

CHOICES

Choices. We celebrate the word, placing it above all others, assuming that all of us will make the right decision. The freedom to choose, is above all the most important right we can have. In a free country, we fought to gain Choice, without it, the direction our lives follow would be determined by others. Others who knew nothing about us, our families, our aspirations and dreams. A faceless nobody who decides everything for us.

Would life be easier that way. Surely if we do not have to pander to our own whims, life would be so much better. Rather like Computers; The information would be programmed into us and we would just carry out orders to a conclusion set down by others. How bad could that be?

Our whole life consists of crossroads. Times when we stop and think about what should come next. Which path should we take in order to fulfil our ambition. Roads are long hazardous places. Many branches form, spreading like plagues across our thoughts. Obstacles can descend quickly in front of us, persuading us to take a long detour through our fears and dislikes. So the firm decisions we take at the beginning, could become the nightmares that we strive to avoid.

Do we really know what career we desire at the age of thirteen? Many of us feel we do, or at least have an idea of the activities we enjoy, that could blossom into a life long ambition. Just think for a moment. If we could go back to the many roads that crisscross our fate, just think how different life would be today, had we taken a different route.

Someone pushing us into a place we really did not want to go. What if they had succeeded? Would life be so bad. Maybe instead of choosing French and English in our school options, we instead choose Drama and Music. Where would we be now? Let us say we found driving a car more difficult than we did, and passed our test at the age of twenty two instead of seventeen. What difference would that have made to us?

Then there are the really hard choices we make throughout our lives. My girlfriend is pregnant, what should I do? The younger you are the more likely it is that you would have a termination. Life would just carry on as normal. What if you had chosen to keep the child? How harder would you have found things. Could you have found more rewards?

The future bodes well for "Choice". Choice is on the march. From a period where all decisions were made for us; The type of school we went to; The class of person we would marry; The direction our life would take and the care we would be given in later life.

To a very different, exciting time. An era where nothing is certain. The choices we make now do not necessarily mean for life.

I was brought up in an age where choice was emerging. The word was being used widely for the first time. People were flocking to the "Word of Choice". Choice had spoken, the rest would follow. Everything would be alright now that we could decide for ourselves. Like most individuals of the time, I followed an ethos, as laid down by our leaders, the great and the good of political life, Mrs Thatcher, Chancellor Lawson, Kenneth Clark. People who persuaded us of a future where markets and individuals would decide direction, a Les a Faire approach to problems that still existed, but could be vanquished with the Choice of a single person, to determine his own fate.

Things never quite happen as they should!

CHAPTER 1

DIFFERENT TO THE OTHER BOYS

You're a boy, a young male, a masculine person, whose role is to protect the weaker, female species, so why the fuck do you want a DOLLS HOUSE. A fucking female, girlie, dress up and play, DOLLS HOUSE.

Until the age of eleven I was pretty much the same as everyone else. There were of course exceptions to this. While my mates were out playing "BOYS" games, Cowboys and Indians, Cops and Robbers, smashing each other up in games that they called sports, with balls, bats and fists, hurting each other in the name of macho manliness. I was out playing house. Making a home for myself in secluded undergrowth near the flat where I lived. Somewhere I felt safe, where I could protect myself and my treasured things from people. I say people, I really mean boys; Boys whose only aim in life was to destroy everything and everyone in their path.

I never really enjoyed my early childhood. It was a time where I stored up a lot of the troubles and feelings that I experience today. Knowing I was different from most of my friends and peers, I coiled inwards, preferring to live in my fantasies and dreams. My parents thought it was just a phase, a rewiring of my brain before adulthood. Maybe it was, but I certainly didn't like the results, at least in the short term.

Many of the friends I had at School, were also friends I lived with. I grew up on a small South Hampshire Council Estate. Well kept gardens, and genuine lovely people. I suppose in many respects we lived rather an idealistic life. Neighbours would pop in and out of each others houses for a cup of tea and a chat. My school was literally a few hundred yards away over a small wire fence, Surrounded by fields. Fields we used to play in, enjoying the long summer months.

In 1977, The Queens silver jubilee was celebrated. Our block of sixteen flats was no exception. Trestle tables were placed in the communal washing area, washing lines decorated with Union flags rather than clothes. All the mothers played there part, baking, cooking, waiting and playing.

