

no. 65, April 2016

Play and Folklore



Olivia and the 'Cat and Mouse'

Growing Up in the East End



From the Editors

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In the last issue of *Play and Folklore* we published a preliminary notice about the National PLAY and PLAYwork conference, organised by Marc Armitage and the Malarkey team and held in Melbourne on 4-5 March 2016. This was the first national Australian play conference for many years, and attracted 550 delegates from around the country and overseas to attend sessions on play in early childhood, nature play, 'loose parts' play, play as therapy, play and child development, play theory and the design of play spaces. Two of the editors of *Play and Folklore* contributed to the conference, June Factor as a keynote speaker with her presentation 'Play From a Historic Perspective: the Folklore of Play', and Judy McKinty talking about 'Children's Folklore and Traditional Games: the "Other" Kind of Play'. Congratulations to Marc and the Malarkey team on a successful, well-organised and playful conference.

Regular readers of *Play and Folklore* might remember a story we published in issue no. 55, April 2011, about the 'Cat and Mouse', a strange piece of playing equipment at Princes Hill Primary School, in an inner suburb of Melbourne. The origin of this singular play structure was a mystery until now. In this issue, the story of how and why this playground was created is finally told. It is the moving story of Olivia, the little girl for whom the playground was built.

Also in this issue is an interview with one of Australia's finest singers of traditional and contemporary folk songs, Danny Spooner, about growing up in the East End of London during the Second World War. This interview is one of a series by Gwenda Davey, who spoke with well-known Australians about their childhood experiences for the 'Talking Chair' audio exhibit in the *You're It* exhibition of children's traditional games, which opened in the Children's Museum, Melbourne in 1988.

Gwenda Beed Davey, June Factor and Judy McKinty

Play and Folklore

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Olivia's playground - now the 'Cat and Mouse'. Photographer: Judy McKinty.

Olivia and the 'Cat and Mouse'

Judy McKinty

In *Play and Folklore* no. 55, April 2011, we published a story about a strange piece of playing equipment at Princes Hill Primary School, in an inner suburb of Melbourne. The children at the school called it the 'Cat and Mouse' after the chasing game they played there. This game, with its well-established rules and lore, and its symbiotic relationship with the curved wood-and-metal structure, had become one of the enduring playground traditions at the school, passed on from child to child over the years and, at the time, completely unknown to the teachers. Everyone accepted that the structure had been part of the school for a long time, but its origin was a mystery. I had not seen anything like it at any other school I'd visited, and nobody could tell me why it had been constructed. In the article, *The 'Cat and Mouse'*, I wrote: 'Its original purpose is still a mystery – perhaps it was meant to be used exactly as it is being used now, for play'.¹ Five years and 10 issues later, the unique and moving story of why this play structure was built can be told, and it can now be said that this guess was not so far removed from the reality.

Originally, the play structure was not called the 'Cat and Mouse'. It wasn't called anything – it was simply the place where a little girl named Olivia could spend time in the playground and be with her friends. Olivia is the reason the play structure is there.

Olivia Havyatt started at Princes Hill Primary School in July, 1982, when she was five-and-a-half years old.² She was a gifted, creative child,³ who loved to draw imaginative pictures and write stories from a very young age.⁴ At the time she became a student at Princes Hill, she was also undergoing an unimaginable challenge in her young life – Olivia had been diagnosed with a very rare condition called dermatomyositis, an auto-immune disease that usually affects middle-aged adults⁵ and very rarely presents in children.⁶ Myositis Association Australia's description of the degenerative nature of the disease is heart-breaking, particularly when it applies to one so young:

The seriousness of these diseases lies in the fact that the body's inflammatory response is turned against us causing our autoimmune system to attack and destroy our own muscle tissue. Once gone the muscle cannot be regenerated (although there are research studies working on this) and over time this can result in a progressive and cumulative loss of muscle that leads to a state of weakness and disability. In rare instances with some of the diseases remission can occur.⁷



Olivia Havyatt as a student at Princes Hill Primary School.

The physical challenges presented to Olivia throughout the school day were enormous – her weakness and fragility meant that she had great difficulty in sitting, standing and moving about without assistance. She eloquently described her condition to the then Victorian Minister for Education, Robert Fordham, when he visited Princes Hill Primary School in 1985, to launch the Victorian government's policy on the integration of children with disabilities into mainstream education.⁸ The conversation was reported in *The Age* newspaper:

Olivia Havyatt hates having a fuss made of her, but yesterday it was unavoidable. The Minister for Education, Mr. Fordham, had come to Princes Hill Primary School to talk about disabled children attending normal schools and the eight-year-old child reluctantly found herself the centre of attention.

She handled it with a grace and maturity beyond her years, patiently explaining her disabilities, the name of her disease and what it had done to her body. 'I've got dermatomyositis – it's a difficult word to spell. Here, I'll write it for you', she said taking pencil and paper. 'It makes my muscles weak'.

'Do you want to know how it happened? I wasn't born with it. When I was little my white blood cells – they're the ones that kill disease, they went crazy and started to eat my muscles. So I can't run or hop or skip or jump or get up from the floor without help or go up and down steps unless they are this big', she said, holding her fingers a few centimetres apart...

Seated in the corridor for the interview, Olivia seemed philosophical about her disability. She knew it precluded her from a future requiring physical exertion, but she was proud of her talents and knew these would compensate. 'I want to be a writer or illustrator – I write faster and neater than the others – I'm not boasting – it's because when I was little I was in hospital a lot and all I could do was write...'

