Bonfire Night in the 1970s

As October draws to a close and we try to remember which clocks to change by hand and which were changed by witchcraft in the night, thoughts drift to the approach of winter in a land far away: a thousand miles and forty years away.

1977 barely registers as “a long time ago”. The shape of Europe was completely different then, of course, with fewer countries to learn on a map and even fewer to visit. Music came on vinyl discs and phone calls were truncated by the peeps as you rummaged through your pockets for another 2p. Nobody had ever heard of the internet, and computers could fill a room. But Elizabeth was queen, as she is now, and HP Sauce was brown. It still rained at the seaside and bus shelters were filled with rubbish. Yet even for its familiarity, the past is a foreign country.

To visit 1977 as a citizen of 2017 would be like visiting Dublin for the first time as an Englishman. While feeling surprisingly familiar, it would also be strange enough to throw you a little off your step. Everyone speaks English! – but it isn’t the same as the place you left behind. And, just as each subsequent visit to Ireland reveals how different the land really is to the land in your imagination, so an extended visit to 1977 would reveal a world much further away than the mere forty years marked on the calendar.

As my American wife and I walk around Aldi looking for Haribo sweets and felt spiders, I remember a world in which trick or treating was something I read about in books. Hallowe’en existed in the English Midlands in 1977, but it wasn’t an important event. It was merely the starter, the prawn cocktail to the steak and chips that was Bonfire Night. Maybe we’d write a story about a witch at school, or bob for apples in the scout hut. But that would be all. The main event would come five nights later.

As the evenings grew chillier and darker, and the mist curled around the bright yellow streetlights, you’d look out of the window to see huddled figures pushing a wheelbarrow. Maybe they’d knock at your door and you’d see that the wheelbarrow contained a man made of newspaper, dressed in old clothes. The children in their flared trousers and parka coats would peer inside and one the older, bolder ones would ask, “Penny for the Guy?”

Of course, the poor old Guy had no need of pennies. He would not be able to buy his way off the top of the bonfire for a thousand or a million pennies. The pennies were to buy fireworks: Catherine wheels and bangers and roman candles and sparklers and rockets. 1977 really was a very long way away from here. Of course, everybody knew somebody who knew somebody whose brother had blown his hand off with a firework. But these tales were told to thrill, not to warn. We always half hoped we’d see it for ourselves – but we’d never admit it!

Then the night itself would arrive. It would begin as a normal night, like any other. Bonfire Night in 1977 was on a Saturday, but in those days the bonfire would be lit upon whichever day of the week the 5th happened to fall. Maybe you’d have fish fingers for your tea, watch the telly for a bit. Then you’d put on your wellies and your thick winter coat and trudge up to the muddy field in which the ill-fated Guy had been waiting for his irrevocable incineration atop his enormous tower of wood. In the darkness, you were certain you could make out some chairs high up in the stack, but you could never get close enough to see properly.

There would be hot drinks and toffee apples and big kids running round and laughing. You'd stand a little bit closer to your mum and dad, a little scared and a little thrilled by this one-night-only departure from the normal world of brightly lit living rooms and television game shows. The big event was coming, and it was dangerous and you might get to see someone's brother…

Is that a man walking towards the wooden tower? There's a light! Has it caught…? No? There it is again – a flash, a wisp of smoke… it's alight! The fire is alight!

There would be a mass movement, like the migration of starlings or mackerel, as a hundred, two hunded people shifted closer to the fire. There would be whoops and cries. The flames lapped the side of the tower and rose, higher and higher, towards the paper traitor at the top of the stack. Soon the entire edifice would be too bright to look at, too hot to stand near. Some daft kid ran in a loop, too close, much too close, to shouts of encouragement, before being yanked back by his mother for a good telling off. The wind shifted and the smoke stung our eyes. Our faces dripped with sweat while our backs froze. It began to rain. There were baked potatoes. There was cake.

And fireworks. I've seen professional firework displays a hundred times since, expensive affairs sponsored by big banks, in which hundreds of thousands of francs' worth of fireworks went up in smoke, watched by people on yachts with Prosecco and salmon. But no firework display will ever compete in my memory with the fireworks at the cricket club, or the scout hut, or in our back garden. I never wrote my name with a sparkler at the Zurifascht.

Finally, too early, long before the fire had even begun to die down, it was time to go home, walking sadly down the hill, leaving behind the shrieks and squeals and crackles and cries. Boots off outside, hang up your coat, a cup of cocoa and time for bed. That's it now until Christmas.

This exiled Englishman is looking forward to Hallowe'en. The twins are old enough to have a go at carving their own pumpkin and the baby is sure to look cute in whatever home-made costume we put him in. It's a big part of my wife's culture, and I'm proud to be invited to be part of it.

But prawn cocktail without steak and chips to follow is a bit sad, isn't it?

Mik Sutton
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