CHAPTER 5 – Manchester

BUT IT WAS TIME TO MOVE ON. Unlike two *Journal* graduate colleagues who had been employed by *The Sunday Times* on the strength of their obvious ability - Hamlyn and Lew Chester - I decided that my next step should be a national newspaper's Manchester office, a well-worn route in my day from the regions to Fleet Street for old-fashioned journalists without a university education. I could have gone straight to London, but I believe I gained some respect later among older colleagues, especially those who lacked my educational advantages, for taking this traditional course. And I believe my ensuing experience of the old industrial north of England gave me an advantage in perspective on life in Britain as a whole - an antidote to the over-emphasis on London and the South-East which bedevils the media even more today than it did then. I really did acquire a sound grasp of how the other half lived.

My intention to move at an opportune time is shown by the fact that I persuaded Dobson and Brownlee to write "to whom it may concern" letters in December 1962 as references for job interviews even though my contract with NCJ still had four months to run. Both were generous. Dobson wrote: "He has fitted in very well and has become a most useful and competent member of our news-gathering team. He has specialised in crime reporting, in which capacity he has done outstandingly well... Although... junior in age, I have been glad to give him responsibility on the news desk and he has frequently taken overall charge in the absence of the news editor." Brownlee added: "Van der Vat quickly became accepted by high-ranking police chiefs... as... competent and trustworthy... Police officers were soon asking for him by name to give exclusive information... He has given *The Journal* some top-class

crime stories, much to the dismay of our competitors. Van der Vat is quietly efficient... His manner is decisive and he assumes responsibility with a natural ease and confidence. For some time now he has stood in as my personal deputy on the news desk. I have never found him lacking."

A letter dated one day after my NCJ contract expired offered me a reporting job on the *Daily Herald*, the Labour-supporting paper that was already struggling for survival. This would have meant eventually being involved in the sale of the paper by Odhams Press to the *Daily Mirror* group, which would soon relaunch it as the compact-broadsheet *Sun* (about the same size as today's "Berliner"-sized *Guardian* and *Observer*). After a few difficult years it was bought by Rupert Murdoch, who would transform it into Britain's most successful and influential "red top" tabloid, displacing the *Daily Mirror*. By declining the offer I thus unwittingly avoided an uncertain fate (yet it proved impossible to escape the grasp of Murdoch, as later events will show). But a letter dated one day later offered me a job on the *Daily Mail* in Manchester as a "holiday relief reporter," effectively a six-month trial with no obligation on either side - the usual route onto a national in those days.

As a hard-news man I admired the broadsheet *Daily Mail* of that time, a very different animal from today's driven, sometimes vicious, right-wing tabloid, but then very much the underdog to the *Daily Express*, the strongest and largest national daily of the day. In the meantime, the tables have been well and truly turned, with the *Mail* very much the top dog over a deservedly dying *Express*. In my time the *Mail* was obsessed with catching up and was a better read on most days, under the

editorship of Mike Randall. The Manchester offices of the nationals at that period were much larger than they are now: they had their own editor and senior executives and their own separate printing plant, taking foreign, political and some feature material from London but otherwise produced by a large editorial staff. These included regionally based reporters and photographers, in the *Mail's* case controlled from Northcliffe House in Deansgate, which has long since disappeared. The dividing line between London and Manchester ran vaguely across the country from mid-Wales to Lincolnshire (Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, was, I think, right on the line). The northern editor was Harry Myers, a short, softly spoken but convivial man in his early fifties who spent much of his working day nurturing his business contacts at the Midland Hotel, then Manchester's poshest. Anyway, that's where we almost always found him when he was urgently needed.

Armed with my not unimpressive array of cuttings, I had a good interview with the northern news editor, the dreaded Ken(neth) Donlan, an incandescent Mancunian of Irish ancestry whose temper was notorious, and he offered me the job, with a handy pay rise. He had made his name by brilliantly improvising, from a nearby pub, coverage of an air disaster at Manchester's Ringway airport, which got him his promotion. Willy nilly I learned a lot from him. Apart from his presiding seat at the newsdesk sideways on to the reporters' tables, he had an enclosed office off to one side from which the roar of a Donlan "bollocking" could often be indistinctly heard. At least he had the courtesy not to castigate his victims in the presence of their peers. The editorial office, shared with the *Daily Sketch,* was on the first floor of the Deansgate building. Now the *Mail* has a much more modest editorial office in another Deansgate building, number 129, where *The Guardian* is also based.

