

You were asking about my wartime experiences. When I started studying family history the starting advice was always to button-hole the older members of the family to get their memories! Ah well " plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose " I have quite vivid memories of some aspects of the wartime and I must apologise if I have already bored you with some of them. I remember listening to the Prime Minister , Neville Chamberlain, broadcasting and telling us that we were at war with Germany. We had a large wooden box-like radio-set the maker being "Echo" . It was run on a large heavy accumulator which I had to take to the electricians at the bottom of the street to be re-charged. I remember also the broadcasts by the much-loved King. He really did have a very bad stutter and it was painful to hear him sometimes. We used to have the Daily Herald , a popular broadsheet, which was strongly Labour and was later taken over to become the Sun.

Rationing was very much part of our life both during and after the war. One had a ration book containing coupons permitting you to buy the staple foods:- milk, cheese, butter etc. There was much disquiet when bread was put on ration at a later date. The ration book also contained points vouchers which enabled you to buy luxuries such as clothing. The shop-keeper would have to count the coupons and presumably these enabled him to get supplies (see Cpl Jones in Dad's Army). As a boy I always wondered why other boys did not have a father but ,of course, they had all been conscripted. Conscientious Objectors were ostracised and called "Conchies" Children were supplied with free orange juice and cod liver oil to back up the food. I am convinced that this Spartan regime was the reason that my generation have been so healthy and lasted so well.

CHAPTER TWO

Winston Churchill became Prime Minister in 1940 and mother said " Tory war monger !" a not uncommon view at the time. As First Lord Of the Admiralty at the time of the First World War he was seen as responsible for the fiasco of the Dardanelles with many casualties. Soon however he became the revered leader as history sees him. Hitler was always seen as a comic figure with his little moustache, Nazi salute and goose-stepping troops and there were many songs and jokes about him , mostly based on his alleged mono-testicular condition. I can still remember one of the songs but I will spare your blushes and not print it . If you cannot retain your curiosity I could send it in a plain envelope.

We often played football and hopscotch in Jubilee Road and cricket by chalking the wicket on a fence or building. There was very little traffic partly because petrol was only available for essential services. We also spent a lot of time scrambling amongst the timber in the timber- yard attached to the nearby chair factory (no Health and Safety then) we also spent a lot of time train spotting at the level crossing and had small 1-spy books listing the various types of trains which we ticked off. I remember the King class and Castle class of express trains and the square-belly shunting engines. We also got quite good at plane spotting and could identify Spitfires and Hurricanes. Also the odd Messerschmitt. Later we would see the Lancaster and Halifax bombers going over.

We had been told that Wycombe (then known as Chepping Wycombe as well as High Wycombe) was a possible target of German bombers as the chair-factories had been converted to make Mosquitoes, a two-engined bomber with a wooden fuselage. When the siren went for the first time we had to go to the air-raid shelter in the school playground which was a large concrete building with concrete ledges to sit on. After the all-clear on the way home mother said " I'm not going down there again. If I'm going to die I'll do it in my own bed ,not down there." And we never did. The

only bombing that we experienced was when a doodle-bug(German V1 rocket)landed in front of my school and smashed all the windows.

I remember the ARP wardens (Air Raid Precautions) whose job it was to go round to make sure no-one was showing a light. (See Hodges in Dad's Army) . There were red buckets at strategic points containing sand and water in case of fire. Swimming pools were all closed as the water might be needed in case of fires from the bombing and there were static water tanks in various places for the same reason. This is one of the the reasons for me not ever having learned to swim. I did not see much of the Home Guard , originally called the LDV(Local defence volunteers