Pleased to escape the limelight, Olivia returned to her classroom, gleeful at the news that she had missed a maths test, and was just in time to hear a story being read by her teacher...⁹

Before the 1980s, it was thought that children with severe disabilities were best educated and cared for in separate 'special' schools,¹⁰ but by the time Olivia started school attitudes were beginning to change, albeit slowly. The Victorian Education Department's Annual Report for 1981-82 included the following comment:

*The acceptance of children with severe disabilities into the regular classroom, with appropriate support, is indicative of changing teacher and community attitudes towards the disabled.*¹¹

In 1982, Olivia's first year at Princes Hill, the Education Department had no formal policy for the integration of children with special needs into mainstream schools, and the educational services provided for children with disabilities were 'ad hoc and fragmented'.¹² Despite this, Olivia's parents wanted her to lead a normal life, and felt strongly that she should be able to attend the local primary school.¹³ At Princes Hill there was a School Council which had an Integration Sub-committee, although parents of children with disabilities often found it necessary to call on the additional support of advocates, who negotiated on their behalf, to try to obtain the necessary funding or materials which would enable their children to participate in everyday school activities.¹⁴ Silvana Scibilia, a close friend of the Havyatt family, was an advocate for people with disabilities and their families, and also a Princes Hill parent. Silvana was instrumental in the establishment of a functioning integration program at the school, from which Olivia and other children benefitted throughout their school years.¹⁵

During her time at Princes Hill, Olivia had the assistance of an integration aide, at that time funded through the Commonwealth Schools Commission.¹⁶ The critically important role of her aide, and the challenges Olivia faced at school, are described in the following letter she wrote in November 1986, in response to the threat of funding cuts, to the then Victorian Minister for Education, Ian Cathie:¹⁷

Dear Mr. Cathy,
Hello. My name is Olivia Havyatt and I'm nine years old. I go to Princes Hill Primary School three days a week and Yooralla Glenroy two days a week. I have a disease that is very rare called Dermatomyositis. It makes my joints stiff and my muscles weak, so I need my aide...to help me at play, sport, excursions, etc.

So when I heard that [she] might not come next year I was very worried. I will probably be going four days a week to school next year and will need [her] more. Here are the reasons I think I need [my aide] to help me:

A. AT MORNING RECESS, LUNCH AND AFTERNOON RECESS

- 1.) Because the playground is very crowded and I get easily bumped because I can't run or dodge or walk fast and bumping hurts me more than other kids, as my skin is delicate.
- 2.) If some kid knocks me and I fall over I can't get up without [her] and would get hurt more than other kids my age would. My bones are brittle too.
- 3.) I can get around more with [her] as my safe-guard against misdirected balls, kids, etc.

B. EXCURSIONS

- 1.) I'm too slow and usually [she] gets going with me before others and can pay attention to me. If [she] was absent then a teacher of about thirty or more children could not pay much needed attention to me.
- 2.) [My aide] makes sure I'm not jostled or bumped, and gets me a good view of things. She makes sure I have a seat I can use comfortably.

C. SPORT

- A. If I can't do it I don't just watch, [my aide] takes me inside to do my own special exercises. So I get exercise too.
- B. [She] makes sure I'm not knocked, jostled, hit, bumped, etc.
- C. [She] lets me do sport to the best of my abilities.

Now I don't know weather those are good reasons to you or not. Mr. Fordham [Victoria's previous Minister for Education] visited me last year and was greatly in favour of intergration aides - so why are you not doing it now????

Yours sincerely,
Olivia Havyatt

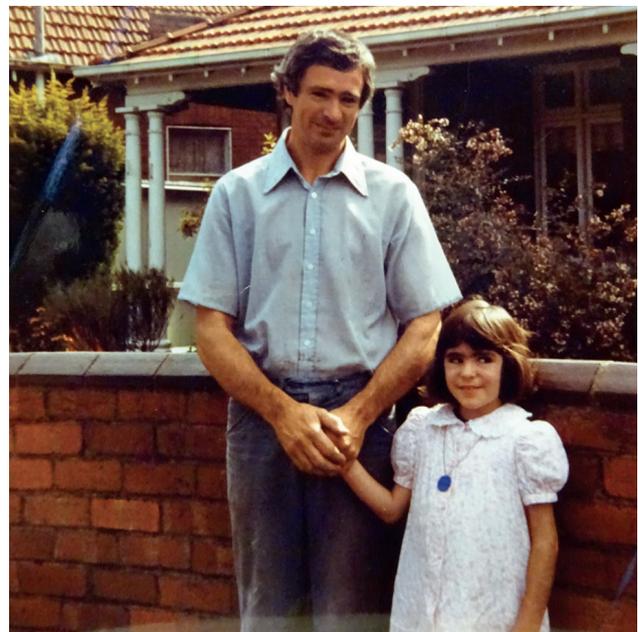
Recess and lunch breaks were particularly hazardous for Olivia – outside in the schoolyard she was especially vulnerable to being bumped or knocked over by other children as they ran about and charged past her, playing Tiggy and other fast-moving games with their friends. When Olivia started at Princes Hill in 1982, her mother, Luisa, expressed her concern about how her daughter would cope outside in the playground, and that is when her friend, Maggie Edmond, ‘stepped up to the plate’.¹⁸

Maggie Edmond is a founding partner of the Melbourne-based firm Edmond and Corrigan, one of Australia’s foremost architectural practices.¹⁹ Maggie’s children also attended Princes Hill, and she remembers the early 1980s as a time of increasing awareness of special needs and inclusion: ‘It was at a time when the government schools were nurturing children that had disabilities – welcoming them into the school more than they had been previously, and ensuring that they were well integrated within the school’.²⁰ In 1982, two years before the Department’s integration policy was launched, the school put in a submission²¹ and obtained a grant through the Victorian Education Department ‘to design and build a piece of playing equipment for Olivia where she could move around, and at the same time would be engaging to her friends to come and play too’.²²

On 20 January 1983 an inspector from the Public Works Department visited the school, and the building of Olivia’s playground became the South Central Regional Office’s Project No. 49, under the Minor Building Works program.²³ Twice in February Olivia’s parents, Luisa and Richard, met with Maggie Edmond to discuss the project, and from these discussions Maggie created her imaginative design, which grew out of Olivia’s need for support when moving around:

So the reason it was like that was because she couldn’t walk without the aid of something to hold her up... The design enabled her to hold on to the rails and move along. She could swing and she could go like this, so that was why it had this convoluted form, and she was able to access every part of it unaided, just by hanging on to the rails. Her friends could be with her and doing whatever they wanted to do at the same time, and play the games with her...