An old wooden wireless was relaying the celebrations from within a nearby flat. As the National Anthem played we all stood up in our best clothes saluting The Queen. I remember I was wearing a pair of grey cord trousers, a deep burgundy tank top, and a wide collared shirt, emblazed with loads of penny farthings. My hair was a chestnut brown colour, plenty of red in. Shoulder length, curling at the ends.

As usual my front teeth were missing.

“Whenever I look back to this period in my life, my front teeth are never there. Those obligatory school photographs; A large one for Mother and four smaller ones, for grandparents and aunts”.

My shoes were my best ones. The ones I went to “Clarks” shoe shop to get measured for, so they fitted just right. Rather hard patent leather, which always rubbed my heels, due to the lack of wear. Not the prettiest of shoes but we all seemed to have them, and any way no one really cared what we wore in those days.

By my left side was a small brown bag, with handles. It was similar to a satchel, but not as big. Inside was everything that was important to me. My Crayola Crayons, Note pad and exercise book, An orange plastic cat, no bigger than a polo mint, my toy Rolls Royce, (Clearly even then I had delusions of grandeur), and lastly a small red purse with a few cherished coins in. I never got pocket money in those days, but my Nan used to give me some money when she came to see us on a Saturday.

We all wore party hats, red, White and blue. The tables were decorated with bright red table cloths. Balloons were tied to each leg of the wobbly tables, raising high into a sun filled sky. Cakes decorated with smarties, Chocolate fingers and warm ham sandwiches.

This was the best time of my life until now.

At age eleven I went to Senior School. I suppose I never really knew what to expect; Just another school, like all those that had gone before. How wrong could I have been.

By this time me and my family had moved half a mile down the road to our new council house. In fact it was opposite the very house where my mother had grown up as a child. Many of the same families were still living on the same street where my mother was born. The houses were part of thousands built just after the Second World War, to house people, like my Maternal Grandparents, who had been bombed out and been made homeless.

We moved in January 1979. It was cold and icy with snow on the ground. The house was old, poorly decorated with a coal fire in each room. I hated it. We had moved from a modern warm flat into a cold disgusting shell of a building, which looked like it hadn't been decorated since the 1940s, and probably hadn't. Mum and Dad, especially Dad were extremely house proud, and living in such circumstances was really difficult for them. Money was tight. Dad; who worked at the Ford Factory in Southampton was on a three day a week, and mum was a cleaner at my old school.

I remember the old metal framed windows, cold to touch. There was more ice on the inside than the out. Any heat that was inside the house just disappeared.

I reached puberty at a very early age, I was eleven going on twelve. I remember getting facial hair for the first time, not knowing what to do with it. My parents, very liberal in their views, found it difficult to broach the subject of sex and puberty. To be perfectly honest, had they even tried to discuss it, I would have brushed it aside and left the room.

My dad offered to show me how to shave. I felt embarrassed. I just didn't want my father telling me how to shave my face. It was as if I didn't want to admit I was growing up. In any case my father had a beard, so what would he know about shaving.

I had two close friends at school, Christopher and Peter. Christopher was more like me, preferring solitary pursuits than group activities. It took him a lot longer to reach puberty than I. Looking back on it now, he kept a lot of my childish ways to the fore. While I was physically growing up, mentally, I was still a small child, running around the playground. Both of us lived in a bit of a fantasy world. We had our own pretend Radio Station, lived in our own pretend island and had our own pretend titles.

I had always loved writing, even from an early age; about the strange world that I tended to inhabit, for most of my childhood. I gave those people I knew in class different names and titles, related each to their own unique personalities. I loved to watch people, listen to their voices, observe their body language and interpret this in my own way, putting pen to paper.

When Christopher and I were together we were terrible. Frequently told off for immature behaviour, and as one teacher put it "our diffident behaviour", was causing concern. Jason was always more intelligent than me, being gifted musically, and excellent in Mathematics, so it was clear that at some point we would be separated.

Then there was Peter. Peter was quieter, more difficult to fathom out. You could see there was a lot to him, spending most of his time deep in thought. He was also more physically active, than either Chris or Pete!

