

# Bonfire Night

*Judith Lewis*

In the 1940s and 50s Bonfire Night was one of the best times of the year. Weeks of hard slog went into building what was one of the biggest and best bonfires in town (at least we all thought so). For about a month or more before the big day, Empire Day 24<sup>th</sup> May, Queen Victoria's Birthday, we kids spent every afternoon after school, and most of the May school holidays, collecting and cutting down tree branches from 'The Bush' across from Hamilton Road, and dragging them home. We usually went up by Drayton's, through Pearce's paddock (now Dingle Street), through a small gap between the fence posts where two boundary fences met. This was known as 'The Squeeze', because you had to 'squeeze' to get through, obviously. The track home was usually down Crown Road and along Piccadilly Street, leaving a trail of leaves behind us.

The most important task was selecting and chopping down the 'Middle Pole'. This had to be very tall and straight and reasonably thick, to hold all the branches that would be stacked around it, and yet not too large that half a dozen kids could not pull it. Sometimes the search for the Middle Pole took us almost to the Windsor Road. My brother, Bill, and our neighbour, Mattie, usually had the final say on which tree was to be the Middle Pole as they had been entrusted with their fathers' axes for this all-important task.

Empire Day was a half-holiday at school. We had to do patriotic things, like sing the National Anthem, *God Save the King*, and *Land of Hope and Glory*, and sometimes we had sports' activities before being released at midday. The bonfire was usually built that afternoon. It couldn't be built any earlier because it might be set fire to. If you were lucky someone would get you some old tyres to put in amongst the bushes. They gave off lots of smoke. Air pollution was not really heard of then! Old clothes stuffed with straw became 'Adolf Hitler' who was placed on the very top of the bonfire so he could BURN!

We built our bonfire on the vacant block at the corner of George and Park Streets. One Bonfire night we were all home having tea when someone did set fire to OUR BONFIRE. We all gathered to watch it burn, but we felt cheated. We had our suspicions. There were a couple of kids who lived nearby who never joined us for anything. It had to be them! Was it? The following year we again had a huge bonfire waiting ready to be lit, but this time we were taking turns to go home for tea, always leaving a couple of kids on guard. When the local Fire Brigade arrived and told us they'd had a complaint about the bonfire's size, from concerned neighbours, we felt our suspicions were well founded. The Brigade allowed us to light the fire ourselves. They supervised and when the fire had died down they made sure it was completely out. The next year we moved to Challenger's paddock, on the corner of Mill and Piccadilly Streets, where there were no houses close by.

Whilst the lighting of the bonfire was the highlight of the night it was closely followed by what came afterwards, once the fire had died down, the letting off of fireworks. Our uncle, Sheck, would arrive home from work on Bonfire Night with the biggest bag of fireworks he could carry – *Double Bungers, Tom Thumbs, Rockets, Catherine Wheels, Jumping Jacks, Roman Candles* and *Sparklers*, to name a few of the favourites. We usually pooled our fireworks with the other kids. I distinctly remember one night when we wished we hadn't.

There was a lot of us – my brothers, Bill and Rob, and I, Pat and Mattie and their cousin, Johnnie, Parko, Betty and Baldy Brickhead, plus a number of smaller kids who came, with their parents, to watch. This night everyone was sharing, except for Baldy. An only child, he stood apart, with his parents, to light his own fireworks. The trouble was, he stood close to where we had our combined 'loot' and began to light his crackers, before we had even thought about lighting ours. A spark from one of his fireworks fell into our bundle and up went most of our fireworks in one spectacular, and downright dangerous, burst. We were devastated, and, if we'd had our way, Baldy would have joined 'Adolf' atop our next year's bonfire. The next morning we scrounged around in the charred pile that had been our fireworks and found a surprising number of them that had not gone off. We were able to light them that night, but I think this experience ended our 'sharing'.

What a pity that irresponsible people have spoilt one of the truly memorable childhood experiences. None of us ever got hurt, except for the odd blisters from months of dragging bushes for miles. Today's kids will never experience the real joy of Bonfire Night as we did. They call it progress?

*LAND OF HOPE AND GLORY.*

E.W. Edgar      A.C. Benson

*Land of Hope and Glory, Mother of the free,  
How shall we extol thee, who are born of thee?  
Wider still and wider, shall thy bounds be set;  
God, who made thee mighty, make thee mightier yet,  
God, who made thee mighty, Make thee mightier yet.*