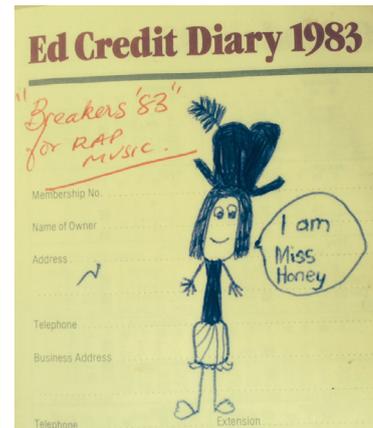
I think I would have just sat down and had Olivia in the back of my mind, and felt that if she was going to have something like this [that] she’d enjoy, she’d enjoy the curves, she’d enjoy the freedom of it, the open-ended quality of it, plus the embracing curve, but that would have come intuitively...at the time I was thinking as a mother, I was thinking how children played...And the site probably affected the design too – the way it sat in the treed landscape that was there...²⁴



Olivia with her father, Richard. This photo was taken in 1984, the year after the playground was built.



Olivia with Robert Fordham, Victorian Minister for Education, at the launch of the integration policy in 1985. Photograph: Fairfax Syndication.



One of Olivia's drawings on the front page of her mother's diary for 1983, the year the playground was built. Miss Honey is a character in the Roald Dahl story *Matilda*.

Olivia Havyatt was 'the first pupil at the school for whom disabled ramps and other facilities were acquired'.²⁵ The extraordinary play structure that the children at Princes Hill Primary School now call the 'Cat and Mouse' was created for a very particular purpose, and designed for a particular type of physical play, for a child with a severe physical disability. It was a special, unique piece of play equipment, built so that she could have some degree of participation in play with her friends.

Over time, the curved steel rails have become polished by generations of little hands rubbing along them, and Olivia's playground has a new element – a game that has grown out of the structure. No-one knows how or when the game of 'Cat and Mouse' began – it may have even been played while Olivia was at the school – but now every part of the configuration has a name and a meaning, and a rule that tells the players what can and cannot happen there – and these rules have been made up by the children themselves.²⁶ Maggie Edmond says, 'Had there been a brief, which was the game of

"Cat and Mouse", it would probably have been completely different. It's just extraordinary – the game has been tailored to something that was a very special piece of equipment'.²⁷

Olivia's playground is one of the most perfect structures for imaginative play that I've seen, because it is just itself. It doesn't pretend to be a boat or a cave – it doesn't pretend to be anything – and, unlike much of the play equipment found in schools and parks, there is no overt design element or decorative feature to suggest this. It's just a structure which allows the children to put the layer of their imaginations on top of it, and then use it for their own purpose. Over the years, the children have expanded the possibilities for play within its curves and given it a new life.



Olivia dressed as a punk.

Olivia Havyatt lived until she was 16 years old. She died of cancer on 25 October 1993. Although her body was fragile she had a strong voice, particularly through her writing: 'Her voice as a human being was very, very powerful. Very powerful, and not the physical fact of her voice, but just what she had to say, and her opinions...she was a force to be reckoned with, really'.²⁸ Two months before she died, Olivia wrote a poignant story about herself and her condition. This story won the Age-Australian Medical Association essay prize for 1993.²⁹ The announcement was published in *The Age* on 17 November 1993, a month after she died, and Olivia's essay, titled *Swim Blind, Swim See* was published a week later.³⁰ These are some of Olivia's words:

My life has undergone an entire transformation within two weeks. I have felt the blackest, cruellest despair dissipate, as clouds of tangerine fairy floss fly into the wind on a hot summer's night, and a strangely beautiful acceptance enters my mind. My name is Olivia and the story of my 16 years of life is unusual, to say the least. I'm not going to try to be pretentious or wonderfully poetic as I speak to others. I love the beauty and complexity of writing and this is my voice. Please listen – I need to tell someone...

This time, the cancer is incurable, and although doctors are always very hesitant to predict exactly, because cancer is such a cunning and unpredictable snake, I probably only have 18 months to live. Everyone hears about miracle cures, and perhaps – there is a very small chance – I can go into remission or maybe even be cured. Hope lives within me – I am fighting every step of the way, but with realism and acceptance. This is the centre of my story – I didn't fall in a heap because I'm going to spend the rest of my life living, and trying to make others and especially myself – believe in the power of life and love.

Our soul never dies, and when I am living my new life, I will be loving every one of my family and friends just as much.

Sometimes, in my blindness, I have hurt others. I have screamed hate and fear and shame, and poisoned any love others tried to give me.

Cold, like a mean grey stone sending out self-pity and maudlin morbidity when I should have been telling people I love and care for you more than you know. I have had to grow up very fast, and I am very grateful that I could summon the maturity, clarity and insight not to sink when there is an ocean of life calling me, waiting for me...

