

THE SECOND WORLD WAR THROUGH THE EYES OF A CHILD

I was four and a half years old when the Second World War started in September 1939 and not yet at school, as at that time a child had to be a full five years old to enter education. I lived with my family in Brompton, near Northallerton in a cottage on the green. I can well remember Neville Chamberlain, who was our Prime Minister at that time, speaking on the 'wireless', as the radio was known. He said we were at war with Germany. I asked my mother what that meant and she explained that men would fight one another and perhaps get killed. This was all very bewildering to a child of four.

PREPARATIONS FOR WAR

One of my earliest memories was of my father joining the A.R.P. which stood for Air Raid Precaution. He had to wear a navy blue uniform when he was on duty or on training sessions. His earliest job was to help to distribute gas masks to every person in the village and I went around with him. These gas masks would have to be worn should Germany launch a gas attack from the air, as had happened in France in the First World War. Off we set with the gas masks in my mother's wicker laundry basket. There were three sizes - small, medium and large and people had to try them on to see which fitted the most snugly. There was also a special cradle-like contraption for small babies. The whole population was ordered to carry their gas masks with them everywhere they went. They came in cardboard boxes with string through them so that they could be carried over the shoulder and then, as time went by, you could purchase special waterproof cases which were a bit more substantial. The real duties of the A.R.P., however, were to assist the civil population at the time of air raids, helping to put out fires and getting people into air raid shelters. Dad was issued with a stirrup pump, which was a small hand pump not much bigger than the sort of pump you would blow up your bike tyres with. These were designed to pump water from buckets onto small fires but I don't think they would have been very effective. These pumps, together with buckets of sand were placed in all public buildings. He also had a wooden rattle, similar to those used at football matches, which had to be sounded in the event of a gas attack.

And then of course there was the Home Guard. I can remember going to see them practice drill on Sunday mornings on the field that is now the football field in Station road. We wondered what these men were doing marching up and down with broom shafts over their shoulders (they hadn't yet been issued with guns). They didn't half look daft - talk about Dad's Army.

Another introduction at the beginning of the war was that everyone was issued with an Identity Card with name, address and a number unique to each individual. As children we had to learn our number by heart and I can still remember mine, JHMA 585, Some of us got bracelets or medallions made with this number engraved on it. The purpose of it all was that should we be injured

or killed in an air raid if we had our identity number on our person we could be easily identified.

Further urgent preparation was the making of blackouts for windows. You hadn't to show a chink of light as enemy bombers would be able to spot a town or village from the air. It was another duty of the A.R.P. to go around at night checking that no-one was showing a light - if you were they would knock at the door and shout 'Put that light out' Blackouts were made from heavy black material or some householders made wooden frames to fit closely to the glass and covered them with a black, tarry paper. They were held in place with swivel fasteners so that they could be put up at 'Blackout time' and taken down during the day. Brown sticky paper was also stuck to the glass in windows in criss cross patterns so that should the glass break because of a bomb dropping, the glass wouldn't fly everywhere, but would splinter and still be held in place by the brown paper. Double Summer Time was introduced in an effort to make the most of the daylight hours for the farmers. We would be put to bed in the summer with the sun still shining brightly and it was very difficult to get to sleep.

Shops, offices and public buildings had walls of sandbags placed outside them, again to protect against bomb damage and huge water tanks were erected in the streets to provide water should incendiary bombs be dropped. I can remember barricades being built in Northallerton High Street to impede the advance of tanks if the Germans actually landed in this country and air raid sirens were placed on County Hall in Northallerton, ready to sound at the first sighting of an enemy aircraft.

There were lots of leaflets issued telling householders how to make rooms gas proof, always to carry your gas masks, careless talk costs lives - meaning you hadn't to discuss anything in public which may be of use to an enemy spy.

Posters seemed to be everywhere telling people:

to eat National Wholemeal Bread (which was a dirty white colour)

to dig for victory

not to waste food

to keep children in the country

to know how to behave in an air raid shelter

to look out in the blackout

to look out for poison gas

` to carry gas mask everywhere

to join the Auxiliary Fire Service

to register for Civil Defence duties

to help build a plane

to recruit for the Air Training Corps

to save for Victory

With regard to the last one, one could buy savings stamps at Post Offices for as little as sixpence (two and half pence). When you had fifteen shillings (75p) saved you purchased a National Savings Certificate which went towards the

war effort. When I started school I used to buy the savings stamps from school and when I got into the top class it was my job to go to the Post Office once a week to buy the stamps for the whole school.

My next most vivid memory was of the evacuees arriving in the village. These were children from Middlesbrough, Hartlepool and Sunderland, where because of the shipyards there, it was expected there would be heavy bombing. Brompton being in the country was considered safer than the towns. The children looked so forlorn being led around the village by ladies from the WRVS. They had labels with their names and addresses pinned to their coats and carried brown carrier bags with their clothes in them. It was the job of the ladies to knock on everyone's door to see if they would take in an evacuee or two, not an easy task. I am still in touch with a person who was evacuated with her mother and brother to a cottage opposite the Church Hall. They came from Sunderland and stayed for the duration of the war.