On a lighter note the main entertainment at home was the wireless with many good plays and comedy shows such as ITMA (it's that man again) with Tommy Handley. Like most people the first sight of television was the Coronation which we watched on Don's set. There were four cinemas in the town :-the Majestic (later called the Odeon)' the Rex, the Palace and the Grand which was a "flea-pit" round the corner in Desborough road. Seats were usually a shilling at the front and one and nine at the rear and balcony if there was one.The offering was normally the main film, a news real and a supporting film. With time as the main films became more ambitious the supporting film was dropped. N.b, the back row of the Odeon was where Mor and I did much of our courting. On Sundays one did not go out to play and I went to Sunday school at the Oakridge Road chapel (now a mosque). At home we always had dinner at 12 to fit in with the meal breaks at the factory and there was a "British Restaurant " run by the council offering cheap meals intended to help families where the mother was at work in the munitions factories. Aunt Sally and Aunt Lil ,mother's sisters, would call in once a week on their way to collect their pensions at the Post Office at the top of Green Street. A less welcome visitor was Mr Cartwright to collect the rent each week. His father who was a chair-factory owner had had the houses in Green St. built and insisted that his workers must rent them or lose their jobs.

CHAPTER THREE

The doctors at that time made house-calls and if we wanted one we had to go next door to Mrs Coppucks (not sure of spelling) as they had a telephone. The next door neighbour on the other side "had gone to Stone", said in a very hushed voice. This was the so-called lunatic asylum at a village called Stone near Aylesbury. The name was later changed to St. John's hospital and is now closed.

As a child I suffered from earache and excessive ear wax. Dr. Wilson (a dour Scot) told my mother to put full strength hydrogen peroxide in to the ears and he would also clear them out with a gadget like a tiny corkscrew on which he wound cotton wool. It had a sharp point and was very painful and when I complained I was admonished. When I was talking to your mother about it she said that she remembered mother putting the peroxide in with a teaspoon and that it all fuzzed up. When I started my pharmacy apprenticeship I saw that the correct dose was a few drops of 50% peroxide! I am sure that this treatment had been partly to blame for my perforated eardrums and subsequent deafness.

In 1941 I noticed that your mother had started to wear maternity smocks. These were half - length smocks intended to hide the facts that a woman was "expecting" . The word pregnant was never used. I was rather bemused by all this as there was no sex teaching either at home or school. Later your mother went to the maternity hospital in Priory Road and returned home wth Judith. (It begins to sound like an episode of Call the Midwife) .

I remember going once a week to a house in Desborough road with a small book and a sixpence in which the man would enter it. I think this may have been a form of health insurance

in those pre- NHS days. When a friend or relative died it was customary to pull the blinds down in the front room and they were not wound up until after the funeral. This made the front room rather gloomy but it was only used for special events such as weddings and funerals. We spent most of our time in the central room which we termed the kitchen and cooking , washing etc was carried out in the attached scullery.

In 1943 I passed the 11 plus and went to the Royal Grammar School (founded by Edward the sixth in 1551 as were many grammar schools) at the top of Amersham hill. This was a large modern building and took about 700 boys. It was a penny bus ride from Green street. Most of the teachers wore academic gowns and the headmaster Mr. Tucker and the deputy Mr. Morgan wore mortar-boards. Only Mr Tucker was allowed to use the cane and I received the cane for eating strawberries when I was fielding. I have disliked cricket ever since! As it was a grammar school Latin was taught. After the first year one could opt out of it and take Woodwork, Music, Spanish or German. As the woodwork classes were full I chose music. On the first day I said to one of the other boys „ My favourite classic is the Warsaw Concerto". The teacher Bernar(sic) Rainbow loftily said „ at the end of the course Keep you will realise that it is neither a classic nor a concerto .. Pupils were always addressed by their surnames. The Warsaw Concerto was very popular at this time and was the theme music for the film "Dangerous Moonlight". Like many films at that time it was thinly disguised propaganda.

