The Hedgerow

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Growing Up in War-time Cheddar

I was four years old when I really became aware of the Second World War, English and American soldiers were walking around Cheddar in uniform. Then one evening I heard a strange droning noise coming steadily nearer.

I looked up and asked, "What's that noise, Dad?"

"That's Jerry, on his way to bomb Bristol."

I felt very frightened. My cousins Gill and Tony lived in Bristol. Their Dad my Uncle Herbert, worked at Robertson's marmalade and jam factory during the day and as a voluntary fire-warden at night.

Dad said comfortingly; "Don't worry Marilyn, they'll all be down in the Anderson shelter by now"

On our next visit to Bristol, they showed us the Anderson Shelter dug into their back garden. I was glad I didn't have to sleep in it; it smelt mouldy and damp. Gill and Tony normally slept under the stairs so when they heard the air raid sirens they didn't have far to go into the Shelter. Their teddies, coats and gas masks were arranged on the mattresses. They had to practise putting on their gas masks quickly in case of a gas attack. Nobody liked having to put them on because it felt hard to breathe.

On one occasion Dad went with Uncle Herbert on his warden's round. They had been to their sister Irene's wedding and were still wearing their best suits. These were only worn at weddings and funerals and on Sundays, being carefully brushed after each event and hung back in the wardrobe. Even clothing was rationed during the war and a lot of recycling took place.

Being a port on the west of England Bristol was regularly and heavily bombed and this particular evening was no exception. Suddenly a bomb landed near them and a house crumpled, showering its bricks in the road.

"Lie down," yelled my uncle.

"But I'm wearing my best suit," protested Dad as my uncle pushed him to the ground. Early the next day Dad drove back through Bristol, passing buildings still burning and with the taste of smoke thick in his throat, back to the safety of Cheddar and his grocery shop. This was a brown painted wooden building, built on Birch Hill, overlooking Cheddar Gorge. From the shop there was a clear view down across the village to the St. Andrew's Church clock. Not quite so good was the Garston Farm Piggery just up the lane. The owners were thoughtful enough to clean the pig sties on a Sunday which was Dad's only day off.

The Mendip Hills were sparsely populated, with isolated farms raising sheep and cattle. It was felt therefore that they made an ideal site for a German invasion. Dad became a member of the Home Guard, polio had affected his walking, but he proved to be a good shot. The Guards were stationed in an old caravan on top of the Gorge from which they could see the German planes in outline against the glowing red flames of Bristol.

There were only two occasions when the Guards were really frightened. The first was when a German plane returning after a bombing raid on Bristol had to make a forced landing above the Gorge. The Home Guard approached nervously, very aware , as with everything during the War they had a limited number of bullets. The German pilot seemed extremely angry that he had lost one of his fur-lined boots, but waited quietly enough until the very relieved Guards handed him over to the police.

Another time they heard movement along the hedge. Reaching for their rifles they crept slowly towards it and then burst out laughing. A long sustained "Mooo" put their fears to rest.

In wartime everyone of whatever age had to have an identity card, which entitled you to a ration book as well as being able to prove your identity to the police and army This contained coupons cut out each week by the grocer In return each person could buy 2oz butter, 1oz cheese, 2oz lard, 2oz tea, 4oz marg. 8oz sugar each week. It was slightly more generous at the beginning and end of the war, but the success of the German U boat attacks did reduce rations during the middle of the war.

There was a monthly 8oz ration of sweets but my mother refused to allow sweets to be sold in our shop as they were bad for our teeth. There were coupons for spam, tinned pork luncheon meat, jam and syrup. This made sure that everyone had a regular supply, albeit a small quantity of basic foods each week. These quantities were slightly

more generous at the beginning and end of the war, the initial success of the U boat attacks did reduce rations during the middle war years.

As well as a sharp pair of scissors to cut out the coupons, other essential tools of the grocery trade were a claw hammer to open the wooden boxes of sultanas currants and raisins from Australia thereby releasing a rich spicy aroma to make our mouths water, scoops to weigh out sugar and soap flakes from hessian sacks into dark blue paper bags and finally the cheese wire cutters plus sharp knife to cut up the very small cheese ration 8oz at the beginning of the war and dwindling to 1oz per person per week.

