



MERTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LOCAL HISTORY NOTES - 7

I Remember

Childhood Memories of Wartime Mitcham

By Irene Bain - 1993

“The day war broke out, my wife said to me...” was a popular saying of the comedian Rob Wilton on the wireless during the Second World War. He started his act with this phrase and then went on to relate some funny happening. However, the saying itself was considered highly amusing and was what is now known as a catchphrase and repeated often throughout the war.

The day the war broke out or, rather, the morning the war started, I was nine years old. I lived at No. 56 New Barnes Avenue, one of the roads leading off the far end of Commonside East, with my mother and father and my brother, Peter, who was a year younger than me. It was a bright, sunny Sunday morning and I was in my bedroom playing when my mother came in to make the bed and tidy up. She had a light scarf tied in a triangular fashion over and under her hair to keep any dust from it. She was crying as she made the bed and I asked her why. How could a nine year old have any understanding of the fears one’s parents would have under those circumstances? It must have been terrible for them. My mother was a lovely, kind and caring lady. I sensed her tears were for a wider issue, which I could not comprehend. The siren sounded. It was our first air raid warning. We looked out of the window at the clear blue sky but could see nothing. It was apparently a false alarm, people said, caused by one lone plane crossing the channel, but we believed it was a sort of test to let the public begin to understand how the system worked and prepare them for what was to come.

Previously, I had sat in the corner of the living room listening to the wireless broadcast of Chamberlain returning from his visit to see Hitler and waving a piece of paper - "Peace in our time"! I pictured him in my mind getting off the aeroplane at Croydon airport, which I knew, but this, of course happened at Heston airport. The wireless had an aerial which was strung between long metal poles down the garden. It also had a large accumulator which had to be re-charged and I remember taking it up to Long & Watson's electrical shop in Northborough Road. It had to be carried by its handle very carefully because the acid could spill and burn you. It cost half-a-crown to have this done and was a great deal of money then.

We entered a world of shelters and sandbags; of wardens and gas masks; of tape criss-crossed over windows against flying glass; of blackout curtains, slacks, turbans and siren suits, vacuum flasks and torches. The torches seemed mainly to need number 8 batteries and these became very scarce and hard to get and were the butt of many a joke.

A man had come to the house with our gas masks. He fitted them on and showed us how to use them. What a nasty rubbery smell they had! They had their own small square brown cardboard box and were to be taken with us whenever we went out. There was a string for a strap and we carried them over our shoulders. Later more attractive carrying cases were for sale. The man showed us a Mickey Mouse gas mask for very little children. It had a brick reddish coloured face, a peculiar flap of a nose and round black rimmed eyes. It did not look attractive to me. He also showed us a respirator for little babies. This had a square shaped perspex visor to be able to see the baby through. You put the baby inside this contraption and the mother would have to use a hand pump to keep the baby alive. These things were accepted as part of life.

One morning as I was playing in the back yard our neighbour's daughter called Dad to the fence. She then told him she was just going off to get married. Her husband-to-be was in the forces and was going abroad. Later on he was to become a prisoner of the Japanese and work on the notorious Burma railway.

A friend of mine lived seven doors up the road from me. In those days one knew the names of nearly everyone in the street. I can remember the names of our nearest neighbours even now and picture them in my mind. Her father found the skeleton of a cow in the garden whilst digging the hole for their Anderson shelter. This showed how rural Mitcham once was. Our houses were built on the land of New Barnes Farm - hence New Barnes Avenue. Dad always used to say that the gate posts for the big house were beneath our alleyway. This would be the Watney brewery people who had a house nearby, also noted by Watneys Road, which crossed near our section of the common.

Our first shelter was also outside in the garden, but was square, built of brick and stood above ground. It had a flat concrete roof and was quite near the house. The cement between the bricks looked very sandy to me. It had wooden bunks inside, but the roof leaked and my mother used to sit there at night holding an umbrella over my brother and I when it rained.

Public shelters were dug all over Mitcham and a few remained, but forgotten, until quite recently. It is just possible that one still exists somewhere. We had several in my Sherwood Park School grounds for the children and teachers. When the air raid warning went we would file out in an orderly way, with our teacher, class by class, down to the shelters. We spent *many* hours down there in total and this did no good to our education. We would sing songs, play the whispering telephone game, or just sit and wait for the raid to finish.

Sometimes it would be a short raid and sometimes a very long one. Another way the teachers thought of to use the time was to get us to recite our tables. One child would have to start "Once two is two" - the next child "two twos are four", on and on and round and round. This was all right until we got to the seven, eight and nine times tables, when I would be in an agony of getting it wrong. This was a nightmare to me, as I was hopeless at arithmetic.

The shelters were dimly lit and dank. They had wooden seating and duckboards to keep our feet out of the water which formed into puddles now and again. Eventually, the All Clear would sound and we would all file out singing. "We're Going to Hang Out the Washing On the Siegfried Line (Have you any dirty washing, mother dear)" was a favourite and gave one a happy feeling, and it was good to be out in the air again.

There were street shelters, too. These were long and built of brick with flat concrete roofs just like our garden shelter. They had rows of metal bunk beds in. There was one in Dahlia Gardens, where we slept several times. There were a couple in Sherwood Park Road, but we didn't sleep there.

