

## Chapter 1

# Hunger

**T**hey came from all corners of Lancashire. And they marched. The rhythmic thud of lace-up leather boots, the beating of drums, enduring songs of protest and the spirited defiance of the brass band was the soundtrack to what became known as the hunger marches. Throughout the 1920s and into the Depression era of the 1930s, thousands of men and women joined this social protest. They marched to Manchester. They marched to London. They marched everywhere to demand an end to the degrading unemployment means test.

By the early 1930s industries across the north were crumbling, unemployment soaring and entire communities suffering. A mood of grave civil unrest had taken hold of large parts of the country. The hated household means test carried out by the Public Assistance Committee would see investigators search through food cupboards and order families to sell valuables before they would award unemployment relief. Unemployed workers would be given food vouchers or, worse still, public assistance pay. A plate of bacon fat boiled in water poured over a few small potatoes was the kind of meal on offer for a day's labour. But while

the north felt the worst effects of the Depression era, stories had begun to emerge across the country of mothers starving to death to feed their children. Annie Weaving was one. After the 37-year-old starved to death in London to feed her seven children, a 'Hungry England' Inquiry was commissioned. She 'sacrificed her life' for her children, observed the coroner. 'I should call it starvation to have to feed nine people on £2.8s a week and pay the rent,' he concluded. In Lancashire this battle for survival was made worse by the fact that the lowest unemployment payments in the country were awarded.

To proud workers it was an intolerable indignity. Degrading. A third of Lancashire's 800,000 unemployed had been struck off benefits completely. Only 7 per cent of children in elementary schools were receiving meals and the county medical officer warned that large numbers were suffering from malnutrition.

Public anger was palpable. In 1932 almost a thousand marched towards Lancashire County Council's offices to demand change from the Public Assistance Committee. Songs were sung. Women carried banners that read 'food for kiddies, not for cannons'. Unemployed weavers, spinners and dyers joined from towns en route as the protest converged on Preston.

As they arrived at the county town, police lines blocked their route and batons were drawn to stop the marchers reaching the hated Public Assistance Committee. Accounts say the violence was ferocious and indiscriminate. Batons were swung wildly and blood and teeth flowed along the cobbles. Bricks and stones hurtled through the air. Screams

were heard above the din. But the police stood firm and ensured the seat of local government remained protected.

Scenes like these were common during the Depression era. Violent clashes between the police and the unemployed happened on a regular basis. A year earlier the army had been called to guard Rochdale Town Hall during a protest against hunger and unemployment.

Against this backdrop of poverty and struggle, Cyril Smith entered the world in 1928. Born in Birch Hill Hospital, Rochdale, he was, in his own words, 'illegitimate, deprived and poor'. Like many of his generation, Cyril was scarred by the extreme hardship that shaped his childhood and his early years were tough. He shared a room in a one-up one-down house on Falinge Road with his grandmother Sarah, his mother Eva, his younger brother Norman and older sister Eunice. Both his siblings would end up marrying and his brother followed Cyril into politics, becoming a Liberal councillor in the town. As children they were part of a tight-knit family living in extremely cramped conditions with only basic amenities. The communal outdoor toilet was 300 yards away down a back alley.

To keep warm, Cyril and Norman would scavenge bits of coal dropped on the pavement from the horse-drawn drays. Other days they'd collect pieces of wood from derelict mill sites. Plenty of other children were out on the same mission and the task often became a fierce battle to seize the best logs. On occasion, they burned bits of their own furniture in order to cook a meal. Food consisted of dripping on bread, a single egg shared between three people, potato hash and penny bags of stale cakes.

But if Cyril was aware of the poverty around him, he was far more conscious of the fact that he and his siblings had no father. It was customary in those days for the *Rochdale Observer* to print details of all the births at Birch Hill Hospital. But if you check the records for June 1928, Cyril's name is conspicuously absent. Illegitimate children were not recorded. Being poor, he acknowledged in his autobiography, 'was just simply how life was'. Being illegitimate was socially unacceptable.

