

# **SOLIHULL IN WARTIME**

**1939-1945**

**Edited by**

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## ***INTRODUCTION***

At the outbreak of World War II in September 1939 Solihull had been an Urban District Council for little more than five years. The former Rural District Council became a UDC on 1st April 1932, when the boundary was altered to exclude the more rural areas such as Lapworth and Rowington. The new Council House in Poplar Road (refurbished from the former Public Hall) had opened in 1937 and became the co-ordination centre for the District, with operations directed from a basement command centre.

Barrage balloons appeared throughout the area, and searchlight batteries were erected. There were several smokescreens in place, in Solihull and other villages around Birmingham - their purpose was to confuse enemy planes in an attempt to save Birmingham. The smokescreens were created by setting fire to crude oil in large drums, which produced clouds of acrid smelling smoke.

For the local population new rules and regulations became the order of the day. Air Raid Precautions (ARP) were very important and feature prominently in memories of the period. The same phrases occur over again when people talk about the period - for example that "not a chink of light must show " [that is, from the outside] when the blackout was in place at night.

Children from Solihull were not evacuated as it was not considered to be a high risk area for air raids, despite its proximity to Birmingham and Coventry. In fact Solihull became a reception area for evacuees, first from the East End of London and later from Coventry.

Air raid shelters were hastily erected in 1939. Public shelters were built in the street or at public buildings for the use of passers-by caught in an air raid. Individual shelters were constructed in many gardens. The government issued Anderson shelters for use outside, and Morrison table shelters for use inside houses. Shelters were supplied in parts with instruction booklets. Private air raid shelters were very uncomfortable and claustrophobic, and as the floor had often been dug three or four feet down they could also be damp. Most families eventually put in some kind of bunk beds, and light was usually by candles. Many shelters were converted for other uses after the War, such as coal or cycle sheds. One or two even survive today, fifty years on.

Everyone was issued with a gas mask in case of gas attacks, and people were instructed to carry masks at all times. Young children were issued with specially designed "Mickey Mouse" gas masks based on the famous Walt Disney cartoon figure, and small babies had a special portable chamber. Everyone was encouraged to test their gas masks and practise their use in a special building which was filled with tear gas. In comparison to Birmingham and Coventry the Solihull area suffered a small amount of actual bombing raids, but several attacks were experienced in Shirley, Olton and Solihull.

A large proportion of men and some women between the ages of eighteen and forty were away in the forces, and relatives at home often had little information about their whereabouts. News of those killed or injured often arrived by telegram.

Others worked in reserved occupations doing jobs essential for the war effort. Several factories were located in the Solihull area : the Rover "Shadow" Factory in Lode Lane, Solihull; the Austin Aero Works near Elmdon Airport and the BSA in Shirley were just a few in the neighbourhood. The name "shadow factory" has caused much speculation, but it meant that the factory "shadowed" production at another factory in a different location, with production in parallel, so that a bombing raid on one factory did not stop production of vital components. The Rover factory in Lode Lane shadowed production at another factory in Acocks Green.

Other essential jobs included water, gas and electricity supply (and emergency repairs after air raids) and emergency services. Solihull Fire Station in Streetsbrook Road had been open since 1934, and crews served a wide area. Firemen from Solihull were reported at the scene of the disastrous fire at Coventry Cathedral on 14th November 1940.

For civilians Solihull had only a cottage hospital, which had formerly been the Infirmary Ward of the Union Workhouse. It was designated as an Emergency Hospital but had inadequate facilities. Paul Quinet, a local surgeon, recorded that he used his own portable X-ray machine there. In addition to routine medical care, injuries (caused by enemy action or the blackout) needed treatment. Some military hospitals were also created, including a convalescent hospital at "Tudor Grange" in Blossomfield Road, the house now used as part of Solihull College. The house was then the home of the Dowager Lady [Eleanor] Bird, who was the widow of Sir Alfred Bird, of custard fame. Her son Sir Robert Bird lived opposite at the "White House", and his wife Edith was involved in the administration of the hospital, which was visited by the Princess Royal.

Food, and how to procure it, became a major pre-occupation. Rationing was introduced, which allowed very small amounts of butter or margarine, cheese, meat and sugar per person. Pregnant women and babies were allowed extra milk, and orange juice. It was necessary to register with a butcher or grocer, and use only the shops with which you were registered. Coupons had to be surrendered at the time of purchase, and shopkeepers had to return the coupons to the Food Office in Warwick Road each week. Some food, such as bananas and oranges, disappeared almost completely. Queues became commonplace, and it was said that people joined any queue in sight - only asking what was available when a place was secured. Many allowances were very small, but some food such as offal (when it was available) required no coupons. Food was "zoned" throughout the country to save on petrol and distribution costs, so that different regions had different food available, for example there was no "Shredded Wheat" in this area. The "National Loaf" is still remembered (probably with horror) by many - pale brown in colour, it was not uncommon to find splinters inside.

As the War dragged on food parcels were received, sometimes from relatives living abroad. Various organisations in the USA sent parcels, including CARE, USA (which was partly organised by the actor Douglas Fairbanks Jnr). A celebration, attended by Mr Fairbanks and several Solihull dignitaries, was held in London after the War to commemorate the work of this group.

Vegetable growing was encouraged, to supplement rations and to help reduce the amount of food imported (as convoys of ships were at great risk from enemy action, and required

protection from the Navy). Many people kept chickens (for eggs and meat) or a pig (which had to be registered). Many schools and employers (such as Solihull Gas Works) turned over any available land for use as allotments which pupils and employees were encouraged to use, and most gardens were at least partly under cultivation. Various slogans were coined - such as "Dig for Victory".

Most factories had canteens where workers could obtain a nourishing (if plain) meal. A chain of "British Restaurants" were established where a reasonably priced meal could be purchased - chiefly by school children or those who has no access to a works canteen. No coupons were required. Typical meals composed of good wholesome food made from whatever ingredients were available that day. An average price was one shilling (ie 5p) for a main course. The British Restaurant in Solihull was in Mill Lane, in the former Boys' School, while a temporary building in Stratford Road housed the Shirley Restaurant (this is now the site of Shirley Post Office).

Transport was difficult, with petrol rationed, and non-essential vehicles forbidden. Private cars were laid up for the duration of the War, either at home or at a local garage, but the vehicles were first immobilised by removing the rotor arm (which had to be given to the police). This was to prevent their use by the enemy in the event of invasion. Buses ran to Birmingham, when conditions in the city permitted, but the last bus returned to Solihull at about 9.00pm. Many people had bicycles, but it was difficult to ride at night in the blackout, and it was impossible to obtain batteries for cycle lamps - even if the cyclist had a dynamo great care had to be taken to mask the lights. There were, of course, no streetlights and traffic lights were masked at night so that only a small cross of light was allowed to show.

Garages such as Solihull Motors were commissioned by the Ministry of Defence to refurbish and maintain the vehicles essential for communications work in Britain. With car factories given over to munitions work it was impossible to buy new cars, or even to obtain spare parts in some cases. Garage staff would collect worn out or faulty cars from far afield and tow them back in convoys to Solihull to refurbish, or cannibalise for spares if the vehicle was too far gone for restoration.

Solihull UDC had adopted a "V/W" class destroyer called "HMS Vivacious" in 1942, and on 25th March 1944 a party of officers and other ranks visited Solihull for a weekend by invitation. Various events were laid on to entertain the guests, including a reception, a dance and a football match. Happily "HMS Vivacious", which had been built at Yarrow in 1917, survived the War and was sold in 1947.

When the United States of America joined the War many American servicemen were sent to Britain to train for the invasion of Europe, which was to begin with the "D Day" landings in Normandy in June 1944. An American Army Headquarters was created in Blossomfield Road, Solihull (on the present site of the swimming baths). Some soldiers were in camp at Catherine-de-Barnes, while others were billeted with local families. Staff from the US Army Medical Corps were stationed at Knowle. Many people (especially those who were children at the time) remember the Americans, and the catch phrases such as "Got any gum, chum?" used, mostly by children, to greet them. Many recall the sudden mobilisation prior to "D Day", when convoy after convoy drove through the area and disappeared.

Throughout the War spirits could be raised by social events, which were often linked to fund raising for the war effort. Campaigns such as "Save a Soldier" and "Wings for Victory" were supported locally. Local entertainment included the cinema, public houses and occasional dances, especially when servicemen were in the area.

When victory finally came in May 1945 it was greeted with much joy and celebration on VE Day. In spite of rationing and other limitations most streets or villages in the area managed to arrange a party, with food at least for the children, games and sometimes even fireworks. Several photographs of such events have survived. More celebrations followed VJ (Victory in Japan) Day in August.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, all the hardships and privations caused by nearly six years of warfare, many people recall the spirit of comradeship often prevalent. Everyone, after all, was affected to some degree by the War. The following pages allow those who experienced the war years to speak for themselves.

**Mrs J. Alder (nee Webb)**

I was born in Solihull in 1936 and so I spent my childhood during the war. I don't remember much about the war itself.

My mother, father, brother and myself lived in the bungalow at the entrance to Malvern Park which was known as the Lodge.

Before the war started my father, Mr William Webb, was the Park Keeper. He did all the gardening and looked after the tennis courts and bowling green. He was also a part-time fireman. There was not a telephone in the bungalow but if there was a fire a bell would ring in the bungalow.

If the fire was in the daytime when my father was working in the park, my mother would stand at the back door of our bungalow and blow a whistle. My father would then drop everything he was doing and run home where his uniform was always left ready to put on. My mother would have his bicycle ready at the gate and then he had to cycle as fast as he could to the Square outside Solihull Church where the Fire Engine would come to pick him up and any other firemen that could get there in time. If there was a fire in the night the bell would ring in the bedroom and then my father jumped out of bed one side and dressed into his uniform, my mother jumped out of bed the other side to get his bicycle ready by the gate. After my father had cycled up the road my mother would put a coat on over her nightclothes and walk up to the church to wheel my father's bicycle back home.

In the summer, at weekends my mother sold pots of tea and ice cream to visitors to the park.

When the war started my father was in the Police Volunteer Reserve and so he became a policeman stationed at the Police Station in Poplar Road next to the Council House.

A lady then became park keeper. In those days there were gates on all the entrances to the park. A small gate and railings by our bungalow and big heavy wrought iron double gates across Park Road. The big gates were the gates to Malvern Hall, our bungalow being the Lodge to the Hall.

Every night the park gates had to be locked at a certain time. On several occasions a courting couple would get locked in the park and as we didn't have the keys then when we heard someone shouting my parents would take one of our wooden kitchen chairs outside to the small gate to help the couple climb over to get out of the park.

I went to school at St Alphege's Park Road C of E, as it was known then. Mrs Fitter was the Headmistress. The teachers were Mrs Thompson, Mrs Antrobus and two sisters, the Miss Appleton's. One was short, plump and jolly, the other was very tall and slim. Being a church school the highlight of our year was Good Friday and Ascension Day. We would meet at school then walk in a crocodile to church. After the service we were allowed the rest of the day holiday.

Opposite the school was a row of very old cottages with about three steps going up to the front doors. Next to the cottages was a factory, belonging to Wilsdon & Co. and then next to that was the George Hotel. During the war the George was taken over for a while as a billet for

American servicemen. My mother and father were also caretakers of the Methodist Chapel in Station Road. The smaller one known as the Old Chapel was taken over as a recreation hall for the Americans. Although there was food rationing in England it did not matter much to the Americans. I had never seen so many doughnuts that they had sent from America in all my life.

As I said our school was near to the George and at playtimes the children would stand by the school gates and shout to the Americans a favourite saying at that time "got any gum chum" and sometimes we would get some. We had to take our gas masks to school and had drill in putting them on. Mine had Mickey Mouse on the end. One day we were told to take a screw top jam jar and every school child was given a jar of cocoa powder, a gift from Canada. What a treat!

When the school doctor came round our feet were measured. If your feet were over a certain size you were given extra clothing coupons for having big feet. I was one of those.

At that time there were no school meals. An old school in Mill Lane was converted into what was called a British Restaurant where people could go for reasonably priced meals. We were marched there from school for our dinners.

When there was an air raid at night my mother had to unlock the air raid shelter which was by the park entrance. She would not go in it herself nor let any of her family go in it after she heard of the BSA Factory at Small Heath had been bombed and caught fire. People were in the shelters under the factory. The firemen were putting out the fire but the blaze was that hot that scalding water was getting into the shelters and killed the people in them.

We had a "Morrison Shelter" in my bedroom which had a steel top and wire mesh side and we made a bed inside.

The Gas Works in Wharf Lane was a target for the German bombers. On moonlight nights they were able to follow the canal to the Gas Works and the Rover Factory but they never managed to hit them.

Several houses in Alston Road were hit and families killed and made homeless. One morning when I woke up we found that we had no electricity. Later I found that several bombs had hit Solihull.

A German bomber, on its way to blitz Coventry, had been hit by one of our guns. To lighten the plane's load it had dropped its bombs. The first bomb fell on Winfield's Chemist on the corner of Poplar Road and High Street. The next one on Duddy's Wool Shop and part of the White Cat Cafe and one on one of the classrooms of my school. Another came over the top of our bungalow, taking the slates off the roof before landing in the park. If we had lived in a house we surely would have been hit, three bombs in all landed in the park. My father was on duty that night and was cycling along the "ash path" which ran from Blythe Way, Brueton Avenue, Park Avenue to Park Road, when in the dark he rode into a bomb crater near our home. He was very lucky to have only a broken wrist.

### Solihull as I remember it.

In the first house in the Square at the top of Church Hill lived two sisters, the Miss Stubbs. One Miss Stubbs was a physiotherapist. She often told her patients that they had a ghost in the house. It was a friendly ghost and never bothered them. They would feel a cold wind then the figure of a monk would come through their closed front door and go upstairs. There had been talk of a passage from their house to the church and also a passage from Malvern Hall to the church. The girls at Malvern Hall wanted to search for a passage but Miss Forster, Headmistress of the school, would not let them look for one.

In the house on the corner of the Square and High Street lived Miss Dorothy Sanderson and Miss Florence Sanderson. Dorothy was housekeeper for Mr Smith who lived in the upstairs of the house. Mr Smith and Dorothy also owned a small barber's shop opposite next to the George.

On the left-hand side of High Street going from the Square, the first shop was Payne's Shoe Repairs, repairs done on the premises, then came a little shop owned by Mr & Mrs Deebanks. It was only a small shop but they sold anything you could want in stationery, books and toys. It was a wonderland. How they could find anything and know what they had got to sell I will never know.

Next to the Malt Shovel was a shoe shop, Freeman, Hardy and Willis, and then came the Greengrocers owned by twin sisters, the Miss Blizzards. The Miss Blizzards were identical twins. They wore long black dresses and white aprons and had their hair done in a bun. Miss Forster, the Headmistress of Malvern Hall had a flat above their shop.

Next came the Manor House, then Napier's Seed Merchants, then a large double-fronted shop which was Bancroft's Drapers. After that was Solihull Motors owned by Joe Kinchen. My brother worked there for a while.

There was a Newsagent and Stationers belonging to Miss Poulter. Mr Hull had a butchers and then a grocers, Wrensons. Next door to that was a cake shop, Coxhills later taken over by Wimbushes, then a mens outfitters called Manly Clothes. This brought us to Ramsgate, the cottages up a little side alley.

Hobdays had a furniture store, then Simson's Wet Fish Shop and small Fish and Chip Shop.

I cannot remember all the shops in Station Road but I know there was Pailings, a men's outfitters, Windsor House the hat shop and a large shoe shop called Bata.

The right hand side of High Street, next to Mr Smith's barbers shop was a sweet shop, then the Mason's Arms, White Cat Cafe and Duddy's before it was bombed.

After Drury Lane was the Royal Oak and Solihull Cinema. Mr Freeman was manager of the cinema for many, many years.

The Co-Op owned the next few shops, a grocery department, butchers and a greengrocery department, which was the front of the shop, where the front of the shop was open to the street,

and a bakery department.

Mill Lane next, the Davis's Bakery, Warden ladies outfitters and haberdashery and then a small grocers owned by Miss Sharp and her son John. It was a lovely shop with the tins of loose biscuits in front of the counter on which was a slab to make pats of butter and to cut the cheese with a wire. There was also a big bacon slicer.

Jasper Hall had a chemist shop and Mr Pegg and his daughter had a large bicycle and pram shop. Woolworths had a large store. Bywaters had a cooked meat shop, La Fleuriste greengrocery and flowers and then Tay's butchers, Timothy Whites and Taylors had a double fronted chemist shop where you could also take new babies to be weighed. George Masons had a grocery store. Rotherhams newsagent and sweet shop had a milk bar at the end of the shop.

Finally Winfields had a chemists on the corner of High Street and Poplar Road. They had a shelf round the back of the shop with big glass bottles of coloured liquid. In Poplar Road opposite the Council House was Baldwins electrical store, Twiggs book shop, Mary Mary's ladies and children's outfitters, Pattisons cake shop and Capons ladies outfitters. Round the corner in Station Road were more shops but I can only remember Brunners cake and sweet shop. At the end was the Post Office and then open space. There was a drive to a large house which was used as offices for the Milk Marketing Board. Tudor Grange, in Blossomfield Road, was used as a convalescence home for wounded soldiers. They wore hospital blue uniforms. At the White House, home of Lord and Lady Bird, there was a fete in the gardens every summer. In the grounds was a maze which was a big attraction.

In Robin Hood Cemetery were graves of I think German servicemen. As children my cousin and myself used to pick bluebells to put on their graves.

My grandfather was a foreman for Solihull Council and he was in charge of a gang of German P.O.W.s to work on the roads in the district. The POW's made wooden toys in their spare time with just a pen knife and a hot poker. They made a bat with some pecking chickens on for my cousin and myself.

When the war finished my father left the police and as the Lodge belonged to the Council we had to move house. My father started his own taxi service and was a very well known person in Solihull.

Among my school friends were Joan Mell, daughter of Maurice Mell (whom Mell Square was named after). They lived in Streetsbrook Road on the corner of Station Road. Sheila and Bernard Watts lived at the back of Paynes shoe shop. Roger Hovey lived at the back of Solihull Motors near to where Harrison's Opticians had a small workshop. Christine Rawlings' parents owned a painting and decorating shop on Warwick Road.

Miss Marion Swingler gave tap and ballet lessons in a large room at Park House in Park Road. Opposite Park House was a private school called Cedarhurst run by Mr Callaghan and his wife. The pupils wore red blazers and caps or straw hats.

At a house in Drury Lane, Miss Constance May Podesta gave singing and piano lessons. She was also the Organist at the church at the corner of Drury Lane and Warwick Road. Miss Podesta married late in life becoming Mrs Turner and moved to a house in New Road.

Also in New Road was a sub Post Office and newsagents. My brother had a paper round from there.

Another of my school friends was Sally Rogers whose father owned the garage in Warwick Road. Solihull Library was in Warwick Road.

Contributed January 1989.

### **Mr D. Banham**

I left school in the summer of 1939 at the age of fourteen to learn the hotel trade, and I entered employment at the Midland Hotel, Birmingham as a trainee waiter known as a comis waiter.

At the best of times then, it was hard work, my hours were from 9am to 3pm with three hours off, and starting again at 6pm to 10pm, which meant catching one of the last buses home to Shirley and I think the very last bus was at 10.30pm.

Then came Sunday 3rd September 1939, the day war was declared. When I went into work on Monday the ordered routine had changed somewhat and something like chaos reigned, as we had already lost some staff and in the following days many more were to go, either called up or detained under the Defence Regulations, for quite a lot of the staff were foreigners. That Monday I have never forgotten or likely to, for I was detailed to take over the lower snack bar all on my own, whereas before there were at least two people doing that job. For a lad of fourteen with little experience it was very daunting and really beyond my scope. The business people were coming in as usual expecting the same efficient service they were used to, for they had no conception of how hard pressed we were, for outside the hotel walls life still carried on more or less in a normal fashion, except for people carrying their gasmasks, and as anyone knows who lived at that time, the so-called phoney war carried on for quite some time. I remember saying to one of the elderly waiters "the war will be over before I get a chance to go into the forces": how naive youth can be.

But it was not all gloom and doom for on one occasion I remember in 1939 Gene Autry the film star, with his horse Champion came to Birmingham and for quite a while he and his horses were outside the back entrance of the Midland Hotel opposite what was then the Queens Hotel. For a lad brought up on a fare of cowboys and indians, although more of an addict of Buck Jones, Tim Maynard and Tim McCoy and also being fond of horses, I was not going to miss the chance of seeing Gene Autry. Fortunately it was one of the quiet times and I managed to have quite a conversation with him and getting to know his horses which was quite a thrill for me.

After a period of time what with the long hours and the indoor atmosphere my health began to

deteriorate and I was advised by my doctor to seek an outdoor job. I next entered the milk trade and had a job with a private dairyman, a one-man business. Our round was very extensive as we covered Shirley, Hall Green and Sparkhill and the round was in two parts. We did one part before breakfast then went back to reload the van for the other part. Yes, we had a van when a lot of milk deliveries were still done with horse-drawn vehicles. Not only did we have crates of bottled milk but also loose milk in cans where the people had the loose milk tipped into their jugs, and woe betide you if you did not give them what was known as the splash, a little extra measure.

We used to have very severe winters in those days with heavy falls of snow and hard frost which made the job of delivering the milk rather difficult to say the least, and we worked long hours, but it was our proud boast we delivered to everyone of our customers. I remember seeing the Stratford Road with a track down the middle just wide enough for a vehicle to pass along, and every so often there would be cut-outs in the high banked snow for vehicles to pass. The phoney war had long finished and we knew what war was all about for it was the era of the air raids.

One of the very sad aspects of the job was when we started out in the mornings we never knew if we were going to see all our customers again, people you had served milk and chatted to the one day were gone the next day, killed in the air raids and their houses flattened. There was also the problem of negotiating the roads with all the bomb craters and rubble. In spite of the hard and stressful times, the British sense of humour was never far from the surface.

On the Home Front we had the Home Guard and the ARP, in the latter of which I was a member of the Messenger Service: young people (both girls and boys) complete with their cycles who wanted to do their bit for King and Country. Our base was a wooden hut on the corner of Shakespeare Drive in Shirley, but we also had to take turns to be on duty in the basement of the Council House in Solihull, ready to go wherever we might be required. Our main duty was of course to carry messages, but we also had other duties: one being to check all the crude oil burners that were all round the factory centre in Shirley to make sure that they were burning properly - the idea being to create a smokescreen to hide the centre from the German bombers. Depending on which way the wind was blowing, we might either arrive back at base clean, or looking like chimney sweeps. I might add that we used to cycle around the area with little or no light, so one had to have a very good local knowledge of the area. We were not heavily bombed as in Birmingham, but nevertheless we had some harrowing incidents with loss of life with the bombs that did drop on Shirley.

I was still keen to do more in participation of war work, although I was already in the ARP Messenger Service, the ATC and firewatching. I saw an opportunity in working on the land with the Government backed War Agriculture Committee, and it partly fulfilled my sense of adventure travelling around a large part of Warwickshire doing all kinds of jobs on farms and helping to clear large tracts of land to grow corn crops etc. to help make up the supplies of food coming to Britain lost at sea by ships being torpedoed. I was in that occupation till the latter part of 1943 when I went into the Navy.

So ended my civilian life in wartime Shirley, from then on I was only home on leave.

Early in 1944 in my Royal Navy service, I was in barracks, namely HMS Drake Devonport awaiting a draft to what I thought would be a ship, instead one day on the drafting boards against my name was the legend S.A.S.O., on looking further I realised quite a few chaps had the same letters against their names.

It turned out we were to be a special Naval self contained group assigned to the big ammunition depot at Bull Point further down the river, an unusual and perhaps unique assignment for Navy personnel.

Our work would entail being barge and tughands. All over the estuary were moored groups of barges loaded with ammunition, they were in lines of about eight barges each line, some had accommodation and that was where we lived when on duty. Tugs would come any time of the day or night to take the barges to ammunition the vast number of ships that were coming into Plymouth, at first it was mainly Royal Naval ships, then more and more American ships started to arrive, something was happening, but no-one knew what.

On the other hand we did duty as tug hands. Tugs had been sent from other places including some from the London area to cope with the greatly increased amount of work. While the ship's company got on with unloading the barges we were free to go on the ships. Used to our own austere living conditions both on our Navy ships and bases ashore, it was a real eyeopener to us to see the living conditions aboard the American ships, some were like five-star hotels. To illustrate, at the ends of the mess tables, would be big bowls of sugar, also bowls of cream and a huge coffee pot, all around were Coca-Cola, ice water and ice cream machines. Food was in abundance served on those partitioned trays, and there were loads of "candy", American for sweets, to us used to years of rationing and being short of things it was like another world.

Then of course there were their uniforms which we were rather envious of, but we did have one thing, that they would have given anything for, Royal Naval personnel were issued with a knife with rank, name and number engraved on it and it was a most important item at sea and to lose it would mean one would be put on a charge, so the Americans had to do without their swop.

I got on quite well with the Americans they were generous and open hearted, but there again they could afford to be. I think they did rather respect the Brits.

I have often wondered since how many of our Naval chaps and the American Navy whom I met during that period of time survived the time that lay ahead.

Although I saw action at other times and other places in the war, I realise how lucky I was to be such on such an assignment, my work was a very tiny segment in the great build up.

Came the day when the biggest sea borne invasion in history took place, and fifty years on is the anniversary of what we all know now was D-Day. I also remember those chaps who were not so lucky as I.

Contributed 1994.

