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Chapter 1

Every Mother's Son

February 1952 to November 1961

*In which the awkward bugger's dad meets his mum;
a notorious progenitor meets the gallows; I give my first
performance—drunk—at the age of two; and I am relieved
of the only appendix you will encounter in this tome.*

At the beginning of 1971, I had a Rolls-Royce in the drive of my 400-year-old Elizabethan farmhouse. The house was snugly nestled in its own three acres, along with a host of outbuildings that included a three-bedroom cottage and a huge Essex barn. When I stepped outside through my front door, I walked on a red-brick bridge over a pond edged by quietly majestic weeping willows. It was heaven on earth, and I was only 18.

Just over a year earlier, I'd joined a new band called Humble Pie, which the British press had immediately dubbed a supergroup, comprising as it did mega-pop-star Steve Marriott and the nearly-as-famous Peter Frampton, along with Greg Ridley from the highly successful rock band Spooky Tooth... and me, whose previous band's output consisted of precisely one single, which had promptly and spectacularly flopped. The next several years were a heady joyride of incredible proportions: recording eight studio albums and a classic live double album, touring the world and basking in the adulation of countless fans, meeting and playing with some of the most legendary names in rock music, and generally having more fun than should rightfully be allowed by law.

But by 1975, the party would wind down almost as quickly as it had started.

How did all this happen to a shy little short-arse kid from Waltham Cross who miserably failed his 11+ school exam? It's a good question. I suppose I am a product of both my family and the golden era of rock music. But be-

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fore I get to the music, I think it's best to start, just as those weeping willows did, from the roots...



Margaret Shirley came home from work, having been to the doctor's on the way. It was the early spring of 1949. Her world had just come apart at the seams, and she was desolate, inconsolable. According to the doctor, the tests said that she was unable to have children—no ifs, no ands, no buts or even maybes. Just no babies. As she waited for her husband, Robert, to come home, she wondered how he would receive this dreadful news, knowing how desperately he wanted kids. She prayed he wouldn't take it too badly.

She shouldn't have worried. This indomitable man—who had survived Dunkirk, El Alamein, and everything else World War II and Adolf Hitler could throw at him—looked at his distraught wife, smiled gently, and said, “We'll see about that, my dear.” Nine months later, my older brother, Angus Robert Tipson Shirley, was born. Dad wanted to call him Frederick Angus Robert Tipson Shirley, but Mum put her foot down, so A.R.T.S. he would proudly remain. Being a primary-school teacher, Mum knew the school-yard piss-taking that would have ensued. Fred Farts, Flatulent Freddie, etc., etc.—all of which was precisely why the old man thought it was a good idea!

Angus was born on January 30, 1950. Little did my parents know then that on the same date, just three years earlier, a certain Stephen Peter Marriott was born in the East End of London, but more on the significance of that little fella later.



Just over two years later, on March 21, 1952, across the Atlantic in Cleveland, Ohio, the Moon-dog Coronation Ball was held at the Cleveland Arena. This gathering has since been considered the first that was officially called a “rock 'n' roll” concert. Six weeks prior to this, on February 4, Robert and Margaret welcomed their kicking and screaming second son, Jeremy Duncan Tipson Shirley, into the world. Mine was a breech birth that took 36 hours to complete. Poor old Mum, it must have made her eyes water—and it set the tone of my character for years to come. “You always were an awkward bugger, coming out arse



At the start of my image-conscious ways. Check out the attitude and the hairstyle—years ahead of my time!

backwards as you did” was Dad’s colourful way of summing up my argumentative tendencies.



When I decided to write this book, I realised early on that this part of it would have to be as much about the two sides of my family and their history as it would be about me, for two reasons. One, out of respect; they were truly wonderful people. And two, their stories are fascinating in their own right.

My father was half-English and half-Irish, whilst my mother was half-English and half-Scottish. I once wrote a song to sum up that little nest of vipers, the title of which was “Part of Me Is Irish and Part of Me a Scot, the Rest of Me Is English, I Fight With Me a Lot!” I didn’t need to finish the song, as the title said it all, really.



Ladies first...

Mum was born in 1914 in Kuala Lumpur in Malaya, as it was then known. Her missionary father was a linguist who had astonishing knowledge and talent; while he was in a Japanese concentration camp, he wrote a Chinese-English dictionary, no mean feat when you consider the limited resources available. Being the devout man of God that he was, when he needed pen and paper, he would do what came naturally—he would pray for his needs—and lo and behold, they would appear. Apparently, a sympathetic guard who overheard Grandpa’s heaven-addressed wishes would kindly oblige by leaving the supplies under his pillow.