I rented a sky-blue Ford Consul, a large but underpowered car big enough to hold our daughter, barely five months old, in her pram-cot on the back seat (no booster seats or belts in those days), and our clothes and very few possessions around her. It was a pleasant enough drive across the Pennines through Westmoreland (now absorbed with Cumberland into Cumbria) and down through Lancashire to Manchester, where we moved into a ground-floor flat in Victoria Park, Rusholme. Karen was far from being the noisiest of small babies but did inevitably cry from time to time. The landlord, whose premises, including a small, cheap hotel, were equipped with resonant plywood walls, complained about the noise and gave us notice to move out after about three months. I went to the offices of the *Manchester Evening News* in Cross Street to catch the first edition hot off the press at midday and scan the small ads for a new place to live: there were always a few people there with the same idea. We were lucky enough to find a spacious flat on the third and topmost floor of a huge Victorian detached house in Sale, a pleasant, unremarkable southern suburb in Manchester's Cheshire fringe. I was earning £26 per week, and the rent took £7. The landlord, who lived some miles away, was pleasant and relaxed, and we had good neighbours, including a medical couple, a thoracic surgeon and a theatre sister, on the floor below: Geoff and Ishbel Ingram. They doted on Karen, being childless at the time. Next door was another huge Victorian pile, in whose garden a teenage boy kept a few turkeys. Karen's first attempt at speech was a close imitation of the birds' characteristic gobble-gobble as she stood at the kitchen window looking down on them. The fowls were otherwise notable for hopping over the front-garden wall and depositing their monumental "droppings" on the bonnet of the light blue Ford Popular I had bought second-hand and had to park next to the wall. I drove to work

every day, an ordinary journey via Stretford - except for one day when I was nudged forward by a bus at a traffic light: after establishing that no damage had been done, the relieved driver tried to reassure me by saying: "Don't worry - the bus is only made of fibreglass." All ten tonnes of it... We used to park in the side streets off Deansgate where usually only two hours were permitted, which meant people were constantly disappearing from the office with a muttered "got to move my car" to the newsdesk as they hurried off, often combining the car movement with another clandestine errand.

The only person I knew at the *Mail* on arrival was Ken Moor, a seasoned reporter who had interviewed me in Durham during some long-forgotten student protest because I was on *Palatinate*. In his copy he quoted me accurately, adding the words: "as he supped his third pint." Said refreshment was kindly provided by the *Daily Mail* under the soon to be familiar sobriquet of "hospitality to contacts" (something completely unknown on the parsimonious *Journal)*. But Ken gave me some good tips, including advice about how to deal with Donlan. In my first days I was given a story about a family inheritance row in Blackpool and a phone number to call to find out whether there had been any new developments. The person I wanted to speak to was unavailable, so I set about finding another source and managed to produce the goods. Ken told me later that Donlan had actually expressed approval of my initiative, undoubtedly the result of my sound training. Apparently, he had expected me to report the failure of my first phone call and ask what to do next. So I managed to get, in a small way, into his good books - though I still received the odd bollocking like everyone else - to such a degree that within months I was doing shifts on his newsdesk as a lowly assistant. Donlan's deputy was Bill Dixon, much easier to work

with although he nurtured a deceptively tough Glasgow accent. Ken Moor unfortunately soon went missing - he had got tuberculosis and had to spend months in a sanatorium on the Lancashire coast.

Even though a newsdesk assistant was little more than a messenger boy (I do not recall the presence of a single female journalist - reporter or sub - in that office), I was sometimes in the position of giving instructions, albeit on Donlan's behalf, to some considerably older and more experienced men. They included Harold Pendlebury, a reporter with a spectacular record of scoops and coups as good as that of anyone in Fleet Street but a committed northerner. Another such was John Chartres, whom I was to meet again when I was on *The Times* and he had become that paper's northern correspondent, still based in the Manchester area. A younger colleague was Brian Macarthur, who became a very senior executive on Times Newspapers during and after my time there. David Seymour became a senior editorial executive on the *Daily Mirror*. Tony Hoare, a reporter, briefly became a friend, encountered again when he came to London for an interview with *The Times* soon after I had joined it; he did not come south in the end so our paths parted. He stayed in Manchester and became a leading scriptwriter for Granada TV's *Coronation Street,* then far and away the nation's favourite soap.

