

Written by Brenda McColl

My first memory is of a lovely sunny day, out walking with Mum and Dad. We'd gone to see the Carter Patterson horses, stabled in Willow Walk, behind the buildings where we lived in the Old Kent Road. The next thing, we were plunged into an inferno! Noise of heavy bombers droning, explosions like volcanoes, the sky turning black, livid red, billowing smoke – I thought the sky was falling in – the noise was deafening – my Mum screaming. My Dad scooped me up in his arms and dragged my mum by the hand – we ran over Greyhound Bridge (up by the Dun Cow pub – years later I was to have my wedding reception there!) and turned into the Old Kent Road towards home. Dad ran fast and I can still feel the rough serge material of his ARP uniform as I bounced up and down in his arms, poor mum trying to keep up. We took shelter in the door of the barber's shop near home – I can still remember vividly the red, white and blue pole outside the shop. (Next to the barber's was Carter's, a posh men's outfitters that had a clock on the roof in the shape of a man with a bowler hat and he lifted the hat on the hour! – it survived the Blitz and for years afterwards until demolition and redevelopment).

Next thing I recall is being in the underground shelter opposite the barber's shop – lots of people, the shelter smelt very dank and I was crying a lot, and a lady giving me a toffee to try to console me!

We must have got back okay to our flat in the buildings, the noise didn't seem to stop, the sky still livid and black. My dad was on ARP duty and it must have been relentless and very dangerous, and he was out a lot of the time.

As the night wore on and the awful air-raid warning siren sounded (I still tense up if I hear it in a film or TV show), Mum and me went over the square to join my Nan and auntie who lived in a basement flat. I suppose grown-ups thought they'd be safer down there just below ground – although a direct hit would have buried us all alive under 6 storeys of flats! This probably took place over several nights, say September 7 – 15.

But down there in the corridor between 3 flats it was wonderful – exciting, safe, not scary at all! My Nan was a wonderful woman in her 50s then - a widow of the 1WW and known as a "mother" figure in the buildings – Mrs Pope, Mary, could be relied on to cope with any adversity and turn it into a party!. Long wooden benches had been brought over from St George's Mission Hall (which in the next few nights received a direct hit) next door to the buildings; my Nan and her neighbours had tea and cocoa ready for all. The children were all encouraged to do "turns" singing and dancing; and my Nan's piano was dragged out – no shortage of pianists then – and we drowned out the noise outside with choruses of all the old songs! I think that's how I came to know all the 1WW songs and those of the music hall – Long Way To Tipperary, Pack Up Your Troubles, There'll Always Be An England, Run Rabbit Run and of course Knock 'Em In The Old Kent Road (I can still give a good rendition!). But perhaps the one song that came later to be most associated for me with that time was My Old Man Said Follow The Van – because that's what happened next!!

My Dad, who had now I think received his call-up papers, and other family members had thought it far too dangerous to remain in London, especially as we had so many near misses in the buildings, bits of shrapnel, debris (even a revolver I recall at one point) were found in the Square after raids, and my Dad's mum lost all her pet canaries by blast from the St George's Mission bomb, poor things! I cried!

My Dad and Uncle Tom hired/borrowed a covered van/lorry from a mate in Southwark Bridge Road. Our whole extended family (not counting those already in the forces) on my Mum's side were moving out, evacuating ourselves. (My Dad's mum and sister remained in the flats in London the whole of the war – Aunt Lil, still alive, has tales to tell of going to work in the Blitz!)

I can remember it all so clearly – the grownups hurriedly piling bedding, blankets, coats, clothes, saucepans, kettles, a couple of chairs – and us (!) inside the van. Only taking what they must, so much left behind in the flats – hoping it survived. I remember sitting amongst piles of bedding clutching my two teddies - virtually the only toys (apart from my farm animals in a tin) I cd [could] take – no room for doll's pram and tricycle! We were fleeing for our lives! Mum used to say it was like going "hopping" only not so organised.

My Uncle Tom had a sister in High Wycombe and it was decided to go there to escape the Blitz. (They didn't consider Bomber Command was also there (was it though, then?) – although I don't think we had many "scares" there...)

I remember we stopped near a big open park (later I knew it as The Rye) with big houses and steps going up to the front door. We got out and started to go round to see if we could be taken in as evacuees. It wasn't a happy experience; Nan and Mum holding my hand, knocked on several doors and were turned away, other family members had the same luck. We went up stairs to the next home, I recall, knocked on the door, the lady again said "no evacuees" but we should try up on the new council estate, Castlefield, on top of the hill.

I can recall turning round and going back down the stairs feeling so unwanted and sad to the lorry and off we drove again. We drove up a very steep hill and into the first street called Spearing Road. Nan got out and knocked on No 22, I had held her hand, a lady opened the door and after some talk said "Come in"! She took us all in to her 3 bedroom council house, made us so welcome we didn't feel like gypsies or evacuees or refugees anymore – her name was Vera and she had 4 children of her own and a sick husband.

