In 1916, within four months of each other, were born the two men who, half a century later, were to face each other for ten years as rival party leaders and contest four general elections. They came from similar social backgrounds, but different geographical regions which were strongly to mark their characters – Wilson from Yorkshire, Edward
Heath from Kent, where he grew up in the seaside town of Broadstairs, from where, on a clear day, he could see the coast of France. Continental Europe was a living reality to him from his earliest days.

Heath, who was known as a child, and still as a young man, as Teddy, was born on 9 July 1916. His father, William Heath, was a carpenter, who later set himself up as a builder and decorator. His mother, the former Edith Pantony, had worked as a lady’s maid. Teddy had a younger brother, John, born in 1920, but was much the brighter of the two children, and became his dominant mother’s favourite, and the focus of the family’s hopes. William Heath was a skilled craftsman and became a well-respected local small businessman. Fiercely anti-trade union, the mild Liberalism of his youth was to evolve into firm Conservatism. Something of a ladies’ man, he was an easygoing congenial character with few intellectual interests. His influence on his elder son seems to have been limited, and Teddy grew up very much a mother’s boy. The qualities and habits which she instilled in him – the exceptional importance of cleanliness and tidiness, the necessity for hard work, for taking responsibility for others and a decent ambition to advance his own position in life – early marked him out as exceptional among his schoolfellows at the local Church of England primary school, where he always seemed old for his years. He also showed a precocious talent for music, which his parents encouraged, buying him an upright piano, which they could scarcely afford. The cost, Heath recorded in his autobiography, was £42, which they paid for in 24 monthly instalments of £2 each. Just before his tenth birthday, he sat for the scholarship examination for the local fee-paying grammar school, Chatham House School, at which he won a free place.

Heath was regarded as an ideal pupil at his school, where he won virtually every honour, except in sport, though he was felt by some to be almost unnaturally self-contained. His father wanted him to become an accountant, but Heath set his heart on going to a university, though, as he was to recall, ‘I knew that my family would never be able to provide the money to fund me for three years’ (Heath 1998, p.20). He sat a scholarship examination for Balliol College, Oxford, but did not do sufficiently well to win an Exhibition. He was, however, offered a fee-paying place, which he was able to take up only because Kent County Council offered a loan of £90 a year, repayable when he graduated. So he arrived in Oxford, in October 1935 – one year later than Wilson – to read Politics, Philosophy and Economics at Balliol. He was not there for long before an opportunity arose which transformed his financial situation and gave him a prominent position in the college. The college