

About the authors

*The authors of **The Boat to Boystown** were on the second boatload of orphans sent to Australia by the British Government in 1952. This forced migration was documented in the ABC TV program **The Leaving of Liverpool**, which was screened in Australia in 1992, and in Britain in 1993.*

*Peter Allsopp spent his early years at an orphanage in Bristol, England. He was sent out to Tasmania in 1952 at the age of nine, on the **Ormonde**. Also on the **Ormonde** was David Despard, who was ten when he left Wales for Tasmania.*

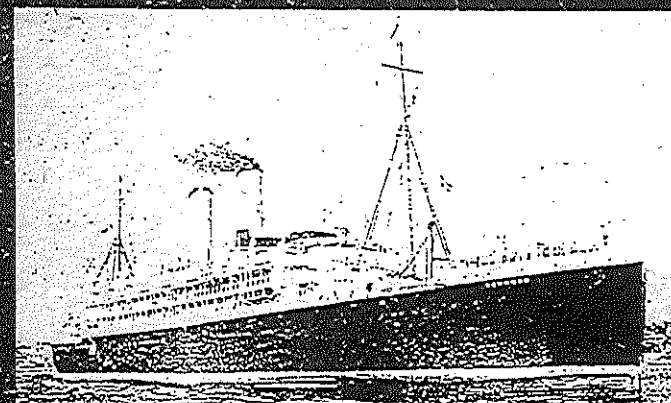
'My story as an orphan in England and Australia', and 'My big adventure', are true stories – Peter and David write their memories of the journey and of their lives at Boys Town.

Peter and David do not dwell on the hardships, having acquired the habit of making the best of things. But the hardships were there. David says, 'we didn't realise when we were young just how hard it was; they were very strict on us'.

The Boat to Boys Town

stories by

Peter Allsopp & David Despard



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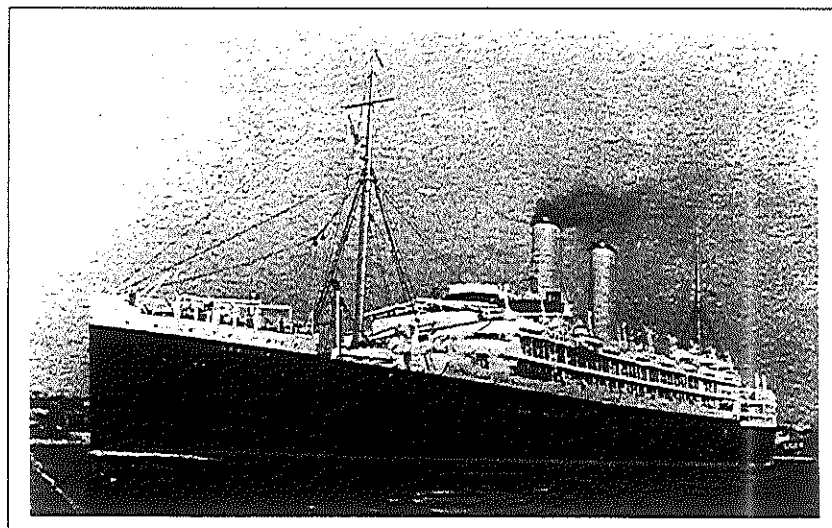
My story as an orphan in England and Australia

Peter Allsopp

When I was two years old I remember nuns looking after me and being woken up and taken to a cellar and bombs going off. I was still in the orphanage and a nun had died and us children had to line up and have a look in the coffin.

Every holiday a middle-aged couple would take me to their house. I had a bedroom upstairs. One night there was a power blackout so I lit a candle. It was a warm night but windy. The curtains blew onto the candle and were set alight. The couple took me back to the orphanage and never came to pick me up again.

The orphanage was in England and we used to be minded by nuns. We used to go to school outside the home. As a young boy I used to bash kids up. I was a troublemaker. During school hours I remember throwing stones and one day cutting a boy's forehead open. I was sent to Tassie by the teacher. We left England on the ship *Ormonde*.



