

Before the Second World War brought normal life crashing around my ears I was a happy, lively South East London boy. Along with millions of others, adults and children. My life was to be drastically changed. When people would be parted from their loved ones and familiar surroundings. When children were forced to grow up. Practically overnight. This account is of one lad who did just that.

Den Johnson.

Reflection.

I look in the mirror.  
What do I see ?  
I see an old man looking  
at me.  
Where went the youth.  
Firm flesh unlined.  
Where went the sparkle  
once in those eyes ?  
All that he dreamed of  
was never achieved.  
A youth that was wasted.  
In warring lands spent.  
The memory to linger.  
For years to torment.  
I look in the mirror.  
Clearly I see.  
The old man was youth.  
At the wrong time to be.

D.W.J.

### **Far From a Bed of Roses.**

A few days before my tenth birthday the second world war started. In the following year nineteen hundred and forty I was evacuated to Dorset. To a place of safety. So we were told. My nine year old brother and my three nearly four year old sister and I were put on a train packed with kids at Waterloo Station, London. I had strict instructions from my mother to look after my younger brother and sister and make sure that we stayed together. I was then just ten years old. If I had known what a totally unpleasant time I would have I would have insisted on staying at home. Bombing, V.1. Flying Bombs, V.2. Rockets or not. When we arrived at our destination a small Dorset village we were assembled on the village school playground. The school itself struck me as being very small which of course it was. In comparison with the very large school buildings in London. I remember it was a sweltering hot summer day. The news soon spread that we had arrived and soon a crowd of local people gathered to look us over. It was as if we were cattle at a cattle market. Stared at, commented on, examined one by one. Even looking in our hair for fleas. I don't think any were found. The older healthy looking boys and girls were soon picked out and taken away. Some of the boys to become unpaid farm labourers. As were my brother and I and some of the girls to become housemaids. Others were picked out by genuinely kind people who were trying to do their bit to help in the war.

Hours later there were still a few children left standing in the school playground in the hot sun with their bundle or battered suitcase beside them. Nobody wanted to take them in. When it became obvious that they were not going to be offered a billet the local vicar took them to the vicarage until a place could be found for them. But for some a billet was never found so they stayed at the Vicarage.

We must have seemed an alien lot to those villagers with our London accents. Scruffy clothes and runny noses wiped on convenient coat sleeves. Many children were red eyed from crying. Not surprising considering that we were taken away from our parents and familiar surroundings and dumped hours later over a hundred miles away from home in an environment that was totally alien to us. Then taken off to live with total strangers. What started as an adventure had, for some of us, turned into a living nightmare that we would remember for the rest of our lives.

At first we were a novelty. Then the verbal and physical abuse started. The local children were the biggest problem. "You kids from the London slums " was the most common taunt. I wonder where they got that from? To call us kids from the London slums was ridiculous. Although we evacuees came mainly from the poor areas of London our homes had gas lighting, gas ovens, drinking water on tap and flushing lavatories. Whereas the two billets I stayed at were primitive indeed. Paraffin lamps and candles for lighting. Wood burning ranges and most of the drinking water came from a brook. And as for the lavatories. They were buckets under a bench seat in a shed at the bottom of the garden that you shared with mice, rats, spiders and anything else that crawled or slithered in. We did not dare point this out as it would meant another out numbered fight. We were already involved in running fights with the local boys to and from school. There was not much we could do about it. I would not

have minded so much if we evacuees won a fight now and again but we were always well out numbered.

Nasty incidents also occurred inside the school. One day we were learning a poem. One of the lines was 'Three white owls in the belfry sit'. Playtime came and we all trooped out into the playground. When it was over, back into the classroom we went. Looking at the poem again on the blackboard we soon realised that it had been altered while we were out in the playground. What we had read previously as. 'Three white owls in the belfry sit'. Now read, 'Three white cows in the belfry sh-t.' Of course we all burst out laughing. But it was soon to become far from a laughing matter for me. After frantically rubbing the offending line from the blackboard, the teacher demanded to know who was responsible for writing it. I was horrified when some of the local boys said it was me.

