

Interviewee: Alfred Brett

Interviewer: Bill Fairclough

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BF: This is an interview on the 30th of September 2010 with Alfred Brett, date of birth 9/2/33, and my name is Bill Fairclough.

AB: [Laughs] And my name is Alfred Brett and I'm here to talk about me dad, Henry – Harry – Brett. He was born in Hertfordshire – Ware in Hertfordshire – and they came down to London because of work. They came through Blackwall Tunnel to live on top of the tunnel where there used to be some cottages and a block of flats – but after a few years me dad was nineteen years old and he had two brothers and two sisters. Well, his six – twelve year old sister fell over the balcony of Blakeney Buildings – and she smashed her head and really broke her body up a bit. Me dad - he never rushed up to the top of Blackwall Lane to the hospital he ran through the tunnel to an hospital over that side – I don't know what the name of it was – anyway going on from there he saved her life – and as life went on he became a footballer for the Dreadnaught Old Boys - finished up at Wembley – they lost anyway but all the photos and everything was lost in a fire at one of the photograph shops I don't know exactly where it was but everything was gone anyway. Even his medal [laughs].

BF: What year was, what year was the match though? When was that?

AB: I haven't got a clue. I have been meaning to get on to the Mercury to see if they had any, 'cos it must have been something in those days you know.

BF: Yeah

AB: And there was a member of royalty there as well, it was at Wembley.

BF: Yes

AB: Oh yeah

BF: It'd be a big thing then for the Dreadnaught Club anyway.

AB: Yeah, yeah. That was behind the school in Blackwall Lane down the bottom Board – at the bottom of Board Street.

BF: Ok.

AB: Where we both lived, where we met - me and my wife. Anyway this is about me dad. As years went on, or as months went on actually, they moved out of some cottages down – I forget the name of the turning now – it's gone anyway – they moved down to Charlton and I was two months old me-self. Anyway, the family finished up a family of fourteen plus mum and dad and we lived at number twelve Pound Park Road. Right opposite what became a pit where they used to bury all the stuff from

London when London got bombed - all the stuff came down by great big American lorries – they brought over, you know. Anyway me dad worked for the Council – he was a horseman – his family were horse dealers and his grandfather was on the River Lea you know used to fetch all the maltings down to London and that but that's going back too far. Anyway, when the war start – actually started – he worked for a firm called Merritts at Greenwich, just the top of Christchurch Way across the road, and he had a pair of horses, cart and he used to go all the way to Woolwich Arsenal Barracks at the top of – I don't know the name of the turning now, where you know where Rockets used to be?

BF: Yes, yes.

AB: Well just to the left along there, it's not there now. Used to be the Quartermaster's Stores¹ and you used to go down a slope, you know. He used to back the horses – actually I used to be with him more of less all the time, you know. He used to back the horses down there, fill the cart up with whatever and go all round different barracks, 'cos there was a lot of different barracks on Woolwich Common.

BF: Yes.

AB: One particular day [coughs] we went there. We was going along Ha Ha Road there and right opposite - in the turning that goes up to Well Hall Road there's great big houses all the colonels and majors and all that owned them – really big Victorian houses. And during the war whilst they was away they used to let them out to the ATS girls, and a doodlebug hit 'em - hit 'em, smashed 'em right down, bits of girls all over the place there was. My dad to me like wallop down in the cart and he was helping picking bits and pieces up like, you know. When he finished we carried on sort of thing. It was a bit traumatising, you know. I dreamt about it a few times and that. Anyway going on from there we had another one dropped at the top of Pound Park Road – there's a hill – Thorntree Road – goes up like that and at the top another Doodlebug hit there – 'course nosy had to go up there and have a look and there was everything up there as well, you know.

BF: You were about eleven at this time weren't you, eleven or twelve?

AB: No, I was about seven.

BF: Seven?

AB: About seven year old, yeah.

BF: Ok.

AB: And then I used to be right at the front of the house and I could hear them planes coming when they was coming through Kent, you know. I was the first one that 'eard 'em. When I was up they knew that we had to get down in the shelter.

¹ 5 min

BF: Yes.

AB: And one night we got up and went down to the shelter and me dad was sitting outside with me mum, and all of a sudden he said 'What's that?' Looking up and couldn't see it was completely pitch black, you know, and it was like a load of flapping, you thought it was a load of massive birds or something like that 'cos it was so loud, you know. And what it was, was a couple of land mines – two of 'em – both together, whether they was caught together I don't know but they landed right opposite there was a sand pit and a great big hole as I said when they – when London was being bombed they dropped it in – and they landed in the sand pit itself, the two land mines, that's only what? 2 -300 yards from me house, and all the houses on the other side of the road they all got buried with sand – you thought it – me dad thought it'd started raining but it wasn't it was sand – when he put his hands out and all the other side of the road the majority of them got – sort of got buried in and you had to dig 'em out.

BF: So the flapping sound, the sound, the sound was like birds?

AB: Yeah, that's what it sounded like.

BF: That was the sand coming down?

AB: Yeah.

BF: Yeah, it sounded –

AB: Yeah, they must have – to be – say 300 yards from the house into the pit they must have only been about 100 yards above the house you know? And we – we did lose the roof a couple of times, you know, from blasts and all that. That was a really was a bad – 'cos everybody was digging on the other side of the road then weren't they getting people out you know?