In a town such as Rochdale – medium-sized, surrounded by the Pennine hills – one wasn't afforded any anonymity and everyone knew each other's business. There were shops in the town that would not serve Cyril and his brother and sister. His sense of being an outsider was very real and painful. One day, after his mother burst into tears out of frustration at having no money for food or coal, a young Cyril eavesdropped on a conversation downstairs. As a neighbour tried to comfort Cyril's upset mother, he remembers hearing him tell her that she should have taken his advice and put young Cyril in an orphanage. All of this never would have happened, he said wearily, if only she'd taken his advice.

The terrible stigma attached to children born of unmarried parents was something Cyril could never quite shake off. He saw it in the way people looked at him. It was an open secret. Many people believed illegitimate children were from such a morally weak bloodline that they could corrupt others just by being in their presence.

Cyril became acutely aware of the pressures on unmarried mothers to get rid of illegitimate children. 'I myself

could have been aborted if my mother had taken some of the advice given to her at the time,' he told the BBC years later. In Parliament he was to become one of the fiercest opponents of abortion. When a Liberal bill to reduce the time limit for abortions to eighteen weeks failed, Cyril was forced to apologise to the Speaker for shouting 'murderers' at other MPs.

Yet while a growing sense of injustice cast a long shadow over Cyril's early years, his home wasn't a miserable place. Hunger often gnawed away at him, but laughter and song filled Falinge Road. Cyril had fond memories of the time, singing in a tin bath before the fire, playing with his brother and sister, and hungrily breathing in the tantalising aroma of the little food being cooked on the open fire in the grate. Although his diet didn't vary and meals were often the same, the smell of food cooking never failed to excite him.

Being his mother's first son he was always her favourite. Of all her children, Cyril was the one she had highest hopes for and from an early age would get preferential treatment. This came at a cost and, with all three children said to have different fathers, none of whom played any part in their upbringing, Cyril took on that mantle of male head of the household. He had to. His mum worked seven days a week as a live-in maid for a cotton family. The responsibility of bringing up three children fell on Cyril's grandmother, Sarah, and, as soon as he was able, on Cyril. From an early age he carried a sense of expectation and responsibility was thrust upon him. It was obvious straight away that he was bright and very able. If the family were going to fight their way out of poverty then Cyril would lead the charge.

Cyril grew up in the heart of a bustling mill town that was one of the first in the world to be industrialised. Situated on the edge of the stunning and dramatic natural landscapes of the Pennines, not many towns could boast Rochdale's proud history. By the eighteenth century Rochdale was full of wealthy merchants and it became the centre of textile manufacturing during the industrial revolution. It spawned luminaries such as Samuel Bamford, the celebrated weaver, radical and poet; John Bright, one of the first Quakers to sit in the House of Commons; and Reverend Joseph Cooke, the inspiration behind the Methodist Unitarian movement. It was also home to the Rochdale Pioneers, who established the co-operative movement in 1844.

Like many northern towns at the time it had fallen on hard times, but it wasn't all drudgery and grinding poverty. As one of the town's most famous daughters, Gracie Fields, ably demonstrated, Rochdale had a thirst for glamour, too. The Depression of the 1930s conjures up some of the most striking images of poverty in the twentieth century. But it was also a time of great social and technological change that was to usher in a new wave of prosperity. Squalor and misery were sharply contrasted by the emergence of cars, cinemas and the expansion of electricity to power homes. Only the wealthy had access to these new advances at first, but gradually modernity started to spread. Despite the grinding poverty all around him, the young Cyril did not have to look very far to see the first hint of glamour, excitement and the prospect of an altogether very different life.

A few months after Cyril's birth, Gracie Fields opened 'Rochdale's Super Cinema', a first for the town and a symbol

of the new entertainment era that was dawning. During the 1930s, Gracie became one of the world's biggest stars and Britain's highest-paid actress. She was a rare combination of glamorous Hollywood star and down-to-earth Lancashire lass. Typically, in her 1934 film *Sing as We Go*, she played a champion of workers' rights fighting the closure of the mill where she worked. Gracie, too, had tasted her fair share of poverty as a youngster and though her star had long since ascended from squalor to the stratosphere, her roots remained strong. For Cyril she was an inspirational reminder that talent and determination could always overcome poverty. She gave Rochdaliana a sense of pride and identity. She radiated hope.