Although I continually denied writing it the teacher did not believe me. So innocent that I was, I received three strokes of the cane across the knuckles of both hands. Although I was in terrible pain I did not cry. I would not give them the satisfaction of knowing they had hurt me. Another petty thing happened as Christmas approached. We were rehearsing the school Christmas play. It was 'Good King Wencelas' I was chosen, surprisingly, to play the part of the King. Perhaps it was because I was tall and in those days had a reasonable voice. But at the next rehearsal the part of the King was given to a local boy and I was given a minor part. Evidently certain parents of the local boys protested because an evacuee was given the lead part in Their school play.

During the first month or my brother, sister and I were billeted with an elderly spinster. She was a kind old dear but three children were too much for her so other billets had to be found for us. A farmer offered to take in my brother and me. And his neighbour who farmed half of the same farm took in my sister. The farmer and his wife who cared for her treated her very well. But as for my brother and I, that was a different kettle of fish. At first living on a farm was very exciting for us. Surrounded by cows, goats and chickens. And there was a huge shire horse that I grew to love and I am not ashamed to say so. Almost every day we were harnessing him up to the dung cart or some other piece of farm machinery to do whatever task we were told to do. But the excitement and novelty of living on a farm soon wore off when we were expected to do more and more work. It was never ending. It was not long before my brother and I were doing a considerable amount of the manual work. But I suppose that although it was not our choice to be in the situation that we were in we should be rather proud of ourselves. For we became efficient farm labourers. The only break we got from the constant work was during the week when we went to school after we had finished our early morning chores.

The school was three miles away and it did not matter whatever the weather conditions were, winter or summer we had to walk it. We were woke up at about five o'clock every morning to start work. The first chore of the day was to get the cows feed ready. A mixture of hay, chopped up mangel wurzels, swedes and cattle cake. Then with the farm dog, a collie named Rough we went out into the fields and drove the cows in for the morning milking. The dog would bring them in practically unaided until

the day he fought a large dog fox that the farmer had trapped in the nearby wood. After that fight the dog who was previously a lively very friendly dog now limped about with his head hanging down. He was a pathetic sight. It was heartbreaking. The fight with the fox had completely ruined him. It was not long before the farmer had him put down.

Imagine if you can the daily life my brother and me had to look forward to when we were woken up about five am every day. First we had to carry out the chores I have previously mentioned. What then? After our breakfast of cold solid porridge. A peaceful and restful hours few hours walking to and attending school ? No. As soon as we reached the outlying houses of the village we were joined by the local children who seemed to take great delight in making our daily lives a misery on the way to school and for the rest of the day when ever they got the chance at the school.

As soon as they were milked the cows were driven out into the fields. Then we had to clean out the cow shed. When all that had been done we were allowed to go into the farm kitchen to have our breakfast. Breakfast was invariably cold porridge that had been cooked the night before and was now a solid lump in the saucepan. The farmers wife cut a portion out of the saucepan for my brother and I with a little cold milk poured over them and a cup of weak sugarless tea was our daily breakfast. I did wonder what the farmer and his family had for their breakfast as there was no porridge left in the saucepan. At weekends it was work all day saturday and if there was essential work to be done, all day sunday as well. If there was no work to be done on sunday other than milking we were told to go to church. The church was opposite the school three miles away. Mentioning the church reminds me of my short spell as a choir boy. It suddenly came to an end when the vicar caught me singing Mademoiselle from Armetoirs in the vestry and relegated me to pump air into the old organ. So there I was whenever I went to church I was made to spend the services stuck down a narrow passage to the rear of the organ and pumping a wooden lever up and down whenever a hymn was sung.

I did not mind for two reasons. One it gave us a break from the farm and the second was that very often while we were walking through the lanes to church a retired Colonel and his wife always stopped give us a lift in their Bentley. It was a wonderful experience to ride in such a car. For even though we were Londoners and had ridden often on Buses Trams and Trains and even Paddle steamers on the Thames we had never rode in a car and what a car! When we arrived at the church the Colonels wife always said. "Wait for us here after the service and we will take you back as far as our cottage." I knew that when we arrived at their cottage we would be invited in for either a glass of real lemonade or cup of tea. With sugar. Without doubt that Colonal and his wife were the nicest people we ever met during our evacuation.