BF: Yes, yes.

AB: I don't know whether it was before or after that - at the bottom of the turning, at the bottom of Pound Park Road, there's a big nursery there now but it used to be houses all up Charlton Lane. I don't know how it – some they used to say it was about eight bombs dropped there, and it completely wiped out about six – six or eight houses, you know, and a shop on the corner – used to be old Birch's. One dropped right in the middle of the road, Pound Park Road, and 'course when – after they'd finished they didn't realise the hole² had filled up with water so me dad going out to get his horses at say four – half past four – five o'clock in the morning, he fell down the hole didn't he – nearly drowned [laughs]. When they was dealing with that [unclear] they had to deal with him as well! Get him out. Now that's the first time that was. I don't know – I can't remember whether the incendiary – there was a period where they dropped loads and loads of incendiary bombs, you know, and me dad down Pound Park Road, turn right, over the level crossing, there's a level crossing there, down to the main road, turn right and down to Eastmoor Street and there was loads and loads like a little village.

² 10 min

Loads and loads of stables down there and when that started all them incendiary bombs and me dad went down there – being an horseman – he loved his horses.

BF: Yeah.

AB: He went down there and he saved forty horses.

BF: Yes.

AB: He got 'em all out and brought 'em up – had a lead horse of course –

BF: Mm

AB: Brought 'em up over the level crossing, and there's like a little field on the one side there, and he kept them there for the rest of the night.

BF: Or else they would have burnt?

AB: Oh yeah, yeah.

BF: Lost a lot.

AB: 'Cos they - well he nearly got killed there as well [laughs] getting them horses out, you know. But he managed anyway and a couple of – can't remember how many months – was a few months after that – where his stables was, at the top of the road there, just behind the shops, the stables. The doodlebug – while he was taking his harness and all that off his horses the bomb – the doodlebug dropped there as well. He got buried, he was buried there for hours he was – one of the horses had to be put down 'cos he had a big lump of glass right down his rump – and he just managed to get out of that.

BF: You're lucky you didn't lose him then really that's –

AB: Three times.

BF: That's three lucky escapes.

AB: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

BF: And just minding his own business really.

AB: That's it.

BF: I mean it's –

AB: And having fourteen kids, you know. It was a bit much – was a bit much for the Council. I think we went up to the end of 1941 to '42 and then the Council had had enough you know fourteen kids – 'We can't have this'.

BF: Yes.

AB: You know it was too much for the Council so they got rid of us, didn't they? Sent us up to Nottingham [laughs]

BF: What sort of ages were you though if there were fourteen of you, what sort of ages were you then?

AB: Oh, most of them had gone. There was only four left.

BF: Mm

AB: There was – I'm not really sure to be quite honest.

BF: Where were you in the, where were you in the fourteen?

AB: Half way [laughs]

BF: You were half way were you? Oh, happy medium.

AB: [Laughs] I was the seventh one born. Oh, Sigmund Street that was it where we was – where seven of us was born in Blackwall Lane – Sigmund Street – that's gone now. And the other seven of course they was born in Pound Park Road.

BF: So you were in the middle of fourteen,

AB: I was in the middle yeah. But the ages – the ages I can't – I think it was more or less every year you know? So from fourteen to – [laughs]

BF: Yes.

AB: Yeah, we being kids you know I was only six year old coming up seven approx, we used to go up to the park at the top of the road, that's Maryon Wilson Park, and where all them incendiary bombs was dropped they was hanging in the trees in that park up there, you know. Used to get 'em out of the trees, take one round the Wardens' Post, just round the corner, carrying a live bomb like, you know [laughs]. The old Warden used to come round to dad like, you know – you know, we used to get really, you know, and that was all the time that was happening like you know every week sort of thing.

BF: Yes.

AB: Yes, we enjoyed it though. We was always running - running - even in the evening like you know when the air raids was coming over you'd hear that shrapnel – and you knew they'd come right through you. It was really you could hear it 'PING, PING'³ all over the place, you know, yeah.

BF: So it was sort of exciting in a way?

³ 15 min

AB: It really was, yeah, being a kid I mean. You were never frightened as a kid are you? We wasn't anyway [laughs].

BF: Parents are sort of frightened for you more I suppose.

AB: Yeah. Oh yeah, yeah. We had in front of the house there was, you know, the old privet hedges? Well ours was the biggest [laughs]. It was about fifteen/sixteen foot tall, you know. It was really massive it was and the old UGB that was down on the river there, he came up our turning and he had a big trailer on the back. At the top he turned left to go up the hill and he couldn't make it, but as he was backing back again the shaft of it came off and there was a man hanging on to it like and he turned it into Pound Park Road, and it ended up in our hedge didn't it, turned over – all the medicine bottles, you know, about so big [laughs] that was a sight that was Jesus – it's a good job we wasn't playing outside, you know.

BF: Yes, yes.

AB: The kids would have had it.

BF: Yes. Do you remember these things quite clearly today?

AB: Oh yeah, yeah. We used to go over the tip, where they was taking all the rubbish from up London [BF: mm] – the bombed rubbish like – you know, we used to go over there 'cos it was all shops and that – jewellery shops everything over, you know? All dumped into there 'course we used to go over there being kids [laughs] get in trouble after it like, you know. Used to go over there find all sorts of things in there - rings, everything like you know.

