

Hector's first day at work

Gillian Bell

It is a bright Monday morning on 3rd January 1938, and sixteen-year-old Hector Craig is preparing for his first day at work at Challingsworth steelworks in Richmond. He is a slender but muscular lad, good at sports, winning a silver cup for running at the school sports the previous year. He has wavy brown hair and a shy smile. Hec is nervous, but his father Walter who will accompany him this morning is calm. He is already a veteran of almost twenty-seven years at Challingsworth as boilermaker and foreman.

Mary, Hec's mother, hands them their brown paper bags of sandwiches. Walter claps his grey felt hat on his head, and together they set off. The large oak tree in the front garden waves a wistful goodbye to Hec's childhood.

In the street a small stream of workers is making its way back to work after the New Year break, along the quiet streets of Surrey Hills to the Wattle Park tram stop. From down the street Mr Neil waves. He is tall and rotund with a booming voice. He is off to his job at the Ruwolt's steelworks in Victoria St. They will all travel the five miles to Richmond on the edge of the city. I can see them now, three distant figures, one tall and well-built, one stooped and balding and the third walking eagerly into the future.

Hec is fidgety with excitement as the green and yellow tram arrives. The conductor has his hand on the bell cord, ready to signal their departure. The striped canvas doors are open to the fresh air. It is pleasantly cool on this sunny morning, but when the southerly winds blow in winter the centre compartment, designated for smokers, will be icy cold.

On the Middle Camberwell hill, Hec peers up at the crisp new grey and white St Dominic's church, open less than a year. Its crowning spires will be added some twenty years later.

At the foot of the long slope the tram clangs its way through Camberwell Junction. There are as yet no traffic lights, and the six-way junction is thick with traffic. Pedestrians dodge amongst the cars, and an occasional cyclist threads his way through the melee. Onward goes the tram, stopping every few hundred yards to allow more passengers to board. The tram is now jam-packed, and the conductor with his heavy leather bag of coins and multi-coloured paper tickets can barely make his way along.

On this sunny day Hec cannot possibly foresee the years to come. In almost exactly one year the disastrous Black Friday fires will swallow much of Victoria. Later that same year, a second World War will break out in Europe.

Mary, Walter's wife, had two brothers, Hector and Harry, who eagerly enlisted for the great adventure of the First World War. One was killed at Gallipoli and the other in France. She grieved for them always and named two of her four boys after them.

Walter had a different experience of war. By a twist of fate he escaped being sent to the front line. He had worked since 1910 in the din of the Challingsworth steelyard and had already become stone deaf, rendering him unfit for service. So instead he was sent to Southampton in England to work in ship-building for the war effort. In a mixed sort of way Walter is grateful to his firm for his disability.

They alight with relief from the crowded tram and enter the Challingsworth forecourt. From the dark red brick office comes the sound of a typewriter, and from the steelyard comes the clang of metal. Hector breathes in the heady scent of fire and steel and opens the office door.

Photo: The Craig family outside their Surrey hills home, 1930s. Mary and Walter centre; Hector on right.