Sports Lessons; The worst days of the week, were those in which we had sports. I hated it with a passion, as did Chris. There were many reasons for my inherent dislike. The fact that I had to get changed in a whole room full of boys. Getting my Penis out in front of a group of Lads, yes lads, who had not started growing hair yet, was a nightmare. Having to shower with the same boys was humiliating.

I was not the smallest boy in the school. I had more than my fair share of hair, on my face and chest and genital area. I found boys attractive. Could it get any worse, at a time in my life where my hormones were doing somersaults, I had to get fucking undressed with guys, some of which I fancied, without becoming aroused; Couldn't do it. No way!

Results could be ugly. I saw one of the most popular guys in school, reduced to the most unpopular, within a matter of seconds, because he "Got an erection", in the showers at school. That was the warning for me to either blag my way out of Sports lessons, or where my sports kit underneath my school uniform, and certainly never to have a communal shower.

Peter unlike me was rather quieter, it always felt that there was something to hide, a secret of some sort. He, like myself, matured earlier. As time moved on, the three of us became very close indeed. We did all the usual things kids did, making pacts, promising never to forget one another, and saying we would always be there for one another. A strong bond existed between us, spending copious amounts of time together, getting to know each other inside and out.

I really should have never been surprised at the eventual outcome of our friendships. When people become close, they also become physically entwined. The emotional bond was there, we knew each other inside out. We knew each others tastes and habits. Eventually we also discovered sex. Not sex as I would call it now, but physical experimentation.

We explored each others bodies, comparing each to our own. Were we different, what were the similarities? Touching and feeling each other, like a child exploring his new toy. I remember how bad I felt, the first time something happened. I did feel dirty. It didn't feel right, what on earth was a doing.

We had had sex education at school. One must remember this was the nineteen eighties. Sex discussions began with a flower and pollination, and virtually ended in the same way. There was little or no discussion about safe sex, contraception or sex between two people of the same sex. It was sadly at that time outlawed.

What I was doing was wrong in my eyes. It couldn't be natural for two men to be sexually close, especially becoming aroused at the sight of another mans body. I knew sex should be between a man and a woman, and was experienced for the pro creation of children at least. So what was I doing?

School became a nightmare for me. I was always scared that someone would find out what I was doing, and that is something I really did not want to happen. It was beginning to get too close to home for me literally. I was a local lad, born and bred in a tiny village, where everyone, knew everyone else. Both my Maternal and Paternal families resided no more than half a mile from me. My brother, who was four years younger than me, also went to the same school, as did my adopted uncle, who was in the same year as me at school, being the same age.

My brother is different, even today we do not get on. This was especially noticeable when we were younger. Luke is a sportsman, a straight bloody Cricket, Football, everything playing sportsman, and proud of it. He mixes in circles that I can only describe as "Straight Dominated", full of like minded matey lads, slapping each other on the back, congratulating each other by downing fifty pints of beer in a night. These were not the type of people I would choose to be in the company of. If my brother ever found out what I had been up to, I would probably be strung up to the nearest lamp post. The sort of thing Rugby playing lads get up to, but with out the friendly undertones. Ouch!

Then there was my adopted uncle. My mothers' family are what you might call "old school". They are very old fashioned in their approach to most things in life. To be honest they are throw backs from the nineteen fifties. My Grandmother had never worked, where my grandfather works even today in his eighties. He enjoys all forms of hunting, from Fox to Pheasant. His son, my uncle was cut from the same cloth. He was the son my Grandad always wanted, having four daughters, they were inseparable. My uncle referred to women, gays, blacks, indeed anyone different in negative ways. That was something I had picked up on from a very early age.

Before my family knew I was gay, I used to spend a lot of time at my maternal Grandparents, I loved them dearly, especially my Gran. My mother would always go to her house on a Saturday Afternoon. We would all sit around the breakfast bar in the kitchen. I say we, what I really mean to say is "The Women", would always congregate together; My Aunty who lived next door, My Aunts who lived further along the road, and any other female person who just happened to pass through that day. They, including me, would spend the next three hours gossiping, talking about the price of this that and the other, and what so and so was up to at the moment.

Occasionally Politics would creep into the conversation. This was rare, since all the family were True Blue Tories, except my mother and indeed my father who were very politically aware and staunch Labour supporters. Politics for Granddad, especially, were extremely racist, homophobic and deeply hurtful. I saw my mother reduced to tears on several occasions, and used it as a warning in later life to avoid this side of my family. I suppose you could call it self preservation in a way.

