The Hedgerow

Issue 34, Autumn 2014. ..*a tangle of words from local writers...*
***The Hedgerow**, a free publication from writers in the Epping Forest area, is distributed in libraries and bookshops from east London to Epping. Thank you to everyone who sent in submissions or helped with this edition. If you would like to write for **The Hedgerow** we would be pleased to hear from you.*

A WW2 Story

I was born in a flat in Hatfield Road Stratford. However, when I was very small we moved to 91 Tower Hamlets Road, Forest Gate, which was just as well, because Hatfield Road was destroyed by enemy action.

The LNER railway from Liverpool Street to East Anglia ran along the end of Tower Hamlets Road, and the Germans were always trying to bomb the railway, which meant that all the ends of the roads abutting on our road were flattened. At the end of our road Forest Gate hospital had barrage balloons tethered in the grounds to foil the Nazi aircraft. One night, one of the balloons broke its cable and came drifting down our road, where it wrapped the cable round our chimney and took off the roof. My mother and I were in the shelter, and my father, an engine driver, was working a night shift. He came home early in the morning while it was still dark and never noticed the absence of a roof until he went into the kitchen to make himself a cup of tea, thought he could hear water running and went to investigate. He gazed upstairs straight into the sky; the sound he had heard proved to be trickling plaster. We promptly moved two doors along to an empty house, where the occupants had left for a safer environment.

My school was Odessa Road Primary, the oldest school, I believe, in the borough of West Ham. It still had the classrooms arranged in steps to the back of the room, where the good children sat, so that the naughty boys could be at the front under the teacher's eye. I was in the infants' department at this time, and the hall of the junior school was fitted out with bunks as a Rest Centre for bombed out families. Of course, this was only at night, during the day they had to go to friends or wander the streets.

Whenever there was an air raid warning we infants would be herded into the hall with the juniors, where we sat on bunks and had community singing. Over our heads was the weight of a very tall school- we had no air raid shelter. One afternoon we emerged from the hall to find the place besieged by hysterical mothers who had heard a rumour that the school had received a direct hit. My mother was not among them. I was a bit miffed, and enquired why. "Oh, I didn't think it very likely," she replied. My mother was a very calm lady.

Maureen Poole

During the war my school was evacuated to Worksop. I was very unhappy and suffered badly with home sickness. After some weeks I became very ill with jaundice. It was decided that I should return home and my parents travelled up to collect me.

The train back was very slow, stopping and starting and crowded with soldiers. There were no seats free and we sat on the floor. We arrived back in London late and the Underground was closed so we made our way on foot in the blacked out streets to my granddad's house in Islington. Then Mum and I sat on the front steps while Dad looked for his dad, and the front door key, in local air-raid shelters. The sirens had gone off some time before and gunfire was thumping away.

Eventually we were in. The lights were all off so in the dark I was put to bed in granddad's iron bedstead while Mum and Dad made themselves comfortable in chairs. Outside the raid banged on. I could see out of the big uncurtained window the search lights criss-crossing the sky and as I closed my eyes, nearly asleep I felt deeply, deeply happy. I was back in London.

A flavour of wartime living.

Wondering what was wrong when my parents listened to the declaration of war on the radio – Mum crying and Dad comforting her. The sound of the siren being tested and people running into the street. The cat ate our dinner.

Staying with cousins in Portslade just after the start of the war and listening as a family around the radio to the news, and not being allowed, even at the age of 4, to speak or interrupt.

Getting to school early after a heavy raid to collect shrapnel. The different colours and shapes made it both interesting and swappable

Spending time in the air raid shelters when there was a daytime raid at school and taking turns to entertain each other. We were disappointed if the all clear sounded before we had had a turn.

My Father wrapping me in a dressing gown to carry me to our Anderson shelter when the siren had gone off and we could actually hear the enemy planes approaching.