## **Mr J Cliff**

In 1938 the Gas Board were in the old Mill Lane office (the new showrooms are on practically the same spot as the old one). It was a very busy works at the time, there were a terrific number of houses being built and there was always plenty of work. You could never keep up with the work, you were simply fixing meters or cookers or fires or everything. But of course with the war coming on, slowly things started to change. There was a shortage of material, you had to make do with what you had. You could see the whole set up was altering - there were no new cookers coming out, I mean all the factories were moving over to war work and things were altering definitely with food rationing coming on (you couldn't get this and you couldn't get that). The shops were altering altogether and as far as the gas industry was concerned they were slowing down because there was no brick work available, everything was being requisitioned for the war.

Then when the war came - the Sunday when the war was declared - we were in the old Mill Lane showroom shoring the building up and making the cellar into a bunker (I don't think there are any bunkers left, they blew the lot out). We shored the building up and they cut another hole as an escape route in case the stairs collapsed. That was the day war was declared and things went from bad to worse as you might say.

We got started with the war, and then after a month or two a rumour came about that they were going to cut the staff at the gas office, well of course naturally I thought that being the last in I should be the first out, anyway within forty eight hours six had got the sack and there were only twelve of us left. Later we were reduced down six again, and one left so we went down to five. There was not the amount of work going on and we just went around doing the fitting jobs. Then one day there was a bit of an accident at the Gas Works. They had lost men at the Works already because some men had been called up for the forces, and Mr Bennett (H J Bennett was in charge of the fitting staff at Mill Lane) said to me "You will have to go to the Works for two or three days - it's only a steam pipe that has broken down, but there is a shortage of labour so I have sent two of you down there". So that left three men at Mill Lane. When we had finished the job I said to the foreman, a chap called Fred Snow (a nice chap he was) "I suppose we will be back in Mill Lane tomorrow then?" but he said "Oh no, I'm afraid you are going to be here for a long while now. I tell you what, you can forget about the Saturday afternoon in Solihull Village shopping, and you can forget about going to church on Sunday morning or on Sunday night, because we want all the hours you've got, down at the Gas Works and I stopped at the Gas Works until the war was over. Mind you, it was a filthy job.

As I was on the phone this was considered to be very useful, and I was sent for if anything broke down at night. When the war started the workers had to report to the Gas Works every time the sirens went off. They had lorries ready for going out, with sand bags and sand and picks and shovels so that we could look for trouble with the gas mains. When I was on the fitting staff my district was from Haslucks Green Road, Shirley, to the River Cole, and we had to inspect every single house in the area to see that every mains tap was greased so that it moved freely, in case of air raids.

It was not too long before we got bombings. I think the first bombs that dropped on Solihull were at the corner of Drury Lane and the High Street. I remember the raid on Alston Road -it

was just before 6 o'clock in the morning. We knew the sirens had gone off, I was getting up and getting ready to report to work. That morning as I went outside I thought "Well that couldn't have been so far away", and I picked up a piece of shrapnel, a piece of shell case, as it dropped off the roof, but I dropped it down - it was so hot. A family was killed - the bomb dropped on the Gas Works drive and the guide and tail fin were torn off, and it bounced and hit the big branch of an oak tree and bounced farther up the field and went straight over into Cornyx Lane and killed the family - the whole family was wiped out, that was a terrible blow. It was a family of six I think, named Pinder (the same name as the Deputy Chairman of the Solihull Gas Company).

I think they were looking for the Rover factory - it was very low down there and due to the canal it was almost always misty down there - probably they could not pick it on the aircraft. The bomber came back again at about 9 o'clock, and I remember Fred Snow said to me "Well if he comes back and it looks as though he is going to have another go at us, get in the canal - the canal being the lowest point any blast will pass over the top of you." I said "Well I can't swim, but a wet shirt would be better than being blown up". Anyway the bomber cleared off and reported that night that the Germans had destroyed a gas works on the east side of Birmingham.

The Gas Works was very busy during the war because demand from factories was increasing all the time. At first they had twelve vertical retorts and they worked on ten with two resting, but then it had to be doubled so then she had twenty four retorts and it was a massive place then. They used to store 400 tons of coal in the roof on top. Then before the end of the war they had another gas holder put up and there were thirty six retorts. There was coal coming in all the time, at first by train from Yorkshire to Solihull Station and by lorry from the Station. Then they used to fetch it direct by lorry with Solihull men going up as far as Chesterfield way.

We had to go out to houses to see if there was any damage, see the house was made safe and empty the gas meter. You were supposed to make good whatever you could. We found lots of houses where the gas pipes had broken open and you did what you could. There were no valves on the services, and if the roadway was up you could not stop the gas on the main. This could be dangerous if it caught fire. Also, in Shirley, sometimes the gas main and the water main both burst and got mixed up together, so if you went to turn the gas cooker on you got water.

We worked very long hours and sometimes we never went home for two or three days - you got in there and (like the night they did Coventry) we were there all night. At other times, when there were no emergency repair after bombings, we still worked long hours. It was as good as prison because the Company wanted all the hours we had got to deal with the plant because it was just being simply flogged to death. There was always more work to do with the alterations - boiler houses, new boilers, chimney stacks, plant alterations and steam mains all being enlarged. They were making gas for anything anyway they could, and when production rose they were pumping it into the Birmingham mains.

Some of the work was dangerous. The steam pressure was terrible, when it came out it would cut you in two (the boilers were around 120 pound to the square inch) and lots of the pipes were very hot. I don't remember any major accidents though, but I do remember one chap

losing a finger when the chain on the coke conveyor snapped when he was cleaning the track.

It was all filthy dirty work and your clothes simply stunk of coke gas. You could smell it when you got home at night, and after you had been doing the oxide boxes you couldn't sit there when you went in the room if the coal fire was on and you couldn't go to sleep because the stuff had got into your skin and you sat there and the tears were running down your face all the while. You were forever bathing, always having a bath but you couldn't get the stuff out of you.

Eventually we had about half a dozen Italian prisoners of war come. They were living in a prisoner of war camp in Marston Green and were fetched in van in the morning. They weren't that much help to us because they were talking in Italian and you couldn't understand them and they couldn't understand you, but one chap named Michael who was used to hard work and he was a real winner. He was a very popular chap even with the English because he was a really willing worker. If there were any bonus paid out to the manager, Mr Downs, always saw Michael on his own and he got the same as an Englishman.

We got married in October 1938 and came to live in Damson Lane. When the war started my wife's job had to finish and she was sent to the Rover factory and she was on progress chasing. She was on nights for three or four years, working five days a week, until our son was born and of course she was out of it then. Sometimes we would not see each other for two or three days, if I was out working on emergencies.

We did not have much social life in those years, but we did have a club room at the back of the showroom in Mill Lane. We had darts and snooker. We had a beautiful billiards table. We used to meet people there - the police used to use it quite a lot. We were very well in with the police with good reason as we were always being reported for riding (bicycles) without lights! We used to invite various troops who were stationed here too, which made a problem because there were ladies in the forces and no women were allowed in the club. We just said we didn't see any ladies, but we had a problem with the toilets so we got everyone out and let the ladies use the toilets for half an hour. We used to have a raffle and it was always made out that the men in the forces won the raffle not the gas workers. They used to go in the village and buy a great big chicken, brussels sprouts and potatoes and things like that, but it was only the visitors who won the prizes of course, they were in the forces and away from home.

I think the worst part about the war for us was the food rationing - that's what got people down. They were waiting in queues for everything and you got fed up with it. My wife used to get a meal at the canteen at the Rover, but we did not have a canteen at the Gas Works. You could get hot water and that was the lot if you had not sandwiches with you you'd go hungry. You would have your meal when you got home if you hadn't had an air raid - but those times you sometimes went days without a cooked meal. Of course war time you did not miss much because there was no food about. You often had corned beef or offal, and sometimes there was a bit of rabbit about. You did not know what you were eating half the time - I'm sure we had horse meat. We had a garden and you would do it when you could if you had a bit of time, and we had allotments on land at the Gas Works. I grew Brussels sprouts, parsnips and carrots - things like that.

The day before VE Day Mr Sadler, the manager, came to the works and told me to get the floodlights ready for 8 o'clock in the morning and take them to St Alphege Church, and the fitters from Mill Lane and we had had the floodlights ready for the evening and we went on for two or three days I think. The floodlights were gas, and there is a gas service point still there in the corner of St Alphege cemetery but I don't know whether it is still alive. They had gas floodlighting before the war but I don't think it was ever as effective as electric because it was not as powerful and the beam was wider so you couldn't concentrate on the spire or anything like that. But it looked nice, and the next time they did it was VJ Day.

Extracts from taped conversation with Sue Bates March 1994.

### Alfred Collier

#### Solihull Home Guard - 5th Warwickshire Battalion

As with most Home Guard units the Solihull one started out as the L.D.V. "Local Defence Volunteers", with pick handles, garden forks or any other implement. Then the H.G. was formed and uniforms and rifles were issued. Solihull H.G. eventually used Touchwood Hall in Drury Lane as their Headquarters. The platoon that my pals and I were in consisted chiefly of young men below the age of twenty one. Our sergeant was Frank Lewis of the bakery at Catherine-de-Barnes. We did our first arms drill in an upstairs room standing between the oak beams in case we hit them with the rifle barrel. Our parade ground for the Sunday morning parade was in the play ground of Mill Lane School. Manoeuvres against army units took place around the fields and lanes of Catherine-de-Barnes and also unit training in Barston Lane and Ravenshaw. For those training sessions we slept and operated from Catney Village Hall. Tear gas training took place in a hut behind the Grove - now an old peoples home.

#### The Special Police Messenger Service

The S.P.M.S. was formed in 1940 for the specific purpose of using scouts as foot messengers, or on bicycles, to communicate between various police units and maybe A.R.P. units should telephones be out of action. My pals and I were in the 1st Solihull Troop and our H.Q. was a hut at the rear of Solihull British Legion. The father of one of the senior scouts was a member of the Legion and also a Special Constable and had first hand knowledge of the decision to form a messenger service. He came to a scout meeting and asked for volunteers and the senior scout patrol volunteered, six in all.

No scout under fifteen could join because we had to do night duty from about 7.00pm until 7.00am unless the sirens went before the start of the duty. Two messengers were on duty, but any messenger would turn up if the sirens sounded and would often stay until the all clear. One example of the use of the messenger service was when Solihull was first bombed. The bombs fell from the corner of Poplar Rd and the High St which was Winfield's chemist shop, then to Fitters Jewellers on the right of the High St, the next one fell on Duddy's wool shop near to where the Masons Arms Hotel is. The remainder of the stick of bombs fell in Malvern Park at the bottom of Park Rd.

The messenger on duty came on that night with me, but I was taken to Olton sub-police station in case a messenger was needed. The one left at Solihull had a lucky escape when a piece of kerb stone from the chemist's pavement went through the roof of the toilet he had minutes before vacated. The same messenger was used, by being placed on the chemist's corner to keep people away.

Contributed March 1992.

### **Mr John Collins**

The COLLINS family lived in the council houses in Hay Lane during the war. They arrived there just after the houses had been built, having outgrown the cottage in Drury Lane where they had been previously.

They arrived in Solihull from Bristol where the father (Fred) had been the owner of a busy restaurant in the Haymarket until the various problems of the "Slump" in the Twenties had forced him into bankruptcy. Arriving in Solihull in 1936 via Keynsham, Cheltenham, Worcester and Sparkhill in Birmingham, the family (with ages) then comprised:-

Father Fred(erick)... 45 years

Mother Victoria (known as "dof" or "Clara" in Solihull... 29 years

Son Eric... 8 years

Son Graham... 5 years

Son John... 4 years

Daughter Olive... 2 years

Later to be increased in size by the addition of:-

Daughter Rita, born 1942

Son Robin, born 1944

There was another son (Alan) born during the war years but poor little angel only lived for a few weeks, cried nearly all the time and was then interred in St Alphege churchyard near the wall by the school. He has nothing to denote his resting place and although he was much loved by the family there was no money available to record his short life.

So, we lived in Hay Lane, and the "catchment" boundary for the schools actually went right through the middle of the council houses. Some children should go to school in Solihull and some at Salter Street. It so happened that the Collins family (out of all the children who then lived in Hay Lane) would go to Solihull, so that when we were old enough we made our ways variously to Mill Lane and Park Road (as it was then known) schools, and we attended these schools until they were either closed down (made into a British Restaurant as Mill Lane was), or we left because Park Road had its direct hit with a bomb in 1942?

Dad and Mum were both quite well educated and had promising starts to their lives, but then both had been orphaned whilst still young, and Dad was very seriously injured in the first war and could not enlist. He had also been previously married but his first wife died in childbirth.

During the war years Dad worked as a storekeeper at the Rover in Lode Lane and I well recall him bringing his stock books home some nights because he had made a mistake during the day, and he would then copy the whole page out meticulously in his copperplate handwriting and only put it down when he was satisfied as to it's neatness. Dad died in 1980 aged 89 and until about six months before then he continued to write in copperplate that was near perfect. We children used to have compulsory lessons in writing copperplate, every day when we came from school we wrote a page out in a copperplate copy book. Graham still has the style, but it's become more untidy as the years have progressed and ball-point pens have arrived- it hardly bears a resemblance to it's origins now!! Eric, the oldest child, never did copperplate, his writing was (and is) the same as his mother's, probably attributable to the fact that during the "Slump" Dad spent most of his time out looking for work; and when he found it it was long hours.

Mention of the fact that Dad worked at the Rover makes me recall my first ever recollections of Company Christmas Parties. We had family invitations to these each year, and, although it wasn't really today's image of kid's entertainment we listened year after year to Anne Zeigler and Webster Booth (who I believe lived locally). We did have other amusements that kept us happy and on the whole the Rover Christmas parties were eagerly looked forward to. How on earth we got there from Hay Lane I don't know, Dad used to cycle there every day. We listened fascinatingly to stories of happenings at the Rover during the periods of the Air Raids, it was all like a fairy story to us kids, we had no inkling of fear.

Mum, in spite of dragging up her burgeoning family, including all the necessary cooking, washing, general housework etc., found time to do a lot of gardening (we grew most of our own vegetables) and also she lent a not insignificant hand on the land where farmers throughout the county found her to be at least the equivalent of a man as she took part in such activities as haymaking, harvesting, spud planting and picking, swede "bashing", and later on, in the summers, she was a familiar sight as she acted as "feeder" on the "drum" - standing on top of a threshing machine, receiving the sheaves of corn, cutting the bands of binder twine, feeding the loose corn stalks into the revolving knives of the thresher (the drum) - it was one of the most thankless tasks on the farm but she did it week in week out all around the county, often cycling as far as from Monkspath to Claverdon, doing a day's work, and then cycling back home again to start her housework/cooking etc. Mostly in the latter years she worked with the teams of workers sub-contracted out by George Napier who had gradually expanded his seedsman business in the High Street to provide a service for farmers which saw him processing the seed corn on the farm and then buying it in for onward sales.

Mum was nothing if not hospitable, and if she had an inkling that there were workers on the land somewhere near home that she suspected had no means of making a "cuppa" she would dispatch one of us kids to find out if and when some beverage was needed. Subsequently, though how she afforded to do it I don't know, we would be traipsing across the fields with a white pail full of tea, with perhaps some home made cake to go with it. Later we would fetch the pail and empty mugs back to be washed up ready for the next trip. It was Mum's attempt to help the war effort and went on incessantly when it appeared people were in need.

Her efforts weren't all directed towards human beings however, and all the animals in the

neighbourhood, wild or domestic, knew that if they went to 216 Hay Lane they would get a good reception because there were always two or three bowls put out with food and water/milk for the needy. Not that animals were always safe, I'm told that my dislike of cooked rabbit now stems from the fact that I used to watch Mum and others skinning rabbits, and I've never been partial to game because we were out shooting and trapping it at every opportunity. When you're hungry nothing tastes better than a dozen moorhen's eggs boiled in a billy can over a camp fire, perhaps supplemented by some "scrumped" fruit and perhaps a bit of home-made bread, and the gloves and helmets that we wore made us realise that rabbit fur has it's uses after the rest has been put in the pot.

There were times when we went out to provide tea to the "smoke-screen" men who were billeted in a nissen hut on the corner of Hay Lane and Shelley Green. The Authorities had decided that the factories at Solihull and the few on the way into Birmingham (Cranmore) were obvious targets for the bombers that came over, mostly at night. Their idea seemed to be that if you laid a smoke screen of thick black smoke over an area of the countryside it would attract the bombers who would think that there was a prime target beneath the smoke..it seemed to work, because the smoke chimneys were put along the whole length of Hay Lane, about one every ten yards, and the men from the corner of Shelley Lane came out when the air-raid sirens sounded and dropped lighted rags into the drums of filthy black oil. They thus created the thickest, blackest smoke ever seen, and over an area of countryside; soon after the bombers would arrive and we were subjected to several heavy air-raids in which heavy bombs as well as incendiary bombs were dropped (even in our garden). One of the more well known casualties of this was Jack Bickford who lived and farmed at Monkspath Hall then, and on the morning after one raid he found an unexploded incendiary near the farmhouse and picked it up; it exploded in his hands, the rest is history and it was many years before he was back on his feet again but did eventually recover.

One favourite occupation of ours was when we later went to school at St James, Shirley and at Sharmans Cross we had to walk along the Stratford Road and after a night raid we used to search and collect shrapnel and on arrival at school there was a sort of competition to see who had the most or the biggest piece. It was during one of these trips to school that we saw Mr Dyer's horse dead at the side of a crater in the field opposite his house (in the corner of the field a little way along from the George and Dragon and in the land now belonging to Lucas).

On the way back from the Shirley schools in those days we used to go cross-country from the George and Dragon, crossing what is now Swallow's Meadow where we used to search for and dig up truffles and a form of ground nut.

When we went to school in Solihull we walked up the Lane, crossed various fields to cut off the corners, were carried across the brook in Hay Lane if it was flooded by the Roadman Mr Bill Eden (who lived in one of the cottages in Shelly Green) whose responsibility it was to to keep the roads and ditches and verges tidy from the Stratford Road as far as Bunkers Hill - and a good job he made of it too. There was a time when the snow was so deep in drifts that it went from the top of the hedge on one side of Hay Lane to the top of the hedge on the other (probably 12-15 feet deep in the centre) and Bill Eden had made a tunnel for us to go to through on our way to school. That winter we also had a tunnel going from the back door of the house to the top of the garden where the chicken pens were, the snow had drifted halfway up the bedroom windows.

There wasn't much that stopped us going to school in those days and we felt ever so proud as we strutted off with our gas masks trailing off our shoulders. In our satchels we carried our "emergency" rations which primarily consisted of Horlicks tablets, BUT THEY WERE ONLY TO BE USED IN AN EMERGENCY!!! So, I recall more than one occasion, for instance when walking along Hillfield Road at about 08.30 when the sirens went off to signal an imminent air-raid. This was followed by a jump into the nearest ditch (such fun) and then a unanimous decision that the emergency had arrived and we could eat our Horlicks tablets! We had to eat them quickly too, in case the All-clear sounded before we had finished the packet!! Funny, I still like Horlicks.

It was on one of our trips to school in Solihull that we arrived in the middle of the devastation caused by that stick of bombs which had dropped, going from behind the Post Office to Winfields shop, to Harrison's opticians shop, to the White Cat, the middle of Park Road School, and into the park.

We most often walked up Church Hill, having arrived at the end of the gulley that crossed the stream going to Malvern Park, usually zig-zagging up on the allotments side of Church Hill, in between the trees and hardly ever keeping to the footpath. Some days though, I think if we were early, we went up Homer and Herbert Roads and into the start of the High Street. (We very occasionally managed to get to Herbert Road by bus - 154 - if we had previously walked to Lewis's shop - built into the corner of Archers Garage - first from Hay Lane. I don't know why this occurred and sometimes we might even have had a bus to Shirley although they were only running at about four hour intervals).

Anyway, on the morning of the bombs in Solihull we were picking our way up the debris that was scattered across and along the High Street, thinking what fun it was, when the voice of the Law asked us where we were going, and when we said, "School" and replied "Park Road" to his enquiry as to which school he told us to turn around and go home because there wouldn't be any schooling for a while at that particular school.

So, like Whittington, we turned and went home. It didn't seem any trouble to us to walk another three or four miles, we were used to it. As well as walking to school and back every day we used to do shopping on Saturdays for one or two not so capable neighbours, so that day saw us pushing a pram to the Village (there was always a pram around!) to shop at the specified shops, usually George Masons, Connyberes and maybe somewhere like Duddys. On Sundays we set out again on the same old journey to go to St Alphege Sunday School, - and all the times we did this I never got fed up with it except when I applied for a prize from the Sunday School for full attendance for the year and it was refused because my attendance book with its stuck-in stamps had been half eaten by our alsation dog. That really did upset me!

I think it was about another three months before we were sent back to school again, I don't know why and it didn't worry me at the time, but then we had to settle into our new schools and make new friends. It was a little awkward at times because there had always been a sort of feud in existence between the Hay Lane gang and the Cranmore gang - and here we were stepping straight into the lion's den as it were. Things settled down however and I loved St James School, particularly the garden which had the blackest soil you've ever seen and on which we grew some lovely vegetables, particularly onions.

One of the houses in Portia Avenue at that time had a miniature railway running around the garden - yes, even in war-time, and just occasionally we were allowed the privilege of seeing the locos running over bridges and through tunnels etc. Magnificent. It was at St James that I won a raffle (first ever!) with ticket number 21 (I'll never forget) and carried home my first prize. It was a second-hand model yacht, about four feet long and a sail four feet high. It was brilliant and I treasured it for all of two or three days before I succumbed to temptation and sold it to my eldest brother for five shillings (loadsamoney!)

Toys etc were quite difficult during the war and we went to all sorts of trouble to keep ourselves occupied. In the Red Cross shop in Solihull High Street (what was Solihull Motors showroom but had no motors to show) I purchased a Monopoly game, I can't remember how much for but I do remember that it had no dice and no money so I set about and made a pair of dice and then borrowed a printing set from someone and made a complete set of money on plain white paper with just the values printed on. Utility perhaps, but it was wonderful and brought us many hours of enjoyment and helped teach us whatever you learn from playing Monopoly.

Before I leave St James School ( from whence I went to Sharmans Cross) I must point out that in the grounds, between the playgrounds and the gardens there was a massive horse-chestnut tree that was appreciated at a certain time of the year. Legend had it that it was planted to commemorate something to do with Queen Victoria and it later was supposed to have a protection order on it.

In my later life I owned number 15 Portia Avenue, which backed on to the gardens of the school, and when the school was knocked down for development of the houses at the top of School Road in the 1960's I enquired of the demolition contractors what was happening to the tree. I was told that they were going to cut it down!! They had apparently allowed two days to get rid of this Queen of trees which had a girth of about twenty feet (it was massive). In the event they should have left it alone because it BELONGED there and would not have interfered with the development, it was too far back, and it took over three weeks for the workmen to fell it, using heavy equipment and explosive charges.

There was an open corridor running along the back of St James School, supported by 9" x 9" wooden posts which I purchased from the demolition contractors and used to build a long greenhouse type shed at the back of my house in Portia Avenue, I often wonder if it is still in use! On the wall at the back of the corridor there were several open electrical sockets which had failed to be repaired because of the war problem. They were "live" and we (stupid) "tough" lads used to stick our fingers into the sockets to get shocks!! I often wonder if this helped me in later life where I have three times received serious electric shocks and yet have survived?

In spite of being off school for those weeks/months before going to St James I surprised everyone, not least myself, by coming out top in most of the subjects then taken at school, and when I eventually went to Sharmans Cross into form 1A the teacher there said my mathematical skills would be better employed in the fourth year, so I had special tasks set for me. I enjoyed

the fame, and passed the entrance examination to go to Warwick School where I eventually went for interview. However, I don't think my attitude, accent or dress suited the Headmaster and I went back to Sharmans Cross - to shine again!!

In form 1A we had a teacher, Mrs Gardner from Mill Lane, Bentley Heath, who had come into teaching because her husband (a teacher) had been conscripted. She was a form teacher who also taught English to other classes, and used to amaze us by arriving at school early so that when we eventually went into the classroom for our English lesson (I think about two times a week) we were confronted with the whole of the Daily Telegraph crossword written out in chalk on the three blackboards with the clues to left and right and the grid on the centre of the triple blackboard set-up. It was a brilliant, friendly way to learn English, also of course to get hooked on crosswords. I was a young man growing up at that school and was most impressed by some of the wartime emergency teachers, especially the young female ones who seemed to be almost within my age group!! One unfortunate incident happened when one of the younger and most admired lady teachers was riding her cycle just outside the school, having finished for the day, when she was knocked off her cycle by a passing lorry and killed. A terrible shock to all the pupils who were going home at the time.

Whilst at Sharmans Cross (Senior) School incidentally we took part in the decision and design for the new school badge which we were told then was to more accurately depict a "Shireman's Cross" than the cross with the letter "S" in each of it's four corners which had hitherto been in use. So the "Sword" design badge was born, and I remember that the story then was that the junction of Sharmans Cross Road and Prospect Lane, on the corner outside of the farm, was where the "Shireman's Cross" had originally been - as if he had staked his claim to that territory!! - well, that's what was said, it sounded feasible.

In order to have pocket money to spend we needed to have a job of sorts when we were not at school, and in those days paper rounds were very limited, so we looked elsewhere.

One job we had (my brother and I) was a milk round (or two!). We worked for Hopkins' Dairy in Tanworth Lane and it was necessary to get there by 05.30 each day. We loaded the crates of milk into the trap behind the pony and set off to do our round. Typical was the half-built Shakespeare estate in Shirley where we dodged from one unmade road to another, dashing hither and thither with our bottles on even the coldest day of the year. The ponies knew the rounds so well that they would stop in the right places for the right amount of time, they would move off at the right time and at the right speed, so that it was hardly necessary to issue a command. We took all the empty bottles back to the dairy and had the nice warm job of washing and rinsing them. Then we bottled up another lot of milk using a hand bottling machine, pressed the card tops on the bottles, put it all in the fridge - and went off to school! After school we did exactly the same thing again doing another round in another direction, sometimes using the lorry if it was a very long and heavy round, and when we had returned and done our washing and bottling etc; we went wearily home to do our homework. We did this seven days a week, rain or shine, for ten shillings a week - which put us up among the bloated gentry in those days.

