



Robert (extreme left) at work.

 Free at last

The shop manageress put down her book, gently encouraging Robert to try and say the word once more. Mrs Siddall, a former nurse, had taken an instant liking to the teenager since he had started his employment as an errand boy a few weeks earlier. Robert was a conscientious worker who got on well with customers. It was obvious he had a number of social problems, not least his ability to pronounce his words clearly. His personal hygiene was also suspect, which probably owed much to the fact he wore the same shirt and jumper to work every day. Some of the elderly ladies who came to the store found it difficult to understand what the new boy was saying, although he was very polite and helpful.

Mrs Siddall was divorced with grown-up daughters of her own. She was training as a manageress at one of Birmingham's oldest grocery stores, George Mason's, and wanted to help Robert improve his speech. The shop closed every day for a lunch hour and, during that time, she gave the teenager some simple spelling tests. But his efforts to say the words out loud ended in frustration, baffling the mother-of-two. Observing Robert at work, Mrs Siddall knew he was intelligent, but was puzzled why he could not pronounce his words more clearly.

"Robert, let me have a look in your mouth," she commanded as someone used to telling patients what she wanted them to do.

Robert stood awkwardly, opening his mouth as wide as he could. He was embarrassed as his boss took hold of his face and peered into his gaping mouth.

"My goodness," she exclaimed. "I can see what your problem is straightaway. You're tongue-tied, Robert, and quite badly at that."

I've never known anyone your age to be like this. It's something doctors usually pick up in babies. Did your mother never take you to see a doctor?"

Robert could not tell her that doctors' visits were never high on his parents' agenda. He had never heard the phrase "tongue-tied". He was just glad to hear someone give a name to what was preventing him from speaking. Within two weeks, Robert had an appointment at Selly Oak Hospital as a day patient, on his one afternoon off from George Mason's. This hospital is now the main military hospital for troops returning from Afghanistan.

The youngster lay on a bed in preparation for his operation when the doctor entered followed by a posse of medical students. Each took a turn to stare into Robert's mouth then made notes on their clipboards while shaking their heads.

"I felt like a specimen in the lab," recounts Robert. "The doctor asked me to recite the alphabet so the students could hear my poor pronunciation. However, at fifteen, I did not know the alphabet. I got as far as the letter 'd' then he had to help me. It was humiliating.

"The students took turns to examine me like I wasn't even human. I was then taken to theatre where the doctor froze my tongue and, moments later, simply snipped the two pieces of membrane on either side which had pinned it to the floor of my mouth. It was as easy as that. I was free. I could talk like anyone else. I felt like a prisoner who had been wrongly convicted, finally let out of his cell, desperate to tell his story. All my young life, my outward appearance made the

"I dreamed again of the red robin that I trapped in a cage. I now understand why he kept hurting himself trying to escape from the trap. I now understand why he escaped and never came back. One day I will escape. One day I will be free."

world dismiss me as stupid and backward. My clothes were dirty rags. I was usually too embarrassed to speak and, when I did, I sounded clumsy, like a baby. Inside, my mind was buzzing and observant. I had so many questions and was keen to learn.

“After the operation as I waited in the outpatients department, a growing anger towards my parents intensified. I reflected how the operation had taken only minutes. I was going home that same afternoon. If mother or father had bothered to take notice of their children, they could have saved me years of misery, pain and exclusion.

“They could have fixed Jean and Brian’s squints; Jack and Bernard’s asthma could have been treated and my speech corrected while I was still an infant. My father had not even come to Selly Oak with me that day. Our parents had never been proper parents; they had been our jailers.”

“Read out loud and write down the words”

William Hicks turned quickly when he heard his son open the door of No. 335. He didn’t ask about the operation or how Robert felt or if he had a follow-up appointment with the local GP. He only wanted to know if he had received his wages so he could head off to the pub. In those days, the teenager earned the equivalent of £2.26 a week. His father took most of it, leaving him one shilling and one penny, or 5p, to pay for food, bus fares and clothes.