Politics, or things loosely defined as such were a male pastime in their household, and only male family members were really allowed to contribute, including my uncle. He spoke as eloquently as my Grandfather, about the need for "*Tight regulation of immigration*", and the "*Scurge of Homosexuality in society*". These harsh, unforgiving, nasty words were forever ingrained in my mind. I dreamed of my Granddad and uncle trying me in court, and how the only sentence could be DEATH.

Four years of sheer hell, the best way to describe secondary school. I have never asked either my uncle or brother if they ever knew what I got up to, although I have my suspicions. They must have known.

Children and teenagers are practically good at reading others. I guess there must have been certain characteristics that I, as a young gay man portrayed. The way I walked, talked or even the things I said. I myself never noticed anything different about me, just the fact I liked men, and that in my view was personal and private to me, and anyway no one else knew the way I felt. Maybe I was naive to think that others had no idea of my sexuality, but with hindsight they must have done.

It started with the odd name being used towards me. *Gay, Poof, Queer*. The sort of thing, I am well used to today. Then it was different. The words were harsh and offensive. They pierced right through my skin, leaving their mark on me. I suppose the name calling just helped me harden up. This was just the beginning, the rest of my life would consist of such things, and worse.

The name calling went on for years, during my time at school. Most of the time, I just shrugged and walked away. At heart I am a pacifist, always avoiding conflict where possible. Reacting against these idiots would just add fuel to their fire, and I really did not want that. I just wanted to get on with School and get the hell out of there. Other times, I did not react so well, and ended up hurt physically, or indeed hurting someone else. It just depended on how I felt, the way I reacted.

It was at this time, when I was about thirteen that I took up smoking. My Nan used to give me a handwritten note asking for a packet of *twenty Cadet's*, I used to take it down to the Newsagents in the parade of shops near her house. The shop assistant would dutifully hand over the offending packet, telling me to give my Nan her regards. Oh what a ruckus there would be today. Police called, Court Action and a substantial fine. How different things were then. Are things better today.....I doubt it!

Thanking the lady behind the counter, who was probably related in some way.....(Mum had a newspaper cutting in her purse, in which it describes our family as the biggest in Hampshire during the 1950s).....I would endeavour to take the Cigarettes back to my nan, stopping to buy a packet of "*Candy Fags*" on the way, with some pennies Nan had given me.

Handing over the cigarettes, I would always wonder what they actually tasted like. Strawberry, Chocolate, may be sherbet and fizzy like those space hopper sweets. My Maternal Grandmother, was always immaculate. She was a large lady, with Grey Blue hair, perfect make up and nails, dressed beautifully, with a string of pearls, glittering rings, and she always wore high heel shoes, ALWAYS! She would open her cigarettes, with her shiny manicured hands, her ring catching me in the eye as she did so. It was so graceful, the way she took the first cigarette out, placed it in her hands and lit it. I remember how much I loved the smell that emanated from the packet. Rich and strong, of course at that point I had not had a puff yet.

Smoking for me at first was a way of becoming more accepted by others. The fact that I had a cigarette in my hand tended to deter a lot of people from chastising me for being gay. Smoking also had a calming effect. School days, especially in the later half were stressful, not only because of my homosexuality, but also exams and targets. The humble white stick helped me cope with that. Sadly I also helped my addictive personality become further addicted, something else to hold on to.

I did continue to get into fights, especially towards my late teens. Getting hit by a brick to the side of the head was one such incident. Whilst walking to a shop during my lunch break, a group of people, mainly girls oddly, started to taunt me. Here we go again I thought. Again it always amazed me how these people knew. I was in no mood for a fight, so I walked straight through the middle of them. They jostled and pushed me all the way to the shop door. We do young people have a habit of hanging around shop door ways? I made my way inside and bought a newspaper. I waited inside for a while, hoping they would just go away. No such luck! Fuck it I thought, I'll make a run for it.

I peered cautiously around the right hand side of the door. They were all chatting about who they were going to beat up next. Looking to the left, and then right again, I legged it. One of the girls must have seen me. She screamed at the top of her voice,

"There he is, the fucking poof, is making a run for it"

"Poofs can't run", shouted another girl.