One of these shelters was damaged by a flying bomb and this ties up with a happening recorded later on. I understand that someone concerned in the building of these shelters had some sort of fiddle going and did not use the correct mix in the cement, making the shelters unfit for their proper function. We did not know this when they were first built.

Dad was a male nurse and worked at Springfield Mental Hospital in Tooting. This hospital stood in massive countrified grounds and even had its own farm and slaughtered its own animals. Dad cycled to and from work through Tamworth Lane. I can remember him arriving home late from work one night. He was travelling through the blackout during the first barrage. He had reached the railway crossing when it started. He described the darkness broken by searchlights, the guns firing all around him and the shrapnel falling. How relieved we were to have him safely home. We children would go out in the mornings and search for shrapnel in the streets. We used to find a lot of this heavy grey metal, often with screw markings in it.

Winston Churchill was affectionately known as "Winnie" during the war. He had a face somewhat resembling a bulldog and a short, sturdy body. We saw him on the newsreels at the pictures. His personality was as far-reaching as his oratory and he rose to be the figurehead of our hopes and endeavours during these terrifying times. We hung onto every word of his speeches, which were broadcast at intervals. From this most outstanding character of our time we received fresh hope and courage. The famous phrase taken from one of his earlier speeches, in answer to something Hitler had said, "Some chicken, some neck", was made into a song which we heard on the wireless - "Some chicken, some neck, some chicken, by heck..."

There were many slogans about and posters appeared with pictures and captions which read "Careless talk costs lives" and "I trust you'll pardon my correction, but that stuff's put there for your protection". This last one showed a man persuading someone not to peel off the criss-cross paper put over windows to alleviate the damage caused by flying glass. "Put that light out!" was a command of the air raid wardens who patrolled the streets looking for leaks in the blackouts. Another saying was "Is your journey really necessary?" And if you went into a shop and they didn't have what you asked for the reply would be "Don't you know there's a War on!"

Standing at our front door and looking up the road towards Pollards Hill you could see a line of shiny grey barrage balloons strung out on the horizon like great big fat fish, put there for our protection.

The news broadcasts always seemed to coincide with mealtimes and particularly at dinner times. My brother and I were usually quarrelling and Dad used to get very heated, as he was trying to catch up on the latest news. "Here is the news and this is Alvar Liddell reading it" was a line I heard times without number. My other friend's mother had put up a large map on her dining-room wall and had little flags to move following the war's progress.

Workers' Playtime was also broadcast at dinner times and went out live from various factories doing war work. This was performed in large works canteens while the workers ate their midday meal. The programme was brimful of gusto with a tremendous atmosphere coming over the airwaves.

Jack (Mind my bike!) Warner was a good entertainer all through the War, as also were his sisters, Elsie and Doris Walters, who had their own double act as wives with their husbands away. All of them gave much pleasure.

There was a short family doctor programme, something quite new, given by Dr Charles Hill. He gave blunt, earthy advice and also seemed to talk a lot about bowels - very nearly unmentionable then.

Every evening there was the lovely Children's Hour with its variety of plays, stories and serials and items such as "Out with Romany", a nature programme. I really thought this was an outside broadcast, but discovered years later that it had all been done in the studio. One of the favourite programmes was "Toytown" with lovely characters like Dennis the dachshund (whose sentences were all spoken the wrong way around) and Larry the Lamb (I am only a little laaamb"). Not to be forgotten was dear old Mr Growser with his saying of "It's disgraaaceful, it ought not to be allowed." And at the end of it all was Uncle Mac's closing of "Goodnight Children, Everywhere", a blessing if ever there was one.

Princess Elizabeth gave her talk to the children of Britain at the end of a Children's Hour broadcast with Princess Margaret Rose sitting by her side and in my head I can hear their voices signing off now.

Then there was "Monday Night at Eight". ("It's Monday night at eight o'clock, Oh, can't you hear the chimes, they're telling you to take an easy chair, to settle by the fireside, forget your radio times, for Monday Night at Eight is on the air.") Arthur Askey and Richard (Dickie) Murdoch entertained us marvellously with their antics supposedly coming from a flat high up in Broadcasting House. We were always sent to bed before 8 o'clock, but on Monday nights my brother and I would get out of bed and sit at the top of the stairs in our nightclothes begging Mum to let us come down and listen. Of course, she soon relented and down we would go, returning happily to bed afterwards.

Another programme was ITMA with Tommy Handley and his gang. He was certainly put on this earth to lighten our lives during the war. There was the phrase "Can I do you now, sir?" said by Mrs Mop, with its double entendre - very risqué in those days, and lots more catch sayings that kept us bubbling over with hilarity for days afterwards.

Vera Lynn, the Forces' Sweetheart, was heard singing her songs all through the war. She sang "There'll be bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover, tomorrow, just you wait and see", and "When the lights go on again all over the world". Was it possible, we wondered, that life could be different?

Not to be forgotten was the dot-dot-dot signal taken from Beethoven's 5th Symphony, heralding the sending of messages to those working underground in enemy occupied territory. These cryptic, staccato messages sounded so odd to us. Sentences like "Louise has seen her aunt" would mean more than we could ever comprehend to those to whom they were sent.

Lastly, I remember the King's speech to us one Christmas, a special one when he quoted from a little known poetess, Minni Louis Haskins. At the end of his broadcast, in those darkest of days, we were left with these beautiful, hopeful words:

I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God.