Of course it was a terrible crush – 11 of us in 3 small rooms – but after a week or two other billets were found leaving my Mum, my Nan, my Auntie Alice and me at Vera's. We were safe and lucky to be alive – above all there was no constant sirens, crashing explosions, and debris – there was lovely Castle Wood right outside the back door, a huge hilly field and big Sands Wood – heaven! I loved it although it was hard for my Mum, who looked after me and the family, especially with no running water upstairs, and meagre cooking facilities.

My Auntie Alice was put to war-work at Hoovers (later G-Plans) in High Wycombe, winding coils for the munitions and “planes”; my Nan was “called-up” and became a welfare lady in the REME looking after Italian prisoners of war etc. And I began to grow into country life – Vera liked to hear me say “I be Bucks, I be” with a good imitation of her country dialect!

One of the great games amongst the boys in Spearing Road was throwing themselves into the privet hedge outside No 22! (See me on my trike, brought down to Wycombe eventually, outside the home) Years later, my husband and I revisited the house, the hedge was still there, I took a cutting and planted it in a pot and it thrives at Moordown!

The local children weren't always kind to evacuee kids but I fitted in ok, did very well at the local primary school, (I remember having air-raid drill there) but mostly I adored the countryside.

We kids had to do our bit for the war effort – we were all asked to collect rose hips (and haws) for making into rose hip syrup because oranges/vitamin C were not available. We took these down to the local community centre. It was lovely in the early autumn collecting rosehips and cob nuts from the hedgerows and fields – and conkers to play with! I remember, too, we had to collect caterpillars and white butterflies and destroy them because they were ruining our green vegetables which were so precious. I seem to remember the local boys did this with some relish, although I hated it. I also hated birdnesting which they were very fond of.

Mushrooming was another great activity – I remember a lot of us – mums and kids, some in prams, would go to particular field – but this day there was a bull in the field who took umbrage to us – we've never run so fast when it started to move towards us! Fast! Kids, prams were thrown over the fence and mums scrambled over just in time – but the mushrooms were delicious (we were so shook-up we all went to the local pub for shandy – even us kids)

The bluebell woods in spring were a delight – the scent and sight of them a joy to this day – and so many! You couldn't help walking on them and you could pick them – great armfuls – and we did!

Going to the local picture palace in the town to see Bambi and Snow White – weepy and scary!! Finished up under the seat when the Queen metamorphosises in Snow White – still do!! We would take a bottle of water and jam sandwiches to eat!

At the end of the war, or near it, in the cinema seeing a Betty Grable film and the newsreel had pictures of the allies liberating Belsen etc – I have those images burned into my eyes and can still cry if somehow seen again on history programmes – also the Japanese prisoners of war later on. Man's inhumanity to man – God forgive...

So – some of the other things I remember in High Wycombe...

- Seeing planes (ours) pulling gliders out to Arnhem, flying so low over Castle Wood at back of our house that I could see the men and pilots in them – the noise, the low drone! But these were “ours” and we cheered them til hoarse – but I think not many came back.

- The “Yanks” about the place – handing out Hershey bars and gum to the kids – but I wasn’t allowed to take them! My Auntie, who looked like a film-star herself, had a friend who kept us supplied quite often and the Italian prisoners of war, who adored my Nan, would often give treats sent to them in food parcels! (I even recall being given the odd orange, source I do not know.)
- Our own food parcel from South Africa, containing dried fruit and chocolate – delicious.
- My Mum being given a chicken by my Uncle who now had a small-holding – trouble was it still had its head and all its feathers! I can still recall trying to pluck it, ugh! Finally Uncle Tom had to help!
- Tap-dancing!! I was the young Ginger Rogers, Betty Grable, Ann Miller (the latter just happened to be my middle name!). My Mum paid for me to go to a local dance academy – the Betty Whincup troupe – and I was the youngest (but brightest she said) pupil. Shuffle spring, shuffle hop, shuffle spring and shuffle hop – I loved it and Xmas 1944 we put on a big show at the Town Hall for St. Dunston’s. Lots of Americans there as well as locals – it was super! My Auntie made my costume out of dyed book muslin and cardboard and I thought I was the bees-knees.
- My other Nan visited from London and setting fire to the chimney trying to get a blaze going! The smell lasted for days! But she brought me lovely knitted clothes – hat, jumpers, socks and gloves all to match.
- I had great clothes - all handmade by my Auntie Alice – I think perhaps other kids were a bit envious. I was so lucky. She made me an “Alice-blue-gown” for a party, full underskirt and “butterfly” front. I felt a million dollars, until the Chow dog of the party girl tried to bite me and tore it!
- Learning to sew and knit with my Nan while my Mum and Auntie went to the pictures – and staying up late!
- I remember the beautiful pink and white cherry blossom trees in spring all up Castlefield Hill – like something out of a film set; playing with other kids and my Nan in great drifts of autumn leaves throwing them about in Sands Wood, covering ourselves and Nan in them for camouflage – red, bronze, gold, copper beech leaves! Glorious fun...
- My Mum (and Nan sometimes) had to come up to London by train to check on our flats, contents and to pay the rent – and for me to see “our own” doctor in the Old Kent Road for jabs etc. On those visits we saw my other Nan and Aunt and our/my special treats were very thin cut bread (and butter?) sprinkled with white sugar. My Nan could cut the bread so thin – she would do this by holding the loaf against her chest and slice! I used to watch in awe

thinking she would cut right through herself! The other treat was Aunt Emma's Effort (!) - a lovely savoury sausage meat pie – Nan made lovely pastry.

