

**YOU CAN HAVE AN  
AMAZING  
MEMORY**

**Learn life-changing  
techniques and tips from  
the memory maestro**

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**DOMINIC O'BRIEN**

**Eight Times World Memory Champion**

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AMAZING  
MEMORY**

**Dominic O'Brien** is renowned for his phenomenal feats of memory and for outwitting the casinos of Las Vegas at the blackjack tables, resulting in a ban. In addition to winning the World Memory Championships eight times, he was named the Brain Trust of Great Britain's Brain of the Year in 1994 and Grandmaster of Memory in 1995. He has made numerous appearances on TV and radio and holds a host of world records, including one for memorizing 2,385 random binary digits in 30 minutes. In 2005 he was given a lifetime achievement award by the World Memory Championships International in recognition of his work to promote the art of memory all over the world; and in 2010 he became the General Manager of the World Memory Sports Council.

**By the same author (all published by Duncan Baird Publishers)**

*How to Develop a Brilliant Memory: Week by Week*

*How to Pass Exams*

*Learn to Remember*

*Never Forget: A Name or Face*

*Never Forget: A Number or Date*

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“The mind is like a trunk: if well-packed, it holds almost every thing; if ill-packed, next to nothing.”

**Augustus William Hare and Julius Charles Hare**

*Guesses at Truth, by Two Brothers, 1827*

# FOREWORD

As a child I was diagnosed with dyslexia and I was told by my form teacher at school that I would not amount to much in life. In fact, throughout my school days, no one held out much hope for me. Certainly, no one entertained the thought that one day I'd appear in the *Guinness World Records* book for what others have described as a feat of staggering brain power, or that I'd become World Memory Champion, not just once but eight times over! Here are some of the comments from my school reports when I was aged ten – they make unhappy reading:

*“He tends to dream in the middle of a calculation, which leads him to lose track of the thought.”*

*“[Dominic] has not paid much attention. Appears to know more of the Universe than the Earth.”*

*“Terribly slow. Often cannot repeat the question. Must concentrate.”*

*“Unless Dominic really shakes himself up and gets down to work, he is not going to achieve any success ... he is painfully slow.”*

Although they might sound harsh, these reports paint a fairly accurate picture of my state of mind as a child. I felt as though my brain was like a muscle that was permanently relaxed. My teachers knew it, and they were endlessly frustrated with me. In those days, teachers weren't governed by quite the same codes of conduct they are today, and one in particular behaved appallingly toward me – shaking me, shouting at me and generally humiliating me in front of my friends. I guess he hoped to bring me out of my apparent stupor.

Needless to say, I became highly stressed about going to school. In fact, I was completely terrified. By the age of 11,

I hated it, but not only that – I was also emptied of all self-esteem. I regret to say that walking out through the school gates at the earliest possible opportunity felt (at the time, at least) like one of the happiest days of my life.

Almost 15 years later, I taught myself to memorize a deck of cards. I can't describe to you how that felt – not only had I achieved an amazing feat of mental agility, I had also made a symbolic conquest. I had kicked back at all the mistreatment, negativity and bad reports I'd received in my youth. I suddenly realized that perhaps I wasn't destined to be the low achiever everyone had expected, after all. I thought that if I could master a deck of cards, what else was I capable of accomplishing? Slowly, with every new indication that I could build myself an amazing memory, I began to gain self-confidence and self-belief and a world of opportunities opened up before me.

Now, my rather flaccid memory muscle of yesteryear has been seriously put through its paces. A strict regime of memory training over the course of 25 years has turned it into something that is beautifully toned and of which I am immensely proud. What a pity that I didn't discover and practise the art of memory when I was at school!

In this book I want to show you how you can train your memory not only to make it perform mental acrobatics the like of which you've never thought yourself capable of, but also to give you a massive boost in confidence, just as I have had. When you get a glimpse of what potential lies within your memory, you'll soon realize that that potential is applicable to other aspects of your brain power, too – from your powers of concentration and your ability to think on your feet (your "fluid intelligence") to your confidence as a narrator or speaker and even your ability to be thrown into a gathering of people you don't know and work the room like it's exactly where you belong.

By taking you along the path of my own journey of discovery, mapping the routes and byways that brought me to where I am – and who I am – today, I hope I can give

you the tools to find your own amazing memory. And I hope  
you enjoy the ride just as much as I have.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dominic O'Brien". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter of each name being significantly larger and more stylized than the others.

*Dominic O'Brien*

# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Unlike so many other guides to memory improvement, this book is not intended as an exhaustive introduction to every memory technique out there. Instead, it is an unveiling of my own journey into the power of memory and of my own discoveries about how the human brain works. I have won the World Memory Championships eight times so far and I've been able to do that because, by trial and error, and by careful, faithful perseverance and dedication, I've uncovered the specific techniques that have given me a perfect (well, near-perfect!) memory. This book is my way to share those techniques with you in ways that I know work – because these were the ways that worked for me.

In order to get the most out of the book, try to resist dipping in and out of it, reading the chapters by random selection. In the first half of the book, each chapter builds on the discoveries that come before – so, some techniques or details may not make sense if you haven't read the information in sequence. The second half of the book provides all the various ways you can apply the techniques, either for dedicated practice or in day-to-day life, as well as some tips on how to make sure that your body is healthy as well as your mind – another important aspect of memory training.

You might wonder how long it's going to take for the techniques to work. There are no fixed guidelines on this. Some techniques may click with you instantly, some may take more practice. The important thing is that you don't give up. I do suggest, though, that you don't move on to a new technique or new challenge in your memory training until you're completely confident with the step before. It's pointless, for example, trying to memorize a full deck of

cards if you haven't yet made it past 20 cards without error. If you try to do too much too soon, you'll only become frustrated and you're more likely to give up altogether.

The other important thing is that, while the book provides you with the methods, you'll need to do the practice. If you like, you can dedicate time each day to memorizing some cards or a sequence of numbers, but actually daily life presents all sorts of opportunities for notching up practice time without feeling that you have to make a special effort. I cover this in [Chapter 27](#).

There are 15 exercises in the book, too. The first and last are benchmark tests – you'll be able to see how far you've come by the improvement in your scores. The other 13 relate to specific aspects of memory training and they encourage you to practise skills or repeat certain challenges that develop memory power. Several of them include timed elements. It's really important that when you're memorizing you don't clock-watch, so I strongly urge that you attempt these exercises using a timer with an alarm that you can set to go off when the allocated time is up.

Most of all, though, try to keep an open mind. Read the techniques and try the exercises with a positive attitude, because I'm certain that succeeding starts with believing. Good luck!