That shall be to you better than a light, and safer than a known way."

This piece of poetry, so very relevant then, is still so to this day, and always stirs the feelings to tears.

We saw many dog fights, but one in particular I remember was high above our houses. Up in the clear blue sky of a lovely sunny day a deadly battle raged as "one of ours" and "one of theirs" weaved and dived in attack, machine guns spitting. So clearly their engines could be heard.

Planes would return home from raids on Germany and do the Victory Roll, turning over and over. This was exhilarating to watch.

Later on a new hair fashion came into being, when ladies' hair was rolled into a big 'V' at the back of their heads. It was an attractive and tidy style and well suited the women in uniform who were very smart, especially the WRNS in their navy blue skirts and jackets, black stockings and super smart hats.

Things began to get very scarce and luxury goods disappeared from the shops. Mother spent hours queuing, for if you saw a queue forming, you joined it. Pregnant women were allowed to go to the front of the queue but, pregnant later on, my mother never did this. Often a rumour would go round that a certain shopkeeper was "expecting something in" and people began congregating. The counters of Woolworths in Mitcham were empty, except for one or two nondescript items. Suddenly, there might be a few combs put out, and you joined the queue.

I would often be sent to get the weekly rations. Carrying mother's wicker shopping basket, I would take the shortcut through the alleyways and cross Sherwood Park recreation ground, hopping and jumping from one fairy ring to another. We got the rations from Robins grocer's shop in Sherwood Park Road.

The shop itself would be quite crowded with people and a child was often made to wait a long time to be served until someone's conscience struck them and one would be pushed forward. The buxom peroxide blonde girl serving behind the counter would take the shopping list and ration books and put the items in the basket, crossing off the coupons in the books as she did so. Now and again, if you were lucky, she would reach down and take an item from "under the counter". This could perhaps be a bottle of sauce or some such item in short supply and reserved for regular customers only.

The value of the shopping would be about one pound. Mother would say she was pleased with the contents because, small though the portions were, they were good basics for a family's needs and we were lucky to get them in wartime.

I couldn't believe there had ever been such things as bananas, but the adverts for Fyffes still stuck upon the wall of the greengrocer's shop proved that there had been. Tinned fruit was a dream. If you happened to see an American magazine, the luxury of their lifestyle depicted in the advertisements was unbelievable. If mother had queued for an hour for some apples, my brother and I would be given a half of one each, and were grateful. Although, I must say that in season there was plenty of English fruit for sale. I can remember once we bought a pound of gorgeous dark blue English plums for fourpence ha'penny from a greengrocer's shop at the Common end of Manor Road and ate them from the bag as we walked along.

As the shortages tightened and sweets disappeared from the shops we children made up little mixtures of cocoa powder and sugar in a twist of paper for something sweet to eat. We would dip our wetted fingers into the mix. At Eastertime marzipan was made out of soya flour and flavoured with almond essence.

Fancy cakes were also a thing of the past. There were cakes about but these were plain ones, such as Madeira or light fruit cakes and buns. Later in the war, when I was older, I used to be sent up to Streatham High Road to queue at Fuller's cake shop for a ticket. These were issued on a certain weekday and the queue for them was a long one. When you had obtained the ticket this then entitled one of us to go back up there again on Saturday and actually buy one of their sponge sandwich cakes. These sponges, such a treat, were delicious. They had a slight orangey flavour and were the highlight of many a wartime Sunday tea.

Our school (Sherwood Park Road) was to be evacuated. Mother bought thick white canvas and made two large shoulder bags, one for my brother and one for me. I can see her now sitting at the dining-room table sewing them on the hand sewing machine. Into these bags was packed all the clothing necessary for our new life. With the large bags over our shoulders and me carrying my beloved Teddy Bear, we were loaded onto buses. My brother was not in the bus with me, so we must have been taken by classes. Then, the mothers and fathers waving us goodbye, the convoy of red London buses packed with children set off, we knew not where.

Our destination turned out to be a little town called Egham, near Staines, a country place then. It was dark when we were taken into a local hall, now packed with children in the centre and grown-ups standing around the sides. People began picking out the children they wanted and the crowd thinned a little. Eventually, four of us girls were taken by a gentleman helper in his little car and personally delivered to foster parents on the edge of town. My friend, Jean, and I were taken up to a front door. When the lady of the house opened the door she was told she could pick which child she wanted. She chose Jean, which was not a very nice feeling for me.

I was therefore delivered to a house just a few doors away, but could not have been passed to a nicer person. Her name was Mrs Boniface and her appearance matched her name. She was small with curly brown hair, red cheeks and a happy, smiling face. She had two children of her own, named Mary and Hugh. Her husband was an architect and he was away up in Yorkshire on government war work. She had another evacuee besides me staying with her, an older lady come to escape the bombing in the heart of London.

Mrs Boniface, so aptly named, was pleasantly surprised at the contents of my white canvas bag. Mother had made pleated skirts put onto bodices and I had knitted jumpers to go with them. We were not well off but I was nicely dressed. I think people thought children from London would be poorly dressed as, indeed, some of them were, often arriving in layers of all the clothes they possessed, and sometimes very dirty. I was certainly expected to have a cockney accent.

