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CRACKER NIGHT

Who remembers the 24th May as Queen Victoria's Birthday? Probably no one - but those of my age group will remember Cracker Night or Bonfire Night, also officially known, but only to adults, as Empire Day.

The occasion was to celebrate the achievements of the British Empire but to us boys it was a big night of the year.

It was a half-day off school but only after a march to the local picture theatre (not then called a Cinema), speeches of loyalty by the headmaster, (not then called the Principal), and a local Alderman (not then called a Councillor).

Then it was off to put the finishing touches to the bonfire.

Preparations had begun at the Easter Weekend when the gang of 10 from adjoining streets began collecting bushes and cutting down suitable branches from trees in local parks and reserves and dragging them labouriously to a nearby paddock or, preferably, someone's backyard where they could be concealed to theft by rival gangs.

The main feature was the finding and chopping down of a straight sapling about 12 to 15 feet (not 4 to 5 metres) high for the centre pole.

Meanwhile, pocket money was carefully squirrelled away and bottles that could be traded for cash at the local grocer's shop (not store) were eagerly sought. Other bottles suitable for sky rockets were also put aside.

Then it was time to head for the local paper shop (not then called newsagents) to buy the crackers (not then called fireworks).

Remember the names? There were Catherine Wheels and Sparklers used by girls - any boy seen with one was immediately dubbed a cissy - Mount Vesuvius, Roman Candles, Throw Downs, Double Bungers, Tom Thumbs, Sky Rockets and scarce but dangerous Basket Bombs. These were not generally used at the bonfire but were ideal for blowing up letter boxes. One of my mates got hold of one and by universal agreement, Mr Chidgey, the district nark, lost his letter box. Even some of the parents said 'good job too.'

The bonfire was completed with bushes and branches in place on the afternoon of the 24th and, by tossing a coin, two of the gang were sent on a raiding party to try to prematurely light the bonfire of adjoining gangs.

Meanwhile, the rest of us, and some dads, helped guard our own bonfire to ward off rivals.

Fortunately, there were no problems and, at 7.00 pm precisely, according to my mother's alarm clock that I was allowed to take, we all stood around the 'bonny' and shared with the lighting ceremony.

Dads, some with buckets of water on standby and Mums with homemade cakes and toffees joined in and girls were, reluctantly, allowed to join in provided they didn't get in the way!

It was all over by 8 o'clock and then it was home to bed.

The darkest years of the Second World War saw blackout restrictions which meant no bonfires and crackers were difficult if not impossible to obtain.

Chemistry teachers warned students of the dangers, such as lost fingers, and even hands, which had resulted from home-made crackers and Chemists refused to sell the chemicals to children.

The words 'environment' and 'pollution' were unheard of and little did we realise that, in the future, bonfires would be prohibited - it would be illegal to cut down trees and the sale of fireworks would be declared illegal.

It meant that there would be no fun for a boy and, it seems all he could do was grow up and join a Masonic Lodge.

I did, and by 1961, I was Tyler of my Lodge at the single storey Temple at Gladesville which had a side entrance with a short corridor leading to the Lodge door on the right and the entrance to the hall on the left.

On 24th May the Lodge held an emergent meeting for the 3rd degree for 3 Candidates. The local kids saw that the 'rockchoppers' were holding a meeting and I spent an hour or so having double bangers thrown at me through the door by a lad who is now an esteemed Past Master of the Lodge.

The ban on the sale of fireworks had not come soon enough.

They were the days!

-G.H.C.