## CHAPTER ONE

# YOUR MEMORY, MY MEMORY

The human brain has two halves, or hemispheres: the left and the right. It is now commonly accepted and understood that the left hemisphere governs activity in the right side of the body and the right hemisphere governs activity in the left side of the body. This may explain why tests show that I am right-brain dominant: I'm a left-hander at most activities. I write and throw with my left hand and I kick a ball with my left foot (and I was my school soccer team's left winger). But exactly how do the hemispheres of the brain work and is it as simple as all that?

Theories on left-right hemispheric functions of the brain are constantly changing. In 1981, the Nobel committee awarded its coveted medicine prize to neuropsychologist Roger Sperry for his work on split-brain research. Sperry showed that each hemisphere in the brain is responsible for specific functions. So which side does what? Since the 1980s the convention has been to say that the left hemisphere is responsible for sequence, logic, speech, analysis and numeracy; while the right is involved with imagination, colour, rhythm, dimension and spatial awareness. However, more recent research suggests that the distinction cannot be that clear-cut. Now psychologists believe that both hemispheres have a hand in all in these functions – it's just that the two sides process the functions in different ways. For example, we now believe that the left hemisphere is more concerned with details, whereas the right hemisphere looks at the bigger picture. The way in which we store and understand language makes a really good example. Although the left brain may be responsible for storing and sequencing words, the right brain is

concerned with such things as intonation and humour – that is, how someone’s tone of voice can influence how we interpret the words that are spoken.

Take the phrase “Get out of here!” If someone said this to you with a happy, friendly lilt in their voice, it would be an expression of surprise or incredulity. If you got up to leave – to literally “get out of here” – you would be displaying a dip in right-brain function. You have taken the words literally – which is a left-brain characteristic. The suggestion is that the left side of the brain has little or no sense of humour, while the right side takes a wider, less literal view of the world and decides what sort of detail the left side should concentrate on.

Getting your memory into shape, I believe, is about getting the two sides of your brain to collaborate in the most effective ways possible. I’m going to teach you to apply logic, order and thought (left-brain tendencies) to imaginative, colourful and humorous images (right-brain tendencies) to get everything working in perfect synchrony. Best of all, you won’t feel like you’re having to try that hard – with a bit of practice, harmonizing the two sides of your brain will start to come naturally, and your memory will start to feel like it’s getting bigger, better and stronger every day.

## INSIDE MY MIND: RIGHT-BRAINER

*I can remember that when I was at school, I spent a lot of classroom time staring out of the window, wishing I was somewhere else, or staring aimlessly at the teacher's face, but not actually concentrating on the words he or she was speaking. Most of the time I was daydreaming. You might think that my daydreams were fantastical stories with some underlying logic, but they weren't – they were haphazard, unfocused. I would allow my mind to shoot off at tangents and switch storylines quickly and at random. I wonder whether my left brain simply wasn't in a fit enough state to process details for any reasonable period of time, which meant that my right brain was constantly left unchecked, allowed to roam free. Although at the time this meant disaster for my schooldays, I believe that my ability to see things from all angles has left me open to the creativity that's so essential in memory training.*

### **You try first: Check out your memory**

In order to give yourself a benchmark by which you can measure your improvement as you learn the techniques in this book, you'll need a starting point. On the following pages I've provided two baseline tests that I give to all my students to get a measure of their existing memory power.

Short-term memory can comfortably hold chunks of around only seven to nine pieces of information – that's why, excluding the dialling code, telephone numbers tend to be six or seven digits long. In addition, rote learning, or learning by repetition, is not necessarily the best way to commit something to memory. So using a strategy will produce the best test results.

Have a go at each of the tests. If you find them tricky, it's almost certainly because I haven't taught you the best

strategies for memorizing yet. If you feel that you score poorly on either or both tests – don't be too hard on yourself! Keep a note of your scores and then, once you've read the book and are confident about using the techniques, try the comparison tests at the end of the book – I hope that my experiences of working with memory, and the discoveries I've made and techniques that I've taught myself along the way, will enable you to stretch your memory closer to its true potential. Mind you, I have to say that, so far, I have found the potential of my own memory – and all the memories I've helped to train – to be infinite!

### **EXERCISE 1: Scoring Your Baseline Memory**

**These two tests will give you a baseline memory reading against which you can measure your progress as you learn the techniques in this book. The first test contains a list of 30 words that you must memorize in the exact order. The second test contains a list of numbers that you must also memorize in the correct order. Your time limit is 3 minutes for each test – set a timer so that you don't have to keep looking up to see how much time you have left. The scoring systems are given at the end of each test.**

**TEST 1: Three-minute words**

Try memorizing the following words in the correct order (beginning with the first column on the left and reading down) with the correct spellings. You have 3 minutes to perform the memorization and as long as you need to write the words down once the time is up. No peeking!

VIOLIN	ORCHESTRA	PENCIL
KNIGHT	HERRING	STAMP
SUITCASE	FILE	RAINBOW
NECKLACE	WINDOW	CARPET
SNOWBALL	TABLE	PEACH
BABY	WRINKLE	CORK
MASK	BALL	PLANET
ROSE	PHOTO	MAGAZINE
STEEPLE	ELEPHANT	GOLD
GINGER	TROPHY	WATCH

**Scoring:** Score one mark per word if the word is in the right position in the sequence. Deduct one mark for a positional error (say, if you missed a word, or got a word in the wrong place). If you transpose two words, you deduct two points, but then if the next word is correct, scoring resumes as if you'd never made a mistake. The average score for students between the ages of ten and 14 for the word test is 9.5, but I would expect adults to score slightly higher.

## TEST 2: Three-minute numbers

Try memorizing the following numbers in the correct order, reading left to right. You have 3 minutes to perform the memorization and then as long as you need to write the numbers down from memory once the 3 minutes are up. As before – no peeking!

1	7	1	8	9	4	6	4	3	9
2	5	3	7	3	2	4	8	5	6
4	6	9	3	7	8	3	1	7	8

**Scoring:** Write down as many numbers as you can recall and in the correct sequence. Score one point for a correct number, and deduct one point for any number that is wrong or out of place (if you get two numbers round the wrong way, you deduct two points; but scoring resumes if the following number is correct, as with the words test). School students averagely score 12 for this test, but, again as with the word test, I would expect an adult's score to be slightly higher.

