

## Chapter 1 Traumatic Years for Peter and Joan Dibdin 1933-1943

This chapter, taken from a booklet of the same title, has been introduced as a prelude that was written after the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of Three Lives in WW2 and now sets the scene for what is to follow.

A greater insight into the early lives of Joan and Peter are covered in the book "William Joseph Dibdin and Family" but the reader will find some repetition within that book and this one .



Joan and Peter Dibdin was orphaned at the age of 13. Their parents, Lionel and Cecily, died on 28<sup>th</sup> March 1933 in the first major aircraft crash this country had experienced. It happened in Dixmude in Belgium near "Flanders Field" where Lionel, had been on active service just 16 years before. Peter was just 20 years old, a minor, articed to his father's property company and Joan was just 13 years old and at Ancaster House boarding

School in Bexhill.

The probable reason for her being at boarding school was that it was within the family culture to consider that private boarding school was the best one could do for one's children, and there may have been an element of hope that boarding school would settle a somewhat unruly child. An additional aspect to be considered regarding the family was that 3 years before Joan was born in 1920, Peter's older brother Stanley died of pneumonia, at 6 years old, while Lionel was at the front in WW1.

At the time of the plane crash, Peter was demonstrating himself to be a capable and very active young man and had bought his first car a couple of years before and Joan was, it seems, a very self-willed 13 year old young lady. Both were probably used to a fairly comfortable lifestyle in which much could be taken for granted and quality goods and services was the order of the day. Records and letters show that up to and during World War 1, life was financially hard, in a middle class sort of way, and that the family's more comfortable state of life had only developed during the few years after the war and must have been based on Lionel's success in Civil Engineering and Property Development. At the time of his death, he had worked on at least ten property estates in the south of England and had just bought Leladene, also called Camille Lacey, an estate at West Humble in the Mole gap, next to Box Hill, that had been owned in the previous century by the author, Fanny Burney.

At the time of the plane crash Joan was probably still at school with her Easter holiday due in a week or so.

It appears that Joan did not go to the funeral. Mrs Midd, a very close friend, almost member of the family, mentioned once that Joan was not there and was playing in the garden. Whether this was her choice or not is unknown, but it may have been taken for granted that children did not go to funerals. However, there is evidence that suggests that Joan was in fact sent straight up to her Aunt Edith in Saltburn.

The burial itself, in the graveyard of All Saint Church Carshalton, which was less than half a mile from their home in Grosvenor Avenue, must have been an interment of ashes as both Lionel and Cecily were cremated having been probably badly burned in the plane crash. The minister was in fact not from Carshalton but from Sutton.



TELEPHONE  
SUTTON 728.

THE RECTORY,  
SUTTON,  
SURREY.

3rd May 1933.

Dear Mr. Dibdin,

I would like you and your family really to believe that I counted it a great privilege to be allowed to perform the last acts of respect and honour to your Father and Mother. Your relations have been kindness itself in the matter, and now I get a most unexpected letter from you. I had the highest opinion of your Father through meeting him often at the Rotary Club, and I wish I had known your Mother. I am not going to attempt the impossible task of trying to express to you how deeply all of us felt for you and your sister in having to face one of the greatest tragedies that can happen to a man. I think I caught something of your Father's spirit in your own face at the funeral, and, indeed, you must have needed it.

Many thanks once again for your very great kindness in troubling to write. I am most grateful.

Yours sincerely,  
*E. P. Rowcombe*

It was not surprising that over 18 months later in November and December 1934, there are letters to Peter, from Joan's School, Ancaster House, Bexhill, about indirect reports of Joan not accepting her parent's death. She had told a friend that she thought that they were still in Belgium, living poverty stricken, and the friend had told a clergyman who in turn told the Head of the School. The Head teacher, Miss Burrows, rather insensitively, requested Peter to talk to Joan to get her accepting the truth and gave him advice on how to do it. It is noted that in Northy's letter from Nigeria at that time, he refers to Joan being in Hospital and hopefully out for Christmas. It appears that Northy, Mr Kingsnorth, was a close friend of the Dibdin family who had worked on engineering projects with Lionel, Joan's father and had known him from the wartime. He lived in Shooters Hill and in 1917, there is reference to Mrs Kingsnorth. There are a number of letters from him to Lionel and to both Joan and Peter, particularly a condolence letter, of a very down to earth nature, from Nigeria where he was working on building a school for local children. Sadly he died in 1935.