I did not bring off any major reporting coups on the *Mail* in Manchester, hardly surprising as I was diverted unexpectedly soon to newsdesk work. But I did a lot of driving in my own car in the north, to the Lake District, Staffordshire and North Wales among other areas. This brought in some useful extra cash in the form of

mileage (a *Mail* colleague, Peter O'Hanlon, a superb raconteur, invented the *Scoop*-worthy concept of "reverse mileage" for distances covered in reverse gear, which do not show up on the odometer). Another wit (and mileage expert) on the staff was Bill Davis, a reporter larger than life in several senses, who lived in Chesterfield, Derbyshire, and covered southern Yorkshire from there. He was a fully qualified pilot and owned his own plane. Sent from home to cover a mining accident in Yorkshire, he replied when asked by the newsdesk how far he would need to drive, he replied: "About £5-worth of mileage." On arrival at the scene, he phoned the desk again and said, "There must be at least half a dozen *Express* reporters here and I'm on my own," to which Donlan coolly replied: "Walk tall." Bill, not the tallest of men, filed the better story.

I interviewed the mother of Keith Bennett on the anniversary of his disappearance. This sad and bewildered woman would learn in the end that her young son had been abducted and killed by the notorious "Moors murderers," Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, arrested in 1965, tried, convicted and sent to Broadmoor indefinitely. Keith was never found and his mother died without knowing where he is buried.

Sometimes there were northern angles on other big national and international stories, such as the Great Train Robbery of August 1963. We stood around in the newsroom watching the "flashes" coming out of the Press Association teleprinter - it was like a crazy auction, starting with a report that £100,000 had been stolen. Then it rose to £250,000... We were agog as the figure rapidly mounted to a final £2.6 million in used banknotes, then Britain's biggest robbery. The main local angle was

the unfortunate driver of the train, Jack Mills, and his co-driver David Whitby, who were viciously assaulted by the gang: Mills never fully recovered - the one big flaw in the huge criminal caper which otherwise evoked admiration, not always reluctant, for its scale and boldness, balanced by sheer incompetence that led to early arrests. Both men lived in the great railway town of Crewe and they and their families drew a lot of media attention, including mine.

I was sent to the vast Chatsworth Estate in Derbyshire of the Duke of Devonshire in November 1963 when President Kennedy was assassinated. His sister Kathleen is buried in the grounds: her private aircraft crashed en route to France in May 1948, killing her and her second husband, Earl Fitzwilliam. Her first husband had been the Marquis of Hartington, heir-apparent to the Duke who was killed in action in the Second World War. Kennedy visited the grave en route to London after a state visit to his ancestral Ireland, to the amazement of estate workers and local people. Quite a few of these had visited the grave to lay flowers as a tribute to JFK and his sister. I did a few "vox-pop" interviews. I recall earnest discussions in the ensuing days at the Victoria pub, the *Mail's* Manchester local round the corner from the office, with Donlan and others about the likely outcome of the shocking assassination. Another regular there was Brian Wilde, a very amusing actor who became famous as Foggy in the long-running TV series *Last of the Summer Wine* (the Granada TV studios were just down the street and many actors and staff joined us at the bar; a young reporter was sacked by Donlan for using his press card to get into a Granada television pop show for his own amusement).

I went to the annual prize day of the august Manchester Grammar School because the guest of honour that year was the ever-newsworthy Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery of Alamein, the country's most eminent war hero, who handed out the awards. He was also a tetchy little man who ejected my unfortunate photographer colleague for daring to move about (quietly) looking for the best angle while the great man was speaking.

Not yet famous but clearly on the make was a young man called Jeffrey Archer. I was given a "house job," a story to cover because it was of special interest to the paper rather than of intrinsic news value. It concerned a charity supported by the *Mail* for which the Beatles, then a rising national musical phenomenon, were to make an appearance in Manchester. Archer was doing the public relations, but what I remember is seeing the photographer's prints after the event. Archer somehow managed to appear in the centre of every single shot. One might have thought that the event was about him...

I was fortunate enough to have a long and enjoyable chat with the sculptress (later Dame) Elisabeth Frink, then aged 33, whose work was already attracting much attention at home and abroad. She was returning to Manchester airport from a trip to the USA. I do not think the encounter led to any print worthy copy beyond a possible picture caption, but at least it afforded me a memorable moment. I have no idea what we discussed...

