

“In my career with the BBC, I have heard many fascinating stories of people’s lives, but only two have struck me as worthy of a book. Robert’s is one of them.”

—Esther Rantzen, broadcaster and writer

“Robert’s story, harrowing as it is, demonstrates that Someone is always listening and in sovereignty continues to surprise us all in the way He raises up individuals to be a blessing to many.”

—Rev. Richard Bewes, All Souls Church, London

“Robert is a first-class honours graduate from the College of Hard Knocks. He is a testimony to the Christian principle that it is not where you come from but where you are going, that matters.”

—Rev. Dr Steve Brady, Principal, Moorlands College, Christchurch

“Without individuals like Robert Hicks, movements like OM would be the poorer. I, for one, am inspired by him and his vision for the Word of God and its distribution.”

—George Verwer, Operation Mobilisation

“Robert, I am always amazed by your vision and commitment to Jesus and his Gospel. Your many enterprises leave me speechless. Your life and testimony are an inspiration to us all.”

—John RW Stott, Author, Bible scholar and rector emeritus of All Souls, Langham Place, London

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all children who have suffered at the hands of inadequate parents.

Thank you, King James records the remarkable influence that the King James Version (Authorised) Bible has played in the life of Robert Hicks.

First published in 1611 in the time of King James I of England, the year 2011 marks exactly four centuries that this version of the Bible has been in print.

Translated from the original languages of Hebrew and Greek by several godly scholars, it brought light and liberty of the English-speaking world as the power of the Word of God was unleashed, and the conscience of nations was touched.

Timeline

1941	Robert is born in Birmingham, the Midlands, the city of a thousand trades.
1941–1947	Lives in various care homes and with mother in Birmingham slums.
1947	Hicks family move to 335 Stonehouse Lane, Bartley Green. Father returns from the war.
Christmas 1947	Worst winter of the century
1948–1952	Robert attends two primary schools.
1951	His mother deserts family and Robert is sent to Middlemore Care Home.
1951–1956	Attends two different secondary schools.
1956	Robert becomes an apprentice grocer's boy at George Mason's and finally receives operation so he is no longer tongue-tied.
1957	Robert copies out and reads the Bible for the first time and comes to faith in Christ.
1959	Made Master Grocer, promoted to Relief Master.
1961	Robert and Joyce marry and he is appointed shop manager for the first time.
1973–1979	Marketing Director for the Co-Op in the North West. Launches UK's first hypermarket and also oversees 110 shops.
1979–1984	Becomes Publishing Director for Scripture Union. Leaves to start own publishing company in London.
1989	Joyce dies from cancer after two-year battle.
1991	Robert marries Annabelle.
1999	Robert publishes ten million Millennium Gospels.
2000	Joint promotions with the Daily Telegraph and the Daily Express.
2002	Robert conceives and sponsors <i>Back to Church Sunday</i> .
2009–2010	The <i>Fresh retelling of the Gospels</i> are published
2010	Robert publishes the Harper Collins <i>Bible Companion</i> .
2011	Celebrations planned for the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible. Launch of <i>Open Your Bible</i> —a new 800 page edition combined with a website www.openyourbiblesources.com .



Robert writes:

When I was a child, I found it nearly impossible to communicate with anyone outside my immediate family and a few friends who had learnt how to understand my peculiar way of speaking. As a result, I spent many hours every day thinking and reasoning within myself.

I would wander the fields around my house, holding conversations with imaginary individuals and imaginary conversations with real people. This, coupled with the developing powers of observation (something all children are blessed with), is the reason I have no difficulty in remembering those 'child's thoughts.'

At intervals in the book, some of these thoughts are recorded.

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Robert as a young man, Bible in hand

 Prologue

For the first time fifteen-year-old Robert could remember, the blood seeping gently from his lip was not caused by his father's fist. The man, who would regularly beat his six children and abuse his daughter, was in his bedroom lost in a drunken sleep.

It was one o'clock in the morning, and the teenager sat alone in the kitchen. A single candle illuminated the starkness of the room which was like a textbook to poverty. An air of neglect hung on every bare wall; dust loitered on the floors and shelves, drifting into the empty cupboards. William Hicks spent his wages on booze and gambling and sometimes prostitutes, but not on his children. The drab kitchen at Number 335 Stonehouse Lane mirrored every other room in the house with the exception of the front room—that was where social workers and police officers were welcomed. It was kept immaculate.