Joan once mentioned that, after the death, there was difficulty within the family about what to do with them both. It was considered by the most enlightened, Mrs Midd, that they should stay, with some support, at Avondale, but between the Public Trustees and the Haycraft and Dibdin families, it was decided that Avondale should be sold and as a consequence Peter and Joan split up.

This situation was created, in part, by the fact that Frances Georgina Haycraft, Cecily's mother who was now 77, and who lived close by in Sutton, was legally due to be the next of kin, as the only surviving grandparent. Sadly she renounced her responsibility as guardian and so other guardians had to be found and the result was that Edith and Gertie, both Cecily's sisters

agreed, probably reluctantly, to take on the job. In one letter, Edith pointed out that she felt obliged to taken on this responsibility because of a promise to Cecily years before, during a time when Cecily was in hospital. There are numerous legal documents relating to this decision and finally in July 1933 Joan and Peter signed themselves over to live under this regime. The result was that Peter was to find his own accommodation which he did moving to East Court, Woodmansterne Road, Banstead and Joan would be under the wing of Edith, a spinster Headmistress in Saltburn, and Gertie who was married to Lewis, a bank manager. There probably was, at the time, no suitable member of the Dibdin family available. The Public Trustee would control the finances.

Joan used to refer to how she, in her younger days, would fight terribly with Peter, however from now on, she seemed to recognise how important he was to her and he must have felt a tremendous depth of responsibility towards her. In later years, during the World War 2, Joan expressed deep concern for his state of unhappiness in one of her diaries and this was followed by one or two very endearing letters.

Returning to the 1930's one gets, from letters, an indication of the sort of regime that both Peter and Joan were living under. Within weeks of his parents death, twenty year old Peter had to contend with such , letters and documents as the following from the Airline.

Two inventories from Imperial Airways of "Relics" from the "City of Liverpool" written about two weeks after the crash, offer a devastating layering of the impersonal approach on what must have been the closely personal.



REVISED INVENTORY OF RELICS FROM  
"CITY OF LIVERPOOL".

1. Rectangular wrist watch No. 61075/871. Stopped approx 13.18.
2. ✓ Gold half-hunter wrist watch. Stopped approx. 14.23. No. 42545
3. ✓ Silver wrist watch. Stopped approx. 13.30. No. 4310095
4. Gold spectacles. Very thick lenses. In aluminium case.
5. Leather key wallet, remains of. 7 keys. Including Chubb 4 lever  
safe key No. 390 A.A. telephone Box Key No.606976.  
EAGLE No. 24464. EAGLE No. 05746.
6. ✓ One flat key.
7. Chromium wrist watch strap.
8. Metal backs of hair brush and clothes brush.
9. Bracelet, including 1 spider set in crystal ("Lotte" on back),  
monkey on stick, dog, mickey-mouse, etc.
10. Grey case containing gold and amethyst necklace, brooch and  
bracelet.

COPIE  
ING.

IMPERIAL AIRWAYS LTD.

18th April, 1933.

PHY/MP. 1641.

Dear Sir,

We have on hand at Croydon three pieces of baggage which have been identified as being the property of the late Mr and Mrs Diddin. The description of the baggage concerned is:

One dark brown expanding suit case containing lady's and gentlemen's effects.

One light brown suit case.

One Oxford blue revelation case.

We are holding also at this office a few small items which we believe to have been the property of the late Mr and Mrs Diddin, namely:

Two cheque books.

One Driving License.

One traveller's cheque for £5.0.0. and

One seal inscribed with "J"

We shall be glad if you will let us have delivery instructions regarding these articles when we will endeavour to clear through the Customs and deliver as soon as possible.