Being evacuated: getting off a coach carrying a case, hugging my teddy bear and being grabbed by someone who wanted to take me home. Little girls always went first, older boys were the last to find billets for.

After peace was declared being taken at night to the top of Portsdown Hill, Hampshire and watching as the lights were switched on across Portsmouth, Southsea and the coast. Everyone cheering and letting off fireworks. After the years of darkness the effect was stunning and very emotional.

Eileen Ward

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Wartime Memories of Woodford

In the long hot summer of 1960 my husband of three months and I came to South Woodford Station (George Lane) to look for a flat. Geoff was starting work as a lecturer at the South West Essex Technical College and School of Art, I was teaching in Bethnal Green and so Woodford seemed a convenient place for us to live.

We walked up George Lane appreciating the flowerbeds, bright with red geraniums and edged with white alyssum. Turning right into the High Road, we could see that not only gardens had trees but also there were trees alongside the road giving a welcome shade on such a hot day.

There was a great variety of shops and outside some of them were glass cases containing postcards, advertising second-hand furniture, toys, bicycles and motor bike gear. Then, outside a newsagents at the bottom of Salway Hill we saw an advertisement for a flat in Empress Avenue. The weariness from the long hot walk drained away and we crossed the road into the Avenue. The houses at the bottom of the Avenue were different from the houses in the middle of the Avenue. They were semi–detached and with a modern design. Apparently, a bomb had fallen during the War, we wondered why they had been re built so quickly. Was it anything to do with being in Winston Churchill's constituency?

We knocked at number 44, and waited nervously for Mrs Young, the lady of the house to answer the door. The reason for the delay was she had a bad fall and was unable to walk upstairs. The terraced house had two large reception rooms, a breakfast room, scullery and lavatory downstairs and corresponding rooms upstairs. Mrs Young would, of course, live downstairs and we would rent the upstairs for £4.10 a week, gas and electricity included. We would also be responsible for bringing her coal and anthracite from the cellar and carrying her dustbin from the back to the front of the house.

In the front bedroom there was a very large cigar shaped stain on the ceiling. Mrs Young explained that it was the result of an unexploded rocket.

"We were so lucky it didn't explode, our shelter in the garden wouldn't have withstood a direct hit. We couldn't do anything until the army experts had been and examined it."

They did decorate the bedroom and the stairs but we had to have that dark brown paint on the dado. You couldn't get the lovely light original cream in war time, probably something to do with the blackout." Unfortunately Geoff had to carry his bike up and down the stairs every day and new chip marks of her lovely cream paint appeared every day.

Marilyn Hawes

Wartime Memories of Scotland

I was born in Glasgow in 1937, and lived with my parents and my baby brother in a suburb of that city which was just a short tram ride away. I remember my class at school trooping out to sit on a wooden bench in a newly constructed air raid shelter, and the sense of fear that gripped my heart when I saw on the newsreels the screen filled with purposefully marching German soldiers, wearing sinister-looking helmets, goose-stepping their way across the silver screen intent on their purpose which boded nobody any good.

But, my earliest memory of the Second World War was when my father carried me downstairs to our sitting room, where my parents slept on a bed settee. As he put me into bed with them, I heard him say 'That's terrible' and what was terrible was the sound of the great whump of bombs falling on nearby Clydebank. When I asked my Scottish grand-father to tell me about the First World War – he had been most reluctantly conscripted to serve in France – all he would say was that 'It was terrible.' And of course, it had been, as the bombing of Clydebank would be. And so much more besides, not spoken of.

The blitz of Clydebank was on the 13th and 14th of March 1941. I would have been four years old. Clydebank was the target of one of the most intense Luftwaffe bombing raids of World War II. Each night, over 200 German bombers had attacked, aiming to destroy naval, shipbuilding and munitions targets. Incendiary bombs were dropped, starting marker fires to assist further waves of bombing. Fires at a distillery, an oil depot and at timber yards caused great damage to industry. But Clydebank's housing bore the brunt of the raids. Of 12,000 homes, 4,000 were completely destroyed. Only seven properties were undamaged. The official death toll records 528 casualties. Many argue the figure should be far higher.