Since the fight, William no longer physically attacked his son. However, the psychological bullying continued. His father denounced Robert as a burden who had stayed on too long at school, sponging off his father for food and rent. He was told to get a job and start contributing to the house upkeep, which effectively meant his father’s pockets. His room remained bare and dirty; the

kitchen was barren of food; and the whole house froze when the gas ran out, which was frequently. William may have long ago left Birmingham's slums, but he retained a slum mentality so that No. 335 was just a slum in the country. Downstairs, the main lounge remained spotless.

There was a sigh of relief from his teachers when Robert confirmed he was leaving school. It was as if they were delighted to see another difficult pupil walk out the main gate. At fifteen, Robert was barely able to read and write, but his mathematical skills remained an untapped resource and his dyslexia was undiagnosed. The awkward, inarticulate boy, who was entertained rather than educated in class, had never been earmarked as university material; he was just more truculent factory fodder. Robert recalls the coldness of his departure. "The teacher bent down, looked me in the eye then whispered in my ear, 'What a waste.' I vowed, at that moment, I would prove him wrong. I would make something of my life and be successful. I did not waste my time at school: I never got a chance."

As he lay in bed that night, the surgeon's advice rang fresh in Robert's ears: "Read a book out loud while writing the words," he said. "That way, you can start learning how to use your tongue so your speech will gradually improve. You must read a book, Robert, the largest book you can find."

It seemed an impossible task. The only printable materials in Stonehouse Lane were the Family Allowance books and the Daily Mirror. It was Robert's job most mornings to fetch the newspaper from the nearest newsagent, which meant a two-mile round trip

"The way for me to overcome not being able to read is page by page and word by word even if it takes years to do it."

before he walked the same distance to school, or earn a severe beating from his father. As a result, he was regularly late for class registration, the perfect excuse for teachers to scold him as lazy.

The day after his operation, Robert was back at work. Mrs Siddall lovingly fussed over him, anxious for every detail of the hospital visit and his prognosis. He told of the doctor's advice and how he had found a large book at home along with an ancient ink pen which was essentially a wooden handle with a metal nib pushed in at one end. All he needed now was ink, a lot of ink, because the book called *The Holy Bible* contained 1,400 pages, with no pictures. Mrs Siddall put her hand to her mouth in excitement. She fetched a huge tin of industrial ink which she had bought for him. Robert was humbled and delighted. It was big enough to fill hundreds of desk ink wells. He beamed as he accepted this precious gift.

Cycling to George Mason's that morning, Robert's mouth was still very tender and raw where the surgeon had operated, but he had been practicing his "T" sound, which previously had always been voiced as a "D". For example, the word "they" came out as "dey" and "there" was heard as "dere". He felt incredibly humble as Mrs Siddall congratulated his efforts and then handed over the huge tin of ink. He was unused to such kindness and it overwhelmed him. Robert's home life had been the very negation of selflessness and generosity. There were one or two people in the care homes who had treated him kindly. But human warmth, in the shape of a gentle hug or a comforting smile, was foreign to the teenager. For the first time in his life, partly because of his operation and partly because someone had shown him unconditional kindness, Robert Hicks was finally able to say: "Thank you."

Before he left the shop, one more miracle took place. Robert explains: "I knew we had no paper at home. Ours was not a house where children's colourful paintings adorned the fridge or kitchen

wall. Our family's stains were there for all to see, if only someone had looked.

“That week, George Mason’s was being monitored by a man from a company which checked our stock sales record, most popular items and so on. The man had sheets of used spreadsheet paper and he was making notes on the blank side. I told him about my plans to copy out a book and I was amazed when he gave me a huge bundle, saying I could have more if I wanted. It took me several days to transport all the paper home in the basket of the bike I used for deliveries.”