At the Plough Inn at Monkspath in those days was a gentleman named Walter Ward. The pub had a central door at the front which opened into what was the "off-licence" (just a counter three feet wide). On each side there were doors, the left to the bar where you could hear the

rattle of dominoes going on incessantly and on the right the smoke room which always seemed quiet. Each room could only hold about twelve people before it became overcrowded. Our purpose in going there was to earn some filthy lucre, and we achieved this by taking turns turning the churning drum in the rear dairy where said W. Ward made butter (which was a bit of black market in those days). We only earned pennies, but it was something, and occasionally we took a pat of butter home as a special treat. Mr Ward also kept a whole variety of fancy and exotic fowl in a large series of pens about fifty yards long and some twelve feet high by twelve feet wide. This formed the boundary of the pub's grounds and would have been where the rear of the Motel is now. I don't know what he did with those fowl, they were very pretty like varicoloured bantams, perhaps he bred them and sold them on.

The Crown (now Jeffersons) was a very dull pub during the war and only came to life when a Garden Party or something of that nature was arranged in the grounds. One thing it was useful for is that it had a snooker table where we tried to get in to play snooker or billiards, but were often kicked out by the landlord for being too young - usually just after we had set the balls up to play and had put our hard-earned sixpence in to the light meter that gave us enough light for one game.

I don't think it is a very well known fact around the Village but Walnut Tree Cottage in Widney Lane used to be a cafe and was frequented by ramblers of all sorts and was affiliated to the Cyclists Touring Club and other organisations. We used to know the lady (Mrs Powell) who owned it and spent quite a fair amount of time there because she was always glad to see us around. It amused us to watch her cyclists or other visitors arrive and order their teas and sandwiches, we used to call it "bread and scrape" because she put a little margarine on the dainty white slices of bread - and then scraped it off again before applying the jam. Talking of jam, when sugar "went on the ration" during the war Mum gave us the ultimatum of having sugar in our tea and none in our puddings and no home-made jam, or go without sugar in our tea! Except for Dad we all opted to go without sugar in our tea, and we've been like that ever since!! We spent many happy hours stirring the jam pot and helping with the baking, more than most children of the time.

Along from Walnut Tree Cottage, on the corner of Hay Lane and Widney Lane there was a triangular paddock (where the Chequers public house now is) and in that paddock was put up a workshop where we young kids were taught the rudiments of woodwork and metalwork. This was at the auspices of the Toc H and the person who taught us at evening classes all those years ago was Francis Durbridge, subsequently the celebrity author of the Paul Temple books and radio serial. When the plans were being mooted for the building of a public house in that corner I wrote to the brewery pointing out these details and asking them to consider calling the pub "The Durbridge" or "The Toc H", or even "The Seven Sisters" (there were seven horse-chestnut trees opposite, on the edge of the Libbards House farm field), but I'm afraid they never even bothered to reply.

Another job that I had was as a casual farm-hand for the owner of Garretts Green Farm in Whitefields Road, where Monkspath Hall Road now crosses Whitefields Road. Bill Fairfield was a chubby bachelor farmer of advanced years who lived in the farmhouse with a housekeeper, Alice.

There were about forty-five milking cows, five shire horses, perhaps two dozen sheep, a few pigs, lots of chickens, several semi-wild cats and one dog.

The "Staff" consisted of one Ernest Marshall who lived in the farm cottage which was on Blossomfield Road adjacent to the bungalow by the top entrance to Tudor Grange, his son Harry Marshall who lived in the farm cottage on Dingle Lane, opposite The Dingle where Harold Cartwright school was built, and then myself... and at this farm I learned all sorts of tricks of the trade. We milked, by hand, all the cattle each day, we pasteurised the milk and churned it ready for collection. The farm produced quite a lot of hay for the stock, wheat and oats and a little barley, and kept us all busy. I may be the only person still alive who has actually ploughed areas of what is now Tudor Grange Park with shire horses! When Bill Fairfield died and his farm was sold and the proceeds passed to his nephew in Leicestershire it was the end of an era in Solihull. I spent two days with a shotgun shooting the really wild cats (25) prior to the sale. I bought loads of things at the sale, including books and photographs etc., but lost them all subsequently when I left home to join the forces and never went back. I have happy memories of riding shire horses, sometimes all five, to the blacksmiths (at either Barston or at Earlswood) for them to be shod. I had to climb on to a gatepost to get on the horses back, and only had a rope bridle to control them with, and a folded hessian sack to sit on!! It was great fun and we galloped everywhere.... no traffic you see!

When we were old enough we joined the Boy Scouts at the Vicarage at Salter Street and spent many happy hours there and in the surrounding fields and lanes. We did what scouts everywhere do and went camping. We went out to Baddesley Clinton, and in order to get there we used a Market type trolley (iron rim wheels etc) and push and pulled it all the way to set up our camp. We also went to camp at Arthog near Barmouth in North Wales and in order to get there we pushed the truck, loaded with two weeks supplies, to Earlswood station and caught the train to Birmingham where we caught the connection for Barmouth. The truck stayed on the platform at Earlswood and was always there when we got back. It was during one of these long camps in Wales that V-J Day arrived and a ship (HMS Birmingham or something) in the bay put on a big display of fireworks, it was wonderful as there hadn't been anything like it for years, and some of us had never witnessed such a sight.

Sometimes we had returned from camp by train to Birmingham and arrived in the middle or aftermath of an air-raid. Sometimes everything seemed to be on fire and I saw my first dead body at that time. When at home in Hay Lane, on nights when the smokescreens were not alight we could stand in front of the house sometimes and see a red glow in the sky over Birmingham in one direction and over Coventry in the other.

We knew that there was a war going on, but young children had no idea really how tough it was for our parents to keep going, money was not very plentiful and food at times had to be repetitive because there wasn't the variety available. We were lucky in a way that we had access to farm foods which enabled us to have more than the usual eggs, chicken, rabbit, occasionally pork and bacon. It was brought home to us every now and again when a local farmer would lose sheep (which were being rustled!) in the night, and occasionally one came across the remains of a sheep or cow that had been killed and skinned, dissected and spirited away overnight. Having a very versatile Mum our family was better off than most, we had a pantry that was generally full because we tried to live as much as possible on home-made items. We

had large jars of pickled eggs, cabbage and onions, jam and marmalade (made from the most unusual ingredients). There was bottled fruit of all sorts, and apples and pears wrapped carefully in newspaper to make them last the year. Sometimes there would be ham and bacon curing from the ceiling. Occasionally we would get into the locked pantry by climbing through the transom window (sometimes getting stuck!), but were always found out and had to suffer the consequences.

We were able to supplement our diet in the countryside by seeking out and then eating wild bird's eggs (duck, partridge, pheasant, moorhen etc.,) we tried "tickling" trout, and even pike!, we caught and took home for Mum to cook pigeons, game birds and rabbits and in the Autumn if we felt really hungry (perhaps even on our way home from school) we would make a sandwich by cutting slices of swede (which were in plentiful supply) and then, between two slices, we would put a layer of blackberries!...uncooked Summer Pudding! - it was lovely.

Sometimes, on our way home from school in Solihull, we would call in at Hillfield Farm to buy a bag of apples or pears. We went to the farm house and paid our pennies and were rewarded by the farmer's wife taking us out to the orchard where she proceeded to shake the trunk of one of the trees which discarded a cargo of fruit upon us. We were given a bag which I would estimate today would hold about ten pound of apples and then filled it up as high as we could before we proceeded home. We also helped harvest apples at Shelley Farm for Mr Francis, and they were carefully stored in the cold cellars on marble shelves.

Food gathering was an art, and it wasn't always legal because we often went out "scrumping" to get our hands on fruit that wasn't to be had by fair means. The Co-Op shop on the corner of the High Street was one target of the children heading for Mill Lane School. We arranged a charge down the High Street from the church direction and the leader of the charge had the job of dislodging the bottom row of fruit from the displays that fronted the shop on to the pavement. This could easily be done as the fruit was very neatly piled up at a 45 degree angle, and it invariably resulted in a cascade of fruit on to the pavement. The rest of the gang, charging along behind the leader would then confuse the shopkeeper by all pretending to help pick them up and putting them back on to the display. As we were always in a desperate hurry to get to school it created sheer chaos with fruit and bodies all over the place, and as we rounded the corner into Mill Lane we congratulated ourselves on a job well done as we counted the "spoils" which we had tucked away into pockets and satchels etc; I was never sure if the shopkeeper ever found out what we were up to. The prime target was the display of oranges, when they were available, which was rarely.

As we came to the High Street from Church Hill the first shop we saw was the "Modern Library" opposite the war memorial, and this became a target for the more daring of us. I can't remember exactly how easy or otherwise it was to get chocolate at this time, and it was rationed anyway, so we thought it would be clever to pilfer some! We did this by having a decoy who was in possession of the necessary money and coupons and who went into the shop first to negotiate a purchase. Whilst this was going on we would STEAL another bar or two from the well arranged displays which were on tables in the shop. These spoils would subsequently be shared out at school and we congratulated ourselves upon getting away with it! - that is until we were on parade in the playground at Park Road School one day and had the audacity to start to share it out whilst lined up for the Register and Hymns etc. Imagine our dismay when the owner

of the shop appeared and accused us of theft (in front of the whole school!). We pleaded guilty, promised not to do it again and subsequently made atonement for our sins.

Punishment for errors of one's ways in those days was quite severe, but we knew what to expect and if we were caught in the act of some misdemeanour we took our punishment - and then went off to think out how we could do the same thing again without being caught! Dad had a broad leather belt hanging up on the living room door and it was used if necessary but more likely was considered to be a deterrent. One of the prime uses was for a belting for being rude to Mum; needless to say we didn't allow ourselves to get caught very often.

My brother Graham and his friend John Lee (who lived in Creynolds Lane) were "playing the wag" (truanting) from school one day and were caught by the farmer at Monkspath Hill Farm (on the Stratford Road between where the M42 now is and Gate Lane). When he realised that the lads were not only trespassing but playing truant he decided to teach them a lesson of his own and they spent the rest of the day with a sledge hammer each, smashing up old rocks and house bricks in order to lay a hardcore base for a drive. I'm not sure if they played truant again after that, but if they did you can be sure they kept away from Monkspath Hill Farm.

Incidentally, across the Stratford Road from Monkspath Hill Farm was the nursery of Smith and Dodds (on the slopes running down to the River Blythe) and it was there that I did my first day's work after "leaving" school. In those days one left school at age 14, and as I had my birthday on the Saturday I decided that on the Monday instead of going to school I would find myself a job. So I set off, had an interview, showed to the Nurseryman that I knew what to do, and was set to work pruning rose bushes. I worked at this task all day, stopping only to eat my sandwiches, until about 3.30 when a voice suddenly boomed out "Collins, shouldn't you be at school?" - it was the "School-board" man" who had obviously been sent for by the Nursery and who demanded an explanation as to why I was working. The result was that I was back at school next day, I never went back to Smith and Dodds, and to this day they still owe me 3s.3d (16p) for my day's work. I believe their nursery was taken over by Sydenham's eventually (who became Notcutts) so perhaps I may be a secret major shareholder in the Notcutts organisation?

It is interesting to note that we used to spend a lot of time playing in the vicinity of the Blythe at Blythe Bridge, Monkspath, and along the fields from there, toward Widney Manor, all those years ago we used to look for and find lots of old clay pipes. It was of no special interest then and it wasn't until I went back to talk to the archaeologists who were working on the medieval camp site at the side of the Blythe prior to the building of the M42 that I realised that things used to happen in Solihull long before we were here.

The River Blythe played a big part in our entertainment schedule as kids, and we fished it incessantly with nets and lines with pins on, and in the Summer we selected a favourite spot and dammed the river with tree trunks and logs, with straw and turf and rocks and material of any sort we could find until we had a dam which would be probably three feet high or more and which enabled us to make a deep pool which was as wide as the wide part of the river that we had chosen. And there we played and picnicked for day-in, day-out, and got to love water and most of us learned to swim (so that when we went camping at Baddelsey Clinton we weren't

afraid of water and swam in the canal!) - I think canal and river waters in those days were much cleaner than they are now, and we had been "dragged up" the rough tough way, so we weren't susceptible, and didn't seem to catch, any of the modern diseases!! We were most upset when one year the contractors arrived and proceeded to cut out all the trees and bushes along the whole length of the Blythe, and then dredged it, straightened it out a lot, and left it looking like the start of a housing estate. It was never the same again, my few-weeks-old sister would never fall off the bank again, in the middle of a picnic, and float down the river, face-up and supported by her billowing baby clothes, to be rescued by her big brother!

We kept ourselves fit by walking generally, or running everywhere, and we also played lots of cross-country games. We made dens at ground level and in trees and sometimes dens shaped like igloos which were made of snow and ice in the Winter and of turf in the Summer. We played "Hopscotch" in the road and also "Cannon" (a game where the "bowler" throws a tennis ball from about five yards as hard as he can at a wicket constructed of sticks about nine inches high). "Cannon" was a sort of a cross between Rounders (which we also played) and cricket, but no teams. We played "Tag" of course, and "Hide and Seek" (over half of Warwickshire sometimes!) and we skipped a lot - one of our pride and joys was a heavy rope about twenty or more yards long which we stretched across the road and had to sometimes have two kids (or one grown up) at the ends doing the turning, whilst there were perhaps a dozen actually skipping inside the rope. And of course we made and used catapults and bows and arrows quite regularly. If we were indoors the lads among us used to have boxing lessons in the spare room of a neighbour (gloves and all) and we played cards (Pontoon more often than not) and Monopoly and Chess and Draughts and Dominoes, and we had spelling quizzes and played with toy soldiers etc. The radio came on when Dad was in and I can still remember the words to all the theme songs of shows like ITMA, Ray's a Laugh, Much Binding in the Marsh etc., and it's no problem to remember the wartime songs.

At Christmas time we used to go out carol singing and one Christmas in particular is remembered because a group (I think five) of us set out to cover Widney Lane from Walnut Tree Cottage to the Blossomfield Road corner, and then along Blossomfield Road (a route which was considered to be quite affluent and financially promising). After about three houses the general concensus of opinion was that I wasn't singing very much, my voice was awful, and in fact that I didn't know the words to most of the carols! So I was told to shove off!...and I did, I walked back down Widney Lane all the way to Widney Manor Station (in the pitch black remember, no lights showing anywhere and no street lighting), and set off to sing MY CAROLS in MY WAY along Widney Manor Road toward Solihull. I worked my way into Solihull and was very well treated on the way with gifts of mince pies and tea etc. I then ran the three miles home to count my earnings - which amounted to about £2.15s.0d (£2.75) - a lot of money in those days, and completely eclipsing the few pence that the rest of the group had earned by their efforts, and they came back later than me! It wasn't talked about much afterwards!

We used to watch the Home Guard out and about on their exercises sometimes as they often utilised the fields and area around the end of Shelley Lane and one day a friend of mine found the body of a man, face down in water in the "Gypsies Gap" which was the name we knew the Monks Path as from Hay Lane all the way to the Stratford Road by Sydenhams (because each

year it was filled at it's Hay Lane end with real old fashioned gypsy caravans. They stayed a while whilst the womenfolk went around the district selling clothes pegs, rag dolls etc., and then they went away as suddenly as they had arrived). The man had apparently been left behind after Home Guard exercises (he was in uniform) and I believe had had a heart attack (we mustn't laugh at Dad's Army, it was all very serious!)

The mention of gypsies reminds me of one, whose name escapes me, who lived in his caravan just inside the field beyond the spinney on the corner of Whitefields Road and Dingle Lane, just opposite Fowgay Hall. He lived there with his dogs and chickens (which were tethered by long lines on their legs to stop them wandering away) and I chatted to him many times when I worked at Garretts Green Farm. He offered several times, and I eventually succumbed to temptation and tasted my first and only roast hedgehog. It was roasted in clay on his fire, I remember it tasted quite nice even though I hated rabbit, but I never went back for more. I got on well with this Romany, but began to dislike him when I found out that he was catching badgers by trapping them in wire traps in another spinney just along from his caravan. Even in those days I thought it was a cruel thing to do, I saw badgers that had obviously taken a long, painful time to die whilst they tried to escape.

Around the Borough there were very many European displaced persons, particularly Estonians and Poles who were always to be found working, and also Prisoners of War who appeared at harvesting time and other occasions to help out the war effort. They always seemed to be happy with their lot and even in those days I think they appreciated that it was better to go along with us than try to escape. There was a P.O.W. camp alongside the railway line on Rising Lane at Lapworth, and when out that way we used to chat to them a lot and if we had any cash we would buy the typical P.O.W. knick-knacks from them. This was mostly treen (wooden artefacts) and I remember the most popular was an eagle carved out of a single piece of wood, about a foot long and with fully spread wings. I wish I had a few of these things now! Some fraternisation occurred and I believe a lot of these P.O.W.'s stayed behind after the war, certainly many of the friendly refugees did, and with the American and British soldiers that were in the area I think it must have made Solihull much more cosmopolitan than it ever was before, these were ethnic minorities in those days though we never thought of them as such.

Some of us managed to get hold of roller skates from somewhere, and it became THE way of getting about (though they were a bit crude compared to the high-tech modern variety). When attending Scout meetings at Salter Street Vicarage our Scoutmaster used to come to the lane to collect us, riding his motorbike. Some would hang on to him and get a tow if they had bikes, and others would do the same on roller skates. Public transport was a sort of hit and miss thing, our nearest bus would be the service 150 which ran at four hour intervals to Stratford, but the service was eventually doubled and ran every two hours (if you were lucky), buses then ran alternately to Stratford and Hockley Heath along the Stratford Road. There was a 154 bus service running to Solihull (it used to go as far as the war memorial to turn around, but later the terminus operated in Herbert Road) from Birmingham via the George and Dragon and if we wanted to get into Birmingham we caught that. If we cycled to the George and Dragon we would leave our bikes at the house on the corner of Marshall Lake Road/Stratford Road opposite Archers (for a penny a day, payable on collection - so we tried to sneak in and get our bikes out without anyone seeing!), but generally, if we wanted to go anywhere we walked, until we were old enough to qualify for a "school bike". I remember very well the day I was given my

school bike, it had the number "112" stamped in the middle of the handlebars. We qualified for a bicycle by virtue of the distance that we had to go to school and up until the time that I had my own I used to run to Sharmans Cross School from Hay Lane by holding on to the saddle stem of a friend who lived in one of the Shelley Farm Cottages and whose family were affluent enough to have a bicycle each.

Later, when old enough to attend special events at the Walford Road Skating Rink in Sparkbrook, Birmingham, some parties such as the New Year's Eve special night would go on too late to catch a bus home, so we used to roller skate along the Stratford Road, in the early hours of the morning and sometimes in the pitch blackness, all the way from Walford Road to Monkspath.

On the subject of transport I might mention that although the council houses in Hay Lane were connected to the main sewer system some houses around the borough were not, and it was a regular occurrence for us to see (and smell) the operations of the "Dumbwell" tanker lorries which came up and down the lane in order to empty their tanks into the manholes situated at the corner of Hay Lane just where the entrance to Shelley Green was. Imagine the "stink" that was created one day when a lorry went along Hay Lane, in the area between the Stratford Road and the council houses, with its main discharge stopcock open - spilling its contents all over the road!! There weren't facilities like cleaning lorries about then, so it just stayed there until it dispersed naturally.

Another form of transport that abounded was the pram. As well as its normal use for the carriage of infants the perambulator was most useful for shopping because the types in use then had a removable flat base under the bedding in which goods could be stowed. It was possible of course to carry both shopping and baby, and this regularly took place, but an even more important use was for fetching coke or coal from the Gas Works at Solihull. I think that certain grades of fuel were either cheaper or free from the Gas Works, so it was good incentive for us to push a pram a round trip of about ten miles and it supplemented the logs which we had at home most of the time.

When prams reached their end of useful life as prams they would be recycled as the basis for a "truck", which took the form of a wide board on which the driver sat or kneeled, with a crosspiece at the front which carried the guiding wheels and which swivelled by use of either a guide rein if the driver kneeled or by feet if the driver was sitting. The more sophisticated of these trucks had "brakes" operating either on the wheels directly or onto the ground beneath. We had much fun with these, suffered many mishaps resulting in a race of children growing up with scars of play over all parts of their bodies. In the winter, if there was enough snow/ice around there was a mad rush to knock-up a sledge if last year's one couldn't be found. This often resulted in the cannibalising of one's truck.

Transport around the fields locally was sometimes made easier by the farmers who left horses there. Very often we would have a round-up and throw a bridle on to a horse so that we could go riding around the fields bare-back. It was great fun, approved by the horse's owners to such an extent that they sometimes asked us to round up horses and take them to a certain place for them. Sometimes it could be a bit dangerous when a horse decided to be a bit lively, but we usually won the battle and I think the horses knew that they were only there because we allowed them to graze on what were, after all, our football and cricket pitches. We experienced another

form of transport as well, in this case gliders which used some of the bigger fields near us for what I presumed were landing and take-off exercises. The same fields were also used by a Model Aeroplane Club who provided more excitement when they arrived and started to fly their large power-driven models. We were often involved in tracking these planes cross-country when their steering mechanisms failed to function and they wandered off course.

During the war years of course there were small airfields all over the country and in Solihull we had our own at Hockley Heath alongside the Stratford Road opposite Box Trees Lane and running all the way up to the village from Kineton Lane. The land was levelled and the runways laid, the nissen hut type hangers were set up, and we had our first barrage balloons! - it was very exciting, but after that initial burst of activity I don't recall very much happening.

The only other form of transport that I remember using was the horse and cart, which was particularly useful for collecting heavy loads, and I used to borrow some from Mr Fairfield at Garretts Green Farm for two main uses. The first use was to take home logs which I used to cut from fallen trees when I had a spare hour or two and when there was sufficient I would borrow either a two or four wheeled cart to take them home for the fire. I also caught the collecting "bug" very early and used to go to sales at country houses, farms, etc., buy things up and then to have to face the problem of getting the stuff back home.

I used to use a horse and cart at Garretts Green Farm often for muck-spreading, and very often, because they were harnessed up, Mr Fairfield used to ask me to run errands for him. On one particular occasion, just after we had killed a pig at the farm and were over-run with bits and pieces of pork in all guises, he asked me to take a newly baked pork pie to his sister, "Miss" Thompson. She lived in the white houses in the square by the church, where I left the horse with his nose-bag on whilst inside, and on this occasion the pork pie (with another which had to go to Ashleigh Road) was placed on a hessian sack in the back of my high-sided cart which was literally running with sloppy manure. I took it to Miss Thompson (I often went there) waited while she made and I drank a cup of tea, then she sorted out some apple pie to send back to "Bill" - and off I went on my rounds! - I don't think they cared much for health and safety rules then.

Contributed February 1995.

### **Mrs Maureen Collins**

1. I remember sending most of my treasured books to "Uncle Mac's" appeal on the radio for the children in the Children's Hospital.
2. My Father was dying of pneumonia in 1940. One of the doctors on the Warwick Road, said he could be given M & B tablets, then a new drug and I presume untried, to help save his life. They did and he lived to be 72. We walked, my mother and I, to Solihull to collect the drug, along the Blossomfield Road, the road was clear, but the side of the road was several feet high with snow. I don't think we saw any other people about.

3. We lived in Dingle Lane, Solihull. My Father was a hard working man, and I remember always having potatoes and greens in the garden, so we were lucky during the war as my Mother kept a few hens at the bottom of the long garden, which helped to stretch our rations.

My Mother made a delicious pie, from a tin of Spam. The fat was used for the crust, and the spam for the inside, plus I should imagine a few other ingredients. No other pork pie has tasted so good since.

4. My Grandfather had a small holding at the beginning of the war. He died early in the war. He tended the usual vegetables and kept a few hens and pigs. As we had an old black range, the oven adjoined the fire, we had some tasty meals, like real faggots, and a very tasty dish she made (my Mother) a bacon, potato and onion pie with a pastry crust on, also a lovely bread and butter pudding. My Grandfather was a widower during the war and he had a couple billeted with him. When he became ill, he was nursed at our home. My Mother never thought of having an inventory and a lot of small things were missing when my Mother went to clear the house after his death. Most things were of sentimental value and I remember her being so upset.
5. After I left school, I became a trainee Post Office clerk. Two things I remember vividly, was the cost of a 15lb parcel, 1/1d, and two the number of air-letters that were brought to send to the forces. We mainly saw wives and mothers collecting their weekly allowances.
6. I remember the American soldiers being stationed, almost opposite Dorchester Road, possibly the exit road, from the athletic track area.
7. My Mother and her two sisters, must have bought chemicals, and poured them over small pieces of coal, in a flower type bowl, and the result to me was magic. I think they had pink, blue and white low growing flowers? or whatever happened after the chemicals reacted on the coals.
8. My sister and I for a long time slept under the Morrison table shelter. The noise was shattering when a land mine was dropped near us. The whole width of the road, in Whitefields Road, between Dingle Lane and Widney Lane, was a huge crater and what a depth too.
9. And the last and most smelly thing I remember was having the Pioneer Corps, light the (smoke screen) drums of waste oil outside our cottage. One night one caught fire, causing the hedge to burn, and my Mother had a rambling rose of which she was very proud over the gate, and it never recovered from being burnt.

Contributed February 1995.

