

WARTIME IN BOROUGHBIDGE. (March 2010)

Through the eyes of a small boy. mjrjones

I was 7 years old when wars broke out in 1939, and vividly remember exactly what I was doing when my Dad came and told me. He had heard the news on the wireless (not called “radio” then!), and came out into the garden where I was sitting on my Triang pedal car, which I had outgrown but would not part with, to say that war had broken out and he would be going to fight the Germans.

My Dad had been in the Territorial Army in the early 30s, but was invalided out with rheumatic fever apparently; this did not stop him being passed “A1” in 1939, and he was in fact 34 years old and because he worked for West Riding County Council as a gang foreman on road building, he could have been exempted from military service. However, the Royal Engineers needed skilled road men and recruited round all County Councils; my Dad volunteered along with many other WRCC employees, went to Pontefract Barracks for enlistment, and they all went out as part of the British Expeditionary Force to France as 116th. Road Construction Company in late 1939.

As soon as war was declared, Boroughbridge had a good number of evacuees sent from Leeds to live with local families; Leeds was regarded as a target for German bombers. I remember we had two boys come to stay with us at Stump Cross; they had no socks, plimsolls, ragged jumpers and...NITS!; they shared the nits with all of us at Boroughbridge Primary School, which was generous. That was my first encounter with a fine tooth comb, and-I think- theirs with a bath and hair wash.

Because the school was now overcrowded, (and in those days the present Primary School housed both Primary and Secondary Modern children), Class 2 (Miss Brown’s class) and I think Miss Byers’ Class 3, moved to the old school up Church Lane (more or less on the site of the Health Centre), and had a great time, away from the rest of the school. In passing, it is one of Boroughbridge’s great “what ifs” that the then Parish Council in the late 60s (?) did not buy this building, which was used for a great number of local activities- including the library. The only drawback was that we had to go out to the rudimentary toilets! I remember the Leeds evacuees went home after only a few weeks, but by then other evacuees came in from as far away as London, but we could move back to the “new” school.

My Dad had gone to France by then, and we had letters from him, but I was at home with my stepmother; I remember she had to go out to work, at Miss Mudd’s Dairy, Aldborough, where she had worked before marrying Dad (my own Mother had died in 1935), and she had to work very hard, delivering milk with Tom Archer.

We also had to take lodgers, as a lot of civilian engineers had come to work at RAF Dishforth, and of course the Army had come to Boroughbridge. The first lodgers we had were a Mr. and Mrs. Ingram, from Coventry; he was an engineer for Armstrong Whitworth, and worked on the engines of the Whitley bombers at Dishforth. I remember he had a Riley 9 car, which impressed me, as we had never had a car! Whilst they were with us, their house in Coventry was destroyed in the blitz, and they went back to Coventry (this must have been around 1942/3).

To “us kids”, all that was happening around us was a big adventure; Army regiments coming and going- looking back over almost 70 years, it is hard to remember what regiments actually came to the town; I have checked with those contemporaries who were around at the time, and we all have the same problem! I know we had Scottish, Yorkshire regiments, the Pioneer Corps and Royal Engineers, but how many and when...it’s all gone. I know that officers were living in Boroughbridge Hall, Aldborough Hall; “other ranks” were in Bacon’s shop (now Peter Greenwood’s building), and in Nissen huts where the houses are on Aldborough Road, between there and the Hall, and in the fields on York Road which became Springfield Drive.

As a child, it WAS all very exciting, with soldiers and airmen everywhere, some ATS girls, Army and

RAF lorries whizzing around (we even had 60 foot long lorries carrying bits of aeroplanes about parked up in Fishergate and on Horsefair to marvel at). Planes flying about, night and day-mainly Whitley and Wellington bombers, but a few Spitfires, and one Sunday (possibly in 1940) I was biking to Stump Cross from my Granny's in Aldborough when I definitely saw a Messerschmitt go over, followed by a Spitfire...HONESTLY!

In 1940 my life was changed. Dad had come home for Christmas 1939, and gave me an Army knife, which I still have; he went back to France after 7 days leave, and Mum and I never saw him again. In June 1940, after the Dunkirk evacuation, he, the rest of his Company and up to 9,000 other British, French, Canadian personnel, plus nurses, French civilians were on the "Lancastria" when she was bombed and sank with the loss of 1000s of lives, including my Father. For the rest of the War he was officially "missing, presumed killed", with a pittance by way of pension to my Mum. The whole "Lancastria" business is still a closed file. For an 8 year old boy, devastation; the fact that Dad was "missing" was the great hope that kept Mum and I going- he might turn up as a prisoner. Of course, this didn't happen but after a couple of years, hope went, but we had learnt to live with it and-coped. Looking back, people were kind and supportive to us, and life as a small boy still went on.

Coal was rationed, and I used to have a "bogey" which I made with the help of my Grandad; I used to take it to the Gas House on a Saturday morning for a sack of (un-rationed) coke, which I hauled back to Stump Cross to keep the fire going. Although we lived in a new house, it still had only a fire range for cooking, though we did have a small gas ring for boiling the kettle. My bike and my "Bogey" were my real treasures; I'd bike all over, mainly with my best pal Bill Rennison- as far afield as Studley Deer Park and Fountains- this when we were 10 years old, and no one had any concerns about this- dark days for the nations, but still golden days for children.