## CHAPTER TWO

# HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Memory is a function of the brain that most of us take for granted. Forgetful people, the kind who frequently miss friends' or relatives' birthdays, fail to recall names or have to make a second trip to the local store because they forgot to buy something, may exclaim to themselves, "I wish I had a better memory!," but it's unlikely that they invest these words with true, deeply felt meaning. Few of us bother to stop and appreciate what an incredible, vital tool memory really is. Let's do a little thought experiment. Just imagine for a few moments what your life would be like without your wonderful memory. You would have no mental picture of friends, of family or of once-familiar surroundings. In effect you would lose your identity. Your sense of where you belong (with particular people and places) would be gone. Self-image partly revolves around mistakes you have learned from and achievements you are proud of, and these too would be obliterated. To have no sense of belonging, of your full, complicated self with all its bumps and angles, would be tragic.

Conversely, a fully functioning, powerful memory is not only a practical instrument, equipping us to do everyday things such as call a relative, or find our keys, or bake a pizza: it also provides us with a huge source of personal, inner wealth. I have learned that my memory is far greater than all the things I've stored in it – it gives me self-confidence, reassurance, and an inherent strength of belief in who I am. But more of that later. First, I want to take you right back to the start of my memory journey, which began in 1987 when I was 30 years old. I watched a memory man, Creighton Carvello, recall a random sequence of 52

cards on TV, and I was fascinated to know how he could achieve such an impressive, apparently almost superhuman feat of memory power. Was he a genius or did he use a strategy? Was he a freak of nature or just really clever?

Armed with a deck of cards I set about trying to replicate his achievement. However, like most people, I could manage to recall only the first five or six cards before being overwhelmed by the confusing sequence of numbers and suits. I wondered how on Earth Carvello had been able to achieve this apparent miracle of the mind. Such is my nature that the mystery became all-consuming. I felt compelled to investigate the curiosity of Creighton Carvello's mind from all angles. Why? Because I believed that if he could do it, I could, too.

My starting point was a game I remembered playing as a child to help while away the hours on endless car journeys – we called it “I packed in my bag”. You’ve probably played it yourself – in turn, each player adds an item to the list of what’s in the bag, repeating everything that’s gone before: “I packed in my bag a book,” then “I packed in my bag a book and an umbrella” and so on. When a player forgets an item, he or she is out, until there’s one winner. Although I was quite good at the game, like the vast majority of people I simply repeated the words over and over again in my head in the hope that they would somehow stick, sometimes picturing the items laid out in a row to help me along. Overall, though, I don’t remember using any particular strategy to make the game any easier or my ability at it any better.

I thought about this game in light of what I’d seen of Creighton Carvello’s challenge, but it soon became obvious that he wasn’t using repetition to make the sequence of cards stick – he turned each card over and looked at it just once before turning the next. He didn’t ever go back and review the cards or, indeed, look at any of them again, so he wasn’t obviously going over the sequence to embed it. In which case, what *was* he doing? And, more to the point,

how exactly was I going to memorize 52 playing cards with just one deal?

I pondered whether I could code parts of my body to move in a certain way depending on what cards I turned up. For example, if the first card was the 3 Clubs, I might turn my head by what felt like three degrees; if the second card was the King of Spades, I might move my tongue into my left cheek and so on. There wasn't any immediate connection between the movements and the cards I attributed to them, but I hoped that if somehow I learned the physical codes and used them in my memorization attempts, the sequence would stick more readily than just the names of the cards. Pretty quickly I realized that this system was impracticable, so as an alternative I considered whether a mathematical formula might be helpful. For example, if the first two cards were 4 and 8, I could multiply the two to get 32 – but then how would I memorize 32? And how was I going to incorporate the suit? None of my systems seemed to quite work.

It didn't take long before I realized that parts of the body and mathematics were red herrings. I remember going to my local library to see if the solution could be found in a book, but at that time there were no books on memory training, and I couldn't look it up on the Internet, because the Internet as we know it hadn't been invented. The only way I was going to find the answer, if at all, was by trial and error.

While logic and powers of deduction had to play a part (although I wasn't quite sure what part yet), it soon dawned on me that the key to success lay within my imagination and creativity. I had heard that creating a story was a way to memorize information, so I toyed with this idea. The minutes ran into hours and then days. I began to “recognize” people and objects in the cards (see [p.43](#)), so that eventually I was able to memorize a dozen or so cards without error. I used my budding card codes to create a story for each sequence, and this seemed to work. To my mind this was small but significant progress and it certainly provided me with enough



incentive to persist with the idea until I could do exactly what Creighton Carvello had done.

It was only really a matter of days since my first flirtation with this memory challenge before I succeeded. Using a combination of the story method and the use of locus, or place (but more about that later), I recalled the sequence of 52 cards without error. To this day, when I bring back the memory of that moment, I recapture in perfect detail what it felt like finally to have done it. This wasn't just an achievement, it was utterly empowering. I'd never felt like this before, I was drunk on it and I certainly wasn't going to stop there. Within a relatively short space of time, through curiosity, persistence, trial and error and sheer determination, I'd used my strategy to memorize, not one, but several decks of cards after just a single sighting of each card. In the process I'd begun a journey that was to transform my powers of recall – and much more besides. I believe that those first few steps set in motion a sequence of events that would result in a complete overhaul of the multiple functions of my brain, beginning with my creativity.

## **INSIDE MY MIND: SETTING MY IMAGINATION FREE**

*Once I had begun to try to find the key to equalling the feat of Creighton Carvello, and I started to really explore the weird and wonderful things my brain had to offer, I noticed that I was becoming more creative. The harder I worked my memory, the more ideas and associations would fire seemingly from all directions. At the heart of my system (which I'll teach you over the following chapters) lay the process of transforming playing cards into mental pictures. To begin with, this process was slow and sluggish, but after a while a steady, effortless stream of colourful thoughts and pictures would pop into my mind automatically. Soon I was applying the same methods to memorize gigantic sequences of numbers; long lists of words; hundreds of binary numbers and combinations of names and faces; and telephone numbers, facts and figures, poetry and much more. Becoming a memory man, I believe, unlocked my creativity – a creativity that had been inhibited by years of being told to calm down and concentrate at school. Suddenly, my mind was free!*

## CHAPTER THREE

# MEMORY AND CREATIVITY

It may sound dramatic to say that my experiences with memory have overhauled my brain, but memory is so bound up with creativity – and the many aspects of brain function that involve creativity – that you’ll soon see this isn’t such an over-the-top statement at all. Most importantly, training your memory draws heavily upon the resources of your imagination. Even during my earliest adventures into the powers of my memory, while I was still trying to emulate the great Creighton Carvello, I realized that to memorize a string of unconnected data, such as sequences of cards, involves first coding them into images. In this way, the pieces of unconnected information can somehow become connected together. I now know that this process of using imagination brings into play a whole range of brain functions, including logic and spatial awareness.