Gracie was part of a cinematic golden age that offered a retreat from everyday life. *Gone with the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *City Lights*, *King Kong*, *Frankenstein* and *The 39 Steps* were among the big films of the time. But the film that Cyril remembered best was *Boys Town*. Starring Mickey Rooney and Spencer Tracy, *Boys Town* tells the story of an American priest who set up an orphanage for deprived boys and it was to have a major influence on Cyril's life. Indeed such institutions and the boys that were in their care became a strong feature in almost every decade of Cyril's adult life.

Looking at the grainy 1938 trailer now it's easy to see how a nine-year-old Cyril would have been captivated by this tale. Over footage of hundreds of boys pouring into an orphanage, a distinguished voice booms out, 'This is the story of one young renegade who came from the back streets...' As the camera zooms in to the scowling face of a young Mickey Rooney, no doubt Cyril would have

recognised some of the outsider's defiance that burned in Rooney's eyes.

A school trip had been planned to see the film, but Cyril was unable to attend because his mother couldn't afford the twopence admission fee. His teacher, Mrs Halstead, however, didn't want the poorest children to miss out and secretly paid his admission. Thirty years later, Cyril returned to school to speak on the occasion of Mrs Halstead's retirement and the memory of this gesture overwhelmed him. Tears poured down his face as he recounted the story of her kindness.

Evidently, the film gave the young Cyril plenty of ideas. The thought of setting up a home for boys appealed to him greatly, as did the journey made by Mickey Rooney from wayward youth to mayor of Boys Town. Years later, Cyril confessed that he had come from that cinema determined to find out what a mayor was. Whenever he managed to find any spare time he would run down to Rochdale Town Hall in the hope that he'd catch a glimpse of a real mayor. Marvelling at the Victorian Gothic architecture and its magnificent balcony, where the King and Queen had stood a few years earlier as part of their coronation tour, Cyril would stand alone for hours on end, his eyes fixed on the hall steps waiting for the mayor to appear. When the mayor did finally appear, draped in robes and a chain of office, something clicked. For the first time in his life he dared to dream. If Mickey Rooney could do it, he thought, then why not me?

Despite his keen sense of alienation, Cyril was not short of confidence. He'd assumed extra responsibilities from an

early age and carried his mother's hopes for him like a lucky charm. Although the looks of disapproval he received from 'respectable folk' hurt and the experience of being turned away from shops and shunned pained him, it sparked a fierce determination to be accepted, to succeed and, above all, to have the last laugh. But if poverty and illegitimacy already provided long odds of him succeeding, he was soon going to have to contend with another barrier that would only add to his status as an outsider.

Playtime at Spotland Primary School was never the most enjoyable part of school for Cyril. While other boys raced out of the doors to play football, he would bring up the rear knowing he could never properly compete. But he would try – with severe consequences.

One day, as a tan leather football skimmed across the yard and through the puddles chased by a huddle of boys, Cyril held his position and watched the action come towards him. A determined young face bore down on a goal of jumpers and schoolbags and skipped over desperate tackles. But he wasn't agile enough to evade the colossus defence provided by Cyril. A headfirst collision ensued and both boys scattered to the floor, grazing their knees on the tarmac.

Cyril was the first to get up. A trickle of blood rolled down his shin and he silently winced at the stinging pain. But he made sure no one could see his discomfort and lumbered back to resume the game. It was only a few days later that the consequences of his fall emerged. Collapsing at school, he was taken to hospital. A piece of gravel had entered the cut and made its way into his bloodstream to lodge in his kidney. He was diagnosed with nephritis, a condition so

serious that it could be fatal. Indeed, many soldiers in the First World War had died in the trenches from the disease.

For eight months he lay in a sick bed, living off barley water for the first six weeks. After that he was fed rice pudding to help get his strength back. In those pre-NHS days, access to medical treatment for the poor was reliant on the goodwill of the family doctor and it is to the philanthropy of his family doctor that Cyril credits his survival.