Orient Line R.M.S. Ormonde, 15,000 tons

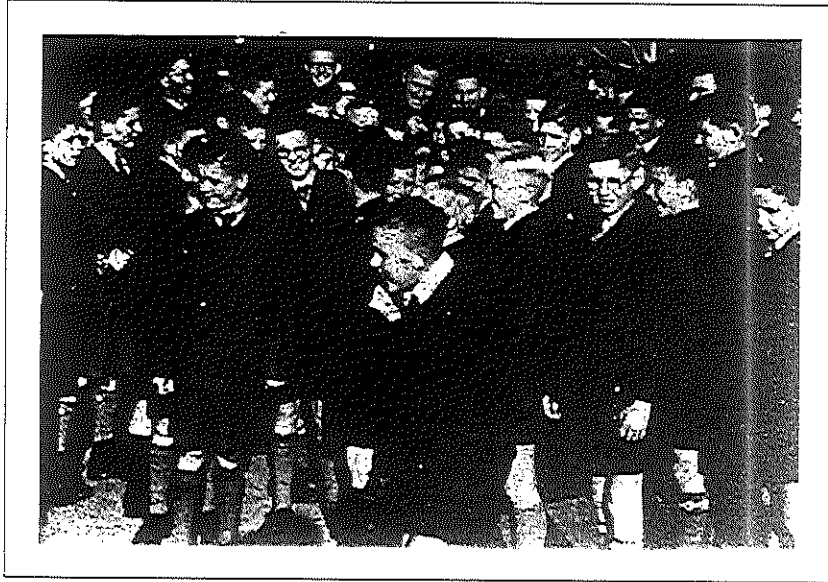
When I was on the boat with the boys we used to bash the Protestants up. The Captain came to tell us off, and one of the boys went to gaol for one day. I made plenty of friends on the boat. There were ten boys to a cabin and we used to get up to mischief.

When I was on board we used to go to school at ten o'clock every morning. We didn't like it, so for two days we stuck at it, but after that we threw our suitcase overboard. The suitcase was full of school books. The Captain punished us – we didn't get any icecream for one week.

We played up and got up to all sorts of mischief. We smashed chairs and flooded the bathrooms. We threw chairs overboard and smashed lights in the cabin. We set cabins on fire. We had a man minding us but he had no control, nor did the staff. We used to get up to mischief at night watching the films with the adults. When we called into port we used to see a lot of blacks in the water. They used to beg for food from the passengers. Some people threw coins.

During our trip to Australia we stopped at a little island where we saw a few coloured people who looked very poor and were wearing only a few clothes. One of the boys, named David Dawkins, felt sorry for them so he

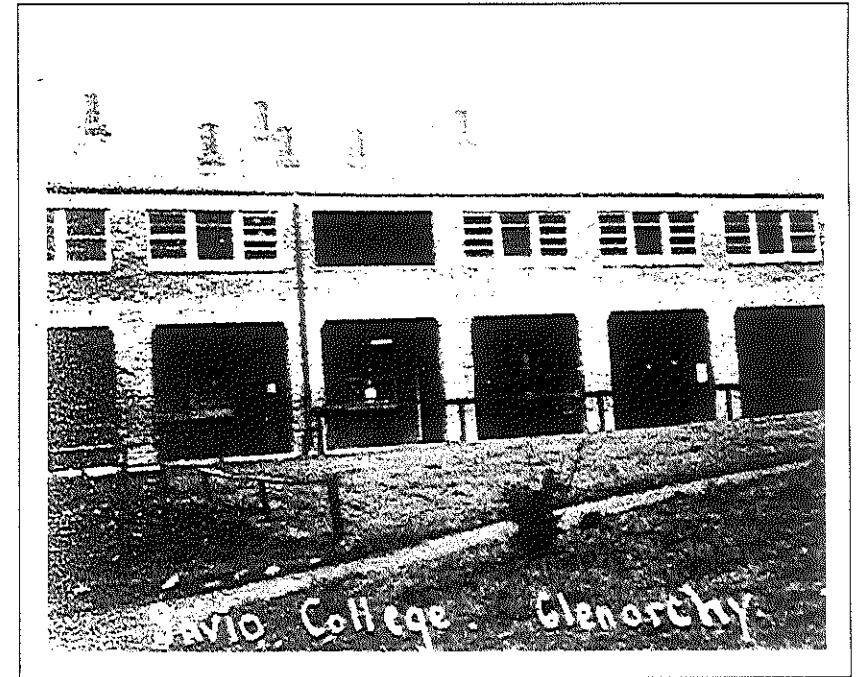
gave them all his clothes. When we arrived in Perth, Western Australia, David was one of the boys who left to go to a school there.