There was a big rush to build airfields around the countryside and this area of North Yorkshire had its fair share, with stations at Leeming, Topcliffe, Dalton, Scorton, Catterick and Sandhutton to name but a few. In some areas 'dummy airfields' were built to confuse the enemy and there was one on the farm in Long Lane where my husband lived. This entitled them to an Anderson Shelter which was a prefabricated, metal air raid shelter, which was to be partly submerged in the ground and the roof covered with earth. The shelters were six feet high and six feet, six inches long and could accommodate up to seven people standing up. In areas of great risk most households were issued with such shelters or there would be brick built ones in every street. As Brompton was a low risk area we did not have shelters issued to us, but some people dug their own in their back gardens

WHAT WAS LIFE LIKE FOR A CHILD DURING THE WAR.

After Easter 1940 I started school and went along on that first morning complete with gas mask. There were up to forty children in some of our classes as the numbers were swelled by the evacuee children who brought with them an infestation of nits. In Northallerton, the grammar school had to use Church Halls and other buildings to accommodate their increased numbers as Bede Grammar School from Sunderland was evacuated here and for a while the Northallerton attended in the morning and Bede School in the afternoon.

Our teachers were all women, as the young men had been called up for military service. My first teacher was Miss Thornton who was quite old as she had been brought out of retirement. Of course, the classroom windows were all covered by the brown sticky paper I have already mentioned and heating in our classroom, the oldest part of the building, was by an open fire with a huge iron fireguard around it. This was always useful for drying out gloves in the winter time and for thawing out our daily third of a pint of milk which in those cold wartime winters would sometimes have an inch of ice on the top, pushing off the cardboard top from its little glass bottle. In summer, the milk would

sometimes be sour when we got it as there were no refrigerators in those days. The daily milk ration was introduced to supplement the diet of the children. The School Meals Service was also introduced during the war years for the same reason. For two shillings a week (ten pence) we got a two course meal every day and, do you know, we all begged our Mums to be allowed to stay for school dinners. The dinners were cooked in a Central Kitchen in Northallerton and brought to the school in insulated containers. We always wolfed them down except on one occasion when we had a sort of blancmange for pudding and I think it must have been made with sour milk - it tasted vile. But the Head Teacher wouldn't let us leave it (there was a war on) and we were made to sit there all through the first sitting and through the second sitting and into afternoon school time and she kept coming to check up on us to see if we had eaten it. However, we were rescued by one of the dinner ladies who smuggled it out for us in our pottery drinking beakers and she told the teacher we had eaten it.

School Christmas parties were pretty spartan affairs. Not only had we to take our own food but we also had to take our own cups. One year, as a special Christmas treat we were to go to the cinema in Northallerton instead of having a party. We had three cinemas in Northallerton at that time but they had chosen the oldest one of all, the Flea Pit as it was known. The film had just got nicely started when the projection equipment broke down and couldn't be got to work again. So much for our treat!

How did the war affect our family? My father and one of my three brothers were not called up for active service as they were employed in agriculture, which was reserved employment. My second brother volunteered for the army before his call-up papers came and he saw service as a sergeant with the Coldstream guards in North Africa and the Italian landings. Unfortunately, he was killed at Anzio Beachhead in Italy on 14th February 1944 aged just 24 I well remember the Saturday morning when the telegram came to tell us the awful news and I don't think my mother ever got over it. His name is on the war memorial in Brompton - Stanley Forth.

As regards food at home we didn't fare too badly. Because my father was farming he caught lots of rabbits and my mother used to make delicious rabbit pies, my youngest brother and I always used to fight as to who got the kidneys, but don't ask me to eat rabbit pie nowadays. However we were glad of it then. My mother kept hens in a run in the field at the back of our house, as did a lot of other people. When they were laying we had nice brown eggs to eat and my father grew lots of vegetables in the garden and we got potatoes and milk from the farm.

He also got a pig fattened as part of his wages so we had home cured bacon too, although I hated it - it was salty and very fatty. On pig killing day, one of the men who worked at VOM Bacon factory would humanely shoot the pig through the head in our back yard, it would be bled and the blood saved to make black pudding and then the innards were taken out and those parts

which could be eaten were saved and the liver was cut up and distributed among the neighbours. The tradition was that you didn't wash the plate before handing it back to the donor, as this was bad luck. Then the pig's skin was scalded with buckets of boiling water (boiled in the copper in the outside washhouse). This was to soften the skin before it was scraped to remove the tough hairs. The carcass was then ready for butchering and cut into sides of bacon and hams for curing. The head, trotters and other spare parts were then put into a large metal bowl and would be simmered for about twenty four hours in the oven. After this, when the meat was cooled, mother would work all the flesh off the bits and this would be put into moulds and filled up with the liquor from the cooking and left to set. The result was delicious brawn. Even the intestines were cleaned and ended up as sausage skins and the fatty bits were rendered down, cooled and salted and ended up as chittlings. Try feeding this to children today!!!