Then bang.....I must have gone out cold. When I woke up, there was an oldish man knelt down beside me. He must have shaken me, to get me up. The group of kids were gone, Only a brick beside me, and a sore head.

Even today No hair grows on my head where I had been hit. A reminder of bad times, I never told anyone what happened, I mean how could I.

School and I had a very strange relationship. On the one hand, I was always predicted to do well. Rarely off sick from school; I tried to knuckle down and get on with the tasks in hand. I would always have a clean school uniform, even though money was always tight at home. My tie would always be done up correctly, in a Windsor knot, my shoes were always polished, and I was a bit of a swat ware homework was concerned. It was always my brother who was a rebel, hanging around the wrong crowd. Like all things in life, it was never simple, for me anyway.

Today my brother has a wonderful career in teaching. Respected and looked up to, he has adjusted to adult life perfectly. I suppose I am envious of him for achieving all his goals at such a young age. Despite us never getting on well, that is putting it mildly. We tolerate one another. Our paths cross only once a year at Christmas, and even then we grate on each other with a passion.

Luke is completely different to me. He has blonde hair, blue eyes, athletic physique and a very "Straight" attitude towards life. He teaches sports at a college, his passion, even from a young age. Then there is me. I am dark haired like my mother, overweight, (at the moment). My weight has fluctuated from an anorexic eight stone, to obese seventeen stone. I jump from one diet to another, and when that gets to much to bare, I take diet pills to keep me thin. I am also a drop out. Since the age of eighteen, I have barely worked for five years.

Sometimes I will sit and try and pin point my failures. How and when they happened. There are too many to mention now, but they seem to haunt me. I constantly wish I could start my life again, just to see how different it could have been. When all is said and done, School was the route of my problems.

My parents, although intelligent people, never had the opportunity, of obtaining a decent education. Both failed their eleven plus exams, and went on to the obligatory Secondary Modern School, which is where they met one another, getting married in their teens, unheard of today. I know they wanted both Luke and I to do well, in a way achieving the things they couldn't.

I went to the local school, not having a choice in those days. The school itself was not the best in the County. It was situated in a predominately working class area, surrounded by a large council estate. My friends came from here, and although not rough on today's standards, they had low expectations. School was something they went to, when they had nothing else better to do.

None of this phased me in my early years. I dutifully attended school and did what I was told. Secondary school was harder to adjust to. There was enormous peer pressure to follow what the older brigade of pupils were doing; To fit in and not look or be out of place. Do as they do, or life would be difficult. If you face didn't fit you had had it.

For the first two years, although physically more mature than most of my friends, mentally I was still a very young child. As one fine teacher put it

“Darren is less productive and more obstructive”.

Today I would whole heartedly agree with that statement. It felt as though I was in the middle of a melting pot of kids, neither a rebel, nor a swat.

Your own sense of Identity is so important when you embark on a new venture, in a new school, full of alien procedures, rules and regulations. Identity was something I severely lacked. I really had no idea who I was. Puberty, growing up and lack of security were big factors in my bad behaviour.

Hiding from who I was; a daily chore. I always knew I was different from the other boys. I had more in common with the female fraternity. Confusion was so destructive in those years between eleven and twelve. I began to have feelings for other boys.

These were the years I began to write. I kept a diary religiously, every night. All of it was written in a bizarre code. Only I knew what I was saying. Thoughts and words mainly consisted of what I thought about this boy, or how another lad had looked at me in a favourable way. Dreams of what it would be like to hold someone who had the same feelings as me. More alarmingly for me at the time, were the dark thoughts. What was happening to me. Why am I so different to my friends? Why do this group and another hate me so much. I wanted so much to belong to something or someone, but it wasn't going to happen.

Being in the middle sucks, pushed and pulled in all directions. If you want to be apart of our gang, prove your worth. I was forever trying to satisfy someone elses whim and not my own. Inevitable proving ones self would get me into trouble. Taking the blame became a daily nightmare. Blaming me was easy. To be horror, it stuck. Darren is difficult, Darren is Immature, Darren is reckless. No regard for others, Should think before he speaks.

This must seem to you like self pity. You are probably right I never had to do anything I didn't want to. I certainly should not have let others push the blame for their failings on me; but then I think weakness was my downfall. I was to busy dealing with my strangulated emotions, to concentrate on being stronger.