David Despard, left; Peter Allsopp front, third from left.

With about fifty-seven of us boys left on the ship, we then sailed to Melbourne, where we went to the zoo for a day. We left a few people in charge at the zoo tearing their hair out and thankful to say goodbye to us. When we left

the ship the captain and crew were relieved to see the end of us too. We left Melbourne, this time travelling by train, and after wrecking the carriages we arrived at Glenorchy. We went to Boys Town, Glenorchy, run by the Salesian Fathers, who were in charge of a school and boarders. This was in 1952.



A lot of the boys were very confused and cried a lot but the Salesians settled us down with cups of tea, biscuits and sandwiches and a tender pat on the back, then we felt

a lot better. The school had other boys boarding from around Tassie whose parents could not control them or who were also on their own. The Pommie boys fought against the Aussie boys but we would always end up friends at the end of the fight.

There were cows, pigs and chickens on the farm and we were often allowed to help work the farm. One lay brother had a large vegetable garden that supplied our food. He was a very good gardener. School work was next



Peter Allsopp, left front.

on the agenda and oh boy, was it hard! After a few hits with the cane we started learning our lessons.

The dormitory was upstairs and at night time we would have to take turns in having a wash one night and a shower the next. We were allowed three minutes in the shower, and if we did not turn the taps off, one of the Fathers would stand outside the door and throw soap at our ankles to hurry us up.

Quite a few families would come and take us separately to their homes for a weekend or for the holidays. I stayed with a family at Gordon. It is right down the bottom of Tassie. Sometimes I would be sent to sell flowers on the main road and stay all day until they came home.

On the Saturdays we stayed at the College, the Fathers took us on walks along the farms at Glenorchy. We often climbed fences, pinched fruit from orchards and raided vegetables. We ate them all and had bad tummyaches at night, especially eating green apricots and green plums. There were two lovely young ladies who devoted their time to having a farm and they had a beautiful large garden where tourists could visit. They also had a lot of

antique farm equipment but all of it was destroyed by bushfires. Different barbers would come to the school and cut all the boys' hair.

I left the College when I was sixteen years old and started working, which was also an experience. I hold a lot of memories of my childhood in England and of the school.