Mary was the oldest child, me next and then Hugh. I can hardly describe the lovely games we used to play, nearly always involving our teddy bears and Hugh's lovely little toy animal called Piglet, who was made out of pale pink velvet. These games were mostly thought up by Mary. Mrs Boniface was very lenient in what we were allowed to do and the scope she gave us was not abused. Mary and Hugh went to a private school just up the road in a big house. The classes had only eight to ten children in them, as against our Council school norm of 35-40 pupils. Mary showed me inside the empty school one day. How I would have loved to have gone there, but this could never have been afforded. Quite naturally, I was often homesick and the sound of violins being played on the wireless always triggered this feeling off.

My brother was one of four boys taken in by a lovely homely couple who lived a few miles away from where I was staying. To visit him I used to have to walk down a very long road and then turn off across a field, gingerly cross a plank bridge over a stream, cross another field and then on a little way until I came to the row of small houses where they were.

One of the girls in our group was taken into quite a large house on the other side of the road from me. The lady who took her in was Czechoslovakian and had come to England for safety. This little girl, who came from a largish, poor family, was taken to the hairdressers to have her hair washed and set each week. This was something unheard of in our lives and we rather envied her.

Some school teachers came with us and taught in the local school. My teacher was very nice and obviously tried to comfort us for being away from home. I was the Princess in the school production of Sleeping Beauty at Christmastime when our parents came down from London to see us. I can remember saying, "Oh, I've pricked my finger," in the most wooden delivery ever! On their journey home Mum and Dad had to walk from Wimbledon to Mitcham in the blackout as all the transport had been stopped because of a raid.

In the end, my foster mother decided to take her children and go to live up in Yorkshire to be with her husband. I was pleased to realise that she liked me enough to offer to take me, too. However, my parents decided against this, for her sake and theirs, and so it was arranged that I would go to live with another family in a house just across the road. My friend from up the road at home in Mitcham was also changing foster homes and the two of us went there together.

I will draw a veil over our stay in the new foster home, suffice it to say that we were not happy there. We both wrote home asking our parents to take us back. The lady found my friend's letter to her parents before it was posted and was, understandably, most hurt. My friend thought I should show her my letter as well, but I didn't see the point of her being doubly upset. We did have good cause to want to leave.

However, before all this happened, the lady in this house did a lovely thing - she took us into a toy shop and showed us two beautiful dressed dolls standing high up on a shelf in their own cardboard boxes. When she was certain we liked them, she paid, I believe, 1/6d off per week for them until they were paid for, and gave them to us for Christmas.

So, after not so many months of evacuation government style, we were back living in Mitcham, bombs or no bombs. Egham, although in the country, for the road I was in ended in fields, received its share of bombing, and I can remember the High Street being hit by bombs. Also, a crashed German plane was put on display for all to see. I was surprised how small it was. Sherwood Park School itself was hit by a bomb during the war.

While my brother and I had been evacuated, my mother went with her friend, the doctor's wife and another lady to help with a further evacuation taking place in Mitcham. She had gone for the day, she thought, but found she was expected to stay. After some adventures with these ladies and the group of children they were looking after, she finished up that night in charge of four boys from the Western Road area in a large house in Oxted. The man of the house was very good to the boys and Mum said he used to line them up and give them pocket money at weekends. Mum took care of the boys and even used to arrange the flowers for the house. The boys themselves were fond of mother, which did not surprise me at all.

The other ladies did not fare so well in their large houses and were regarded more as servants by the people they were placed with. My mother's friend was made most unhappy by the lady in her house, while the doctor's wife was furious at the treatment she received and angrily told the lady of the house that she had servants of her own back home.

Sometime after this, when mother was home again, her friend had gone away into lodgings to be near her husband, who was now in the army. Dad used to go around to Almond Way to keep an eye on the empty house. He was also tending a few vegetables left in the patch at the bottom of the back garden. I was there with him one day when he found some unexploded incendiary bombs amongst the cabbages. He said they were probably part of a Molotov cocktail - a bunch of incendiaries said to be dropped in a kind of basket. Somehow the authorities were contacted and soon an air raid warden came to collect them. He put the aluminium cylinders on the back of his bicycle and rode away!

Urged to "Dig for Victory" from all quarters, including large posters stuck up all over the place, Dad had two allotments and kept us supplied with plenty of fresh vegetables and soft fruits. In season he would bring home colanders full of lovely strawberries. Often mother would bring us up little dishes of strawberries sprinkled with sugar to eat in bed on a summer evening when sleep would not come because of the heat and the light. Another treat would be a few chips on a plate, sprinkled with salt and vinegar. Mother bottled pounds of soft fruits and made lovely jams, also chutney from the tomatoes, as well as pickling the shallots Dad grew.

At school we were asked to design posters urging the war effort and the best ones were to be put on exhibition at the town hall, together with others from the borough. I loved art and my poster was one of those chosen. The main part of the picture was of a dog digging up a bone for the war effort. It had a caption which ran on the lines of "Even he digs for Victory" and in balloons around the edge were depicted other methods of "doing our bit". Unfortunately, I was not able to see the exhibition, which was a big disappointment. I hasten to add that my poster did not have great artistic merit.

Everyone tried to "Do their bit" as the saying was. I decided to hold a raffle. I bought a book of raffle tickets and went around the houses asking people to buy them. The prize was to be a savings certificate, costing fifteen shillings. I soon sold out the tickets. When it came to the draw and giving out the prizes Dad suggested I use the money I had collected and give it all out in savings certificate prizes. The total collected was just over four pounds and was a lot of money then, as the average man's wage was about that amount. The remaining few shillings were put into the firemen's fund. In this way Dad made sure the people themselves benefited as well as the war effort and the winners were surprised and pleased.