Mum’s sister Ethel had been born in China in 1912, and her brother Ernest was born in Australia in 1917—all of this continent hopping happened before commercial flight existed. In fact, the three children circumnavigated the globe no less than three times, all before my mother’s 20th birthday.

As a fully fledged member of a very devout Plymouth Brethren family, Mum only started to question the religion’s belief system when she fell madly in love with a young Indian boy on the boat home from India, where she had attended grammar school. Her parents barred her from seeing him, simply because he was of a different colour. This broke her heart and made her furious at the same time, and the hypocrisy, along with the plain and simple bigotry of it all, formed within her a vehement anti-prejudice attitude that lasted the rest of her life.

Once home, Mum went on to attend teacher-training college at Homerton College in Cambridge, where she officially severed her ties with the Plymouth Brethren.



Dad, although a very clever man indeed, was born to earthier pursuits. He came into this world in North London in 1910, the son of a pig farmer. His mother was from an Irish horse-breeding family. Dad played the drums in the Casino Dance Band alongside his brother Cecil, who played piano exquisitely. (Some things never change—this pattern was to be repeated years later by my brother, Angus, and me. Our band was called the Apostolic Intervention; Angus and I preferred the Casino Dance Band as a name.)

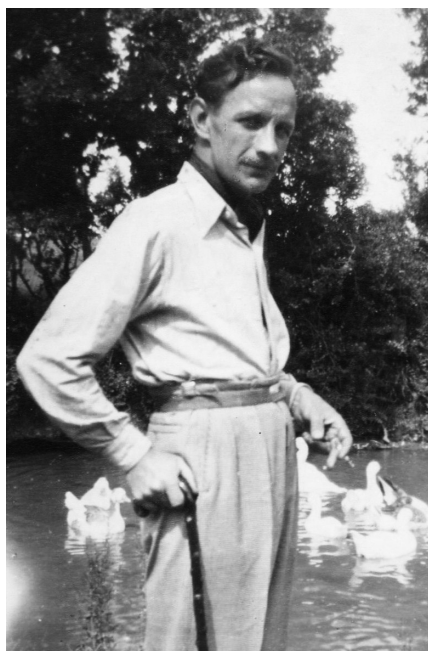
Dad met his first wife backstage at a dance where his band were performing. A couple of months later, she turned up with some interesting news: she was pregnant. So Dad did the honourable thing and married

“Aunty” Gladys, and, pretty soon thereafter, my half-brother, Barry, was born.

Grandpa Shirley was the first man on his street to buy an automobile. Not long after it arrived, Dad decided that, in order to fully understand the workings of the combustion engine, he would have to totally dismantle it and then put it back together, which he promptly did. From then on, there was nothing he couldn’t do in the area of mechanical engineering, and those skills would serve him well for the rest of his life, proving particularly helpful when he was an officer in World War II, serving in the desert under Field Marshal Montgomery.

On September 3, 1939, my father went to sign up for the Army and soon found himself on his way to France as part of the British Expeditionary Force. It wasn’t long before he realised that life as a private in the British Army didn’t really appeal to him. He was told about the Officer Training Corps and resolved to take the entrance exam when he got back home.

Dad managed to survive Dunkirk, and, after a brief period of R & R, he was sent off to his new barracks in Aldershot to get re-kitted. Like most of the men who lived through Dunkirk, he had left all of his kit on the beaches. On arrival at the barracks, he walked into his Nissan hut and chose



Dad (Major Robert) in his David Niven lookalike period just after the war.

the bed in the far corner from the 12 in the hut. On each bed, there was a basic kit that included a British Army standard-issue helmet, or tin hat, as they were called. When he had received his first tin hat, he had scratched his initials inside it and covered them with a blob of black sealing wax; he subsequently lost that helmet on the beaches of Dunkirk. Now, as he looked over his new kit in Aldershot, he saw that the tin hat looked strangely familiar. He turned it over and, to his utter astonishment and disbelief, there was the blob of black wax. Just to be positive, he scraped the wax off, and, sure enough, there were his initials, R.S.