I did obtain a micro-scoop some time in 1964, when the Prime Minister, Sir Alec Douglas-Home, came north to address a Tory rally. His wife was with him, and when waiting around in the lobby of their hotel I noticed she was sitting in an armchair knitting - baby clothes. I learned from her that a Douglas-Home grandchild was due, an event of no conceivable significance but quite printable.

Donlan being Donlan, he decided to condense my byline by removing the gaps in my typically Dutch surname with its pesky capital letter on the last syllable. He dismissed my objection. It was obviously *Daily Mail* policy: the paper's correspondent in Washington, later a friend and colleague when I worked in South Africa where he came from, rejoiced in the resounding Afrikaner name of Pieter van der Westhuizen. This was too much for the *Mail*; after a small struggle he was reborn journalistically as Peter Younghusband (the maiden name of his mother who was related to the explorer of that name, Sir Francis, leader of a great expedition to Tibet). Thus, a byline 25 characters and spaces wide shrank to a not altogether wieldy 18. Its owner is one of the most amusing people I have ever met. A London reporter called Peta Deschampsneufs had her byline truncated to Peta Deschamps (she became Brian Macarthur's first wife)

A favourite recollection from those days is of a hearing at a North Wales magistrates' court, probably at Llandudno, a.k.a. Liverpool-on-sea. On the night of the Miss World contest on television, then a massively popular event, viewers in a nearby village found they could not get a picture. Most rented their sets from the Rediffusion company because local reception in the hills was poor, a problem solved

by the rental firm's cable. It turned out that a local man had illicitly plugged in to this cable to give himself a perfect picture, while all his neighbours had to do without. There was much hilarity in court and in the media.

For me the most memorable "character" of my *Daily Mail* days apart from Donlan was Jimmy Lewthwaite, then seeing out his last years before retirement as northern Night News Editor. Short, gruff and laconic, he was a veteran reporter with an entertaining sense of humour. Working on a late shift with him was both educational and diverting, especially when he could be persuaded to talk of his greatest scoop. He was the paper's Scotland reporter in the 1930s and covered the country in a private aircraft. As I understand it, he was the man who "discovered" the Loch Ness Monster, launching one of the great hardy annuals of British journalism, still with us today. The *Daily Mirror* also claimed to have fathered the story. He picked up gossip about the mysterious creature frequently "sighted" by locals living by the Great Glen, where the consumption of whisky is not unknown, and filed the first of countless stories (when I was briefly on assignment in the area in the late 1960s, I was shown an umbrella stand that might have been an elephant's foot but was solemnly presented to me as a relict of the Monster). After the later shifts we weary reporters and desk men would repair to the Manchester Press Club, which was open virtually all night, for a game of totally incompetent snooker and a pint or two.

On one late-stop shift, which ended at 4 am, there was a dreadful winter road crash in the Pennines between Manchester and Leeds in which several people died in conditions that were particularly difficult for the emergency services. I was the last

reporter in the newsroom and it fell to me to get the details on the phone and write the copy at top speed, paragraph by paragraph, for that night's front-page splash. Newdesk staff snatched each paragraph from my typewriter for copying on the awful Banda copying machines then used by the *Mail*, which tended to cover the user in purple ink up to the elbows. I had never worked so quickly but it was good training for later in my career, as will be seen. So was a short stint in the Liverpool district office when someone was on leave: I covered the general-news aspects of the Grand National at Aintree, the world's most famous steeplechase.

I was on a late shift one night when Donlan invited the local police round for a drink, a noisy event that took place in the spacious newsroom itself. I remember one cameo from this shindig: a rather handsome young secretary who worked on the *Daily Sketch* newsdesk clambered up onto her place of work and belted out the Petula Clark hit of the day, "Downtown", without accompaniment. Her voice was much larger than her slight frame and she drew a well-earned storm of applause.

My least favourite assignment in Manchester was Saturday duty. A sole reporter was detailed to sit in Donlan's seldom-used office all day to sort out the post and take calls from readers (there was no Sunday paper in those days - the *Dispatch* was dead, the *Mail on Sunday* as yet unborn). The other main task was to go through a small mountain of regional and local weeklies to look for possible stories. There was no-one to talk to or go out with for a pie and a pint. It felt like a wasted day. It was a mildly depressing duty and fortunately it did not arise very often.