During the war farmers were allowed to keep older children away from school for twice the length of the summer holidays to help with the harvest. So summer holidays were far from being a holiday for us. They were fourteen weeks of hard work. One of the most revolting jobs we had to do on that farm was emptying the bucket of excrement from the outside lavatory that was hidden at the end of a double row of thick laurel bushes at the back of the farmhouse. The bucket was usually full to

overflowing so sliding it out from under the bench seat was a very difficult and nauseating manoeuvre. When we finally managed to slide it out without slopping any of the contents over the edge. Holding our breath for as long as possible. Then dashing outside to gulp a few lungs full of fresh air before going back in to have another go. Then we slid a pole through the buckets handle and very carefully carried it into a small orchard. There were only two plum trees in that orchard where we dug a hole. Usually under one of those plum trees and poured the contents in and covered it up quickly with earth. I remember those trees bore big juicy plums. I kept out of that lavatory as much as possible especially during the summer. I used a nearby copse. It was pleasant and convenient. Weather permitting.

As I was now turned eleven years old I sat my eleven plus school exam. I failed. Which did not surprise me. It would have been a miracle if I had passed. That village school was way behind what I was being taught at my old school in Greenwich, London. The tiring farm work did not help. So having failed the exam I was sent to a Senior school in the nearby town. Only two of my erstwhile bullies came with me. And surprise surprise. At that school they kept out of my way. Two of them I could easily handle and they knew it. One of them tried to get friendly but I totally ignored him.

My brother and I did have one or two exiting moments. During the build up of the invasion forces and equipment on the channel coast. Conveys of trucks and tanks were commonplace on a main road that passed near to where we were billeted. While one such convey was passing a tank stopped and a soldier asked us where they could get some drinking water. I started to direct them when the driver said climb up on the tank boys and show me the way. So we did. Down the lane to the brook where we drew our water from. Then when they had obtained all the water they needed we showed them a way further along the lane that brought them out on to the main road about half a mile ahead of where they had left it. Then with a cheery thanks boys, goodbye, they rumbled on their way.

I remember one evening milking after the cows had been let out to graze after they had been kept in for over a week as the weather had been so bad. They had stuffed themselves with fresh grass. Consequently while they were waiting to be milked they were depositing very loose motions into the gutter. Literally a green slime. I was milking a Friesian when without any warning she lifted her hind leg and kicked me the bucket and the stool into the dung filled gutter. I was not hurt but I was smothered in the green slimy dung. The farmer took one look at me. Then taking me by the arm he marched me out into the farmyard to where an old rusty iron bath stood full of ice cold water. It was there to water the horse and the bull. He chucked me in saying. "Get yourself cleaned up, you baint going in the house like that." Dorset was supposed to be a safe area, although I don't think there was any part of Britain in those days that could be called safe. I know I witnessed more than one dog fight in the sky between our fighters and german fighters and bombers right above my head. The sky was criss-crossed with vapour and smoke trails from crashing aircraft. We also had a few bomb loads jettisoned from fleeing german bombers trying to get back to the safety of France. Some of them were burning and leaving a trail of smoke as they fled. A bomb from one of these fell into a herd of cows on a nearby farm. It was a scene of utter carnage. The shattered remains of cows were everywhere.

Hanging in the hedge was the body of an unborn calf that had been blown out of its mothers body. All around the field lay bodies of cows that had been injured and were put out of their misery. There must have been plenty of fresh beef around that week before the authorities got hold of it. I believe they were called the Ministry of Food. Another bomb fell on another neighbouring farm. It broke a few windows and killed a pig the farm dog ran away but returned a few days later.

One day a Spitfire made a forced landing in a field close by. It had engine trouble. The only damage caused by the landing was a bent prop. A Royal Air Force repair crew arrived and started work on the engine and the bent prop. Some of them cut a gap in the hedge at the far end of the field then levelled the earth between the two fields. That was to give the fighter a longer run to take off. It was very exciting for my brother and I. Especially when they started up the Merlin engine. We were stood behind the fighter and I remember that the blast of air from the prop almost blew us of our feet. After testing the engine the Pilot climbed into the cockpit and away went the plane faster and faster down the field through the gap in the hedge then up into the air. Then he made a wide turn and came back over us, as he did so he wagged his wings then away he went and was soon out of sight. There went either a lucky Pilot, or a very good one. To land a crippled Spitfire in one piece, saving it and himself to fight again another day. I hope he survived the war.

