns could hardly get me down to meals. I told them that I had found some "nice stamps" and they seemed happy about me taking whatever I wanted. Back at school I catalogued my finds (worth over a thousand pounds then - perhaps £40K now) and showed them to Clapham and my collector friends. At the end of term, our trunks were laid in an open row along a landing for us to pack under Matron's eagle eye, and I remember putting the Trechmann stamps separately into my trunk underneath some clothes when no one was around. When my mother met me at Bembridge station, I could talk of nothing but my stamps, but when I unpacked they were not there! I remember just about tearing the trunk apart in my frenzy. Someone had known exactly what they were after and where they would probably be. I suspected Mr Clapham as it would have been difficult for a boy to explain how he came by such valuable stamps. I never reported the theft, and in time convinced myself that I deserved to lose the stamps for my abuse of hospitality and dishonest intentions!

VE day was during my last term. We were assembled on the front drive, addressed by GWS, and given the rest of the day off. I also remember GWS announcing on the day of my Winchester exam that the school would have kippers on my account because fish helped the brain. Unfortunately I did not (and still don't) like kippers, and remember a fishy taste in my mouth as I struggled with my papers.

GCF 1.2.1999