Fortunately, there was a touch of light relief even in this drudgery: a northern local weekly ran the following caption (as I can approximately recall): "Meet Nelly - there's nothing she likes better than lying on her back and having her tummy tickled." Unfortunately, the caption lay fair and square under a photograph of a radiant bride in white dress and veil. Somewhere else in the paper was a picture of an elephant, probably a denizen of Chester Zoo...

Jimmy Lewthwaite had two sons in journalism. Gilbert worked on features and foreign news at the *Daily Mail* in London before becoming the London correspondent of the *Baltimore Sun,* a leading American title for which he later worked in its head office. James Jr was in charge of the *Mail*'s regional office in Newcastle at the time, and soon left, like Donlan himself later, for the London *Sun,* eventually to become a senior reporter. I got to know both younger Lewthwaites.

After little more than a year in Manchester, which never became a favourite place, I was sent back to the North-East. This happened when James Jr left the *Mail* and his colleague in the Newcastle office, Clive Borrell (later a colleague on *The Times*) was transferred to London at about the same time. As my experience of the area was recent and detailed, Donlan decided to put me in charge of the office, which also accommodated the dapper *Daily Sketch* man, Laurie Taylor, and his photographer, the raffish Johnny Learwood. The *Mail's* resident snapper was Leo Dillon, a local man with a deadpan sense of humour. Also present was Doug Wetherall, regional sports reporter, whose main interest was Newcastle United football club, a quasi-religious institution in the city. I was soon reinforced by another local journalist,

Mike Gay, a first-class reporter who later wound up on the *Sun,* first in Newcastle and later in London.

When writing this I found I could remember very little about Manchester, so I took a brief trip there in 2015. I returned as unfond of the place as I had been before I went. The city had been transformed, unrecognisably for me, thanks *inter alia* to the powerful IRA bomb that demolished the huge Arndale shopping centre, injuring hundreds, in 1996. Its replacement is dull and unadventurous. Sale looks the same as it was; Rusholme now accommodates a large south Asian immigrant community which is responsible for such a great number of restaurants that they are collectively known as "the curry mile". Lots of individual new buildings are scattered among the many surviving redbrick structures from the industrial revolution in and near the centre, but there is nothing to match the recent reconstruction of central Liverpool, or "Liverpool 1". In Salford, on the other side of the river Irwell, the "other city" that most people take to be part of Manchester itself, there is the huge, bleak, empty-looking "Media City" development, whose architecture is rather less inspiring than the Olympic area of east London, built around the same time for the games of 2012. No wonder that so many BBC people resented being made to move there. Not even the impressive Lowry gallery, the Imperial War Museum North and the National Football museum confer much life on the area. But one new and positive feature of the city as a whole is the still expanding tram network, the largest re-adoption of this mode of transport in Britain, which should never have abandoned it in the 1950s. But at least my little latter-day trip to Manchester explained why I could recall so little about my time living there…

Newcastle II/Whitley Bay

The heading on this chapter is Manchester, although my last 15 months living in the North were spent back in the North-East, running the Newcastle office of the *Mail* and living in the seaside resort of Whitley Bay, a fifteen-minute drive away. But I was still at the beck and call of Donlan and the Manchester office, so the main heading stays...

Once again we drove over the Pennines, in the opposite direction. I had acquired Chris's mother's sporty Triumph Herald car, trading in the Popular in part-exchange for her new car, a later model of the same make, and making up the price difference in cash. We had arranged temporary lodgings in Holly Avenue, Jesmond, Newcastle, with Anna Bolam, the widowed mother of Roger Bolam, copytaster on *The Journal*. Her house was just round the corner from our first home, the flat in Osborne Road. This kind and motherly, if also highly strung, woman (widow of Silvester Bolam, the editor of the *Mirror* jailed for contempt in 1949 for publishing allegedly prejudicial material about John George Haigh, the "acid bath murderer") had become a kind of universal aunt for us young journalists from *The Journal*. Her daughter Claire would soon marry Michael Hamlyn. Anna was also inordinately fond of cats: she owned two Siamese which appeared to have been trained to treat newspapers as toilets. Since the house was swamped in newsprint we had to learn to live with the all-pervading feline smell.