Two months later, my father's Home Guard platoon was on Eaglesham golf course, when a German plane crashed, its pilot parachuting onto the green sward to be placed under arrest. The incident made national news because the pilot was Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess, who had been a frontline soldier in the Great War, on his way, it was said at the time, to meet a fellow aviator, the Duke of Hamilton. Evidence would much later emerge that Hess's intention had been to broker a last ditch peace deal between Germany and the Western powers, prior to the invasion of Russia which became Operation Barbarossa.

I remember helping Dad to polish the shiny buttons on his khaki uniform, admiring his rifle and its firing mechanism. When our family moved away from Glasgow to live on the Clyde coast, where my parents ran a private hotel, we saw lines of shipping that had come across the Atlantic in convoy to reach the port of Glasgow, And observed the silent submarines waiting for the opening of the great boom thrown across the Clyde to keep the sea-borne enemy at bay. The great houses built along the coast by Glasgow merchants when it was the second city of Empire, were requisitioned by the army and navy for the duration of the war. When Peace was declared, bunting fluttered along the little promenade, and we school children were given a brown paper bag containing a somewhat stale bun to mark the special nature of the day. My father continued to cut out coupons from the guests' ration books, the neat piles of cuttings swept up weekly from the kitchen table as the Nation found its feet and while we listened on the wireless to the cheers that greeted Mr Attlee, our newly elected Prime Minister, when he ended his first post-war speech to the Nation by quoting Blake's Jerusalem, drawing our attention to England's green and pleasant land.

Sylvia Ayling

This issue of *The Hedgerow* is also available on-line at www.penny-freeston.com

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Editor: ***Penny Freeston***

Childhood Memories of World War II

My memories of the preparation for the war in Woodford are not that clear, I was just 6 years old The first thing was that my grandfather had a surface air raid shelter built in his garden at 53 Abbotsford Gardens by local builder Stokes. He paid for another one in our garden at 17 Forest Approach. They had 9 inch reinforced concrete walls and a 6 foot cube living space inside. There was a corridor entrance providing a blast wall which had a frame on it on which a piece of dampened material could be placed to block gas. We were issued with gas masks. Those for very young children had a red rubber piece sticking out like a nose. My cousin, a baby, had one in which she was placed. The tops of the postboxes were painted with a yellow paint which would detect gas. Other things were done but I do not remember if it was before or after the war started.

A hole was dug in the island at the top of Forest Approach. A roughly 10 foot cube reinforced concrete box was half sunk into it and then banked up with earth. It was entered by a trap door at the top. This was soon found to be impractical so a door was put in the side with steps down to it and a blast wall to protect it. This was an ARP (Air Raid Precautions) post. The ARP warden was responsible for ensuring all windows were blacked out at night, for going round the street with a rattle if there was a gas attack and for the reporting of bombs and fires in the area. There was a similar post on the island at the other end of Forest Approach which had a large EWS (Emergency Water Supply) tank placed next to it at a later date. This provided water for the fireman if the mains were damaged. Fire tenders with no pumps towed two wheel Coventry Climax pumps. An AFS (Auxiliary Fire Service), later NFS (National Fire Service), station was established on land at the end of Fullers Road between the wooden cottages and the workshops of Wells garage. The Singer sewing machine shop on the High Road opposite was taken over as a canteen and rest room. A volunteer force with LDV (London Defence Volunteers) armbands was created, it later became the Home Guard. Harvey Hudson's new showrooms next to the Majestic cinema were taken over for some wartime purpose. Bus windows were covered with a varnished material mesh with a wooden diamond surrounding a clear region in the middle. This was to protect passengers from flying glass. A steel pole with a siren on top was placed next to the blue police box at Gates Corner. The box was surrounded by sand bags to protect it. Car headlamps were covered with a metal disk which had a narrow slit in it and a shade sticking out over the slit. Substantial pig bins were placed on residential street corners to collect food waste to feed pigs. A defence, or at least a delaying line was created through Woodford. A tank trap ditch stretched through the Forest from the junction of Hale End Road and the North Circular Road to the top of Chelmsford Road at Mill Plain. There was a ring of 6 foot cube concrete tank traps around this junction and around the junction of Churchfields, Chelmsford Road and the High Road. In the road were sets of plugged holes. The plugs could be removed and steel girders placed in the holes so that the road was blocked. On the pavement just north of Broomes the chemist and Chelmsford Road there was an octagonal pill box with a false superstructure all painted to look like a real building.