### **Mrs D.R. Colls**

In the summer of 1940 residents of Knightsbridge Road foregathered in a local lock-up shop to set up a Fire-Watching Committee and rotas for night duty. Each household contributed 6d. (six old pennies) per week towards equipment: ladders, ropes, buckets, stirrup-pumps. Also, throughout the War, a volunteer collector for National Savings stamps called each week; firstly, Mrs Brogan from Barrington Road, latterly Mrs Malin who lived in Knightsbridge Road.

We cleared the pantry under the stairs, put down a 3-ft. mattress and brought in tea-making equipment, i.e. a small spirit stove and a paraffin night-light! Both items would horrify us now, in such a small space. The first air-raid was in August 1940, when there was a false alarm in the road over a suspected unexploded bomb. Later, incendiaries were dropped in a daytime raid and another time two houses suffered bomb damage. At that time also, London evacuees were living in the many empty houses.

After the catastrophic raids on Birmingham in November 1940, there was no gas or water supply available for several days. For cooking we used a small electric fire which could be lain on its back and used for a saucepan or frying pan - a very slow process. Also, in the front room we had the coal fire with trivet. The latter was a sturdy metal device which hooked on to the front of the fire basket and was supported on two legs. Most houses used a trivet where the black-leaded kettle provided hot water. Once water had been drained from the cold and hot water tanks, the back room fire couldn't be used. The problem of the lavatory was quickly solved provided that it had a low level cistern: the cover was removed, all waste water carried upstairs and tipped into the cistern until there was sufficient to flush same. We did receive one visit from a water-cart, at dusk on the Saturday afternoon. This vehicle had come from Sheffield Corporation; there was very little water left by the time it reached the far end of the road and it was undrinkable anyway but, nevertheless, very welcome.

It is difficult now to realise how rural the area was east of Knightsbridge Road and Highwood Avenue. The latter as far as the island-junction with Moordown Avenue, and Faulkner Road and Rodney Road, were laid out with drains and kerbs but the land was still used for cereal farming and, later in the War, in Faulkner Road, there was a hostel for Italian prisoners-of-war (P.O.Ws) who worked on the land. So it was with relief that in the November of 1940 a spring was discovered some quarter of a mile away on the south-east side of Dovehouse Lane near its junction with Lode Lane where armed with two buckets each we queued patiently for perhaps half an hour before standing in the muddy hollow of the ancient ditch while the precious water trickled into containers. Then there was the slow walk home, hoping not to spill any despite the 20lbs. in weight. All the time though and in whatever queue, there was always wit and laughter. Never forget that.

In the summer of 1942 I worked in the local "Shadow Factory", i.e. Rover's Meteor Works in Lode Lane, on inspection of the cylinder units of the Hercules aero-engine. It was a 20-minute walk from home to factory bench. The engines had been tested in the very latest test sheds, from which the noise was minimal - unlike the noise from the Armstrong-Whitworth testing which surrounded my childhood - but because of having been used the cylinder units still contained oil

around their fins so when tipped forward to be scrutinized for score marks in the barrel, oil leaked out and permeated through to one's skin! My Mother made me a rubber apron to wear under my white coat-overall. On the morning of my first stint of night work, I was still in bed when a lone German bomber swooped so low over the house that we saw the great broad crosses on its wings and the pilot in the cockpit. A small section of the Rover's works and houses in Moat Lane were hit that morning and several Silhillians killed.

Some two years after the Coventry blitz, a letter reached us from a friend in the U.S.A., who'd written to our former address in that city on the 15th November, 1940. What a great achievement it was by the G.P.O. in Coventry that they discovered the letter ultimately in their severely damaged Sorting Office, then checked other records to find our forwarding address! Following that letter, at regular intervals we were the fortunate and grateful recipients of food and clothing parcels from our friend and other members of her Christian Science church in Boston, as well as from our to us unknown distant relatives in New Zealand and Australia who'd tracked us down and who sent, among other welcome items, knitting wools. Does anyone else remember embroidering in wool geometric patterns on to thick cotton floor cloths which were then backed with unpicked tweed or old twill (heavy cotton with diagonal lines) to make very attractive cushion covers, etc?

FOOD: Sausage-meat, with the addition of sage, onion, apples, mashed potatoes and gravy, was made into a very tasty dish known as "mock-duck"! Wild English rabbit and fish were available by queuing at Pearce's the fishmonger in Acocks Green, and it was a comedian's joke to say that people joined on to the end of any queue with no idea of what was available at the front. Elderberries used in a flan in place of blackcurrants were not a success! Lemon curd made with custard powder, margarine, hot water and lemon essence, and mayonnaise made with flour, vinegar, margarine, mustard, spices, milk and a precious egg, were quite acceptable.

"Holidays-at-Home" was the slogan and the Solihull Urban District Council did its utmost to provide entertainment and light relief. There were various "Weeks" nationwide, i.e. War Weapons, Spitfire, Battleship, when along with the main idea of raising money we enjoyed parades by soldiers, airmen, the occasional contingent of naval personnel, police, fire service, O.T.C., J.A.C. (Junior Air Corps), St John's Ambulance, and of course those stalwarts of "Dad's Army", the Home Guard. When first recruited they were known as the L.D.V., Local Defence Volunteers, or "Look, Duck and Vanish Brigade", but that was only in fun. When the U.S. forces arrived, they too took part in such parades and when a Cockney friend of ours witnessed what we considered to be their somewhat informal manner of marching, he exclaimed "Cor blimey: I've seen better on Drury Lane many a time".

Some weeks before D-Day, when the black-out had been lifted I think, we were awakened one night by a terrific noise from the R.A.F. We rushed to the window and what a magnificent sight it was to see formation after formation of bombers flying slowly by, each plane fully lit. Neither at the time or ever afterwards have I learned of the reason or destination of this dead of night great morale booster.

When V.E. Day was imminent, two ladies in the road called at each house carrying a baby's galvanised bath to request whatever item of food could be spared, and a few nights later we had an open-air Victory Party in the field adjoining Ulverley Farm - now the site of Ulverley School.

There were games and prizes for the children, plenty of good things to eat, bottled beer and lemonade, and dancing to a wind up gramophone. It was not until our present Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 that the road got together again with a fine celebration that was more lavish but certainly no more joyful.

After the War the Fire-Watching Committee organised a formal Dinner and Dance at the old Council House, or Public Hall as it was once called, to absorb the last of the funds. A good time was had by all that night, with pre 1939 dance dresses and dinner jackets to the fore as well as older "glad rags" prettied-up for the occasion. The weekly subscription was continued for several years in the form of a football sweepstake, during which time at least two coach outings were arranged, one to Carding Mill Valley in Shropshire, the other to the seaside in North Wales.

Contributed 1994.

### **Mr Peter Derek Grace**

My introduction to the Convalescent Home was whilst I was living in Solihull before the war.

My mother was taken into hospital for a serious operation and I was sent to stay at the home for three weeks. I must say that as far as I can remember, I thoroughly enjoyed my stay there. One thing that has stuck in my mind was a story told to me by a friend that I made during my stay. He told me that he wanted a day off from school so complained to his mother of a pain in his stomach. Despite his protests his mother sent for the Doctor who diagnosed appendicitis. He was sent to hospital, operated on, and thereby qualified for three weeks convalescence. Shortly after this we moved to live in Birmingham.

When a house a few doors away from us was demolished by a bomb, I was evacuated to the Convalescent Home situated in Widney Manor Road, Solihull, which was then used mainly to house evacuee and bombed out children, as well as those recovering from an illness. This was known as, and displayed a large notice board, growing out of a large holly hedge in the front garden to the effect, that it was "Evans' Convalescent Home for Children".

The home was run by Matron Price and her senior nursing sister, Nurse Doris. Nurse Davis and another Nurse, whose name escapes me, comprised the rest of the staff. Elsie Hemus was the maid, who together with another casual maid did the manual work. I think that a help also came in daily. The maids were uniformed in green or pink coats and work caps in the morning, and changed into black dresses, white frilly aprons and white caps in the afternoon.

Matron was, as I remember, a tight lipped, very strict, very efficient religious lady, but underneath very kind. A typical Matron. She believed in bringing us up in a Christian manner, not too heavy though. I will always remember her singing "Oh for the wings of a dove" as she went about her daily work. All the staff wore immaculate uniforms at all times, even when taking us out for walks.

We felt as though we could get away with more with Nurse Doris, although she was stricter than the rest of the nursing staff, she had to be, she was Matron's deputy, but she was no fool, she knew what we were up to.

Nurse Davis was of a softer nature, but we could wind her up very easily, and she used to get quite rattled.

Elsie was a pal, I suppose because she was quite young, but she had to keep her place as far as the children were concerned, but on the quiet, I could obtain information and scandal out of her, if there was any about.

From what I can remember, the home was governed by a committee who used to meet and inspect the home on a regular basis. There was always the threat that if we misbehaved, we would be "reported" to the committee.

The home consisted of two large dormitories, one for the boys, the other for the girls. One small dormitory, mixed, for the little ones, and one room containing two beds which was normally kept for emergencies, or as an isolation room. One walked through the large dormitory to the south wing, which contained the little `uns dormitory and the maid's room. In the dormitories, as well as the normal light, there was a very dull blue light lit by a 12 volt bulb, connected to a transformer which was plugged into one of the light fittings. This was left switched on all night in case of an air raid warning. It was very dull, and certainly did not keep us awake, in fact it was very soothing. There were coal fires in all of the dormitories. We each had our own personal locker at the bottom of the bed where we kept our everyday clothes, toys, books and non-valuable possessions. Anything of value was locked up in a cupboard downstairs.

Like all little boys pockets, these lockers could yield up a wealth of surprises, like the day that I found a live unexploded German incendiary bomb. I saw the incendiary bomb fins sticking up out of the ground in the woods, as we used to call them, at the rear of Lode Heath School. I dug down and was more than surprised to find not only the fins, but the whole bomb complete. I extracted it out of the ground and hid it in the bushes until going home time. Then I put it under my coat and took it home with me. All lads kept a sharp look out for souvenirs such as shrapnel or fins, but a whole bomb, wow, wait till the lads hear about this. When I got home, I hid it behind the sun shelter and after tea I showed the lads, and some lassies who had come over to see what all the excitement was about to take a look. I remember saying to the lads, "don't let the girls know about it, you know what they are like", I was certainly the big white chief. At bed time I sneaked it upstairs and hid it in my locker and thought no more about it. When I got home from school next day I wondered what had hit me. Someone had "split on me". I suspected that it was one of the girls, lads didn't do that sort of thing. Matron had me in the office and did not stop berating me for about twenty minutes, and many dire threats relating to the various types of punishment available. Apparently when Matron found it, she evacuated the house and called the Police, who in turn notified the Army, who came along and removed the aforementioned weapon.

On this floor were two separate toilets, two bathrooms, one containing two large baths and wash basins, and the other one with one large bath and a wash basin. Each of us was allotted a fixed bath night and we were bathed two to a bath, whilst those whose bath night was not that

particular evening, would be washed at a wash basin in turn, a very jolly and boisterous procedure, no doubt a nightmare to the staff. A nightly ritual took place in the playroom before going to bed, we all sat in a line on one of the benches which had been turned round, so that the seat was pointing outwards and the back was towards the table. Matron stood at the top of the table with a large white enamel bowl on the table in front of her. Then we all in turn, stood in front of her whilst she went through our hair with a tooth comb. I hated it, but the girls took an even dimmer view. No use thinking that one could dodge it, I never knew Matron miss one.

After all the children had gone to bed, different times, not much, for different ages, we were given a certain amount of time for talking. After that, one of the staff would call out "right, time for sleep now, no more talking". We then carried on in whispers, and of course the odd giggling. A member of the staff would occasionally listen at the door and issue various warnings. In the early days, and many times after that, the one to be caught was me. I was told to get out of bed, put on my dressing gown and come down stairs. I was made to stand in the hall near to the playroom door whilst the staff had their supper. After a while I was allowed back up to bed. This was a dangerous place to make us stand, because close by was the breakfast trolley ready for the morning, on which were plates of bread and dripping, need I elaborate? At some later date the trolley was wheeled into the kitchen for the duration of the punishment. Of course the other children wanted to know just what the punishment consisted of. I told them that it was great, that I was made to have supper with the staff, which that night consisted of roast beef and pickles. Naturally, on the next occasion that we knew that there was a "spy" outside the dormitory listening for whisperer's, there was no shortage of lads wanting to be identified as the offender. When the chosen one returned to his bed, by which time the rest of the occupants had been put in the picture, I was tipped out of my bed. But, for ever after that, this punishment was known as "roast beef and pickles".

A grand staircase with a window at the top led down to the ground floor where there was the large playroom, with a large fire grate at each end, which the maid used to keep fuelled by means of a large coal scuttle. In the front of each fire grate was a large brass fender with a brass coal box at each end, on top of each was a padded seat. There was a Westminster chime clock on the mantelpiece at the far end of the playroom. Along the centre of the room there were two large heavy tables placed end to end, where we sat to eat our meals, also used to read our books or play on, with high backed benches along the sides, and two large chairs with arms at each end. Around the walls there were children's small wooden chairs. At the far end of the room was a wooden settee with cushions and at the other end was a piano. The walls were gloss painted with beautiful bright childhood scenes, as were the wooden panels on the piano.

Leading off the playroom were toilets and an exit to a rear garden, commonly known as Matron's garden. Another door led to a small room where toys were kept. There were some wonderful toys available to play with, including a lot of very old treasures, such as old music boxes using brass perforated records as well as the cylinder type, obviously donated by some well to do families. Daily at regular times, the little `uns were sat in a line on their potties, and after lunch they were laid down on the settee and had to sleep for a certain time. If they weren't "regular" for the rest of their life I'll never know why. During their sleep time we older ones had to read quietly or play outside. I always tried to get outside.

Off the Hall were the reception room, staff dining room and sitting room, Matron's study, the very large kitchen, the large ornate and thickly carpeted staircase and a cloakroom for shoes and outdoor clothes, which led to a tarmac play ground and rear entrance. Next to that was a small locked room, in which was kept special toys, and a purse for each child in which was kept their money and postage stamps. There were also personal boxes in which one's "goodies" and sweets were kept, to be rationed out at a certain time each day. We were expected to write home at least once a week. The letters in unsealed envelopes were handed to the staff for posting. We were given the stamps out of our purse. I discovered that in fact the Matron read all the letters before posting. I found this out when I found a letter that I had written home saying that I could not sleep at night, at the end of the letter Matron had written, "he is always fast asleep when we do the bed checks". This was obviously done so as not to cause undue worry to our parents. After I discovered this, I would sneak out through the hedge into Widney Manor Road and post the letter in the post box, which was only a few yards from the front gate. Others could have theirs posted for a due consideration. I believe that the very same post box is still there, bearing the initials "GR".

When we came down in the morning, we had to bring with us any toys or books that we might need during the day, as we were not allowed upstairs during the day so as to prevent wear on the carpet.

In the kitchen was a very large white scrubbed table, and a large highly polished triplex type firegrate, with ovens each side, a water boiler and a hook on which was kept a large kettle, again there was a large guard in front, just in case any of us drifted into the kitchen which was very much out of bounds, except when we were doing our chores when there were always staff about. Sometimes when the sirens went at night, we would all come down stairs and sleep on mattresses, many underneath the table in the kitchen. We could hear the German bombers flying overhead. On hair wash night we used to take it in turns to kneel in front of the kitchen fire to dry our hair.

Off the kitchen was a large scullery where there was a sink and a large gas cooker, as well as a work table and various cupboards. I can still smell the aroma from the coffee percolator, which each evening was on the cooker in readiness for the staff supper after we had all gone to bed.

Outside the scullery was a large kitchen yard surrounded by a high wall, on one side of which, was a pile of what seemed to us, hundreds of very large logs, as well as outhouses and a coal house.

Outside at the rear was a large tarmac playground, with two toilets, so that we would not be running in and out once we had been permitted to play outside. On the edge of the tarmac and the grass, there were two see-saws and a swing. One or two of us used to see how high we could get the swing to go before jumping off on to the grass. Nurse used to go mad if she caught us doing it. Off the passageway leading back into the house, there was a store room where a number of small bicycles were kept, both two and three wheelers for use on the tarmac on certain days of the week. There was also a sand pit for the younger children to play in. Nearby was a small fence with a gate leading to Matron's garden, forbidden territory, except for the fact that inside, near to the gate was a drain pipe reaching to the top guttering. We used to see how far we could climb this pipe and write our initials on the wall. Again a victory for me, I

managed to climb to the top and put my initials just under the gutter. What I wouldn't do to impress Phyllis Gibbs.

Beyond the playground was a long field to play in, which also contained a large wooden shelter-cum-playhouse-cum-sun shelter, open along the one side with windows at each side, surrounded by a small wooden fence with a small wicket gate at the entrance. The games that were played and the schemes that were hatched in there were beyond belief. I can still hear the ghostly echoes of girls voices singing "ee I adio the Farmers in his den, the big ship sails on the ally ally oh", and many more songs. I can remember being in serious trouble for carving my name on the rear wall of the shelter and being threatened that I would be reported to the dreaded committee on their next visit.

We used to build dens and snow houses in the field, and Matron gave us a small plot at the bottom so that we could dig and grow vegetables.

There was a farm on the one side of the field, I think that the Farmer hated the sight of us, understandingly so, because, although ours was a very large play area, the temptation to climb through the fence into his land was always too great to resist. We had our share of excitement, like the day that one of the girl's fathers, who was a fighter pilot, flew low over our field in his Spitfire and dropped her a parcel. No one complained about low flying in those days. That incident was a talking point for many a day, and didn't `alf fire the imagination of some of us lads.

Mr & Mrs Metcalf with their son Robin lived on the other side.

On the edge of the playground was, to us, a very large tree, which we believed contained an owl's nest. I was very often in trouble for climbing it, saying that I was going to sit in the owl's nest. I was told that Matron looked out of the kitchen window, saw me up the tree and nearly passed out. Later she warned me, saying that I would have my eyes pecked out one of these days. I believe that the tree is still there.

I was the senior boy there, and Mary, a "Braithwaite Road girl" , who was older than I, was the senior girl and "boss of the playroom".

Kept in the hall adjacent to the playroom entrance was a large multi-deck serving trolley used to wheel in our meals. I can remember we used to often have porridge, stews and milk puddings. Sunday tea included cake, if you hadn't played up during the week. Supper consisted of bread and dripping and a mug of cocoa. There was always bread and dripping on the table at supper and breakfast time, it was delicious. We were well fed and the food was good but in a lot of cases, boring.

There were a number of girls who were evacuated there after being bombed out of their residential school at Braithwaite Road, Sparkbrook, Birmingham. These girls were known as the Braithwaite Road Girls, I seem to remember that a teacher was evacuated with them, who used to teach them.

The day after the heavy raid on Coventry on the night of the 14/15th November 1940, a number of boys and girls arrived after being evacuated from there. I remember amongst the Coventry

children a friend of mine, I think that his name was Dennis, and a girl I was sweet on by the name of Phyllis Gibbs.

Mary was one of the Braithwaite Road girls, and I can recall the Turner sisters, one who was Lillian, and the other Esme.

Most of us older children had jobs to do, such as putting up the blackout panels at certain times of the day, making beds in the morning, peeling potatoes, cleaning shoes, washing and wiping up, gardening, sweeping the playground after use each evening and many more things. It wasn't as bad as it sounds because there were plenty of children to share them out amongst. Although I seem to remember that most of the jobs were allocated to the boys. I suppose that the girls helped out with the little 'uns. I remember on one occasion three of us lads were detailed to weed the front drive, two of them refused to do it, saying that they were not there to be used as manual servants. I however, probably because I did not have the courage to be defiant carried on with the weeding, no big job if I remember correctly. At bath time the Matron came storming into the bathroom and told us that the disobedient action had been brought to her notice, and that the extra Christmas presents, (it must have been near to Christmas) which were going to be given as a reward would not now be given. I was not slow to complain that the job had been done, I know that she went down to inspect it. At Christmas I received an extra gift, it was a toy garage. The thing that disappointed me was that the car, which I knew went with the garage, was given as a present to another lad.

At one time there was a diphtheria scare, Mary contracted it and was taken to the isolation hospital. I remember that she was away a long time. When she returned after being in bed for such a long while she had to learn to walk again because she was flat footed. I was suspected of having contracted the disease and was confined to the small bedroom, used as an isolation room at the top of the staircase. I was kept on a very strict diet, but could always look forward to some bread and dripping which my pals "nicked" off the breakfast trolley which was always prepared for breakfast and left outside the playroom door. On their way up to bed, they would quickly open the isolation room door and drop them inside as they passed.

Each Saturday we were taken for a walk into the "Village" where we could buy sweets and other things with our pocket money, we were only allowed to spend a small amount each week. I think, although I may be wrong, that there was a small sweet shop in High Street on the same side and close to the Solihull Cinema, or Ye Arden as it was sometimes known. Farther along High Street on the opposite side, somewhere near where McDonalds is now, was a barber's shop, yes, barber's not hairdresser's, where us lads got our hair cut. If we didn't want to pay, or were short of money, one of the staff would cut it for us. I would always try to afford it.

As we got a little older and able to be trusted, one or two of us were sent on errands into the village. The one errand that I liked was going to the Post Office, which was situated in Station Road, almost opposite Herbert Road. I was fascinated by a large picture behind the counter showing the inside of a Post Office vehicle servicing garage, the centre piece of which was a very large tyred lorry wheel. I cannot see now what the attraction was, but I know that whilst standing in the queue, yes even in those days, I could not take my eyes off that picture.

The Coventry children eventually obtained small premises in the village where they could attend daily and use as a school. I seem to remember that they eventually secured residential premises where all the children could be housed and educated under one roof.

I attended Lode Heath School which I loved. It was, in those days a very strict school, governed by Mr Lunnon who was a great disciplinarian, but very fair. Heaven help any one who that was caught playing truant, the punishment for the boys was a public caning on the stage of the assembly hall in front of all the boys. Two chairs were put back to back and the recipient kneeled on the one chair and leaned over and grasped the horizontal cross pieces of the chair in front of him. He received a number of strokes across his backside and some on his hands. It was a great deterrent for those who might be thinking of playing the wag. I don't know what punishment was handed out to the girls, but then, I did not hear of any girls playing hookey, not many boys for that matter. I received the cane for various offences on occasions, but I always felt that it was deserved. I treated it as punishment for getting caught.

A teacher that I remember was my favourite was Miss James, I think that she was a favourite of most of the boys, never had to clean the blackboard herself. There was also I seem to remember, a Mrs Griffiths, she drove a Wolseley motor car. I cannot remember the name of the science master who's lessons I looked forward to, where I first learned how to spell hydrochloric. Then there was the domestic science mistress who taught us how to cook in the domestic science lab. My first effort was potato and cheese pie, progressing on to a large cake which I took home and shared amongst the boys and girls. Cake twice that week! At the back of the school were some woods, or at least a number of trees, where we used to dig for pignuts, they tasted delicious, and again I used to take them home and we used to eat them in the dormitory at bed time.

Parked on the edge of the playground was an old Tiger Moth which was used by the school squadron of the A.T.C. I think that Mr Lunnon was the Officer Commanding, he impressed me immensely in his RAF officer's uniform. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that in the not too distant future, that I would be wearing a similar uniform. One never knows what the future has in store. I recollect that on the wall of the lower corridor, next to a cloakroom and opposite to the assembly hall which was also used for serving and for the consumption of school dinners, was a large coloured plaque depicting the RAF motif, and its motto "PER ARDUA AD ASTRA".

Farther along the corridor was the Headmaster's office with an illuminated sign saying ENGAGED, WAIT or ENTER, this sign used to attract my interest and I wanted to make one myself, which I eventually did with the assistance of the Science Master. It was in this office where we used to receive the cane for every day offences. Nevertheless, I think that we all had a great respect for Mr Lunnon, I know that I thought the world of him. I don't suppose he knew that I existed except when he was wielding his cane on my hand. An incident which will always remain in my memory happened one lunch time. Those of us taking school dinners in the hall had to take our own chair and return it to our desk after lunch. There was a particular bully who used to wait for me to carry my chair down to the cloak room, opposite to the hall where we used to sit and wait to be admitted to have our lunch. He would take the chair off me and use it for himself, which meant another journey for me upstairs, and that I had to carry two chairs back up after lunch. On that particular day, I had come straight in from a gardening lesson

carrying my garden fork, which I intended to return to the stores after lunch. I went upstairs to my classroom and came down clutching my chair and the garden fork. The bully was waiting as usual for me and tried to pull the chair away from me, well, something snapped inside me. I am usually a docile type of person, but on this occasion, I went for him with the fork, and I meant it too. I think that he quickly realised the danger and took to his heels, racing along the corridor hotly pursued by me brandishing the garden fork. Hot on my heels were two prefects, who eventually brought me down with a rugby tackle, thereby preventing what looked like developing into a very ugly situation. Later that afternoon I was marched into Mr Lunnon's office expecting the belting of my life, but no! He told me to sit down and informed me that had heard of the continual bullying and the provocation that I had been subjected to. However, he left me in no doubt as to what would happen to me if a similar incident happened in the future. It was over half an hour later that I left his office. To my surprise, I later learned that the bully had been dealt with and received several strokes of the cane. He did not trouble me again.

Another incident happened one playtime, when a number of lads were throwing penknives into a toilet door to see how many times they could get them to stick in. I only possessed a penknife blade but could not resist testing my prowess. Later on in the day a prefect came round the classrooms asking all lads who had a penknife to report to the Headmaster's office. Me being the clever one, decided that legally a single penknife blade did not constitute a penknife, so ignored the instruction and kept my seat. Five minutes later the prefect reappeared, called out my name and accompanied me to the Head's office, where I joined the other miscreants. Mr Lunnon's opinion and mine certainly differed on the description of a penknife. He had counted the number of knife cuts in the door, then divided that number by the number of lads in front of him. The total equalled the number of strokes of the cane that we each received.

