Harold Norman Swinnerton (1916-2004)

Norman was an uncle of my wife and I was one of the many people who I got on with him really well. We had a few things in common such as being pretty nippy round the athletics track, working in the building trade, and seeing the funny side of life. He retained that famous Liverpuddlian sense of humour right through his life. Although he had no children of his own, he always took an interest in his wider family and kept in touch with relatives all around the world. He became a father figure to the family and was also vice-president and US representative of the Swinnerton Society.

Having collected a good deal of information about Norman I have started to write it up for our family history and shall share aspects of his life by instalments in this magazine.

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Childhood

Harold Norman Swinnerton, known universally as "Norm", was born on 6 May 1916 at 101 Ponsonby Street in Liverpool which was a small 'two up and two down' terraced house. He had four brothers and five sisters and they shared beds, sleeping 'top and tail'. Their father, John Swinnerton, was a Marine Engineer on transatlantic liners, so was away from home nearly all the time.

Whilst his father was away, Norman's eldest brother Bill took charge of the children and maintained discipline until he left home when Norman was about two years old. Although it must have been very cramped in such a small house, it was a happy place and the boys in particular were always jolly and playing pranks, often having their sisters in stitches of laughter. The girls helped run the house variously cleaning or cooking. On Sundays their mother ensured that they were all turned out well for church, the boys in bright white shirts and the girls in white lace pinafores. When his younger brother Eric became poorly Norman would help his mother to look after him until his death in 1923.

Norman attended nearby newly built Granby Street school in Liverpool between 1921 and 1931. He then continued with night school there for two years in technical studies.

As a child, Norman suffered a series of medical misfortunes. The first was a poisoned foot. When he was 11 or 12 years old, Norman trod on a rose thorn and the wound turned septic and his foot went black. The doctor came to the house and sent him straight to hospital where he was taken immediately to theatre where the wound was pierced to drain out the ooze. It had got to the point where was a danger that his foot may have had to be amputated. When he was recovering he was confined for several weeks to basket type wheelchair with a long steering handle and his friends would take him out and push him down a slope in the local park.

The second was Ringworm. One day at school, Norman put on another boy's cap by mistake and caught ringworm which was not noticed for some time as he had thick hair. He was given cream to cure it but there was no improvement after six months. Consequently he became badly infected and was taken to hospital by his aunt Sally where his hair was cut off and he was strapped to a table and given x-ray treatment. This was a fairly new process at that time and the exposure had to be timed carefully. As it was, the Grand National race was being run that day and Sally was interested in horse racing so she and the nurse went off to listen to it on the radio. I believe it was the first year that the race had been broadcast and they got involved, forgetting about Norman and consequently he received too much exposure. He was told the hair would grow back and it did not seem to have been a problem at the time but his hair never grew back properly so he was effectively bald. That led to Norman being teased at school but to counteract it he tried harder at sports, football and athletic in particular, excelling in both thus silencing the teasers. His mother told him that "difficulties strengthen the mind just as labour strengthens the body" and it seems that Norman took that approach.

It was the loss of his hair which affected Norman the most as his fellow pupils would rib him. To counteract that, he decided to do better than them, and succeeded by achieving fourth place from the top in school and excelling in sports including football, cricket and athletics in which he won a number of medals When he was 14 years old, he was representing Lancashire when he won a bronze medal in the 440 yards sprint at the English Schools Athletic Association in Stamford. The same year he became Lancashire county champion for the 440 yards setting a new record in the process. Others at that event thought his school must have provided special training out of hours but this was not the case; it was all done within normal school routine.

The third problem was pierced eardrums. Norman was suffering with earwax so was taken for treatment. The nurse was not too careful in removing it and punctured both his eardrums which, although they healed over, retained scar tissue. That was to prevent him from his ambition of becoming a pilot in the RAF during World War 2.

Norman joined the Princes Gate gym club along with his sisters Edie and Doris but did not last long as he did not like being up-side-down due to his ear problems. He also continued to train for the 440 yards event for four years after leaving school but eventually lost interest although he did race whilst in the RAF at Dumfries and again at the end of the war on which occasion he won.

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