"If I do what they say, they will not find out what I am about. Just be a doormat, and they will like me in the end"

As I know now, that would never be the case. I could not be all things to all men.

When I reached thirteen, I was becoming wiser. Still scared and frightened inside, but able to control my self more. Self control, was always a sore point with me, still is, and although it would never be my best attribute, I was learning at least.

By now I had my own friends, neither popular or not, just two mates who were more in tune with my thoughts. Christopher, Far more intelligent than I. He came from the "posh" side of the street. A high achiever, who was in all the top classes; He had his childish side as well, but it never affected his progress. He would listen intently to what was being taught in class. Feverishly taking down notes, understanding each word. The first in the class to raise a hand, questioning what had been said. Then there was me. Christopher's immature side. Sitting in the middle of the class room, looking directly in front of me, glazed expression, wishing for the bell to ring, an end to this horrible lesson. I would spend my time writing thoughts down on paper, about a story I wanted to write. I was a great people watcher, basing my characters on all those surrounding me. Same characteristics, same body language. Occasionally a wry smile would break through. Someone had said something that just stuck in my mind. It would make a great sketch for my next story.

There was one lesson I truly looked forward to. English. I excelled in a subject that allowed me to use my imagination. My English teacher, was a young guy, who I just happened to have a crush on. He was quiet an unassuming as a rule, but when the opportunity was there, he became this eloquent figure, articulating every word with such grace and thought. He encouraged my writing, even though it wasn't always appropriate. He enjoyed everything I wrote. Occasionally he would question what I had written, not quite able to understand the theory behind the paper. I would spend, what seemed like an age, explaining what I was saying. Well the way a thirteen year old does. Eventually he knew me all to well. He knew the mischievousness behind my words.

I always knew when he understood, he would give a sly wink, as if to say, only you and I know what you are saying. The stories I wrote, were always based around people in the class. Different names, titles and expressions, as though I was still writing in code. The personalities were always the same as the individual I was writing about. He knew that, and like me would have a chuckle to himself, when he knew who I was denegrating, or not as the case may be.

I learnt so much about me, and people during his tutorage. He began to bring out a confident side, that not even I knew I had. He actually liked me as a person. He adored my writing. He laughed when he was supposed to, and cursed when the opportunity arose. Strange really, he was the one teacher, that the other pupils enjoyed punishing. Self control was a big asset I had gained. So what if others took the piss, who cares. What matters is that you are happy with who you are. In a way I always felt that I knew something, anything that the persecutors didn't.

Two faced I hear you say. I would agree with that, but it was learning to survive. Funny though, because today I find two faced people abhorrent, and go out of my way to avoid them. Maybe because I was that person all those years ago, I knew what they were really thinking, or was that paranoia?

My other close friend was Pete, he came from a small village near the school. He was a rather odd choice for a friend. We were like chalk and cheese. He was into horses, country pursuits, hiking, that sort of thing. They were not on the school curriculum, and all the other sports that were on offer did not appeal to him, just like me. Peter was a very quiet unassuming boy. Always polite, please and thank you, took his shoes off before coming into my house. Good thing really, Dad being a fanatic where cleaning was concerned.

I don't really know if Peter was intelligent or not. If he was, he never showed it. He found school quite difficult, and counted the days to when he could leave. Peter and I became very close in all respects.

The later half of school crept up on me, at what seemed like a snails pace. The more I wanted it to be over, the longer it stretched. At fourteen we had to choose options to take in our final two years. As if a child at the age of fourteen knows what he or she wants to do for the rest of their life. Firstly I chose Business Studies. In those days there were no computers to speak of. Keyboard skills consisted of a typewriter, with a wooden cover over the keys. I never got the hang of typing this way, not being able to see the keys. It was torture.

Business theory was deep rooted in Thatcherite thought and processes. Success at any cost was a must. Individuality was the buzz word. You, I were important. Us and other such words were never used. It was a very greedy time, and the lessons of the time emphasised it. It was a subject that really set the pace for what I would follow in the future. I hated it with a passion towards the end. Mother and Father said it was the future, and would be the option I should take. So I duly followed their advice.

History was another subject I chose. Like my father I had a keen interest in Historical events, and politics. Sadly it was not what I had thought it would be. The only historical events taught were those in a modern context, after 1914. War, destruction, more war! Now I am not, nor have I ever been interested in war.

