

Preface

I wrote "wartime child" in 2010 for my grandchildren so I apologise if the wording isn't entirely "grown up" in places.

However I have been persuaded that it may be of interest and whilst I am one of the oldies in the club, there must be a few who have memories of the time and I, at least, would be interested to hear them.

Wartime Child

Introduction

What triggered the idea to record my war? I suppose it was taking grandchildren to the Imperial War Museum and their questions. Not about all the weapons, tanks or planes on display but rather what did it feel like? what do you remember?

Before I go very far, I should mention two childhood friends who will crop up from time to time. The first of these is Ken Wilmshurst who used to come and stay with a neighbour Blanche Beaumont. I always claim we collided pedal cars at the age of 3, exchanged addresses and insurance details and have remained friends ever since. The second is Jim (or Ron) Georges. Jim was in my class at Winterbourne Elementary school but wasn't amongst my close friends there but we were both successful in passing the 11 plus early, Jim to Whitgift and me to Selhurst. When evacuation came both schools were sent away together so we palled up and remained friends until he died a couple of years back. Eventually I acted as Best Man at Jim's wedding and Ken acted as Best Man at my wedding to Joan.

Where do I start? Well Dad was a Post Office worker, a sorter at Mount Pleasant, Mum was at home and I had a pretty conventional childhood. I liked school, I rode my bicycle round locally on the pavement or in the road.

As there were few cars on suburban streets pre war and most deliveries were by horse and cart, I played football or cricket in the local park or even in the road, went to the cinema with Mum & Dad to sit through some feature film they enjoyed while I waited for the Cartoon, the Newsreel and the B film which was often a "Cowboys and Indians".

Mum and Dad were Londoners and so we often went up there. I particularly remember George VI's Coronation, visits to the Science Museum or the Zoo, the Crazy Gang at the Victoria Palace, Pantos, or just a walk in the London parks on a decent Sunday.

Obviously things were going on in Europe but at 8 or 9 they don't register. The great experience in 1938 was the holiday in Jersey involving the over-night sailing across the Channel. I was aware of the grown ups being anxious towards the end of 1938 and that we were issued with gas masks but all the worry seemed to disappear with Chamberlain and his piece of paper signed by Hitler and Peace in our time.

The main event for me in 1939 was winning my scholarship and though things were happening in Europe they didn't really affect our way of life. Our holiday this year was at a holiday camp at Dymchurch in late August which was great fun with all the other kids that were there.

Towards the end of the second week however, the adults were called to a camp meeting and came back with long faces and told us our holiday was over and we were going home early. Coaches were laid on for us to go and even before we

had finished embarking, Army lorries were arriving. As we came through the outskirts of London, things had changed; There were -barrage balloons around, some people were filling sand bags or digging air raid trenches and that weekend the pattern of my life changed.

Evacuation To The South Coast

When we arrived home on Friday we found that Dad and I were to attend a meeting at my new school, Selhurst Grammar, early on Sunday morning whilst the grownups were talking about Poland, Hitler and what was going to happen. The upshot of the school meeting was that war was very likely and that the school was to be evacuated out of London.

Then of course the school radiogram was switched on in time to hear Chamberlain's epic broadcast that no reply had come from Germany concerning withdrawal of German troops from Poland and hence Britain and Germany were at war. Now there was certainty, we were given some instructions on what we should take with us including the inevitable gas mask and told to report to the school the following morning to be taken out of London. Apparently our party would include boys from the other grammar schools in Croydon but neither the boys nor the parents were given any idea where we would be going.

After the meeting we headed towards the trams to take us home when the Air Raid Warning sounded. Dad obviously was anxious to get home as Mum was on her own and as there seem to be no obvious danger we carried on. Part way along we were chased by a very agitated Warden who insisted that we must take cover and sent us into a nearby school where we were ushered into the hall which had a mainly glass roof! Luckily the whole thing was a false alarm and the All Clear sounded quite quickly.

The rest of that Sunday was given over to packing and on Monday morning Dad took me back to Selhurst with a suitcase and gas mask and we all walked in a long crocodile to Selhurst station and were crammed into a train. After a couple of hours with delays en route we finally arrived at Hove and split into groups and taken to a church hall for tea and sandwiches while we waited to be sent to various foster parents. Gradually our numbers diminished until there were about six of us left and this group was taken to a very imposing house overlooking Hove cricket ground.