Then something happened that almost broke my heart. The shire horse I mentioned earlier. That daft lovable horse that stood on my toes, luckily on soft earth, and refused to move. Who nudged me along with his huge head as I walked in front of him and led me a merry chase when he was loose in the fields and did not want to be caught. Or sometimes when he was called would charge straight towards me at full gallop as if he meant to trample me into the ground. But always skidded to a stop a few feet from me and would stand quietly while I put a halter on him. He was lent to the farmers brother who harnessed him up to plough a field with his own horse. But the other horse was not a heavy carthorse. It was a slighter built horse, an ex hunter. The mismatched pair were set to plough a dry stony field. The shire had most of the work to do and he pulled and pulled until his heart gave out and he dropped dead. There was a terrible row when the farmers brother came to tell us what had happened. We ended up with the ex hunter. A very temperamental horse that could not be trusted. One day I was driving him harnessed up to a cart when he was spooked by a small patch of snow in the hedgerow and bolted. I yelled out "Jump" to my brother who was on the cart with me. Luckily I was not hurt when I jumped and hit the frozen ground. My brother did not jump. Fortunately the cart did not turn over and eventually stopped so he escaped injury as well.

I know it is often said that hard work did not hurt anybody but it can become a torture if you are not clothed and fed properly. When, for instance, you have to trudge through snow and rain wearing worn out leaking boots, a jacket and short trousers with an old sack tied around your shoulders. When your feet are so numb with cold that you cannot feel them and the pain when you get the chance to rub some warmth back into them I will never forget. My brother suffered worse than I did during the

winters. He had chilblains so bad that they bled, but he never received any treatment at all for them from the farmer or his wife. I usually had large cold sores around my mouth that cracked and bled whenever I moved it. I think the chilblains and the cold sores were caused by a lack of vitamins. We were always hungry. We ate pieces of swede and mangel as we cut them up for the cattle and when we worked among the root crops out in the fields we pulled up turnips and carrots to eat. Also, on cold winter mornings while we were milking we squirted warm milk straight from the teat into our mouths. Without the farmer knowing of course. We also ate the cow cake. An aquired taste necessitated by hunger. These clandestine suppliments to our meagre meals with the farmer and his family gave us a bit more nourishment than we got from the continuous rabbit served up on weekdays with the usual boiled spuds and cabbage. If a chicken died, or was killed off because it was too old to lay eggs we never had it to eat, it was taken to market and sold.

Sunday dinner was always mutton with veg with never a dessert to follow. In fact we never expected a dessert because we were never offered one and only when. By chance, I went back into the kitchen for something that I had forgotten and saw. To my great surprise. The farmer and his family tucking into what looked like homebaked apple pie and cream. I did not say a word. I just turned around and walked out again. Nothing was ever said about my catching them having a dessert after we had left. I knew then what the farmers wife used some of the cream for. That she frequently skimmed from the churns of milk. We were always told go for a walk until milking time. Or do some job or other as soon as we had finished eating our Sunday dinner. That Sunday I found out why. Evening meals were either bread and cheese, or just bread spread with rancid butter. Never a cake and what was put on our plates was all you got. No seconds. At that time school dinners were unheard of. So we had to take something to eat at our dinner break. One of the snacks that the farmers wife was in the habit of sending us off to school with was dry slices of bread spread with black treacle. The treacle she got from a barrel kept out in the farmyard. The farmer dosed his cows with it, what for I don't know. You can imagine what that bread was like by dinner time. A soggy brown mess. But when you were as hungry as we were you ate it. If the bread was not spread with black treacle they were spread with what was invariably rancid butter. I don't know which of the two I disliked the most. To drink we were give a bottle of water to which a few lemon crytals were added making a very weak lemon drink. Since my evacuation I dislike and will not eat Rabbit, Butter or Black Treacle.

One morning just before six o'clock John, my brother and I went out into the fields to fetch the cows in for milking. We had already prepared their usual morning feed of hay, chopped up wurzels, swede and cow cake. Their individual portions were waiting for them in their own stalls. Each cow had its own stall and always went into the same one. On that particular morning we found the herd in a field called Long Meadow. It was the farthest field from the farmyard. As we were chivvying them along without the aid of the poor old dog I noticed one of the cows was walking very slowly and unsteadily. She did not look very well, but I was still surprised when she suddenly dropped to the ground and died. When we arrived at the farmyard I told the farmer and he went to take a look. After instructing my brother and I to get the cows in and start milking. When milking was over and the cow shed