Dad was always polite to his customers and only let off steam in the family kitchen referring to a good customer as Old Lady Saye but to a moaning Minnie as Old Fanny Hoskins.

Some customers like Toby Small were especially popular because they were able to provide some variety in our diet. Although a vegetarian he had a licence to shoot rabbits and we would swop our cheese ration for a rabbit, as there were six in our family he got a sizeable chunk of cheddar cheese.

Any loss of food was a major disaster. One Christmas the allocation of jars of mincemeat and Christmas puddings from Robertson's had been stored on high shelves in the store room. Unfortunately, the weight of the puddings and jars was too much for the brackets supporting these Christmas treats, when suddenly they all crashed to the ground smashing all the jars of mincemeat, the broken glass now embedded in the puddings. Fortunately for Dad, Uncle Herbert, who worked for Robertson's was able to supply another order. He said, " I would rather do my rounds as a fire warden than face a crowd of angry women deprived of their Christmas pies and puddings.

Oranges were only available at Christmas, and one year of the three crates delivered as our shop allocation, only two crates contained edible fruit. Sea water had seeped into the third crate so that green mould enveloped each tissue wrapped orange. We did not know whether this was the result of severe storms flooding the hold of the merchantman or the ship being damaged by enemy action. It made us even more aware of the heavy cost of shipping food to Britain.

We not only missed having the oranges to eat but the mould on the tissues they were wrapped in was so bad we could not even use them as lavatory paper. When supplies of the stiff and shiny Izal lavatory paper ran out neatly cut squares of the daily newspapers held together by a length of string were used and hung on a nail. String was also scarce and was always recycled being especially useful if you grew your own fruit and vegetables.

Like most families in Cheddar my parents rented two acres of land on which they grew enough vegetables to feed our family of six all the year round. The southern slopes of the limestone Mendip Hills were ideal locations for growing strawberries, well drained and benefitting from facing the sun. The Wells to Weston Railway was nicknamed "The Strawberry Line" because so much fruit was transported along it from all the villages to cities such Bristol, Birmingham, London and Coventry. Axbridge strawberry growers produced the first strawberries in early June, although early, they were rather sharp and were referred to as Axbridge acid drops.

Any sort of machinery was scarce and petrol was rationed and we considered ourselves very fortunate when a friend lent us his horse, Polly to pull the plough. Dad was delighted with how much ploughing had been done and Polly after a good feed was locked into the shed for the night.

Our ground lay on the southern slopes of the Mendip Hills and the wild horses from the hills called so enticingly to Polly that she had kicked down the wooden door and gone to join them. Dad and I trudged after them in the blazing heat of a June morning, but it was better than facing the blazing heat of my mother's anger. Finally we managed to herd them against a cliff. Dad held out a handful of oats and the fun and games were over for Polly.

"Would you like to ride her back ?" asked Dad.

"Yes please," I was far too tired to worry that there were no reins or saddle, or that I would have to ride him bare back. I spent the rest of the afternoon pulling horse hairs out of my knickers, but it was a good story to tell my school friends the next day.

On our way to school we passed a stone barn where Italian prisoners of war were locked up at night and sent out to work on the farms and market gardens during the day. As six year olds we found it very frightening having to pass the enemy, so Dad lifted me onto the front of his delivery bike. As we cycled pass they waved and smiled. I was so very surprised : they seemed so friendly and happy, Dad grinned and said.:

"You don't have to worry about the Italians. They're only too pleased to be away from the fighting. They certainly won't hurt you.

Another time on our way to school, trying to cross the main road,

we were held up by a seemingly endless convoy of armoured cars and tanks. We had to wait so long that we were late, but when we stammered our apologies to Mr Tyson, the headmaster, he told us to just go quietly to our classrooms. Later we learned that they were on their way to take part in the Normandy Landings in June 1944.

Whilst the Generals planned their campaigns, my parents used equal determination, skills and ingenuity in trying to give us children a happy Christmas. Owning a shop was a bonus as many goods were delivered in boxes. The best of all were the wooden boxes from New Zealand containing butter. The butter came in 8oz packets which was a big improvement on the previous arrangement when individual rations had to be cut from a massive block of butter.

