

Memories of World War II



It was September 3rd 1939 we were listening the wireless (as we called the radio in those days), when the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain announced “Britain is at war with Germany.” What would happen? I had no idea as I was ten years old at the time and did not know what to expect. Life went on as usual for a while but then worrying announcements came over the wireless, countries in Europe were being invaded, ships were being sunk, troops were in action.

Then in January 1940 food rationing arrived with the following for each adult for a week... 2 ounces of butter, 4 ounces of margarine, 2 ounces of cheese, 4 ounces of cooking fat, 3 pints of milk, 8 ounces of sugar, 2 ounces of tea, 1 egg or one packet of dried egg powder which had to last a month! Then preserves (jam, marmalade) one pound or one jar a month. Meat ... bacon and ham 4 ounces, and other meat value of one shilling and two pence. For example two chops. Sweets were also rationed later to 2 ounces a week! We grew vegetables in the front and back garden. To make the butter ration go further I had to mix the butter and margarine in a bowl with a little milk and beat it for a while to blend it together.

To supplement the meat ration we had sausages, liver, roast animal’s heart, savoury rolls, (similar to sausages,) rabbit pie, tripe, spam, boiled meat bones flavoured with Bisto gravy for soup, plus vegetables. It was often a case of putting our rations together for Sunday roast, then on Monday ... cold meat and bubble and squeak (cabbage and potato fried). Tuesday... cottage pie (Minced meat) and potato. And then the rest of the week it varied from above choices, sometimes a piece

of fish with potatoes at home, but fish and chips if you could afford them from the fish and chip shop. I remember going to buy fresh fish from Miss George’s fresh fish shop in Fore Street. The two sisters ran the shop. One served customers while the other gutted the fish in the back room and cut up newspaper to various sizes to wrap up the fish after first having a sheet of white paper around the fish. I can hear the sister who was serving suddenly shout “Florrie more fish” or paper.

We spent some time outside the sweetshop deciding how to spent our sweet ration and with only a penny a week pocket money, alphabet letters were the best value, more for your money (half penny a bag) or one barley sugar stick or one penny bar of chocolate either from Cluttons in North Road or Miss Bright’s vegetable and sweet shop in Fore Street. A special feature in Miss Bright’s shop window at Christmas was a mechanical Father Christmas who nodded his head all day.

At school each day we had a small bottle of milk, a third of a pint I think it was. Rationing continued long after the war.

Bananas were almost unheard of and I remember being in a queue at the fruit shop as we heard bananas were arriving that day. After over an hour I eventually got two small bananas! Wonderful. We did not waste food and you had to eat whatever was put in front of you, or go hungry! We did not have fridges in those days so butter, margarine, meat, were kept in a box safe with wire across the front and hung up outside the back door in the shade!

We survived and did not go hungry and did not get colds and walked to and from school each day, or cycled.

Clothing coupons were also a feature and you had to make do and mend, and clothes had to last. My mac was so long, nearly down to my ankles as it had to last while I was still growing all my secondary school days!

Then came the air raids and the blitz. Each night the throb of the German aircraft woke me up about 9.p.m, and quickly out of bed, put on thick jersey over pyjamas and downstairs before the air raid siren sounded and sheltered in the cupboard under the stairs (considered the safest place in the house when bombs were falling outside). As time went on and the air raids increased I did not go to bed but slept on a mattress on the stair cupboard floor until the air raid was over with the "all clear" siren sounding over the town. Mother sat on a stool in the same cupboard. It was during one raid I thought a bomb had landed on the house, the lights went out! It was further along the road outside Clutton's general shop and market garden, and an unexploded bomb had come down and all properties in the vicinity had to be evacuated the next day. With my parents we went to relations outside Landrake for several weeks, until the bomb had been either removed or made safe so we could return. At the farmhouse over a mile from Landrake, we were packed in with people from Plymouth, escaping the air raids. In the one room, my mother and I slept in one bed in one corner, my grandmother on a camp bed, my Father slept on the floor. Each day my Father and I walked over a mile to Landrake to catch the bus to Saltash for him to go to work and me to Saltash County Grammar School, and back in the evening by bus then the long walk.

During the war we were all issued with gas masks and carried them everywhere plus identity cards. Sometimes we had to wear our gas masks during lessons, not easy if you wore glasses as you could not wear them under the gas masks! There were air raid shelters in the school grounds and we sat on forms in a cold damp atmosphere until the raid was over. Lessons went on as usual and school finished each day at 4pm, so home to do homework, not so easy in one room with the wireless on. We only had a coal fire in one room, no heating in the bedrooms or bathroom.

Of course we did not have television only wireless and listened to Children's Hour with Uncle Mac, and a programme "Out with Romany". In the evening programmes "ITMA," "In Town tonight" and "Dick Barton, special agent" and others entertained us.

We also had holidays at school when we had various activities and I remember a day out on Dartmoor, travelling by train.