Even though my body is weak, and I lie in a hospital bed with a drip in my thin, mottled hand, being given the dreaded chemotherapy, my mind and heart remain strong.

I accept myself, and accept that life does not have to be long to be beautiful.

I tried to swim, and nearly drowned. My lungs caught fire, but the fire became a lamplight to the stars. My body grew light and free, and a pure clean water washed away my fear and made me whole.

Now I swim towards a new life, and I am no longer afraid. Swim with me.³¹



Children playing 'Cat and Mouse' in 2010. The ramp in the background was also designed for Olivia by Maggie Edmond.
Photographer: Judy McKinty.

Olivia's playground stands at Princes Hill Primary School as a kind of legacy handed down to the children who have followed her. It has become a unique example of the close relationship that can develop between play and place, and evidence of change and continuity in the children's play traditions. I can only repeat my concluding remarks from the article I wrote five years ago:

The 'Cat and Mouse' is, as far as I know, unique... It is a valuable and irreplaceable play resource at the school and has a strong presence among the school's traditions. If there was a National Register for the preservation of historically significant play equipment, this would be a fine example to add to the list.³²

I am deeply grateful to Luisa Havyatt, Maggie Edmond and Silvana Scibilia for sharing their memories of Olivia and the creation of the 'Cat and Mouse' with me, and to Esme Capp, Principal of Princes Hill Primary School, for granting me access to the school archive.

Judy McKinty is an independent children's play researcher and a co-editor of Play and Folklore.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Judy McKinty, 'The 'Cat and Mouse', *Play and Folklore* no. 55, April 2011, 24.
- ² Princes Hill Primary School Pupil's Register, No. 7, 80/88–82/145, entry number 82/137.
- ³ Silvana Scibilia, pers. comm.
- ⁴ Luisa Havyatt, pers. comm.
- ⁵ Myositis Association Australia, *Dermatomyositis Info*. <http://myositis.org.au/dermatomyositis-info/> (viewed 10/2/2016)
- ⁶ Myositis Association Australia, *Incidence*. <http://myositis.org.au/incidence/> (viewed 10/2/2016)
- ⁷ Myositis Association Australia, *What is Myositis?* <http://myositis.org.au/what-is-myositis-2/> (viewed 10/2/2016)
- ⁸ Victoria. Ministerial Review of Educational Services for the Disabled, *Integration in Victorian education: report of the Ministerial Review of Educational Services for the Disabled*, (Melbourne: Office of the Director-General, 1984)
- ⁹ Barbara Fih, 'Why a disabled girl likes going to school', *The Age*, 1 March 1985.
- ¹⁰ Max Angus, Harriet Olney, John Ainley, *In The Balance: the future of Australia's primary schools*, Australian Primary Principals Association, 2007, 2. <http://www.appa.asn.au/reports/In-the-balance.pdf> (downloaded 10/2/2016)
- ¹¹ Victorian Education Department, Education Department Annual Report 1981-82, (Melbourne: F.D. Atkinson, Government Printer) 1983, 43. <http://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/papers/govpub/VPARL1982-85No100.pdf> (viewed 10/2/2016)
- ¹² Victorian Auditor-General's Office, *Special Report No 17, Integrated Education for Children with Disabilities*, (Melbourne: L.V. North, Government Printer) May 1992, 22.
- ¹³ Luisa Havyatt, pers. comm.
- ¹⁴ Silvana Scibilia, pers. comm.
- ¹⁵ *ibid*.
- ¹⁶ Australian Government: ComLaw, *Commonwealth Schools Commission Act 1973*, Section 13: Functions of Commission, 4(c). <https://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/C2004C06603> (viewed 10/2/2016)
- ¹⁷ Olivia Havyatt, letter to Ian Cathie, Tuesday, 25 November, 1986. Copy in possession of author. Letter is published as originally written, except for removing the name of Olivia's aide.
- ¹⁸ Luisa Havyatt, pers. comm.
- ¹⁹ Houses Awards 16, Jury: *Maggie Edmond*. <http://www.housesawards.com.au/pages/jury/maggie-edmond> (viewed 13 February, 2016)
- ²⁰ Maggie Edmond, pers. comm.
- ²¹ Luisa Havyatt, diary entry, 1983.
- ²² Maggie Edmond, pers. comm.
- ²³ Luisa Havyatt, diary entry, 20 January 1983. Author's note: Documentation of this minor project was not found among Public Works Department records or in the Princes Hill Primary School archive. Subsequent information suggests that only Major Building Works documentation was archived.
- ²⁴ Maggie Edmond, pers. comm.
- ²⁵ Princes Hill Primary School Archive, Photo Album F: Photo Series Sheet – Series no. 88, Photo no. 1, 1984.
- ²⁶ See Judy McKinty, 'The 'Cat and Mouse', *Play and Folklore* no. 55, April 2011, 25-26 for a description of the rules of 'Cat and Mouse'.
- ²⁷ Maggie Edmond, pers. comm.
- ²⁸ Luisa Havyatt, pers. comm.
- ²⁹ Denis Muller, 'A young girl dies, swim with her words', *The Age*, 17 November 1993, 1. <http://newsstore.fairfax.com.au/>
- ³⁰ Olivia Havyatt, 'Swim Blind, Swim See', *The Age - Education Age*, 23 November 1993, 35. <http://newsstore.fairfax.com.au/apps>
- ³¹ The full text of Olivia's essay can be found at: <https://year11re.wikispaces.com/file/view/Swim%20blind%20Swim%20See.pdf/575663129/Swim%20blind%20Swim%20See.pdf>
- ³² Judy McKinty, 'The 'Cat and Mouse', *Play and Folklore* no. 55, April 2011, 26.