BF: Yes, just everything that had been just –

AB: That's it, yes.

BF: Loaded up and carted away really?

AB: What they'd missed [laughs].

BF: Yeah, what they'd - exactly – 'cos there was no time I mean it would all be –

AB: That's it.

BF: You know be –

AB: Shovelled up –

BF: Fairly fat –

AB: But them old – them old American lorries. Our uncle – me dad's brother he told us they was coming like, you know, and lovely lorries they was.

BF: Big things.

AB: Yeah.

BF: Yeah.

AB: We used to play football out the front coming round – into us and then they'd run over our football that was it [laughs]. That was that. Yeah – we called 'em everything then [laughs].

BF: Yes, yeah of course. So it's exciting isn't it all sort of –

AB: Yeah.

BF: All exciting things.

AB: But that was terrible at the bottom of Pound Park Road when all them bombs dropped there was a lot of people killed there, there was.

BF: Yes.

AB: Plus the man in the shop like, old Birch, a good old chap he was.

BF: Mm.

AB: We used to get our penny gollywog stick of toffee [laughs], yeah. He left his shelter there that wasn't bombed and there was everything in there. He must have been hoarding everything in there [laughs]. Yeah.

BF: But you seem to remember the – you remember the sort of excitement but do you remember the death as well and you say that that, that that affected you - the some of the things you saw?

AB: Only for while like you know 'cos it happens all the time you get it you hear it – you see a doodlebug coming over well you knew it might come back so then you'd go and hide sort of thing you know but - we was always taught that if you see it coming over run the other way, run towards it.

BF: Run towards it, yeah.

AB: But if it did turn round 'course you were running the wrong way again [laughs].

BF: Of course.

AB: [Laughs]

BF: Well there seems to be a lot of luck isn't there, a lot of luck in it [AB: there was] – a lot of bad luck – like your dad falling into the [AB: yeah, yeah], falling into the – falling into the water in the road where the bomb had made [AB: that's it] a hole I mean it's all sort of luck and bad luck [AB: that's right] all mixed up.

AB: Yeah. We used to sit on top of the shelter and we could see all the – what's the name? – over the other side of the water, you could see all that burning. But we had just as much as they had over there you know 'cos we was only what – we could've only been at the most a quarter of a mile from the Arsenal. That's all and they was always trying to hit that weren't they, you know. So we had just as much of it, but we used to sit out you know on top of the shelter and watch all that burning over the other side, 'course it was mostly the homes and that over there weren't it? Factories and one thing and another you know.

BF: Yes, yeah. So you were really very close to the, you were close to what was going on really [AB: oh yeah] here and across the river, the docks and all along⁴ [AB: that's it] – so you really had sort of like front row seats for it all?

AB: Really yeah, yeah, oh yeah.

BF: And how about your mother, how was – how was – what do you remember of her during the war?

AB: Big strong woman she was. Me dad was a big man, I mean, you can see he's no, no slouch. He was a big man, you know, very strong. Well, my cousin lives round the corner – me dad's sister's girls and they knew – they knew more about him really than I did when he was younger 'cos their mother he saved her, as I said, and they used to talk about him, you know. They said he was very athletic. A very, very strong athletic man he was. Well, I knew that anyway I was always with him. Out of 14 children I was with him 'cos I used to hop the wagon. I mean, I'm not hiding nothing I used to hop the wagon all the time. I used to wait for him to come along the main road, Francis Street. That's where he used to go up, up Francis Street. 'Cos I was waiting for him on the main road at the school – it's a college now innit down at Charlton now.

BF: Mm, you were there so you'd hop off with him then?

AB: Oh yeah, I'd come out of the classroom to the toilet, which was near the main road, silly weren't it? [laughs] I could hear him coming along like, you know, out [laughs] –

BF: What did he say to you though when you –

AB: He knew – he knew, you know, 'Alright come on then' [laughs] I know he shouldn't but – but I mean over the years I've learnt a lot, learnt a lot about life, don't know about anything else [laughs]. And I've got 5 good kids as well. But getting back to me dad – he was a hard worker, he really was a hard – he'd never had a day out in his life. Not in his life he didn't. Not – not one day out.

BF: It sounds like he cared for horses and that sort of – if you cared for them you had to be there all the time don't you really.

AB: Oh yeah, oh yeah he loved his horses. Well, his ancestors were horse dealers.

⁴ 20 min

BF: So it was through the generations?

AB: Oh yeah, ran right through 'em.

BF: You've got some [laughs] [unclear]

AB: Oh, you 'aven't seen half of it. I've got loads upstairs! [laughs]

BF: Yes, so horses very much part of –

AB: Yeah, I think there's a - what's the name? If you look at him in that one especially – if you look at that you can see – you can see gypsies there. Because I not 100% but 99% sure there's gypsy in the family, you know, I mean true gypsy – I'm not talking about these caravan dwellers that are – make the place look untidy now.

Bf: Old families from hundreds of years ago?

AB: Yeah, oh yeah, well I think it comes through a lady that married me great granddad. A lady called Patmore – we're like, all my family is like the Coxes – the Coxes were on the river Lea, you know. It was – I'd like to know really if that is an old English name – Cox – I think it must be? I don't think it's a foreign name sort of thing, you know.