Another adventure, incredible to think of now, was that on what is now the A168 but what was then the A1, which went through Boroughbridge, South through Stump Cross up Gibbet Hill and Ornhams, we used to choose our times between the infrequent lorries, and hurtle down Gibbet Hill, past Stump Cross, Kelly's café and nearly to the "Rec"! In winter, before the gritting lorries came round, you could do the same thing on a sledge (also down Aldborough Hill, though you had to sneak past Grandad's house on Hill Top! Don't try it now.

I mentioned we had lodgers; after the Ingrams we had Mr. and Mrs. Jones; he was another civilian worker at Dishforth. Mrs Jones was very good at giving me first aid after my many mishaps with my bike- most memorable being after oiling the chain, turning the chain wheel round at great speed with my index finger, and trapping said digit between chain and sprocket. I still have the scar. What else did we do as wartime kids? Roamed the fields around, followed the soldiers, hoping to pick up bullet cases (we did, from time to time). Went to the various fund raising events, like "Wings for Victory"; One of the most memorable of these was the sterling performance by the local volunteer firemen one day, when they staged a "rescue" from the top window of what is now Greenwood and Company's building. They had a very long ladder, one of them went up it to "rescue" a damsel in distress,(a dummy), and had a terrible time coming back down- chiefly because his "colleagues" were pumping water at him from an old manual pump. This machine lived in Joe Clark's yard in St. Helena, and was loaned to the York Castle Museum for safe keeping when the volunteer fire service moved from the rear of Greenwood's butchers. I have tried unsuccessfully to get it back for Boroughbridge, but sadly the York people deny they ever had it.

People often ask "Were there air raid shelters?" there were two in the school grounds, on the grass between the school and the Aldborough /York Road junction; one was for the juniors and one for the seniors. I remember we had to go into the shelter when the siren went (this was on the Police Station, and went off for tests fairly regularly); we had to wear our gas masks, which tasted and smelt of rubber, and which we had to carry everywhere in a cardboard box with string to go round your neck. It was damp, dark and cold down the shelter, and I remember we once had to sit with tear gas in the shelter to see if the masks worked. They did (sort of).

Rationing. Biggest problem for kids was-sweets. We had been used to having a reasonable amount of toffees, chocolate before the war (governed by your pocket money and how indulgent your parents and grandparents were); suddenly that all stopped, and the ration amounted to about a bar of chocolate a week (I think); additionally, whilst you could get apples, pears, plums during the season (either legally or by scrumping), after that - nothing. Once a week there was a small delivery of bananas or oranges to Miss Ellis's shop in High Street, and if you queued and were lucky you might find yourself with one banana or one orange. However, necessity being the mother of invention, there WERE alternatives. In 1942 I sat and passed the County Minor scholarship to King James' Grammar School in Knaresborough, and a whole new world opened up in the form of Mr Lawrence's Oldest Chymist Shop (it WAS spelt like that!), and his rich source of liquorice root (advisable to be chewed and swallowed only in small quantities, for obvious reasons), and cinnamon sticks; this diet supplemented by Clarkson's halfpenny teacakes and- wonder of wonders- half a single block of Lyon's ice cream (some of you will remember that these were small cylinders about 2 inches in height and the same in diameter) from Mrs. Woodward's shop opposite the bus station. This happened only very rarely, and usually when you were "skint". As far as meat, eggs and other groceries were concerned, I cannot remember a shortage, living in the country; the limit was as to whether we could afford them! I remember that Miss Mudd kept pigs, as she was rightly famous for her ham and egg teas, which were popular with the aircrew from Linton and Dishforth; one pig was called Hitler, and became such a pet that Miss Mudd could not bear to see it killed; commerce prevailed however, and Hitler became bacon, pork and ham.

York was heavily bombed, and some relations came to stay with my grandparents when their home was damaged in York; I can remember them as not being very nice people, and my grandparents being glad to see them go home. On many nights I can remember the sirens went, and we sat downstairs under the stairs and listened to the German planes going over, and hearing the bombs falling on York. In 1944, a Halifax bomber crashed on Howe Hill at Aldborough, two fields from where my grandparents lived, and going across to see the site; tragically all the crew were killed, but the Aldborough policeman Jim Harley, who was a friend of ours, was decorated for trying to save them.

What was there to do? Many lads joined the Air Scouts, we met in a loft at the vicarage; the Scouts were run by a Mr. Akers and Mrs. Spencer (the wife of the Head of the Secondary school). We had a great time learning knots (?-the AIR Scouts?) and doing all the other things Scouts do; I think Air Scouts because of clothes rationing; we only needed our school flannels, grey shirts, and a blue beret, plus the neckerchief, as opposed to the harder to obtain regular Scout uniform. Good fun, until Mr. and Mrs. Spencer moved on.

There was also the British Legion Silver Band, which some of us joined towards the end of the war; this was led by Mr. Ingledew, Pauline Phillip's grandfather, and we practiced above what is now the Social Club. Bernard Harcourt, who had been bandmaster of one of the regiments in Boroughbridge, married Joan Davey, and he took over the band, which grew from strength to strength until- sadly- it disbanded in 1955.

One abiding memory is of the Nissen huts off York Road being occupied by squatters at the end of the war by returning servicemen and their families who were homeless, and of "sailing" between the huts in a tin bath when the snow melted (Springfield did not get that name for nothing!)- again with Bill Rennison and others.

More? Much more, but that's enough for now.

Geoff Craggs