We also enclose a revised inventory of the relics of the ill-fated aircraft which we shall be glad if you will peruse with a view to identifying any of these articles as having been the property of the late Mr and Mrs Diddin.

Yours faithfully,  
For and on behalf of IMPERIAL AIRWAYS LIMITED.

(Sgd)  
Secretary.

M. Andrews Esq.  
18, Mulgrave Road,  
SUTTON.

The significance of this letter is unclear but it a remarkable state of confusion bearing in mind that the Airline were having to deal with only 15 victims of the crash.



Note the letter from 25 April addressed to L.A. Diddin 4 weeks after his death.

A collection of letters written in 1933 from Joan to her brother, Peter, suggest that she was, at face value, handling the situation in a matter of fact way. These letters are generally from Ancaster House School with one or two from Meols. She suggests that their dog Ben is sold or given to a neighbour. She makes the suggestion that their house Avondale is rented out rather than sold.

When one reads her requests for Peter to keep some items like pictures and the oil paints and some furniture for her, it is heart rending. One appreciates the state of complete devastation that both Joan and Peter must have felt. Parents die and home and its contents are up for disposal.

An 11 page catalogue produced for the auction is chilling reading.

Her tone of writing to Peter is very loving and caring, although there is, quite reasonably, a sense of demanding particularly for him to visit and to collect her from school for half term breaks and take her to Auntie Gertie in Reigate.

Early in the year, the letters are to Peter at the office in Mulgrave Road but by October she is writing to him at his new home in Earls Court, Woodmansterne Lane.

"My Darling Pet.

Peter I do want you to keep my Mendelssohn ornament also the centre picture of "Notre Dame" and my big hanging picture over my mantelpiece of "the little girls and the kittens". Also any other nice pictures in my room Christopher Robin etc. I wish you could send me a shorthand book, haven't you got one in the office.....I am sorry the Hornet has got to go. I wish you could just "let" "Avondale" instead of selling it.....Can I go home half term?..

Dearest Darling, Duck Divine

I am writing this to ask you exactly what I am going to do at half term. Can I come home or are you coming down....."

*Priced*  
L. A. DIBDIN (deceased).

**"Avondale,"**  
**79, Grosvenor Avenue, Carshalton.**

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CATALOGUE of  
The whole of the Household

**FURNITURE**

and EFFECTS, including:

Bedroom Furniture and Bedding, well made  
**MAHOGANY WARDROBES AND CUPBOARDS**  
Dressing Tables &c., 5 ft. Oak Dining Table, Sideboard  
**6 OCTAVE PIANO IN MAHOGANY CASE**  
(by Rud. Ibach Sohn, Barmen)  
Oak Davenport and Bookcase, Clocks, Carpets,  
Linoleum, Electro Plate, Household Linen, Kitchen  
Utensils, Garden Tools &c.

*which*

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W. LEWIS  
**HIND & SONS**

will sell by Auction on the Premises, as above, on  
**Friday, 15th December, 1933**  
at 1.30 o'clock precisely.

ON VIEW DAY PRIOR TO SALE.

Catalogues of the Auctioneers — **32, High Street, Sutton.**  
Telephone: Sutton 231.

**The Freehold House is for Sale with vacant possession.**  
Apply Auctioneers as above.

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FREWER BROS. LTD., Printers, West Street, Sutton.



Meanwhile as time went by, how well was Joan being cared for? A letter from Edith to Peter on 24 August 1934 demonstrates what was going on:

Dear Peter

Thank you so much for the pretty card. I am so glad you are having such a nice holiday, dear.

Joan { *now aged 14 1/2* } left us yesterday about midday. I think she ought to have arranged to be in London earlier, as she had another railway journey. Still, I suppose she knows her own business best. She seems more like her father as the years go on. I want you to arrange for her to go somewhere for the 3 days in between her leaving East Wittering on the 30<sup>th</sup> and Auntie Gertie's return to Reigate on Sept 3<sup>rd</sup>. The week might have been arranged to coincide with Auntie Gertie's return, but that is not Joan's way. So be sure to see to it please dear. I expect you have his address. Glovers, East Wittering' Sussex.