After a further nine-month stint at an open-air school for convalescent children, Cyril returned to school determined to pass his eleven-plus in order to get into grammar school. Despite his setbacks, Cyril looked at the challenge in front of him as well within his grasp. He was so certain of passing his scholarship exams that he told his mother to start saving for a high school blazer. Sure enough, he passed.

But if this was to mark the start of Cyril's ascent to better things, it was tempered by another troublesome development. His weight started to balloon and his body began to assume the girth that made him so instantly recognisable years later as a politician. Cyril has always argued that his obesity owed to a medical complication caused by nephritis, which left him unable to burn off excess calories. This was a side effect of kidney damage. He did, however, acknowledge that his poor diet, born of economic necessity, was a contributory factor. Bread, boiled potatoes, chips and dripping were his staples. The irony that he was born at a time of starvation was not lost on those who viewed his growth with disbelief. He was also deemed medically unable to take part in sports at school and physical exercise quickly became an alien concept.

He arrived at high school weighing in at twelve stone. By the time he was fifteen he'd shot up to fourteen stone, which was the same weight as the then world heavyweight-boxing champion, Joe Louis. While the other boys enjoyed football, cricket and athletics, Cyril was sent off to play table tennis. At playtime he cut a lonely figure. Mocking voices, cruel taunts of 'fatty', 'jumbo' and 'fatso', and the sound of laughter followed him wherever he went. And it hurt.

Some evenings he would go home and sit alone in the bedroom, brooding. But he never cried. He wouldn't allow it. A tough identity was forming and long before he left his teens Cyril was battle-hardened and resolute.

'I didn't grow up as someone's son,' he said, 'I grew up as me. Cyril Smith, individual. It was one of the first lessons of life, perhaps one of the most painful...'

Hurtful as his overweight figure was in making him the target of playground cruelty and endless taunting, he soon realised he could turn his size to his advantage. He learned to accept that he was always going to be fat and stand out from the crowd. Obesity as a child may have made him an easy target but it strengthened his sense of being an individual. He wasn't like the others. And the mocking voices in his ears helped build a strong defence against ridicule in later life.

Like the obese hero of John Kennedy Toole's posthumous novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Cyril began to combine the same mixture of clown-like antics and wonderful oratory that made Ignatius J. Reilly such a memorable character. Ignatius was described as 'a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one'.

Cyril was more a strange blend of Les Dawson, Alan Sillitoe and John Bright, but his sense of individuality was equally striking.

Being bullied, poor, fatherless and carrying a strong social stigma was painful, but it set Cyril apart from others, and this wasn't always to his disadvantage.

The more his outsider status was reinforced the more self-assured he became. Cyril was never going to shuffle off into the shadows, doff his cap and know his place. He was going to show people how wrong they were to judge him. His self-belief started to translate into a fine northern eloquence and his large frame gave him an unmistakable identity. Years of poverty, struggle and ridicule had helped forge a determined outlook. He was soon picked to play table tennis for Rochdale. 'He was probably the best table tennis player in the world for his size,' Roy Cooper, an acquaintance at the time, remembers. 'He really was good.' As an early indication of Cyril's resourcefulness, it showed how he was able to make the best of his situation. Most boys denied the right to play football and forced instead to play the more gentle sport of table tennis would have nursed resentment rather than thrown themselves enthusiastically into mastering a new sport. Not Cyril.

He umpired in the Central Lancashire cricket league as well, and began to show a willingness to discover new experiences. The shy, withdrawn boy standing on his own outside Rochdale Town Hall peering up the steps to catch a glimpse of the mayor had grown up and was barely recognisable.

The extra-large figure prowling round the table tennis table, swatting the ping-pong ball back and forth, pulling

faces in between points, dancing the occasional little jig and clowning about as though he were on the northern comedy circuit was a different beast entirely. An extrovert was born.

But behind the silly antics lay a keen mind. Books, religion, girls and politics signposted a dizzying journey of self-discovery. First he devoured history. The Dutch Golden Age, the French Grand Siècle, the General Crisis, the Enlightenment and French and American revolutions. Then the great British reforms of the Liberal governments of Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith: primary education for all children, the first sickness benefits for the poor, old-age pensions and controls on the House of Lords' powers.