My father was an RAF volunteer and was called up the day before war was declared and travelled to France overnight on the day war was declared. He served with the RAF Wireless Intelligence Service on the French/German border intercepting enemy transmissions, recording them and determining their bearings. In Service life he was a high speed telegraphist.

My mother and I had gone to my grandparents in Hastings and we were returning from morning church when the sirens went off telling us war had been declared. In October we returned to Woodford as nothing was happening (The Phoney War).

There were two newspaper like magazines, Modern Wonder and Modern World. They were full of photos and articles about mechanical and technical things. There were lots of details of aeroplanes and war materiel. It was all very interesting to a boy of my age. When publication ceased I looked forward to their return "when the war was over". Like so many other anticipated things, peace did not bring their return.

"Dig for Victory" allotments were created on Forest land behind the Roses next to Bunces Lane. It was fenced off and our neighbour, Mr Pressman, had the first plot in the corner next to Bunces Lane. He dug it two spade spits deep putting the turf in the bottom with the sub soil on top.

It was a very cold winter and in France Dad was issued with a white woollen roll neck navy submarine jersey. I still have it and use it in cold weather.

In June 1940, 12 days after Dunkirk had finished, Dad, who had been stationed at Metz, brought his unit and equipment safely out of Brest.

Air raids started and we spent the nights in the air raid shelter joined by our neighbours who came through a hole in the fence. We had electric light and a paraffin heater. I remember the sound of guns, bombs and aeroplanes and standing at the bedroom window and seeing the sky glowing over the docks. I used to go out first thing to collect the shrapnel lying on the roads and the pavements. I still have some of it. I never found a shell nose cone of my own. In October when the Blitz was at its height Dad was stationed with his unit and equipment at a Coastal Command airbase on the Isle of Islay, the southern most of the Hebrides. He called for my mother and I to join him and he came down on leave to collect us. We all went up to Glasgow in the night train. It had all ordinary carriages absolutely full, mainly with servicemen and with kitbags everywhere. In the morning we caught a train to Port Glasgow where we boarded a Macbraynes ferry, the Loch Fyne, to East Port Tarbert. I remember watching the dolphins swimming alongside the ship. At East Port Talbert we were taken by bus across the Mull of Kintyre to West Port Tarbert where we had refreshments from some sort of WVS ladies. Then we boarded the Loch Eil and sailed to the Isle of Islay. We stayed there for 2¼ years in various rooms in Port Ellen. I went to school. Proper Scots elementary - the 3Rs and no nonsense, and I was reading in no time, something they had not managed in England. It was beautiful country and there was loads of space. I can still visualise so much of it in my mind's eye. I ran wild. I gained a Scottish accent. The evidence of war was all around us with all the airman and soldiers but really that was all. There was rationing and shortages but there were compensations in the form of snared rabbits from around Dad's Direction Finding Station, poached game from crofter friends of Dad and, rarely, unrationed venison. Vegetables were limited but so many swedes I never want to see them again. There was plenty of milk and we shared weekly boxes of kippers from Stornaway with other RAF families. It was my job to chop up the boxes for firewood. The peat fires did not start well and a newspaper over the mouth of the fireplace to make it draw either caught fire or got sucked up the chimney or both. Dad made a metal shield out of flattened petrol cans which clipped on the fire bars and worked beautifully. Mother cooked on a very small paraffin stove and lighting was a pump up paraffin Tilley lamp with a mantle "borrowed" from the RAF. We had a radio run by a large HT battery and an accumulator which was exchanged for another charged one each week. I remember listening to Tommy Handley's ITMA and a short programme about war exploits called “Into Battle” which had “Lilly Bolero” as its signature tune. Although Dad never said much about listening to, and getting bearings of, Atlantic radio traffic which besides Convoys and Coastal Command would have included U boats. The signals from the latter would have been passed on to Bletchley Park for decoding but he would never have known where they went. At the beginning of 1943 Dad was posted and we returned to London.

