

My Life and Asthma

by Alan Vaughn

I was told when first diagnosed with Asthma, that while the symptoms may come and go, the illness is always with you, even when for periods of time it is dormant. In my case it was prevalent from ten years old until I was sixteen, it was then on a downward curve for about ten years, until it was not affecting me. To put this into perspective I am nearly sixty-seven and have had very little problems with Asthma in my adult years.

My generation, as has been said many times, had so much freedom as children that we were able to easily amuse ourselves without spending money, which in most cases was not available to us in the 1950's. My friends and I spent most school holidays roaming the fields and woods around our village of Kempston. We also had the River Ouse and several spinneys with brooks running through them. These were great times for building friendships, usually in small gangs, and learning so much about the countryside. Kempston was, in my childhood, a village; it even had two farms within it. It is situated in what was known as the Ouse Valley and we had about ten brickworks to the south of the village. They sent clouds of smoke from chimneys across the area, and contained pollutants such as sulphur. We couldn't smell the sulphur, because we were used to it, but anyone visiting the area always commented on it. The other pollutant at this time was domestic coal fires, which we all had. By the 1990's all but two small brickworks remained, only one now, and that's for research. The closures were because the building industry demand had gone, and I suspect also because they did not want to pay for extremely expensive filters for their chimneys. Mrs Thatcher had said she would make the Hanson Group fit filters, but it never happened. Whether or not the pollution contributed to Asthma I don't know, but I have always kept an open mind on the subject. Kempston is a town now and the urban sprawl has removed the farms around us, and there is not a smoking chimney to be seen.



Anyway back to my story, the shop in the village where Mum worked started selling fishing tackle and so like many of my friends, by the age of 8/9 years, the fishing bug bit! My Dad thought it was a daft hobby, but I enjoyed it through the long summer holidays. Just before my tenth birthday I went fishing on a very hot August day down at the local Mill feeder stream. In those days reeds grew in vast numbers and I soon learnt that using them as a shield helped catch fish.

The problem was that pollen in clouds was swirling around the reeds, and I soon realised it was making me sneeze and making my eyes very sore and itchy. It got so bad that by mid afternoon I had packed up and walked home, frightened at what was happening to me. By the time I reached home I was in distress, my eyes were swollen and almost closed and the irritation was unbearable. Dad being an Ambulanceman got me to wash my eyes in cold clean water and after

taking some aspirin for the headache I now had, I went to bed. I managed to sleep, on and off and by next day felt a lot better, and the sore eyes got better with the help of some eye drops, and more bathing in cold water.



I was ten years old in September, and by November we had a lot of very damp cold weather, and that's when the wheezing, difficulty breathing and chest tightness began. I had some really frightening nights, waking up, fighting for breath. The family doctor, whose name was coincidentally Dr. Vaughan, was sent for and he prescribed some pills to relieve the tightness, and what was then the only inhaler available, a strange device with a glass holder and rubber tube with a bulb on the end. It came with a bottle of mauve liquid which had to be loaded into the inhaler glass holder. It was sprayed into the back of the throat and tasted foul. It did help but was not practical to carry about, and was kept in the medical cabinet in our kitchen. He also suggested I get pillows with rubber filling (Dunlopillo) and to use two pillows to raise me up in bed and I should sleep on my side, plus having a small window open at night. The Doctor also arranged for me to go to a clinic at Bedford South Wing Hospital for allergy tests because his

diagnosis was Bronchial Asthma, and the tests hopefully would find what I needed to avoid to reduce the problem.

The allergy test results identified that I was allergic to grass, tree, and shrub pollen, which meant I had to avoid the fields and woods during the spring and summer - impossible where we lived. The specialist at South Wing Hospital took blood samples and tested my lung capacity. He suggested I should have weekly appointments for physiotherapy at North Wing Hospital. So from that time for about one year I left school early Friday afternoons to be taken by Mum on the bus for about one hour therapy. This involved lying on a couch, breathing to instruction, with weights on my chest and sometimes my stomach. This also had to be done at home between sessions. I was very aware that having Asthma was rare in the 1950's and in fact I did not know anyone else with this illness, and it felt strange having to go to hospital each Friday.

This all came about at a time when I had just been selected for the second 11 at football, but soon found I couldn't cope with the running. In the summer term we were taken by coach to Stewart by open air swimming pool. But as soon as I got in the water my chest tightened up so I couldn't breathe, hence swimming was impossible, obviously the same problem applied to most sports, which I previously enjoyed. Up to this time I did not have a bicycle and while I could not breathe properly. I really didn't want one.

In July Mum and Dad took me on holiday to Cornwall in a caravan, and although it was a lovely place with wild countryside and a beautiful sandy beach, my Asthma was very bad. Unfortunately we went to the same place for four years. I had to go back later in life to really appreciate the place, but of course as everywhere, Cornwall had become very commercialised which spoilt it if you wanted peace and tranquillity.

The problems continued through the next year but the physiotherapy was helping me cope. When I was eleven I failed my 11+ so went to Kempston Secondary Modern School, and by this time the physiotherapy had finished. I now found I could play some football, so with an understanding teacher, I came on in games for short spells, which was better than nothing. I also started playing football with friends in the park on Saturday mornings, which I enjoyed. We had 'houses' at school and in the summer had a sports day. I was able to do Discus and Javelin, even though I was not much good at it. I could also cope with cricket, but swimming was still impossible, the chlorine and the cold (it was open air) just made it impossible to breathe without struggling.