This was the house of Lady Wishart and it was clear that we were there only whilst other arrangements were made. We were given some rooms within the servant's area and we were banned from most areas of the house. It wasn't too bad and we had a fair amount of freedom since we had no foster parent looking after us and though the masters checked on us from time to time, we found the beach, the boating lake and the Palace pier still open.

On Saturday, Jim and I were allocated to a family and this was indeed a culture shock.

Our fosterers were Dr Reginald and Mrs Joyce Windle and we were taken to a multi storied house a little back from the seafront where there were three maids and a cook, a part time gardener, and two cars in a mews at the end of the garden. They had no children so it was probably a culture shock for them as well but they made us very comfortable and we got on well with them.

Gradually arrangements began to fall into place. The school was to share the Brighton and Hove Grammar School with Brighton using the school from 8 to 12 and the Croydon group from 2 till 6 but since we were sharing classrooms, all books etc had to be taken every day. The timing did raise a minor problem for Jim and I since we had midday lunch with the Doctor and Mrs Windle. This was served at 1 o'clock and we were some 15 minutes from the school. On some occasions when the Doctor was late coming back from his rounds, Jim and I had to run all the way to school.

The timing of our period at the school also meant that we were returning to our billets in the dark with no street lighting whatsoever and so at 6 o'clock we were assembled into groups and led back under the control of a master and some prefects to our houses. We soon settled into a routine. The Windles owned two Scottie terriers and it became our task to regularly walk them along Hove front in the mornings though one day we caused panic when one slipped its lead and was lost for an hour or so.

My Father and Jim's Dad came down to see us on alternate Sundays and frequently took us to Lyons Tea shop in Brighton and since there had been no air raids on London, once in 6 weeks we were allowed home for the weekend and also at Christmas and Easter.

A few events stick in the memory - we were taken on a skating trip to a frozen lake up in the Downs, an afternoon at Roedean School surrounded by about 300 very noisy girls at a Lacrosse Tournament (Dr Windle was Roedean's Doctor), A New Year Cocktail Party where Jim and I acted as doormen and cloakroom attendants and got some very generous tips, an evening when Jim's dressing gown brushed against an electric fire and we had to douse it in the fire buckets on the landing and there were regular trips about Hove and Brighton in Mrs Windle's car

This all began to change in May 1940 when the German Army attacked in France. We heard reports of "forces retiring to prepared positions" and "battle of the bulge" but it was only when the French surrendered and the BEF withdrew to the Channel Ports and Dunkirk that it became apparent that the situation was very serious indeed. In June the German Air Force started attacking ships off the coast and also the coastal towns including Brighton so we were now getting regular raid warnings, the early stages of the Battle of Britain.

The decision was taken to move the School from Hove to Bideford/ Barnstable which before motorways were many hours travel so since London was not at that time receiving air raids, my parents took me back home and Jim went home very shortly after.

Our experience of evacuation was very good and we were sorry to leave but we must also have impressed the Windles since after the war they adopted two children.

Back Home To Croydon (all be it for a short while)

It was good to return home but I must admit my first impression was how small it was compared with Hove and also that half the garden was now taken up with the Anderson air raid shelter but to a large extent, life was much as I had known pre war. The Battle of Britain was at its height but hadn't yet come to the London area and the papers and news were reporting RAF and German losses almost like sporting results.

In late August I was playing in the garden when some aircraft flew over and was surprised when anti aircraft (AckAck) guns opened up. It was a raid on Croydon Airport and the warning sirens were very belated and a number of people were killed. This was the start of a number of alerts but the main one was in mid September when a very large force flew up the Thames one afternoon and severely raided and set fire to the London Docks to be followed by another bad raid that night. This was the start of the London Blitz which was to last over 70 odd consecutive nights. After several nights spent in the shelter, it was decided that Mum and I would go to stay with my grandmother in the country in the village of Old Bradwell, Buckinghamshire. This village has long been absorbed into Milton Keynes but then was completely rural.