BF: No, I don't know but – I don't know. It sounds as though it might be.

AB: Yeah, he married this lady, Esther Patmore, and I think that's where the gypsy comes from 'cos he completely got his colour and everything like, you know, very dark [BF: dark yes]. And I – anyway – a bit of wind and I go black [BF: yes so you've got yes], yeah, and me son.

BF: The same – it's come through the years.

AB: Comes right through, yeah. Even all the names innit funny that. Have you noticed that? Names – they've all come through. I got loads of Uncle Jims, Henry. His uncle Henry he had a farm in – just outside Ware, in Hertfordshire, so he used to go round the farm, all round the fields, chickens, they laid their eggs everywhere didn't they in them days [BF: free range]. Yeah [BF: total free range], they used to go round the edges of the fields picking them up⁵, you know. But all that ended when they came down to London of course. He – he enjoyed it.

BF: So you talked about, you know, that the Council found, you know, they got fourteen children in the family and you were evacuated. How, can you say a bit about that, about how that was for you, what was it like?

AB: Don't forget I was only seven like, you know. When we got to Nottingham we went, you know, the cricket ground - Trent Bridge it was over the bridge, as you go, as you go over the bridge like that, there's – just across there was the old Player's factory you know. It was all camouflaged it was, I'll

⁵ 25 min

never forget that, all camouflaged it was where they made the cigarettes, you know. Down past there about 200 yards down the road there was like a lane - you went down this lane. When we got to the bottom of the lane there was a great big massive mansion house [phone rings] – excuse me – hello, right – when we went down the bottom there it was a great big mansion house. ‘Course it was about two or three families, I can’t be sure, and some single people as well there. As soon as we got there dad went off with horses – me dad got a job lorry driving straight away on to lorries.

BF: Oh he came with you then? [AB: Oh yeah] So you went as a family?

AB: Oh, they cut all the family, all the lot.

BF: Oh right I thought, I thought they might have just taken the children and moved them. [AB: oh no] All of you went.

AB: I’ve got a little story about that. We’re – they evacuated all the – at first evacuated all the older ones down to Kent, you know, when the war started and me dad wasn’t satisfied with that ‘cos he heard that, you know, the kids were getting whacked and all of that sort of thing. So he borrowed an old pop pop motorbike, you know. And one by one from right down in Kent he brought us all back one by one.

BF: Oh so you were in Kent for a while [AB: oh yeah] and he fetched you all back.

AB: Yeah, he fetched us all back one by one he did. ‘Course when we got to Nottingham he got this job straight away. Where we was there, just behind the house, there was a little factory made tennis – tennis rackets, you know, and he used to take the tennis rackets wherever he, I don’t know where he took ‘em. But off of horses straight up to Nottingham – driving. You know, he seemed to have it straight away. It was weird really, you know.

BF: What that he was sort of capable you mean?

AB: Yeah.

BF: He could just switch from one life to another life [AB: yeah] and he did it for you really I suppose and your brothers and sisters [AB: oh yeah, yeah, yeah] He fetched you all back from Kent and then he took you all as a family to Nottingham.

AB: Yeah. Well, they made him. The Council made him go, you know. He had no – what’s the name –

BF: But you stuck together [AB: oh yeah] you weren’t separated or [AB: oh that would’ve been great wouldn’t it you know]. Yeah, I was thinking –

AB: I used to hop the wag up there ‘an ‘all [laughs].

BF: So you carried on [laughter]. So did you go in the lorry with him when he was driving?

AB: Now and again not very much you know 'cos I was getting older then wasn't I. Had to learn something but we used to sit at the top of the lane. There was a barn at the top of the lane, pig sties all up this side and a barn at the top, and me and me brother used to sit up there waiting for mum to go up do the shopping like and go back to the house [laughs] [BF: go back?] Yes. But dad he liked it but it wasn't like Greenwich, you know. See he'd lived in Greenwich all his life apart from that 9 years in Ware but he wanted to come back anyway. We weren't up there long, weren't up there very long, came straight back.

BF: Oh, you came back again?

AB: Oh, yeah.

BF: Before the war ended then you came back?

AB: More or less – more or less. Yeah, we came back and he got a house in Orlop Street at the top here, I don't know if you know it or not?

BF: No but in East Greenwich somewhere?

AB: Yeah, you know the William [BF: yeah I know that] well just by there.

BF: So he was back home where he was happy I suppose?⁶

AB: Oh yeah, where he was happy, yeah. All his friends was there as well you know.

BF: Of course, yeah if he'd spent all his time.

AB: That's it.

BF: Mm. So was it quite a close place to be, I mean, you knew people in the street and things like that?

AB: In Greenwich?

BF: Yeah.

AB: Oh yeah, oh yeah, boxing matches everything in there. Was one man he used to organise things, yeah, boxing matches. Yeah, was lovely was better, actually was better than being down at Charlton where I was the only one that dad took to Charlton football. Yeah, he used to go there all the time Charlton and for me fifth birthday, for me fifth birthday in 1938 he took me to watch, and I've been going there ever since. 72 years now.

BF: It sounds as though you and your dad were quite close [AB: yeah] I mean [AB: oh yeah] of all the [AB: of all of 'em] brothers and sisters you had you were close to your dad more than maybe some of the others?