Things didn't change much and when I was thirteen my doctor gave me a course of injections over six weeks, which he said, may help, but there were no guarantees. I'm sure, by degrees; it helped over several years, apart from that it got me over my fear of injections! I was at this age given a more conventional inhaler and found I was able to swop the swimming for tennis lessons, which I really enjoyed. By the age of fourteen I even managed to control the Asthma enough to do cross-country at school. I even ran for the local boys club in an all Bedfordshire Cross Country with my friend Tony. He came seventeenth and I came twenty-third out of a field of about seventy. Considering my problems, I was pleased with my efforts.

My Dad, around this time had been brainwashed by his friend at work and actually took up fishing, and quite seriously, though I couldn't help occasionally reminding him what he said about this hobby some years earlier. I found if I kept to 'non pollen' days I could go fishing, and so Dad and his friend took me with them with no real problems. We even got to go in winter with snow on the ground! I also got a bicycle and after several weeks struggling, I mastered that after all the years without one.

I managed to get an apprenticeship at Brookhirst Igranic as an Electrical Fitter and left school in the summer of 1960 aged fifteen. I started work in January 1961 and cycled to work. To start with, for six months I was in the Training Centre with about eight other lads. It was at this time because of peer pressure here, I started smoking, not excessively but it obviously was a bad idea for some one with Asthma. Mum and Dad smoked so they just said I was silly for starting, but this was something I carried on with till I was about fifty.

In June we were all sent on a week's course at an old house in Amersham, in the Buckingham countryside. This was about bonding exercises for groups of apprentices from various companies in the region. We had dormitories with six to a room, all strangers. The Asthma came back with a vengeance and the week proved a waste of time for me. Army Assault Course and Football, etc. were impossible and I ended up making friends with a couple of lads who had their own problems, and we spent most of the week playing snooker and table tennis. We came back on the coach at the end of the week and I felt terrible. Luckily for me that was the last really bad Asthma I had. Anyway my Apprenticeship started for real in September and by then I had saved twenty pounds and bought a motorcycle from a work colleague. This was more like it, no more peddling and I felt I had some credibility.

I found riding a motorcycle was fine because I could get all the fresh air I needed and it did not cause any problems. I joined the local motorcycle gang and that led to going to various youth

clubs in the area, all good social stuff! Working in the factory and out on the bike at night and I started day release at Mander College. I think this was the first time I could say I felt good about my life. The Asthma by now was very sporadic and not too bad. I carried on with various motorcycles and the following year I was sent to Luton College of Technology for my day release. I tried going on the train, but the hanging about was boring, so I was able to go on my motorbike. My apprenticeship continued and I transferred to office work. The hours were better! And it was mostly sitting down.

The Asthma became rarer and rarer and all I had some years was Hay Fever for a few weeks in June up to the 1980's. In August when the pollen season was over I found the hay fever had left my lungs congested, so I went to the doctor's each year for a session on a nebuliser, which cleared the problem. Even this became unnecessary in later years. When I was nineteen I got married and had two children. My daughter Sharon started smoking in her teens and also contracted Asthma, which at times was severe. In the 1970's, when she was at school there were about two or three children per class with Asthma. When she got married and had children of her own she decided to stop smoking and the Asthma vanished.

I gave up smoking when in my fifties, around the same time and soon found my lungs improved. I still go to an Asthma Clinic once a year and have found my lung capacity has improved dramatically, I have inhalers and still take a daily preventative. But the reliever inhalers have not been needed for many years, at least, not at this stage of my life. I am approaching sixty-seven and feel in better health than when I was forty.

When I was the ten years old, lying in bed panicking because I couldn't breathe, and didn't understand Asthma, I thought this was all I had to look forward to. I even thought that my life would be a short one. Well, I hope this will help those who find themselves where I was fifty plus years ago. With modern medication if you have faith and common sense, things will improve. There may be some limitations but you can still get a lot out of your life.



I was told initially that whatever happened, once you have Asthma it is always with you, but remember it can disappear into the background, where it belongs! In the 1980's I became an Infant School Governor which I did for some fifteen years. My role included Health & Safety and this included an Asthma Policy. I soon found that in approximately twenty pupils there were about eight to twelve with Asthma and this was a normal situation through the school. Bearing in mind these children were between five and eight years old, this really shocked me to realise how this illness was affecting so many and so young.

With all the modern medicines and the strong emphasis on Asthma Research appeals, I feel as a country we should have got to grips with this problem by now. I have to be optimistic for future generations, that either a cure will be found, or at least a way of quickly putting it 'into the

background.' Then every child can get on with life in a normal way, without having to put restrictions on their activities and ambitions.

Smoking has now become much more uncommon due to education and restrictions, but young teenagers still need support to keep them from starting this addiction, which I now realise is so dangerous. It is so obvious by the great numbers of very young children contracting Asthma, that the solution to eliminate the root causes has not come yet. But we must make this a priority now to give them a healthy future.

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