Robert's mouth was still raw and tender from the previous day's operation. Every few minutes, a little blood swirled around the wounds where the doctor had removed a membrane from either side of his tongue, attaching it to the bottom of his mouth. The medical term was tongue-tied. It was a fairly routine operation, usually performed on an infant. But Robert's parents had never bothered taking any of their six children to their GP for regular check-ups, so the condition went undiagnosed; at fifteen, he underwent the procedure he should have received as a baby.

At school, Robert's poor speech led him to being labelled retarded. Combined with dyslexia, it was a difficult burden. His childhood was marked by constant worry and a searing loneliness and frustration. He felt adrift in a silent world; his brain knew how

to speak, but his mouth was neutered. Robert's clumsy attempts to form words made other children giggle and adults impatient. One day in class, he raised his hand and asked a bemused teacher: "Dease sir, I need da doilet." So he simply did not speak unless it was absolutely necessary. His only release from his isolation was humming quietly to himself which annoyed everyone, especially his father; then the beatings followed, usually from father's old army belt. The huge, sharp buckle could easily tear open a child's skin.

Hospital staff were shocked a fifteen-year-old boy had turned up alone for such an intimate operation on his mouth. Robert did not try to find his father to go with him. He knew he would be entertaining a crowd in the local pub or gambling his son's wages away; mother had walked out on the family five years earlier and Robert had no idea where she was.

That night, using the wooden box which covered the gas meter as a table, he lifted his large pen, dipped the nib in some ink and took a piece of scrap paper he'd found in the grocery store where he worked. In 1955, speech therapy was not available on the National Health Service and, as his dad seized his wages every week, Robert had no means of paying for private treatment. The doctor who discharged the teenager made another suggestion:

"Robert, now we have removed the extra membranes, there's nothing to stop you speaking normally, once you get used to moving your tongue," he explained. "It's become flabby and weak with lack of use. I suggest you read out loud while writing the words down. That will help. Find a book, a large book, and copy it out by hand."

So that afternoon, Robert had searched every room at 335 Stonehouse Lane for a book, any book. He quickly realised the irony of his task. Finding a book in a house, which rarely had blankets on the one bed he shared with his four brothers, seemed a fruitless task. As he went from room to room, his frustration grew. After years of

being called stupid, a retard, living in an isolated world, he finally had the chance to escape. He desperately wanted to speak and be understood. His need to express his true feelings, rather than just grunt emotions, was overpowering. He could not bear being stuck in his lonely grey world any longer. But first, he needed a book.

The one room he dared not search was the beast's room. That was what the children called their father's room. It was not a place to find things; it was a place where childhoods were stolen. It was where Robert's sister Jean was led in tears at night and from where she left the following morning in a stunned silence.

The one cupboard he dared not search was the one in the living room where his dad kept his army belt. But he had tried everywhere else, so finally, taking a deep breath, he pulled the door open. Plunging his hand into the darkness, he recoiled when he grazed the belt buckle. He pulled out a tin of shoe polish, a torn cloth and other rubbish. Then his fingers touched something softer. Dragging it out, he beamed when he saw it was a book. Dust and cobwebs shrouded the black leather cover. He was amazed to see the page ends were all in gold.

The book's title had faded so badly, it was unreadable. Taking a piece of shoe polish, Robert gently rubbed it into the cover, restoring the faded glossy sheen until it glistened. It was as if this book lit up the darkness. Placing it near his small candle, he gently turned the first few pages until he came to the first chapter. Lifting his pen, he scanned the first line and started to write, clumsily speaking the words out loud:

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”



Robert aged 11 with his mother on the day trip to Belle Vue in Manchester. Two weeks later, she walked out on the family.

 A stranger calls

Robert Hicks was almost six years old when he was handed over to the woman he was told was his mother. Born in Birmingham in 1941, the first few years of his life were shared between different overcrowded houses and lengthy stays in a variety of care homes. Usually, he was sent away whenever his mother became pregnant, which was often. Winifred Hicks had ten children by four different men. Four of the children—including twins and a mixed-race girl—were placed for adoption before Robert ever met them. In later life, he thought about tracing these unknown siblings but had so little information he knew it would be hopeless.

Robert had no photograph of his mother and no mental image of what she looked like. His mother was almost a complete stranger. He could barely picture his sister and four brothers as they, too, were placed in different homes for months at a time. Sometimes, they would run away and come home themselves; other times it was the police who found them wandering around Birmingham.

“At home, it wasn’t unusual for three of us to go to bed, and wake in the morning to find two new children sleeping beside us,” says Robert. “These were my brothers, fetched from a care home late at night. This often happened when my parents needed extra social security money which was automatically reduced if children went into care. Of course, we never benefited from the money; it was used for a night out at the pub or new clothes for mother.