Things were fairly quiet and I have no particular memories until May 1944 when convoys of troops passed through Woodford along the High Road going south. No one knew why but we all guessed it was a build up to an invasion of the Continent. There were lorries and half tracks. They stopped regularly lined up along the kerb. Some ladies brewed up tea among the tank traps in the garden of a large house which stood at the corner of Churchfields. They filled large enamel jugs with the tea and distributed it to the soldiers. I helped a few times but was stopped by a stupid policeman who said a boy should not be doing it. After he had gone I carried on. With my mother I bought some cigarettes with my pocket money and distributed them.

Then the first V1 flying bombs landed. When the siren sounded we went down into the school cellar but soon the Alert was continuous and school was stopped. At home we had a Morrison shelter in the front downstairs room. It was the size of a king size double bed. It had a frame of heavy girders with a thick steel plate on top. The bottom had slats with a mattress and the sides were hung with heavy 2" wire mesh. You removed a mesh, got inside and rehung the mesh on the outside. It would have protected you from a collapsing house but not from a direct hit. We slept inside at night and went into it when we heard a V1 coming during the day. My mother was deaf and it was summer so I sat in the garden reading and I would tell

my mother when I heard one coming. Very soon the dog learnt what was happening and his ears would prick up and he would start to move before I did. One would wait for it to pass overhead before the engine cut out and then you were fairly safe. Once after a long silent wait I looked up to see our windows coming in! The V1 had landed at the bottom of Empress Avenue.

Things got worse and by this time Dad was stationed at RAF Pershore, Worcestershire. He asked us to join him and we stayed with an old lady in nearby Bishampton. She had a brother-in-law who was a farmer and I "helped" with the harvest. We were there for the summer and in September I started secondary school in Pershore.

Because I had a place at Sir George Monoux Grammar School in Walthamstow we returned in November and that night a V2 rocket landed in front of the school knocking out all the Junior school windows. We were all transferred to William McGuffie School in Forest Road. Back in Monoux in February we were having school dinner when a V2 fell on a road behind the school. Fortunately no one was seriously hurt but glass made a very small cut in my head which bled profusely so I ended up in the First Aid Station. Coming home from school one day the trolleybuses all stopped at Becontree Avenue and I walked on to find a conical crater in the centre of the road where Grove Road met the Woodford New Road and damaged vehicles were scattered around. I was not scared by V2s. I was young and fatalistic and as you did not hear them coming if one hit me I would know nothing about it.

Victory in Europe came in May with great celebration including a big bonfire by the island in Forest Approach but VJ day (Victory over Japan) in August had very little celebration to my disappointment. I and my family escaped the war unscathed and I enjoyed wide ranging experiences. We were very very lucky.

Richard (Dick) Walker

Wartime Memories

I was nine years old when war was declared. The only thing I can remember doing at primary school to help the war effort was knitting squares for blankets. And while I enjoyed doing this, I hated being in the sewing teacher's class. My first experience there was awful. We were issued with big wooden knitting needles and because one of mine was bent, I tried to straighten it. Unfortunately, I only succeeded in breaking it in two and for this I got the strap. So that teacher became pretty low in my estimation.