In 1941 we were sheltering in the cupboard under the stairs during night raids. There was only just room for my mother, brother and myself. Mother, sitting on a chair, would read comics to us.

Dad was an air raid warden. The wardens' post was in an alleyway at the end of our road backing onto Dahlia Gardens. He would come in now and again to check and see if we were all right. I can remember him coming in one night and saying he had just put out an incendiary bomb fire in a house nearby. You could hear the guns banging away and the shrapnel falling. By now we could all recognise the drone of German bombers.

The large area wardens' post was at the junction of Chestnut Grove, Greenwood Road and Sherwood Park Road and was called "Windy Corner".

ARP Wardens for Pollards Hill area, probably taken near "Windy Corner" main post at the junction of Sherwood Park Road/Chestnut Grove. Note bomb damage at rear. My father ↓ is standing fifth on the left of the picture. Most of these people were neighbours or known to me.



Water was conserved in large EWS (emergency water supply) tanks sited here and there. Bath water was restricted to a depth of 5". However, we didn't use the volume of water in our homes then that is used now, for the majority of us had a bath only once a week. There were hardly any washing machines about then and very few cars needing hosing down.

Monday was washing day. Clothes were soaked, soaped and rubbed on the rubbing board. Put to boil in a large tin bath on the gas stove, they were removed with a big stick, rinsed, wrung out and hung on the clothesline in the garden to dry. The shirts used to look like big fat people puffed out by the wind.

The tops of letterboxes were painted with special green paint which, in the event of a gas attack, would change colour to warn us. There were pillboxes on every bridge into Mitcham. Also, unbeknown to the majority of Mitcham residents then, there was a specially fortified house on the Croydon Road, which was to be used as a secret headquarters if the invasion came.

On the night of 16th April 1941, while we were sheltering under the stairs, a landmine fell on The Creameries, also known locally as the Margarine Factory. This was not far from us and stood actually on the edge of the common. Fifteen men of the 57th Surrey (Mitcham) Home Guard were killed that night, as their meeting was being held there. The young man across the road from us was killed. His name was Henson and he was only eighteen and had been courting a young woman from Commonsides East. I sat next to a very nice girl at school, named Lilian, whose father was also killed that night. She was one of three sisters left fatherless and their name was White.

My friend up the road's father was in the Home Guard and he had a strange escape. His friend had knocked for him to walk down to the meeting together. Halfway there my friend's father had been so thirsty he just had to go back home for a drink of water and his friend went with him. This act saved both their lives.

We went to see the damage the next day. Very sadly I watched a draped stretcher carrying a body being eased from the ruins. (My brother remembers seeing rows of covered stretchers laid out on the common, but I did not see these). From the explosion, huge girders had been flung, twisted and carelessly across a wide area of the common and, it was rumoured, a man's head had been found there.

My sister was born in June 1941 - a war baby. There was a difference of eleven years in our ages. Mother would therefore have been pregnant at the time of the Creameries bombing when we were sheltering under the stairs. Babies were mostly delivered at home then and the midwife, Nurse Gaunt, lived just across the road from us.

At the time of my sister's birth the front room downstairs was turned into a bedroom for safety and convenience. My brother was off out playing somewhere, as usual. Dad took me out into the garden. A neighbour was in the room at the birth. She came running out into the garden crying, "It's come, it's come!"

Dad picked her up and swung her round in joy. The next thing I remember was being taken on the back of his bike up to Dr Miller's house near Pollards Hill to call him out. Words were whispered to neighbours asking questions, so that I would not hear. Unbeknown to me, my mother had a terrible haemorrhage and Dr Miller saved her life. He never forgot the sight that met his eyes as he walked into the room that day and would recall the occasion when my mother visited him over the years.

There was a gunsite and army encampment on the common opposite the Goat Pub. One light evening a few days later I was in the front room with Dad talking to Mum who was in the big bed. She was still "lying in" after having the baby (ten days in those days). There was a raid on and Dad and I were on the window side of the room. Suddenly, there was a loud explosion. Immediately, Dad threw himself over me, turning his back to the window and using his body as a shield against whatever was to come. The gun had scored a direct hit on an enemy plane and we turned to see through the window a man floating down in a parachute. The men on the gunsite let out a tremendous roar of triumph, clearly heard from that distance away and inside the house. I started to cry. I was afraid for that airman and what would be done to him when he landed.

I cried twice during the war: the other time was when I was older and a newspaper published pictures of a row of men being hung in an occupied country. I was convinced the Germans were going to come here and do the same thing. The rest of the family thought I was ridiculous and laughed at me.

Within days of the airman baling out, Dad had gone down with scarlet fever. He was put on a stretcher, tightly wrapped in red blankets, placed in an ambulance and taken to the local fever hospital. So, mother was left in bed with a new baby and two young children. Parts of the house were fumigated. My brother and I could not go to school and, of course, no-one would play with us. Nurse Gaunt gave mother her sole attention, as she could not now visit any of her other patients. My mother's closest friend would not visit or help her because her eldest son was taking his exams and, if he caught the fever, his future would be set back. Her friend did not see my sister until she was nearly six months old.