cleaned out we went into the farmhouse kitchen for our usual solid lump of porridge for breakfast. Then off to school. Returning to the farm late that afternoon we had the usual round of chores to do. We got the cows food ready, then went out into the fields to get them in for evening milking. We found them in the same field as we did that morning and the dead cow was still lying where she fallen that morning. The farmer had made no attempt to either shift the cow or bury it. When the milking and all the cleaning up was done the farmer said. "Get yourselves a couple of spades and go and dig a hole to put that dead cow in. I will be along later. And dig the hole as close to the body as you can so that we can pull her in without too much trouble." I was not at all surprised that we had to dig the hole. So we returned to the dead cow with spades and started to dig. We were still digging when the farmer arrived. I supposed we had dug about three or four feet. "That will do" he said. So we climbed out. We had dug the hole about six inches from the side of the cow. The farmer tied a rope around the cows front legs. Then another one around the back legs. Giving one rope to us he said. "When I say heave you pull on that rope as hard as you can". As soon as he said "heave" we pulled. The first pulled was not sufficient It took two or three more before we managed to slide her into the hole. The hole was not deep enough. The cow had become bloated with gas while lying all day which did not help. The farmer decided to get rid of the gas by repeatedly jumping up and down on the cows stomach. As he did so the gas belched out of the dead cows mouth. He carried on until he could not get any more gas out. I moved back out of the way. One whiff of the terrible stench of that gas was enough for me. Although the cow was considerably thinner there was one part we could not get below ground level. That was one hind leg. It stuck up at an angle practically vertical. Well above ground level. It did not seem to bother the farmer at all. "Cover her up" he said and walked off.

We put as much earth on that cow as we could but the hind leg was still poking up out of the ground. It was not a pleasant sight to see every time we passed that spot. Especially when the foxes had eaten the skin and flesh from the leg leaving just the bare white bones and hoof. But after a month or so they disappeared leaving only us to know that a cow was buried there. One of the jobs we were told to do was to drag large branches broken from the trees backwards and forwards across a field to break up the clods of earth to get the field ready for sowing. It was a job that we normally would have done with the horse and chain harrow. The ex hunter had been returned to the farmers brother. It was not capable of heavy farm work. The farmer never did get another shire horse while I was there so no work was done that really needed a carthorse. It is a wonder that he had not put a harness my brother and I.

It was while my brother and I were dragging the branches up and down that field that he first started to feel the pain of his infected appendix. Even though the farmer knew that my brother was in pain he would not let him rest. It was only a stomach ache he said. I got very little sleep as we shared a single bed for he was groaning all night with pain. Finally he was allowed to stay in bed. But they did nothing to help him. It is almost beyond belief that anyone can be so callous as to let a young boy suffer so much pain from for so long and never bother to call a Doctor. On the fourth day, Sunday. I had enough. My Grandmother had recently arrived in the area and was living on another farm a few

mile away. So very early on that Sunday morning. The fourth day of my brother's illness I sneaked out of the farmhouse and ran over the fields to tell my grandmother about him. She was very surprised to see me but she soon realised why I had arrived on her doorstep so early on a Sunday morning when I told her how ill John was. I said he was in great pain and talking nonsense. Lucky for him she believed me and phoned for an Ambulance straight away. Then she returned to the farm with me. The farmer and his wife were very annoyed with me for running off to my grandmother and annoyed with her for phoning for an Ambulance. But when my Grandmother saw the state my brother was in she let rip and gave them a good telling off. As soon as the Ambulance got him to Hospital he was rushed straight into the operating theatre. It was touch and go. The appendix had burst, he was now suffering from peritonitis.

When it was realised how seriously ill John was it was decided that my Aunt Sheila, who was staying the weekend with my Grandmother, should go to London with me and tell my parents. The phone service to London was cut off. We started our journey that Sunday afternoon. Unfortunately there had been an air raid on the main line to London. Probably the reason for the phones not working. So we went on a roundabout route down to the coast first then up to London. We arrived at our house in Lewisham early Monday morning, waking up my parents who were still in bed. I was exhausted. I had not slept properly for days. My parents decided to get to the Hospital as soon as possible. I could not help thinking if only I could get into that warm bed my parents had just got out of. Just for an hour. But no, that was not to be. Back to Waterloo Station we went to catch the first train to Dorset. On the journey to London I had to stand on the packed train all the way, but I got a seat on the train back to Dorset simply because I fainted from exhaustion and a soldier gave me his seat. I slept all the way. My brother was lucky to be alive. He was in Hospital for three months. When he was fit enough to walk around the nurses took him to the Cinema which was just across the road. Then when I visited him he would boast about it. I did not mind. I was so relieved to see him well again. I don't know what I would have done if he had died. Remembering how I felt at that time. Very likely I would have gone for that farmer with any weapon I could lay my hands on. If not then later when I was older.

