Traumatic Years
for Peter and Joan Dibdin
after the death of their parents.

At the risk of repetition, it is reiterated that Joan and Peter Dibdin's parents died on 28th March 1933. Peter was just 20 years old, a minor, officially, articled to his father working in a property company and Joan was just 13 years old and at Ancaster House boarding School in Bexhill. Peter had bought his first car a couple of years before and was demonstrating himself to be a capable and very active young man and Joan was, it seems, a very self-willed young lady. Both were probably used to a fairly comfortable lifestyle in which much could be taken for granted and purchasing good quality goods and services was the order of the day. At the time of the plane crash Joan was probably still at school with her Easter holiday due in a week or so.

All the details of the time have not been unearthed yet, but it is worth noting some anecdotal reports and much that has been gleaned from letters.

It appears that Joan did not go to the funeral. Mrs Midd mentioned once that Joan was not there and was playing in the garden. Whether this was her choice or not is unknown, but it may have been taken for granted that children did not go to funerals. The burial itself must have been an internment of ashes as both Lionel and Cecily were cremated having been probably badly burned in the plane crash. The minister was if fact not from Carshalton but from Sutton. *See Appendix*. It was not surprising that over 18 months later in November and December 1934, there are letters to Peter, from Joan's School, Ancaster House, Bexhill, about indirect reports of Joan not accepting her parents death. She had told a friend that she thought that they were still in Belgium, living poverty stricken, and the friend had told a clergyman who in turn told the Head of the school. The Head teacher, rather insensitively, requested Peter to talk to Joan to get her accepting the truth and gave him advice on how to do it. It is noted that in Northy's letter from Nigeria at that time, he refers to Joan being in Hospital and hopefully out for Christmas.

Joan once mentioned that, after the death, there was difficulty within the family about what to do with them both. It was considered by the most enlightened, Mrs Midd, that they should stay, with some support, at

Avondale, but between the Public Trustees and the Haycraft and Dibdin families, it was decided that Avondale should be sold and as a consequence Peter and Joan split up. This situation was created, in part, by the fact that Frances Georgina Haycraft, Cecily's mother who was now 77, and who lived closeby in Sutton, was legally due to be the next of kin, as the only surviving grandparent. Sadly she renounced her responsibility as guardian and so other guardians had to be found and the result was that Edith and Gertie, both Cecily's sisters agreed, probably reluctantly, to take on the job. In one letter, Edith pointed out that she felt obliged to taken on this responsibility because of a promise to Cecily years before during a time when Cecily was in hospital. There are numerous legal documents relating to this decision and final in July 1933 Joan and Peter signed themselves over to live under this regime. The result was that Peter was to find his own accommodation which he did moving to East Court, Woodmansterne Road, Banstead and Joan would be under the wing of Edith, a spinster Headmistress in Saltburn, and Gertie who was married to Lewis a bank manager. There probably was, at the time, no suitable member of the Dibdin family available. The Public Trustee would control the finances. Joan used to refer to how she in her younger days would fight terribly with Peter, however after this time she seemed to recognise how important he was to her and he must have felt a tremendous depth of responsibility towards her. In later years, during the war, Joan expressed deep concern for his state of unhappiness in one of her diaries and this was followed by one or two very endearing letters.

Returning to the 1930's, one gets, from letters, an indication of the sort of regime that both Peter and Joan were living under. Peter was still articled to his fathers company and yet he must have realised that there was no future in it for him. It is reported within the family that he inherited no position in the company by virtue of his father owning it and that the partners sidelined him. In July 1933 Peter received a very supportive letter of advice about work from his Uncle Rex written on 31 Idminston Road paper. From the archives it is noted that on 1st June 1939, Peter was articled to his father Lionel, at the cost of £1-0-0. After the letter from Rex he contacted Quintana and Co, Charter Surveyor in Eccleston Square asking about Articled Pupilage, however in October 1933, there are new Articles of Pupilage to Dibdin's as Chartered Surveyor costing £140-0-0. This was of the order of a years wages. So he worked for them for another 2 years and as soon as he completed his time in October 1935, Peter then

joined the civil service working for the Crownland Commissioners at 55 Whitehall. It seems from letters that Peter was working for or at Quintana sometime in 1933 perhaps on a project or subcontract.