Thanks to this more-than-simple twist of fate, Dad somehow knew deep down that he would survive the horrors of war that were about to ensue. I, for one, am most grateful that he did. Soon afterwards, he took the Officer Training Corps exam and passed with flying colours. He spent most of the rest of the war as Captain Robert Shirley, becoming Major Robert Shirley (Acting) by the end.



Dad would always tell me with immense pride how our ancestor Laurence Shirley, the fourth Earl of Ferrers, was the last man to be tried by a jury of fellow Lords and the first to be hung by the trap-door method. As proud as he and Grandpa were of this, they withheld, with foolish reticence, the vital information as to why the fourth Earl was hung up like a kipper. So I went with my two daughters and looked it up at the library, and, sure enough, the *Doomsday Book* revealed all. It turns out that Laurence was a pisshead, who, in a drunken rage, accused his rent collector of favouring his estranged wife in rental disbursement, then shot him. How you do.

Does alcoholism run in families? I think there's a strong possibility. At least today you can get help in rehab, a slightly better solution than the gallows, assuming, of course, that you haven't topped anybody. Grandpa Fred Shirley liked a tipple, as did my father. Grandpa's drinking career came to a crashing halt when he came home a bit worse for wear one too many times for Grandma Shirley's liking. She was a formidable woman who you did not want to piss off, and nobody knew that better than Grandpa Fred. So when she gave him an ultimatum—"It's me and the children [all seven of them], or the booze"—that was that; he never drank again. My father never entirely stopped drinking, but eventually slowed down. Booze certainly adversely affected his life over the years, but he did survive its ravages for the most part, bless his heart.



After graduating from Homerton with honours (Mum was a very smart lady who later became a member of Mensa), Mum started teaching in Luton. While she was there, she met and fell in love with a man, a butcher by trade, and after seeing him for a while, she got engaged. Fortunately for me, she did not marry him. Thank God she didn't; otherwise I might have ended up as a butcher who supported Luton Town Football Club. That would have been ugly. I don't have anything in particular against butchery or Luton Town FC, but it would have meant that I'd have missed out on being a drummer in a great rock 'n' roll band and a devout Tottenham Hotspur FC supporter.



Mum trying her best to look like Ava Gardner. My parents loved the movies and took us all the time.

After the war broke out, Mum found herself teaching very large classes (40 plus) of children in and around the outskirts of North London. She shared a flat with two girlfriends. One was Auntie Marjorie (who went on to marry Mum's brother Ernest); the other was a lady called Mary Iola Hewitt, better known as Iola, a name I've never otherwise heard, before or since. Iola met an American brigadier general called Henry Lee Badham, who she promptly married. Mum, not to be outdone, also had a whirlwind romance that resulted in marriage, but that's where the similarity ended. Iola's marriage lasted until she died. They had two remarkable children. The daughter, Mary, starred opposite Gregory Peck in *To Kill a Mockingbird* at the tender age of 10. Her brother Johnny went on to become a very successful movie director whose films have included *Saturday Night Fever* and *War Games*. On the other hand, Mum's marriage lasted less than a week, which I would imagine is some kind of record. That's all we ever knew about the marriage. She never spoke about it, other than to chuckle over it from time to time.



Once my father had earned his commission, he was sent off to North Africa as part of the British Eighth Army, Field Marshal Montgomery's infamous Desert Rats. Starting as lieutenant, he quickly moved up to captain

and stayed at that rank until late in the war, when, as part of the peacekeeping role that the British Army were given, he served as Acting Major Robert Shirley. He would have probably become a full-blown major, but, unfortunately, a couple of hell-raising incidents prevented that from happening. One involved fishing with hand grenades, which was spectacularly effective and fed lots of hungry troops, but was against all regulations, to say the least. A large net would have sufficed.



As the war came to an end, so did Mum and Dad's respective marriages: Mum's one-week wonder and Dad's to "Aunty" Gladys, his backstage babe. Soon thereafter, my parents met through my Uncle Cecil, who had dated my mother briefly and introduced her to his brother Robert. After Mum and Cecil stopped seeing each other, Dad stepped in and asked Mum out. They got on famously and soon realised that they were meant for each other. With the war finally over, they, like most people, were at a loss as to what to do with the rest of their lives. As horrific as the war was, it was also all consuming and, in a way, very exciting. A lot of people just wanted to get away from it all and went in pursuit of happiness and the quiet life. This included the Shirley family. Dad, his sister Vivian and her husband Len, and Dad's parents all went down to Cornwall to renovate an old mill house that Uncle Len had somehow managed to buy. It was in dire need of repair, so my father was in his element. When it came to fixing things, whether it was a car or a house, he could do it all.