Growing up in the East End

Danny Spooner

Danny Spooner was born in the East End of London just before the Second World War, and grew up with the traditions, music and folklore of a typical working-class Cockney family. A singer of traditional and contemporary folk songs, his passion is the expression of British and Australian culture through folk music. He is regarded as 'the foremost traditional singer in Australia'.¹ On 18 October 1988, Gwenda Davey interviewed Danny about his London childhood for the 'Talking Chair' exhibit in the *You're IT!* exhibition at the Children's Museum, Melbourne. This is an edited transcript of the interview. Our thanks to Danny for permission to publish the interview, and for his help with corrections to the transcript.

DS: I'm Danny Spooner. I was born in the East End of London – a place called Stepney, very near the docks – in 1936, and I was brought up as a young child in that area, and of course that was also the period of time of the Second World War. Living in the dock area of course we saw quite a lot of action, because one of the things that the Germans wished to do was to bomb the area, to try and 'fix up' the docks because that was the trade area, so we got bombed out a couple of times, as did lots of other people in our area.

But it was a great time to grow up because we spent a *lot* of time in air raid shelters... There were air raid shelters at school, and every now and again the air raid signal would go off and all the kids'd go flying out of the class. Well, not flying actually – there were fairly orderly arrangements for getting down to the air raid shelters, which were normally underground, and the thing was, you could be down there for hours on end, so it was necessary to make up things to do to occupy your time. Usually with school we sat around telling stories, or the teachers told us stories, or we had discussions or little things like that to occupy our time. And when you were down there with your parents and the other people in the street, there were usually games.



Singing played a pretty important role, in fact in the air raid shelter in *our* street we had a piano, and that was constantly being bashed by somebody, and we'd all join in the choruses of the old favourites, and as a young kid I learnt quite a lot of songs from that time.

So although it was pretty frightening and all the rest of it, it *was* a good time to grow up. People were very friendly to each other, and kids were very friendly to each other, and of course we had our games. We used to have street fights and competitions, and I remember hopscotch and marble competitions. We used to play on the streets, and other gangs would come over and we'd challenge them to a marble competition, and all of that sort of stuff, which was usually good.

Most of the games had songs to them in some way or another. I can't remember terribly much, but for example when you picked, if it was going to be Tag, you know, in a game, you all stood round in a circle and you held your two fists up, and then they did this counting-out, and the last one left they'd go: 'One potato, two potato, three potato, four, five potato, six potato, seven potato, *more*', and if he tapped your hand on the 'more', you put that one hand behind your back, and he'd go round again until only one person was left in the middle, and whoever was left in the middle was the 'tag'.

And we used to play 'Knock Down Ginger' a lot...we used to be a bit of a nuisance to all the people from miles around, because we'd knock on people's front doors and run away. That was (laughs) you know, that was pretty horrendous. But the other one which we used to do, which was rather like that, we'd tie a piece of cotton across the street from one knocker to another. We'd knock the first one and they'd come out and open the door, and in opening the door they would knock the one across the road, and so (laughs) you had these people go backwards and forwards to the front doors. If they caught you they gave you a bashing of course, which was customary at the time, but that was good fun.

We played a game called 'Hi Jimmy Knacker' which I really liked, which was played up against the wall. One fella stood with his back against the wall, with two teams, and then all the others bent, and made like an animal's back, and one behind the other. Then the other team had to hop or leapfrog onto the backs and get right away along until they're all *on* there, and their job was to try and break the horse or whatever it was, and the horse's job was to throw you off, and you could only hold on with your legs, and that was great...You used to get broken arms, and things like that was standard.

And 'Tip Cat' was a good one, where you had a piece of wood about six inches long, pointed at each end, and that stood on the ground and you hit it with another stick at one end, and it caused it to spin up in the air, and then you clouted it down the road. Whoever was 'tag' had to run after it and get it and by the time he's got it you're all supposed to have hidden, and it was his job to find you, and it's just a beginning to a game of Hide-and-Seek really, and it was good fun.

And we had a good ball game which we used to call 'Kinky', where you were tagged with a ball. They could throw the ball at you, and had to hit you between the shoulder and the knee. You could protect yourself with your fists, or you could punch the ball away, or you could catch the ball between your two closed fists and hold the ball yourself or with your team. You had to prevent the other team from getting it, because as each person was tagged they went onto the other team. And the real skill of that game was it started off with a wicket, up

against the wall, of short sticks about six inches long, and you built this wicket against the wall, and you threw a ball and broke it, and then it was your job as the team to rebuild that, before they tagged you all. So it was a smashing sort of game.

And...you know, there was lots of 'Nyar, nyar, nyar, nyar' type of things going on and so you had rhymes like: 'Sticks and stones'll break my bones but names will never hurt me', and things like that – that was common.

And we used to speak in rhyming slang a lot, which is common to that area of England. Rhyming slang was made up by costermongers who were fruit and vegetable people, and it was their way of communicating with each other so that the customers didn't know what they were talking about. Mind, it didn't take long for the customers to get onto it, and it became a sort of a language.

And there were songs written in that – there's a song called, say, 'Totty', which goes: [Danny sings, to the tune of 'I was walking down the street one day, in the merry, merry month of May']:

'As she walked along the street, on her little plates of meat [feet],
And the summer sunshine falling on her golden Barnet Fair [hair],
Bright as angels from the skies, was her dark brown mutton pies [eyes],
Through me east and west [chest] and Cupid shot his shaft and left it there.
She had a Grecian I suppose [nose], and of Hampstead Heath [teeth] two rows,
In her sunny south [mouth] that glistened like two pretty strings of pearls.
Down on me bread and cheese [knees],
I did a drop of murmur: 'Please
Be me storm and strife [wife] dear Totty, oh you darlingest of gels'.
But then a bow-wow [dog] by her side, which 'til then in vain had tried,
A Jenny Lee [flea] to banish that was on its Jonah's whale [tail],
Give an hydrophobia bark, she said: 'What a Noah's Ark' [lark],
And right through me rank and riches [britches] did his cribbage pegs [legs] assail.