This was just one incentive for Chris and me to buy the first of the three houses, all new when bought, that we owned in our more than 50 years together - a three-bedroom, end-of-terrace home on a new, middle-class estate in Whitley Bay, the main feature of which was a forlorn mini-Blackpool then patronised by Glaswegian industrial workers for their annual holiday fortnight. As it was a new house, there was no delay beyond the usual bureaucratic (and expensive) legal procedures involved in taking possession. There is a wonderful sandy beach (much better than Blackpool's pebbles) which sadly does not benefit from the Gulf Stream and also faces east. To catch the afternoon sun therefore you have to lie with your head towards the sea and your feet pointing inland, possibly encouraging a mild rush of blood to the head...

The estate, whose streets are mostly named after places in the West Indies (where the developer doubtless spent his ill-gottens) is very close to the coast and to the pretty St Mary's lighthouse on its rocky islet, reachable by a short causeway at low tide. The house cost £3,000 and we borrowed the last £100 for the deposit and fees from Chris's uncle Gordon in Tynemouth where he, his brothers and two sisters, including her mother, had been brought up, and who owned an important trawler flotilla based at neighbouring North Shields - the Dobie family business. I thus became a proud joint houseowner at the age of 24, not at all uncommon in those days. We furnished it very basically, but decently and cheaply, from local auctions. In exchange for Latin lessons, Chris took cookery instruction from Ella Pybus, wife of Rodney, a former *Journal* colleague who had recently left for Tyne-Tees Television and later became a full-time poet of national renown. They lived nearby.

Next door lived another young couple who became close friends: Basil and Nora Boland. He worked for the Ferranti company in the infant but rapidly growing electronics field and she was from Argentina, a fabulous cook from whom Chris also gladly collected hints. At that stage we each had one small daughter and could provide babysitting for one another. Nora was wont to amaze (and delight) the local butcher by buying great slabs of veal on an Argentine scale for her elaborate version of *Milanesa* - a breaded escalope on which she piled slices of ham, cheese and cooked tomatoes. Our neighbourly relationship was very culinary, because the Bolands had friends known to our little circle simply as "Ann 'n' Ian" - the Lumsdens from Wideopen, north of Newcastle, Ian being Basil's colleague. They lived with her mother and could not entertain there - so they used to turn up in their green minivan, which reeked of strong curry from the part-prepared meals they used to bring along.

It was in Newcastle that I began to learn how to be a foreign correspondent. This had nothing to do with the famous, and sometimes barely penetrable, Geordie accent, with which I was already very familiar. The key factor was having to find your own stories, over and above official or scheduled events. I was able to renew some old contacts from barely a year earlier, including former NCJ colleagues. There was the "on the road" camaraderie-cum-rivalry with the members of the national press corps in the city. The *Express* had three reporters and a photographer. The *Mail* had two plus one and the *Sketch* one plus one all sharing an office as in Manchester; the *Mirror* had two plus one, the *People* had one (the formidable Sidney Foxcroft). And

there was the ubiquitous freelance, Bert Horsfall, and his photographer colleague Les Palmer, who usually worked together and covered for nationals when opportunity arose. There was also Ian Kerr, the Newcastle man of the *Sunderland Echo* who did a lot of freelancing for the nationals on the side. The broadsheets covered a more broadly defined north-east region from Leeds, and their reporters would drive up when the story was big enough.

The North-East was covered by the first, i.e., earliest, Manchester editions. This brought one important advantage: any breaking story, however big, was yours alone, at least at the outset, because nobody from Manchester, let alone London, could get to the area in time to take over on the day. There was nothing a regional reporter liked less than to have a big story taken away by someone from head office. But I was robbed in another way when I learned that ICI (Imperial Chemical Industries) was about to start selling petrol from garages. ICI, based *inter alia* in Billingham on the Tees and now all but forgotten, was then Britain's largest and most important industrial company, a household name and a blue-chip share held by everybody's private pension fund - equivalent in such ways to today's BP. The birth of the petrol pump sporting the ICI logo, borrowed from an ancient Greek inscription, was thus a big story. I wrote it and it duly appeared as the splash in the *Mail* almost verbatim - under the byline of the paper's London-based motoring correspondent! I was not amused, but Donlan made it clear I should learn to live with such things. ICI itself has disappeared off the map altogether, having been broken up and had its rump taken over by a Dutch chemical multinational in 2008.

It was hard work and involved a lot of driving (and therefore mileage), often six days a week. Only Saturday was a safe bet for a day off. The work was also quite convivial. The *Mail* office was on the first floor of a decrepit building in Pink Lane opposite Newcastle Central station. Conveniently situated immediately underneath was the office pub, the Forth. The *Express* office was down towards the precipitous Quayside and used a pub called the Bodega, less exotic than its name implies. There was any number of "neutral" pubs in the city centre where one could meet one's colleagues and rivals. Since Mike Gay and I both lived in the Whitley Bay area (he was in Monkseaton) we would often drive in convoy after work for a beer in the town. Half-pint rounds were the norm.