“Other times, I’d wake to discover one of my brothers was missing. He’d been taken in the night to a care home and it would be months before we saw him again. As children, we found it very

difficult to bond as our time together was fractured; we were more strangers than siblings.”

In the care homes, Robert’s mother quickly became a distant memory, his father even more so. His mother never visited him in any of the care homes. When he was living in the slums, there was no mother-and-child bonding. This time, he had been placed in care because his mother was pregnant by another man, not her husband, and would soon give birth to a daughter Robert would never meet. The six Hicks children were left to look after themselves, especially at weekends when their parents spent all night in the local pubs or cinema. Before William Hicks was called up to the army in 1944, he had spent very little time with Robert or any of his children. After work, he would head straight to the pub. There were no visits to the park to kick a ball around with dad, no walking to school with mum or bedtime stories from either. When William Hicks was demobbed after the war, he eventually made his way back to his family. One afternoon, the six Hicks children—five boys and one girl—were placed before a handsome stranger standing in the kitchen dressed in a soldier’s uniform and told: “This is your father.”

Winifred was born in the slums of Birmingham but her grandparents kept her sheltered from much of the reality of that life. She had a love of fine clothes and regarded herself as different from the other slum-dwellers. Robert explains: “My mother was a strong, well-built woman who always felt superior to those around her because of the privileges she had received as a child.

“Like my father, she was overly attracted to the opposite sex and, like him, was incapable of accepting responsibility for her actions. She was educated and distinctive yet flawed, for mother was attracted to physically handsome men. She never bothered to discover their character but would quickly go off with them even if it meant staying out all night, leaving her children alone at home. She

was only twenty-two when I was born, her sixth child. In all, she gave birth to ten children, but never became a mother. I have no memory of her ever hugging or kissing me unless it was to impress visiting social workers. Birthdays and Christmas went unmarked. I always felt like a trespasser in her presence. I longed to be touched, hugged and kissed. I wanted to be noticed and asked questions about school or who our friends were. But there was just silence born out of sheer disinterest.

“When she was at home, mother would sort her clothes or sit listening to the radio, anything but interact with her children. Looking back, the physical beatings from my father were extremely painful and terrifying. He could become furious at the slightest excuse then punch us or beat us with his huge army belt. However, the absolute indifference from both my parents, especially mother, to their children was probably more painful. They simply didn’t care. We had no value, no relevance to their lives.”

He adds: “It was like strangers using the same lift. You are aware of someone else’s presence, but there is no conversation. You’ll stare at the floor or a stain on the wall, anything but talk. When I saw other parents playing with their children in the local park, it was as if they were speaking a different language. Laughter, hugs and kisses were unknown vocabulary in the Hicks’ house. Even today in my seventies, I find it awkward being hugged or kissed. Thankfully, I have now overcome this, although it has been hard.”

Robert remembers the excitement of meeting his father after he was demobbed. He and his siblings idolised the man they could not remember, imaging him as a war hero, returning with exciting stories of bravery and daring, along with chocolates and chewing gum. Within days, however, the smiling soldier became the enemy.

“My father was born in Sheffield, Yorkshire, and, by all accounts, was a wild young man. It was rumoured he was forced to leave the

city after getting a married woman pregnant and abandoning her. He had a punch-up with his mother before heading south to Birmingham where he met my mother.

“They married in 1939, when she was seven months pregnant with my older brother Jack and had a son, Donald, from a previous relationship, both born in the same year. Dad was tall, fit and handsome. He and mother were attracted sexually, but there was no emotional relationship. They could not remain faithful to each other.

“My parents loved drinking, socialising and the whole pub culture. At weekends, they would go out and have fish and chips before heading to the pub, while leaving only bread and lard or margarine for our tea. Their taste made me sick, but it was the only food in the otherwise empty cupboard.”

Born just before an air raid

From an early age, the Hicks children learnt the futility of crying. Whether from hunger or in need of a consoling hug, any cry went unanswered. In Robert’s case, the hard lesson began just hours after his birth. His mother had saved enough money to book into a private clinic, ensuring a room to herself. A cot for Robert was placed in the far corner.