'Ere a bulldog I did stop, she had called a ginger pop [cop],
Who said: 'What the Henry Merrill [what the devil] do you think you're doin' now?',
And I heard as off I slunk: 'Why the fellow's jumbo's trunk' [drunk],
And the Walter Joyce [voice] was Totty's with the lovely Barnet Fair [hair].'

Now that's a sort of *love* song if you've got a warped sense of humour.

There was another language that was spoken in that area, was called 'thieves' cant', and it was criminal, underworld language, and there were songs in that too, the sort of (sings):

'Understand if you please, I'm a travelling thief,
And the gonophs [colleagues] they call me the gypsy,
On the rattler [train] I ride, when I've taken me brief [done the job],
And I slings on me back an old kipsie [sack].
If I pipe a good chat [hear info], why I touch for a wedge [cut away],
But I'm not a 'particular' robber,
I'll smug [steal] any snowy [linen] I sees on the hedge,
And I ain't above daisies [boots] and clobber [clothes].
One day I'd a spree wiv two fins [£5 notes] in me brigh [pocket],
And a toy and a tackle [watch and chain], both red 'uns [gold],
And a spark prop [diamond thief], a pal, a good screwsman and I
Had touch in fer working two dead 'uns [using skel-eton keys].
I was taking a ducket [ticket] to get back to town, (I'd come on the rattler [train] from Dover),
When I spied as a reeler [policeman] was roastin' me brown [staring],
And he rapped [said]: 'I will just turn you over' [search you].
Well I guyed [gave false name] but the reeler, he give me hot beef [stop thief!],
And a scuff [crowd] come around me and hol-lered,

I pulled out a chive [knife] but I soon come to grief,
 And wiv the screws and the james [burglary tools] I was collared.
 I got fullied [tried] and then got three stretch [years] for the job,
 And me trip [girl] cussed the day that I seen her.
 She sold off me home [belongings] to some pals in her mob,
 For a couple of foont [sovereigns] and ten deener [ten bob].
 Well it's doomies [girls] an 'omies [boys] what gives me the spur [annoy]
 Is, I's told be a mug (he tells whoppers) [lies],
 That I ought to 'ave greased [paid] to have kept out of stir [jail],
 The dooks [hands] of the narks [informers] and the coppers [police]!²

(Laughs) They're a smashing sort of song.

But there were lots of little rhymes, and I can't remember terribly many. Oh there was things like: 'March winds and April showers, fill the merry May with flowers', and at that period of the year, in March and April, we'd get winds, and rain, and bright sunshine, rather like Melbourne does round about October time, and that was our little rhyme about the flowers coming in the Spring.

Oh, Guy Fawkes, there were things about Guy Fawkes – we used to go around, we'd make a Guy and stuff it – old pair of trousers and shirts and things we'd blagged from somewhere, and stuff him full of paper and all the rest of it – take him around and we'd *beg*, you know: 'Penny for a Guy, sir? Penny for a Guy, mister?' And the idea was that you would put all your money together that you got for the Guy, and buy fireworks for a month or so before firework night, on a bit of old bombsite usually, because there were lots of bombsites around London at that time. Over a couple of months you'd build this enormous bonfire, and Guy would get chucked on top on the 5th of November, and all this money that you'd collected would be used for bangers and sparklers and God knows what, to celebrate the Gunpowder Plot, yes!

GD: Did you have any special rhymes that you'd say about that?

DS: I can't remember most of them now – it was sort of something about: 'Guy, Guy, stick him in the eye', that was one, but I can't *remember* it.

GD: The one that I can remember from reading of books, though we never actually said it, was: 'Please to remember the 5th of November, Gunpowder treason, and plot'.

DS: (simultaneously:) Yes, 'The gunpowder, treason, and plot', that's right.

GD: Yes, 'I see no reason, why Gunpowder treason, should ever be forgot'.

DS: That's right, yes, that's right.

GD: So, did you actually say that, or something similar to that?

DS: Yes, yes, you *said* it, though I don't know that we *sang* so much as chanted...I think that's what kids do more than anything else, they chant...

GD: What about marbles, Danny? Now tell us about the marbles.

DS: Oh the marbles.

GD: What were some of the games you used to play?

DS: Oh, well...it's a wonder we didn't all end up getting typhoid fever, because we used to play in the gutters of course. We'd roll them down the gutter, and the idea was that...you'd ping them off as you go. Then they had the other one which was in the circle. The marbles were just set out in a circle – what you're basically trying to do is hit the one in the middle, but you can only do it by flicking it with your thumb. You don't *roll* 'em, you have to get your marble against your thumb, and your thumb held in your finger, and you flick your thumb off with the marble – it's quite hard to do, but of course you get very proficient at it. And we used to play that a lot – well, all in season. These things came in season.