Among the Liberal titans of this era were northern figures that Cyril developed a special kinship with. William Gladstone, the son of a Liverpool merchant, who served as Prime Minister four times. Herbert Asquith, the son of a Yorkshire wool merchant, who, until Thatcher, was the longest-serving Prime Minister in the twentieth century. And, of course, John Bright, the son of a Rochdale Quaker who helped repeal the Corn Laws to create a free market for goods.

Bright is a fascinating figure in British politics and his statue still stands proudly opposite Rochdale Town Hall today. Opinions remain divided on Bright, though. He undoubtedly helped achieve remarkable reforms, including the 1867 Reform Act, which gave most urban working-class men the vote. But he also stands accused of hypocrisy, campaigning against slavery while blocking efforts to improve the slave-like conditions of children working in his factories in Rochdale. He also provided terrible-quality housing for his workers in some of the worst slums.

Nevertheless, it is Bright's reputation as a determined reformer and ardent Nonconformist that ensured his legacy in Rochdale. A restless religious sensibility informed his radicalism, and Bright campaigned against and won the fight to oppose payment of a tax to the Anglican Parish Church.

One branch of Nonconformism is Unitarianism, which has strong roots in Rochdale with churches dating back to the early eighteenth century. For several generations Cyril's family had been committed Unitarians and he quickly fell in with what he called a 'left-wing religion', which deliberately encouraged rigorous independent thinking among its followers.

Unitarianism has no standard set of beliefs and is a very broad church, accepting Christians, Jews, Buddhists and atheists, for example. Central tenets include the belief in religious freedom and diversity, tolerance of other religious ideas, including humanism, and religious principles founded on conscience, thinking and life experiences.

Cyril credits the Unitarians for helping develop his fiercely independent and anti-establishment streak, and his involvement at Sunday school soon began to take on a greater commitment. A dedicated singer in the choir, he quickly became first a teacher and then assumed the more senior role of school superintendent. It was Sunday school that soon tested Cyril's outspoken and critical nature and as the first signs of Cyril's straight-talking style emerged, he made it clear that no one was free from his sharp tongue – including the Unitarian church itself.

First this manifested itself in a violent outburst. At the end of each weekly meeting tea would be poured for the

congregation. As the steam rose from a cracked teapot and trays of old, chipped cups were brought out, Cyril would grumble at the state of the crockery. Surely we can do better than this, he'd moan. Weeks passed and still dusty, chipped crockery was used to serve the tea. And then Cyril exploded. His face turned a violent red, expletives poured out and he smashed every single cup in a fit of rage.

Then, after securing the new crockery he'd demanded, he followed his physical outburst with a moral one. Taking to the pulpit to preach the Sunday sermon at the Blackwater Street chapel, years of pent-up disgust at the hypocrisy of the establishment tumbled out. Pointing to the church elders, he accused them of double standards, of condemning drinking and gambling from the comfort of their chapel pews, only to go home and do the same themselves.

The chapel council immediately passed a motion. Cyril Smith was never to be allowed access to the chapel pulpit again.

This forceful response did little to dampen Cyril's confrontational style. His inhibitions were melting away, his struggle to find a voice was paying off and the lure of politics was starting to grow stronger.

While the likes of Asquith found their political voice debating at Balliol College, Oxford, among men he described as having 'the tranquil consciousness of an effortless superiority', Cyril's early debating days took place in a far less grand environment.

From the pulpit of his local church he made the journey to Rochdale's Town Hall Square on a Sunday evening. Here, speakers of different persuasions, along with evangelists,

firebrand preachers and doomsayers, would mount soapboxes and express their views.

This outpouring of passionate oratory fascinated the seventeen-year-old Cyril. He'd stand for hours listening to arguments about communism and fascism, following every last intonation of a rapid-style oratory delivered by all kinds of characters. He'd revel in their presence, their charismatic delivery and how they commanded attention. It was, he recalls, a place that was teeming with life. On some occasions, Cyril would join in the debate and heckle the speakers, including one old-style communist who he'd regularly argue with. Very soon he would climb on to a soapbox himself and be forced into a decision that would change the course of his life.