Dad used the wood to make a framework and bed-head, then cut up a hessian sugar sack to make a doll's bed strong enough for us to sit on. Mum cut out sheets and even two blue quilts from old bed linen. The dolls were donated by local girls, now grown up and much more interested in English and American soldiers in our village on leave and on the lookout for female company.

American officers were billeted in the Cliff Hotel situated in the Gorge. The river Yeo emerged from its underground river there and flowed picturesquely through the hotel gardens. In the Thirties the Yeo had been dammed, forming not only a large spectacular waterfall, but the power to generate hydroelectricity. The Yanks, as we called them appreciated the electricity much more than the continuous thunder of the waterfall.

My Dad was a local Methodist preacher. One Sunday driving back from Shipham, he stopped to give a lift to two American soldiers. In return they invited Dad and me to the Cliff Hotel to see my first film: black and white in those days of course. We didn't get home until ten o' clock, I was even later going to sleep because I had to tell my younger sister Valerie all about it.

We had evacuees in our village, too. Some came from Vicarage Junior School near Stratford East London. Cheddar British School nearly doubled in size and after taking the local children in the mornings and the evacuees in the afternoons, the Methodist Church was used for the Infant classes. It had a balcony and a stage where we put on plays and even a huge organ big enough to hide behind at playtime when it was too wet to go outside. My Dad remembers taking it in turns with another lad to pump up the organ. Once they had a fight as to whose turn it was, and did not end it in time to pump for the final hymn. Dad always remembered the Bible quotation from the irate organist. "When I was a boy I behaved as a boy, but now that I have become a man I have put away childish things." Then he boxed their ears ! , The lavatories were outside the building, there were two smelly earth lavatories and one flush one, which had a wash basin, towel and soap. There was always a queue for that, however desperate the need.

As Cheddar was considered a safe place, free from bombing raids, evacuees were billeted into houses with spare bedrooms. My grandmother had a large house and she given five young teenage girls to look after. Gran made the most of it and soon had them all well trained in domestic duties, to keep them busy.

"Satan finds work for idle hands to do," was her motto. The girls did not appreciate this at the time. But after the war, when they were married and came back to see her, they admitted then that the training had come in useful.

To entertain the children and keep their spirits up there were fancy dress parades. A " squander bug" was a very popular choice. This large menacing beetle like creature in red or black appeared on posters and warned people not to waste food or materials of any kind because the squander bug would be sure to notice!

One year, my mother decided to dress my sister Valerie and me up as "Ancient and Modern." I thought my sister very lucky to be "Ancient" as she wore a full length ballet skirt, a pretty shawl and straw hat decorated with flowers. A pink parasol completed the ensemble. I seemed to have embarrassingly few clothes to depict "Modern." My outfit would not have drawn any criticism from the squander bug. I wore a grey band in my hair, a narrow piece of material around my chest and my homemade flowered knickers. I was not allowed to wear socks with my brown sandals, which made my feet sore as we had to walk around the village to show off our costumes.

The high point of the afternoon was tea laid on by the village ladies in the Church Hall. Fish was never rationed so there were always bloater salmon and shrimp sandwiches but few meat ones and we finished with buns split in two, with a scraping of margarine or home-made jam, never both. We also were given one cup of tea sweetened with one small teaspoon of sugar. Sugar spoons shrunk in size as the U boat attacks took effect on merchant shipping. It was considered polite to say you had given up sugar when invited out to tea.

The Church Hall was the venue for the Women's ' Institute activities. Mrs Sydney Fountain was one of Dad's favourite customers, because she lived across the lane from the shop she used to bring him a cup of tea each afternoon about four o' clock. After bringing him his usual cuppa, she made a complaint that her butter had melted away because the weather was so hot. Dad then dad recalled Mrs Sydney Fountain winning the W.I.'s cake competition and being complimented on the lovely flavour, so dad had a good idea as to where the butter had gone.

During the summer months there was an extra sugar ration so that soft fruits, like strawberries, blackberries, black currants gooseberries and apples could be bottled or made into jam. Glass jars had been saved throughout the year, likewise rubber bands and greaseproof paper, in preparation for the hot sticky marathon of jam making.

If there was not enough fruit, carrots and parsnips were added giving bulk and sweetness. Indeed grated carrot was also regularly used in the making of Christmas cakes and puddings. Apples were another popular supplement. Returning from taking the morning service at Ubley, after a particularly stormy night we noticed that a large number of apples had been blown into the road. Having just come from chapel we were all mindful of not taking someone else's fruit. Just then a car drove past crushing some of them. That settled it. In war time it was wrong to waste food. The surviving apples were picked up and shared around.

