

# Bourne toWrite...

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workshops

## Lessons for Life

by Nick Barrett

The shop was small and so was the house, and if the gypsy boy hadn't mentioned them in his algebra exercise I might never have known they were there.

I was buddying him for his first days at our school, overseeing some of his homework before he handed it in. I supposed this was the way gypsies dressed, old short trousers and jacket and sandals on his feet in the middle of winter. He didn't say much but he seemed friendly and grateful for help.

Algebra lesson number one: Sets: Cooper's bicycle shop, Scott's the electricians, Russell's the butchers, the shop with the house, Kelly's paraffin shop and Rashid's grocers. That was his list of the Set of shops in Calder Street between Rose Street and Carfin Street.

He had got the right idea about Sets, but he'd got the wrong idea about this shop or house, there was no shop or house where he said. There was only a lane there – well we always called it the lane although I never actually saw a lane - with a big, solid old wooden gate completely covering its arched opening. No doors or other openings in it. It was the same at the back, I knew from playing there since I was little.

“There's no shop or house there,” I told him.

“Oh but there is, for sure, I've been in them,” he said in his quietly insistent way, “I'll show you tonight if you like.”

We met at the wooden gate, he was already there. He knocked on it and ran off saying “See you soon,” over his shoulder. I thought it might be that game where you ring a doorbell and run, but I saw a light come on, shining through cracks in the gate, revealing the outline of a door. A girl about my age opened it.

“Come on in,” she said, “we're open.”

Inside it was a shop right enough, very small and quite dark, with old oak counters and cupboards but no sign of anything for sale.

“I’ve never noticed the shop before,” I told her, “what do you sell?”

“Only what you most need,” she said, “the essentials.”

“What kind of thing do you mean?”

“Come into the house and speak to my father,” she said and I followed her through a short narrow hallway into a very small living room with just enough space for a sofa and a couple of easy chairs around an electric fire where a man with a beard and longish greying hair who could have been any age was sitting. Leather bound books lined the walls.

“How do you do young fellow,” he said. “We are out of stock of what you will need but keep calling by, we are sure to have it when you really need it. You can read some of our books while you wait.”

It struck me as an odd invitation but the books looked old and interesting so I took one down from the shelf. I had no idea what language this was or even what alphabet was being used but somehow I could understand every word.