Joan is invited to Dick's wedding on Sept 17<sup>th</sup> and Uncle Lewis and Auntie Gertie are already going to another wedding on that night so they will not be able to see to Joan at all. I think the simplest thing would be for Joan to go back to the hostel that day and pay the few shillings extra which it would cost, as she has to return there, in any case, on Sunday the 19<sup>th</sup> so as to begin work the following day.

Will you talk to Joan about this ?

Of course she may decide not to go. She could not tell me for certain before she left, whether she would go or not. Do not let her leave this to the last minute.

I shall not be able to have Joan for her holidays, as I am going to live with Laura in her very small house at Redcar in the winter time, always now. It only has two bedrooms and a tiny dressing room, so, as we have maids, there will be no room for Joan. Next summer I hope to go abroad again, and let the house.

Perhaps you will be able to arrange for some of the Dibdin relatives to have her, as perhaps, by that time she will expect to arrange her own holidays.

I thought you ought to know, dear, what my plans are, as I could not spring this on you at the last minute.

I hope you had better weather the last part of your stay in Switzerland so as to enjoy Lugano. What memories that place must have brought back to you.

With love you affectionate Aunt Edith Haycraft.

P.S. Could you and David go round to Grandma's and move Joan's heavy black trunk up to the top of the house and her case. They are going off by "Goods" tomorrow. I don't want them hindering up Grannie's hall.

How appalling this letter seems !



**Edith Haycraft and Laura Gerrard**

Edith was given, or took on Guardianship of Joan and yet casually hands over such responsibility to Peter just 21 years old and ducks the need to care for a 14½ year old girl. Alright, there are and have been worst cases of neglect in this world, but Edith took this job on, as part of a promise to her sister, Cecily, and being a headmistress of a girl's school, should have had some insight in caring for an adolescent girl. It maybe the case, that Joan was a roaring caged adolescent screaming out because of the loss of her parents and craving security.

Bearing in mind Joan was in fact homeless, and for this reason, there may have been difficulties, this letter seems like a total abdication by a woman who was only 56 years old. We are reminded of the incident at school, just after the time of this letter, when Joan convinced a friend at school that her parents were still alive in Belgium. We are later given a vivid image of Joan in letters from a friend in Leeds, Jane, during the war describing her during those early years at the Royal Academy.

How Peter felt about the situation and responsibilities is open to conjecture but we can get some insight of his nature at this young age from the archives and from hearsay. There is enough evidence to show that he must have been a fun loving young man, polite and charming and well liked by those around him. It is reported by a cousin who knew him that "He was a very likeable person who one always looked forward to seeing."

After 1934 Peter was a free agent and must have inherited his share of the estate probably in the form of stocks and shares, which he managed in considerable detail.

How Peter managed the responsibility and family flack that surely must have surrounded Joan is interesting. As mentioned before Joan felt that the sibling antagonism of earlier years had faded that she and Peter grew, within the limitations of age and distance very close. Peter fought her corner against the Aunts and Public Trustees and challenged their view of what she should do after school. The family flack must have been considerable for example the remark from Edith in the letter above:

"Perhaps you will be able to arrange for some of the Dibdin relatives to have her, as perhaps, by that time she will expect to arrange her own holidays."

Also, there is an interesting comment in a very supportive letter from Uncle Bernard in Nottingham to Peter at East Court, Woodmansterne Road. Banstead, in late 1933 from 2 Brunel Terrace, Nottingham.

Bernard was to buy a dressing table at the estate auction and was to collect it by car and take it North to Notts. In one of his letters, he advises Peter to stay clear of his argument with Gertie and Lewis, Gertie being his sister. Both Joan and Peter had strong connections with the Nottingham Haycrafts and in fact it was through Don Haycraft that Joan met up with the Guise family during the war after a chance encounter between Tony Guise and Don during training.

Joan often spoke of her visits to Nottingham and friendships with the members of that branch of the Haycraft family.

As will be seen later Don Haycraft featured in Joan's life before during and after the war, as did the very close friend of her and Peter, David Muir who, in effect, was the boy next door at Avondale.