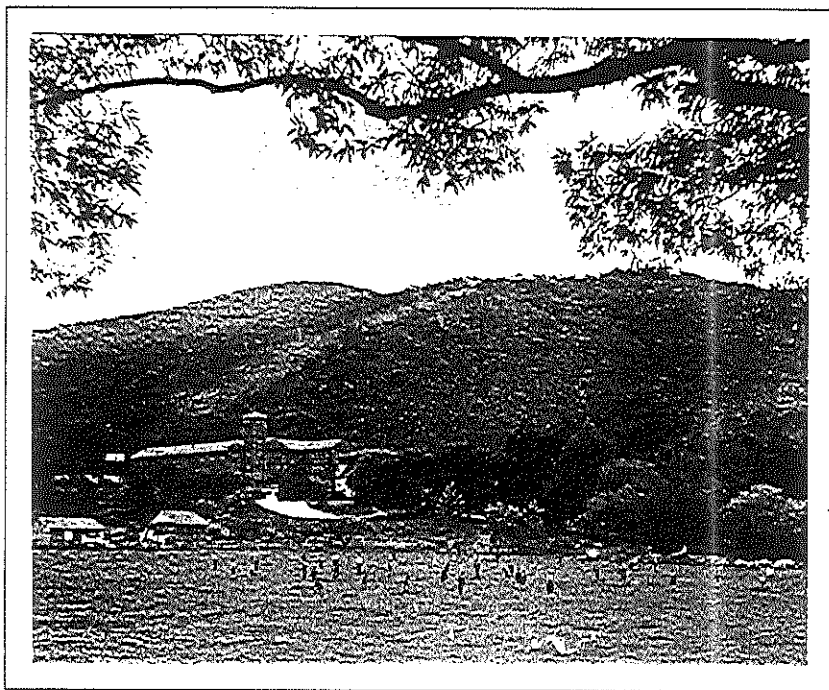
My big adventure

David Despard

'These boys are going to Australia'

The sister went out to get the milk and found me in the basket. There was snow all round me.

This was the story told me by the nuns. Since then I have found out more. My mother was French, father unknown. I lived in the convent at Swansea, in Wales, and attended school in Cardiff. We travelled on a big red doubledecker bus every day.



Boys Town, Glenorchy, Tasmania

One day the nuns took us for boxing lessons. It was my turn in the ring. I had already had lessons before so she told me to hit her. I gave her a right to the jaw and down she went, flat on her face. I got into trouble for that. They locked me in a room and said they would deal with me later. And they did.

It was the year 1952. I was ten years old. We were told to make our way to the Big Hall, which was called the gym, where we played all sorts of games. It was the month of October, in the autumn – the leaves were blowing off the trees. As I approached the Big Hall with twenty other boys I could see the nuns talking away to each other. We were assembled in four lines as we were told. I was talking out of place and one of the nuns clipped me round the ears. They were standing behind us and at the side.

The Reverend Mother entered through the big doors in the Hall. You could have heard a pin drop. Her voice echoed loud and clear. 'These boys are going to Australia.' There were cases stacked on top of one another near her as I stood wondering if my name was to come up. She had already called half a dozen names – then my name was called. I slowly walked to the front. When the list of names was finished they gave a case to us, one each. We got instructions about what was going to happen while the other boys went back outside to play.

Later we had our first visit to the Doctor – examinations, medicals, inoculations and so on. The next day we had our photographs taken. By that time my arm was starting to swell. It was the needles, so we had a day or

two in bed. By now I was tired and did not know what was going on.

The next day I was up and around saying goodbye to my friends. I talked of what it would be like in Australia. The nuns said we would be riding kangaroos to school and many other things which never happened. Three days later, after we had recovered from all our medicals, we started to pack our small cases. We were put to bed early that night so we could get up very early the next morning. We had breakfast, then we were all ready to go. The bus had arrived. The nuns checked every case to make sure we hadn't forgotten something. We looked smart for once. The clothes were new, as were the shoes. This was something I'd hardly ever had before. It was great.

Well, it was time to go. It was five a.m. as the nuns led us to the big front doors of the convent. As the doors opened I kicked the snow on the ground. Walking towards the red double decker bus, I looked up at the convent for the last time. My other friends had their windows open, waving goodbye to us. As I approached the bus I kicked the snow in front of me. I was sad in one way and happy in another. Leaving my friends was hard, but going on this long trip was my big adventure. The nuns said

goodbye to us, and the bus slowly drove off into that crisp morning on our way to catch the train to London. The starting point for our long journey to Australia.

No one there to say goodbye

There was only half a dozen of us on the bus. When we got to the railway station in Cardiff, the capital of Wales, we met a half a dozen more boys and they joined us too. They came from different parts of the country. We stayed in London for half a day before we set off on our long journey to catch the boat. It was four p.m. when we arrived in Southampton dockyards. The boat was so big. It was called the *Ormonde*.