So off our intrepid band of wandering property developers went. The deal was simple: Len bought the mill and Dad fixed it up. My mother went along and found a job teaching, which she had become very good at.

Just before moving down to Cornwall, Dad had proposed in a somewhat unusual way. Apparently, back in those days, you had to go to Tottenham High Road to pick up your marriage licence so that you could get married there or anywhere else. The marriage licence office was even open on Saturdays to accommodate working people. So, when Dad called Mum out of the blue and asked her to meet him at Tottenham High Road on a Saturday afternoon, she knew it could only mean one thing, as she wasn't a football fan and as Tottenham weren't playing at home that weekend anyway—he must be about to propose. That, of course, was precisely what he did.

With all the necessary paperwork filled out, off they went to their new life in Cornwall. After the wedding and reception in Newquay, Dad immediately tackled the first job at hand: fixing up Trewerry Mill. He did a beautiful job on both the house and the grounds, and they still look good to

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this day. In fact, when I took a friend and my daughters to have a look at it many, many years later, the present owner told us with great pride that an eccentric ex-army brigadier, whose horse (when the soldier was a bit worse for the wear) would bring him home from the pub, fixed the place up to look just the way it looks today. Once we told him that it was Dad and that the only thing he got wrong was Dad's rank, he was so ecstatic that we got a free round of Cornish cream tea out of it.

After Dad completed work on the mill, it was time to move on to more buying, fixing up, and selling of houses and cottages. Unfortunately, Uncle Len's lack of commitment was causing problems. My father was a very generous man who would literally give you his last fiver if he thought you needed it more than he did. The problem was that, as he was not a rich man, his giving nature often left him in the shite, which would piss Mum off no end. After he went to great lengths to help out his sister and her husband, Mum finally put her foot down and insisted that he started getting his fair share of the business or they would have to move on and do something else to make a living.



Not long after being told that she could not have children, Mum got pregnant with Angus. This prevented her and Dad from having to get tough with Len about not being paid properly; all they had to do now was say that, with a child on the way, Dad needed to find a job sooner than later. Then another bit of good fortune came their way in the form of a good job offer up in the North London area. So, they moved back to Cheshunt, less than 10 miles north of Tottenham, which suited Dad immensely, and Mum found a job close by in Waltham Cross. Dad's job came with a nice flat right next door to his place of work. The flat was in a house called Ivy House, which was located in Crossbrook Street, halfway between Cheshunt and Waltham Cross.

I have a few vague memories of the place, but we moved out by the time I was four years old. There was one particular incident there that I am not surprised I didn't remember, even after Mum and Dad told me about it later in life...



From time to time, our parents would have dinner parties or go to the theatre with friends and invite them back after the show for a nightcap. Angus and I would be well and truly asleep by the time the party started—or so my parents thought. What they didn't know was that we used to spy on the revelry from a walkthrough closet that had one door to the living room and

another that opened into our bedroom. The living room door had a small hole in it, so we could see all the people having a really good time.

One fine evening, when I was about two and Angus four, he noticed that the partygoers were all drinking an amber-coloured liquid that came in a strange bottle with big dimples on its three sides. He also noticed that the more they drank, the more fun they seemed to be having; in fact, some of them had so much fun that they would have to sit down and take a nap. Sometimes Mum and Dad couldn't wake them up and would let them sleep on the couch. They must have been *really* tired.

The idea that this magical potion could make a whole roomful of people feel so good made Angus determined to try it out himself. Not wanting his little brother to miss out on any kind of fun—and, I suspect, needing a guinea pig—he got me up one morning and put me in my high chair, then put some of the amber liquid in a saucer and started to spoon-feed it to me. The taste was so foul that I refused to drink it, so he laced the whiskey with copious amounts of sugar. We went on to become as drunk as skunks and waddled into Mum and Dad's bedroom, very unsteady on our feet and singing, "My old man's a dustman / He wears a dustman's hat." Our parents' giggles quickly disappeared and were replaced by deep concern when I managed to fall flat on my face.