Like in Autumn there was 'Conkers' – they were chestnuts, horse chestnuts, and you got the horse chestnut and you bored a hole through the middle and you put a bit of string through the middle with a knot. You held yours up and the other bloke *struck*

at it with his one, and whoever broke, the other one's won. And of course, kids being kids, they got into all sorts of things like, well, you used to *soak* 'em in vinegar and then bake 'em in the oven, and things like that – that was one way of doing it, and that made 'em very hard, or you *thought* it made 'em very hard. Indeed it made 'em very *brittle*, and so it was a very, very careful, scientific procedure you had to go through to make 'em hard, but not brittle. And then a mate of mine, who was always a rotten cheat, oh he used to pull the middle out of them and put a nut in there (laughs) – an iron nut, off a bolt, you know, and put his string through it and kids are bouncing their 'conkers' and smashing their 'conkers' on his one, until they finally discovered what he'd done and then they punched the daylight out of him! (laughs)

And we played, oh, cigarette cards were really popular. Cigarette packets used to have a card stuck in them. You had all different sorts, you know? There were ships of the sea, there were soldiers, different regiments, there were footballers and, you know, a whole list of stuff, and with a *lot* of information on the back about them too. So I mean, really, you could have a real good history lesson with some of those cigarette cards.

And we used to play, against the wall again – you'd flick the card, and the idea was to get as near to the wall as you could, so the one who got the nearest got all the cards. And another game, much the same, up against the wall, and you had to try and flick your cigarette card to land on another one. If you landed on another one you won it, and so that was the sort of game we played.

Hopscotch was very, *very* popular. There were two sorts as I remember. One was a square – no, an oblong – with two rows up each side, and you went straight up one side and down the other. Then there was the well-known one which is the sort of two-one, two-one, two-one and a turning-spot at the end. And you rolled your stone onto the number, you had to do it in order, and you rolled it onto one and you hopped on and you went all the way up and all the way back, and you picked your stone up. You had to actually *get* it into the square before you could start hopping, as I remember.

GD: Did you call the stone anything in particular?

DS: No, oh not that I remember, we probably did, but...

GD: And did both boys and girls play it – Hoppy, or Hopscotch?

DS: Oh yes, one of the things that I can remember about London, and I'm sure this happened in other places too – boys and girls weren't segregated at all. I mean, girls were in everything. We played wars, or if we played 'Cowboys and Indians' or if we played 'Hidey' or whatever, the girls were there. I mean your gang comprised girls, you know – it was half and half. You always had girls in your gang, and they were expected to be able to do all the things that the blokes could do.

And it was very interesting actually, with our gang – it might be one of the reasons that I think the way I do. We were also expected to *knit*, and *sew*, like the girls would show us how to knit and sew, and that sort of stuff. So it wasn't just, you know, 'We only do all boys' things'. We *mainly* did all boys' things, you know, and sort of tadpoling and all the rest of it, but...we used to make lemonade and all of that sort of stuff and we'd go scrumping (laughs). Out the back of where we lived there was a whole area of bombsites, and over a period of time the locals had turned them into allotments, you know, and they were growing vegetables and things during the War. And we'd go scrumping, I mean nicking all their vegetables and things like that. But it was real good because again, because of the War, there was always lots of junk around, you know – bits of houses and all of that sort of stuff – so we had a terrific cubby house, a really big, I mean it was almost like Buckingham Palace, ours was, just made from destroyed houses and things like that. We had saucepans and knives and forks and all the rest of it, and we used to do a bit of scrumping, and then we'd cook up a stew, in the house, with, you know, in one of the big pots that we had there, which was *great* fun, and oh, *we* thought it was great fun. It was probably *terrible*. I remember we used to get the water out of a creek – and I mean a creek in London could have everything in it – and I suppose because we boiled it we didn't all die of dysentery or something like that, but we did all sorts of things like that. It was great fun.

The thing I remember more than anything, we didn't have television and we only had a radio. My dad was crippled and he was in a wheelchair, and he used to tell us a lot of stories – we'd sit round the fire at night and he'd tell stories, and we were expected to sing and recite and all of that. But the radio didn't go on all day – the radio was turned on after tea, at night. We used to have our main meal during the middle of the day, and then we'd have tea at night. What we called 'tea' was just a light meal, and that was round about six, at five or six o'clock at night, and then the radio would be turned on. There used to be terrific radio programs, serials and things like that, and that was the main media that we came into contact with.

And as kids I can remember that if you were indoors, your mum thought you were ill, you know? We were *never* indoors, you know, and she would say, 'What's *wrong* with you kids, why don't you go out?' You know, if we were in she would be thinking that there was something wrong with us. We spent *all* our time outside, and over in the bombsites and over in the fields. It was quite dangerous I suppose in lots of ways, because there were bombs laying around that we didn't know about, and old buildings falling down and things like that, and we could have been hurt but we weren't. Oh, but we spent *so* much of the time outside, and getting our sort of gang shed and making up these meals and things. God, it was awful – baked potatoes in their jackets, and we used to *burn* them within an inch of their life, you know, and then we'd eat all the black stuff and reckon it was great. And we used to have parties in there, and the parents never, never, never, never had to *worry*, because they knew exactly where we were. We would only be within our own area, because the other streets had their own gangs...and I mean sometimes there would be little fights and things like that. You never sort of went out of your area, and at that time everything was *in* the area, you know? There were all the bombsites, and there was a brook, and there was a rubber tyre factory opposite where you could go and play, and there's so many things, and you made everything. You made your toy guns. You didn't go and *buy* 'em, but you made your cricket bat, and you made whatever out of a bit of old wood and stuff like that. So you got lots of skills, lots of good fun, lots of good friends, and your parents always knew where

you were, and apart from cuts and scratches and things which every kids *gets*, your parents knew you were *safe*.

And you know...it used to be funny, at about five o'clock at night...all these women would suddenly appear at the back gates, and all start screaming, 'Danny! Terry! Tommy! Jilly!', you know (laughs). They'd come out – it was a like a choir, and you could practically tell the time – well you *could* tell the time by it, it was five o'clock. And you'd all go in (laughs) and you'd have your tea and whatever, and then you'd all go out again after tea, you know, your lump of bread and jam or whatever, and then at about half past seven, eight o'clock they'd be out again, this chorus of mothers, (laughs) screaming out for their kids.