When the war ended Cheddar celebrated with a firework display in the Gorge. Dad took my sister and me to sit on an old rubber mat to see the brilliant colours explode into the night sky. People were singing. I still remember the antics of a couple next to us as they sang and laughed to "Only five minutes more, only five minutes more, only five minutes more in your arms.

Wires were zig zagged across the Gorge along and the fireworks whizzed and fizzed along them. We shrieked and peeped behind our fingers because it looked as if the fireworks were coming straight for us. The grand finale was a cascade of what looked like a shining white waterfall descending 400 feet down the sides of the Gorge. It was magical. We could see the silhouettes of the soldiers standing at the top of the cliffs, waving to the crowds at the bottom. They had organised a truly memorable display and we all joined in the cheers that marked the end of the six years of bloodshed. **Marilyn Hawes**

Waiting For Lucy…

It's Wednesday; "Lucy Day" and it's hot. At least there are trees at the end of the playground for a bit of shade because my little Dolly-Day-Dream is always last out. I stand with the all the mums and wait.

I get there at 2.55pm –just in case she gets out on time for once but...no...and then... out they come, all the other little darlings; screaming and shouting, falling over each other in their haste, careering all over the playground being claimed by their parents and shepherded out of the gate.

It's unnaturally quiet now and I'm alone. There's a long gap and, eventually, at about 3.20pm – out she comes, my nine-year-old granddaughter, dragging her "Hello Kitty" backpack along the ground; scuffing her shoes. She's in no hurry; busy thinking of the next animal story she will write, no doubt. She's got a very vivid imagination and is always writing. There's paint on her hands and face - Wednesday is "Art"! Her hair has long escaped its pony-tail band and is blowing around her head.

A little short-sighted, she swings along for quite a while before she sees me and then.....her dear little face breaks into a big beam and she rushes up to cuddle me.

Suddenly waiting a half an hour doesn't seem to matter anymore. **Mo Woods**

The World Naked Bike Ride

Did you see a thousand or more nude people riding through London in June? What was that all about?

The World Naked Bike Ride or WNBR is "... a celebration of the bicycle and also a celebration of the power and individuality of the human body. A symbol of the vulnerability of the cyclist in traffic.". Worldwide, rides are organised by ad-hoc groups of people, originally as a protest about oil-dependency and car culture, but they have changed and expanded a great deal. The first London WNBR rides had a police escort but since 2010 we have been left alone to fend for ourselves in the London traffic. The ride in London this year on 13th June was watched by at least 60,000 people, the majority of whom waved, cheered, shouted encouragement, took photos or simply smiled. No-one reported any bad reaction, no shock-horror, no "what about the children". The bystanders were of all ages including many children helped by their parents to get a better view. As London is full of tourists, there were many from widely diverse cultures. The reception and especially the goodwill were absolutely outstanding. But that works the other way as well, since attitudes to nudity have changed so much, it did not even make the news. As they are dubbed "bare as you dare", the WNBR attracts those accustomed to such a state, naturists. We go along for the sheer fun of it all, but why is it fun? It begs the question, why go naked? I have found that to be the wrong question, the really hard question is why are we all so wedded to covering at all times, even when it makes no sense at all such as in the swimming pool. Ignoring that hard question, if you asked naturists why they do it, our answers are likely to include the words freedom, comfort, feeling good, feeling better about yourself, better health, better body acceptance, relaxation and a general sense of well-being. As far as the WNBR is concerned, it is enormous fun, combining a sense of occasion, a wonderful sense of freedom and the friendliness of the crowds and the more serious aspects of campaigning for a better world. It can also be quite moving as when riding past the Cenotaph. Here I remember those who fought and died to give us the freedom to live and express our individuality, protected by a freely elected Parliament.

Attitudes have changed but it is not always easy to speak or write about such things, mainly owing to the fear of being ostracised or ridiculed. E. E. Cummings, the US born poet said "To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody else means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight; and never stop fighting." At least for naturists, this battle is easing.

Howard Anderson, naturist and WNBR rider.

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