Some people are concerned that they don’t have a strong enough imagination to make memory training possible for them. If you’re one such person, banish that thought! Don’t you sometimes sit at your desk at work imagining yourself in great detail somewhere more exotic or – if you’re having a stressful day – calming? If you let time slip, you may even find that you’ve created a whole imaginary world with precision accuracy. I believe that we all possess incredible powers of imagination – it’s just that often we’ve been taught or conditioned to suppress them. I want to reassure you that it’s never too late to unleash your imagination.

I certainly know about this – remember how as a child I was often criticized for being a daydreamer? My teachers did all they could to suppress the imaginative me. Now, however, I’ve learned to appreciate that my early tendency

to daydream merely showed my powers of creative thinking. Yes, my daydreams were bizarre and skittish, but I think they were my mind's way to express its infinite, random potential for creativity – a potential that I'm sure is the reason I've been able to excel in memory competitions. That potential is there in all of us, if we can learn (or re-learn, as I had to) to let it out.

Imaginative thinking is definitely something that comes naturally to me – today, more quickly and effortlessly than ever. However, if you feel that it's not natural for you, I'm certain that the practical exercises and all the advice and tips you'll encounter throughout this book will teach you how to tap in to your imagination in a variety of ways. The more you exercise your imagination in the ways I suggest, the easier it will become to think creatively – to generate images, ideas and thoughts – in all walks of your life. Furthermore, as your imagination becomes livelier, so will your brain power, including your memory, become stronger. You'll find that you're able to think faster and with greater clarity whether you're deciding what to wear, how to memorize a deck of cards or how to pitch for a sales deal. All that's required from you is to allow that dream-maker to come out to play.

## **INSIDE MY MIND: THE MAKING OF A DAYDREAMER?**

*The following is a true account of an incident that took place at a railway station on April 24, 1958. A young mother and her children had been visiting an aunt on the south coast of England and were returning home by train from St Leonards-on-Sea. As they were waiting at the platform, the mother decided to buy a magazine to read on the journey home and left her young son to hold on to the pushchair and in it his contented eight-month-old baby brother. As the mother walked into the newsagents, a train departed from the platform and headed toward a tunnel. At this point the young boy decided he, too, wanted something to read on the train and let go of the pushchair to follow his mother.*

*As the train headed out of the station, causing a backdraft, the pushchair started to move, found the platform slope and picked up speed. On its descent it collided with the very last section of the train, which then pulled the pushchair along with it. At this point, the mother, hearing the commotion, rushed outside and, screaming in horror, watched her baby being carried off to what she thought was certain death.*

*I was that baby. Miraculously, I am alive to tell the story – a bump on my forehead was the only outward sign of what had happened. However, I believe that that bump was to map out the rest of my life, because I think this single event could have accounted for the attention problems I had as a child. If it did, in a peculiar way I'm somewhat grateful to it, because without my tendencies toward daydreaming perhaps I'd never have discovered my own perfect memory.*

### **EXERCISE 2: Imagining the Senses**

**This exercise is designed to loosen up your imagination so that you get used to the idea of making unconventional associations – not just by using visual images, but by engaging all your senses (this will prove essential for creating memorizations that will stick). Practise it daily if you can, until you're really confident that you can make vivid, imaginative links between things that at first seem unconnected. Once you've read the instructions, close your eyes if this makes it easier to flesh out the images and sensations.**

## **SCENARIO 1**

Imagine you're holding a football in your hands. Imagine that it smells of freshly squeezed oranges. Take a few moments to bring those two thoughts to life in your mind. Now imagine the football has the texture of jelly. It's ticking like a clock and tastes of chocolate. Don't rush – dwell on the image for at least 5 minutes, making it as vivid as you can. If your mind wanders, bring it back to the first sensation of holding the football.

## **SCENARIO 2**

Once you've fully engaged with the first scenario, try this one: Imagine a yellow elephant with pink spots. It mews like a cat, tastes of ginger and has the texture of stinging nettles and the aroma of fresh coffee beans. Again, spend at least 5 minutes making all this come alive in your mind.

When you're ready, test yourself by recalling the strange qualities of that football and of the elephant. The more detailed you made the visualizations, the easier you'll find it to bring the images back to mind.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# THE POWER OF ASSOCIATION

I hope that the exercise at the end of the last chapter has shown you how capable you are of conjuring up associations between themes or notions that at first may seem completely disconnected, by engaging your senses. This is your first step to a perfect memory. However, to make that step really worthwhile, you need to be able to make the links as strong as possible and at speed. Happily, your brain is a powerful machine when it comes to association – it wants to make links, and it wants to make them fast. The problems lie not with your brain itself, but with the “interference” that prevents you from thinking freely – that upsets your mental footfalls, causing you to stumble every now and then.

If you find that interference is hampering your ability to think freely and creatively, you have to do what I did and learn to let go. Don't try to slow down your brain or clear the inner noise, and don't try to make sense of how the associations are connected together; just trust that they are connected and let the pure power of association “happen”.

I believe that we are, in a sense, preconditioned to pigeonhole our experiences into certain categories. If I said to you the word “strawberry”, I suspect that a picture of a strawberry would come into your mind. There it is – fat and red with a green stalk. But if you let your mind go, set it free, what happens? The simple image of the strawberry will still ping up, but perhaps you can taste it this time? Or maybe you can smell it? Is the skin pitted or glistening? Is the strawberry growing on a plant, or is it in a bowl with other strawberries? If you let your mind wander freely, the chances are that the associations will get both broader and

richer. They'll become more vivid. Perhaps you remember a day when you went on a picnic and ate strawberries. Were you with a friend? Were the strawberries dipped in chocolate or dunked in cream? What was the friend wearing and what did you talk about? And there you go, your mind is off again – the reminiscence you have sets off another string of associations until you end up far from where you started; your last imaginings before you come back to the real world might have nothing obviously to do with strawberries at all.

In the same way, the French novelist Marcel Proust wrote an autobiographical novel called *Remembrance of Things Past*, which he spun from the stream of memories that were triggered by the taste of Madeleine cake dipped in linden tea.

The point here is that, allowed free rein, your memory will take you to untold places. Every time you set your imagination free, you set your memory free to make associations with lightning speed and great accuracy and strength. Speed, accuracy and strength in associations are all essential components of having a perfect memory.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# DIMENSIONS OF ASSOCIATION

Other than how fast – even instantaneous – associations can be, what your free association on a strawberry and Proust’s novel teach us, in particular, is that making associations is not a simple, one-dimensional thing. First, your emotions come into play. Probably before you remember the details of any episode from your past, you remember how you felt about it. For example, do you remember the day you learned to ride a bicycle? When I think about this, the first thing that comes back to me is the feeling of elation – and slight panic – when I realized I was responsible for staying upright all by myself. Once your emotions have brought the event alive again, then come the senses. Smell has strong links with memory: the olfactory bulb (the hub of the sense of smell) and parts of the brain associated with memory and learning have a close physiological connection. So you might first remember the scents that were around you as you pedalled off. Or perhaps it’s sound that comes back first – you might remember the wind whooshing through your ears. Alternatively, think how a piece of music can make a memory more vivid (often it triggers more emotional feedback). Or perhaps it’s the sights around you that come flooding back – you may have a sharp image of how the scene around you looked, especially if there was something particularly bright, vivid or unusual in it.

