

WORLD WAR 2 - MEMORIES FOR BETH

In 2012 our 13 year old granddaughter was working on a school history project about the Second World War. Her teacher suggested that she could contact us about our experiences of the war, so she sent us some questions. How old were you when the war began and ended and where were you living during the war? She asked if we remembered the outbreak of the war, whether we were evacuated and how we were affected by it. She wanted to know about our feelings when the war ended and any other memories or reflections about it. This is a fuller version of my reply.

Dear Beth,

During the war I lived in Branscombe, a village of about 600 people situated on the coast of Lyme Bay between Sidmouth and Seaton. I was nearly 6 when the war began and 11 when the war with Germany ended. Just before the outbreak of war in September 1939 my father took me to London for a holiday, but it was cut short as he had to get back to Branscombe because he knew that war was imminent. His concern transferred to me so I knew that something serious was happening. It all came to a head with the declaration of war on Sunday September 3rd. I heard the broadcast by Mr Chamberlain, the Prime Minister, but at the time I didn't understand its importance - the adults were very concerned, talking about what he had said in hushed tones.

In school (which was next door to our house) my father had to make arrangements for the 25 evacuees from London who had arrived in Branscombe on September 1st. I became friendly with some of them but I was not evacuated - Branscombe was in a 'receiving' area. Being head of the school, my father was in a reserved occupation. so he was not called up for the forces. I've written more about the school and the evacuees 1939-1945 in my piece - 'Evacuees'.

We were affected by the war in some other ways. Although Branscombe was not bombed by the Germans we were always afraid that we might become a target because there was a munitions factory in the village and we knew that German aircraft flew over the area, for example when they raided Exeter. Another cause for concern was our proximity to the coast which left us open to the possibility of invasion by sea. Early in the war our beach was cordoned off by barbed wire and concrete pillars, mines were hidden away in the pebbles, pillboxes were put up and the Home Guard (Dads Army) patrolled the cliffs and roads. They also manned a large bunker close to the

beach and it was rumoured that they kept a barrel of beer down there. My father was in the Home Guard for a time before he became the school ARP (Air Raid Precautions) warden and he often returned home from duty with his rifle. It was strange to see him in possession of a rifle, especially in the living room, but he was always quite sober - as far as I know.....!

So you can see why we were on edge when the warning siren went off and why I began to realise that the world I was growing up in was not all love and apple pie. Fortunately though, we didn't hear the church bells - I believe they would have signalled an invasion. There were fewer threats in the later stages of the war but we were never certain that we were completely safe from attack. I remember that our parents always tried to keep us calm - for instance, on a number of occasions when the frightening sound of distant heavy guns woke me up in the middle of the night. My bedroom window looked out to the east across Lyme Bay and the deep booming came across the sea from that direction. My parents assured me that they were our own big guns practicing at Portland, but for me, at 7 or 8 years old in the wartime darkness, these sounds were sinister and unsettling.

Everyone was affected by rationing which lasted from January 1940 until the summer of 1954. You can easily find information about how it was supposed to work but the practicalities of it were quite complicated. Our saviour was my mother's friend Mrs Lucy Hutchings (1889-1964), who kept the grocery shop down in the Square. I still remember the old-fashioned ting-a-ling of the bell on the door of her shop. Down three steps and you were in one of the commercial, social and therapeutic centres of Branscombe and behind the old wooden counter was Mrs Hutchings in her long white grocer's coat, ready for a cosy chat about what was 'on' and what was 'off' ration, how the coupons and points system of the Ration Book worked, and in her hushed voice, the special bargain she had for us that afternoon. I remember these Saturday visits because my mother employed me to do the carrying - my father was usually gardening. Garden produce supplemented our rations - 'Grow Your Own' was the order of the day and as a result of gardening with my father I learned quite a lot about growing vegetables, an activity I still enjoy, 70 odd years later, a long term effect of the war I suppose. We also kept chickens during the war and I've said more about that in my piece - 'The Chicken Hut.'

During the war Branscombe was really isolated and quiet. There was very little traffic through the village and for five years we hardly ever went out of the place. It was also a world of darkness and starry skies. Of course there were no streetlights and from September 1st. 1939 all windows and doors had to be blacked out with heavy curtains or blinds to ensure that not even a glimmer of light could be seen from the air. The headlights of vehicles had to be shielded by slotted covers which directed the light downwards. The rules were enforced by ARP wardens and the village policeman who went around the village checking to ensure that everyone was observing the blackout rules. People could be fined for disobeying them. There was a lot of grumbling about these rules and later in the war, when the threat from the air declined, they were relaxed. But the darkness did give us a bonus - the night sky. The moon, stars and planets all stood out so clearly on fine nights, giving us memorable experiences. I remember asking my father lots of questions about it all.

You'll remember that last year (2011) we all went over to the Branscombe at War exhibition in the village hall. While we were there I came across a cutting from a May 1943 local weekly paper. It was about Branscombe's contribution to the Wings For Victory fund raising week. The report said that fund raising included a fancy dress parade for children and my memory was stirred when I read that there was much amusement when the children appeared in their outfits. It went on to list the prize winners - First Prize, Geoffrey Squire - Tramp..... Looking back on this, my first public appearance, I'm pleased that I amused someone and that I managed to make a small contribution to the war effort, looking a bit like Charlie Chaplin in an old black outfit with a stick and a moustache. I remember the preparation for this event - I was pushed to do it by my parents on the grounds that the experience would do me good - I'm still very doubtful about that!

So you can see that the war affected me in many ways but I had a much easier time than many children, including those evacuated to Branscombe. They came without their parents from the middle of a great city to the fields, woods, wild flowers and cows of Branscombe. What a shock they had. Some stayed until the end of the war and when that time came in May 1945 we were all

very happy that the fight for freedom had been won and at last, threat and danger had passed. I remember church bells ringing and dancing in the village hall and the Square. Evacuees went home and men came back from the war to their families. But 1945 was not the real end because it took another year to finish the war with Japan. There was no TV News at that time but we heard speeches on the radio, especially from Churchill, who had turned out to be the great war leader. There were lots of newsreels in cinemas, pictures in newspapers and magazines and celebrations and street parties in cities, towns and villages across the country - countless millions of rejoicing, happy people - a tremendous, unforgettable, nationwide experience - everyone was caught up in it!

Looking back on it the end of the war seems to have been a turning point in the history of modern Britain - we certainly thought of it in that way at the time as everyone looked forward to a safer less anxious future as the prospect of a new world opened up. You must remember that World War 1 ended only 21 years before the outbreak of World War 2 and the intervening 1920s and 30s had been an anxious and difficult time for millions of people. However, although the end of the war was a time of hopes and good intentions we now know that post-war the going was hard and it took Britain a long time to get back on its feet after such tumultuous experiences in the first half of the 20th century.

Well Beth, these are my answers to your questions and I hope they will help to make your project as successful as your London Olympics project and your Lord of the Flies book cover. I hope my memories are accurate - after such a long time the memory may fade, but you can see that the war was a significant event in my early life. One writer has said "People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them," so by recalling and recording people's experiences of past times and events historians try to build up a more complete picture of the past. Granny is also interested in oral history so we'll send you her response tomorrow.

With love from Granddad.

Geoff Squire 10/9/2017.