

The Penny¹

I am sure that in everybody's house you will find somewhere a box full of keys, little pieces of metal with velvet cords, old bulldog clips, and other things that might come in useful, or that might just unlock a long-forgotten suitcase that had been in the attic for years.

I found one such box the other day, and it contained an almost unrecognisable old penny; flattened to a shape more ear-like than round. Why had it been kept? I have no idea – but it contained a little magic that unlocked a memory and whisked me back 65 years to boyhood. For I remembered how we found that penny.

It was wartime, and my older brother Nick and I were at boarding school. This was no ordinary school. Its normal location was in Winchester, but Kenneth Tindall, the headmaster, was advised that the south of England was too dangerous for his charges, so he evacuated the school, lock stock and barrel, to Scotland, first to Stranraer, and then to Blair Castle, the seat of the Dukes of Atholl. So it is to Blair that my memories took me.

Travelling to Blair Atholl by train for the start of term was an adventure in itself. The “London Mush” comprised the boys who lived in London; they met in Euston Station to travel together, with school staff to supervise, on the 7:20pm Inverness train. Tearful boys and tearful mothers would exchange last words, all too well aware of the dangers of wartime London, and at last the train would leave for the long journey northwards. Early the next day we would cross the border, and we would eventually reach tiny Blair Atholl station by lunch-time.

All trains on the mostly single-track line from Perth to Inverness would stop at Blair Atholl, for the land to build the track was only sold by the 7th Duke of Atholl in the early 1900s on the condition that all trains stopped there.

Once there, we would walk the mile to the Castle, while our baggage followed on by cart. Arriving at the Castle for my first day of boarding school, for the first time away from maternal care, was a daunting experience. My 8th birthday was still 5 days in the future. My brother Nick, 1000 days my senior, was a tower of practical sense – scarcely the mother-figure for which I often craved, but solid, reliable, and usually comforting.

Soon after the start of term, the joyous news of VE day came. Even the homesick new-boys like myself were happy, and the School celebrated with a huge bonfire, on which an effigy of Hitler was incinerated.

Visits from the parents were few and far between, but half-term in Summer 1945 was a special occasion. Our parents stayed in the Killiecrankie Hotel, and we could spend time together, walking, talking and playing games, before the inevitable departure, softened by gifts of chocolate or sweets that had been saved up for on the sparse wartime rations. Nick and I were able at one point to go off walking on our own (no doubt because the parents were coping with 1-year-old brother Daniel) and it was not far from the hotel that we found the railway tunnel, where the nearby river Garry zigzags, because of a low rocky promontory – famous for the Battle of Killiecrankie and the Soldier's Leap pass. With no room to divert, the railway engineers dug a short tunnel for the track.

“If we put our heads on the rail, we will be able to hear if there is a train coming,” said practical Nick. So we did, and there was no train. “We should be able to walk through this tunnel – it isn't long,” said Nick. “What if a train comes when we are in it?” I asked anxiously. “Oh, you just lean back against the wall and it goes by,” said Nick reassuringly. I thought of the trains that we knew came that way – great steam monsters, belching smoke, tearing the air as the carriages would go by in the narrow space of a single-track tunnel, but I recognised Nick's confidence, and my qualms vanished.

“In any case,” said Nick knowingly, “they have little hollows in the tunnel where you can stand when the train comes.”

So through we went. No train came. We came safely out of the tunnel at the other end.

Blinking in the summer sun, we stood clear of the track. “Look,” said Nick, “a penny! Someone must have come through the tunnel, and put it on the track to see what would happen to it when the train ran over it.” It was almost unrecognisable as a penny, flattened to a shape more ear-like than round.

Now, wherever *did* we put that radiator key?

¹ A short story by Anthony Hodson, written for “Old Penny Stories” (April 2011), edited and published by Louis McCagg.