This was the second culture shock. Whilst Beverstone Road didn't have some of the features of Hove, nevertheless we had 3 bedrooms, 2 living rooms and a kitchen, gas, electricity and water supplies, a flush toilet and hot water supply from a gas geyser and a bath fitted in the kitchen. Grandmother's cottage was small and had only two bedrooms, one living room and a small kitchen, drinking water was drawn by bucket from a well in the yard which also served 5 other houses, washing water came from water butts fed by rainwater. While there was an electricity supply there was no gas in the village so cooking was done on a coal fired range or by a paraffin stove and the toilet was in a block of 6 small sheds containing buckets at the end of the common garden, the buckets being emptied once a week by refuse men. The bath was a tin bath kept in a shed and brought into the kitchen when required but the only supply of hot water was the coal heated copper in the kitchen.

The village itself formed a square of four lanes with nearly all the cottages facing outwards to fields. There were three pubs, two small shops, one of which was also the Post Office and a bakers, the butcher came in a van twice a week and the local bus ran about 6 times a day to Wolverton. The population was about three hundred with many of the men working in the large railway workshops in Wolverton.

It was going to be difficult for us to live with my Grandmother for any long period and Mum tried to find some alternate rooms but there had been many evacuating from London and most of suitable rooms were already taken

Another difficulty was my schooling where I had had no formal schooling since returning from Brighton. Since I had a scholarship to Selhurst, I was eligible to attend the local Grammar School in Wolverton but such was the confusion and delay because of the bombing etc the authorisation for this took some time to come through. As a result I had no formal schooling for over 6 months and with Wolverton following different methods of teaching I was at some disadvantage.

After a while living with my Grandmother, Mum became a live in housekeeper with a local farmer and we moved in to Church Farm in Old Bradwell. The farmer himself was semi blind with a wife who was an invalid but nevertheless he still did the milking and drove a pony and trap around both Old and New Bradwell doing his milk round whilst his brother and two others worked the farm.

Like many town bred children the rural scene was all new to me but I soon settled to life around the farm and soon helped out in a number of the small tasks, helping with the milking and the milk round, collecting eggs from all over the

farmyard, going out with the labourers shooting rabbits on Sunday morning (always a useful addition to rationing) and in particular I remember the rickyard as a great playground.

One highlight that I recall was the thrashing of the wheat harvest. In the 1940s there were no combine harvesters and the corn harvest was cut by reaper binder, stacked in stooks of 10 or 12 sheaves to dry and then stored in barns awaiting thrashing. On the appointed day the thrashing machine arrived towed by a steam engine, and with much manoeuvring became sited in the barn. For the next 3 days the yard was a hive of industry with noise, dust, the steam engine going full blast and the more than occasional swear word from the volunteer village men.

Because of his work at Mount Pleasant Sorting Office, Dad had to stay in London and though he didn't say much about the Blitz he was looking increasingly tired and strained when he came down to see both us and his mother. Also his age group was conscripted into the Home Guard and into firewatch duties in the street but he came down whenever he could. He came down at Christmas and Mr Folkes and his family made us very welcome but Dad then went back to the Blitz at New Year when the City of London was virtually destroyed by bombing and fire.

Despite the large railway workshops at Wolverton the area was never bombed and seemed very safe. We even stood in the fields and heard the aircraft overhead and saw the fires in Coventry from some 40 miles away. On one occasion an aircraft jettisoned its bombs across the fields near three villages killing one cow - an event for the villagers worse than any suffering by the large cities. One afternoon I arrived home from school to hear that a Wellington bomber had crash landed in a field half mile from the village. When I got there it was to find half the village also there and one lone village policeman frantically trying to prevent people taking bits as souvenirs

Later that Spring, unfortunately Mrs Folkes died and as her cousin was coming to act as housekeeper we moved out and stayed for a little while with grandmother but then Mum got two rooms with Mrs Goodyear, the sister of Gran's next door neighbour and we stayed for the rest of our time in Bradwell. Running two homes and Dad travelling whenever he could was a financial strain and Mum did odd cleaning jobs round the village and I did an evening milk round (with a small churn and measuring jugs).