There were blackout restrictions, so no lights were allowed to be seen from outside so heavy curtains were hung over each window. If a light was showing outside the Air raid warden would call "put that light out". Blackout was to deter the approaching German

aircraft. We had to put special strips of paper across the windows to stop them shattering if a bomb dropped nearby.

Later my Father eventually bought an Anderson air raid shelter from the Borough Council for £1 (I found the receipt recently!) and had to dig foundations in the garden and assemble the shelter. It had two steps down and a wooden door, and the galvanised shelter was covered with turf. Our only light and heat was a candle in an earthenware plant pot! Father stood outside with his 1914-1918 tin helmet on and warned us each time a searchlight lit up the sky, then we knew the massive gun at Carkeel Amy camp was about to fire. It shook the whole of Saltash as the German aircraft flew overhead trying to dodge the gunfire, barrage balloons, and English aircraft.

Father was also in the Home Guard and did duty at night in various locations in the town on certain nights.

My Mother's war effort was working once a week for the Red Cross, knitting for soldiers, scarves, gloves, hats etc. and also making bandages and assembling other medical equipment for the fighting forces.

My war effort with the 2nd Saltash Girl Guide Company every Saturday was to collect waste paper on the Guides two wheeled trek cart and deposit the load at a house garage in Burraton where Mr and Mrs Miles lived. The authorities collected the loads from there to be recycled.

All iron railings, fences and gates were also removed and sent away to be used for munitions,

We also had soldiers billeted in our house. The one room had to be emptied and just the bare boards were left, and three soldiers from a regiment based at Carkeel slept on the floor when not on duty. I do not know why they were billeted in various private properties in the town for several weeks. We did not have to provide food for them. I think they were among the troops guarding Brunel's railway bridge. Glad to say that although the main Fore Street was bombed and shops and houses destroyed the bridge escaped. People were sadly killed in the Saltash blitz. One night Saltash Six Firemen on their way to Plymouth to help fight fires there, were killed en-route. A Saltash Scout Donald Cummings, was also killed near Saltash station while on messenger duty as he was standing in for Scout Master Douglas Vosper. People were also killed when the bombs fell in Fore Street.

St Nicholas and St Faith Church had an incendiary bomb through the roof on the left hand side of the East window and all the choir stalls were burnt, but the window remained intact except for a small triangle on Christ's shoulder. You can see today the triangle was replaced with different coloured glass. Saltash Wesley Church in Fore Street was completely destroyed like other buildings.

With the air raids each night, we often wondered if we would ever sleep all night in our beds!

Yes we carried on with our lives, attending school, Sunday school, Guides etc plus social evenings at the Church hall making sure we were at home before the air raids began.

We did not starve and I do not remember ever getting colds although heating was sparse. We dressed up warm to walk or cycle to school, and with macs and Wellington boots in the rain.

We had thick snow on one occasion and the school field was deep, so our games teacher arranged a snow fight as we could not play hockey!

During the war sheep were put on our tennis courts to keep the grass down, so no tennis for a while. We went swimming every day from May to end of September in the public swimming pool on Brunel Green which was fed by cold salt water from the river. The only facilities were wooden huts to change into our costumes. Mr Train was in charge of the pool and we paid one old penny a time.

If you got into difficulty in the pool, Mr Train was standing by with a long boat hook to haul you out!

Luckily we did not need it!

School swimming sessions were held once a week in the pool and an annual swimming sports day.

Eventually I left school in December 1944 and started work in the book department of WH Smith and Son on Mutley Plain as the shops and other buildings in the centre of Plymouth were destroyed during the air raids. The war in Europe ended on May 8th 1945 and we had a day off from work. Cycling up through Fore Street, Saltash on that day, no one seemed to be around so I presume they were all celebrating at home. But at last we could sleep all night in our beds. The war in the Far East did not end until a few months later, when VJ day was celebrated and the end of world war two. Food rationing ended 1954 although some foods came off rationing before.

We did not starve and perhaps we were healthier in those traumatic days.

Audrey Miller.

Voices in the night...

In the early hours of Saturday a mail train all the way from Saltash to Truro caused many sleepers to stir and several to reach for the telephone. A loudspeaker on the train constantly blared out:

“Help Help This train is being attacked by bandits. Please inform the police.”

The message, a standard device in use since the "Great Mail Train Robbery," cannot easily be switched off. A spokesman for British Rail told the "Cornish Guardian" that the device went into action with its false alarm after the train had left Plymouth. The train was stopped at Keyham and checked by police, but no one was available to switch off the alarm. The nearest G.P.O. engineer able to do it was at Truro.

At 4.95 a.m. a police constable on the Tamar Bridge who heard the alarm contacted headquarters and was told that the train had already been checked out. The voice in the night crying loudly for help went on until the train arrived in Truro.

"I don't know about train robbers." said one man at Saltash who sleeps close to the line.

"All I got robbed of was sleep."

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