- Our flat wasn't actually bombed but because the goods railway was at the back of us, we got blast damage when it was hit. My Mum and Dad's lovely handmade bedroom furniture against the window miraculously escaped with only a dent in the little metal rail – it's there to this day as a reminder, I still have that furniture...
- On one of those occasional visits I remember being terrified of the continuous drone of a V1 (or V2?) doodle bug – and being even more terrified when it stopped – bringing terror and destruction close by.
- I remember the great huffing-puffing steam train engines- big and black, blowing steam and soot – we used to travel to/from High Wycombe to Marylebone and then get a No 1 bus all the way to Tower Bridge Road. Once we had to get off at the Elephant and Castle and my Mum carried me all the way to Old Kent Road – I had become very ill with horrible sores all over my body following an infection and Mum was bringing me to see our doctor. I had on a siren suit, like Winston's, and couldn't walk much. I eventually got better although had to have my tonsils out.
- And, of course, we had 2 family weddings in London to attend – my Aunt Alice and Uncle Bert, my other Aunt Alice and Uncle Dick (my mum's brother). Both Weddings took place in our old parish church in the Old Kent Road – St Mary Magdalene – all my family having been christened and married there – but those two wartime weddings were in a church open to the sky – the roof having been blasted off by a nearby hit earlier in the blitz. The church was also that of the Pearly Kings and Queens and just after the war when we came back to London and the Old Kent Road the *coster royalty* still held their annual service there and arrived in little donkey carts – after they all migrated to the "World Turned Upside Down", next to the Waleran Buildings, for refreshments.
- In the College Hospital, High Wycombe, scarlet fever broke out and I was in there a month! Heartbreaking for Mum and me only to be able to wave to each other through the glass door. One day a big convoy of Americans drove past and we kids rushed to the big windows to see the soldiers now waving and calling out to us – made us feel better.
- Visits to the "sea-side" which wasn't! It was a little sandy strip at Bourne End by the river – my Mum, Auntie and her fiancé would take me there on a sunny day when we had use of a car! Happy Days. It was well after the war that I saw the sea – that was at Southend – and the tide was out!
- And VE Day (see attached)

- But above all – I missed my Dad...By now he was in the RAOC, munitions (“ammo”) and preparing to be sent overseas. He saw us once before he left, and I didn’t see him again until I was 8 ½, at the end of the war. He went through the African, Sicily and Italian campaigns in the 1st and 8th armies – I have supported and marched with the Italy Star Association on Remembrance Day in gratitude for their bravery and fortitude. Don’t make ‘em like that anymore. But my Dad never wanted to talk much about his experiences; what I have are lovely cards, letters from his service years in Africa and Italy. But most of all, my Dad came home to us and we had a wonderful family life throughout the 50s, 60s, 70s, until 1983 when he passed away. Dad was proud of me, my husband Angus and our two children Karen and Iain. He and Mum had many happy years together.

WHERE WERE YOU ON VE DAY?

We were there – at the front, by the railings, in THAT cheering crowd outside Buckingham Palace on VE-Day! Every time I see it on the TV screen, I keep thinking “if only I could keep the picture still, I’d see us – my Mum, my two Aunties and me, aged eight”

Having survived the War in London and High Wycombe, we were nearly crushed to death in the crowd outside the Palace!

We’d got there early, but crowds were gathering apace; My Auntie Alice had me pick-a-back but then couldn’t put me down again, so dense was the press of people now behind us, and my best dress was nearly turn off my back. But it was worth it just to be there, the only place to be on THAT DAY!

I could hardly believe I was actually seeing the King and Queen and the Princesses on the balcony and I think Churchill was there too. We cheered ourselves hoarse with the crowd. After the Royal Family went in, it took us HOURS to get from the railings of the Palace to the grass verge by St James’s Park – the grown-ups struggling to stay upright, me still pick-a-back – and I can still feel the crush and the relief as we just collapsed and lay there. Sanctuary!

After that, we made our way in easy stages through more celebrating crowds to the Old Kent Road where we lived, finally arriving home very late, exhausted and happy. And I couldn’t wait for my Dad to come home.

But, of course, the War was not over and it wasn’t to be until 1946 that my father came home from Europe, having fought throughout the North African and then the Italian Campaigns that did so much to making VE-Day possible. I still have all the wonderful cards and letters he sent me from those years overseas.

Sixty five years on, memories of dear ones and events are still vivid and so treasured.