I think the biggest hardship for a child was that there were very few sweets available and sweet rationing didn't end until February 1953. We used to mix cocoa powder and sugar (if we could get it) to make something sweet to eat. Sometimes we managed to get chewing gum from the soldiers and on one occasion I took some to school. I had been chewing it over the lunch time break and took it out of my mouth when we went back into class as we weren't really allowed gum. Well, instead of disposing of it, I sat rolling mine around in my hands. Miss Thornton suspected something was going on and shouted out "Doreen Forth, Hold up your hands." Well, I did and do you know they were completely stuck together. The teacher made me go in the cloakroom to try and wash the stuff off but the fact that there was only cold water on the sink didn't help. They then got my brother out of his class to help but that didn't make any difference, so in the end he had to take me home. Well, you can imagine the reception I got from my mother! My hands were pretty sore by the time the offending stuff was removed



Geoff Forth aged about 10 in this school photograph

There was hardly any fruit imported from abroad because of risk of the shipping being attacked by the German U Boats. Just now and again there would be a consignment of oranges arrive and we would have to queue to get our ration. I think I saw my first banana after the war had ended. Each autumn we would pick blackberries from the hedgerows to make jam and rose hips, which we took to school to sell and were paid 2d a pound for them. They went to make rose-hip syrup which was an important source of vitamin C and the money an important source of income for us.

Clothes were also on ration and we had to 'make do and mend' which speaks for itself. I had hand-me-downs from my older cousins and adult wool jumpers were pulled out and the wool washed and knit up again to make into something for the children. I can remember my mother buying some flowered, cotton curtain material which the local dressmaker made into two dresses for me. I was so proud of them, but one day, when the washing was hanging out in the field at the back of our house, one of the cows in the field ate the skirt off one of my new dresses. I was so upset! One winter, my mother cured some of the rabbit skins and she made me a lovely pair of fur mittens from them she also made slippers.

We even made our own bathing costumes from old woollen jumpers - can you imagine what a sight we looked. Clothes rationing ended on 15th March 1949. All the family had to help to make mats and rugs from old clothes cut up into clips and woven into a hessian backing. Nothing was wasted. On cold, winter evenings you either helped with the mat making and got to sit near the fire or you were banished to the other side of the matting frame and sat at the back of the room and froze. One thing which was rationed, which we children were pleased about, was soap and as we could only have four inches of water in our baths this didn't bother us at all! Soap came off ration in 1950.

ENTERTAINMENT

Our main source of entertainment at home was the radio (or wireless as we called it). We would avidly listen to a programme called ITMA starring Tommy Handley and then there were programmes like Forces Favourites, Workers Playtime and Childrens Hour with Uncle Mac. Sometimes the programme would be interrupted by the voice of Lord Haw Haw, a German propagandist who would say 'Germany Calling, Germany Calling' followed by mis-information, designed to undermine the British population. I don't think anyone really took much notice of him though, nor of the leaflets which were dropped by German planes.

After the evacuation of Dunkirk we had troops billeted in the village in the church halls and Sunday Schools until they could be re-united with their regiments. They set up a field bakery in the Recreation Field and some of their vehicles were parked on the village greens. The village children used to help the soldiers to weave camouflage to put over these vehicles. While the troops were there we had a curfew on the village and people were asked not to go out

after dark, if you did one of the sentries would stop you with 'Halt, who goes there?' Occasionally the troops would give a concert in the Village Hall and we would be invited to attend. They used to sing and play instruments, even the spoons, and we would have a good sing-along with them. Later in the war a Land Army Hostel was built in the village to house the young women who worked on the farms while the men were at war. They would also give concerts and organise parties for us. We also had a prisoner of war camp nearby which housed mainly Italian soldiers who had been captured, and they too worked on the farms. Some of them married British girls and they stayed here after the war.

THE EFFECTS OF THE WAR

We were very lucky around here that we didn't see a lot of enemy action during the war although we could hear the bombs dropping on Teesside and see the barrage balloons over that area. Northallerton had some light bombing one night and a few small bombs were dropped in the fields near Brompton. I think they were aiming for the dummy airfield I have already mentioned. Several planes came down in the vicinity. usually our own planes coming back from bombing raids. One summer, Sunday morning we were playing on the green when we heard a funny noise in the sky. We looked up in time to see a plane explode in the air. It was a spitfire and it came down in the field at the back of the house where I now live. My two sisters lived in York at that time and it suffered heavy bombing, the railway and railway workshops being the principal targets. My mother took me over a few days after the bombing and I can remember walking through the streets and seeing all the damage, some houses with just one wall left standing with the furniture still up against it and the piles of rubble in the streets.

In Northallerton, the sight of wounded Canadian airmen became a familiar sight as a Base Hospital had been established where the Friarage Hospital now is. The buildings were made of timber brought over from Canada and some of these buildings are still standing today, even though they were only meant to be temporary. The nurses used to wheel the wounded out into the town in wheel chairs and long basket beds . The wounded airmen used to wear a bright blue uniform and were easily recognised.

The war in Europe finally ended on 8th May 1945 and the war with Japan on 14th August of that year. Let us hope and pray that we never again see such a conflict.

Doreen Newcombe 1998