There were hundreds of people at the wharf to see family and friends off. As I approached the gangway I looked back for the last time. There was no one there to say goodbye to us. My friends and I got on the boat and went up on the top of the high deck. There were streamers blowing off the boat from the top to the bottom. By this time the sun was setting. It was about five-thirty. The boat was slowly moving out of the harbour to the cheers of the people – away into the night.

There were two government men with us to look after us. But we were all over the boat and they had their work cut out for them looking for us. We were shown to our cabins. There were ten in a cabin. By this time the boat was well out to sea, and we all got ready for tea. It was our first night at sea. We were excited, and I didn't sleep well, neither did the other boys.

In trouble again

The next morning we tried to find our way around the boat, up the decks and down all over. We got lost a few times. It was a beautiful morning, very mild and peaceful. There were people relaxing in the deck chairs. I looked over the side of the boat and I could see the beautiful blue water. By this time there was no land. There was sea for miles. About four days later we had settled down and we got to know the other people on the boat. There were families and they were very good to us. The two government men gave us five shillings a week for the tuck shop, which had every kind of lolly you could eat.

In the passage next to our cabin were cupboards full of sugar lumps. We got a bit restless so we raided them

and got caught by the stewards who made our beds every morning. We gave them a hard time until their patience ran out and they reported us to the two government men. They gave us a warning, but we still got up to mischief. They gave us a hard time, which we didn't like, so one night we left the cabin door ajar with a shoe on top. They checked us every night to make sure we were sleeping, and when they opened the door the shoe just missed them. So that never worked. The next night we put a bucket of water on top of the door. When we heard them coming we put our heads under the blankets. All of a sudden the door opened and – *splash* – all over them. We were in trouble again.

The government men put us to school on the third deck, away from the other people so we wouldn't annoy them too. They gave us books and pencils and we got to work. About two days later I was sick of school, so the next day we went up to the third deck and sat down. One of the men said *good morning boys* and we said *good morning* to him. About an hour later I threw my books overboard. So did the other boys. By this time the two government men were furious. They took us back to the cabin and had a good talk to us. We were in trouble again.

A day in Cairo

By this time we had been at sea for about fourteen days. It seemed like a month. The sea was getting rough with rain and fog. Those were the sorts of days we played table tennis, draughts and all manner of games inside. A week later it was a warm day and word got around there was land up ahead so we went up to the top of the boat. You could see a little speck of land. As we approached, it got bigger and bigger. The two government men told us it was Cairo in Egypt. By this time it was very hot. We had a day in Cairo, walking around the city, which was a lot of fun. The next day we went through the Suez Canal. You could see people with camels walking through the desert. It was a beautiful sight. The boat made its way through the Red Sea.

It was rather warm that night, and word got around that they were going to have movies on the top deck. The two government men said we were not allowed to go. But we had other ideas, so when they sent us to bed after tea we made our way to the top deck and hid under the chairs of the people sitting there. We were there for about an hour when the two government men missed us. They checked

on us all the time – they had to. We could hear them coming up the noisy stairs. We were very quiet. We could see their feet walking up and down the rows of chairs. They were looking for us everywhere when one of the boys gave the game away by making a noise. Some of the people started to scream and we all got caught. The two government men were starting to lose patience with us again. They took us back to the cabin and locked us in for the night. The next morning the government men were in a bad mood. We were in trouble again.

Heading for the Equator

The sea started to get rough again. The stewards tied everything on the decks up, even the deck chairs. They lost a few of them overboard because of the seas whooshing over the decks. By now we were well into the Indian Ocean. The boat had cargo for Bombay in India. We had two hot days there; we went on shore and walked through the villages. The Indians spoke no English but we intended to have a good look around the markets anyway. It was very dusty with mules and bullocks dragging

carts behind them through the village. Then it was off to Colombo.



David Despard (back right) with two mates.