But it was a lovely time, and because where we lived was very, very near the docks and we were right on Barking Creek as well, and so we had all the docks to wander around, which was *very* exciting, you know. Of course we saw all sorts of different nationalities of people, so you know there would be Indians and oh, you name it, and so we had no problem coping with a multicultural sort of situation – it was lovely. And I remember the Indians used to come with their bags full of things which they would sell around the place, and they would allow you to get out there and buy them. And then on a Sunday the 'cockles and mussels man' would come down the street, singing his song and I think with his barrow, and you used to go out and get a pint, or a half a pint, of cockles, and that was Sunday tea. That was the *highlight* of the week – it was great.

GD: What would he call out?

DS: Oh, he had a street cry: 'Cockles! Whelks! Mussels!' you know, and he'd just call 'em over and over again...He had a sort of song that went with it. It was like a vendor's cry, just shouting out, you know, sort of (chanting, in dotted crotchets, a tango rhythm): 'Cockles, and mussels, live, cockles, and mussels'. It was really quite nice, and he'd go all round the streets – you'd hear him coming from miles away. All the kids'd be out there with their little tins that you'd go and collect the stuff [in].

GD: Danny, if I can take you back to marbles again, because this is something we're particularly interested in. Can you remember the actual marbles that you had? For instance, did they have special names, different kinds of marbles?

DS: (laughs) Mm-mm! The only one I can remember, the only name I can remember was a Glarny and...they were all different sizes. You'd get all different sized marbles, and one was a fairly large one, about an inch I suppose, round, and it was a sort of a milky colour, and it had another colour through it, and I remember that one used to be called a Glarny. And then there were Crystals, you know, and they were just the plain ones, and then there were all different sorts of coloured glass, and then there were the ball-bearings, where you used to get ball-bearings from different things, and that was another marble that we used. But no, I can't remember any of the other names for them...

GD: What about Jacks, or Knucklebones. Did you play that?

DS: Yes, yes, we did, we played that a lot, Jacks. Again it was a seasonal thing – it came in at a certain time, you know like yoyos do now, or whatever. It was, that was a summer game, because you could sit on the floor and play that, and oh, we used stones. Actually we called 'em 'Fivestones', because we actually used stones – just small bits of bluestone or granite or something like that. We never had knucklebones, and I didn't even *know* of knucklebones, actually, until I came to Australia was where I first heard 'knucklebones'. And I remember some toy firm brought out some jacks that were constructed – they were like stars, but made of metal, but we didn't like them because they sort of hung together. There wasn't a lot of skill in that, we felt. We used to have odd shapes, you know, so we'd have round ones, and ones with edges and things like that, and the idea was that it was part of the skill *balancing* 'em all, and that sort of stuff, you know, so it was *interesting*.

GD: Can you remember the actual details of how you played that game?

DS: Yes, there was the 'old' game and the 'new' game. The first one was, you throw the [stones] and you catch 'em and whatever ones fell on the floor you pick 'em up one at a time, and then you go to two, to three, to four, picking them up, four at a time, and so on. And then you had 'Creeps', which was you threw the jacks out onto the back of your hand. The ones that fell you had to creep your hand along the ground and pick them up between your fingers, and then throw the others over and catch them, and then roll them back into the palm of your hand again. That was 'Creeps'. And 'Cracks' we did the same thing. We threw them up, and as you picked each one up you had to crack it against the other one – as it came down you had to crack it, and if it didn't crack you were out. And then, of course, 'No Cracks', you had to do the same thing but you pick it up and you had to make sure you *didn't* crack it. And then, 'Big Titch' and 'Little Titch' (laughs). Now 'Big Titch' was, you threw them over onto the back of your hand, and then back again, and then you took a leader, and you threw the one up in the air and you picked them up, one at a time from the floor, but you had to keep them in your hand, so you threw the thing and picked, and threw, until you've got them all in your hand. And then the 'Big Titch' was, that you chose your leader, and you threw it into the air and picked one up and you threw *two* up, and picked another one, and you threw three up and picked the next one up – so that was what they called the 'old' game.

And then, the 'new' game was that you didn't throw onto the back of your hands at all. You just threw the jacks out across the floor, and then somebody would select a leader for you, and what they would try and do was, as you threw them down, they would select a leader that was not close to them. They'd leave any that were close together, because when you threw it up you had to throw it and pick that one up without touching the other one, because you were out if you touched the other one. And then you went through the one, two, three, four again, and then through all the other numbers, but each time they were thrown out. Oh, and all sorts of rules that they used to make up, you know – sort of 'Scatters' and things like that, so you'd be having to, say, pick up three at a time, so you'd try and block 'em if you could. You'd throw them out and block 'em. And it was a case of shouting out 'Block!' before they shouted out 'Scatter!', because if they shouted 'Scatter' first you had to throw 'em, and they were allowed to sort of swat 'em, (laughs), which meant that they'd go everywhere, and you've got to pick up four at a time, you'd be running round in a circle trying to get them and you'd need to throw the dice about five feet up in the air before you could get it. It was really interesting stuff, right.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Central Highlands Arts Atlas <http://www.artsatlas.com.au/danny-spooner/> (viewed 19/2/2016)
- ² *The Plank-bed Ballad*, 1888, written by G.R. Sims (pseudonym 'Dagonet'). Found in John S. Farmer (ed), *Musa Pedestris, Three Centuries of Canting Songs and Slang Rhymes (1536-1896)* (USA, Hardpress Publishing, 2003). It is written in thieves' cant – a mixture of words from different languages and slang used in London by the villains.