Judging from Peter's correspondence he had a busy time keeping his car maintained, working on his financial deals and generally doing work associated with his dead parents estate. On top of this he had to deal with the management of Joan up until 1941.

From letters it would seem that Miss Burrows the head of Ancaster House and the Public Trustees decided that Joan was not up to taking her school Certificate in the summer of 1936 at 16 ½ years old. This forced Joan to stay on for at least one more term if not two. How she felt about this can only be judged by the upset that occurred around her with the school, Edith and the Trustees.

Joan had also mentioned during her life that she wished to play the cello, as she was in possession of her mothers, but had been told that this was unladylike and so had to learn the violin. In the letter from Peter to the trustees endeavouring to smooth out things in September 1936, he mentions that she should give up the violin lessons as Joan was only learning it to help out the school orchestra. We need to keep at the back of our minds, that underlying all the issues was money, as Ancaster House was a private school and any future studies such as a German Cookery School mentioned by Edith in Dec 1936 would be expensive. It seemed that Joan passed the School Certificate so that in January, despite pressure, she could leave and she applied to enter a student hostel, Queen Alexandra's House, by the Royal Albert Hall, in preparation for starting at the Royal Academy. During this period Joan was obviously causing upset with Aunt Edith who then approached the Public Trustees who in turn contacted Peter. Peter then had the problem of unpicking all the misunderstandings and ensuring that Joan was allowed to pursue the career of her choice.

In a letter to Edith he took a firm line in favour of Joan choosing as she wished.

The Public Trustees had the responsibility of controlling all expenditure until Joan was 21. It seems that in May 1941 there was a balance to the estate of about £3800 owed to Joan.

It is puzzling that on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1938, Peter was contacted again by the Public Trustees:

"I am directed by the Public Trustee to say that he will be glad if you could arrange an appointment to call to see him to discuss the question of your sister's future career."

This is surprising considering that by now it seems that Joan was settled at the Royal Academy and living in Queen Alexandra's House, a hostel by the Albert Hall.



Joan herself was showing signs of considerable talent from the age of 7, gaining many awards local, and passing Royal Academy



piano exams quite young. At the age of 19, just before the outbreak of war, while still at the Royal Academy she qualified to teacher Piano to a certain level.

How Peter felt and grieved for the loss of his parents and his brother Stanley, who died early in 1917 is difficult to judge, however Cecily's letters to Lionel during WW1 indicate how much he, at 4 years old, missed Little Stanley.



**Peter and Stanley**

Stanley is likely to have been named after Cecily's brother Stanley Haycraft who was on the front in WW1

The full impact of death of Stanley on the family is untold, however, whereas Lionel's busy time and strong faith may have supported him, it seems to have been more difficult for Cecily.

There is a very moving letter from Lionel to Cecily expressing this point, explaining how he finds it difficult to say how he feels, but is able to write freely about his faith in God and how he hopes that she will find solace in Jesus Christ. The exact date of this letter is unknown but it was probably soon after Stanley died and it tells us something more about Cecily's state of mind.

Modern understanding of the psychology of grief, particularly in youngsters that lose parents and even grandparents, enables us to have more insights into the tumult that such grief can create and this is explored in the book that documents Joan's earlier life in more detail "William Joseph Dibdin and Family 1850 to 1945". The considerable number of letters from 1935 to 1941 to Joan seem generally to be from Peter who must have been taking on his role as a carer very seriously. He was a source of finance for Joan and no doubt had to often bail her out, usually insisting on some explanation as to why she needed the money.

Years later, when she became ill in November 1940, he wrote to her in hospital at Mount Vernon Hospital in Northwood and also obtained the information from the sister of the ward that Joan had been overdoing it and needed to rest.

Judging from the life she was living at the age of 20 years old, it is not surprising taking into account that the war had been going for 14 months, London was being blitzed and she was working as a Red Cross Nurse in a First Aid post at Marylebone as well as probably having quite a social life.

Peter left the "once family" Property Company in 1935 when his apprenticeship was complete and started work for the Crownlands Office of Commissioners. He had a very active work and social life until he joined the army in 1939 just before WW2.