



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

St. John's Wood

St. John's Wood is a neighbourhood in northwest London. I lived there in the mid-1960s in a flat I shared with a friend who, like me, grew up in Uruguay and had recently arrived in the U.K. We had low-paying white-collar jobs in the City to which we commuted back and forth on the Tube.

The flat was on the top floor of an old three-story building that had been chopped up into small apartments. Ours felt as though it had been squeezed into one end of what had once been an attic where the roof sloped down sharply, forcing us to stoop ever lower as we entered the bedrooms. In retrospect it was all rather shabby, but I don't remember noticing that at the time. I was in a new country, far from home, learning to adjust to my new circumstances.

As in most London flats of that kind, the bathroom had a stand-alone bathtub but no shower. Donald and I grew up in homes with showers and decided this was something we could change. We bought a hose attachment and a plastic curtain and rigged up a makeshift shower that we thought was perfect. We strung the curtain across the front of the tub to prevent water from spraying out into the bathroom but gave no thought at all to the water splashing over the back of the tub onto the floor.

Another idea we came up with allowed us to go to work in what looked like well-ironed shirts. Irons and ironing boards cost money, which was in very short supply, so we improvised. While boiling water for our morning cups of tea, we leaned over the cloud of steam billowing out of the kettle's spout, holding our shirts taught against our chests with one hand and "ironing" them with the other. We were mad to step out into cold London mornings wearing damp shirts, but they looked ironed and that was what counted.

Not long after we moved into the flat my brother and a lifelong friend arrived from Uruguay, and of course they stayed with us. We only had two beds, but they insisted that would not be a problem since they weren't planning to stay long. They believed their first priority was to see "Swinging London," so in the evening they sashayed off to Soho to explore the famous red-light district in the West End. They returned, somewhat the worse for wear,

the following morning as Donald and I were ironing our shirts over the tea kettle. They climbed into our unmade beds and proceeded to sleep the day away prior to going on the prowl again the following evening. You'd think we'd been raised by wolves.

The flat directly below me was quite a bit larger than mine; it was occupied by a married couple from India who were studying at the London School of Economics. Mr. and Mrs. Bochee apparently had some money and were in the process of decorating their home, painting the walls and ceilings in exotic colours and bringing in sofas, thick carpets, and standing lamps to fill the spacious living room. One Saturday I was enjoying a lazy morning in my room when I heard a strange *whoomph* sound followed by hysterical screams that seemed to be coming from the



floor below. I raced downstairs in time to see Mrs. Bochee stumble onto the landing, soaking wet, shrieking and waving her arms about. Through the open door behind her I could see that her living room ceiling had sagged and bulged and burst open to release thousands of gallons of dirty water that had apparently accumulated in the space between her apartment and mine. I broke into a cold sweat as it dawned on me where the water might possibly have come from. My parents had tried hard to instil in me the fundamentals of honesty, but a baser, more self-serving instinct now prompted me to race back

upstairs, dismantle the shower arrangement, and dispose of it immediately. A short while later the maintenance man came to inspect all the bathrooms on the top floor. Finding nothing untoward in ours, he remarked that the old building's leaky plumbing had given trouble before but never on this scale. When I enquired how repairs and restitution would be handled, he shrugged and said the property's insurance would cover it all. Feeling tentatively absolved but still uneasy about what might emerge once repairs began, Donald and I decided this might be a good time to move. We decamped a few days later, leaving no forwarding address, and never set foot in St. John's Wood again.