When I train students to allow their minds to associate freely, I ask them to think about not the first time they rode a bike, but their first day at school. Try it now. You might have a vague recollection of the walk up to the building and maybe a mental glimpse of the teacher who welcomed you, but I bet the first vivid thing you remember is how you felt. I

remember feeling excited but apprehensive. I *sort of* wanted to go, but overwhelmingly I didn't want to leave the security of home. I also remember that once I was there, on that first day at least, I was happy. I remember laughing a lot with my new friends. Then come my sensual memories. I remember the smell of the tarmac in the playground (a smell that still reminds me of that first day), the sound of the bell that called us in for our first lessons, and even the taste of school milk – it seemed thicker and more creamy than milk from home. I remember the ice-cold feel of the milk bottle and the exact blue of the thin straw that we used to pierce the shiny milk-bottle top and drink through.

If you can hone your natural ability to make connections and bring alive episodes from your past by using your emotions and senses, as well as logic and creativity, you make it easier for your brain to memorize new information in an instantly vivid, memorable way. In addition, you get used to the sense of letting your brain make the fastest connections and trusting them. Instant association is an important aspect of memory training, because first associations will prove to be the most reliable. I shall come back to this point again and again over the course of this book.

### **EXERCISE 3: Memory “Free Play”**

**Words evoke memories. Look at each of the following words to see what flashes from the past they bring up for you. You need only glance at each word for a second or two. Try not to edit what you remember, just allow your first associations to happen. Then, let the images, thoughts, emotions and senses resurface in as much detail as possible – it may take moments, or it may take several minutes – and then move on to the next word. The aim of this exercise is merely to get**

you used to free-associating and letting not only images but also emotions and sensations flood back. Although this doesn't feel like it's going to make a memory champion of you, trust me – the better and more practised you are at this kind of free association, the more accomplished you'll become at memorizing.

KITTEN  
RAINBOW  
TOY  
BIRTHDAY  
ICE CREAM  
SNOW  
CHURCH  
CUSHION  
SAND  
TOE NAIL

The exercise on the previous page will help you to get into the habit of recapturing not only events, but the thoughts, sensations and emotions that go with them. You also need to feel comfortable with the speed with which a memory or memories can come alive.

When I do this exercise – and other exercises like it – I travel back and forth through my life. I find myself in different locations, with different people, feeling different emotions and hearing, seeing, smelling, touching and tasting different things. The reminiscences come so thick and fast it's like being on a rollercoaster, zipping this way and that way through my personal history. I hope it felt at least a bit like this for you, too.

## **INSIDE MY MIND: MY EARLIEST MEMORY**

*Words evoke memories, and whenever I hear the word "cot", I find myself transported to my earliest memory of all. I must have been aged about two and I was shaking the bars of my cot, enjoying the feeling of bouncing up and down with an endless stream of energy. I can even remember my mother telling me she thought I was limbering up my muscles, like a boxer on the edge of the boxing ring. It constantly amazes me how much, how far back, can be triggered in the brain if it is left unhindered, to roam free into its deepest recesses.*

## CHAPTER SIX

# CHAINS OF ASSOCIATION

Now that you know how your brain can supply you with a flood of memories triggered instantly by just a single word, you need to take the next step and look at forging links between two words that have no apparent connection. We've talked about imagination and we've talked about using your past to make associations – when you put the two together, I think you have the key to the most basic skill in the art of memorization.

Without points of reference in your past, I believe it would be impossible to make connections between any two concepts (whether they are words, objects, activities or whatever). Your past provides you with learning and you need to use that learning to create pathways from one thing to another. Everything in your life fits together like pieces of a jigsaw. To get from one piece of the jigsaw to another, you can link them piece by piece. The most efficient way to create that pathway is to use the fewest pieces of the jigsaw possible – to find the most obvious connections from your bank of knowledge.

Let's say I want to memorize two words: wall and chicken. I have an endless stream of memories associated with both these words and I just have to find the pathway that links one to the other in my mind. For example:

Wall makes me think of the Pink Floyd album, a wall I climbed as a child, the wall I used to jump over on my way out of school and so on. As the associations come thick and fast, I come across the most obvious link: the traditional nursery rhyme "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall." Eureka! Humpty Dumpty sits on a **wall** and he is an egg – eggs are laid by **chickens**. I use my imagination to visualize a chicken

laying Humpty the egg on a wall. I make the associations vivid by recalling my childhood self singing the nursery rhyme and, automatically, I imagine “little me” giggling at the image of the chicken laying Humpty. This may not have happened in my actual past, but the link between little me and the rhyme is enough to create a logical scenario for my reaction. This all sounds laborious and long-winded – but in practice my brain makes the connections in little more than an instant.

Here’s another example: pen and soup. In what ways can you connect them so that you remember them both? Using free association and my imagination, I come up with the following possibilities: use the pen to stir the soup (perhaps the soup changes colour as the ink from the pen mixes in); use the pen to make a pattern or perhaps write a word in the thick soup; fill the pen with soup as though it were ink to write a letter; use the pen as a straw for the soup; and so on. Although the connections to my past aren’t obvious in this example, all the associations draw upon my experience and understanding of both a pen and a bowl of soup. Memory and association are inseparable.

Practise the same principles for yourself using the exercise opposite. If this is your first attempt at this sort of exercise, you may well find yourself deliberating over some of the pairs of words. The goal is to allow your brain to arrive at whatever common denominator it wants to find without prejudice or preconceptions getting in the way. Mobile phones hadn’t been invented in Beethoven’s day, but you still might imagine the composer using one to call his agent; or, if your brain prefers audio cues, perhaps you imagine your phone going off with a Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony ringtone. All you have to do is to allow the fastest common denominator to enter your head. Don’t try to make the connection any more weird or fantastical than it needs to be – there’s no need to make your creativity work overtime. The more natural and logical the imagined scenario is to you, the more likely it is that the two halves of

your brain are working in harmony and your brain will accept and remember the associations you come up with.

