

CHAPTER 7

# Fun and Games



Children playing in the street after the war – in the 1930s there would rarely be vehicles visible.

We'd sing this one over and over again until we tired of it:

There was an old man called Michael Finnegan.

He grew whiskers on his chin again.

The wind came out and blew them in again.

Poor old Michael Finnegan – begin again.

**H**ow did our subjects entertain themselves when they were children? Mostly they were left to their own devices. Many households had no books. Most had radios, but none of the programmes were designed for children until the war, with a Children's 'Hour', usually only 30 minutes, between 5 and 6pm. Television watching didn't start in earnest until the 1950s, and even then broadcasts were deliberately ended after an hour of children's programmes to allow parents to put the children to bed before 'grown-up' programmes started at 7. And until ITV began and shocked the BBC out of its complacency, its programming was almost exclusively as middle class as its presenters and managers. The only entertainment deliberately aimed at children was in the cinema, the Saturday morning film show, with its cartoon-and-cowboy diet. So children had to make their own entertainment at home, and by playing with local children in streets almost entirely devoid of cars, with the occasional delight of street entertainers, the last vestige of an old tradition.

Sometimes we had entertainers in the road with a barrel organ, great dancing, men dressed as women with long billowing dresses.

On one occasion I saw a barrel organ in the street with men dressed up as women dancing in order to get some pennies. This was at a time of mass unemployment and was the only way they could get any money.

One man used to come down the street sometimes with a roundabout pulled by a horse. He charged a halfpenny a ride, and the roundabout had to be pushed by hand by one of us, which would earn us a free ride.

A man with a horse-drawn roundabout would give us rides, which we paid for with two empty jam jars. Presumably he could scratch a living that way.

Most of our informants played in the street, very few had a garden of any size to play in, and not many had a park nearby. What they did have was freedom. Mothers at home had a far greater workload than they do today, and were happy to let their children out to play, with few restrictions. Out you go from under my feet, mothers used to say. The only exception was when it was raining, and even then many didn't fuss about getting wet. Inner London streets were the playgrounds of both necessity and choice, even if a garden was available. Some of the games listed here are doubtless still played, but most seem to be dying out, at least in the street. Some do clearly persist in school playgrounds.

There are as many variants of each of these games as there are places they were played, and below I've used descriptions from informants wherever they've given them. Several used the words 'the street was our playground'.

The street was our playground – I cannot remember having friends in the house to play or playing in the garden, though we had one.

We spent hours skipping with a rope stretched across the road, singing esoteric skipping chants... When we were skipping across the street the rope holders would think of a colour or film star or food, and the jumper had to guess it... When you skipped they'd