

# BOYHOOD MEMORIES OF HOUGHTON FEAST

#### MEMORIES FROM KEN REWCASTLE (1949-1951)

WITH HOUGHTON FEAST 2015 fast approaching, I have been thinking about the Houghton Feast of sixty or more years ago, and comparing it with the Houghton Feast of today. My first thoughts are, of just how much credit we should give to all those involved in keeping the tradition and spirit of the Feast alive - not least Houghton Heritage Society. Looking at the Feast brochure's programme of events planned for this year, we can see how much organisation must have gone into it. Houghton Feast is still alive and well and as always, a great annual event.

It is difficult to compare the Feast of today to the one we oldies remember when we were children. In those days the Feast attracted people from well outside the Houghton area; and every year the "Shields Wives", as we would call them, would come in on coach trips from South Shields. It was an annual outing for them and I remember coaches from Hartlepool, Stockton and Darlington also bringing visitors to the Feast.

The only fairgrounds we saw from one year to the next were the ones in the Lake grounds and the Market Place every October. Throughout the year we never had a holiday away from home and there were no theme parks to visit and the nearest we got



## HOUGHTON HERITAGE SOCIETY

WWW.HOUGHIONLESPRING.ORG.UK

IMAGES ARE FOR ILLUSTRATION ONLY AND MIGHT NOT RELATE TO THE ERA THAT THE MEMORIES DEPICT

to Disney Land would be a cartoon at the Saturday morning pictures. If we were lucky we would have a rare visit to Roker or Seaburn by bus from Houghton to Sunderland and then by tram from Fawcett Street down to the beach. But Houghton Feast was something special to look forward to every year. The Market Place would be packed with people, and that was only the overspill from the Lake. The shortcut at the far end of the Lake up to the top of end of Nesham Place would be crowded with people coming and going between the two showfields. I remember the first illuminations in the Park and how exciting that was to us.

When I called at the Wild Boar pub to collect this year's Houghton Feast brochure, I stood at the bar and I pictured where I would be standing in the days when Sunderland Street and the Lake existed. Memories came flooding back....



It's 1949, late September. Summer has gone. Our Mother comes in from the local shop. "By it's chilly out there today," she says. "It's real Houghton Feast weather." Everyone in those days referred to the autumnal change in the weather as Houghton Feast weather. But those two words "Houghton Feast" mean something different than the weather to us boys. To my two brothers Hanley and Ron, and me, they mean the shows are coming to the Lake and the Market Place. We looked forward to this annual event nearly as much as Christmas and we couldn't wait to see the Show people's trucks and trailers coming into Houghton from all directions.

At last the first day of the shows arrives. Our Dad has gone to work nightshift at the pit and my brother Ron and me set off for the Lake with a tanner each and our Mother's words ringing in our ears: "Be back here by nine at the latest".

Off we go down the Hetton Road at a fast pace, past the Imperial Garage then along past Dimambro's ice cream shop where our pace slows dramatically; but we resist the temptation to go in and buy a cornet. We must keep our money for the shows!



Along past the Church and the Golden Lion and our pace quickens as we pass Pallister's shop, a right turn and we are there, this is what we have been waiting for.

The sight and smells of the Feast hits us. The smell of pies and pork dips from the butchers on the corner of the Lake entrance and the smell of fruit and toffee apples from the carts lined up right along the narrow entrance to the showfield. Our willpower deserts us and we stop and buy a toffee apple each. We are left with a threepenny bit each as we head on into the showfield. Should we go on a ride or should we change our money into pennies and try one of the stalls where you roll your penny down a slot and if it lands on a square without touching the lines you can double your money or even win a bob? We make the crucial decision and two minutes later we have nothing.







We can't go on any of the rides now but at least we can watch. Up the steps of the Noah's Ark and round and round the boardwalk while the music blasts out, competing with the music from all the other rides. On to the Moon Rocket, the Waltzer and the Dodgems, watching and wishing. There's a new attraction this year in the far corner of



## HOUGHTON HERITAGE SOCIETY

www.HOUGHTONLESPRING.org.uk

copyright © 2012

IMAGES ARE FOR ILLUSTRATION ONLY AND MIGHT NOT RELATE TO THE ERA THAT THE MEMORIES DEPICT

the Lake - it's the Dive Bomber and we gaze at it in awe. It would be considered tame compared to today's theme park rides but to us it is awesome.

An idea hits us – let's go down to the other end and try and get a job on the Coconut Shy; but our Mother's words echo again: "Back by nine at the latest." Our luck is in and we both get jobs on the Coconut Shy. We have to collect the wooden balls in a basket then bring them to the front and tip them into the box standing on tall legs and we will be paid a tanner each plus a coconut thrown in.

Nine o'clock arrives and our Ron shouts across, "We're supposed to be in by nine" but we can't leave now or we won't get paid. It's now ten o'clock and we are still at it. The pubs and the pictures (cinema) are coming out and the Lake fairground is filling up. We know a lot have come from the pub because we have to dodge the balls that are supposed to hit the coconuts.

Then it happens! We see our mother giving the showman a piece of her mind and beckoning us to come forward. "We can't leave now Ma" we say, "or we won't get paid." "Never mind getting paid" she says, "you'll get a clip round the ear if you don't come now".

