

## **Reflections on the passing of the years**

read by Sir David Attenborough

Like me, author Michael Bond, the creator of Paddington Bear among other characters, also celebrated his ninetieth birthday this year. He reflects on the 1926 vintage and the passing of the years:

I was born on January 13<sup>th</sup> 1926. My mother took one look at the scales and decided to call it a day. I weighed over 11 lbs so I was destined to be an only child at the outset. As a precaution she stood me in a bowl of Tidman's Sea salt to stop me going bandy with the weight, and it seems to have worked.

Apart from an entry in the local paper it went unreported. The Times of London was more concerned with the fate of a bus conductor who was in court charged with allowing an excess of passengers to board an omnibus in East Ham. 'They swarmed on before I 'ad a chance to count them,' was his plea. Things moved at a different rate in those days.

I was fortunate enough to be brought up in a house where books were part of the furniture. Mother was such an avid reader she wrote to authors to thank them and in the same letter ask if they could make the next book longer.

My father's motto was 'the most precious gift you can bestow on a child is your time.' He was a very polite man and always wore a hat when he went outside in public – even when paddling in the sea - in case he met someone he knew. That aside, he tended to be accident prone.

For example: He rode a bicycle to work, and one day he managed to get both wheels caught inside a tram line. Instead of stopping there and then to unravel himself, he left it until he reached the depot, only to fall and break a collar-bone.

And I clearly remember the day when he suggested a race. I got to the bottom of the garden and my father wasn't with me. He had set off at great speed with his head down to reduce resistance and ran straight into the garden shed. Flat on his back, he was muttering "Strike me pink".

Mind you, addressing people older than yourself by their Christian name if you were a child could be a tricky business in those days which meant most were either labelled an uncle or an aunty. Owing to the horrendous casualties in the First World War there were far more of the latter and because most of them led lonely lives I was frequently invited to stay while I was growing up. It was a mixed blessing.

There was Auntie Emm, who insisted on giving me a daily bath. She smoked endless cigarettes whilst she was doing it and the ash used to fall all over me.

Then there were two aunts who kept a dog kennels near Newbury's Greenham Common. Auntie Annie who brought everyone to attention whenever the National Anthem was played on the radio, and Auntie Gee, who was stone deaf. The latter loved going to the cinema, and as she was unable to lip-read from the picture on the screen Auntie Annie took a torch and shone the light on her own lips instead as she read the words out loud. Lovely ladies both, but...

Confusion was being piled on confusion.

It wasn't until I reached the age of ninety that I began to realise the comfort of Louise Haskins's words suggesting that when you have a problem your best bet is to consult the man who stands at the gate of the year.

'Truly, if you put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way'.

Michael Bond, born 1926