We lived in Dunfermline, right on the eastern edge of the town. There was a dairy farm at the end of our road and our back garden overlooked a field that was often full of cows. But because we were on the flight path to the Rosyth Dockyard and even further to the Clyde shipyards, we eventually experienced long periods of air raid warnings. My Dad was an air raid warden and had to go out on duty every time. He had made a bunk bed in the cupboard under the stairs for my little brother to sleep on and a kind of makeshift bed for me. While my Mother and my other brother snuggled down close by under the dining room table.

There was only one time when bombs were dropped anywhere near us in a field about a mile and a half up the road. I was older then and I remember cycling there with some of my friends to see the craters. My Mum said that the pilot was probably just getting rid of the bombs on his way home.

Talking about cycling reminds me of another time when I went cycling with some friends. Just as we were passing the Polish soldiers camp, two of us crashed into each other. A few of the soldiers came rushing out to help us and decided that I was badly enough hurt to need treatment. So they took me and my bike back home in a truck. That was the end of my picnic. And my mother had a terrible job getting all the bits of gravel out of my knee. I still have the marks to this day.

We had a Polish officer billeting with us at the time. He was very nice and had a girl friend who was a teacher. She often came to supper with us and that Christmas she gave my brother and myself a book called The Far Distant Oxus which was an adventure story written by two young girls in the style of Arthur Ransome. She knew how keen my brother and myself were on all his books.

One day, I think it was in the summer of 1940, I went home with a school friend for tea and we were playing in her backyard, dancing and singing popular songs when we decided that this would be something we could do to entertain the troops. When I got home, I told my Mum and she thought this would be wonderful! So, believe it or not, she eventually did just that! Our next door neighbour who played the piano agreed to be our pianist. Other Mums joined in, eager to help and soon we had a little concert troop of local boys and girls.

I have to say my mother was brilliant.. During the school holidays, she arranged afternoon dates for us and a coach to take us there and back. We loved it, partly because there was always a nice tea laid on for us afterwards. We went to places like the Toc H soldiers club or Rosyth dockyards and gave them a show of little sketches, songs, dances and poems. I had two poems to recite. One was a comical Irish one called McGinty and the other was The Charge of the Light Brigade. Imagine that! And I was only ten or eleven! I think Tennyson was my mother's favourite poet. She loved all the narrative ones like The Lady of Shallot and Lady Clare and knew them all by heart. While she was doing her housework she would either be reciting poems or singing songs from the shows of her day like Rose-Marie or The Maid of the Mountains.

When I was older and at secondary school we had an extra week off in October to help with the potato harvest - tattie howking -- as we called it.

That was really great! We were picked up in town by a lorry very early in the morning and taken to a farm. It was hard work but it was great being with a group of friends and I loved it. We had our lunch there and then we were brought home in the early afternoon. I can't remember if we were paid for working but I know I felt really fit and healthy.

I remember that I did get paid for berry picking. This was when I was staying with my cousin in Kinglassie, a mining village in Fife. My mother came from a mining family in Cowdenbeath and my cousin Tom was called up to be a Bevin Boy to work as a miner.

When I was at primary school, we used to carry our gas masks in cardboard box slung round our necks but I don't remember carrying them to high school. Maybe it was because we had too many books to carry or maybe because the scare had passed.

On the morning of the 8th of May, 1945 my mother called upstairs to us "The war is over". It was a Tuesday so off we went to school as usual. By the time we got there, hundreds of children were gathered in front of the school. There wasn't a teacher to be seen and no-one seemed to want to go inside. We were laughing and shouting and cheering. And then the head boy and another boy appeared with pots of red paint. They painted V E on the sandstone wall on either side of the main door of the school and before we knew what was happening we all took off in a long procession through the town shouting Victory in Europe.

Bella Goldstein