Our kindly neighbour of next-door-but-one, who had been present at my sister's birth, braved the disease and came in to tend to us, although she had a little boy of her own. One day my aunt came over all the way from Barking and we walked across the common to visit Dad at the fever hospital. It was called the Wandle Valley Isolation Hospital and was near Goat Green right by the river. Parcels for patients had to be left at the gate and we could only peer through the ward windows and wave.

When at last Dad came home from hospital, mother was still terribly weak. She was ghastly pale and he could see her teeth through her lips. There were no blood transfusions in her case then. As a child I knew nothing about all this. All I did know was that my sister was a baby who cried and cried and kept us all awake at night. All you could see in the dark was an even darker round hole where her mouth was open, yelling. I was not happy about this and could well have done without her! She, poor child, was not happy at that time either. Because of mother's low state of health she was not getting proper nourishment. As soon as she was put on National Dried Milk (which came in large tins and you got from Sherwood House clinic) she settled down. Mother used to eat a spoonful of the dried milk when she made up the feeds and this, plus the milk stout the doctor said she was to drink started her slowly to recover. Soon my sister became a happy, bouncing baby, full of life.

Having a baby in the house entitled us to concentrated orange juice for her. To get it at first we had to go to the Food Office in the Parish Rooms near the Cricket Green. It was a long way from Commonsides East down into Mitcham, but we walked there, pushing the pram. We would stop to see the horses in Mrs Farewell-Jones's field before walking over Beehive Bridge. We walked to most places then, the library especially.

The children's library was in a wooden hut at the side of the main Mitcham Library then. I loved its woody smell and there were little tables and chairs of various sizes to sit at and lots of lovely books to borrow, which gave much pleasure to read.

The Food Office was always crowded and you waited ages to be dealt with. Although the juice was for the baby, it was natural that, not having oranges, my brother and I should sometimes be given some and we found the orangey drink, which you diluted with water, delicious.

There was also concentrated blackcurrant juice, which came in tins. A teaspoonful of the thick purple stuff in a glass of hot water made a lovely drink on a cold winter's day.

Dried egg appeared. It came in packets and made reasonable flat omelettes and could be used in cakes. Later came tins of Spam and this was very tasty. Also introduced was a fish called Snoek, sold in tins, which we had never heard of before, and whalemeat was sold in the Butcher's shop, but we didn't buy these.

Later on in the war a Morrison shelter was provided for us. It was put into the dining-room and took up most of the space, so that furniture had to be moved out. It was called a table shelter, because you could use the top as a table. However, it was very large and had a grille around the underneath part and was not really convenient for sitting at, so we used our normal dining table and chairs, which had to be put in the front room.

When there was a raid on we all got into the Morrison shelter, including the dog, the final piece of grille being pulled into position after the last one was in. At night bedding would be placed inside and if the raids were bad, we went down into it. As I got older, I became more blasé about the raids or, more likely, ignorance was bliss! I would stay upstairs, reluctant to leave the comfort of my bed, even with the guns banging away and the raid getting worse and worse. Eventually, Dad would come up and say, "I really think that you ought to come down now. They're getting very close," and reluctantly I would go down and join the others, knowing full well that he was right.

The sweetest sound of all during the war was the high piping of the All Clear. It was wonderful to hear this, especially early in the blue of a bright sunny morning coming out of a shelter and knowing that you had survived the raids.

At one time it seemed that the Germans had a schedule for their daylight raids specifically meant to interrupt our dinner at about 1 o'clock! It was nothing to be sitting down to our meal and have to leave it to dive into the Morrison shelter, then re-emerge to take up where we left off. Once, I recall leaving our lovely dinner of fresh new potatoes and garden peas from Dad's allotment, with fried plaice and salad cream three times. Did we get annoyed with Hitler! My little sister, now a sturdy toddler, would run in from playing in the garden straight into the shelter with Taffy, our lovely Welsh sheepdog, as a matter of course, knowing no other way of life.

When the shelter was first delivered it took several men to handle and assemble the heavy pieces and bolt them together. Among those helping was a quiet soldier in khaki battledress. One of the older men told us, out of his hearing, that he was home on leave because his wife and child had been killed in an air raid.

Mitcham received a great many hits by bombs during the war, together with Croydon, probably due to being near Croydon airport. There were also a large number of bomb craters to be seen on open ground, fortunate because nobody had been hurt. These used to throw up pretty crystal-like stones along with the earth.

I remember a soldier being on guard near the ruins of St Mark's church. He was armed against looters.

Dad once came in with a funny tale about a Home Guard exercise he had seen near Beehive Bridge. As he cycled over the bridge he looked down and saw a Home Guard hiding in a bushy tree, but the man was smoking and a spiral of cigarette smoke rose up, which would have given the enemy a clear indication of where he was!

For my brother and I our lives centred quite a lot around the Church of the Ascension, which was in a hall then. I was a Brownie and a Guide, and my brother was a Scout and choir boy. Later on in the war he received savings stamps to the value of sixpence for every Sunday service he sang in the choir, which he would cash as soon as possible! In the post office in those days was a dragon of a lady behind the grille at the end of the hardware shop in Sherwood Park Road. If I wanted to cash any of my savings stamps, she would tell me off. She has given me a complex for life!