Gardening was a popular lesson. A patch of grass had been cleared for us to dig for victory. I certainly learned a lot about growing vegetables from these sessions.

I made many friends at this school, but alas many of the names have gone. I can recall a friend by the name of Webster, and a lad named either Knock or Lock who lived almost opposite to the school, and another named Withers. There was a friend by the name of Harrison who I believe lived at the Hermitage. There were a number of lads at the school from the Hermitage, I understand that most were orphans, and perhaps some who had been taken into care. Not a bad bunch of lads from what I can remember. The only girl that I can remember was named Joyce, a favourite of Mrs Griffiths or Griffin I believe. Notice that us lads were known by our surnames, this applied throughout life.

There was a library at the school run entirely by the pupils, and they had some good books in stock.

My memory of the school tells me that the pupils were well disciplined and honest. When we bought our morning bottle of milk, we could also buy a digestive biscuit, and at the end of the break, the tins of biscuits were left outside the classrooms in the corridor, to be collected by a prefect. I never heard of anyone pinching a biscuit. Also, in the science lab there were a number of expensive instruments and models left around, but none ever went missing.

Gas mask training also took place at various intervals, when we had to don the masks and continue our work whilst wearing them. We were also checked to see that they were worn correctly.

Although bicycles were provided by the school on free loan to competent children having to walk over a certain distance, Matron would not hear of it. She told me that whilst I was in her care she was not going to permit my life to be endangered by the heavy traffic using the roads. If only she could see the volume of traffic today!, so I walked daily to and from Widney Manor Road to Lode Heath School.

The walk took me along a tree lined Lode Lane past the Hermitage which was, understandingly, on the corner of Lode Lane and Hermitage Road. There were many children residing there, several of who attended "Lode Lane". Next to the Hermitage was, I believe, the ambulance station. This is where the Youth Workshops are now situated. Also on the site was a civil defence centre and a gas chamber. I called in there on several occasions when I felt brave, and went into the chamber to test my gas mask. The general public were encouraged to call in and test their masks. I think that it was filled with tear gas. I know that you were left in no doubt as to whether it fitted properly or not. We carried our gas masks with us at all times in a cardboard box on a stout piece of string over our shoulder. I remember that on the lid of the box was the word "TOP", heavily embossed in large letters. I and most lads filled in the impression with a pencil which made the word stand out more prominently. Some enclosed the box in a cloth or leather cover with a matching strap which could be purchased from a number of local shops, very posh.

Just around the corner in Hermitage Road, was a very nice sweet shop, where they sold sweets that we could afford, which was very little I can tell you.

Carrying on along Lode Lane, which as I have said before was very leafy, I came to the junction of Warwick Road, opposite Poplar Road. In those days Lode Lane did not bend round to the right, but carried straight on to the junction, with Brueton Gardens on the right, past where Rafferty & Co. are now, with Quinet House on the left hand corner.

At the junction was a set of traffic lights. The lenses of the lights were fitted with a metal screen, which when rotated in one direction during daylight hours, left the upper half clear and the lower half blacked out. At "black out" time, the screen was rotated in the other direction, which also obliterated the top half except for a small cross, which would indicate which light was illuminated. The screens were altered twice daily by a man with a cane.

To the right just a few yards along Warwick Road, opposite to the Barley Mow was the bus stop for the Midland Red buses from Birmingham. The buses started from the St Martin's Church in the Bull Ring. Two that I can remember are, Solihull via Blossomfield, and Bentley Heath via Solihull which went past the Convalescent Home.

Crossing over at the traffic lights into Poplar Road took me past what was either the police station or the police court, as it was known in those days. I then turned left into High Street up to the Square and turned right at St Alphege's Church.

On Sunday mornings two or three of us were allowed out on our own to attend St Alphege's,

we took it as a treat, which could be withdrawn at any time. At bed time in the bathroom we were often quizzed as to what we thought about the sermon. It never entered our head that we were being checked to see whether we had attended.

Right into Church Hill Road, on the right of which is Whitefields Road, where there is a railway bridge crossing the road. One morning going to school I happened to glance down this road, and saw what I thought was a suspicious parcel lying on the ledge which ran along the lower part of the bridge. At that time there was a lot of talk about "enemy agents" and to always be alert and on the look out. I reported it to a policeman that I saw in Poplar Road and went on my way. It was investigated and found to be harmless. Nevertheless, the police contacted the Convalescent Home and the school where I was congratulated.

It was not long however, before I was to fall off my pedestal with a crash.

I continued my walk home along Church Hill Road, which continued as Widney Manor Road and into the Home. On the left hand side of this road were beautifully maintained grass verges, very different to how they appear today. Situated on these verges at regular intervals were smoke screens. These comprised of a wide drum like base, about three quarters the height of a dustbin but wider. Sitting on the centre of the drum was a tall chimney, at the top of which was a plate that acted as a smoke spreader. On the top of the drum, at the side of the chimney, was a round hole through which the fuel oil was poured. These were ignited at night by soldiers prior to an expected air raid on Birmingham, depending on the direction of the wind. The smoke generated by these units made it difficult for enemy raiders to identify their targets. After use the soldiers would return the next morning, clean, refuel and leave them ready for ignition when next required.

One late afternoon I was making my way up the hill past these smoke screens and happened to see a box of matches, a fuse and some paraffin, which had obviously been left in error by one of the soldiers. I was in my element playing soldiers preparing for an air raid. In a short time the oil ignited and nothing I could do would extinguish it. I ran for my life. The local residents were horrified to see the black smoke belching from the machine. They were far from happy with them when they were being used in anger, but as a prank, that was too much. I could never puzzle out why the first approach to me by Matron was "and where did you get the matches from?". I did not think any one had seen me so why was I picked out without hesitation. I got a right belting for that, both at home and at school, not fair, I thought to be punished twice.

When I left the Convalescent Home and returned to my home, I carried on attending Lode Heath School, which was quite a journey by bus from Great Barr, Birmingham each day. And I was always in the top for the least number of absences, despite one period of heavy snow. I am sure, that that must indicate how much I enjoyed Lode Heath School. I also made regular visits for a short while to the Convalescent Home.

Those are just some of my memories of wartime Solihull. One hears that we only remember the good times, that may be true, but I certainly enjoyed my stay at the village. I am now living back in Solihull. My writing this has laid a few ghosts.

Contributed February 1995.

## **Mr Derek Harper**

King George V was on the throne when I was born and had been for 18 years. Coming to Solihull in the early 1930's, I still have memories of the Silver Jubilee celebrations in Solihull Park during May 1935 and remember it to have been a festive occasion with the revered turf of the bowling green, then sited in the park at the rear of Rectory Gardens, being taken over and trampled on by the general public, as part of the display was sited there. The King died in the following year and for a short while, Edward VIII reigned and then abdicated. In 1936, King George VI acceded to the throne and was to remain there until 1952. During his reign, my memories of Solihull are very vivid. The area of High Street, Poplar Road and Warwick Road with the intersecting Drury Lane and Mill Lane was known as "the village". A return trip to Birmingham from the Barley Mow cost 1/3d on the old Midland Red single deckers and going "the other way" to Knowle was really an adventure and you would look out as you crossed the River Blythe.

Hampton in Arden was another good outing, minnows abounded in the stream and if lucky, you might see the occasional L.M.S. steam train stopping at the station. Henley-in-Arden was also within reach by bicycle, the lure there being to buy the best ice cream in the country before journeying home.

Back in Solihull, I remember regularly visiting the old barber, Mr Smith, whose salon was opposite the Church and near the George Hotel. He would place a wooden plank across the barber shop chair and sit me up high, daring me not to move my head. He had a plaque in his shop which illustrated how one could live on 30 shillings a week; everything was listed and priced and it added up to 30 shillings and 6 pence - which meant getting into debt. The solution to insolvency was simple, one of the items read: "wife's beer 6 pence" so the last line on the list read: "this means getting into debt, so cut out the wife's beer". Opposite what was the cinema, were two shops of note, a greengrocers run by the elderly Blizzard sisters and a little general odds and ends shop run by a lady who liked to stock everything, but who when out of stock would always come out with the expression "we're expecting it in any minute". The other greengrocers shop in High Street is the only one still there (as far as I can see) and was and is called "La Fleuriste". Here during the war and if you were in the know, you could buy strawberries "under the counter" - they were in very short supply!

After leaving primary school in Solihull, my parents made a financial sacrifice and in 1937 I began at Solihull School when fees were 7 guineas a term. We had long summer holidays, I was bored, so ventured as far as Malvern Park Farm and helped in the dairy business which included haymaking and riding four of their horses (one at a time) to have them shod at the Knowle blacksmiths. Delivery of milk was on a float pulled by one of the smaller horses and on the Sunday in September 1939 at the time war was declared, I was actually delivering milk in Ladbrook Road; some was bottled, otherwise you had to dip a pint or half pint measure into a small churn and then tip it into the customer's jug. I was now 11 years of age and was enjoying my holiday job which often included delivering muck in the afternoon with a horse and cart - the same horse, but a different cart!

The build up in the war was initially slow, but black-out material was the order of the day and windows were being taped to prevent glass flying. All-mains radios had come into fashion - we had a Philco superhet which gave us endless news bulletins, supported by the music of Henry

Hall and Frank Biffo and his brass quintet. At that time I really believed that Percy Grainger's "Country Gardens" was dedicated to Rectory Gardens where I lived. Max Miller was a radio comic, but I wasn't allowed to listen as he was "too rude". Our spirits were kept up by the various radio programmes broadcast by the B.B.C. There was always that regular reminder to carry your gas-mask. On the day peace was declared, I brought this radio onto the doorstep and literally broadcast the glad tidings to the nation at full volume. Nobody complained of the noise.

In 1939 our estate was lit by gas lights and a man with a ladder would come round once a week to check the mantles and wind up the time clocks. Street lights went permanently out and as time went on, the only things which were lit outside were smoke burners placed in the streets. These emitted noxious fumes and dense smoke, their purpose being to further black out the area and so confuse enemy planes. We were also subjected to thousands of foil pieces falling from the sky, this being another attempt to upset the navigation of enemy aircraft. The existence of radar was somewhat of a secret, the public at large being told that to eat carrots would assist you when seeing in the dark.

People were busy erecting the outdoor Anderson shelters, some preferred to have an indoor cage (or Morrison) shelter, but we aspired to a piece of heavy gauge corrugated iron placed at an angle of 45 degrees with the top resting against the staircase, with ourselves sheltering under the stairs - the front of the cupboard having been cut out. I must have spent virtually days "under the stairs" and remember that after the wailing siren, we were only too aware of the special sound that German planes made as they flew over. Barrage balloons flew around the Solihull area to prevent low flying raids and the sound of ack-ack guns became commonplace. It was always necessary to take shelter when an air raid was in progress or impending, not only to avoid the bombing and subsequent blast, but to avoid pieces of the expended anti-aircraft gun shells which returned to ground. I once picked up a very hot shell nose-cone in our front garden and dropped it quicker than I had picked it up - in those days it was a case of what goes up, must come down.

Gradually the younger men in Solihull were less in evidence as they entered the armed services; some in what were classed as reserved occupations joined the special constabulary or the auxiliary fire service. A force of air-raid wardens had emerged, their punch line being "put that light out". All in all the morale of the people remained good and the neighbourliness had to be seen to be believed.

Fortunately daylight air-raids were rare, but as a schoolboy I vividly remember that when the sirens sounded, the whole school left their classes and took shelter in trenches which had been dug in the playing fields. Our school welcomed two boys, one Austrian, the other Czechoslovakian who had escaped from their respective countries when the Germans invaded. Both quickly learnt to speak English and were integrated into the school routine; sadly the Austrian boy, Tommy Viola died a few years later in a motorcycle accident.

Masters at school were called up and replaced in one case by the Congregational Minister, Mr Goodfield and in another by a lady teacher, Miss Staveley and I think the boys gave her a hard time - I know I did.

Salvage was the order of the day and I would do a regular round, collecting waste paper and metal from local houses, which was then conveyed on a handcart to a depot somewhere behind

the High Street; recycling was well established in the 1940's. Now, all my school holidays were being spent at Malvern Park Farm where 1,400 pints of milk were bottled each day and nobody will get a prize for guessing who had to wash 1,400 bottles, two at a time on a brush machine. There were perks to the job however as I was given Wednesday afternoons off so that I could caddy for the gentleman farmer, Mr Edmund Lea, whose son Jack and daughter Doris really ran things. As well as the horses and carts, the farm boasted a lorry which a man called Fred would always drive, a Ford V8 truck and two black Ford V8 cars, one 22 h.p. the other 32 h.p. My Wednesday treat was to drive one of the cars (at age 15) to Copt Heath golf course and enjoy a round of the course. And so I learned to drive - Jack Lea would also let me drive to Henley-in-Arden market if I was good.

The war gave us a hard time and Solihull had a share of the bombing. The terrible raid on Coventry took place on 14th November 1940 and the blitz on Birmingham lasted from 19th to 22nd November - Solihull seemed to be in the middle and the nearest bomb fell about 400 yards from me.

I believe that the film "Gone with the Wind" was showing in Coventry at the time of the blitz, but their spirits held and it is interesting to note that for a time, paper money went out of fashion for Coventry people in case it was burnt and my father, whose job included collecting money there would come home in the evenings loaded down with half-crowns and two shilling pieces - no notes! In September 1941 my father, Raymond obtained a direct commission in the R.A.F. eventually being demobbed in December 1945 when he received his civilian suit, hat and shirt as a farewell present. My mother, Dorothy did W.V.S. work, plus a part time job with the Royal Engineers at Tudor Grange.

Food rationing was strict and the "Dig for Victory" campaign made us a nation of gardeners and we grew those carrots to help us see in the dark. Some things you could buy, if you were in the know, like strawberries! There were clothing coupons and the only brand name was "Utility". Chocolate was sometimes available on the sweet ration where "personal points" were tendered, but the texture of chocolate gave one the impression that it contained sand.

What is now Birmingham International Airport there was Elmdon Airport and it was from here that pilots were taught to fly, initially in the old Tiger Moth bi-planes which were heard and seen regularly over Solihull performing various manoeuvres. One of the R.A.F. pilots, Gordon Spencer and his wife were billeted in our house for a while. The other billetees were a couple called Turner and their little boy Michael; Ernie Turner was a war worker at the "shadow factory" in Lode Lane (now Land Rover) and it is interesting to note that although this family came from Norwich, that "little Michael" has close relatives who live near to me in North Devon.

As the war was nearing its end, I took a great deal of interest in the Great Western Railway which ran through Solihull and spent many hours at Widney Manor Station where the porter, Ernie Pike would sometimes allow me to wave the train out if he did not feel agile enough to go over to Platform 4. He had the habit of calling out the station name as "windy Anna" and with double summertime in being, it was still light at 11pm when the last train from Birmingham came in.

My railway interest took me to unofficially visiting signal boxes to pull the various levers and ring the bells. In those days Solihull was on the main line between Birkenhead, Birmingham, Oxford and London and there were two "up" and two "down" lines. Widney Manor signal box boasted 44 levers, and it still used its goods siding and it was here that one of the signalmen, also a Solihull councillor and very overworked as chairman of the housing committee, would put his feet up, go fast asleep and let me work the box, unsupervised. When he woke up, he had to copy all my train timings into the official signal box log. I'm nearly back to where I started, because G.W.R. 4-6-0 locomotive number 6000, King George V built in 1937 had even been signalled by me, unofficially of course.

Wartime memories remain and how we have progressed since those horse and cart days. Were we happier when we conversed more and made our own entertainment and is that why we can recall little events like when the window cleaner, Mr Phelps called with his two ladders, a bucket and a chamois and if mother was in funds, she would have the insides cleaned as well. But that is nothing compared to the lady in Streetsbrook Road who purchased a brand new Hoover and when the bag was full, threw it out to the dustmen.

I lived in Solihull for 13 years until I was 17 and did attain a "school certificate" before leaving school. It was a memorable time and when I came back with my wife not so long ago, I was much impressed during a walk in Solihull park that people were properly exercising their dogs and that gentlemen acknowledging a greeting from my wife, would still raise their hats.

***(Derek Harper, who was awarded the George Medal for his work during the disastrous Lynmouth floods in 1952, lived in Solihull for 13 years. He was 11 when war was declared and remembers events very clearly. Now retired, he occasionally visits here when away from his home in Devon and it is clear that part of his heart was left in Solihull).***

Contributed 1995.

### **Mrs Hart (nee Edwards)**

Mrs Hart was born in Solihull in 1915, and lived for many years in Ramsgate Cottages in Solihull High Street. When she married she lived in Mill Lane over the hairdresser's shop. Mr Hart was called up and joined the Royal Army Service Corps, and Mrs Hart was left in Solihull with their baby daughter Josephine. Mrs Hart remembers the bombing raid which damaged Fitter's jewellers shop and Winfield's chemist in the High Street - Block's paper shop (which had formerly been the village telephone exchange) was slightly damaged at the same time.

A cottage in Ramsgate became vacant, and Mrs Hart was able to move to live near to her mother, who was still living in the family home. The cottages were in three blocks and started on the street - another block went back from the street at a right angle from the first, and the third block was at another right angle, so that the front doors faced away from the High Street and the cottages backed onto shops in the street. By the time Mrs Hart moved back gas had been installed, but there was still no electricity connected. Water came from one tap which served all the cottages. (When Mrs Hart was a girl the cottages had no gas and used oil lamps,

with an oven built into the fire grate for cooking, and water came from a pump). The landlord of the cottages was Mr Hobday, who had a furniture shop in the High Street.

Mrs Hart remembers the queues outside food shops, including Dascombe's and Wimbush's cake shops. She also remembers Italian Prisoners-of-War who worked locally, and American soldiers billeted in Solihull. The Americans had a base in Blossomfield Road (on the site now occupied by Tudor Grange swimming baths). Some of the Italians and Americans attended mass at St. Augustine's Church. The Americans were often seen marching in the area, and were an impressive sight.

Early in the war, evacuees arrived in Solihull from the East End of London. After the air raid on Coventry, children from the city were also sent to Solihull. At first, the children were billeted with families, and a large house in Herbert Road was used as a school for them, with their own teachers. Mrs Hart used to help at the school, preparing vegetables and other domestic duties. Later some of the children returned to Coventry, and the upper storey of the house was turned into dormitories for the children left behind. Mrs Hart remembers an Austrian lady who was the cook, and voluntary workers who helped look after the children. Parents used to come by coach to visit their children.

At the end of the war in Europe, Mrs Hart was still living in Ramsgate Cottages, and helped to organise a V.E. Day party. There were few children living in the High Street at the time, but Mrs Hart remembers a little girl at Dascombe's Bakers, two girls living in a cottage behind the Mason's Arms, two children at the fish and chip shop and her own daughter Josephine. Mrs Hart's sister made paper hats for the children, tea was served on tables in the opening to Ramsgate (off the High Street). There was also a bonfire later with fireworks.

As told to Sue Bates, February 1995.

### **Mrs Herraty**

During World War II women, single or married without children were conscripted into war work.

I was sent to the Aero Works here in Lode Lane and worked on inspection of Rolls Royce engines which went into Hercules Bombers.

The work was very dirty and exacting, for we were looking for any cracks or damage that the engines might have acquired during its long hours on test. They were stripped and dripping with oil when brought to us on huge trays pushed along on rollers. We sat on stools which stood on duck boards to keep our feet out of the oil on the floor.

The noise and oil caused me, personally, to have skin troubles (dermatitis) and noises in the ear (tinnitus), which I have to this day, 47 years later.

We worked from 7.30am until 6pm with one hour's break for lunch. Saturday mornings 7.30am until 12 noon were not obligatory. But if we did work then that was time and a half in pay.

The pay for women was 1 shilling and 2 pence and an hour, if any rises came our way it was by a half penny an hour. Out of this I was stopped 10 shillings a week for income tax and post war credits. When claiming repayments later for the post war credits, all my papers had been lost, I was told, so had nothing back.

Contributed August 1989.

### **W.D. Hopkins ("Old Hoppy")**

***During the Second World War, David Hopkins worked at the Hovis Van and Motor Works, Balsall Heath, in Birmingham. He and several other coachbuilders were kept there by a management who, under a directive from the Government, had to release half their work force. Those workers were transferred to do other war-work at the Morris Commercial, Adderley Park. According to those who remained, "they were given twice as much money" for doing repetitive work, producing wooden levers, and wooden wheelbarrows. While the skilled men who remained at "The Hovis" worked on the conversion of vans into ambulances. Mr Hopkins lived in Earlswood for many years, and died in 1985 aged 81.***

***What follows now is a tape-extract transcribed by Brian Henderson in which Hoppy tells a few of his wartime experiences. The spelling is phonetic.***

When the war was developing and things looked really black, and Hitler had covered half Europe, Anthony Eden\* called for the Home Guard - No, they was the Volunteers. People as knew the country as 'ad had any training, or not, was to recruit, go to the local Coppers' Station and enrol, and they questioned you.

And a few months after, it was the L.D.V. at first - the LOCAL DEFENCE VOLUNTEERS and then they changed the name to THE HOME GUARD - Dad's Army, if you like!

Well, I'd had a number of years in the O.T.C. at school, as a cadet and keen, and I thought I should be the first bloke to be called up, but I wasn't. It didn't come up like that, they was calling-up different age groups. Well anyhow, I joined the Home Guard because, previous to being married, in 1927, I'd lived at the farm, Shelley Farm, which is in the middle now of a great big new housing development, - the Cranmore/Widney. And my parents was farming Shelley Farm, where they'd gone in 1908, when I was four; and so I knew the countryside.

I'd had a bit of experience being in the O.T.C. with firearms, I'd always been interested in guns,

and they were sporting guns and, of course, in the O.T.C. it was the old short Lee Enfield. And so, when the Home Guard was formed that was up-my-street. I thought "if they come I'm going to take as many of the sods with me as I can - I know I shall be finished, like thousands of others" - but I'd got a Winchester repeater at the time -which was my pride and joy, and I joined the Home Guard, and we were stationed at the Racecourse, at Shirley Racecourse, which is now a golf club, and a golf-course. And, of course, there were pit holes full of rabbits. I was in my "oil-tot" and even from the L.D.V. I could put my armband on and stick a map in me pocket, and go with me rifle around grounds where I should've been shot if I'd looked over the hedge normally so it was right up-my-street. But, of course, there was a serious side, like when we was stationed at the racecourse, and was on certain nights in a rota and you went up there, and you played about and you were supposed to be on-guard and telephone to Solihull and, I remember, I was on duty up there at the racecourse, trying to tell some of these blokes how to slope-arms - because I got the arms drill weighed-up from the O.T.C. days. And there was everybody, from Boer War veterans to chaps as bin in the First World War. They had everybody in this Army, which was a joke to some people. Well, to me - and I was up at the Racecourse the night as Coventry was bombed, and it was all lit-up with the fires, and they just come droning-over, you know - this uneven beat of two engines, and you could see Coventry all lit-up, and the barrage-balloons, of course - it would only be about ten miles direct, as the crow flies and they was just coming over and chucking the bloody bombs on Coventry. We could see that the night of one of the big raids, when they knocked the middle out of Coventry, as we was powerless.

Now, I used to go up on the Saturday afternoon, with me Winchester, unofficially, and get these blinkin' rabbits, because meat was getting scarce. And one time, the "alarms" had gone, the Air Raid Warning sirens had gone and I was up there, and I'd got a bloody great German revolver at the time, and some ammunition. And there come this low droning. It was low cloud, - and I give meself fire orders, you know "Engage Enemy" and I loosed-orf these bloody gobs-of-lead to where this sound was, you know more as a bloody joke! - I just thought "It's my little gesture" and, eventually, the Air Raid "All Clear" sounded. But, cycling to work, there was all bombs, there was diversions, there was houses knocked-down, - and a little group outside the Coppers' Station: because the names of the casualties was put on the Police Noticeboards and, as I say, - when I got to Robin Hood Island I used to see if my Mother's house was still standing. Well, me aunt and me mother lived together, to go on, and nobody knew. And then somebody at the Hovis said I didn't care if the bloody place got burned-down. Well, that wasn't right! I was doing me Home Guard duties, see, and so I was roped-in for bloody fire-watching. These sods as had been took out and put in the Morris Commercial, - doing war-work, - their rota only come about every six bloody weeks with the thousands as there was in these factories. But, I didn't moan about that but I was doing me Home Guard and the bloody fire-watching. There was a bicycle for the chaps as lived local - to go home, and the bombs was coming down. You couldn't do nothing. I didn't care a sod! And, I thought, "the people as is frightened was the guilty". The chap next door to me on the Stratford Road used to build caravans - private. And the minute War was declared, when Anthony Eden\* come back and said "there now is a war between Germany and Great Britain" and a chap was waiting to make a decision to have a caravan, and he had this bloody caravan. We took it and put it under a railway bridge out by Lawsonford - where there's a disused railway. He was so bloody frightened. "Now", I thought, "I can't stop it.