By now he'd left education due to economic necessity and was working hard to bring as much money as possible into the family home. The family had endured enough under his mother's meagre wages and it was time for him to start bringing home the bacon. Even though he had no choice, this was still a decision that rankled and Cyril long nursed a regret that he didn't go on to university. He later identified this as the barrier preventing him ever becoming leader of the Liberals. But his thirst for knowledge and wish to immerse himself in the great thinkers of his age had to be balanced with more humdrum requirements for now. The money he'd bring in to the home made all the difference. He was able to buy much-needed clothing for his sister; the word 'paid' was soon stamped on the bottom of the electricity card; there was food on the table and the family became free from debt. It was about keeping the family's dignity.

He threw himself into work. Whitewashing lavatories, selling rail tickets, delivering telegrams for the post office; Cyril showed plenty of entrepreneurial flair. There wasn't anything he wouldn't turn his hand to. Deciding to put his grammar school education to good use, he eventually landed the job of a clerk at the Rochdale Inland Revenue Tax Office. It was a solid start and his mother was proud of the respectability it afforded – at seventeen he was told he had a good pension to look forward to! But it was never a job to satisfy Cyril's ambitions. He still craved excitement and with the 1945 general election looming, he had other things on his mind.

With the Second World War having disrupted the routine of politics, this was the first general election to be held since 1935 and politics soon captured the nation's imagination. Voters were driven to the ballot box by a message of hope, a new social order promising better housing, free health treatment and employment for all. Much was at stake and Cyril was determined to play a part in rebuilding Britain after years of war.

A well-known local Liberal, Frank Lord, convinced Cyril to join the party and introduced him to other members at the Liberal headquarters on Drake Street. Here, Cyril made his first bond with the wealthy mill-owning class of Rochdale, as he shook hands with Charles Harvey, the Liberal candidate. The director of the Fothergill and Harvey's mill in Littleborough (which is still running today), Harvey was one of the richest men in Rochdale and a highly influential figure.

Cyril became a fully fledged activist and he could barely

contain his excitement when he was asked to speak at a rally in Rochdale alongside Sir Archibald Sinclair, the Liberal party leader, as part of the general election campaign.

As he made his way to Packer Spout Gardens by the town hall, little did he know what impact his speech would have. Joining Charles Harvey on the platform at the fountain, Cyril looked out at the faces before him, cleared his throat and began to speak. He was a little nervous at first, but he finished strongly and the passion in his voice was clear to everyone present. He stood down to polite applause, but across from the gardens in a nearby red-brick building, a man peering out of a window was not clapping.

Alf North, Cyril's boss at the tax office, had heard everything he needed to hear. He pulled his window shut, lit a cigarette and pondered what action to take.

The next day Cyril was summoned to North's office and told that he was in breach of civil service rules. Members, he explained, were not allowed to take part in political activities that would compromise their impartiality. He presented Cyril with a choice: a career in the civil service or politics.

Cyril stared back across the desk, dumbfounded. Only the sound of the wall clock ticking broke the silence. North said he'd give him a day to make up his mind. He was asked to bring his mother to the office tomorrow when he'd made a decision.

Cyril was torn. He'd only been in the job six months and he knew his mother would not be happy at the prospect of him becoming unemployed. But he knew in his heart of hearts that he had no choice other than to follow his political calling. As an aside, he now had wealthy mill-owning

contacts to call on and he made the calculation that he wouldn't be unemployed for long.

The next day was a solemn affair. Cyril shifted uneasily in his chair in North's office while his mother's face betrayed a huge sense of disappointment. This has to be your decision, she stressed, knowing what he was about to say. North looked at him expectantly and asked for his decision. There was a brief silence. 'Politics, sir,' Cyril responded.

North nodded and Cyril's mum got up to leave. At the door North extended his hand and smiled. He told Cyril he'd made the right decision and would most likely do well in politics. Cyril shook his hand firmly and, after looking to see if his mother was watching, grinned back. His heart was pounding and it was all he could do to suppress a little squeal of delight. He was on his way.