Back Home For Keeps

As the main bombing of London seemed to ease off at the expense of the other large towns, we did venture home during school holidays but usually spent at least one night in the shelter but towards the end of 1941 the bombing eased completely and with various boys returning back home, a section of Selhurst reopened back in London so we returned home for good. Though my formal education suffered considerably, as a townie bred boy I learnt a lot about farms, animals and country life.

Back home in Croydon in early 1942 I returned to Selhurst and immediately found that because of the changes in schools I was having great difficulty catching up (I think my first report rated me at 26th out of 30). The third year was still doing Latin which I hadn't done since Brighton and many other subjects were at different levels and to a different syllabus to Wolverton. We still had the odd air raid but as a

whole these were nuisance raids not lasting very long but nevertheless involved some interruption and part of the night spent in the shelter.

At Easter it was decided that the rest of the school would return from Bideford and hence we were organised into our proper classes and had most of our regular teachers though many of the younger ones were away in the forces. It did mean that the teaching was on a more structured basis and very slowly I started to catch up and at the Summer of 1942 we made our choices for O levels and I chose sciences and dropped Latin

Life settled down to a wartime routine. Uncle Bob had been called up into the RAF servicing aircraft engines, Uncle Horace into the Army where he became a very good cook and Uncle Reg and Aunt Rose though not in the services probably had the riskiest jobs of all with Reg delivering petrol to aerodromes in Thanet and Rose driving a Naafi van round coastal gun sites.

Dad had now been trained on anti aircraft rockets and had to serve one night a week on duty. All married women without families under 5 years had to work full time so Mum went back to the printing trade.

Most items of food were now rationed and supplies could only be obtained from the shop where you were registered. There were no supermarkets but there were individual shops ie bakers, grocers, butchers etc and it became my regular Saturday routine to do the shopping which frequently meant queuing for half an hour at each individual shop before being served.

Gradually most of my friends returned from evacuation and I met up again with Ken and Jim. By this time every child had a collection of shrapnel from bombs and AA shells and certainly bomb sites were great adventure playgrounds. Very few now carried their gas masks with them (this had been compulsory at the start of the war and you could be fined if without it) and there were restrictions on travel, for instance you could not go within 20 miles of the coast unless you lived there or had business there. Even Theatres and Cinemas had reopened and if the Air Raid warning went a signal was flashed up on the screen or announced over the loud speakers and performances carried on and many people stayed in the theatres.

There were only two BBC radio stations for news and entertainment and there were many light comedy shows ie Band Wagon (Arthur Askey), Garrison Theatre (Jack Warner) and the inevitable ITMA (Tommy Handley). Most of the Stars went round entertaining the forces under the umbrella of ENSA and apparently Handley substituted a photograph of Hitler in his security pass and was never challenged. If you wanted to hear the German slant on news you could hear it by could tuning in to "Lord HawHaw"

On our dining room wall was a war map, showing Europe, North Africa and Russia with tapes showing approximate front lines with German, UK, Russian flags which were shifted around following the latest news. Later on after D Day it was joined by a similar map showing France and Germany in greater detail.

Two events that come to mind were attending wartime marriages.

The first of these was my cousin Eunice who married Stefan. This caused some difficulty since Stefan was a Polish airman

who had managed to get to England and Eunice was under 21 which meant that her father had to give her permission to marry and he was reluctant to do so but my Father and Mother having met Stefan eventually persuaded Uncle Will to allow the wedding. Wartime rations meant that wedding feasts were normally quite sparse but Stefan and several of his friends disappeared one day and came back with a feast and enough wines and drinks to ensure a memorable day. It was a Catholic wedding and I have a fond memory of one of his friends singing Ave Maria from the Organ loft in the Church.

Dad and Bob Gordon and families had always been close friends and we were invited to the wedding of his eldest daughter Joyce. For weddings people were allowed limited extra rations so that there could be a wedding breakfast and whereas Stefan and friends had raided the black market, Bob, who was a policeman, dare not do this and so many friends and relatives rallied round and made small contributions to the food. For me I met again his other two girls, Iris and Hazel, who became good friends in teenage and even taught me the basics of the waltz and quickstep. Needless to say the grooms and many of the guests in both events were in service uniform of some sort.