If they want... I'm going to bed. If I get killed there's nothing I can do about it. I'm going to take no bloody notice!!". And the people was out in the road, getting in a cluster and, the neighbours, and "Ooo, it's a bad raid", .. and a chap I knew was bombed-out, - my friend, Bert Hoppy, he was bombed-out of Bolton Road. I'd got a six-roomed house and I thought, "I'm going to have people billeted on me 'course. All those thousands of workers at the B.S.A. I had Bert Hoppy and his aunt come and live with me. So, better to know - somebody you knew. And they was bombed-out of Bolton Road, and they came to live with me, apart, and then they had a house - a council house, a big private development at Sheldon. And, the Government took it over and finished `em orf, and they housed him, eventually, after the war, in this house. Bert Hoppy was a friend of mine, at the Hovis and he worked there for bloody years and he was a good chap. We was the same name, that was all. And I know, we played truant, one day, and went in the caves at Matlock, - you know, "missing". And, of course, they know it was bloody unusual because they hadn't got a motor car. I've had motor bikes all my life - what I could afford. And, I'd got no telephone but I was given a stripe, - well, two stripes. I was a corporal, 'cause of knowing the countryside, and doing this exercising, and all that, and through my bit of military training. But I used to help these blokes, secretly, with a bit of arms drill. See, - the "sloping arms", and all that, and there was a lot of volunteers, old men, young men, keen, and one of the chaps as was in the Home Guard. He joined the Home Guard and says "They'll have me". He was coming up to eighteen and I know he was on duty up at the racecourse and they used to send him for the beer, from the local, you know, - and he went in the R.A.F. He used to come and see me. And, he was a Rear-Gunner. And, of course, he never come back from one raid. And, - once when I was down in London, I was at Hunter's Hill, - where the big R.A.F. War Memorial is... I'm trying to think of that kid as lived in Blackford Lane - Hughes - and I found his name - "Volunteer" - so-and-so, initials, "Hughes - lost over Germany" - you know. And I remember him coming.....but, talking about the shortage, - I couldn't buy a bloody egg!! I'd got me garden and I used to knock the woodpigeons orf" .....

They was building what was called a "shadow factory", the B.S.A., in Marshall Lake Road, - what used to be a farmland before then. It was Wilde's Farm. They had the land, they was building that B.S.A. shadow factory. And, 'course, the wartime, there was these artificial tanks (prefabricated) made - to put water in case of fire because of bombing and the shadow factory. And I lived there, and I cycled to work most of the time, 'cause I couldn't have a motorbike because I lived on a 'bus route, so I couldn't get petrol, so my motorbike was demobilised and the pick-up and the plug taken to the Coppers' Station, and looked after for the duration. That was part of the safety, if the enemy had come.

There was bombs dropped, one was a delayed action, it had dropped in the B.S.A. grounds and it went orf at dinner time. And there was one in the field opposite where I lived (at 679, Stratford Road, there was open fields) - as killed the baker's 'orse [horse]. Old Dyer the baker as had a little business in Marshall Lake Road, and a shop, and this bomb had dropped (knocked-out my front windows, knocked the front door orf) and killed this baker's 'orse in the bloody field opposite. And there was one casualty there, a chap as lived nearer "the Dragon" was sitting in the car, out in the road. A chap named Wall, he was sitting there with his dad, watching the "fireworks", and the bombing, and when one of these bombs dropped, a piece of shrapnel went through the scuttle of the car - into this bloke and killed him. He was killed sitting in his car, outside his house, nearer "the Dragon". And there was a delayed-action dropped at the bottom of my garden, where there was open fields.....

**\* EDITOR'S NOTE: Mr Hopkins is probably referring to Neville Chamberlain, not Anthony Eden**

Recorded 1985.

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**Mrs E. Johnson (nee Shaw)**

I was about 12 years of age when I first knew Solihull and Knowle, but 4 years later I met my husband whom I married another 4 years on; he was Solihull bred and born from a hard working family; we finally moved to Solihull from our new and modern home to an old property due to financial problems war time and "Army pay". My husband was a volunteer and was soon being trained for war which was inevitable at the time of his joining. In later years he always confirmed to myself and family that he was glad to have taken part in the D Day landings. His "Beach Group" no.10 was a small contingent in charge of and responsible for "petrol supply", near where they landed were the "Canadians". Training for this day had been intense but necessary and for the following weeks. Some of the finest men were in the "Allied Forces".

Living in Mill Lane those days had its hardships but compensation in being central in "Solihull Village" made it a bonus; good shops, main Post Office and ideal Picture House, even the Gas Company had its showroom and engineers in Mill Lane, where I bought my first new cooker; the original one I bought for 5 shillings that was advertised in "Deebanks' glass case". It was black cast iron and called "Black Prince" a good old one, someone had stored it away in a shed or garage.

In mentioning important places, St Alphege Church seemed to be the most historical feature and still remains so to this day and year 1995. Also the joy of Malvern Park to walk around and for children. These were trying and difficult years for everyone. It all helped to relieve tension.

Living near my husband's parents who kept a few fowl, sometimes ducks and one pig, my small daughter and myself were fortunate enough to enjoy a little extra while my husband was away in the Forces. The Ministry of Agriculture only allowed a family so many animals, so it was law to "register" them because of the feeding needs such as corn or cornmeal. The pig had boiled peelings of vegetables and fruit. Neighbours used to bring some & then when the "great day" came and the butcher came to kill poor piggy, it was sharing offal and small joints of pork. Everyone enjoyed every mouthful and the lard was superb. My mother-in-law made real pork pies, she had been a "Cook Housekeeper" to a Miss Kennedy in Dorset.

Only having one child, I lived first in a small cottage and when the siren used to sound I put my coat on and wrapped my daughter in a blanket and ran in the dark to my in-laws, putting my

daughter under the stairs in a little bed while we drank tea, awaiting the "all clear" by the fire, listening and wondering as the planes droned overhead.

Having no real attacks from air-raids on Solihull, we all were on the alert, especially at night, being close to Birmingham. Our Gas Works and Rover Company were targets, in fact the bombs dropped in the High Street and Park may have been a bomber getting rid of his load to make a quicker getaway (who knows) or error in navigation. I believe five were dropped that night. I was in my own house when they were dropped. The earth shook and my sister on leave from the A.T.S. didn't open the back door till daylight in case of a crater, but the garden had pieces of clocks and items including some pieces of concrete slabs from the High Street buried partly in the garden from Fitters the jewellers who had their business about halfway down the High Street. Duddy's, the corner of Drury Lane, an old family drapers was demolished, almost then adjoining the White Cat cafe.

One early morning raid presumed to be looking for the Gas Works, caught a row of houses in Alston Road near the Hermitage. My husband's aunty and her mother were killed, the children were blown clear and neighbours were also tragically lost and injured. It was a very low misty cloudy morning around 7am. We picked up jagged pieces of shrapnell in the yard. Winter nights were very dreary and seemed longer as black-out boards or black curtains had to be secure to make sure not a glimpse of light would show. Of course all over the country was the same, people bonded with each other and were tolerant as we all were working and living for "Peace and Freedom from Dictatorship". Most people grew vegetables and fruit (Dig for Victory).

The school in Mill Lane was used as a "British Restaurant" and served plain meals at a reasonable price. It also had an air raid shelter for local residents. Most people listened to the War Time Radio; BBC News and Winston Churchill giving us encouragement to help fight at home by doing all we could towards the "War Effort" and the slogan "Careless talk costs lives".

Everything one needed was rationed or not being made at all, so extra care was taken over all clothes, bed-linen etc. Sheets were patched and put side to middle to get full use of them. I remember mending the net curtains once. Due to so many men being called up, of course there were left gaps in various jobs of all kinds and many women were able to bridge the gap. German prisoners cleared roads especially after snowfalls and the like. Remembering their faces as they toiled, expressionless, no whistling or even talking to each other, all young; near enough my age, at the time it certainly made one think. The Italians who were in the area seemed far more relaxed and natural.

At a very young age I was always a keen gardener so I enjoyed growing vegetables as well as flowers and the soil was superb. We hadn't hot water or central heating and toilet facilities were outside but we managed.

Contributed 1995.

**Mrs M. Lyons**

I was born in Hampton and was sixteen when war was declared having just left college and started work in Birmingham as a shorthand typist, our village at that time was very quiet and rather reserved.

I had three brothers who took part in the "D" Day Landings and my youngest brother later did his compulsory two year service in the army, fortunately all returned safe and sound.

The first soldiers of the Royal Artillery moved into the "Ring of Bells" in 1940 (this pub closed in 1939) and the ammunition dump was manned by the Pioneer Corp. who slept in the Fentham Hall until huts were built. A searchlight battery was in Bickenhill Lane and the New Zealand Fleet Air Army was stationed at Elmdon for training. In the evenings a number of the forces frequented the "Engine" and "White Lion" so Hampton girls were thrilled to make their acquaintance. By 1943 the Americans were stationed in Maxstoke and a number billeted in private houses here in Hampton, for some of us girls life was wonderful, nylons, chocolate and chewing gum were plentiful, but somehow I don't think the older residents were very impressed. The "Packhorse Bridge" was a delightful and popular venue for soldiers and girls to meet.

We had an air raid shelter built near the war memorial but I can't recall it ever being used. By 1941/42 the raids were hotting up over Coventry and Birmingham, bombs were dropped in Hampton in the field by Belle Vue Terrace and at the back of Hampton Manor, fortunately no one was hurt, just big craters left. For safety reasons people from Birmingham and Coventry flocked into the Fentham Hall, the soldiers having moved out by this time, for a good night's sleep.

When I was eighteen I was asked to join the Home Guard to do clerical work and duty rosters, we met in the old girl's school (unfortunately no longer here, replaced by modern bungalows).

Although food was rationed I don't think we ever went short and as my father was Golf Prof. at North Warwickshire Golf Club, rabbit was on the menu most weeks (I vowed I would never look at another rabbit when the war was over). Once a week approximately 300 meat pies were made, first in the girl's school and later in the butcher's shop in the High Street. This was organised by the Women's Institute and made by the members, the pies were very popular and queues quickly formed.

A number of local girls had formed a relationship with the forces stationed here and were married after the war, also two G.I. brides went back to America.

Our lovely sleepy village was never the same after the war, new houses built, the market closing down to make way for new flats.

Contributed February 1995.

### **Mrs Margaret BMarks (nee Bedford)**

I was four when World War II began. My first memory is of a sky which seemed to be filled with silver balloons. Soon afterwards we moved to a farm in Devon for three years. My brother and I watched night after night the searchlights and red skies as poor Plymouth and South Wales caught the bombing. It resembled an eternal Bonfire Night. We didn't understand this thing called "War". Of course, it was very different for those children living amidst the bombing; those who had lost fathers and brothers in the War; and the evacuees, who were never sure what was happening to their families.

In 1942 we moved back to Earlswood and three of us attended Tidbury Green School. It was so quiet here then. No cars. Everyone travelled by train, bus or bicycle. We walked to and from school with our friends, taking care of each other, sometimes arguing! The only sound was the distinctive sweet song of the hovering skylark.

The school building was of wooden structure, comprising three classrooms, Headmistress' study, an open space for coats and scarves, plus the odd washbasin, and a small kitchen leading from the middle classroom. We sat two at a desk, the top of which opened upwards, and we each had our own inkwell. We used wooden pens with detachable nibs. The toilets were outside and a barrel-roofed shelter stood near the hedge in the playing field. The playground was surrounded by a high, black-spiked, iron fence.

School dinners were a source of misery to several children. I loathed corned beef and longed for a proper meal of roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. One day the Headmistress called several of us into study and asked, in desperation "what exactly would you like for dinner?" One little voice, my friend's five-year old brother, called out "rice pudding!" We did not miss confectionery. We wanted good basic food. Each day we consumed a small bottle of milk which guarded against rickets and other bone disorders.

As a family treat we sometimes visited the British Restaurant in Shirley for tea: delicious tomatoes on toast and a large pot of tea. The British Restaurant was a long prefabricated building where the Post Office now stands.

Of course there was no television. The only news reels we saw were at the cinema - usually the Odeon, Shirley, but sometimes the Rialto or Robin Hood at Hall Green. We regularly listened to the wireless and perused the daily newspaper. We followed the maps and arrows showing military manoeuvres. Hitler was a devil figure to us and to this day I don't like moustaches!

My eldest brother's pockets were always a fascination and contained bits of shrapnel, which he swapped with his friends, string, conkers, a penknife, home-made whistle and a tank, which children made from a cotton reel, piece of candle, two matchsticks and a rubber band.

We had an Anderson shelter in the back garden. We grew vegetables and kept hens. At an earlier date, a German aeroplane with bombs had crashed into the field opposite, the blast shattering all the front windows and front door.

All light was blocked out when the "blackout" cloth was pulled over the curtains. We listened to ITMA in front of the coal or log fire. There was no central heating.

Family clothes were a problem because of the shortage of coupons. The older children's clothes were passed onto the younger children, which was a little hard on my sister who was a smaller child than me!

We sometimes visited Birmingham by bus. There was a gap in the houses in Burman Road, Shirley, where a bomb had shattered several people's homes. I remember shuddering and wondering what had happened to those families. Birmingham Bull Ring, where the bus stopped (outside St Martin's) had suffered much bombing and the old Market Hall was roofless. The lower part of New Street, up to Stephenson's Place, had been completely demolished.

My maternal grandparents were bombed out during the War and rented Burman House in Henley-in-Arden. At Christmas we all travelled by train to Henley for Christmas dinner at grandma's. How she managed to cook such lovely meals on that old gas stove, I'll never know, but they were the most delicious Christmas meals I have ever tasted. I believe the turkey was cooked up the road by the local baker, but everything else was cooked on the ancient stove. Afterwards my aunt would play the piano and we would all join in with the singing.

It must have been just before D-Day that an American contingent passed the school. We were all allowed on to the footpath and waved to them as they drove by. They seemed so friendly and threw us chewing gum.

The War ended and we had a celebration bonfire. In the evening there was dancing in the school playground.

One unusual memory stands out 50 years later. Whilst in Devon we had prisoners of war working on the farm. One blonde-haired young man used to talk to me. He told my mother that I reminded him of his daughter. I have often wondered where she came from and what happened to her. He didn't want to fight any more than our soldiers, but just to return home to his family.

Contributed 9 February 1995.

### **Mr F.P.D. Meixner**

I was eighteen and living at home at No.2 Thornby Avenue in November 1940. One night a "stick" of bombs fell on Solihull. One bomb fell in Malvern Park, one exploded in the High Street severely damaging the shop owned by Duddy's at the corner of Drury Lane, one damaged Fitter's, the jewellery shop halfway down High Street and one exploded on the pavement in front of Winfield's chemist at the corner of High Street and Poplar Road, causing severe damage. The last bomb fell by the first house in Wadleys Road (No.6 I think) severely damaging it.

I was working in Hall Green at the time, and on the morning after walked to the bus stop at the top of Poplar Road, where I saw the corner of High Street and Poplar Road covered in rubble from Winfield's. When I eventually arrived at work (buses being disorganised) one member of staff was not there. It happened that the lady was the resident of the house in Wadleys Road which was damaged. She came to work eventually, I think the next day, and I remember her saying that she and her daughters put saucepans on their heads as a protection.

One day during this period I cycled to Hall Green. On Streetsbrook Road near the city boundary there was a crater partly destroying the pavement and road. It was immediately under a tree and I was surprised to see the tree completely undamaged.

My sister married during the blitz period. We had relatives, wedding guests, staying with us in the house: for a day or two there were nine people in residence, and no water, as a main had been destroyed somewhere.

It was my function to find some and I found a tap with water at the bottom of Seven Star Road. (The road was being developed immediately before hostilities commenced). Thereafter I was constantly walking back and forth with buckets. But the supply was severely restricted, and on the morning of the wedding nine people washed in one bowl of water.

Contributed February 1995

### **Mrs Meixner (nee Duddy)**

One evening in mid November 1940 some bombs fell on Solihull High Street at about 10.30pm. The next morning my father told me as I was about to cycle to school, that one of our shops (at the corner of High Street and Drury Lane) had had the windows blown in by a bomb. So I rode from Rectory Road, via Church Hill to the High Street and found that, not only was the windows broken but all the front of the shop was destroyed. There was debris and stock all around us in High Street and Drury Lane. Some of stock was salvaged, and stored in a room at home which had been my bedroom, and for a day or two afterwards people were returning stock to us which they had been able to rescue.

As the premises were too damaged to be usable we were given the use of an empty butcher's shop a few doors higher up High Street (No.81 I think). However, as part of the floor was not in a good condition we did not open for business, but used it for a stock-room.

Contributed February 1995.

### **Mrs J. Ogden (nee Grove) (died c1989)**

I think that to understand the atmosphere of wartime you have to comprehend the tension and the apprehension under which we all lived. We were at war - anything could happen. We feared

for those who were serving in the forces. We feared air raids. We feared invasion by sea or air - fear was the order of the day. We huddled anxiously round our radio sets listening to the frequent news bulletins, and much grim news we had to endure. I had a little spaniel dog, who would sometimes howl while we listened affected, I suppose, by the air of tension. At the same time there was a wonderful atmosphere of camaraderie engendered. Any fellow countryman was a friend and social barriers counted for little, nor do I think that they have ever fully returned.

In day to day living the things that affected us most were the black out, rationing and A.R.P. (air-raid precautions). The black out meant that no lights must be shown after dark in street or house. The nightly blackout was quite a performance. In our case it entailed fitting black cardboard shutters into every window. We did not venture out at night if we could avoid it for it was easy to get lost. One dark night there was a ring at our door. It was a neighbour who had got lost - didn't know where he was - and he only lived in Widney Lane! and how important to us all at this time were the phases of the moon. Rationing: there was a shortage of everything - food, clothing, soap, milk and later even sweets and petrol. We all had our ration books - very precious, very complicated but we had to be registered and if "our" shop was out of something there was no running along to another one. We just had to do without. How people "managed" was very much a source of conversation at social gatherings. "You know, my dear, if you buy such and such a brand of corned beef, there is always a little bit of fat on top and you can make quite a nice little bit of pastry with that" or "Lewis's have just had a consignment of linen bags (no coupons because not clothing) in quite pretty cotton material, and if you unpick one you will find enough material to make a little blouse". There was no end to our ingenuity, but our suffering was real.

I was married about this time and we were given a book of "dockets" to help us buy household goods. This covered one pair of curtains and one pair of sheets - did I put the curtains on the bed while I washed the sheets, or hang the sheets at the window while I washed the curtains? But is easy to jest, docketts were a help to newlyweds. Of course, all we bought had to be "utility" with the sign of the two unfinished circles. Utility meant basic. Utility blankets were thick and warm, but heavy. Utility bedspreads had no headboards, and so forth.

We were all urged to ease the shortages with such slogans as "Dig for Victory" and "Make Do and Mend". Potatoes were much advertised as good for you and "Potato Pete" was pictured as a friendly advertising figure:

"Those who have the will to win  
Eat potatoes in their skin,  
Knowing that the sight of peeling  
Deeply hurts Lord Woolton's feelings"  
(Lord Woolton was Minister for Food at the time).

It was considered smart to grow carrots and beetroots in your flower beds. We ourselves dug up our tennis lawn to grow potatoes. They were not very good potatoes.

At this time the estate round Charles Road had just begun to be built, but work was halted and some of the land was turned into allotments. But the land was thin and poor and hardly repaid the tillers. Bit by bit the allotments were abandoned and brambles grew there again, but for years there were wild raspberries to be found there and the blackberries themselves were so suspiciously red that we thought they had been crossed with the allotment raspberries. On this same building site was a huge notice board advertising the houses and giving a Birmingham address. But this was when we feared invasion and across the length and breadth of the country all signposts had been removed, and some wit had painted out the address and written in large black letters "Hong Kong" - and for years Hong Kong to us was an alternative name for Charles Road.

A.R.P. was very much a part of our daily life. We were all issued with a leaflet giving us useful hints on how to behave and how to protect ourselves. Many people had Anderson shelters (a government issue) but there was the obvious disadvantage of having to turn out of doors on a chilly night and some, who sank their shelters into the ground for extra protection, found they flooded in heavy rain. We ourselves had the ceiling of one room propped up with wooden posts and beams, sufficient protection we hoped for a near miss. And because splintering glass was a great danger all our windows were protected with black insulating tape, put on to imitate the leaded panes of Elizabethan windows.

The tin hat was part of the equipment of the fire fighters. They were local groups under the A.R.P. and its Wardens and they were formed to keep watch during Air Raids. Our group extended from number 311 Blossomfield Road to Widney Lane - I remember an old, old man coming up our drive and saying in a quavering voice "It's your turn tonight. I've brought you your helmet and shield. I'm sorry we haven't a visor, but you can use the grill on the shield". And I had to pinch myself to believe that this really was armour, really meant for my use in the mid twentieth century. And I remember such things as the little sooty primroses that bloomed along Dingle Lane right under the ugly iron stoves that, when the wind was in the right direction, would belch out black smoke to make the smoke screen that was to protect the B.S.A. in Marshall lake Road, and some factory on the Cranmore Boulevard, which was so hush hush that we never knew what it was manufacturing but it was reputed to be highly important.

Outside the barrage balloons were a great feature. They were to protect vital targets from dive bombers. Ours, I think were protecting the BSA. But there was, pretty well, a ring round Birmingham. But they always had to be lowered quickly if there was a threat of thunder for they attracted the lightning. On one occasion, when they were not quite quick enough, I saw the nearest to us to be so struck and it burned from end to end in about two minutes. The choking black smoke of the smoke screen was another feature, and not a pleasant one.

I was not in Solihull during the whole period of the war, but I experienced there a number of Air-Raids and I may say the wailing sirens and the dipping lights were enough to daunt the stoutest - in one of Solihull's earliest raids a huge bomb fell in Whitefields Road, but penetrating the tarmac and half smothered on its impact it did less harm than might have been feared. Then

there were the concentrated raids on Birmingham, night after night. They said the fires from the night before guided the raiders the following night. Then it was that the great Market Hall was burnt down. We watched the red glow in the sky hour after hour and heard the distant gunfire and saw the searchlights trying to pick up the enemy planes. It seemed to us that the whole city must have been destroyed. These raids did not, as far as I know, touch Solihull for we had not taken shelter. We were outside watching in horror. The bombs that fell nearest to us fell on Charles Road estate - not then built up. One huge bomb fell on a great oak tree. In the morning we went and looked. There was a vast crater but not so much as a splinter of the oak tree. There was another similar crater in the fields beyond Yoxall Road and all the ground round about was pitted with small craters, but beyond broken windows little harm was done. We wondered whether the pilot had deliberately jettisoned his load on open ground.

These are some of my wartime memories. May this country never have to endure such things again. But when peace did return I remember the thrill of burning the old black-out screens and of pulling off the black insulating tape from our windows and letting more sunshine come pouring in.

Contributed August 1989.

### **An Olton Resident**

On 1st September 1939, when Germany invaded Poland, I was staying with my family at Colwyn Bay. The news I found alarming, but at the age of thirteen was not able to realise fully the implications. It must have been so much more horrifying for those who had lived through and had memories of The Great War. This day was the first when black-out regulations were introduced. My father cut short our holiday and the next day we returned home to Olton.

On 3rd September, war against Germany was formally stated to exist by the Prime Minister, Mr Neville Chamberlain. At 11 o'clock the family were in our lounge listening to his broadcast of the dreaded but expected news. As my school had been evacuated to Milichope Park in Shropshire, my parents then drove me over for the autumn term. We stopped for lunch in Bridgnorth, where we heard rumours of the bombing of London and Hull, but these were in fact false, as there had only been siren warnings.

We left my brother at home, who with assistance started to dig a hole in the garden just beyond the top lawn to take the air raid shelter. When I came home in December on holiday, the shelter was completed. It had concrete steps leading down and inside was an arched room formed of corrugated metal, reasonably spacious, while the outside was covered over with a rockery. At first camp chairs were used for resting, but later bunk beds were installed.

Up to the following summer, when Germany invaded the low countries and France, this period was known as the "Phoney War", but afterwards the threat of invasion became a reality. I kept a diary from 1941 to 1944, when I entered the navy and on re-reading, it appeared that there were a greater number of air raids and alerts in 1941 than in the following years (that is when I was

home from school on holiday); sometimes three or four nights consecutively. At first apparently the sirens were sounded on the suspicions of a raid, as the early warning system was not so sophisticated as later in the war. If there was a night raid, relatives who lived in a flat above their shop on the Parade, Solihull, would drive over, grab a stiff whisky and we would all hurry down the garden into the shelter, often staying there until the next morning, even though the all-clear had sounded earlier.

The shelter was damp, only heated by a paraffin stove with no lighting apart from torchlight and candlelight, so my father decided to convert our rear garage into an air-raid shelter. The roof was strengthened by girders and thick walls were built inside, which I believe are still in situ. There was already an electricity supply for lighting and heating, so it was altogether more comfortable, enabling us to have a reasonable night's sleep.

My parents acted as air-raid wardens on a rota system with neighbours. They attended lectures on fire-watching held at a local school. On one occasion they had to crawl through a gas filled tent wearing their gas masks and tin helmets, which at their ages proved quite an effort and caused some amusement. On duty, wardens usually wore the one-piece siren suits for warmth. Near our home a barrage balloon was positioned above a farmer's field. I do not remember exactly where the nearest bombs dropped.

Further along our road a dump of old rubber motor tyres self-ignited, blazing for many days to the consternation of neighbours.

The war brought out a great feeling of camaraderie. We were all in it and pulling together. The local social life continued with an even greater zest. I noted from my diary how many times we went to the pictures; at least three or sometimes four times a week.

In the home there were various types of precautions taken against bombing and fires:-

Curtains were lined with black-out material and curtains hung at windows and doors, where previously there had been none.

Heavy gummed tape was fixed to plate glass windows in a lattice pattern to reduce damage from flying glass.

The bath was kept two thirds full of water. This caused staining to the the surface below the water line.

Stirrup pumps were placed around with buckets of water for fighting fires and also long handled tongs for picking up incendiary bombs, for putting into metal containers with a sprung drop-in lid filled with sand.

We were required to cover the headlights of cars with a special grill that threw down the beam from the lights.

Gas masks were required to be carried, but I do not remember if this requirement lasted throughout the war.