After putting in an exhausting and committed campaign shift for the Liberal Party in the 1945 general election, Cyril's honeymoon thrill with politics woke up to a sobering reality. Charles Harvey had not even got close to winning the seat in Rochdale, losing to Labour by 11,836 votes. Nationally, the Liberal Party suffered a humiliating defeat, as Labour romped to a remarkable – and surprising – landslide victory. Clement Attlee was the new Prime Minister and Cyril licked his wounds and looked out at a new political landscape that had left his dreams in tatters. He'd now learned that wanting something badly and working hard to try and get it was not enough. He'd need to possess great stamina and persistence if he was going to see this mission through.

Despite his sorrow at seeing seventy-six Liberal candidates lose their deposits and the overall loss of nine seats, including

that of their party leader, Archibald Sinclair, the 1945 general election presented one unseen benefit for Cyril. One of Cyril's great talents as a politician was his prodigious networking ability. Powerful contacts were carefully cultivated to help clear the way for him to progress. Charles Harvey was one of the first powerful people he met and, as Cyril had anticipated, he soon secured a job with him: he was offered a job at Harvey's textile mill in Littleborough as an office boy.

It was a new world for Cyril, who was still only seventeen. It wasn't just his first experience of a large, successful private enterprise; it was the first time he came into close contact with girls. Months of debating, campaigning and making public speeches had lifted his confidence no end, but he remained incredibly shy around the opposite sex and was extremely conscious of his weight, which by now was tipping the twenty-stone mark. By any teenage standards this was freakishly large.

Cyril's position became even more uncomfortable when he found himself the only male working in an office of eleven females at Fothergills. This was a new experience entirely. For a while the discomfort he felt was almost unbearable. He was so embarrassed he could barely speak. Puberty had hit Cyril like a train and it required monumental willpower just to stop himself from staring open-mouthed across the desk at the young women before him. Cyril's first approaches were, unsurprisingly, met with rejection. It was a massive blow to his pride and the humiliation stung. Things did not improve despite his best efforts to be noticed. For a man blessed with a forceful personality and strong character this came as a shock.

One woman soon captured his attention, however. She was indescribably beautiful, better dressed than the rest and a source of endless torment for Cyril. He would sit and stare at her when she wasn't looking, careful to quickly avert his gaze if she looked over in his direction. She became part of Cyril's fantasy life and he began to entertain all sorts of silly daydreams, which usually involved him walking arm in arm with her down the promenade in Blackpool.

Maintaining such a fantasy life required strict discipline. Cyril could never approach her for he knew she would reject him and his dreams would crash violently into the buffers. So he remained silent and never spoke to her.

But these dreams could only partially shield him from the cold reality of rejection that he felt everywhere in that office. The haughty laughter, the looks of cool disdain, the scornful flick of heads as the girls would toss their hair back and walk away from him. His sexual appetite had awakened with a jolt. And it wouldn't tolerate rejection forever.

In that textile mill office Cyril learned to deal with humiliation and found a way of earning respect. As teenage secretary of the works council people came to him for help. Complaints from the shop floor would have been communicated to management through Cyril. If staff had a problem with tea breaks being shortened or wanted more overtime, Cyril would make their case. Suddenly he served a purpose.

Teenage years are never easy for anyone. But for Cyril they were a titanic struggle, one where he was forever straining to find an identity and rid himself of the pariah status he'd felt as a child. He knew that acceptance, friendship, love

and a safe passage would not come easily. He would have to defy all odds and fight. Cyril Smith the pariah was going to be killed off. A different Cyril Smith was going to replace him. One who people respected. And feared.

Cyril's tumultuous emotional life mirrored the colossal sense of struggle that was happening all around him. The post-war settlement promised to sweep away an old order, but the change that people cried out for would take a long time to arrive in Rochdale. The old-established way of thinking was crumbling and in Cyril's case he quite literally saw old foundations collapse in front of his eyes. One night there was a large bang and the cottage next door fell down in a heap of bricks. With the support of next door gone and a ton of rubble on their doorstep, Cyril's family had no choice but to leave their condemned home.

As they hurriedly gathered their belongings and left the one-up one-down terraced house for the last time, Cyril took one backward glance at his childhood home. Then he pulled his coat collar up, set his face against the sleeting wind and made his way to what would become his home for the rest of his life.