The Church of the Ascension was a 'high' church with the vicar being called "Father". He wore a long black gown and a little round black hat. There were many processions around the church of the vicar, servers and choir, proceeded by another server shaking incense liberally everywhere. The church collection plate was carved from one of the last oak trees to be felled at the foot of Pollards Hill. My brother had watched these trees being cut down by playing truant from school one afternoon. He made a mistake in judging school home time and got told off by Mum on his too early return!

As a Girl Guide and Poppy Patrol Leader I took my camp fire test in one of the fields off Willow Lane. I cooked sausages and potatoes over the open fire, followed by stewed plums and custard. Two of us went up to a lone house that stood in the lane and asked the lady there for water, which she kindly gave me in a jug. The fields were lovely there then, just as they also were at the bottom of Pollards Hill, each surrounded by its boundary of trees.

Another landmine was later dropped in the Sherwood Park/Pollards Hill area and people all around it were evacuated from their homes, as it had not yet exploded. Our neighbours of next-door-but-one (the lady who had helped mother when my sister was born) came just inside the radius. The whole family, now four of them, together with the bird in its cage and lots of possessions, came into our house and filled it up. A marvellous thing happened - the mine did not go off! It was found to be filled with sand. A wonderfully brave person or persons working somewhere on German munitions had done this to save us, risking their life or lives to do it. Thankfully, people returned to their homes, the threat over. Later, at the Church of the Ascension jumble sale the empty mine case was put on display in the garden. It was guarded by a young member of the Home Guard, the boy friend of a girl I knew. On his head he wore a German forage cap, obtained from I know not where. It was a gesture of defiance and he wore it a lot during the war. The mine itself was just as I imagined it would be, even down to the knobs sticking out of it.

A house in the road at the back of us received a direct hit. It was a small bomb, which completely demolished the one house, leaving its neighbours standing either side of the gap. Fortunately, no-one was in the house at the time. The site was cleared of rubble and it was possible to get from our garden, across the alley and into the next street.

One hot summer evening Mum was sitting using her sewing machine on the living room table. Only three of us were in the house at the time. The windows, french windows and doors were open to try and keep the house cool. My little sister was in bed, but not asleep, it was so hot. Mother asked me to go upstairs and see if she was all right. It had gone rather quiet up there, usually ominous. When I went upstairs she wasn't there! She wasn't in the house at all! We panicked. I then had an idea. I rushed down the garden path into the alleyway. Something made me go into the bombed house and through to the next street. And there was my pretty little blonde sister, in her white nightgown, dancing among the broken glass in Beech Grove, our dog Taffy with her!

We had extremely hard winters then and at one time there was no coal to be had. In desperation mother kept us away from school and my brother and I pushed my sister's big pram all the way down to the gas works in Western Road, where we would be able to buy some coke to tide us over. Girls wore pixie hats then and both of us had woolly scarves and gloves. Our Headmaster, aptly named Mr Head, was indignant that we had missed school for this purpose and drew attention to the non-attendance at the full school assembly. However, he was kind enough not to specifically mention names, but we knew who he meant. He was a fine, upright man, an excellent headmaster. When I left school and wrote later asking if he remembered me and could he give me a reference, he answered by writing, "Schoolmasters have longer memories than perhaps you may think. Of course, we remember you and Peter perfectly..."

The V1 rockets started to arrive. They were amazing things to watch in daylight as they hurtled across the skyline, flames pouring from the back of them. We used to stand in the back garden and watch them in the distance. They made a terrible noise that filled the air. They seemed to travel too fast, even for themselves. Then the noise would stop and the silence they left could be felt. It was frightening because this is when they drifted in the air currents, and who knew where they would fall, for there was death. Then we would hear the explosion and know that something terrible had happened to some poor people somewhere.

My aunt from Barking had come to visit us for the day, together with my cousin and a small baby my aunt was looking after. Mother, with my brother, little sister and the others, had been out shopping. They were returning home along a side street approaching Sherwood Park Road pushing the pram. One of them looked up and there was this 'thing' silently drifting down above the rooftops. The workmen were up on the roofs of the houses in Sherwood Park Road replacing tiles blown down by previous raids. Immediately they started to scramble down the ladders. At first my family started to run up the street towards the shelter in Sherwood Park Road, but something made mother stop them and turn them back down the road into an alleyway. They ran into a back garden to the shelter there. The people in the shelter didn't want them to come in and tried to stop them, but they forced their way in. Then the rocket landed, a matter of yards away, right where they would have been if they had continued walking. It hit a house in Sherwood Park Road and the street shelter. Lives were lost, but I can't recall the details.

A similar incident happened to Dad when he was going to his allotment one day. He looked up and to his horror saw a rocket drifting down towards where he was. He crouched low into the hedge for any protection he could get when suddenly a current of air caught it and lifted it up and away.

It may seem odd that at times we were out during raids, but often it just happened that way. If it was deemed safe to go out on occasions one did. Life had to go on and at times you had to take chances.

It was around this time that I had left school and gone to work in C & A Modes store in Oxford Street as a window dresser. I was fourteen years old. It was nothing to come home in the evening and find Mum and Dad clearing up because roof tiles had been blown down, a ceiling was down or the front windows had been blown out. If I came home via Tooting Broadway tube, I would see people on the platform with their bedding already preparing a place to sleep the night. Coming home from work one day as I got off the bus at the Horse & Groom a lady was waiting for a young woman passenger. She had bad news to tell and put her arm around her and led her away crying. This must have been the evening of the day mother and the others avoided the rocket.