Two days later we arrived in Sri Lanka. It was so hot. The boat anchored about a mile offshore. Suddenly I could see lots of boats coming towards the ship. As they got closer I could see they were canoes with black men, women and children in them. When they got to the boat, they threw ropes up onto the deck and started to sell all sorts of things. Some of the little black boys climbed up

on to the deck where we were. We gave them pennies. We would throw the pennies from the top deck and they dived off the boat straight into the water. They went straight to the bottom and brought the pennies up. They were so excited when we told them they could keep the pennies. Meanwhile people on the boat were buying lots of things off them. We were anchored for two days. The next morning we were off again. This time we were heading for the Equator, the hottest part of the world.

King Neptune

By now there was no land in sight for days on end. We got to know a lot of people on the boat. They were very good to us. One morning a lot of people got us together and told us that it was a tradition to dress up because King Neptune comes on board; he comes out of the water as soon as we arrive at the Equator. They got ten of us and called us the ten little nigger boys. The best fancy dress would have dinner with the Captain of the ship. The next day, as we approached the Equator, the people put black nugget all over us. All we wore were white underpants

and it was hot. There were lots of people dressed up. The people were right – King Neptune did come up out of the water. He was dressed like a king. And you wouldn't believe it, but we got first prize. The ten of us had dinner with the Captain, and what a dinner it was! We ate everything they dished up to us. Above us were beautiful chandeliers and we were sitting at the long table with the captain. Second prize was given to a little girl. She was a bunny rabbit. Third was a crocodile. They looked good. For the next four days we were coming out of the Equator.

On board the ship we had games with the people on the decks. We played all sorts of games with them after tea. We were sent back to our cabins and we got into trouble again that night. One of us broke the light in the cabin. One of the government men went to get the Captain and we realised we had done a bad thing. The Captain came down to our cabin and said that if no one owned up we all would go down to the dungeon, down in the bottom of the boat. So I told him I did it. The two government men had had enough of us, so they locked us in the cabin for all of that evening.

Land ahead

The next morning the boat passed a place called Sumatra and a few more islands. The next land would be Australia. A week later we were told that in a few hours we would arrive in Perth. So we packed our cases and went up to the top deck looking out for land. We were so excited. Then suddenly we spotted land ahead. As the land got closer it got bigger and bigger. It was Perth – our voyage was over. The two government men said goodbye, looking pleased to see the back of us as we went down the gangway onto Australian soil. It was great. Then the boat went back to England on its last trip.

Well, I had finally arrived on Australian soil. There were two priests waiting on the wharf who introduced themselves to us and told us we were going to Geraldton, to a boys' home. We set off on the train. Western Australia was beautiful. The school was like a farm, with cows, sheep and a big market garden, not far from the Swan River. It took a while to settle in. We met the other boys, who were from broken homes around Perth. They would call us all sorts of names, like 'Pommy Bastards', but after a while we got to know them and they weren't so bad. We were very close to the river. One day we went

down to the river, about fourteen of us, and we spotted a dinghy so we all got in it and set off. We hadn't got far when she began to sink. You would think we would have had enough of water after all that long journey from England. The priests caught us and we were punished very badly. I got six of the best, so did the others. I was sore for a couple of days.

I had never heard of Tassie

It was time to pack up yet again. They told us we were going to a place called Tasmania. I had never heard of Tassie before. We were off to a Boys Town, which they told us was to be our last move. Well, we arrived in Melbourne to catch the boat. It was called the *Taroona* – like the *Empress of Australia* – and went back and forth across Bass Strait. The afternoon we sailed across Bass Strait they had greyhounds on deck. We gave them a hard time. We never hurt them – we just stirred them up. It was a rough trip across. We were to arrive at a place called Devonport the next morning. The two priests waiting to meet us took us to the railway station to catch the *Tasman Limited* to Hobart. I had never heard of Hobart before.

It was a long trip from Devonport, but on the way down the countryside was beautiful. We had dinner on the train and they looked after us all right. I had a sleep for a while then we arrived in Launceston, which was a nice place, I thought. On our way from Launceston to Hobart the train stopped at a lot of country stations.