Meanwhile how well was Joan being cared for? A letter from Edith to Peter on 24 August 1934 demonstrates what was going on:

Dear Peter
Thank you so much for the pretty card. I am so glad you are having such a nice holiday, dear.
Joan *{ now aged 14 ½ }* left us yesterday about midday. I think she ought to have arranged to be in London earlier, as she had another railway journey. Still, I suppose she knows her own business best. She seems more like her father as the years go on.
I want you to arrange for her to go somewhere for the 3 days in between her leaving East Wittering on the 30th and Auntie Gerties return to Reigate on Sept 3rd. The week might have been arranged to coincide with Auntie Gertie's return, but that is not Joan's way. So be sure to see to it please dear. I expect you have his address. Glovers East Wittering Sussex.
Joan is invited to Dick's wedding on Sept 17th and Uncle Lewis and Auntie Gertie are already going to another wedding on that night so they will not be able to see to Joan at all. I think the simplest thing would be for Joan to go back to the hostel that day and pay the few shillings extra which it would cost, as she has to return there, in any case, on Sunday the 19th so as to begin work the following day.
Will you talk to Joan about this ?
Of course she may decide not to go. She could not tell me for certain before she left, whether she would go or not. Do not let her leave this to the last minute.
I shall not be able to have Joan for her holidays, as I am going to live with Laura in her very small house at Redcar in the winter time, always now. It only has two bedrooms and a tiny dressing room, so, as we have maids, there will be no room for Joan. Next summer I hope to go abroad again, and let the house.
Perhaps you will be able to arrange for some of the Dibdin relatives to have her, as perhaps, by that time she will expect to arrange her own holidays.
I thought you ought to know, dear, what my plans are, as I could not spring this on you at the last minute.
I hope you had better weather the last part of your stay in Switzerland so as to enjoy Lugano. What memories that place must have brought back to you.
With love you affectionate Aunt Edith Haycraft.
P.S. Could you and David go round to Grandma's and move Joan's heavy black trunk up to the top of the house and her case. They are going of by "Goods" tomorrow. I don't want them hindering up Grannies hall.

How appalling this letter seems. Edith was given, or took on Guardianship of Joan and Peter and yet casually hands over such responsibility to Peter just 21 years old and ducks the need to care for a 14 ½ year old girl. Alright, there are and have been worst cases on neglect in this world, but Edith took this job on, as part of a promise to her sister, Cecily, and being a headmistress of a girls school, should have had some insight in caring for adolescent girls. It maybe the case, that Joan was a roaring caged adolescent screaming out because of the loss of her parents and craving security, bearing in mind she was in fact homeless, and for this reason there may have been difficulties, but this letter seems like a total abdication by a woman who was only 56 years old. We are reminded of the incident at school, just after this time when Joan convinced a friend that her parents were still alive in Belgium. We are give a vivid image of Joan in letters from a friend, Jane, in Leeds during the war describing her during those early years at the Royal Academy.

From a letter dated 24th December 1943
From Jane – married to Harold and working in the War Effort for the Mechanised Transport Corp in Leeds.- 25 of them
" My dear you would just go and be a dispatch rider – how you didn't kill yourself I don't know. Secretly I am filled with admiration because I know I should never have had the nerve."
"Do you look back on those years we knew each other with great pleasure or have you had nicer things happen since? I shall always remember you rampaging up & down those tiny Q-A rooms (Queen Alexander House) like a caged lion – saying you must leave the place come what may! Poor Jo, you did hate it and us sometimes. How silly it is that I still think of you as someone who needs looking after and here you are far more responsible and experienced than I am."