The showmen shake their heads and tell us we can have a coconut each, so off we go with our Mother carrying the fruits of our labour - a coconut each and the threat of a clout round the ear. Deep down we know the clout won't come. The threat from our Mother is borne from worry and care; she has come out in the dark and cold and walked a mile looking for us and in our hearts we know she would walk a thousand miles to find us.

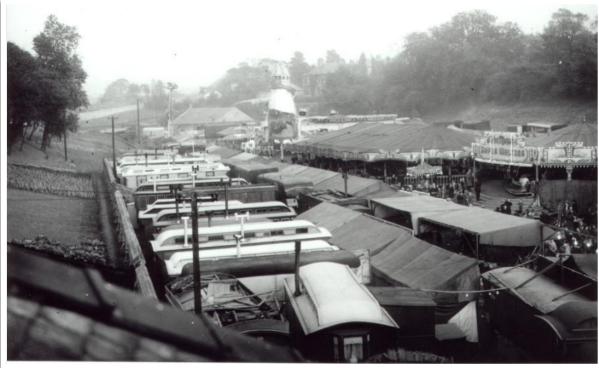
After a good telling off we arrive back home in Wordsworth Avenue. After a wash and a slice of jam and bread we are off to bed. Sleep won't come quickly tonight as the excitement of the Feast is still with us and we lay thinking: it's Saturday tomorrow and the shows will be on in the afternoon. Our Dad might give us a tanner each and we could have a ride on the Dive Bomber. We might even get another job on the Coconuts. Who knows, after all, tomorrow is another day. Just before drowsiness turns to sleep another thought comes to mind: whatever happens tomorrow, at least we have a coconut each.

Houghton Feast also meant so much to our parents. They didn't have cars for weekends away, no television or computers, so no Facebook and such. There was much less diversity in their lives, however Houghton Feast was a really special occasion for them too.

Massive crowds would gather in the Broadway for the service from the Church and the choir singing from the tower. The numerous pubs that existed in Houghton then would be full, especially on the Monday which was the main day and most would have live piano music which created a great atmosphere. I had an Uncle Joe (Swindles) who







played banjo in probably every pub in Houghton at some time or other, and at Houghton Feast he would usually play in the Black Lion on Sunderland Street or the Newcastle Arms on Newbottle Street.



### HOUGHTON HERITAGE SOCIETY

www.HOUGHTONLESPRING.org.ux

IMAGES ARE FOR ILLUSTRATION ONLY AND MIGHT NOT RELATE TO THE ERA THAT THE MEMORIES DEPICT

Another great attraction in those days was the 'Houghton Feast Handicap' at the Greyhound track on Hall Lane. This was the biggest race of the year and attracted huge crowds. We kids would wait outside as the men came out, and say: "Gizza penny mista." If we caught someone who had won we might get a three-penny bit or even a tanner; but if someone had lost the week's rent, then we would more likely have to dodge a clip round the ear. Our Mother worked at the greyhound track and we would always make sure that before she came out, we had scarpered back to our Grandma's who lived over the road in Morris Terrace. I know that pubs and greyhound racing were not the most important aspects of Houghton Feast; but they were part of it and added to the magical atmosphere that existed then.

I remember one year there being a sideshow attraction at the far end of the Lake fairground which had a sign that read: "Come and see the Naked Lady". We were just boys but were somehow allowed in, and when the curtain opened, there stood this lovely young woman absolutely naked. Strippers were unheard of in those days and she had to stand absolutely still, with the curtain closing after about 20 seconds. It was an eye opener for us boys and we had Houghton Feast to thank for giving us our first glimpse of the female form in all its glory.

Good old Houghton Feast! Happy Days!

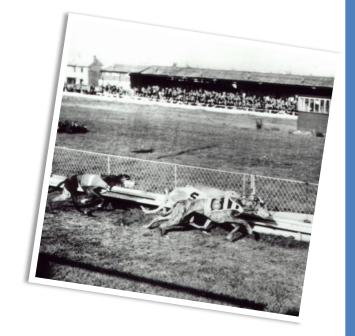
Houghton Feast still remains a special celebration, and as I have already said, so much credit is due to everyone who works to keep it special. Long may it continue!

Ken Rewcastle

EDITED BY

Paul Lanagan

PAUL LANAGAN BA HONS LOCAL HISTORIAN HOUGHTON-LE-SPRING HERITAGE SOCIETY





HOUGHTON HERITAGE SOCIETY

www.HOUGHTONLESPRING.org.uk

copyright © 2012

IMAGES ARE FOR ILLUSTRATION ONLY AND MIGHT NOT RELATE TO THE ERA THAT THE MEMORIES DEPICT

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

With thanks to Ken Rewcastle for sharing his memories and helping to eloquently illustrate an important part of Houghton's heritage that no camera could capture.

These memories relation to 1949-1951 and were written down in the year 2015.

Images are for illustration only and might not relate to the particular era that the memories depict.

#### DISCLAIMER

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a mechanical retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without written permission from the author. The author and publisher have made all reasonable efforts to contact copyright holders for permission. Any errors that may have occurred are inadvertent and anyone who for any reason has not been contacted is invited to write to the publisher so that a full acknowledgement may be made in subsequent editions of this book.

Your attention is drawn to the full Houghton Heritage Society disclaimer which can be accessed by clicking ABOUT on the home page at: <a href="https://www.houghtonlespring.org.uk">www.houghtonlespring.org.uk</a>