By 1943 most men from 18 to 35 were in the services or on war work similarly many young women were either in the services, the factories or in the land army. There was a great shortage of labour at harvest time and the idea of harvest camps arose. Schools had a long break in the Summer and 14s and upward "volunteered" for work to help with the harvest.

Selhurst staffed two camps, one near Guildford and the other at Downe near Biggin Hill which was where I went. We were put up in the local primary school with only outside wash facilities and we slept on mattresses on the floor in the school hall. Our teachers came too and cooked the meals which were eaten under cover in the playground and oversaw the farms we went to. We mainly worked in market gardens in the area and even found time to play the local lads at football and we were allowed home at weekends for a much needed wash and brush up.

One evening we walked across fields to the perimeter of Biggin Hill Aerodrome to have a look at the fighters but were most disappointed to see only dummy canvas models obviously there to confuse German planes. The farms must have thought we worked well because a similar camp was proposed in 1944 but that did not take place. I think we were better off than those at Guildford for they worked in very dusty wheat fields. However the farmers paid something towards our labour and after the costs of the camp we got the princely sum of £2 10s for 4 weeks labour.

From Autumn 1943 onwards we were working towards the O level exams in the middle of 1944. There were now many GIs over from America and London was full of uniforms of all sorts. There were now very few air raids and the news bulletins were full of 1000 bomber raids over Germany and fighter sweeps over northern France.

For some weeks the radio had reported extensive bombing of targets in the Pas de Calais. In late Spring it became apparent that the RAF were trying to attack the launch sites of the V I s. In June came the first of the Doodle Bug V1 flying bombs (also called Buzz Bombs).

These were small pilotless aircraft powered by a jet engine that sounded like a badly tuned motorbike and carried a large bomb as their nosecones. They were given a limited supply of fuel and when this ran out the engine stopped and the whole unit glided to the ground and exploded. They were launched from the area near Calais aiming specifically at London and came over at all hours so alerts were virtually on all the time. They were also difficult to shoot down since they outpaced most of RAF fighter planes.

To defend against them, nearly all the barrage balloons in London were moved to the Kent hills and raised on the flight path of the bombs and their steel cables sheered the wings off many of the bombs and they fell in open country though still a large number got through to London. Quite a few came down near the village of Downe where I had been at harvest camp last year.

Since the raids came at any time people seemed to carry on as normal only taking shelter if the bombs came anywhere near. One of our teachers was killed by a bomb as she cycled to school and after that the school was closed except for those taking O level or A level exams. My O (GCSE) level exams were taken in the air raid shelters at the school with sometimes rather poor light and the odd Buzz bomb overhead.

Once the exams were over there was no reason to stay in London and Mum and I went back to Bradwell where I got a job helping with the harvest at a local farm at the princely sum of one shilling (2.5p) an hour - It was hard work but great fun.

Dad came as often as he could but one weekend he was very quiet and not himself. The reason came out gradually. Each week as part of his Home Guard duties he had to help man the rocket anti aircraft battery at Anerley. On this night, a group had come by train and were approaching the battery gates when the engine of a flying bomb cut out and the bomb started to come down. Dad and several around immediately threw themselves down on the ground and the bomb landed some 100 yards away further into the battery. Dad was unhurt but quite shaken but unfortunately others further up the road were either killed or injured and Dad had to help clear up the aftermath

On June 6 came the announcement of the invasion of France now known as D Day. The battle around the Normandy beaches lasted most of June but later in the Summer the Allied forces broke out and rapidly advanced across France and captured the Doodle Bug launch sites in the Pas de Calais so by August the attacks by them had reduced very considerably and we came back from Bradwell.

However then the bombings by the V2 rockets started. These were targeted on London and were being fired from Holland high into the stratosphere until they reached the top of their course and then the rocket came down at speed and though they could be traced on Radar there was no way of stopping them reaching London. Fortunately they were fairly limited in numbers and seemed to take some time in preparation so the attacks were intermittent. By the time they reached their target, they were travelling considerably in excess of the speed of sound and the explosion was followed several seconds later by the sound of the rocket coming down through the sky. It led to the rather cynical comment that if you heard them coming you were safe. Rather curiously, ice was often found in the craters

School resumed in September and I started a course for Higher Schools certificate (A Level) and to a large extent wartime life carried on without much interruption. The Allied Forces had reached the Rhine and though the V2s still came occasionally and the odd V1 launched from aircraft, there were very few air raids.