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AB: Yeah, yeah, and the thing is I don't know why but I didn't – I didn't really know how much I loved my dad until – until I was about 60 I suppose, I was working on the Council but it suddenly come to me, you know, how much I missed him. It's weird really there's two of us, me and me sister – still she's 85 – she rings me now and again – she's always thinking of dad, you know. But the rest – as I say there's only four of us left. Me sister, one still lives down at Charlton, and one lives down at Camberley. And so there's only the four of us left, all the others were mostly cancer, you know.

BF: Yes. So what sort of age did your father make, what sort of, how long did he live?

AB: 81 he died.

BF: 81?

AB: Yeah.

BF: Good age then.

AB: Oh yeah, when he was about twenty he went in to the Navy. Yeah he went into the – into submarines he was – yeah. I don't know whether that was, I've never worked it out, whether that was between the wars or the end of the – you know [doorbell rings]. I think it must have been between the wars I think.

BF: The early days of submarines though when –

AB: Oh very early, yeah, yeah. Oh yeah and mum, she – she died at 91 and she was still getting his Naval pension.

BF: Yes, from his service of course.

AB: Oh yeah.

BF: Gosh so he'd had quite a life then really.

AB: He did really, didn't he?

BF: It sounds like he was an interesting man?

AB: He'd do anything for anybody. Most – well they're all gone now I suppose but most of the old people in Greenwich they really 'Harry', you know. Was Harry, it was never Henry or anything like that. You know they did – they did like him - especially me [laughs].

BF: Yes, you seem very close to him [AB: oh yeah] and also that you came later in your life [AB: that's it] to really understand how you appreciated him.

AB: Yeah, he loved my wife as well, he really did. She used to go to [unclear] and everything she did.
[Dog barking in background]

BF: So you're close to him and your – and your wife was close to him?

AB: Very close.

BF: There was something about you that was –

AB: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I don't think it was me and my brother Arthur – who, he died of cancer not too long ago, he was – he was the exact spit of him, you know, facial wise. He was pretty strong 'an 'all funny enough. But me dad he was a very strong man.

BF: Yes.

AB: Yeah. And he never ever hit any of us. Mum – mother used to do that [laughs]. He never had to like raise his hand to any of us. And for fourteen children I think that's some sort of a record I should think.

BF: Well it's a lot to look after isn't it, on a good day it's a lot of work. [AB: it is it is]. So [AB: it is it its] it's hard I think – I suppose.

AB: Plus he was at work most of the time anyway so. I've never known him to have a day out, never.⁷ He was still lorry driving at 76. [BF: was he?] Yeah. Five years later he was gone. Yeah, I mean when I say driving it, it's jumping off the side of the lorry 'an 'all, you know. Yeah. I can't really think of much more. It comes and goes, you know, [BF: of course, yes] gradually you remember thing. That was a good time down at Charlton I did – I did like it down there. And I met, funnily enough, I met my wife down where I was born [laughs] weird isn't it?

BF: Yes it's like full circle [AB: yeah, yeah, yeah] some sort of life [AB: yeah] is sort of going round.

AB: I should think his mum's - his mother's family must have – must be a good story I would – I would have thought as they was on the river – what's the name – on the River Lea, you know. As I say they was – he was a sailing barge captain, you know, and my daughter – one of them anyway – she's like her granddad , yeah. It is really – they all – they all resemble one another, you know. The same as all me brothers and sisters. Everybody'd say 'that's a Brett' you can see that.

BF: They've got the features, strong feature that carries on through the years.

AB: Yes, not like me mum. Only like me dad. It's weird.

BF: Yes. So your mother must have had quite a job in the war as well, I mean, looking after the family and worrying about what would happen to you all.

AB: That's it. I always looked at me mum and her arms was like Popeye, you know. [laughs] Massive – she had massive arms, yeah. Yeah, we had some good times down at Charlton during the war. At the top of the, as I say, Maryon Park, we used to go up there a certain time of year when all the

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acorns was dropping, you know. Used to take sandbags up there and fill the sandbags up and take them back down home like, you know. And you can imagine it fourteen kids having acorn fight [laughs] indoors! Indoors! [BF: that's what you did with them?] Yeah, acorn fights – every year we used to do that. One year me sister Eileen, she's just died, there was a big plate on the side you, big you know one of them big meat plates, blue and white [BF: oh yes, yeah I know] that got knocked off, cut her forehead right across, yeah. Dangerous fights we used to have [laughs]. Me eldest brother he used to make us laugh a lot. Bit of a lad he was. He – whoever laughed the most copped it, they copped it and I copped it once. He took off the boiling kettle and threw it at me [laughs] hit me right on the chest, all down me it was. I'm still scarred now like you know. Yeah. Dangerous [laughs]

BF: It was full of hot water as well then?

AB: Yes, yeah it was.

BF: So there was a bit of rough and tumble going on but it sounds a happy family was it?

AB: Oh, it was.

BF: Would you say you were happy?

AB: Oh yeah, yeah, all the time we was fighting we was happy though! [laughs]

BF: Just sort of rough and tumble it sounds like rough and tumble and fourteen kids in one house. It's a lot it's always gonna be quite a lot going on and –

AB: Yeah. He done everything he could to earn a few bob, you know. Not only working all the time, he'd go out on a Sunday out the garden and cut down Golden Rod you know – have you ever heard of that? Golden Rod?

