

# When I was a child



Photo: Scope



Young Jeremy on holiday at the seaside

## Actor Jeremy Brett recalls his privileged country house childhood in the Thirties

**"**ALL started for me on 3rd November 1933. I began life with everything a child could wish for. We had a huge, glorious, country house on the outskirts of Berkswell, near Coventry, with tennis courts, squash courts, horses and dogs, and a wonderful terraced garden created by my artistic mother, Elizabeth. The family was spoiled rotten, for we had three live-in staff plus four other people who came in to help. We always seemed to be entertaining a houseful of fascinating people; the door was always open.

Our high lifestyle was all bluff, I'm sure. I don't think my parents thought very much about money. They must have had a kind bank manager.

My father, Colonel Henry William Huggins (Huggins is my real name), a much-decorated hero of the First World War, had a peacetime position with a firm called Tube Investments. In my childhood memory, he seems to me to have spent a lot of time on horseback. Then, after the Second World War broke out, he was away from home running an army training camp in North Wales.

Not so long ago, I drove up again to the house which was once my home. I didn't know the people living there now, but they recognised me instantly. 'You're Jeremy Brett!' Then they asked, 'Is this your handprint on the wall?' It was. When I was three years old, we had a drawing-room extension built, and I had pressed my pudgy little hand into the still-wet concrete of the outer brickwork.

My own pet dog—he was mainly Jack Russell—was called Mr Binks. When I was fifteen I took Mr Binks, by this time in poor health and nearly blind, on what was to be his last visit to the vet; for he said to me, 'If you love this dog, you'll help him on his way.' I didn't realise what

this remark implied, nor what treatment he was about to give the dog. Mr Binks died in my arms. I was so upset I lashed out and hit the vet. I wept and was ridiculously emotional. It was not an easy parting. I've never owned a dog since.

I had three brothers. Being the youngest by five years, I was a bit resentful, for I got their throw-out clothes, and in school holidays they went off on their own, while I spent the time with Nanny. Compared with my brothers I felt so tiddly.

I did have my own awful gang of pals, but often I'd be hurled into the company of my cousin Joanna, who was the same age as me. To express my annoyance I'd pull her hair and cut her plaits, which made her very cross. When we were both eighteen, and no longer forcibly lumbered with each other, we became good friends and today we see each other often.

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Joanna is now a marvellous grandmother.

As a small child I loved entertaining people. At the age of three, when we held the village party in our grounds, I was put into a wonderful pixie costume and took part in a performance of *Sing a Song of Sixpence*. On reaching the bit where the blackbirds come out of the pie, I suppose I looked incongruous as a pixie among the blackbirds, but this didn't bother me. I wasn't a bit shy—shyness came later.

At around the same age I made my 'cabaret debut' as Little Boy Blue in a concert at Bournville, for my mother was a member of the Cadbury family.

After prep school (Abberley Hall, Worcester), like my brothers before me, I went to Eton, where I found it a great strain to be dressed constantly in the uniform of striped trousers and black coat. I felt tremendously lost in a quagmire of little black mourning people.

The only way I stood out from the other boys was with exceptionally good singing voice, which soared like

a skylark. After our music master, Dr Sydney Watson, picked me out to sing the solos in the Eton College Choir, I got fan mail from the other boys' sisters, requesting my autograph—and I even made a record. Then my voice broke. Quite suddenly I could no longer reach the top note, and I was aware I'd lost something for ever.

During my career I've played the baritone-tenor lead in a BBC production of *The Merry Widow* and, as Freddie in the film *My Fair Lady*, I sang *On the Street Where You Live*. But my voice is no longer remarkable.

My brothers went to either Oxford or Cambridge. Two became painters, the third an architect. My son, David Huggins, has followed their pattern. He was a brilliant scholar—the crème de la crème—won a scholarship to Cambridge and is now a painter. (David is my son by my first wife, the actress Anna Massey. I married a second time and I'm a widower, for my wife Joan died five years ago.)

I took a different path from my brothers after my imagination was caught by Laurence Olivier's performance in the film *Wuthering Heights*. Later, after seeing him on horseback in *Henry V*, I felt I might be qualified to follow his example, because I could ride, too. Thinking back, I should have gone to university, but at seventeen I enrolled at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London.

Four years earlier, something happened which was to prove significant. As required school-holiday reading, we had been instructed to study Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes books. As I grudgingly put aside my Biggles tales, the demand on my time seemed an awful nuisance. I liked Dr Watson, but Holmes seemed a dreadful know-all.

When I was asked to play Holmes on television—after playing romantic roles for many years—I didn't know how I could ever convince myself that I could be anything like this creature.

My interpretation seems to have worked, though. I've been playing Holmes for seven years now, and audiences still love it.

INTERVIEW BY JUDITH SIMONS