It was the quirky stories that were the most fun. Mike spotted a reader's letter in the *Evening Chronicle* in which a man complained that he had ordered a ton of assorted broken paving to build a patio. When it was dumped in his drive, he suspected he had been short-changed - and weighed the load, stone by stone, on his kitchen scales! After hours of labour and totting up he established that the load fell well short of a ton and demanded compensation.

My own efforts included the discovery of "bonking" - in those days a word without a sexual connotation. A major workplace in the Newcastle area was the national social security headquarters at Longbenton (still there). The staff were responsible, *inter alia,* for issuing millions of pension and child-allowance books containing weekly vouchers for cashing at the post office. But every year the budget changed the weekly payments, so that long-since pre-printed vouchers had to be over stamped, by hand,

page by page, condemning the staff to weeks of tedious labour, featuring the high-speed double-bonk: inkpad, voucher, inkpad, voucher...

A lot of energy was inevitably wasted on tips that were wrong, invented, distorted or merely plucked out of thin air. There was always a slightly uneasy feeling on phoning the newsdesk to report that the story did not stand up or was simply rubbish. There was no escaping the simultaneous anxiety that one of the rivals might actually have managed to stand it up. I spent a frustrating day trying to confirm a classic urban (or in this case rural) legend, a story which people swear was seen or experienced by a friend of a friend, but which somehow is never nailed down or confirmed. Manchester rang to say they had been tipped off that an elephant had squashed a Mini by sitting on it "somewhere in the north" and would I stand it up. I embarked on a long series of phone calls to zoos, safari parks, wildlife centres, even circuses - anywhere that might give shelter to an elephant - and although I had several amusing conversations involving a lot of banter, I failed to confirm the tale. It was one of those myths that one fervently wished would turn out to be true, and in a perfect world would even have been proved by a lucky photo.

Two years after I had covered the abortive seal cull on the Farne Islands for *The Journal*, another cull was announced by the fishery authorities. Once again the seals were held responsible for eating too many salmon and damaging the livelihood of the local fishermen. Once again the protests mounted; once again the press, national and local, assembled at the Ship Inn at Seahouses. Representing the newborn *Sun* was Nancy Banks-Smith, who would later become Britain's wittiest TV critic on *The*

Guardian. After an entertaining lecture by a bashful lady zoologist on how to sex a seal pup (inspect rear end: if one hole, male; if two, female) we awaited the start of the cull. And we waited and waited. The weather was cold but pretty quiet this time by north-east coast winter standards - but the boat that was needed to remove the carcases of the cuddly-looking, smelly pups broke down. It proved impossible to find the required spare part in time before the narrow window of slaughter-opportunity closed once again. So the assembled hacks were frustrated a second time, though not totally bereft of copy: once was circumstance, twice was coincidence. The seals survived to present me with a third opportunity 13 years later.

Visiting the Farne islands was a reminder, if one was needed, of the sheer beauty of the countryside of County Durham and especially of Northumberland, where driving a car could still be pleasurable outside the conurbations. In particular, any excuse was good enough to explore Hadrian's Wall and even more to visit Holy Island or Lindisfarne, reachable at low tide by a causeway across the sands from the little village of Beal. It was commonplace for people to mistime their crossing, so a couple of nest-boxes are in place to shelter walkers. Sometimes cars get caught or break down, a rather expensive error for their owners. Historically it was one of the main centres for the spread of Christianity in the north of England, and the majestic ruins of its priory are a considerable tourist attraction. St Cuthbert lived on an offshore islet as a hermit. The island, which also boasts a lovely little castle on a hill, still intact and lived in, was also the first landfall of the Vikings when they came raiding in the north in the eighth century. But sometimes there was a real modern story to be had, such as when Northumberland County Constabulary (as they were then; now subsumed into Northumbria police, who also cover Tyne and Wear) made the

mistake of announcing that they were planning to station an officer to live on the island and started to look for a house to buy. Unaccountably, advertisements for houses for sale disappeared; or else when one became vacant the asking price was propelled into the stratosphere. The islanders were clearly intent on protecting their way of life, which in the matter of drinking hours led the two pubs to stay open on demand, into the early hours when the tide was right. The police abandoned the search.