BF: Yes, I've seen it.

AB: And take it up Cemetery Lane on a Sunday morning and sell it outside, you know. He done exactly what he could – everything he could as well as going to work all the week he'd do that 'an 'all.

BF: So he sort of did all that for you and for your brothers and sisters and for your mum.

AB: Yeah, yeah. She was the tyrant not me dad [laughs]

BF: That's why she needed the big forearms?

AB: Of course! Yeah.

BF: But he worked and he provided for you and it sounds like he cared about⁸ you all [AB: he did] and wanted to make sure [AB: he loved his children exactly the same as I do] Yeah.

AB: He's – they're all round us now. They're all here, you know. Yeah.

⁸ 40 min

BF: It sounds in a way that you took your dad and you kind of wanted to be a bit like him when you – when you grew up maybe?

AB: Yeah, yeah, bonded with him, you know.

BF: You wanted to be the way he was with you with your family?

AB: That's it – oh yeah

BF: And all that so –

AB: Oh yeah, yeah. They're all – all my five children they're all good to us and same like we are to them. They do everything, whatever they do everything for us, you know. There's a – I'll show you it in a minute. You see that one behind you? Well, my son made that, he built that, can you see that one just out there?

BF: Where? Oh yeah, oh gosh yes.

AB: That's a house in America. Well it's pulled down now but that belonged to an English person. I forget the name now.

BF: That's a lot of work isn't it that. A lot of work. It's beautiful.

AB: That one – that one out there, honestly if you looked at it properly it's a masterpiece that is.

[Long pause]

BF: So it was [pause] so do you have any more thoughts about the war or anything else which has sort of which has come to mind?

AB: We just used to carry on, you know. Oh [laughs] there was a family called Savage, just up a little bit further. And at the bottom there was before – I don't know if it was before the nursery got bombed or what? Anyway there was a pub there and there was a little clinic right next to it. There's an entrance there where Saunders – Saunders lorries. They had loads of 'em all green lorries they were. When they painted and done one up, they used to put it on that bit of land and wait, you know, [BF: oh yes] for it to dry out. Then they'd come and pick it up. Well, me and me friend, Eric Savage, that was up the road, we went down there having a look round it sort of – not to do anything to it – but Eric had some matches and he took the top of the petrol tank off [laughs] lit a match to see if there was any petrol in it, 'course [laughs] it blew up. Eric running up Pound Park Road all – like a torch! Yeah, he's I've never seen him since. I – as soon as – as soon as he done that I ran – and I ran back to the school in Woodhill. I ran back to school – me running back to school I can't imagine it now [laughs]. Yeah.

BF: Was it far to run?

AB: Yeah I'd – I'd go all along the main road and up, yeah, it must have been at least a mile. I ran all the way to school. 'Cos it's – I mean looking at Eric burning sort of thing - he was completely covered in flames, well, all petrol, you know. Tank just blew up all over him. And he was in a – he was in a state after that but I've never seen him since. Never.

BF: But he survived?

AB: Oh, he survived, oh yeah. Yeah, they told me he survived but I've never seen him since. Up just a couple of doors up from him, there was a lady called Marshall, I never ever imagined her husband there but she had two sons – Keith and Stewart. The eldest one Keith he used to work in Siemens. If you worked in Siemens they – I don't know whether it was compulsory but you had to do fire watching. And Keith was on top of the – on top of the building when – at the same time funny enough as the firebombs the, you know, was dropping, and one dropped on⁹ the edge never went off. And Keith, and I know this for a fact, Keith kicked it and blew his leg off. He was going to kick it over the side – instead of throwing a fat sand bag on it like they're supposed to, he – it's near the edge so he kicked it and it blew his leg off. Yeah. Wonder he never fell over the top innit?

BF: Yes, yes, yeah.

AB: We've always made a joke of it since then like, you know. Blew his leg off could have gone the other way couldn't it?

BF: Well exactly you're on the roof with one leg it's not a good position to be in is it really, you want both legs at least I think [AB: yeah] and something to hold on to.

AB: She had an old hen that used to come indoors and eat like, you know [laughs]. Old chicken [laughs] things they used to do there.

BF: Yeah.

AB: A funny lady she was. She lived right next to that little school at the top there [BF: oh yes]. Yeah, it's a lot of things you miss, you know. Oh, I used to have a big tyre, that hill I was talking about at the top, where the doodlebug dropped, I got in tyre and come down that hill once. And the first house, if you're going down Pound Park Road, a man lived on – lived there he worked for the Council. You know the old – the very old dustcarts? Horse used to pull 'em round the streets, and then a lorry'd come and put a chain on 'em and pull 'em up like, you know. He used to come round here quite often and leave his lorry there like, you know. He had a big black dog – I come down that hill on the – inside the tyre run the dog over [laughs] right over. He was alright but he went right over the dog, you know [laughs]. Stupid things you do innit, you know. Yeah, didn't care did I, you know.

BF: No. No, it sounds like you sort of – yeah.

⁹ 45 min

AB: Yeah lovely. Yes, good man he was, anyway, very nice man. Bert? No, what was his name now? Bert? Bert - that was his name, Bert. Another – another man had – he had a pig, you know, during the war you could keep anything, dig your garden, keep anything.