A few hours after her baby was born, Winifred fell asleep. She eventually woke to the muffled sound of Robert’s cries. Being tongue-tied meant his crying was different from that of other babies. But her son’s odd whimpering did not concern Winifred. She was more alarmed the hospital was unusually quiet. She got out of bed and left her room, abandoning her son of a few hours alone in his cot. It would not be the first time Robert and his siblings were abandoned. Winifred walked along the empty corridor and down the main staircase until she eventually found the elderly caretaker.

He explained the staff and patients had fled the hospital after an air raid siren and were huddled in a nearby shelter. The hospital had been hit by bombs several times before, putting part of it out of use. Winifred had slept right through the commotion. When the staff finally returned, the nurses were embarrassed to hear they had left a new mother and her baby alone in her room.

“They fussed over mother for the next ten days,” explains Robert. “I was taken out of her way so she could recuperate. It was the best time mother ever had.

“I had cried and cried in my cot but my mother did not come. She never came for any of her children. Mother had left me alone in an empty room in a deserted hospital. A normal mother’s instinct would be to keep her child close to her at all times. The Hicks children knew crying was pointless. It elicited no response. We learnt that lesson very early.”

Robert Hicks was born on the afternoon of Tuesday, February 26, 1941 in Handsworth. He weighed eight pounds and four ounces. All Winifred’s children were heavy. Robert had the same soft creamy complexion as his grandmother, a fine head of hair and brown eyes. He was described as having a naturally happy face. Winifred had placed her three other children in the care of the Salvation Army, leaving her husband at home alone in the Birmingham slums. She knew he would have other women there while she was in hospital. She did not like it but accepted that was how their relationship worked.

After her ten-day stay was up, Robert’s father sent a neighbour’s twelve-year-old son to escort his wife and the new baby home to their rented rooms. She was helped on the

“I was born in a bombing raid, neglected in the slums, taken into care with no voice to speak. Not much to start life with.”

train by a nurse while the boy carried her bags. William was unemployed at the time and could have fetched his wife himself, but chose not to. The Hicks lived in one of the worst parts of the slums. Houses backed on to one another and rubbish covered the streets. The few shops were mainly boarded up.

It was obvious other women had been living in the house while his wife was in hospital, but William made no effort to disguise the fact or to clean the place. The only provision he had made for a new baby was a cardboard box wedged between two chairs.

Robert has only negative memories of his six years in the slums: “There is a fashion today for collecting old sepia photographs of industrial Britain in days gone by. There are the inevitable images of boys wearing cloth caps, girls in aprons and horse-drawn wagons in the background. It is easy to look back on those days as simpler times, a bygone era of close-knit communities. The reality of the Birmingham slums could not have been more different. The slums were evil, foul-smelling places. They bred disease and utter despair. We shared a toilet with twenty other people. The stench was appalling. As children, we wandered around half-naked, urinating in the stinking puddles while dogs roamed furtively. Every Monday morning, gangs of housewives would scrub the steps outside their houses from the congealed human waste and vomit left by the weekend drunks. The overcrowding was so bad, father would often spend a few nights at a relative’s house.

“The smell of the slums stayed with you wherever you went. My speech impediment meant I was trapped alone in this miserable existence, a prisoner to the stench of mankind. I could not tell anyone how unhappy I was, nor did any parents hug or comfort me and assure me everything would get better. Unable to communicate, I felt like I was experiencing it all from a distance, like watching a horror film, but, at the same time, trapped in the middle of the terror.

“In those conditions, incest was rife. Some children’s first sexual experience in the slums was with a sibling or parent. My house was the ultimate stage-set of depravity. Incest, rape, perversion of all kinds, prostitutes and drunken brawls were all part of my childhood script. This was not a place for ‘Winnie the Pooh’ or ‘Treasure Island’. Our house was an X-rated movie.”

Robert’s life soon settled into a pattern of neglect and abandonment. His brother Bernard was born twenty months after him, followed eighteen months later by Brian. This meant several stints in care homes. He was unable to bond with his brothers or other children in the homes because they never managed to be together long enough. Strangers flitted in and out of his life, so that “parent” became a word without meaning. Or rather, the only real meaning “parent” had was fear and misery and hunger and loneliness and beatings and abandonment and cold and despair.

In and out of care

It was a few days before Christmas 1946 when that despair came crashing into young Robert’s life. He had been at the Erdington Cottage Home in Birmingham for several months. The Erdington was a large Victorian building with over a hundred children under care for various reasons. Robert vividly remembers the day he arrived after his mother announced she was pregnant again.