The Holy Bible book

From the day after his operation, Robert’s nightly routine followed the same pattern. After work, he would come home and start to copy out his book immediately. When his father came home, Robert hoped he would be too drunk to demand food and that he would fall straight into bed.

When only his father’s snoring broke the silence, the teenager knew it was safe to get his paper, ink and Holy Bible book from the small space behind the gas meter where he kept it hidden.

Robert’s night-time occupation was unknown to his father; he feared the Holy Bible book would be ripped apart or thrown into the garbage. Alone in the dark, with only a candle providing light, he placed the valuable items on the wooden box which covered the gas meter, facing a cold, brick wall. There, until the early hours, he would write and speak the words aloud with such joy and purpose, he often found it difficult to stop

Although his aim in copying out this unknown book was solely to improve his speech, Robert slowly realised it was having a strange effect on him. He began to take in what he was reading. The Holy

Bible book was divided into two main sections, The Old Testament and The New Testament, and each of these consisted of smaller books with a different name. The first book in the Old Testament was called Genesis. When Robert read how God created the heavens and the earth and the earth was “without form and void”, that phrase struck him because it echoed his own family life. He knew what a void was; it was the empty, fractured life he had lived, traded between parents who shunned him, and care homes where he was just one more abandoned child. He wondered if the God mentioned in Genesis and whose Spirit hovered over the water, could hover over the Hicks family one day and give it form?

When he read about the Garden of Eden, Robert thought of the lush fields surrounding Bartley Green and Frankley Beeches Reservoir. He could understand God creating something so beautiful. But why, if God loved the world, had the world just been involved in a terrible war with bombs and shells tearing cities and the countryside apart? If God loved everyone, why did children like him suffer when they had done nothing wrong?

Writing out the Holy Bible book left Robert puzzled, questioning and enlightened. He loved the poetic language, often marvelling how the author, someone probably called King James, could write so beautifully. He worked his way through several of the books in the Old Testament then switched to the New Testament. There he encountered the man named Jesus whose painting he had seen many years ago in the little church. He loved reading about Jesus and his parables. Robert remembered how he had asked the vicar: “Who is this Jesus?” Now, he was beginning to know him and he seemed unlike anyone else Robert had ever met.

Some phrases and passages affected him so profoundly; like huge boulders they stopped him in his tracks. What did it mean to become a new creature in Christ Jesus? Could that happen to anyone? And if

Jesus' Heavenly Father was so powerful and good, could he not sort out Robert's drunken, abusive, violent earthly father, sleeping in the next room? One thing was certain: Robert loved reading this book. One afternoon, Jack tried to persuade his brother to go into town, something Robert enjoyed. However, he could not bear being away from his writing, using up every spare minute he had.

"There I was, a boy of fifteen, barely able to read or write and with absolutely no theological training whatsoever," says Robert. "I knew nothing about terms such as the Trinity or the Incarnation. But I would read something Jesus said then stop and reflect on it. This meditation brought the Bible alive. What did Jesus mean about living a life of love and having a personal relationship with him? I was aware my speech was improving from all my reading, but something else was also growing inside me, something I could not yet put into words.

"The Holy Spirit was doing a work in me. The Bible is not just a book. It is alive, the living Word in pen and paper. The Bible was becoming my teacher, my literature, my friend, but above all, my salvation. It is the manual for life. It is the complete book." He adds: "This startling revelation at such a young age planted a seed in my life so that many years later, as a publisher, I vowed that I would get a free copy of the Bible, New Testament or Gospels into the hands of as many people as possible, all over the world. Little did I know then that tens of millions of people would receive a copy—and one day at Buckingham Palace, I would hand one to the Queen through her office."

What is your religion, boy?

As he continued to write out the Bible, Robert felt a desire to attend church. He remembered his time at Middlemore Care Home when

all children entering the institution had their personal information collected with military precision. The same questions were repeated with weary familiarity. They were asked their name, address and father's occupation, in addition to their school year and whether they had any medication to take. The more experienced youngsters had their replies remembered by heart, although the first time the questions were addressed to Robert, one left him stumped.