BF: Yes. Do you remember anything about things like food during the war. I mean, whether or not you had enough to eat all the sort of things – was it?

AB: We had everything there was. Being, I mean, they – the soldiers like where he was loading his cart with all the stuff to go round the different barracks and that like, you know, they – they knew me dad so well and how many kids he had. He didn't have to nick anything they just gave it to him [BF: just gave him things] yeah. So we always had tons of food. We had fourteen chickens out in the yard [BF: did you? Yeah]. Yeah, two big cockerels so we had plenty of eggs. He'd kill a chicken after it'd run round the yard [laughs]. We had rabbits. Down the bottom there was a shop on that corner, old Birch he got killed, and there was a big fat Italian man on the other corner – a shop and he had one of them spotty dogs you know. He got across the road and went up the back gardens on our side and killed all the rabbits [laughs] Got in the hutches and killed all the rabbits he did. 'Course everybody goes down there hollering [laughs]. It was his fault like, you know, that the old dog got out and – done it's bit [laughs]. So especially they wanted [unclear]for dinner.

BF: Yes, yeah. But sounds as though you didn't want for anything then when you were growing up in the war?

AB: Never wanted for a thing.

BF: You were ok?

AB: Oh yeah, yeah.

BF: So was that like tins of things that the soldiers would give you?

AB: Anything, anything.

BF: All sorts?

AB: He'd come home with a tray, you know, them trays of Swiss Rolls they used to have years ago? He'd come home with a tray of them. What they'd just given him, you know. [BF: gosh] Yeah, they'd go round all the turkeys at Christmas time – go round all the turkeys and pick out the biggest one¹⁰ and keep it for him [laughs]

BF: So he was quite special then 'cos his work was really [AB: yeah] helping him 'cos he knew people and they [AB: oh yeah] knew him – he did alright through them –

AB: They liked – they really did like him he was a love – he was a likeable man, you know. Very polite to people. He'd never look for any trouble. He could 'andle it but he'd never look for any trouble or

¹⁰ 50 min

nothing, you know. That's how he was. [Pause] Him and his brother when they lived down in Blakeney Buildings on top of the Tunnel they was a pair. When they was together they was a pair. They was a pair of rotters 'an 'all [laughs]. That's the only time he used to get in a bit of a – you know. But after that once he's – once his brother went, you know, he was as good as gold, yeah. Yeah, can't think of a – can't think of much now. But that's where he used to play football in that – they've built something there now, behind that school. They use it - they use the school as storage now like, you know, it's not – my wife went to that school funny enough. There is a little church alongside it that's all gone, yeah. Local church - the school's still there I think the little house is still there 'an'all, alongside it, where the caretaker lived [pause]. Yeah, that's our son he got burnt down there with all the acid. He come out of the gas works – where the acid comes from I don't know. But as they come up our turning he went round to Board Street and he realised the lid was open on top, come down Granfield Street where we lived – me and the wife – and it blew like, you know, blew it all over the place. Cars, everything and my son happened to be there and it burnt all his legs and that. Got over it though. That was a nice little place to live down there, down bottom of Blackwall Lane – like a little village, you know.

BF: Yes, well it seems like, you know, during the war when you were – when you were growing up here and maybe a bit in Charlton that it was quite close and, although it's part of the city it was a bit, you know, you were growing things and you had lots of hens and [AB: oh yeah] it's a bit – and of course the horses, there was quite a country sort of feel to it as well in a funny way?

AB: That's how it was, you know. I was a at one time I will – I will admit it I was a bit of a bad boy at one time and they sent me away - and when I got there the first thing they do – they done – to me, I don't know why, they put me straight on the farm. Why, you know? They must have seen something in me, a bit of a farmer's boy or something, you know. I couldn't make it out 'cos that's where me dad come from more or less off a farm [laughs]. It just don't make sense to me. And I loved it [unclear] I loved it. And I – in later years me dad he worked for Turf Soil, and I went with him, I done all the ploughing down – oh [pause] down in Essex. A place down in Essex there, new town they built down there. I done all the ploughing for the sports fields and that like, you know. [BF: yes, Basildon was a new town] That's it [BF: Basildon mm] that was it.

BF: And you were up there ploughing?

AB: Yeah I done all the ploughing and – which 'aint far from Hertfordshire is it? [laughs] You know. It sort of –

BF: Was that horse ploughing too or was there tractor by then?

AB: No, tractor by then [BF: tractor by then yeah] but when I was away I was horse ploughing 'an 'all. Done a bit of horse ploughing, milking. I had the old hardest one there was there. It was a – I think they had six cows there and he gave me the hardest one – old Leather, old Leather, Leather Tits they

used to call her [laughs] [BF: yeah oh hard work yeah]¹¹. I'd walk out – I'd walk out at half past five in the morning - down to the field, go down to the meadow like, you know. Lovely stream along the bottom. Lovely them trees, you know, what they make cricket bats out of [BF: willows] weeping willows [BF: willows yeah] [unclear] shout out at the top of the gate that they come up for milking. Get that done, yeah, chaff cutting. I loved it, I just loved it, you know. It was it just come natural to me, you know. Like me dad when he from the horses to the driving it just came natural [BF: yes it's like it's in the blood it's that sort of thing isn't it?] Exactly.

BF: Bit like you say that your features have sort of come down through the generations.