Angus was my hero, and I worshipped him. I was also intimidated by his intelligence. We both attended the primary school where Mum taught. My mother usually showed sound judgement about us kids, especially on matters to do with our education in this very rough-and-tumble part of North London. But, for some unknown reason, she completely lost the plot when it came to choosing our school clothes: the Scot in her saw nothing wrong in sending me to school wearing a kilt. In theory, there is nothing wrong with wearing a kilt; however, in my case—being sent to school on your first day when your name is Shirley, you have wavy brown hair and bright blue eyes, and you're wearing a skirt—it did not go down well at all. "A Boy Named Sue" comes to mind. It did, however, teach me how to run fast and how to fight when necessary, which is not something I'm very proud of now, but, back then, in a North London school, you either learned how to look after yourself or you would get bullied relentlessly. You might think that having your mother teaching in the same school you were attending would be an advantage. Wrong. It just made a bad situation worse.

After a little time had passed, Mum stopped putting out the dreaded kilt for me and replaced it with normal clothes. I had no idea why she suddenly

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stopped until recently, when I found out that it was because of my brother. He had gone to her and pleaded my case for me, and that was that—no more kilt. God bless his cotton socks, he had suffered the dreaded kilt himself and didn't want his little bruv to endure the same bullying he had been subjected to. That's what I call brotherly love.



With older bruv, Angus (left).



We moved a lot during my early years: eight different houses by the time I was 14. Most of these moves were very exciting for my brother and me, with one exception. When Angus took his 11+ and passed with flying colours, it happened to coincide with Mum and Dad's decision to buy a pub. Geographically speaking, this threw my warm and cosy existence into complete chaos; we had moved just too far for me to stay at my old school. Angus was now in grammar school, Mum had quit teaching to look after the pub, and I was left to fend for myself at a new school, with no big brother to protect me.

At this point in the story, things start to get out of control. The first and biggest problem that I had to come to terms with was getting acclimatised to my new school. To this day, I have absolutely no idea why I had such a hard time settling in. Prior to this, I was a pretty honest kid, but I'm afraid "Thou shalt not bear false witness" soon became "Thou shalt lie through thou's teeth."

The list of imaginary ailments I suddenly developed was pretty lame and extremely transparent. They were designed to prevent me from having

to attend school; however, having a mum who taught, and therefore could spot a lame excuse from a thousand yards away, meant I was never able to get out of going to school as a result of any of these lies—until my final attempt at it. This last dodge was not only successful, it was also spectacular in its consequences.

At my old school, a friend of mine had taken six weeks off as a result of appendicitis; I remembered the symptoms reasonably well, so I decided to give it a go. I must have done a good job because the next thing I know, I'm in an ambulance being rushed to East Herts Hospital.

Having never before been successful at the art of skiving, I was at a loss as to what to do next, so I decided to just go with the flow, have a few days off school, make a miraculous recovery, and Bob's your uncle—or, in my case, your dad. But it didn't turn out to be quite that simple. On the morning of the third day, the nurse started to serve breakfast, as she did every morning. The food was excellent, so when the trolley got to my bed, I said, "Egg and bacon, please." The nurse turned to me and said in a very stern tone, "No breakfast for you today, my boy. They are operating on you this morning."

I went into complete nervous meltdown. "No, no, no! It's all a huge mistake! I was just pretending to be ill so that I wouldn't have to go to school! *Please* don't operate! I was lying about the whole thing! Honest, I was!"

This outburst put the hospital and my parents into a serious quandary. Should they believe what I was saying now and give me a serious telling off, or should they go ahead with the surgery, believing that I was now lying about my previous lying and so there really was a need for the operation?

The end result is that I no longer have an appendix. Apparently, when they removed it, it was a bit swollen. As that organ is of no use to the human anatomy, it is better off gone because if it bursts in later life, it can kill you by poisoning the bloodstream, a condition called peritonitis.

The boy in the bed next to me was very proud of the fact that his father had bought him a complete football kit as a coming-out present. Not just any old kit; to make matters worse, it was a Tottenham kit. Mind you, I have to say this lad deserved everything he got because, at the grand old age of 14, he was in hospital to be circumcised. Being the cheeky little sod that I was back then, when Dad came to visit me after my operation, I told him about this boy and then said, "I want a drum kit for my coming-out present." Bless his heart, Dad found me a Bitzar drum kit (bitsa this, bitsa that), and, soon thereafter in our house, the rock began to roll.