We have another delightful letter written by Jane in December 1944 from Leeds who was writing a sympathy letter after the death of Tony, remembering back to the old days …
" You never mention your music in your letters, surely it must be an outlet for your feelings and energy? Remember the old days when after a successful elocution or music lesson you used to hurl yourself at the piano, and fairly let off steam? Legs, long dark hair, fingers – all flying about in every direction in your exuberance? Do it now. …."

How Peter felt about the situation and responsibilities is open to conjecture but we can get some insight of his nature at the young age from the archives and from hearsay. There is enough evidence to show that he must have been a fun loving young man, polite and charming and well liked by those around him. It is reported by a cousin who knew him that he was a very likeable person who one always looked forward to seeing.
At the age of 19, while still at home and working for his father, he bought what was probably his first car and although it may not have been new it was only about a year old and would have cost well over £100. To put this sum of money in perspective in 1935, when he started work for the civil service he was earning £2-2-0per week. Between 1934 and 1937 he had bought another three cars, the last being a brand new Hillman Coupe and spent considerable money on travel and maintenance. It seems he quickly became used to dealing in money matters and dealt a lot in stocks and shares as well as buying 4 small houses in the Sutton area as investment in 1935. He was a member of any number of sports clubs in the local area and delighted in well planned touring holidays in 1936 and 1937. It would seem that he was used to being moderately well off and this must have applied to Joan as well, judging from a letter from the Public Trust regarding her expenditure that she would have to learn that she could not expect to live at the same standard at when her parents were alive.

After 1934 Peter was a free agent and must have inherited his share of the estate probably in the form of stacks and shares, which he managed in considerable detail.

How Peter managed the responsibility and family flack that surely must has surrounded Joan is interesting. As mentioned before Joan felt that the sibling antagonism of earlier years had faded that she and Peter grew, within the limitations of age and distance very close. Peter fought her corner against the Aunts and Public Trustees and challenged their view of what she should do after school. The family flack must have been considerable for example the remark from Edith in the letter above "Perhaps you will be able to arrange for some of the Dibdin relatives to have her, as perhaps, by that time she will expect to arrange her own holidays."
Also there is an interesting comment in a very supportive letter from Uncle Bernard in Nottingham to Peter at East Court Woodmansterne Road. Banstead, in late 1933 from 2 Brunel Terrace Nottingham

Bernard was to buy a dressing table at the estate auction and was to collect it by car and take it North to Notts. In one of his letters, he advises Peter to stay clear of his argument with Gertie and Lewis, Gertie being his sister. Both Joan and Peter had strong connections with the Notts Haycrafts and in fact if was through Don Haycraft that the family meeting up with the Guise family during the war after a chance encounter between Tony Guise and Don during training:

From Tony Guise to his mother

"Darling V,
Introducing Donald … pal of mine. Has met Gertie, the Andersons and Stevenson's – we do things together. Fix him up with bath & meals etc and get Widdy to show him the local dumps and tell the girls to look after him. Know you'll all like him, he is quite used to me".
Don was in training as a Sergeant. The girls were of course Tony's two sisters of 22 and 20 years. As a result of this Don and Joan arrived at 4 Pinfold Road. Peter followed soon after.

Joan often spoke of her visits to Nottingham and friendships with the members of that branch of the Haycraft family. During and after the war Don Haycraft was of considerable support as was the very close friend of her and Peter, David Muir who in effect was the boy next door at Avondale.