For me History was a more social thing. I was interested in Social History, fashions of the time, architecture and politics. I know history is full of wars and battles, but remembering the dates, times of battles was never hard for me. 1914 is of course part of our history, but Ancient History has the greatest pull for my thoughts and imagination.

Despite being disappointed with the subject as a whole, I carried on regardless, making the most of a bad situation, and anyway there were various vacations to look forward to, which came part and parcel with the course. Both Christopher and Peter were in my group, which helped me greatly. I had more confidence, during oral discussions and felt at ease in a situation, which on the whole I did not like. Making new friends was always difficult for me. I felt secure around those I knew best. Thankfully the worst elements of my year had not chosen to do a subject, that was intellectually challenging for them, and I could breath freely.

In 1986, we set sail for France. Our group began a week long tour of the battlefields in Belgium and France, including the Somme. I have to admit I was excited about going abroad for the first time, but downbeat at the thought of touring what were essentially graves. Of course I didn't know what to expect, and was presently surprised. We arrived in a small French town called Arras, near the France, Belgium Boarder. The hotel was typically french. Slightly tatty, paint flaking from the tall ornate French Doors. I shared a room was Christopher and Peter, overlooking the front street below.

For the first time we were all in a room together, in private. You can imagine my glee. We could finally be together, without the threat of other people seeing us. For some reason none of us got up to anything, and I really don't know why. We can the opportunity, and were in the right circumstances, and yet nothing happened. We were all fifteen or sixteen at the time, and time had moved on a lot, since those first days together, and for the first time, as young adults nearly, it didn't feel right.

It was at that stage, I believed that what we had done was neither wrong or immoral, it was just part of growing up. The fact that it was something we all grew out of was testimony to that. We were not having sex in the real sense of the word, but rather experiencing new pleasures. As teenagers, with hormones racing we really were going through a process that was alien to us. Feelings for other people. Feelings that were not always what society deemed responsible or "Normal". The more mature we get, the more our feelings may change. Maybe I wasn't gay after all, maybe it was just a phase I was going through?....Only time would tell.

The 1980s was a great time for most individuals. The country began to revive its self from what seemed like an unimaginable sleep. People felt proud to be British. They were not afraid to think about themselves, and money, and the various ways of making it QUICKLY was the buzz.

For me things were rather different. AIDS had arrived on the scene for the first time. People started to take notice of this deadly plague. The government also began a campaign of information. Every household received a leaflet entitled

"AIDS, DON'T DIE OF IGNORANCE"

The leaflet was "dark", grey in colour, and very direct and to the point. Phrases like:

"DON'T HAVE UNPROTECTED ANAL SEX" or:

"THERE IS NO KNOWN CURE", jumped out from the pages, scaring a generation of adults.

Then came the television campaign. This sort of thing had never be seen before. Public information films were not new. My mother spoke of the Cinema and Television campaigns of the early 1960s, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. This campaign was different. It was aimed at the individual, not the masses. It played on our fears, as never before. Sex, something, everyone did, was becoming a scary subject. The television campaign showed "AIDS" as a gravestone falling to the ground. An image that I shall never forget. It haunts me even today. I suppose the reader may think that is a good thing, and maybe in some respects it was.

The biggest question should be

“DID YOU HAVE SAFE SEX”.....The answer would have to be no. I had become so scared of catching HIV AIDS, that I thought my life was over. The campaign offered no hope at the time. To be honest that was a fair representation at the time. There was no cure, and life expectancy after full blown AIDS was diagnosed was a few years at best. There were no drugs to speak of, no combination therapy and no hope.

Schools were prevented from teaching their pupils about the epidemic. The plague was predominately a “GAY” disease, and homosexuality in schools was not allowed to be taught. I really can not put into words how I felt at this time. I had indeed done many of the things, leaflets had said was a no no. I could not go to anyone for advice. It was as though my final days were near, and I should just make the best of what I had left.

Experimentation led to real sex, with real people. Boys, men, old men, anyone really. Did I have a death wish? Not really, just a predisposition to the fate that I thought all gay men were heading for. If only I had been given more help and support, from teachers, peers, family and friends. It was just not forthcoming. Self destruction was the easy answer and I embraced it with all my will!