He said: “When she dropped me off, the great sadness I had was not that I was being separated from my mother, but that one day she would return to collect me. That was the pattern I had become used to. Just as I was enjoying having my own bed and regular meals instead of lard and stale

“I was her fourth child but she never knew my birthday. She never knew me. Not even for one day in a year.”

bread, a member of staff would call me to a room for a chat. I knew that meant mother was downstairs and I had to leave.

“The staff at Erdington were friendly and tender. They did not punch or swear at children and they talked to us. For a few days, other boys had been thrilling me with stories about Christmas at the home. They told tales of cakes, sweets and presents and of a big bird that got cooked with hot food inside. When you are a child living in the slums, one of the most important things in your life is hot food. Every day I could smell new delights from the kitchen and marvelled at the colourful decorations and a real Christmas tree at the entrance. In my house, Christmas was never celebrated; my mother did not even know my birthday.

“Later I would learn this particular baby she was about to have was the result of an affair with a black man, which was a major scandal in 1950s Britain. When the baby, a girl, was born, my father demanded she was immediately put up for adoption. He already had one step-child living at home; he did not want a second one, a mixed-race child, living under the same roof.

“Being at Erdington was one of the best times of my life, yet I knew it could be snatched from me at any moment when my mother reappeared. I just didn’t want it to happen before Christmas.”

Two days before Christmas, a nurse called Robert over as he was playing with some other boys. He immediately knew, from the tone of her voice, this was the moment he had been dreading. He was about to be wrenched from a loving care home and handed back to his family. With a bright smile, the nurse said: “Robert, you are a lucky boy to be going home for Christmas. It must be better than being stuck here with all these children.”

She had already packed his meagre bag of clothes. The nurse hummed a Christmas song as she combed Robert’s hair then, taking him by the hand, escorted him along endless corridors until he felt cold

air waft around his feet. He was one door from reception where the dreaded handover took place. He felt like a prisoner being returned from a relatively happy prison to the cold of a gulag. As the nurse pushed through this final checkpoint, Robert fought back tears.

There, leaning over the main desk, was a tall well-dressed woman signing some papers. She was wearing a warm winter coat and held her gloves in one hand while she went through the form with her pen. Beside her was a small girl, about seven; it was Jean. Her hands and feet were wrapped in newspapers, wet from the snow outside. Her thin coat was ripped at the back. She smiled but Robert did not respond. He was trying desperately to cling to every memory of the place where he had been so happy the past few months and not think about the slum where he was about to be taken.

The woman signing the forms did not look up. Robert knew it was his mother but he did not know her. She was barely thirty but looked older and tired. Then as he was pushed closer by the nurse, the little boy recoiled.

“My mother had a particular smell which always made me shudder,” explains Robert. “It was not a lack of hygiene for she was prideful about her appearance. It was a smell that filled me with dread. I can’t put my finger on it, but it was instantly recognisable after all these months.”

The woman handed the form back to the receptionist murmuring a few words of thanks. Then she put her gloves on and straightened the bag on her shoulder. For the first time, she glanced at Robert. She did not bend down or smile or open her arms for a hug. With a twitch of her head towards the door, she gave an order as if talking to a dog: “Come on.”



A 1940s Wolverhampton trolleybus, similar to those operated in Birmingham

“ Storm clouds gather

As he squeezed through the heavy door of the home, Robert frantically scanned the snow-covered street looking for his mother. He spotted her crossing the road, dragging Jean by the hand.

“Hurry up, Bobby,” smiled the little girl.

Robert’s hands were blisteringly cold so he shoved them into his pockets but that made it difficult to run. Instead, he shook them in the frosty air as he chased after his mother. He was terrified of losing sight of her: she never once turned around in the street which was packed with Christmas shoppers. Robert was as cold inside, numb at the thought of returning to the slums. The smell and noise were already cluttering his senses and he cried some more. Just a few hours earlier, he had been playing with real toys, not broken ones found in the street; he had enjoyed an evening supper, giggling with other boys over tales of Christmas turkeys and presents. Now he was shivering, as he stood alone with his mother in a queue waiting to board a tram.

Robert was so cold he could not enjoy his first tram ride. His mother still did not talk to him but after a while, when she suddenly rose from her seat, Jean turned round to her brother:

“Our stop, Bobby. Get up,” she whispered.

A few minutes later they boarded a big yellow bus which passed through Birmingham city centre. It was the first time Robert had ever been on a bus. The shops and streets were dazzling with Christmas lights, sights which made Robert twist and turn in his seat in awe. However, he quickly realised this was not the road to the slums, even though he was unsure exactly where he was heading. After half an hour, the bus conductress let out a yell: “Bartley Green.”