#### **EXERCISE 4: Forging Links**

Look at these pairs of words and, like someone netting a butterfly, catch hold of the first association that comes into your head to link them together. Don't be tempted to edit the links – just set your brain free to find the most obvious pathway from one word to the other in the pair. Once you've finished, cover the right-hand column and see how many of the pairings you can recall. If you can recall ten or more pairings, you can be confident that your associations are starting to stick. Keep practising until you can recall all 14 words.

BUS	SALT
TABLE	MOON
GUITAR	PLASTER
ANKLE	GLASS
CORK	TORCH
BEETHOVEN	MOBILE PHONE
MARBLE	CANDLE
GOOSE	BUBBLE
ELASTIC	SHARK
ORANGE	RIFLE
PEN	ROOF
DAISY	MOUSE

CAMERA

SHOE

BRACELET

HAIRBRUSH

Once you've completed the exercise, congratulate yourself. You've just mastered the basic technique for memorizing unconnected information. It's called the Link Method. Now that you've used it for pairs of words, you can use it to memorize lists.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# THE LINK METHOD

Let's take the first five words from the test I asked you to do right at the beginning of the book. The first five words are Violin, Knight, Suitcase, Necklace, Snowball. If we run with the principle that everything can be connected to everything else, all that you need to do to memorize this list is to create a link between each of the items on it. Imagine you hear the sweet sound of a violin, which is being played by a knight. In your mind's eye see how tricky it is for him to position the violin under his chin with all that armour in the way. By his feet there's a suitcase, perhaps it's a vivid colour, or perhaps it's rather battered and old. You open the suitcase and find a priceless diamond necklace – sunlight bounces off the diamonds making them sparkle brightly; the reflected glare makes you squint. As you turn your head away, a snowball hits you on the cheek – you feel the icy sting as it makes impact. Remember that the more you practise using all your senses and emotional responses to make your associations, the more adept your brain will become at crafting them quickly and the more memorable the connections will be.

Replay this short scene in your mind – add some more detail if you need to. Once you've done that efficiently (my links might not be the most resonant for you, of course), you should have no problem repeating the list of items forwards – and even backwards – simply by replaying the story. If you can repeat the order of items in both directions, you prove that the list is well and truly cemented in your memory. Now, can you instantly recall the two words either side of the suitcase without running through the complete list of five? If you can, your brain has fully assimilated and

integrated the new data so that you're now able to reproduce it (recall it) in a variety of ways. Being able to remember, interpret, reinterpret and if necessary reconstruct is at the heart of how we assess everything we learn.

When I teach the Link Method, I ask my students how long they think they will remember the list of five words. Most say that it will take only a few minutes before they've forgotten them again – but they are soon surprised to find that's far from the truth. The method is so powerful that often the list sticks for well over 24 hours. I doubt anyone would have that level of success merely by repeating the words over and over to learn by rote.

Admittedly, though, this is a mere five words, so let's add two items and apply the link method to the following seven objects: Boat, Tyre, Parcel, Button, Cabbage, Mouse, Boot.

The story I come up with is that I'm drifting lazily in a **boat** on a calm sea. As I approach the shore, I see a **tyre** lying in the sand. I roll the tyre along the sand and it lands by a **parcel**. As I unwrap the parcel to see what's inside, I find a gadget with a bright red push **button**. Curiosity gets the better of me and as I press the button, magically a **cabbage** materializes from beneath the sand. Out of the cabbage appears a frightened **mouse**, which scuttles away to hide in a **boot** that's been discarded further up the beach.

What I find most fascinating is that while learning by rote and repetition can take hours, and often still produces poor results, learning using the Link Method is quick (how long did the story take to conjure up? 30 or 40 seconds?), and the recall is usually impeccable. It's all about context. The Link Method attaches significance to unconnected pieces of information. We put them in a context that attaches them to the real world, with some form of logic, and they become memorable.

## **A trick of the mind**

I think using the first person is important here, too. By putting yourself in the story (you don't imagine *me* floating in the boat, you see yourself), you somehow trick your brain into believing that the experience has actually happened to you.

However, you can trick your brain like this only if you've made the images as true to life as possible, and that means using all your senses. What can you see as you drift lazily on the boat? What can you hear as you approach the shore? Can you smell the tyre's rubber as it gets hot in the sun? What colour is the wrapping on the parcel? How does the sand feel against your feet as you run along the beach to chase the tyre? The more vivid you make your associations, the more readily they'll come back to you.

Another reason that the first person works so well is that, if you are part of the story, you will have feelings and emotions attached to what happens. You probably felt relaxed and contented floating along on the water. Perhaps you were slightly panicky or anxious as the tyre ran away from you. You were probably a little bit apprehensive when you pushed the red button. Once you bring your humanity, vulnerability and "realness" to your story, your brain can believe it as true – and that makes it even more memorable. Interestingly, the circuitry of your brain – that is, the individual neurons and networks of neurons it contains – can't tell the difference between what's real and what you've imagined. Only "you" as a whole conscious being know the truth – that's why tricking your brain is really relatively easy.

## **Powers of visualization**

Over the years, I've had many people come to me to say they're afraid that these sorts of techniques will be lost on them because they simply don't believe they have the creativity they need to make the images stick. However, it's really important to remember that the things you imagine

should be within the realms of possibility; or at least hold some form of logic – so while they’re creative, they aren’t too fantastical. They might be a bit bizarre or unconventional, but in theory perfectly plausible or possible. Think back to the pen and soup scenario in [Chapter 6](#). I admit it’s unlikely that anyone would ever use a pen to stir a bowl of soup; or that you might use the soup as ink for the pen. But it’s not *completely* impossible. Similarly, do you remember Beethoven on a mobile phone? Alright, Beethoven would not have had a mobile, but if he had had one, he’d probably have used it to call his agent. There is always some logic to the scenario, and yes, you need to be creative, but not superhumanly so.

I also want to reassure you by making a confession: now that memorizing by association is second nature to me, my mental images aren’t at all refined in every detail. Sometimes they are sketches with only the right colour and shapes; sometimes they are cartoon-like. I certainly don’t produce perfect visual representations. I conjure up ideas and scenarios – images that are just enough to make the connection in my head. However, for now, if you’re just starting out, I recommend that you fill in your images as much as possible: only once you’re really comfortable and confident in the practice should you start short-cutting.

## **Becoming a storyteller**

There’s another aspect of the Link Method that I haven’t really touched upon, and that’s order. In the baseline test that I set you at the beginning of the book, I asked you to memorize not just the words, but also the order in which they appeared. In fact, if you remember, you were penalized for not getting the order exactly right. To avoid penalty points, you have to make links from one object to the next in the “correct” order. The easiest way to do this is to create a story that incorporates all the items in the list one after the other. The story, like all good stories, takes on a logic of its

own, which reinforces the order of the items, because the sequence of their appearance is meaningful to the whole context. When you replay the story, following it logically from one scenario to the next, you should recall all the items in the right order, too. Try the exercise on the following page to get a better sense of how this works. If you forget any of the words in the list during the recall, the links you made in the story weren't strong enough – have another go.