Judging from Peter's correspondence he had a busy time keeping his car maintained, working on his financial deals and generally doing work associated with his dead parents estate. On top of this he had to deal with the management of Joan up until 1941.
From letters it would seem that Miss Burrows the head of Ancaster House and the Public Trustees decided that Joan was not up to taking her school Certificate in the Summer of 1936 at 16 ½ years old. This force Joan to have to stay on for at least one more term if not two. How she felt about this can only be judged by the upset that occurred around her with the school, Edith and the Trustees. Joan had also mentioned during her life that she wished to play the cello, as she was in possession of her mothers, but had been told that this was unladylike and so had to learn the violin. In the letter from Peter to the trustees endeavouring to smooth out things in September 1936, he mentions that she should give up the violin lessons as

Joan was only learning it to help out the school orchestra. We need to keep at the back of our minds, that underlying all the issues was money, as Ancaster House was a private school and any future studies such as a German Cookery School mentioned by Edith in Dec 1960 would be expensive.
It seemed that Joan passed the School Certificate so that in January, despite pressure, she could leave and applied to enter a hostel, Queen Alexandra's House, by the Royal Albert Hall, in preparation for starting at the Royal Academy. During this period Joan was obviously causing upset with Aunt Edith who then approached the Public Trustees who in turn contacted Peter. Peter then had the problem of unpicking all the misunderstandings and ensuring that Joan was allowed to pursue the career of her choice. The Public Trustees had the responsibility of controlling all expenditure until Joan was 21. It seems that in May 1941 there was a balance to the estate of about £3800 owed to Joan.
It is puzzling that on 1st March 1938, Peter was contacted again by the Public Trustees:
"I am directed by the Public Trustee to say that he will be glad if you could arrange an appointment to call to see him to discuss the question of your sister's future career." At this time Joan was settled, hopefully at the Royal Academy.

We get little indication of the grief and stress that Peter must have been feeling at the time when having to deal with estate matters in the early days.
Two inventories from Imperial Airways of "Relics" from the "City of Liverpool" written about two weeks after the crash, offer a devastating layering of the impersonal approach on what must have been the closely personal.
See Appendix insert for copies.
It is hoped that this short article gives some insight into the strange, even surreal, life experience by two young people orphaned early in life and how they reacted to the sadness of the situation. Peter demonstrated himself to be a loyal, caring and stable individual, taking on serious work and financial responsibilities and supporting his young struggling sibling through her darkest hours. Joan grew from a devastated, stroppy, wild young girl into a strong willed young lady who then showed herself to be a caring and loving sister to her older brother.

Excerpt from letter from Joan to Peter 3rd Sept 1943

Dearest Peter
How are you? As a matter of fact I am a little worried – I have a feeling that it may be a very very long time before you get another leave (it you know what I mean). If it is so, always remember Darling, my best wishes go with you – God Speed and safe return. ……My fondest love .

Letter from Joan to Peter 17th Sept 1943
Peter Darling
Here are your socks. I'm afraid I can't get them any cleaner. It was so good to see you last Saturday; only wish you could have stayed longer.
Mater rang me up the other night to say that Mr Rayment is selling up all the furniture so of course she will have all her stuff back that we have here. I don't know how they are going to manage, because she only has two divan beds – no bed linen or towels and only about three or four blankets. However as always I suppose they will get over the difficulty somehow. I shall have to start looking around for bedroom furniture and we shall eat off the kitchen table. But now I have good news for you Raoul has a tooth. We spent the day at Mrs Midd's on Weds. And in the evening just before we left he put my finger is his mouth and I felt something prick. I was amazed because he has been so good. I should think it must have been breaking the skin on Saturday when you were here. If he gets them all as easily as that life will be quite peaceful.
Tony sent a little stuffed animal today that his batman made for Raoul. He is going to make an elephant and a bear for him too.
Well Darling, I'm afraid this must be all for now I have started to unpick my costume – its going to be a hell of a job. God bless you dear – My love Joan.

Peter died 28th Sept 1943

From Joan's Diary Sun 2nd April 1944

"Quiet day at home –turned out some of the boxes and cases. Was very harassing – going through Peters things. Poor darling he must have had a miserable life & so lonely. I wish I could have been more help to him – wrote to Tony."

Raoul Guise Feb 2015