At last we arrived at Derwent Park. There was a truck, a car and a ute waiting and two priests and a lay brother to meet us. Away we went on our last journey – up Tolosa Street on our way up to Boys Town. When we arrived they told us to unpack our cases for the last time. It took us a week to settle in.

Boys Town

It was summertime and I wasn't used to the heat. After class we would go down to the creek for a swim, where there was a dam. We had lots of fun splashing around and jumping in off the wall. It was great.

The school had two dogs. One was a collie called Sandy and the other one was Gridgy, and they used to bite us. It was our own fault. We got to know them after a while, and they didn't bite us as much then.



David Despard patting Gridgy the dog

Father Brennan was the rector of Boys Town. He introduced us to all the priests and brothers. One morning in class I put a drawing pin on the brother's chair in front of the blackboard. As he entered the room he said *good morning* boys and went to sit down. I heard a loud scream as the pin went up his bum. I owned up and got six of the best. They weren't the last either.

The brothers took us for long walks up Mount Wellington to Springs Hotel where we had lunch waiting for us. One day we overstayed our welcome on the mountain. We started to walk down late in the afternoon, but by the time we got halfway down it was dark. We couldn't see one another and we got lost, like Brown's cows all over the mountain. We approached the school in the early hours of the morning in groups of twos and threes. We were very cold and hungry.

Behind the school was a lot of bushland. We would go there and build huts and light campfires. Potatoes were our favourite feast. We would cover them in clay with the peeling still on them and let them cook for a while. When they were done the clay and the peeling would fall off them. With a lot of butter and salt they were beautiful.

Mr and Mrs Rezak lived in the white house in front of the school. They were the cooks and they were very kind to us; they were lovely people. At Christmas the Catholic Women's League would come to the school with presents for us, and we thought we were made. Mark Cook and all his friends would come up on a Sunday with their cars and take us for picnics. We would run and pick the best car. They were people from all round Hobart and we appreciated the day out with them. The Tagg family was

very kind to us too. We all went to their home at Ridgeway and had big picnics. Lots of times they spoilt us rotten.



*David Despard and friends.
David has his hands on the priest's shoulder.*

On Saturday the brothers would take us to the football. We would walk down Tolosa Street to catch the tram to North Hobart football ground. It was my first look at Australian Rules and at first it was very strange. During the week we learnt how to play the game. It wasn't so bad.

'There's a big world out there David'

Well, the years were rolling along now. I had just turned sixteen, which meant my school days were over, and it was time to go and work for a living. Father Cole was in charge of Boys Town at this time. It was 1957. He told me I was going to a farm up the East Coast. The night I was ready to go he said, 'There's a big world out there David, and God be with you'. I said goodbye to everyone and set off.

I had seven years up the coast farming, which was good experience for me. I was very shy with people, but after a while I got used to mixing with them. After working on the farm I moved to the city and got jobs here and there. It wasn't hard to get a job in those days, not like it is now.

My social life in the 1960s was exciting. I would go to the drive-ins, pubs and discos and meet a lot of good friends. A lot of my mates who had come from England had drifted all over Australia. I see one or two now and then. I heard that most of them got married. So much has happened since I left school – Beatlemania, the first man

on the moon, our Prime Minister drowned, the assassination of JFK and Martin Luther King, John Lennon's death – and even TV.

One day at work I met a nice guy. His name was Dennis. He asked me where I lived and I told him, in a flat on my own. He asked me to tea to meet his Mum and Dad, which I did that night. Dennis introduced me to Mr & Mrs Joe Bishop and his brother and sisters. They are a lovely family. With one of the girls it was love at first sight. It was Linda. We started to go out together and we got married in 1968 up at Boys Town, which they now call Dominic College. Linda and I have four beautiful children – Virginia, David Jr, Samantha and Katrina. I have never been happier in my whole life.