### **EXERCISE 5: Memory Storytelling**

**In this exercise, use the Link Method to create a story that enables you to memorize the following ten words in order. Your own story will always be more effective than one I create for you, so I don't want to give you any pointers except to say there is no time limit to this exercise. You can take as long as you need to get the story right – but remember that the first, ideally instantaneous connections you make will probably be the strongest anyway. Allow your mind to think intuitively and use all your senses. Once you've created your story, cover the page and write down the words in the correct order. If you didn't score ten out of ten, your story's links weren't strong enough – go back and strengthen any weak links in the chain.**

BICYCLE  
COMPUTER  
LADDER  
PILLOW  
CAMERA  
BOOMERANG  
CAKE  
DIARY  
SOAP  
GIRAFFE



## CHAPTER EIGHT

# EUREKA! MY FIRST SUCCESSFUL ATTEMPT

Now that I've explained to you how important it is to use association, I can tell you how it was that I finally cracked what Creighton Carvello was doing. I realized I needed to stop making lists and stop searching outside myself for the answers, and instead tap into some of that wonderful creativity that was bubbling away inside me already. You have that same creativity inside you, too, which is why I know that my techniques can transform your memory just as they did mine.

So, how did I memorize my first deck of cards? I started by staring at individual cards to see if they reminded me of something familiar – an object or person from my life. For example, I looked at the Jack of Hearts and the face reminded me of my uncle. The 5 Spades looked to me like a hand held out with four fingers and thumb. The 10 Diamonds reminded me of the door to 10 Downing Street (Diamonds reminded me of money or wealth and 10 Downing Street is where the Prime Minister looks after the UK's prosperity, also the address cued the abbreviation for the card: "10 D"). To memorize these three cards in sequence, I linked the people and objects together – in exactly the same way that you learned to link the unconnected words in the last exercise. I imagined my uncle (Jack of Hearts) using his fist (5 Spades) to knock on the door of Number 10 (10 Diamonds).

Over the course of many hours, I slowly but surely gave every card in the deck a new identity, until finally I had coded each with its own unique association. I shuffled the deck and set to work.

The first full deck took just under half an hour to link together into a story. I had my uncle flying through clouds and firing oranges from a hammock that was dripping with honey. Jack Nicklaus (a golfer, so my King of Clubs) was hoovering up a pair of ducks (2 Hearts, because 2 is represented by ducks in the number–shape system – see [pp.82–4](#) – and the Hearts reminded me of little upturned beaks), which were spitting at a snowman (8 Diamonds – the snowman is the number–shape for 8 and I imagined icicles hanging round his neck like diamonds). At the end of this rather exhausting Alice-in-Wonderland epic, I held the deck face down and prepared to recall each card in turn, revealing its true identity as I did so. I managed 41 of the 52 cards in sequence. Not bad for a first attempt!

I had made a good start – but it wasn't faultless and no matter how efficiently I used my story system, the thought of emulating Carvello's memory still seemed beyond reach. He had memorized a deck in only 2 minutes 59 seconds, and for me to get up to speed, especially to complete the feat in three minutes or less, seemed impossible. I wasn't put off, though – I was sure that complete success must lie around the corner. My obvious, measurable improvements made me even more determined to refine the system until the perfect strategy for memorizing finally came to me.

## **My first card codes**

As I continued experimenting and practising memorizing cards using my story method, I noticed that I was able to string together short sequences of cards, but then I would hit a weak link in the chain and a card would slip through. Let me explain by giving you specific examples of my card codes from those early days and some sense of how I came up with the codes:

**6 Diamonds/An aeroplane** (Because the number 6 is similar in shape to the jet engine beneath the wing of a

plane and flying is an expensive way to travel, which fits with the idea of Diamonds being associated with wealth or money.)

**4 Diamonds/Cash** (I imagined this card as a collection of four £1 coins sitting neatly in a square.)

**5 Clubs/My dog** (My Aunt's dog was called Sally and an "S" looks like a "5". It was my Aunt's Jack Russell that inspired me to get my own dog later on in life; I chose Clubs because a club is a weapon and Jack Russells make good ratters.)

**8 Hearts/A cloud** (Because an "8" reminds me of bubbly, white clouds and Hearts are similarly cloud-like to me.)

**4 Spades/My car** (Because the four gives me four wheels and the Spades remind me of my tyres.)

**3 Spades/A forest** (Because Spades are tree-shaped and because three rhymes with tree.)

The logic I applied was that card codes could fall into one of three categories: people and animals; modes of transport; and places. I adopted codes for all the cards in a deck simply by writing down all the card names, deciding on the code for each card, writing it next to the card name – and then learning each pairing. This sounds laborious, and I suppose in a sense it was, but there were certain automatic associations I made (such as 7 Diamonds as James Bond 007 in the film *Diamonds are Forever* and 9 Clubs as Ni(nine)ck Faldo, the golfer) to speed up the overall process. Besides, I stayed motivated because I knew that once I'd learned the codes, they would bring me ever closer to my goal of matching (perhaps even beating!) Carvello.

I then used the Link Method, creating stories by linking together my codes for each card in the correct sequence. Understandably, perhaps, I found that some sequences were easier to memorize than others. For example, let's say the first five cards were 3 Spades, 5 Clubs, 4 Diamonds, 6 Diamonds and 8 Hearts. I would picture the forest and in it my dog would be barking at some cash. A plane would land

to collect the cash and fly into the clouds. The story had some sense of sequence and logic, so I could memorize it easily. However, any slight alterations in a sequence could cause me problems.

Let's say instead the order was 6 Diamonds, 3 Spades, 5 Clubs, 8 Hearts, 4 Diamonds. This time I would imagine a plane flying into the forest where my dog is barking. However, my dog now has to fly up into the cloud where there is some cash. The link between my dog and the cloud becomes tenuous – it lacks any believable logic, and this makes it a weakness in the chain.

But trying to hold on to logic wasn't my only problem. Not only were the links in my chains of association fragile at times, I was expending heaps of mental energy working out crazy leaps and dashes from one scene to another. It was exhausting, time consuming and not foolproof. And then – at last – I had that “Eureka!” moment: I finally understood that I was using all the right ingredients, but in the wrong permutations. I suddenly realized that instead of designating certain cards to represent certain places, if I used a predetermined location and then made every card an object, animal or person, I could place those images at consecutive stops within that location. In that way, as long as the stops followed a natural order, and the link between each card and its location was strong enough, I would surely memorize and recall the sequence perfectly. And there it was, my Holy Grail of memory systems: “The Journey Method”.