CHAPTER FOUR

We always had chicken for Christmas which was a great delicacy as we did not have it during the year. There was no such thing as turkeys. At Christmas we always had a box of dates and a bottle of port. Apart from that port we never had alcohol in the house. That is apart from the tot of brandy which mother took in the morning to help her through the day. At Christmas we bought her a bottle at egg flip but as this was made with eggs it didn't count as alcohol. The rest of the year it was meat, mostly beef, usually brisket as it was cheap. Most offal was off-ration and so was very useful. Amongst other things we had fried chitterlings (pig's small intestines) but I never liked it. There was also black pudding which was rather like a large sausage not the slices you see nowadays. There were also pig's trotters.

Mother was a good cook having been trained by her mother. She never used a recipe though there was a small recipe book sponsored by McDougal's flour but I don't think it was ever used. Of course she made her own pastry and Yorkshire puddings (no Aunt Bessie in those days!) Her apple pies were particularly good and wild blackberries from the hedgerows were added in the Autumn. We often had jelly as a pudding. The only spice that I remember was nutmeg which was grated over rice pudding. Pepper was always white as the black was seen as rather pretentious. Apples were either eaters or cookers and there were no fancy varieties. There were ,of course, no oranges or bananas. Cheese was a standard product rather like a mild Cheddar. Later Dutch Edam and Gouda arrived .At one time the government introduced a fish called Snoek but it never caught on. Later there was Rock Salmon (Dogfish) . Spam was very popular and mother would cut slices, dip them in batter and fry them. Sometimes I would go to the fish and chip shop for "two pennouth of scrumps" which were the bits of batter left in the vats after the fish has been cooked. Delicious!

The only holiday we had was when we went to Tiverton, presumably by train, to stay with your grandmother. Mrs Skinner was a sweet, kindly woman with grey hair and a strong Devon accent. It wasn't possible to have seaside holidays even if we could have afforded it as the beaches were mined and draped with barbed wire.

Opposite to us in Green Street was the butcher Plested. There is still a Piested butchers in Chinnor, presumably from the same family. Next to him was Oliver's the

sweet shop. At the top of the street was Venable's the greengrocer ,next to the Post Office, and a grocer at the bottom of the street. Round the corner in Desborough Road was Horwoods which sold clothing and sewing and knitting requirements. It was there that mother bought her wrap-over pinafores. Sweets were on ration and I think it was 4 ounces per week. Most of the sweets were boiled sweets which we called "suckers" . I do not remember any chocolate as I imagine it would have to be imported.

CHAPTER FIVE

I used to go often to visit Grampy and Grannie Keep (your great-grandparents). They lived in Shaftesbury street about ten minutes away. Grannie Keep was a very frail old lady. Grampy used to wear the sort of shirt which took a detached stiff collar but he wore it without that collar as was usual in his generation. Grampy had been a French polisher and smoked a pipe. It always fascinated me that he spat on the hob where it sizzled. Grannie was very annoyed. Uncle Frank (dad's brother)was usually in the front room being an author (he never had anything published). Mother was always very scathing about him . She did rather a good scathing.

The baker and the milkman delivered to the house. The bread was a sort of white which was termed the "standard loaf". No sliced bread then. The milk was what is now thought of as full-cream. There was no skimmed or semi-skimmed milk. The milk bottles at that time had a much wider neck than the later foil-topped ones. They were closed with a cardboard disc and with these and any odd pieces of knitting wool we would make woolly bobbles. We also used to make rag rugs by threading odd pieces of material through a piece of sacking and these were often used on wooden floors. Shades of Blue Peter! The only man who still used a horse and cart was the rag and bone man who would walk up the street shouting some indecipherable call. We would then take out any unwanted clothes, broken furniture etc. The horse would walk slowly on his own, stopping every so often. We boys used to follow him mocking his call. Like the majority of boys at that time I had the standard hair style with a side parting which I have maintained to this day. We used to plaster it down with Brylcreme. The barber was in Bridge Street and because he had a club-foot he was always known as " Hoppy Berty ".