The War Ends

In the Spring of 1945 came the news that the Allied Armies had crossed the Rhine and with the Russians also attacking in Poland and East Germany, it seemed that the war would soon be over and in early May the German forces surrendered and all fighting was to cease at 11am on May 8th.

This was VE Day and there were obviously great celebrations, church bells were rung, there was dancing in the streets and Dad, Mum and I went up to London and joined the crowds in the Mall when King George, the Queen and Churchill came on the balcony of Buckingham Palace. There was a tremendous sense of relief and I couldn't have had a better 16th birthday celebration.

After the declaration of peace in Europe, street lights came back, sandbags were starting to be removed from many buildings and shelters, blacking out material was removed from windows, and display lights came back on and though rationing would remain to some extent till the 1950s a few items came into shops which hadn't been seen since before the war. We even had our first seaside holiday for years at Wittering. Blanche Beamont had moved there early in the war and told us of a 72 hour curfew before D Day when much of the invasion fleet was loaded from the beach there. Ken was there as well so we had a great time on the beach with very successful fishing since the beaches had not been fished for 5 years.

However the war still raged in the Pacific and many of the troops that had fought in Europe now started to prepare to go East and there was the strong possibility that Japan would have to be invaded at considerable cost in lives. This was brought to a conclusion by the dropping of the two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the surrender of Japan in August.

Now the celebrations in May were now repeated with the knowledge that the war was completely over. As we were at Wittering we went along to Portsmouth where the naval ships were firing rockets and sounding all their sirens. In Portsmouth, outside the dockyard gates there used to be over 20 pubs side by side but bombing had reduced these to 12 but they were doing a roaring trade with laughter, cheering and song and again dancing in the street.

It is not difficult to explain the euphoria and relief that followed the declaration of peace; it was just the realisation that all the tension and worry was now over.

As a family we were very lucky. Nobody in our family was killed or seriously injured. Though we lost roof tiles and

windows, our house was intact though later we had to have many repairs to deal with other hidden damage. There were occasions when there were moments of great fear when air raids were at their height when the noise of planes, bombs and anti aircraft fire was almost unbearable but there were also many moments of joy and laughter. Many items of food were rationed but many of the parks were turned over to allotments, people kept chickens in their gardens, rations were compensated by vegetables etc and apparently we had quite a quite healthy diet.

That was the end of wartime but there were two events later which were connected.

The first of these was a little while later – a street party. In the afternoon the mums raided their store cupboards and provided a tea for the youngsters and in the evening the adults built a large bonfire in the road, a radiogram was set up on the pavement and we danced and sang round the fire. Hazel and Iris came over by bicycle from Brixton and joined in the fun. About 11 o'clock I cycled back with them to Brixton and we passed many similar street parties and when I got back home the party went on till the small hours.

The other occurred in the Spring of 1946. We got up very early, Mum packed a flask and a few sandwiches, and we caught the first train to London. We were going up to see the Victory Parade in the Mall. However when we got there it was to find the pavements packed many deep and all we were likely to see would be the tops of the heads of the passing parade.

Luckily Dad had a brainwave. On our way across the Green Park, we had passed a pile of duckboards which had been used in the air raid shelters. Behind the crowds fences had been put up either side of a 5 foot hedge to protect it. We got a few of the boards and placed them across the hedge and we had an instant grandstand. A lot of others saw what we had done and built their own. The Police came along and made us get off while they shook the fence to see it was safe and then allowed us back up and we got a wonderful view of the whole parade which had representatives and military bands from all over the UK and from overseas forces. After the parade there was then a RAF flypast which included nearly all the types of aeroplane used during the war.

It was then home for a rest before we went up to London again in the evening to the Embankment for a great firework display on the South Bank.

This started out just to put a few notes on paper but it just seemed to grow with one memory triggering another and I am sure there are many other memories I've yet to recall. If it is of interest enjoy, otherwise there is always the WPB in the corner.

GW B

August 2010