To save fuel (coal), bricks were placed each side in fire grates and soil was moulded into a ball shape to be placed in the fire as they glowed and threw out heat.

Servants were gradually called-up to do "war work" in factories, other occupations or into the forces. We managed with just our dear old devoted help.

People took on extra voluntary work. My father assisted in administration of the distribution of petrol. My mother helped at the St Christopher Orphans Home on the Warwick Road.

To eke out one's petrol ration, many people used bicycles. On a Saturday night we would cycle for an evening meal at "The Oak" (managed by the Bussi's) in Solihull, or even so far as "The Engine" in Hampton-in-Arden.

At the start of the war, my mother remarked prophetically "Things will never be the same" - so true! They never have been.

Contributed February 1995.

### **Mrs E. Packer (formerly Mrs Jones)**

It is difficult to remember just how much wartime conditions narrowed our lives. Travelling was limited by petrol-rationing. Black-out curtains at all windows and unlit street lamps made ventures out at night uninviting, so the family gathered around the fireside after dark, to listen to the radio, to knit - if we had any clothing coupons left to buy wool, to write letters to our loved ones away from home, and to hope that the air-raid sirens would not summon us to seek safety in the air-raid shelter. One of my favourite programmes on B.B.C. radio was "ITMA" with Tommy Handley as the star. Tommy could make our family laugh with his jokes about the everyday difficulties that we faced and his funny catch-phrases. We always listened to the news bulletins on radio, at nine each evening. Our spirits were raised when Sir Winston Churchill spoke to the nation.

I remember waiting in queues for such rare commodities as oranges. People used to join a queue and then ask the person in front what was being sold - anything that would supplement our meagre rations was like manna from heaven.

I was given a beautiful large, cut glass cheese dish as a wedding present from my employer at the office where I worked. My cheese ration at the time, being 2ozs per week, looked in the dish, like an exhibit in a glass case.

On radio and in the newspapers, we were asked to "Dig for Victory". Many lawns and flower borders were dug up to grow potatoes, carrots, runner beans, tomatoes etc. We were told that eating carrots helped one to see in the dark. Every item of food grown helped to feed the nation and helped the shipping convoys by lessening the need for imports.

I remember a very sad day when I went to the office in Birmingham as usual, only to find the big, old fashioned building had been reduced to a gaunt ruin by the German bombers. What had been a very busy factory, for many years, was now a shell. The big, mahogany, leather-topped table that had served as a desk for generations, my typewriter, and my job, had vanished overnight.

I was immediately offered a job at an office of a manufacturer of ships' lamps and fittings, where I soon settled.

Shortly after I married, my family and I had our own homes damaged by the blast and shrapnel from a stick of three bombs that fell on the opposite side of the road, killing two wardens who

were out fire-watching. At the time, I was sitting on the hearth rug before the fire, trying to roast a potato in the embers. I doubt if that potato was ever eaten but it may have saved me from injury, as the chair beside me had been torn by shrapnel which might have hit me had I been standing up or sitting on that chair. That particular chair had been rescued from another raid when my uncle's house was bombed.

I ran out to see my family, next door, and found them "safe and sound" but quite a lot of damage had been done to our homes.

When my first baby was expected, there was much joy and preparation. It was to be the first grandchild for my parents. My mother had remembered how to crochet woolly booties and was soon busy. My father made a lovely cot, using the sliding metal parts of an old one. He also contrived a little three-wheeled trolley with a feeding tray and upholstered seat. The front wheel had a swivelling action ingeniously made with the wheel of an old roller skate. There was a well known propaganda slogan "make do and mend" and it challenged people to use their ingenuity.

New mums had to learn how to operate baby gas masks as tiny babies could not wear face masks. They had to be slid into the contraption while lying down. I was so thankful that we did not have to use these, as there were no gas attacks. Expectant mothers and babies were very well looked after, with the provision of milk, orange juice and cod liver oil. My baby enjoyed the orange juice and the oil was accepted too - despite the fact that the smell of it made me grimace. She was a bonny, healthy little girl with a very happy disposition. Our bright little star in the dark days of war.

I remember the first time my mother, father and I took my newly born baby in her pram along Lode Lane. There was little or no traffic along the lane and no other people out walking. It was so cold and windy on that day in 1942, at the end of April, that we were glad to return home.

My sister joined the A.T.S. and I sorely missed her company. She was stationed at Glen Parva near Leicester and looked very smart in her neat, khaki uniform when she came home on leave.

Contributed March 1995.

### **Mr Alan Pittaway**

At the outbreak of war all the civilian population were issued with a ration book, identity card and gas mask.

Petrol was not available for cars and all cars had to be immobilised. I took my father's car distributor cap and rotor arm to Shirley Police Station where it was stored until the end of the war.

I and my brother and sister went to Sharmans Cross School during the war years. Every morning we were divided into our houses:- Greswolde, Odinsells, Archer and Hawes for a session of air raid drill and gas mask training.

To help the war effort all children who were willing went to farms to gather potatoes.

The R.A.F. sited a barrage balloon in the field opposite our house in Radbourne Road. Lightning struck the balloon one night and it came down in flames; tangled cable and bits of balloon everywhere next morning.

Welford Road, Stanway Road, Radbourne Road, Yoxall Road were picked for the siting of smoke screen barrels. These were dustbin like containers filled with waste oil etc. which had a chimney. These were placed at intervals down both sides of the roads and were set alight at dusk. Each of these belched out black smoke until they burnt out. I don't know whether the German aircraft could see through the smoke but I could not see my friend's house opposite.

As German bombing raids started, my father decided that the family needed a shelter. Father with the help of an uncle and we three kids dug a hole in the back garden 7'6" deep, 7' wide and 10' long. With concrete floor and brick walls it was spartan but afforded reasonable protection.

One night just after the warning siren had sounded we were about to leave the house for the shelter when there was a loud plop, plop noise outside. We all rushed to the window and the whole area as far as we could see was peppered with brilliant white flowing objects. We were the target of an incendiary bombing raid.

Our local anti-aircraft guns and their crew did a good, but very noisy, job of keeping the enemy planes from having their own way. One Heinkel III was shot down and it crash landed in a field at Earlswood.

A typical day for my family was:-

Up at 7am. A bath if there was sufficient soap or a quick wash (a lick and a promise my Mother called it). Breakfast was a cup of tea and a piece of toast. All three of us kids had a satchel and our school books and lunch box was carried in this. Lunch consisted of a sandwich and an apple if available. A luxury was to have a fresh bread sandwich with a banana or orange.

Off to school at 8.30 for the day with a half penny each had for the small bottle of milk which the school arranged to have delivered.

After school 4pm we would go home and as both our parents were still working we three kids would collect the few pence left by Mother and go up to the Stratford Road, Shirley to the British Restaurant. This building was by St James' Church. In the restaurant you bought tokens to the value of the money you had. When you got to the food counter, the lady serving the food would tell you what you could have for your tokens. Considering the dreadful shortages those ladies did a superb job.

Back home for about 6pm. We met up with Mom and Dad. Homework if any was done and then family then listened to the radio until bedtime at 10pm. Bedtime was a bit special because

Mother could usually provide "the kids" with a hot drink "Bournvita" was our favourite. Anytime after 11pm the air raid sirens would sound and Mother and Dad would come tearing into our bedrooms and haul us out of bed. Wrapped in dressing gowns or a blanket we would be bundled into the air raid shelter. We would remain in the shelter until the "all clear" siren sounded (often 4.00 in the morning). Back to bed and up again at 7 for another day.

Food was desperately short and frequently I would be given the family ration books and told to go up to the butchers, this was "Bradley's" close to the park entrance on Stratford Road, and queue because there may be some "off the ration" meat available. Having one's family ration books proved how many there were in your family.

One of the highlights for us was to go to the pictures on Saturday mornings. We were frequent visitors to the Odeon Cinema on the Stratford Road (now a supermarket).

Our community was very lucky during the war years to have an excellent medical service. Names that come to mind are Dr Dunn, Dr Blaxell, Dr Brady. One surgery was on the corner of Jacey Road and Stratford Road. Dr Dunn had his surgery on the Stratford Road in the big old house opposite the Post Office. The present surgery is of course in Union Road.

The nightly ritual of bombing raids continued and many Shirley and Solihull people will remember looking out of their bedroom windows to see a huge red glow in the distance - the night that Coventry was destroyed.

For our small community, our closest encounter was yet to come: One bright moonlit night (bombers moon) we were all crowded into the shelter as a large number of enemy aircraft attacked Birmingham and factories around the city. At about 2.30 three or four aircraft approached from the direction of Hockley Heath. They were looking for the factories on Cranmore Road and the Rover factory. Three or four huge bangs occurred and our little shelter shook violently.

The next morning we found the cause: A stick of bombs aimed for the factory centre overshot and landed in a straight line starting at Charles Road and finishing in the back garden of a school friend David Appleby in Radbourne Road. The bomb in David Appleby's garden was a delayed action one and went off the following morning at 7am.

My father heard via the grapevine that Hodriens, the fruit and vegetable store on the corner of School Road and Stratford Road were having a supply of oranges. My brother and I were up early on the Saturday morning and across the fields behind our house to Longmore Road. Past Woods Farm to the Stratford Road and onto School Road to queue at Hodrien's. Two oranges each was the reward for our efforts.

Clothing and shoes were very hard to come by and quite often there were just not enough coupons in the ration books for a new coat or trousers. Bata shoe shop on the Stratford Road were often sympathetic if you were short of the odd coupon or so.

As the tortures of war turned in our favour the bombing raids ceased and we all looked forward week by week for the end. The residents of Radbourne Road got together and decided that a street party would be held to celebrate V.E. Day. Goodness knows where all the food came from but it was a great party to remember fifty years on.

Contributed February 1995.

**Mary Pittaway (nee Bircher)**

JOE KINCHIN           Who owned Solihull Motors in the High Street - known as UNCLE JOE. Every Christmas he gave about ten of us children in the village 2/6 and when he came to our house he always had a glass of sherry with my parents.

WITLEY AVENUE           We used to play tennis across a piece of string across the road but when PERCY BRAGG left the builders yard in his car to come home in the evening we had to release the string.

PARK ROAD SCHOOL       We used to have a big coke fire in the middle of the  
(now ST ALPHEGE) classroom. When the Germans came over we all had to go into the shelter in the Rector's garden.  
When we came home from school along Church Hill Road, on the hill at the bottom where the sub station and car park is, were allotments and a bar across the entrance not a gate where we used to do somersaults and then we would play hide and seek in the trees on the hill by the present rockery.

FOOTPATHS           Through Malvern Park and the Avenues I remember my sister taking me for walks and seeing the Germans laying the concrete paths which still exist today.

WALTER BIRCHER   MANAGER at J.K. BOURNE & SON from 1923.

LOCAL POLICE           Always used to have a warm in front of the old gas fire in the office whilst on duty in the High Street and then they checked their weight on the sack scales in the warehouse.

PEOPLE IN NEED OF     Always knew there was an open door at the shop/office  
HELP & ADVICE AT     during and after closing time as Walter wasn't in the forces.  
ANY TIME               He also helped people from the British Legion.

WALTER               Was in the ARP and used to man the shelter in the garden of 67 Church Hill Road by Witley Avenue so he only had to walk a few yards from home. When the raids were on my mother used to bundle my sister Susan and myself out of bed with our eiderdowns to spend the rest of the night under the stairs.

Contributed February 1995.

## **Miss B.E. Rolfe**

### **Childhood Memories:**

Standing at the back gate with Daddy, both wearing tin hats, watching the sky over Coventry as it burnt. I think it was wearing the tin hat that was the treat! However, I still have the picture of that sky in my mind. (When the new Coventry Cathedral was built I was one of the local ladies who made a tapestry kneeler for the building).

Birmingham and even Solihull (the Rover factory of course was a target) had its fair share of night raids. One day my father suggested that my mother took my sister and I up to her parents in Southport for a rest from the bombings and noise. Apparently we had a horrendous train journey, which I cannot remember unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately and the night we got there, the raids began on Liverpool! Some rest!

Living with our next door neighbours was a German Jewess (a teenager) who had come out of Germany during the 30's. One day, as she walked past the fields behind Dorchester Road, there were German Prisoners-of-War working in the fields and they called out to her. They did not, of course, know she was German and could therefore understand their remarks and were rather taken aback when she answered in kind. I don't think what either they or she said was very polite!

There was an ack-ack gun which used to run along the railway and not only was it noisy, but the vibrations cracked everyone's ceilings. We used to watch the cracks appear.

My sister had a Mickey Mouse gas mask, but I didn't as I was not young enough - I was only about seven! I was quite upset about that!

My Aunt and Uncle in Acocks Green suffered a direct hit on their house. The whole place was a pile of rubble, and in the middle of it was a box of eggs and not one of them was even cracked.

The same Aunt was called-up for work in a munitions factory, as her children were old enough. Twice my mother was called-up and the second time she took my sister and I along to prove that her children were too young for her to be eligible for call-up. She was of course, as everyone else was, doing plenty of voluntary work.

We, my sister, Mother and I, stood in the Bull Ring one morning looking at the smoking ruins of my father's warehouse. They were during those days storing canned goods for the Ministry of Food and my main memory is of the wonderful smell of cooking meat.

The Fire Service used Dorchester Road to test their hoses for leaks one day and we children all sat on the front walls to watch. Unfortunately there was a leak just where my sister was sitting and the pressure lifted her off the wall and onto the front lawn. The only damage was that she was soaking wet, which was a relief to us all including the firemen.

Many of the boys from the Convalescent Home in Blossomfield Road used to come round for the afternoon, and sometimes just for tea! Many of them had lost limbs and I vividly remember when we were playing Beetle, a voice saying "all I want is a leg", as they sat there without a leg themselves. For those who do not know the game of Beetle, it involves throwing dice and each number relates to one part of a beetle which has to be drawn accordingly and the first to complete the beetle is the winner. (That is probably as clear as mud!)

A bomb was dropped in the field behind Dorchester Road, but presumably didn't go off and was disposed of. It's a bit vague in my memory, but I do remember looking at the crater.

Most of the father's in our road had garden allotments along the side of the railway and sparks from the train (steam in those days of course) were always setting things alight. They used to grow wonderful vegetables - maybe the fires helped!

My sister and I slept in bunk beds in the breakfast room during part of the war and our parents on mattresses on the floor. My father always said that if we were going to go we'd all go together. This was only for part of the time when the bombing was at its worst. I can remember lying there, listening to the planes going over and being able to distinguish between "theirs and ours".

To a child a lot of things were exciting as we did not realise the danger and the worry.

A lady over the road did not allow her children to eat sweets, and as only my father in our family drank tea, my mother used to exchange tea coupons for sweet coupons. My sister and I were quite happy about that!

Only once can I remember going into an air-raid shelter. We were shopping with our mother when the siren went and we were all ushered into a shelter in (I think) Poplar Road. We did not like it and were very glad not to be there very long. I didn't like not knowing what was going on outside, I remember.

### **Memories of the Americans:**

My parents virtually held open house to the "boys" during their time in Solihull and some good friendships, some of which last to this day, were forged. As I was away at school most of the year it was my bedroom that they used, just as it was. Some people in the area were not as hospitable and simply provided a bare room in which was placed an army camp bed. What a lot they missed! Our house was always full of boys coming to "press their pants" or having a bath. Some people did not allow them even those amenities. I wonder how they would have felt if others had treated their sons in that way when they were so far from home.

Many days the phone would ring and someone would say not to bother about the evening meal, they would bring a couple of chickens. (What a luxury in those days). My mother would cook a meal and several of the boys would be at the house for the evening and a good time was had by all. The boys who were billeted here knew they could always bring others to our house and they would receive a warm welcome.

One day a crate of oranges was delivered by an U.S. army truck - it was a present from the Colonel to "little Blondie" - that was my small sister who was an ash-blonde in those days. Wonderful - we hadn't had any oranges for goodness knows how long. They were, of course, shared out among all the families nearby. What a treat.

My mother also had to stop the boys giving my sister 10 shilling notes almost every day - it was worth quite a lot in those days, but they did not understand our money and dished them out like pennies.

The old Methodist Church at the corner of Blossomfield Road and Streetsbrook Road was the U.S. canteen and the local ladies took their turns in looking after the boys. My special memory of that is the chocolate ring "donuts". We loved them and were always willing to go there to help our mothers (or hinder more likely!) as we knew we would have at least one donut given to us!

Peter, one of the boys who was not billeted at our house, spent all his available time with us. He was 19 and the evening before they were due to leave for Europe he lay on our hearth rug crying and saying he just wanted to stay here and then go home.

Jimmy, also 19, used to play with us children out in the fields behind Dorchester Road (now Beaminster and part of Winterbourne Roads). He had a wonderful imagination and a lovely sense of humour! When he left us he inadvertently left his kitbag and we kept it until we heard he had been killed. We were so sad. In the 60's we suddenly had a letter from him - he had been injured and lost his memory, hence the mix-up. Sadly he was in an Army Hospital a lot of the time, as his mental state fluctuated. I visited his family and saw him in hospital and also saw some very sad cases of mental injury through wars, some of whom had been there since the First World War and others were only lads of 18 and 19. What a dreadful thing is war.

Only one of the boys who stayed at our house was asked to leave. My parents did not like doing it, but he came home so drunk one night that he was sick all over the bedroom wall. They didn't blame him - thousands of miles away from home and possibly going to be killed - but with children in the house they felt they had to ask the army to take him elsewhere. It was assumed that they would not want anyone in his place but of course they did, much to the surprise of the officers dealing with the matter.

One boy came from Little Rock in Arkansas and had never worn shoes till he joined the army. To us it was like someone from another world.

Someone took a photo of my parents outside our house, but when it was developed they were not there, just the house! We never found out what he had done!

Great excitement one day - James Stewart was coming to visit the camp. I was not here but understand that virtually the whole female population was at the end of Dorchester Road to see him. The camp was where the swimming baths are now situated.

Dorchester Road was unmade as yet and the large vehicles made exceedingly large and deep ruts. We found it great fun to navigate when walking, but it can't have done the cars much good.

The President of the U.S. sent his thanks to all those who had been so good to his forces and my mother was one of those chosen to represent the area at a presentation. She received a large basket of fruit (like gold in those days) and I still have the basket to this day. I remember feeling very proud of her as she went up onto the platform. One day in the newsagents a U.S. soldier was buying a newspaper, then probably about 2 old pence. He held out a palm full of coins and my mother saw the newsagent take a half-crown. She told him what she thought of him and made sure that he only received the correct amount.

Contributed 1995.

***The following are all World War II memories from foreign soldiers who were billeted with Mr Rolfe in Dorchester Road, and were sent to his daughter.***

**Mr James S. Jones (American)**

Glad you asked for the news about World War II. We were the Military Police as you remember. We landed in Glasgow, Scotland. Came in the inlet waters of the Firth of Clyde. It was in the afternoon and we boarded a train which had all the black-out features at the doors and windows.

We traveled all night and arrived in Solihull about 5.00 in the morning. We got off the train at the station which is somewhere near the end of your street ***[Dorchester Road]*** if my memory is correct.

We marched up through town and everything was so still. Not one person on the street at that time of the morning Ha! Ha!

We went sorta north west out of town and up a hill to a large house which I think was once the home of one of your soldiers in wars of the past. This is where we had a dining hall and kitchen and a motor pool for our jeeps.

Then we were placed in homes around Solihull two and three together.

We were staying with an older couple and he ran a Harness Shop up town. It was a half of a double house and they owned their side and someone else owned the other. Which we thought was unusually different than our country.

We were not allowed to go up town for a full week.

We had to be taught the value of our money and had to have our money changed to yours.

The first night we got to go to town the soldiers all made a raid on the fish and chip stores. This we got scolded for the next day as this was the only food your working people had when they got off work in the evening.

So that put us off limits to those places. We would go to the pub and drink beer (which was warm) but we drank it anyway.

That's when some of us got acquainted with your mother and Dad.

Then one night after the pub closed we were invited to your home. This we thought was great and we enjoyed ourselves. Later your Mother had a party for three or four of us and she served a lunch. I can remember it so well because she had a salad made from the clover in your yard with chopped up eggs and a dressing and I thought that sure was good.

Well from then on we sure had some good times at the "Pub" and then one night the town people put on a show for us and the mayor got up and made a speech, which was real good.

So those were the days in Solihull and then we shipped out to Southampton to go to France shortly after "D Day" June 6th 1944.

Well I don't know if this will help the lady doing her writing or not but that was some of my memories of the time spent in Solihull

Contributed July 1994.

### **Arnold William Jefferson (Canadian)**

After 50 years my memory is not as keen as it should be, however, I will tell you what I remember of our trip to your area.

We had a lull in our training and a few of the officers were asked if we would like to go up to Birmingham University for a few days of lectures which would be of general interest.

We were told that we would be billeted with civilian families during our stay in Solihull.

I do remember that I was met by your Dad and taken to your home and how pleased I was to meet the family.

It was such a welcome change from the daily routine of our days with the regiment.

We all enjoyed the lectures we got at the University which included a short history of the area.

Your family went overboard to make sure we enjoyed ourselves and we shall have that memory the rest of our days.

Contributed December 1994.

**Mr S. Butler (Australian)**

During my brief stay in Solihull in the forties, I found it to be a pretty little village with the old pub and church. The people were very friendly and always had time for a chat. When we visited Solihull in the eighties it was a large city with supermarkets, industry etc., all in the name of progress!

Contributed October 1994

**Mr Lloyd Sweet (American)**

It has been so long ago since I spent time with your family, I cannot remember too much about it.

The most I remember was sitting and talking with your father evenings. I also remember I went to church once or twice with your family.

Most of the time I was there was spent training at the end of your street ***[Dorchester Road]*** and playing softball.

A girl from England works at the store I just retired from. She knows Solihull very well and told me how much it has grown up around there. She is married to a young fellow who worked at our store before he went in the service and met her over there.

Contributed December 1994

**Mrs Seaman (nee Allen)**

At the bottom of our garden (now Foredrove Lane) were fields of Italian Prisoners of War picking potatoes in large baskets. Mom used to feel sorry for them and take them cocoa. The Italians used to give me and the other children rides in the potato baskets.

When the incendiary bombs were dropped, Mom used to rush out and put the dustbin lid on them to put the flames out.

Tinfoil strips were dropped to confuse radar, and I used to collect when it fell in the garden after air raids.

There was a large brick air raid shelter built by the old metal canal bridge on Damson Lane. It was filled with gas, and everyone had to try out their gas masks.

As Mom was an asthmatic, she found it uncomfortable to sit in the damp air raid shelter three gardens up. So Dad cut a hole in the floorboards of the cupboard under the stairs and built seats, and we would sit and dangle their feet into the footings of the house in Damson Lane and wait for the "all clear" to sound.

Mom worked on night shifts at the Rover factory inspecting aircraft parts. Our neighbour Mrs Cliff also worked there on night shifts, and she and Mom were friends.

Dad was an ARP Warden until he was called up into the forces. He was 42 then, so he was not sent abroad on active service but worked as a motor bike instructor at Catterick Camp near Carlisle. My mother and I went up to Carlisle and rented a house so that we could be near him for part of the time.

My older brother was called up when he was 18 and was sent to a training camp near Newcastle. He was in East Africa by the time the war ended.

Contributed March 1995

### **Mrs I.G. Simmons (nee Cooke)**

The first of my memories and the horror of war was when the "ATHENIA" was sunk while returning to Canada from England in late August 1939. I had met and made friends with a Canadian girl who had been on a visit to England and Scotland, staying with her Aunt in Forfar. I met her and the Aunt at a hotel in Llandudno where I was also on holiday. The "ATHENIA" sailed without a convoy and was torpedoed by the Germans in the Atlantic. Jean was in the water 48 hours before being picked up. She was one of the lucky ones, if you could call it that.

At the beginning of the war I lived in Acocks Green on the Warwick Road, so was one of many who spent thirteen and a half hours in a public shelter there on the night of December 14th-15th 1940, when Coventry was bombed. The Germans also dropped incendiary bombs on Acocks Green Parish Church that night.

In 1942 we came to Dorchester Road, Solihull, after being sleeping in bedrooms with windows blown out. As Solihull was a somewhat safer area, families were asked to take in either an evacuee, or a factory worker or a member of the American Forces over here. My family had an evacuee from Coventry. Another family in this road took in a Jewish evacuee from Germany. She had been sent by her family through Holland and so to England; the family selling their possessions to pay for her journey. Sadly her family were sent to the gas chambers by the Germans, so after the war she sailed to America to join other relations over there. Prior to the war there were fields at the backs of Dorchester Road in which horses grazed; then these were taken over and corn planted. The harvesting was done by prisoners of war and on one occasion we, (the Jewish girl and myself) walked by these men who passed some remarks in German,

They did not know she was German and she answered them in her own tongue, very bitterly, as can be imagined.

In Dorchester Road they placed incinerators which were lit in times of air-raids. These gave off a black pall of smoke, thus creating a screen over the city of Birmingham. These were placed round the perimeters of big cities, making it more difficult for bombers to find their targets.

In 1942 the Girls Training Corps was formed under Mrs Cartwright as C.O. I joined in 1942. After being in same for 1 year, it was decided to only have officers with First Aid experience. As I was Secretary at the M.C.I. as it was then called, (Middlefield) I was able to take a preliminary examination of the Royal Medico-Psychological association. On passing this in November 1943, I re-joined the G.T.C. in 1944. The cadets were from approximately 12 years to 16 years of age. Our first drill took place at the back of the old Council House in Poplar Road. A Sergeant-major of the regular army drilled us. I am only 5' 1". so was usually in the front line in the middle of a parade. We were given the command to salute, then told to do so again. The sergeant-major bawled "someone is saluting with their left hand". I turned my head to see was doing so (which I should never have done anyway), and he yelled at me, "You in the front row who is turning round". To say I felt dreadful was to put it mildly. After this I practised saluting in front of the mirror. I was mainly left-handed, although I wrote right-handed.