During the campaign for the general election in October 1964, a rumour arose that the actress Honor Blackman, former J. Arthur Rank starlet and latterly a "James Bond girl" (she starred in the film "Octopussy," a single entendre of a title) had decided to lend her support to the Liberal party. Could I find her and get a quote? All the newsdesk in Manchester knew was that she was staying at a hotel somewhere in Northumberland. This was where local knowledge came in: I drew up a mental shortlist of where a big star might stay in the beautiful county to evade the limelight, a total of three hotels. The first one I rang, the George Inn at Chollerford, turned out to be the right address and I was able to get there for a brief interview.

Show business intruded in other ways during my second period working in Newcastle. I covered a gig by the singer P.J. Proby, notorious for performing with such abandon that his trousers split. He appeared in Newcastle and lo, his trousers split on stage, leading to the usual mixture of amusement, uproar and disdain among the public, the latter especially from the majority who had never seen him. On another occasion the pop group known as the Animals returned to their native

Newcastle at the height of their fame and were mobbed in the city centre. To get a breathless interview, I leapt on a suburban train with the lead singer, Eric Burden, to escape the crowd. Their greatest hit was the rousing ditty, "There is a house in New Orleans/they call the Rising Sun." For some reason the words are still in my head...

I wrote an indignant letter to Harry Myers about the significantly greater space the *Express* gave to the North-East in its relevant edition compared with the *Mail*. I had collected the evidence over a couple of months and spelt it out in chapter and verse. I received a polite, non-committal response - and a pay rise of £2 a week, for which I had not had the temerity to ask (nor, to be fair, was it my motive)!

After barely a year in Newcastle, a busy but enjoyable period, I was asked by the *Mail* to go to London for a trial period. Fortunately, my parents still lived there, in a flat in Chiswick Village, so I was able to doss on a camp bed in my father's study. I did not enjoy the head office experience, which not very memorably included coverage of Cruft's dog show. Deputy news editor at the time was Charles Wilson, later editor of *The Times,* whom I remember as the most foul-mouthed individual I had ever met (which, after prolonged familiarity with policemen not to mention journalists, was saying something). Back working in Newcastle, I was contacted by *The Sunday Times* and asked to cover a major local crime story for them, having written about it for the *Mail* the day before. I did so with some trepidation as working for another paper without permission was a sacking offence, and I made sure the story appeared (on the front page) without a byline.

The upshot of this was that I once again found myself in a situation similar to my last term at Durham: I had a choice of job offers, this time in Fleet Street. On a brief visit to Manchester, I had a meeting with Donlan and Mike Randall, the editor of the *Mail,* who both knew (from me) that I had been headhunted by *The Sunday Times* (thanks to Mike Hamlyn and Lew Chester, my former *Journal* colleagues). The *Mail* wanted me to stay and work in London. But I opted for *The Sunday Times* because it was more serious, and a better paper for someone with ambition to work for. I was interviewed by William Rees-Mogg, then deputy editor, and he formally offered me the job. I was confident enough to ask for £200 a year more, which meant annual pay of £2,000 - just enough to qualify for the senior-staff non-contributory pension scheme. I was due to start on August 1, 1965.

The demon Donlan proved not to be an unrelenting ogre after all. In his generous reply to my letter of resignation he wrote: "Our thanks to you for the splendid way in which you tackled all tasks set for you by the *Daily Mail* during the past two years. I know that you will continue to take larger than average strides to progress in newspapers." I still like the "larger than average".

Chris was expecting our second child at the time, which meant a frantic period of house hunting (and house-selling) while settling into a new job, once again lodging with my parents. The solution to the housing question was to be found in my own (new) newspaper: *The Sunday Times* happened to be the only one in which the housebuilding giant Wates chose to advertise at the time. So I saw a display about a new project in south-west London, the Wates estate at Ham, Richmond, Surrey. We

moved in in October at relatively high speed: Sara was born there some six weeks later. The new house, fractionally smaller than Whitley Bay but virtually identical in layout and also at the end of a terrace, cost over twice as much at £6,250. Once again I had to borrow the last £100, this time from my parents, towards the deposit and expenses. At least I was able to repay Chris's uncle his £100 from the proceeds of the Whitley Bay sale, which yielded a small net profit.

Karen and Sara, Ham 1968