Then the V2 rockets started to arrive. They were worse even than the V1s, in that they just dropped out of the sky. No warning noise, no engine cutting out, they just exploded on impact. They were falling all over London. One landed opposite the Middlesex Hospital at the back of where I was working. We went to look at the damage in our lunchtime. The devastation was terrible to see. The very tall London houses had been demolished and others sliced through, so that you saw the rooms and fireplaces, with personal things hanging up there - remnants of peoples lives.

The Yanks, or dough boys, as they were called (because they were paid more than our British Forces, which caused much jealousy) were everywhere in London at that time. Their being there did not have any effect on me, for I was certainly a late developer! However, one Yank did call out "Hiya, red," to me in the tube one day, and I remember being most surprised that he should find me remotely interesting and concluded that he was hard up for company!

There was a Lyon's tea shop near where I got off my bus for work and sometimes, if you were lucky, they had some of their individual fruit pies in - a rare occasion. I had always liked these square shaped pies and in the war, with fillings hard to come by, it was rumoured that this was in fact turnip flavoured with something or other. Whether this was so or not, I do not know, but they certainly tasted fine and it was good to be able to take some home to mother, to supplement the rations.

Then, whilst I was working in London, came the day of the D-Day landings. The excitement was electric in Oxford Street that morning as everyone swarmed around the news vendors to buy the papers and read all about it. When I jumped off my bus I ran to join the scramble, too.

With the V2s targeted mainly on London, I decided to give up working in Oxford Street and to find something nearer home. I was then fourteen and a half years old. I got a job in Towers Creameries (newly built after the landmine) as a messenger girl. The pay was eighteen shillings and sixpence per week as opposed to the twenty-seven shillings and sixpence per week from C & A, but there would be no fares to pay. So, after vowing never to work in an office, there I was set for life on this course. The job was only a short walk away and I could go home at lunch times if I wanted to. Another friend in the road worked there, too, and if there was a raid on we would walk together along the ditch on the edge of the common for protection.

At one time a small group of Italian prisoners of war were working in the factory. They worked on what was known as the Solvat platform and were allowed to cook their own meals there. The factory, amongst other things, recycled shipwrecked butter. My job as a messenger girl took me all over the works and I can remember seeing this group of men who, when I passed near them, curiously smelled of sultanas! I did not fraternise, for that would have been against the rules, not of the factory owners, but the other workers.

It was also quite usual at this time to see small groups of rather good-looking blond-haired German prisoners of war standing in the backs of lorries being ferried about to help clear up the rubble from bomb damage. They also called out as they passed but in no way did you acknowledge them.

Later I worked in an office with two or three people much older than me, for I was the office junior. One of the ladies was very nearly deaf. She was a bubbly person with a good sense of humour. She told of how she had gone to her doctor to ask his advice about this deafness and he had asked her if she had perhaps been near a very loud noise. She answered, "No," but then, on reflection remembered, "Oh, yes, we did have a bomb drop next door"!

After D-Day the tide of the war turned in our favour and the idea that peace could actually come at last and the War be over filled our minds. This was what we had lived for all these years.

I remember the time of the Allies overrunning the concentration camps. Walking to work with another friend on a gorgeous summer morning, we expressed our disgust at the Germans and what had been found in these camps. The morning papers were full of it all. Never had anything so awful been seen before. The horror of it was overwhelming and the newsreels at the cinema showed much more to come.

VE Day came at last - what a day! Mum and Dad went up to London to join the crowds for this momentous occasion.

Then came the Street Party. A group of women in the street formed a committee to organise it. On the actual day trestle tables were set up down the centre of the road and covered with cloths. Chairs were brought out of the houses and arranged down each side. There was no fear of traffic then for only two people in the whole road owned cars.

Use was now made of the precious items of food hoarded for just this purpose. Vases were filled with flowers picked from our gardens and set out at intervals down the tables, which were soon laden with plates of food. All of us children went to the party with our brothers and sisters, and the babies were carried along, too. I wore my best dress and the recently bought wooden soled sandals I was so proud of.

The weather was kind and a good time was had by all. A photographer even appeared to record the happy event.



At the end of the party one of the only two car owners, a taxi driver, sat at a little table and handed out to each child in the road a sixpence.

In the evening the adults had their celebrations. There was to be dancing in the streets. A special, exciting atmosphere could be felt as night fell and bonfires were lit and their sparks flew up in the darkness. I went to watch the party in Almond Way where my school friend lived. There was quite a gathering there with a gramophone playing and dancing going on. A plump, elderly lady of staid and sober habits, whom I knew from church and was a little in awe of, had on a smart new dark red dress for the occasion. I was so surprised to see her leading the line in the conga.

Later, on VJ-Day, I also went up to town with a friend and was one of the crowd outside the Houses of Parliament. The whole of the surrounding area was packed with people as far as the eye could see. People climbed upon the lampposts and any high point possible. One soldier was reclining cheerily in a chair belonging to one of the statues. It was all high spirited and very, very happy. However, there was a point when the mounted police were clearing a path for a car when I felt quite faint as the crowd surged all around and the horses reared up in front of us. Then Winston Churchill came through in an open car, waving to us all on his way to Parliament. The war was well and truly over.

Published by Merton Historical Society - February 1994

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