

Les Lucking's father

I have written one or two essays about my oldest friend Les Lucking, who sadly died just after celebrating with Barbara his wife their Golden Wedding in 1972. Les's father was one of my heroes – a man from the First World War trenches. His name was Alf and he was a character as well as a hero to me and many others who knew him. For a start he was a 'no nonsense' man and never lost his cockney accent despite having Queen Mary – and later 'that charming Elizabeth' – as customers in his Paddington shop 'The Chintz Shop'. He never could understand how an Italian man whom we knew, and who we knew had fled from the Fascists in Italy in the early 1930s, could have the temerity to call his shop 'A.J. Mathews', after Mr Lucking's was called A.J. Lucking and had the name painted in the same style by the same sign-writer. Mr Lucking referred always to A.J. Mathews as 'Podio'. Likewise he called me 'Tiny', our friend Eric Miller was 'Snippet', Les's brother was 'Bottle' and several of our boyhood friends were similarly dubbed – some even with rude names that had been brought home from Flanders trenches and the Army.

Every year on August Bank Holiday Mr Lucking was allocated a space in Mr Barham's estate (the Managing Director of Express Dairies). I was permitted to help my friend Les to run the stall – a money-maker which required participants to throw wooden balls as a giant model of a cat with an open mouth. A ball in the cat's mouth rang a bell – and I was pretty nifty at throwing the ball in the cat's mouth and setting the bell ringing. I could not resist spending my money on this stall and winning a few prizes for my parents, sister and grandma. Mr Lucking stopped me in my tracks and said to me "Come off it, Tiny. You can win a prize for each of your family but then you should stand where the customers stand and keep throwing the balls and keep the bell ringing". He was a wise chap and I respected him almost as much as I respected my own father.