The aim of the G.T.C. was to train girls for the forces when they were due to be called up (unless in reserved occupation, e.g. nursing). We met at Malvern Hall Girls School where we practised drill, took cookery lessons, and First Aid, taking examinations for the latter at the Red Cross, Blossomfield Road. Girls also did rifle practice at Solihull Boys School.

Later in the war we met at Lode Heath School, as did the A.T.C. Solihull. On one memorable occasion we were asked to sell programmes at the Birmingham Town Hall where Glen Miller and his band were performing in aid of charities. Tragically his plane was lost on his way to Europe to perform to troops over there after "D" Day.

The night before "D" Day all army vehicles were going south, through Solihull and Knowle, together with the R.A.S.C. who were stationed in Knowle. This was 16th June 1944. In August 1944 the American Medical Corps who were based at Knowle also went across to France.

The G.T.C. attended Church Parades once a month and were included with other uniformed organisations in laying their wreath on Solihull War Memorial on Armistice Day. On one such occasion I was to lay the wreath, when to my horror found I had left it at home, so had to dash back on my bike to fetch it. Fortunately I had time to do this before the Remembrance Day service began. At the march past in celebration of V.E. Day which was 8th May 1945, with the unconditional surrender of Germany, the G.T.C. had the honour of leading all forces and voluntary corps, stationed in and around Solihull. We all formed up in fields behind Solihull Boys' School, with our excellent band leading. I was by this time the C.O. and halfway along New Road, on our way to the saluting base outside the Council House in Poplar Road a soldier from one of the units taking part was sent up to me by his C.O. to ask me to take longer steps as the troops following were practically falling over themselves as they had a diminutive pace-

setter leading the parade. Nevertheless, I did give the "eyes left" command on the right foot and the "eyes front" was heard by all my Company.

Contributed August 1989.

### **Mrs J. Tomes**

One of the German prisoners-of-war who worked with my grandfather, Mr Alfred Webb (who was sewer foreman with Solihull Urban District Council), made a wooden toy which was a pecking chicken. Unfortunately, two of the birds have become mislaid as successive generations have played with them. Another of the German prisoners made a model battleship for me. The P.O.W.'s laid drains, cleared ditches, and in 1946-47 cleared snow.

There were at least 44 of the Germans still with my grandfather after the war ended, carrying on the work until the English men returned. There were more on other council work, and on farms. A few are still here. Before the Germans, he had Italians.

Every Sunday my mother and I went to my father's grave at Robin Hood. In that cemetery were buried, near the wood and a bit away from the other graves, three German airmen, the crew of a bomber which had been brought down.

So every Sunday I scrounged a few flowers, or picked them there in the wood, for the Germans whose families could not come.

Bombers sometimes seemed to follow the railway line and aim for the bridge over the Warwick Road which is between our house and Olton Reservoir. Some bombs fell on the railway line, and several in the reservoir. One which landed in the grass verge of the Warwick Road blew the railings down and burst the mains. We were without gas or water. My grandfather managed to get the old pump going at the empty cottages next door to us (the old coaching inn) and many people came to draw water for several days. A bomb fell on the station path between Beck's newsagents and Warwick Road, one in Ulverley Green Road which demolished the second pair of houses round the bend by the pool at the bottom of this road (Ulverley Terrace). Two people were dug out from under a table. Another bomb scored a direct hit on a car parked beside the cottages where Ulverley Court flats are now (in Ulverley Green Road). The shrapnel killed Cyril Jones who was cleaning his bike in the hall of his home opposite. We children believed that one in the ground near Watkin's nurseries about 12 feet from the brook which crosses Ulverley Green Road did not explode. Houses are now built there. I think one fell in or near Knightsbridge Road. Some evacuees who lived there decided it was not as safe as they thought and went home.

My husband-to-be, Alan, dug up an incendiary in the field behind our house, detonated but unburnt.

The Home Guard had manoeuvres in this field. They also practised on the land where the new Olton Library is being built, where there were air-raid shelters.

One of my husband's earliest war memories is of farm carts up-ended placed all over the Birmingham Schools playing fields near the boundary in order to prevent German planes from landing there.

Contributed September 1989.

### **Mr R. Townsend**

#### The Solihull Area Report Centre

Situated in the basement of what was the extension to the Public Hall which was a three storey block of office accommodation completely open plan but could be divided into offices or corridors quite easily with the outbreak of hostilities.

The entire depth of the Basement was reinforced with some very substantial H section steel girders and at its one end a rectangular room was made to house a full size Billiard Table. The Operations Room was made at the other end of the basement, which gave a Bolt Hole escape route by the side of the central heating boilers. The Centre was staffed 24 hours a day with five full-time paid staff 9-5. About a dozen volunteers were on duty during the hours 6-10 and Council Staff who were expected to do one week in three of full nights staffed the Centre. In September 1939 we expected to have bomber raids every night but as we now know that was not the case and the Council Staff were able to sleep through the night on folding single beds either in your own office or as time went on, strategic places. When the Caretaker Ivor Goodman joined the National Fire Service his flat became available which was very useful as it gave us extra bathroom and toilet facilities.

The night that Coventry was blitzed gave us all food for thought and I will never forget the constant drone of the German bombers as they flew overhead and not many miles from target. It was decided to build an Observation Post on the apex of the roof of the Old Hall. Just a box about 3 foot wide and five foot long with a circular 3 legged table in the middle of it with a map of the area on it and a pivoted wooden bar with a spying piece at one end in order to line up on any fire or explosion, locate it on the map and phone down to the Centre to take the necessary action. Each corner of the Box had a triangular shelf put across it. We only staffed the box two at a time in shifts. I well remember the night the BSA Factory in Small Heath was hit and set on fire, sparks seemed to be flying all over the place. I was told later that the sparks I saw were actually blazing timber beams about 7 foot long.

My biggest shock was when one morning having washed, shaved and dressed was looking out of the side windows of my office to see where the engine noise I could hear was coming from, only to see a JUNKERS 88 bomber and all its crew on its way, it turned out, to the Solihull Gas Company as it was then. Unfortunately the bomb aimer must have been a little anxious and his stick of bombs fell on Alston Road council houses killing a number of people.

I should tell you of the Ops Room. It ran the full length of the Basement with a table running across the one end with 6' x 3' office tables butted up together and chairs with a phone in front

of each. At the head table sat the Controller and all the phones were manned by the other members. There were a number of telephones on the long table and each was a direct link to all the major emergency services, and also to all Superintendants of Council departments at home. On the wall at sort of picture rail height was a board with coloured electric light bulbs on it. This revealed the state of the emergency, when the purple bulb was on no-one must speak. We would be on the edge of a Raid and anyone coming into the room must observe this board first. The Chief of the Centre was Mr Charles Rowland Hutchinson, Engineer and Surveyor to the Authority. His sub Controllers were, Mr Joseph Forman, (Chief Public Health Inspector), Mr Alfred J. Cox, (Valuation Officer) and Mr Harold Reed (Chief Clerk of the Surveyors Dept) and last but not least Mr Rex Mackrell (Deputy Surveyor).

Contributed March 1995.

### **Mike Tuddenham**

#### Enemy Sighted!

I must have been around five years old and the war had been in progress for some four years when I saw my first German aircraft.

I suppose up to that time I had been aware, in general, of the danger that could come from the sky and hearing during night time raids the peculiar drone of the enemy aircraft.

It was, I remember, quite early on a thoroughly wet grey morning. I was looking out of the bedroom window together with an aunt who was visiting us; suddenly dropping out of the very low clouds a dark plane became visible travelling from left to right across our field of vision. Clearly on the wings were black crosses edged in white; the plane continued in level flight, flying, as it were, up the length of Dene Court Road before disappearing into the murk.

My overriding recollections are of the unexpectedness of the event, and that the plane appeared so near and the wing crosses were so bold. I do not recall any fear of being threatened, more one of excitement at actually seeing an enemy plane!

#### The Balloon

I lived in Olton during the war and while I was very young at the time, I was only six when the war ended, I do recall the barrage balloon which was sited at the end of Braemar Road.

I can also recall adults being amused about an incident when the balloon crew leader, who had false teeth, dentures were not the term then I guess, used to put them in a container of water overnight. He had awoken to find his teeth missing. They, in their container, had been strapped or attached in some way to the flying balloon and when recovered were found to be well and truly encased in a large block of ice!

## Blitz Memory

At the time of the blitz, I was between two and three years old and lived in Olton. My overriding memory of the bombing was being taken to the air raid shelter in the back garden. I was carried through a completely darkened house and when the back door was opened I remember seeing the dramatically starry sky - literally thousands of stars were visible. There was of course no external lighting from street lamps or cars. The whole world seemed black and dominated by the starry sky.

It is difficult for people who have not experienced it to appreciate how dark it was; levels of lighting from all sorts of artificial sources today have made "the starry skies" a thing of the past. Only perhaps in a truly rural location can you get anywhere near experiencing the "black out" of the war years. Even today, when say there is say a night time power failure, I can get my "instant recall" of the blitz and a feeling of apprehension.

Although I am certain my parents would have been nothing less than reassuring when "doing" the air raid drill, I must have picked up their feeling of apprehension which today can still give me "the little shiver".

Contributed February 1995.

## Mr Ken Walker

My parents and I moved from Liverpool to the Maypole area of Birmingham in the late 1930's and this is where I spent the war years. I have lived in Solihull since 1957.

I can well remember war being declared in September 1939. The children in their innocence talked about it quite excitedly. The adults on the other hand, remembering the first world war, were quite solemn and serious.

Nothing much seemed to happen for the first few weeks but then people were getting their instructions to go to various centres to collect ration books and be fitted with gas masks. It was an awful feeling putting on a gas mask for the first time. A very strong rubber smell and a feeling that one couldn't breathe. The person fitting the mask would have to do much reassuring and would place a piece of card over the filter mouthpiece to see if the air was being drawn in correctly. If, when breathing in, the card was retained against the filter without falling off, this indicated that the air was being drawn in correctly and not through the sides of the mask.

The "black-out" was introduced. This meant that all street lighting was switched off and people at night had to cover their windows such that no light showed through. This was achieved in many ways. Some made wooden shutters, others made curtains from thick black curtain material. I recall that thick brown paper with an interior layer of tar was on sale. This special paper would be affixed to a wooden frame which was then fitted as a shutter to the window frame. Many houses had adhesive tape stuck to the larger areas of glass in order to prevent the windows shattering due to blast from near misses.

Today one would have to go into the countryside on a dark night in order to appreciate how dark the "blackout" was. Any chink of light showing would invite a knock on the front door from the local policeman or warden. People tried to have a small torch available but batteries were in very short supply. Quite often when walking along the footpath one person would bump into another. It was not unknown for one person to bump into someone else, apologise and then realise it was a tree or lamppost.

Anderson air raid shelters were delivered to homes where they could be situated in the garden. These shelters consisted of corrugated steel sections which were bolted together. However, before they could be assembled it was necessary to dig a large hole in the garden. The shelter had to be half sunk into this hole with the upper half protruding above the ground level. The soil from the hole would then be piled on top of the shelter to give the hoped for protection. Neighbours would work together to construct one shelter first before moving on to the next. There was a sense of urgency and it was far better to have one complete shelter for all to pile into rather than two or three only partly completed.

From time to time shelters would fill with water and this had to be baled out. Some people turned their shelters into little "palaces" with bunk beds and any other comforts that could be fitted. Others would nip back to the house during a quiet period, in order to put the kettle on. Towards the end of the war, when air raids were no longer a threat, the water was allowed to stay in the shelter and many were occupied by families of frogs and tadpoles. I well remember the larger brick built shelters at my school suffering from water seepage and because there was insufficient room in the dry ones to accommodate all the children, a rota system for going to school was introduced. This rota consisted of us going mornings one week and afternoons the next. We children of course loved this and hoped the water would win the day.

I recall walking back to school one lunchtime when a low flying German aircraft, the crosses on the wings and fuselage were very clear, came right overhead. I crouched down for cover by a fence and I can remember shaking my fist at it. The aircraft was reported to have crashed some miles away but I don't think my shaken fist had anything to do with that.

We children seemed to cover the local areas quite extensively and going across the fields, where the Wythall by-pass now runs, we would find holes where sticks of incendiary bombs had fallen. Houses now stand in Peterbrook Road, Solihull Lodge, where there once was a disused sand quarry. We used to play in the quarry before it was taken over and converted into a rifle range for the Home Guard.

A great hobby of the children was shrapnel collecting after there had been an air raid the night before. Many children had collections of these shell fragments and they were much prized and looked at by groups of friends. One piece I had I remember was shaped just like Great Britain.

One evening, after I had been in bed and asleep for a couple of hours, my mother came dashing upstairs. She was quite alarmed and having woken me up, asked me if I was alright. Apparently a stick of bombs had dropped across the local allotments. Unfortunately the last one in the stick had hit the rear of a house about 150 yards up the road from us. The following morning the neighbours and children were all helping the occupants to clear out their belongings. Suitcases

were being provided and any storage space required was made available by neighbours. The occupants of the house had been very fortunate! The lady of the house, a Mrs Betts I seem to recall, had just moved from the kitchen at the rear of the house, into the front living room when the bomb struck.

One morning the word went around amongst our local group of children that a German aircraft had crashed in the Earlswood area. A friend and I walked the four or five miles to the site of the crash. We could see the wreckage across the field near Rumbush Lane but no one was allowed too near by the police. Sometime in the 1970's a letter appeared in the Birmingham Mail asking for information about this crash. I was one of many who replied and subsequently an article was published in the Mail giving details of the night when the Heinkel III crashed there.

Many people were required to do fire watching duties at their place of work. My father, who had been in the army during WWI was in the Home Guard unit of his firm. He would often be absent overnight taking his turn on the roof of his company building in the centre of Birmingham. He would return home with tales of the damage that had been done and the roads which were temporarily closed.

These are some of the memories I have of the war period during my formative years between the ages of 8 and 13. Some were frightening, others like the neighbourliness that people had for one another were good.

Contributed 4 February 1995.

### **Mary Walker**

When war first broke out I was 6 years old and lived at 143 Streetsbrook Road, by Robin Hood Cemetery. My first memory of the war years was being woken at night by my mother, who dressed me in a fluffy little "siren suit" and then carried me down the garden to a shelter which neighbours and my father had constructed. It was quite cosy and held about six adults and several children. Unhappily I do not think it was made to last and after some wet weather the whole shelter caved in burying everything, including a large red chamber pot!

The air-raid siren was situated on the roof of Solihull Fire Station. I cannot remember being frightened by the war, sirens, bombings etc. Only towards the end of the War did I start to think about what would happen to us all if Germany won.

My father constructed a strong room in the back room of our house with wooden beams across the ceiling supported by uprights on the walls. Sand bags covered the French windows. A huge double bed was put in the room and myself, brother and sister used to sleep there. All windows had to have black curtains so not a chink of light would be seen from outside. A large air raid shelter was situated on the corner of Streetsbrook Road and Olton Road.

I remember smoke-screen tins the size of post boxes being situated at the sides of roads. There was one by where Sharmans Cross Public House is now. This site used to be fields and a bomb

was dropped there creating a huge crater. All the children went to have a look. Occasionally a barrage balloon would catch fire and bits of it floated down, so we children collected it up and also any shrapnel from exploded shells. We would compare our collections and sometimes swap items!

We all had ration books for food and clothes, and many people dug their gardens up to grow vegetables. There was no ice-cream or sweets any more.

Sharmans Cross Infant and Junior School was closed for a time so we had part-time lessons in private houses.

Everyone was fitted with a gas mask, and we had to take it everywhere with us. Mine had a little green case with a shoulder strap. We had to practice using them at school by leaving them on for a longer and longer period of time. They used to get very wet inside I remember. We also had shelter practice at school and had to file out every so often to get used to the idea, and also I guess to stop any panic in a real raid. All school windows were covered by strips of brown paper in case of glass shattering.

We would see aircraft going over just when it was getting dark. They were in formation and I guess they were ours going off to Germany on bombing raids. Sometimes my parents would listen to the drone of the aircraft and say that they were German ones.

At the rear of our house, across the fields and Robin Hood golf course, there were anti-aircraft guns situated, covered up with camouflage nets. When an air raid siren sounded the search lights would be switched on and the guns were fired which shook the whole house. Some bombs were dropped on Robin Hood Cemetery, causing havoc as might be imagined.

Every road in the Solihull area had its pig bin, where housewives threw any edible waste to feed the pigs.

When Coventry was bombed with the resulting fires, my mother held me up to the bedroom window to see the red glow in the sky.

In St Bernards Road there was a rubber tyre store, roughly by where Langley Infant and Junior School is now. At regular intervals the tyres caught fire whether accidentally or by sabotage no one knows.

As there was no traffic, except for Army convoys, we could play tennis and ball games in the middle of Streetsbrook Road!

Evacuees were sent to Solihull from the middle of London where they really suffered from air raids. They were literally arriving with just the clothes they had on. Several families were billeted in Streetsbrook Road.

There was an Army supply depot situated in Beechwood Park Road behind Streetsbrook Road. Italian prisoners of war were there for a time. German prisoners were also in Solihull and put to work in the fields by local farmers. American soldiers also were billeted somewhere near

Solihull, and I would often see them relaxing in Solihull Park, much to local girls' delight I imagine. I believe Polish Officers were billeted at Umberslade Hall for a time.

VE Day was celebrated by a huge party in a neighbour's front garden. They had a gramophone playing music and flags everywhere and all the children were in fancy dress. There was plenty to eat, produced by the women neighbours, and it was quite a feast. People were dancing around and singing. We children had special Union Jack hats to wear.

On VJ Day there was a huge bonfire on the corner of Streetsbrook Road and Miall Park Road. The soldiers from the Army depot brought thunder flashes and the noise of those exploding was deafening but very exciting for us children.

The street lamps were slowly being repaired and when the one by our house was finally done, all the children went out and danced and sang around it.

These are some of my clearest memories of war-time Solihull, and VE and VJ celebrations.

Contributed 1995.

### **Mrs A. Warren**

I remember many details of the war years:

Greville raffles for the troops

Free and easy concerts every two weeks - the money was saved for the local lads

Sandal House War Work

Raffles for "Wings for Victory" and "Salute the Soldier"

Jasper Hall's and Timothy White's chemists in Solihull High Street

General Post Office in Station Road (which is now a Building Society)

My pal Ann joined the W.A.A.F.S. and my sister joined the A.T.S.

We had air raid shelters in gardens, and also public shelters on the pavements.

A bomb was dropped on the corner of Moat Lane and Wharf Lane and made a big crater (MEB is there now). Two houses in Alston Road were down, several others badly damaged, also Cornyx Lane. People were evacuated. My mum's home and several in Hermitage Road had the roof and windows smashed. We were in bed too late for the air raid shelter, when it happened, people were killed in Cornyx Lane and in the area of Cornyx Lane and Alston Road.

We could see a red sky from the bombing in Coventry and Birmingham, it was a dreadful time, but still had to go to work on war work next day (the Rover Shadow Factory was the target).

We had black-out curtains, not allowed to show any lights, even a torch had to be covered with paper or a hankie.

I worked a short time on the Railway Station, Solihull in the booking office, we had to do fire pickets. We had ration books for food, only allowed so much. The food office was on the

Warwick Road opposite Ashleigh Road. We had docketts for clothes and furniture, we had to wait in queues for tinned tomatoes. Dried egg was a luxury meal. We used to queue to get it - it was in a tin. You mixed it and fried it like a pancake.

Identity cards had to be carried on you, we were all supplied with gas masks, the one for tiny babies, was a little thing, like a portable bag with a plastic window in, very difficult for a baby to suffer.

There were barrage balloons on school playgrounds and a big gun, in Lode Lane (Mayswood that is now). We called the gun "Big Bertha". The R.A. was stationed in Lode Lane, Catherine-de-Barnes, and the Americans were in Blossomfield Road where the swimming pool is now.

Search lights were on high buildings, there was one on the Sheldon Picture House, which now is a supermarket. Elmdon Airport was opposite Damson Lane on the Coventry Road.

While working at Goodmans factory in Hall Green, I fell ill with Diphtheria, so did my brother and sister, I lost my youngest brother of 11 weeks with Diphtheria. I had trouble with my legs for quite a long time and treatment at Broad St Cripple Hospital in Birmingham. I even went as Lady Godiva in the Carnival, so the money could go to the cripple hospital, they were donating the takings in that particular carnival for the Woodlands Hospital. I had to go into hospital after a while, I was blown out of bed in the 13 hour air raid, which Birmingham got, and some of the nurses were killed. However I was cured and would walk again after a few years.

I met my husband Cliff in 1939 the year war broke out, I was married in 1942, worked on war work for Brooke Tool of Greet in Birmingham but the work was brought to Solihull, Sandall House, a private house for people who were conscripted for war work, all kinds of people were called up to do war work, rich and poor. I was sent to a Training Centre to help teach these people. Also sent to the BIG TOP in Birmingham to demonstrate the work we were doing to encourage them to do war work. The next table to me at the BIG TOP was the Labour Exchange for them to volunteer.

While I was doing war work, my husband was in Tunisia, North Africa. We married November 26th 1942, I did not see him again till 1945. He was wounded and burnt with petrol, only worked for 6 years on his return from the war

Contributed December 1994

### **Mr Woodcock**

During the war Mr Woodcock worked at the Austin Aero Works, on the site of the present Elmdon Trading Estate. The workers at the factory assembled aeroplanes from parts made at the Austin Factory at Longbridge. In the early years Short Stirling bombers were made,

followed in 1943 or 1944 by Lancaster bombers. When the planes were assembled they were towed along a path which crossed the railway to Elmdon Airport for test flights.

Mr Woodcock remembers Alex Henshaw, who was the chief test pilot at Castle Bromwich Airfield, who would often fly to Castle Bromwich from Elmdon in his own bi-plane.

Mr Woodcock served in the Home Guard, based at the Austin Aero Works.

As told to Sue Bates, February 1995.

**Solihull, Warwickshire, thanks the U.S.A.**  
**July 20th, 1949**

"Solihull thanks C.A.R.E., U.S.A." was the title of an exhibition of photographs in the Commonwealth Gift Centre in London, visited on July 20th 1949 by Mr Douglas Fairbanks, K.B.E. the American film actor. The photographs, which were set up in the Display Room of the Centre, were taken at a distribution of American food parcels in the little town of Solihull, a few miles from Birmingham. The parcels had been sent through the organisation known as C.A.R.E. (Co-operative for American Remittances to Europe) and were distributed through the local authorities in Solihull to some of the old and needy people of the town.

With Mr Fairbanks at the exhibition was Mr Martin Lindsay, D.S.O., Member of Parliament for Solihull, who made a short speech of thanks for the gifts on behalf of his constituents, who were also represented by the Chairman of the Urban District Council, Cllr. Maurice Walker, J.P., and the Town Clerk, Mr W.M. Mell. Apart from Mr Fairbanks, who was present in his capacity as Chairman of the C.A.R.E. Committee in America, the donors were represented by Mrs and Commander Fieldwalker, Liaison Officer for C.A.R.E. in the U.K., and Mr Wilson and Mr Motley of the C.A.R.E. Staff.

Mr J.T.S. Lewis, Director of the Commonwealth Gift Centre, introduced the visitors and asked Mr Lindsay to say a few words on behalf of his constituents.

Mr Lindsay explained that the parcels did indeed go to the people who needed them most - the people who are too old or infirm or ill to go to restaurants (even if they could afford them) and who do not have works canteens at their disposal. He had brought with him several letters from people who had received gifts and he read extracts from these to his audience.

"The top one reads" he said, "Thanks very much for your marvellous box containing such a great assortment of foods - very very kind of the good senders from America and the wonderful persons who have been so generous. Thank you all". "How grateful I am" the second letter goes on to say "My wife has turned 74, and I am in my 82nd year. Hoping that all the givers will be rewarded in Heaven for their kindness. It is not only the gift but the kind thoughts which prompt these actions which we appreciate". Another goes on to say, "I am very grateful for them and I wish the people who have sent them good health and prosperity through life. We are only sorry we cannot thank you people of America ourselves for your generosity and let you know how much it is appreciated".

"You will agree, Ladies and Gentlemen", continued Mr Lindsay, "that these letters come from the heart and they convey in words the tremendous gratitude which the writers feel for the people of America and the organisation of C.A.R.E."

Mr Fairbanks, replying to Mr Lindsay, thanked him for the kind words which he had said, but explained the "the organisation of C.A.R.E. is something quite natural and quite human and I am sure, not as deserving of the high praise which Mr Lindsay has tossed our way". He went on to say that C.A.R.E. was something, quite apart from the European Recovery Plan, which received wide support in the United States because it is something which belongs to the individual, which ordinary people in the street understand.

"It provides people with the means for making a personal gesture", he said, "a gesture from one person to another - from Jim Jones in Pittsburgh to Sam Smith in Birmingham - because he can say, whatever the Government does, whatever the State policy may be, this is my personal gesture to friends overseas, a gesture of my own".

"I would venture to say" he continued "that over the years there has hardly been a more public-spirited and farseeing community than that represented by these islands. We have inherited much from you and we are proud that these instincts of generosity are part of the heritage which we have taken from you. And in that same spirit may I, on behalf of C.A.R.E. and the people of my country, thank you for spirit and your words".

Speaking of the uphill struggle which this country was still enduring, Mr Fairbanks concluded by quoting the verse:

"Fight on, my men" Sir Andrew said,  
"I am wounded but not slain,  
I will lie me down and bleed awhile,  
Then rise and fight again".

Anonymous report of the exhibition written in July 1949.

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