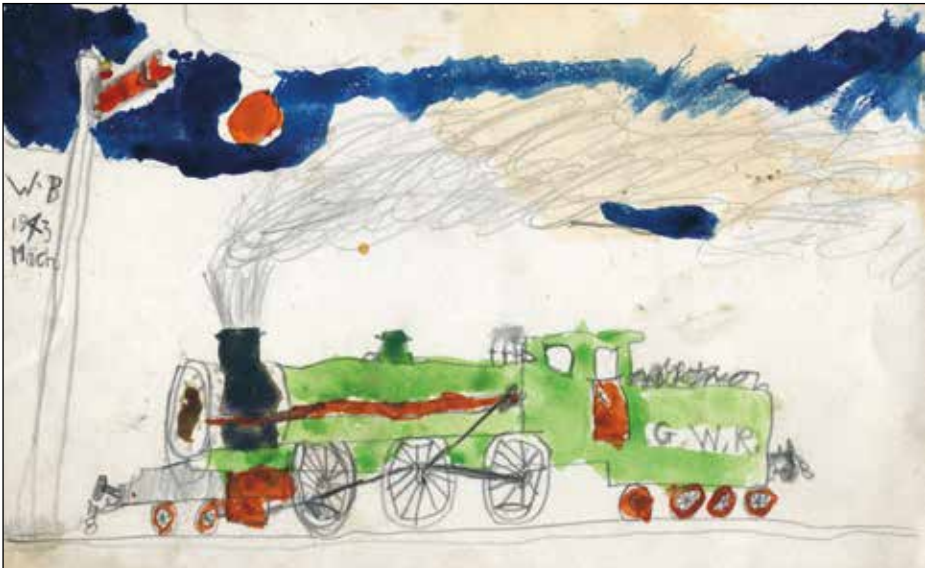


# 1—Beginnings

**I**t's unusual to be able to start anyone's story before they are born, but Wibb knows exactly how he got here.

*I came into being because my Mum and Dad—Faith and Frank—were on a walk in Buckinghamshire and they passed Valley Cottage in Speen. It was May and they saw a cot with a baby inside it hanging from a tree, with the apple blossom everywhere in front of the cottage. And they thought: 'How romantic—let's have something like that...' and I was born on 7th February the following year.*

Valley Cottage belonged to the composer Edmund Rubbra and later on the two Rubbra boys, Francis and Benedict, would play an important part in Wibb's young life. Meanwhile, 1936 was a turbulent year of social unrest, culminating in the Jarrow March—the miners' protest against unemployment and poverty—and the surprise abdication of the new King Edward VIII, giving up the throne for marriage to an American divorcee,



Sketch by Wibb, aged seven

Walls Simpson. What, I wondered, were Wibb's earliest memories as a child in London.

*Thornough Street, the flat where my parents lived, and a bedroom with a nasty picture in it. Nasty looking lady: Mona Lisa! I never quite liked it. I'm going back to when I was one-and-a-half, or two, or something... but I've got lots of memories about Thornough Street, especially about the gramophone that was there—the old, wind-up gramophone, which I broke so many records on! The gramophone was put away at the beginning of the war when we moved out to Buckinghamshire, and it came to light when we moved back to Hammersmith at the end of the war. I broke a lot of good records—there was a part of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony with a great big bite out of it and one record of Bach's Second Brandenburg, with Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra. I liked that—a good military march!*

So, immediately we have art and music in the story. Not that there weren't some other things more associated with a little boy born in the 1930s.

*I can remember the sandpit in Russell Square. I remember playing with my dinky toys in it.*

But it's significant that Wibb's very first memory is of looking at a picture.



Pastel by Wibb's father, Frank Bennett

Both his parents were artists, professional architects, so there were plenty of opportunities.

*I picked up lots of pens and pencils and did this, that and the other. Some drawings have even survived. I always liked doing painting and drawing and, of course, my father was always drawing pictures and things.*

Not surprisingly, Wibb's parents encouraged him to appreciate a great deal of art.

*My parents had lots of friends who were painters and we used to visit art galleries, so I had quite a lot of the old visual stuff and I was quite good at painting and drawing things at school—with pleasure, with fun! I remember going and seeing exhibitions of Picasso, when I was ten or something, and it wasn't something strange to me.*

Wibb was also encouraged to be creative in a very specific way by his art teacher at school.

*We had a lovely art teacher, called Ron Morton, who taught us to break away from things. I remember doing a still life, and he said: 'Well, that looks rather good, but why not make the background more interesting? Why not a bit of purple or something?' In other words, change it, make the picture better. I was trying to represent what was there, but it might look better if you did something else! You're creating a picture, make the picture good—never mind what it looks like! A wonderful step forward.*

In fact, Wibb was surrounded by artists.

*My godmother was another painter, Aletta Lewis, who did all sorts of things in Tahiti and Australia, and then there was Georgina York and Harry Valon, who were both painters, who lived on the other side of St. Peter's Square, and also had a caravan in Speen.*



Early pastel by Wibb

Speen was the neighbouring village to Loosely Row in Buckinghamshire (near High Wycombe) where Frank and Faith Bennett had a cottage and where Frank moved his family in the Second World War to keep them safe from the bombing in London.

*I grew up in the War and was sort of shut away in this place in the country. Looking back I can see that I was making things all the time. I had a garden shed, lots of bits of wood and a saw. I'd make myself toys. I made a toy battle ship by getting a stout piece of wood and sawing a point on the front and sticking a lot of nails in it for handrails and somehow getting a funnel onto it. There was an awful lot of making things for myself because there wasn't anything else. It didn't strike me at all unusual when I was at school, playing the recorder, but wanting a flute, to take a bicycle pump and bung some holes in it and see what came out! So I made my very first flute.*

*Oh yes, and there was my statue! I made it at school with a piece of stone lying around the craft room. I got a saw and I turned it into a man's head. That's what bits of stone are for!*

You can just picture this little boy: open, enquiring, absorbing everything like a sponge, going off and making new things. You can't imagine Wibb being bored! It was an attitude to life inherited from his parents. In the