"What is your religion?" inquired the receptionist at the young boy standing before her in his new clean underwear that had been supplied by the social work department. She had been warned this twelve-year-old boy was retarded, still unable to speak. All the youngsters had been washed, checked for lice and given new clothes in exchange for the foul-smelling rags which were already in the incinerator. She only required an answer to one simple question, and then he could be passed through to the dormitory.

"Can you tell me your religion?" she asked again, very deliberately. "Are you Church of England?"

Robert felt that church sounded far too important for someone like him from the slums. He shook his head.

The woman attempted some more suggestions: "Roman Catholic? Baptist?"

The names meant nothing to Robert. Finally, the frustrated receptionist cried: "You can be Methodist. We'll put you down for chapel. Next."

Robert had only attended a few church services while at Erdington and a few more with his primary school but he did not even know what the word denomination meant, let alone which one he belonged to if any. The following Sunday, he was shipped off to the local Methodist hall. The Methodists did not meet in the big church with the long drive, stained glass windows and paintings of Jesus. To get to the Methodist chapel, you had to walk down a long corridor

next to a shop. There was a smoking room where old men smoked pipes and women drank tea. The smell of tobacco smoke stayed with Robert longer than any of the hymns or sermons.

These early memories of attending church did not diminish as Robert continued his nightly vigils reading and copying the Bible. He had been working unremittingly for some months, and now felt moved to go to church. But which one? He still didn't feel able to go into the beautiful Anglican church, so he opted for the small Gospel Hall in Jiggins Lane, just a short walk from Stonehouse Lane.

"It was little more than a hut with a corrugated roof," explains Robert. "The membership consisted of a dozen people, although as many as fifty to sixty children went to Sunday School. One of the leaders, Mr Barnwell, greeted me warmly. I told him I had no specific church background, although as I was able to tell him a lot about the Bible, he looked confused. You see, I had memorised whole chapters and verses while copying it out."

At the end of the service, Mr Barnwell took the new boy aside. He was shocked at how dishevelled he looked. His clothes were dirty and stained. His hair was too long and his face unwashed. The boy said he was fifteen but still had some difficulty speaking clearly. Mr Barnwell asked: "Are you born again, Robert? Have you accepted Jesus as your Saviour?"

The phrase from the third chapter of John's Gospel when Jesus spoke about the need to be born again was familiar to Robert, but he was unsure whether or not he was born again, so he replied he was probably not. Mr Barnwell invited him to say a prayer, admitting he was a sinner and asking Jesus into his life, which Robert gladly repeated. When he finished, other members of the congregation came over to congratulate him, but Robert was confused. He felt he should have been aware of something special happening, but he could not help think his confession was said more to please Mr.

Barnwell, than a heartfelt acceptance of Jesus. He left Jiggins Lane feeling accepted, but puzzled.

A few weeks later, Robert was lying wide awake in his bed. It was after midnight. His father was still out. His siblings were scattered in different care homes. He thought about Mr Barnwell's question whether or not he was born again.

“I found myself starting to cry. Mr Barnwell's words came back to me. I had never considered myself a sinner, rather someone who had been sinned against. The darkness of the room increased my sense of loneliness and feeling of being unloved. I so desperately wanted to be loved. I slid out of bed onto my knees to pray. I don't know how long I knelt there, but my legs were numb. I raised my head and called upon Jesus to come into my life, to forgive me for what I had done wrong, and I accepted him as my Saviour. There on the cold, dirty floor of No. 335 Stonehouse Lane, the place which for so long as a child had been a living hell, I became a child of heaven.

“After the operation on my tongue, I had felt free. When I started to work at George Mason's I felt free. When I fought back against my father, I felt free. Now, I had accepted Jesus as my Saviour, I did not hear bells ring or see fireworks go off. I was still uncertain what it all meant. But I also felt truly free in a way that I had never felt freedom before.”