

Bert Langthorne's memories of childhood in WW2

(story as told to the Brompton Heritage Group)

Bert was 6 years old at the beginning of the War and already attending Brompton Primary School. He lived on his parents' farm on the edge of the village and walked to school along with other local children. One particular memory has stayed with Bert, though he didn't realise its significance at the time. It must have been just before the war had started and as he walked along the lane he was eating a banana. It broke in half and the piece that fell to the ground was instantly covered in grit, so he kicked it away into the hedge side. Little did he know that it would be 6 years or more before he had the chance to eat another banana.

Bert has known the village to flood 6 times, the first occasion he can remember being in 1939. His grandfather lived in a house near where Orchard Grove is now and Bert vividly remembers how the water went into his granddad's house through the front door and out through the back door. The house must have seemed like part of the beck.

When the War started, children who didn't go home for lunch still took their own sandwiches, which they ate sitting on the heating pipes in school. Now though, along with their bit of food, they had something extra to carry each day – their gas masks. Before long, however, proper school lunches were provided for all the children, the food arriving in containers from kitchens in Northallerton. Parents paid 2 shillings a week or 5d a day (10p a week / 2p a day).

Bert remembers being able to look into the linen mill near the school when the mill doors were open. He could see the roaring furnaces which produced the steam power for the looms. Coal for the furnaces was brought into Brompton by train and the coal yards were adjacent to the railway line up Station Road. At midday, a very noisy hooter at the mill announced that it was time for the workers to knock off for lunch, and the children at school could see all the girls pouring out for their lunch-break.

On the farm there was no electricity or piped water until after the war. Lighting came from paraffin lamps, and the milking was done by hand. Milk was taken into Northallerton in churns in a trap pulled by a pony. As it went round the homes people came out with their jugs, and the milk was measured out with a metal measuring scoop attached to a long handle with a curved section on the end so that it could lodge safely on the edge of the churn. The health and hygiene people would never allow that today!

Living on a farm, the family was never short of food. They were allowed to kill 2 pigs a year, for which a licence was required, and there were always plenty of rabbits, pigeons and hares to put into a pie. Bert's mother made butter and cheese, and there were plenty of eggs from the hens, the surplus of which could be sold locally. Bert's mother used to take produce down to Northallerton on market days, and sell it on the same site where the Farmers' Market is held today.

The need for the country to produce more food brought about changes in farming. Farmers were paid £3 for every acre of pasture which they ploughed up to use for growing wheat. The government dictated the amount. Livestock that went to the mart were graded, priced, then sold – there was no auction.

The most striking change, however, was in the introduction of tractors. Before this time, all the hauling was done by horses. Bert remembers his father getting a Fordson tractor, a basic machine which could only be used for pulling. Later the more sophisticated Ferguson was invented. This had hydraulics so that things could be lifted. Gradually horses were phased out, and fewer people were needed to work the farm. After the War, combine harvesters came in, along with other types of machinery, and a traditional way of life had

been changed forever. Also, mains water was brought in to Brompton, and electricity arrived.

Though Brompton was in a very rural area and well away from the theatre of war and the bombing, there were many signs of military activity. The surrounding countryside was used for a number of air fields, not only Leeming, and consequently the drone of aircraft could frequently be heard – our own planes setting off and returning, and enemy aircraft heading for Teesside. There were 2 plane crashes near the village. One Sunday morning a Spitfire came down in flames just off the Stokesley Road, not far from Stone Cross, as villagers watched in horror. There is a stone monument to the pilot at the side of the road. Another of our planes, also on fire, came down at Lovesome Hill, just missing the chapel. Bert also remembers well the search light on one of his fields on the farm.

Another occasion sticks in his mind, when an army unit parked its lorries at the end of Scots Pit Lane and soldiers came to the farm to ask for food. There were about 15-20 men, so Bert's mother set about frying eggs for them all, for which they paid with petrol, a precious commodity in those days as it was severely rationed.

When the bus loads of evacuees came into the village from Newcastle, Teesside, Hartlepool and Sunderland, Bert's parents took in 2 girls, who were with them for a year to 18 months. Their mothers stayed with them until they were settled, then headed back home.

Bert's father was an air raid warden, along with the other men who were in reserved occupations. Bert remembers 3 bombs coming down on Brompton Banks, landing in the fields, though one didn't go off.

Bert's most abiding memory is of one night in 1945 when the sky was filled with the throb of aircraft. For an hour, villagers stood and watched as plane upon plane passed overhead as far as the eye could see, each one pulling a glider. Then all was quiet. This sobering and impressive scene marked the beginning of the end of the War. D-Day was about to start.