## **INSIDE MY MIND: THE RUSH OF SUCCESS**

*A moment of clarity is an amazing thing. You must have experienced it at some point in your life, too. When I realized where I'd been going wrong, and – most importantly – how to fix it, I had a stratospheric surge in self-belief, like the alchemist turning common elements into gold. It was all the incentive I needed to practise hard, working at deck after deck of cards, until my memory could do the same and more as Creighton Carvello. It's this self-belief that I think transformed me – far more than codes or decks of cards – and taught me that anything is achievable with a will and a way, something my schooldays had singularly failed to do.*

## CHAPTER NINE

# DEVisING THE JOURNEY

## METHOD

I think it's fair to say that the Journey Method was to change my life – but in its earliest forms it was far from perfect. Once I'd had my moment of clarity, I tested my theory about placement by mapping out a journey that consisted of 20 distinct stops. I knew it had to be a journey that was completely familiar to me (I didn't want to have to spend time thinking about what the next stop was) and I also knew that I'd have to make the links between the card codes and the stops on the journey really strong. So, it seemed natural to make my first journey a walk through the village where I lived. Here are the first five stages:

**STAGE 1 Front gate**

**STAGE 2 Next-door neighbour's house**

**STAGE 3 Bus stop**

**STAGE 4 Shop**

**STAGE 5 Car park**

Then I set about recoding the cards that I'd originally imagined as places so that they were now objects, because otherwise I'd have to pair up two locations and I knew this would become confusing. The 3 Spades, for example, had to change from a forest to a log; the 8 Hearts, which had been a rather vague and forgettable cloud, became me (for no reason other than the fact that I had always found this a hard card to memorize – making it represent me provided an association that is particularly strong, because I can so completely imagine how I would respond to any given

situation). With a fixed route and a specific object code for each card, all I had to do was picture each code (card) at its appropriate position along the journey.

Let's say the first five cards I turn up are: 6 Diamonds, 3 Spades, 5 Clubs, 8 Hearts, 4 Diamonds. This is how I memorize them using the first five stops on my memory journey:

- I imagine an aeroplane (6 Diamonds) parked at my front gate.
- Outside my next-door neighbour's house there's a log (3 Spades) leaning against the fence.
- At the bus stop my dog (5 Clubs) jumps up and down barking at the traffic going by.
- Inside the shop I see myself (8 Hearts) buying a newspaper.
- In the car park there's a bundle of cash (4 Diamonds) in a parking space.

This time my mind couldn't get confused about the order, because the journey gave me the order effortlessly. My test run of 20 cards proved a complete success – I didn't make a single error. So, I scaled up: I extended the route so that it went from my gate, through the village, around a pub, across the cricket pitch, along a path with beautiful views to a bowling green, until I had a journey of 52 stages – just right for a whole deck of cards.

After a few more practices at mentally walking my 52-stage route without trying to memorize anything along it, it was time to trial the full deck. Would my promising strategy hold up to my greatest challenge? Yes! I managed to recall all 52 cards with no errors in less than ten minutes. At this point I knew that I could conceivably make a challenge for Creighton Carvello's 2 minutes 59 seconds – it was just a matter of time.

## **Overcoming the drawbacks: Ghosts on**

## location

Perfect as my method was for a single deck, I found that some of the associations I made were so strong that when I tried to repeat the feat, I got ghostly “double” images of previous sequences, and my brain became confused as to which of the images was right for that sequence. The answer was simple: I needed more than one journey. I devised six journeys altogether, using them in rotation, so that by the time I came back to one I’d used before, the memory of the cards I’d memorized on it last time had faded.

The settings for my various journeys had to be sufficiently familiar, stimulating and interesting that I would remember the stages I picked out along them without any trouble at all. I’m a keen golfer, so the natural choices for me were a couple of my favourite golf courses, as well as houses (indoor journeys work just as well, as long as the route around the location is logical, and comes easily to you) and towns or villages that I’ve lived in.

A process of natural selection took place as, by trial and error, I filtered out routes that didn’t work. For example, if the stages along the routes were too uniform in character, I found that they weren’t memorable enough. I devised one journey made up of 52 shops in a town. But it didn’t work, because I had to try too hard to remember the sequence of shops and I had trouble distinguishing one shop from another in my mind’s eye. Fairly quickly I came to the conclusion that variety and contrast in the stages themselves and in my interaction with them are among the keys to a successful journey. Typically, if I base a route around a town, I find myself moving in different ways in or around stops. I make sure I travel in and out of buildings, I might go over a wall or across a stream or river. I might pop into a telephone kiosk, or stop to look at a menu in a restaurant and then wander off to look at a statue, and so on. The journey is interesting and sticks in my mind effortlessly. And once I’ve been through it a few times, I don’t have to think

about recalling it – I can mentally walk through on autopilot and use it to provide hooks for me to hang information on.

## INSIDE MY MIND: COPING WITH TOWN PLANNING

*People often ask me whether or not I regularly update my routes to account for changes in the landscape. The answer is no. Once the routes are hard-wired they provide a track that automatically guides me from stage to stage. Updating causes disruption. In fact, I even avoid returning to old routes, if I can – I don't want to know if shops change their usage, houses are pulled down or telephone boxes are removed. I prefer to remember and use the routes just as they were.*

### **Beating the drawbacks: Card cut-outs**

There was one other element to my system that wasn't yet foolproof – there were certain card codes that were a bit unpredictable, a few that I kept forgetting. I realized that cards represented by people rather than objects were the easiest to recall. People can interact with the stops on my journey; they have feelings and emotions that can turn an abstract scene into something calamitous, joyous, hilarious and so on. Injecting emotion into my memorizations made them instantly more memorable. So, it was time to turn all my card codes into people (and a couple of favourite animals).

Remember the 3 Spades? First, I coded it as a forest, then a log, and then in my final round of refinement it became Malcolm, the man who used to supply me with logs for my fire. The 6 Diamonds, once an aeroplane, became Tim, a friend who used to work for an airline. So, I set to work feverishly refining my codes until I arrived at a cast-list of characters that would leave a lasting impression on my memory. They aren't all people I've known – there are plenty of famous faces in there, too. The 3 Hearts, for example, is the Beverley Sisters (a singing trio from the

1950s '60s), while the King of Clubs is no longer Jack Nicklaus, but Adolf Hitler (Clubs makes me think of aggressors). Thirty years on, now that my master race of unforgettable card characters is in place, I rarely alter the codes, because I have no need. And there's one card that's very special, because it's never been altered: I'm proud to say that the 5 Clubs to this day is my dear old dog.