The standard pain killer at that time was Aspirin in five grain tablets. Milk of Magnesia was used for any tummy upsets and Friar's balsam was put in hot water and inhaled for a cold. The standard laxative was Syrup of Figs though your mother used Senna pods which were soaked in water and the liquid drunk. For most skin conditions there was calamine lotion. Tincture of Iodine was used to staunch any minor cuts etc.

As a by-the-way I was thinking recently that this all sounds rather historical and then realised that Queen Victoria had died only thirty years before I was born!

High Wycombe was a town dominated by the furniture industry and both father and grandfather moved there from Aylesbury, presumably to get work. For special events e.g. Coronations and Jubilees a bridge made entirely of chairs was built across the narrowest part of the High Street. I understand that it has been replaced by a banner due to Health and Safety fears! My father was a chair-maker and brother Don was a cabinet-maker. Mother was an expert caner as were many women at that time, she did this at home throughout the war and afterwards. The caning consisted of crossings and doublings and the edges were beading using a wider cane. Mother would sometimes be asked to cane whole chairs and occasionally antiques. For the most part she caned chair seats. I would go to the factory in Jubilee Road and collect the empty seats. After mother had caned them I took them back. If my memory serves me right mother received Fourpence per seat. I would also have to fetch the bundles of cane. If she saw some caning that wasn't up to scratch she would mutter "gypsy caning" as travelling gypsies did not use the correct amount of doublings and crossings.

At the Grammar School I was always known as "Jedge"(rhymes with hedge).This nick-name was used for all boys called Gerald. I did not become Gerry until I started work in 1948. I was an avid reader and used the public library in Queen Victoria Street a great deal. On the floor above was the reference library which had long tables and it was here that I did most of my studying as it was so quiet. In the front room at home was a twelve volume encyclopaedia called "The Wonderland of Knowledge " containing articles about science,arts, Greek myths etc. I think

this aroused my interest in a wide variety of topics. I understand that dad had bought it as a special offer in the Daily Herald.

The school had a recorder group which I joined . I then had a piccolo as we could not afford a flute. I borrowed a flute from somewhere probably from the Bucks School of Music. Being an "open" flute the fingering was very like that of a recorder. I played the leading (i.e.only) flute in the Bucks Youth Orchestra. One of the pieces that we learnt was" Country Dances" BY Bela Bartok. In one movement the flute played in 5/4 time whilst the rest of the orchestra played in 4/4 .(it was that sort of music!) I never finished at the same time as the rest even at the public concert in the Town Hall. The conductor, Freddie Bailey, was furious.

In 1944 Lawrence Olivier's film of Henry the Fifth was shown and was encouraged by the government to boost civilian morale (once more into the breach etc.).This kindled my love of Skakespeare and was followed by his Hamlet and Richard the third.

In 1945 was held the first post-war election and it was then that I saw Churchill'in the flesh'. At that time the best and poshest hotel in town was the Red Lion in the High Street (now, sadly a pound shop) . It had a large portico with a statue of a red lion upon it . There was a huge crowd in the High street and I was towards the back. Churchill appeared on the portico and although I could not hear him it was reported that he said that like Disraeli (who had at one time been the MP for Aylesbury) he would be at the head, pointing to the lion, and his opponent would be at the tail. However, it was not to happen and the Labour Party swept to victory, mainly on the votes of the returning troops and a general feeling that things had to change from the pre-war conditions.

EPILOGUE

In spite of wartime restrictions I look back on my childhood , perhaps though the mists of nostalgia, as being a happy and carefree time. Children could play in the streets and walk home from school without fear of molestation. Apart from rationing etc. the state did not impinge on one's day to day living. There were no party politics, no political correctness nor an EU. There was no 'Health and safety! It was a time when only girls had their ears pierced and beards and tattoos were only seen on sailors. We knew nothing of the Holocaust and the Cold War was yet to come. There was a feeling that the nation was as one in its determination to " Beat the Hun".

For one little boy in Green Street these were happy times indeed.