AB: The old nose has 'an 'all [laughs].

BF: [Unclear] there's something kind of like a spirit about [AB: that's it] animals and, and the country and growing [AB: yeah, yeah] things so.

AB: I sit in bed sometimes and say, you know, is me dad here? Are you – honestly I do. My daughter, the one that just came and sat there, she sees him and I can't make that out. He don't come to me but he goes to her.

BF: So he's somehow still close to you?

AB: Yes still very, very, very – I can feel it I really can feel it. She knows he's there. [Pause] I wish he'd come to me proper you know [laughs] yeah.

BF: Well –

AB: I suppose there are a few more things but, you know. Oh, we used to go over there, we lived right opposite the gates of the tip and they had – there weren't – the Home Guard – you know Dad's Army – they used to go there and practice. So they were all there with rifles in the shed, they built a lovely shed there and they used to leave their rifles in there. Yeah. We never touched 'em like, I mean, you wouldn't touch a thing like that but we used to go home and dig the bullets out of the – where them land mines landed 'cos it was all sheer.

BF: yes and sandy as well so – so it'd be a good place to practice shooting.

AB: We used to dig all the bullets out of there, you know. There was one boy – we used to go up the hill at the top along the top onto the top of the cliff, sand, cliff and he was digging it with a spear out of the fence out of the iron fence he was digging it and it slipped and went right the way through. Yeah, ambulance come up through the gates opposite where I lived, and we could see the ambulance come up and take him away like, you know but, after that didn't hear nothing. He was dead like, you know. Plus at the bottom of the turning, where the – where the shop was on that corner, the big fat Italian man was, there was a fruit and veg shop at the end - there are houses there now. Just the shop on the corner, but he had horse and cart 'an 'all and he used to – he used to graze it up the top there like

¹¹ 55 min

you know, 'cos that went over the top 'an 'all. Yeah, that was a shame that was. I think we thought more of horses than we did of anything else you know. Yeah.

Me dad - he had a – he had a small pony and cart that he used to do the weekends, 'specially Saturdays, he used to do a bit of greengrocery up round the top of Charlton. Yeah, round the turnings and that. Me brother, one of me elder brothers, sometimes used to take it out, but one of them used to eat all the pears so he stopped him going [laughs] [BF: eat all the profits]. Yeah. I don't know if you know Clevely Close or not?

BF: No.

AB: It's where we use for our teeth now like, you know, the dentist up there, very good. At the top there's the park¹² and on that side there's new houses there now but the yard is still there but that's where his little stable was. Me brother, me brother Jim the one who lives down in Camberley – he sent him round to get the horse and cart out, you know, one Saturday morning and he forgot the key so he had to climb over. He ended up hanging on the railings [laughs] went right the way through his leg here [BF: very nasty] somebody come along like and called the ambulance and that [laughs] [BF: very nasty]. So the horse and cart never went out that Saturday [laughs]. Yeah, he was just hanging there with a spike through his leg and he – when we used to play down on the main road there used to be at the top of Eastmoor Street, there used to be a site there with all broken bottles and that, and we used to play on there like, you know, and he done all his wrist there. Cut, nearly cut it all out. Same brother like, Jim [BF: he was lucky he survived then] He was lucky 'an 'all [BF: things sticking and cutting him]. Yeah, yeah. 'Course we used to laugh about it once it's over like, you know, [laughs]. It's just things – the things you do – and then laugh about them afterwards, you know. It's incredible when you look back on it, you know, the things that you've done.

BF: Well, the war must be something, although you were – you were quite young, something which is very different to the experiences that your children have had [AB: oh yeah] they [AB: completely] it's difficult for you to – to sort of explain what it was like and what you saw [AB: yeah, yeah, yeah] because they would never see things like that [AB: that's it] in their generation.

AB: That's it. I mean you won't get that again will you? They're too mechanised now aren't they? You'll never get anything like that again I shouldn't think. But we enjoyed it, as kids we enjoyed it sort of thing, you know? Yeah, I got chased by about twenty bullocks up in Nottingham when up there right in front of the big house, it was a great big field, massive great big, must have been two or three acres like this field and there was a great big tree, a big oak tree right in the middle. 'Course I've come from behind the pigsties and I thought I'd walk straight down jump over – get over the hedge at the bottom straight in what's the name? Never come to that – I had to dive over the side 'cos these bullocks about twenty of them they all chased me. All the lot of them and I've seen it since 'an 'all with cows – they will come after you, cattle, yeah. Somewhere down in Kent I was, going down a lane and all

¹² 60 min

these cows come to the edge and they was trying to get over like, you know. So it's no myth, it do happen.

AB: I can't really think of anything else – I'm afraid.

BF: Well, that's fine you've – you've had about an hour and you've – you've told us quite a lot, quite a lot.

AB: But he did have a good life, he did have a good life, he enjoyed himself.

BF: Good long life and a good family too.

AB: That's it yeah, one thing he did love his family.

BF: Yes.

AB: All his children.

BF: And he saw you have your family too, did he see your children too? [AB: yeah, oh yeah] which is something again that's good. See it going on, the family going on beyond his children [AB: that's it, yeah]. So it's a comfort isn't it? Well thank you. I'll – I'll stop the machine.

AB: It's a pleasure.

End of Interview.