When my brother was discharged from Hospital he did not return to the farm but went to live with my grandmother and sisters. When he joined them Grandmother was given an empty cottage in another village where they settled in nicely. To my complete surprise and very great disappointment I was left at the farm even though my family were aware that the farmer and his wife were prepared to let a young boy lie in agony and do nothing to help him. If I had not run away to get help my brother would have certainly died. I felt drained physically and mentally by all that had happened. My brother's illness. The constant hard work and the harsh conditions on the farm. And the extra work I had to do as I was on my own. I had a terrible feeling that nobody cared and that I had been totally abandoned. All this affected my school work. I just could not concentrate on my lessons. Realising that something was wrong my teacher told the Headmaster. He sent for me and asked if there was anything troubling me. Suddenly I could not keep it all bottled up inside me any more. It all came pouring out. The worry about my brother. How tired I was doing all that work on the farm. I must have sounded hysterical. He

calmed me down and sat me on a chair. Then he sent for a cup of tea. I remember that his kindness choked me up worse than ever. He slowly coaxed the full story out of me. What I did not realise was that his secretary was taking it all down in shorthand and it was sent to the authorities. They decided to prosecute the farmer for cruelty to my brother and I.

The first I knew about the prosecution was a few weeks later when I returned to the farm

from school. The farmer was waiting for me. He ordered me up to the little back bedroom where I slept. He followed me in and closed the door. Then he said "What have you been saying about me at school?" As he spoke he started to unbuckle his belt. "I have to go to court " he said, as he continued to unbuckle his belt."I have been accused of cruelty". I realised that he knew what I had told the Headmaster and I was in for a beating. Standing there waiting for the beating I felt absolutely desolate. Without hope. I know I kept muttering something. I certainly was not begging him not to beat me. I don't know what I was saying. All I know was that I did not care anymore what happened to me. But then, for some reason, he stopped undoing his belt and fastened it up again. Then he walked out of the room. Perhaps he thought that it would not be wise to have an assault charge added to the charge of cruelty. Or perhaps it was because I looked so wretched? I quickly packed up my few belongings and fled. It was impossible for me to stay on that farm a moment longer. I went to live with my Grandmother in her tiny cottage until I was fourteen years of age. It was a squeeze but we managed. You cannot imagine the relief I felt finally getting away from that farm. I will never ever understand why I was left on my own on that farm after the truth about how my brother and I were treated became known. The whole rotten experience caused me to have bouts of depression for a long while. Looking back I am not surprised. I never have or ever will forget those years on that farm.

While I stayed with my grandmother I attended another village school. It had two teachers. One taught infants in a side room. The other one taught juniors and seniors in the main room. It did not matter to me if they were able to teach me anything or not. I had not learnt much at any of the schools that I attended while I was evacuated. I could not be bothered to even try at this latest school the state I was in. In fact I deliberately copied another boy's work. With his permission. His name was Fred. He was one of only two friends I had there. The other one was a girl. Her name was Joan Warren. In fact I can truthfully say that they were the best friends I had known in all the time I was evacuated. Joan was a pretty redhead I still remember what she looked like. Fred, Joan and I sat at the very back of the classroom. Joan sat between us. The desks were complete units of wide bench seats and desks in ranks across the classroom. One day the teacher really disgusted me. We were in the middle of a lesson when she suddenly stopped and said" Dennis, put your hands up on the desk where I can see them." I don't know exactly what she thought I was doing with my hands that were only resting in my lap but I have a good idea as I was sitting next to Joan. That was the second time during my evacuation that a teacher had assumed wrongly that I was guilty of doing, or had done something wrong. I almost walked out of that school right then. She could not have physically stopped me. I was bigger and far stronger than her. But in those days you did not do that sort of thing. Even if you did have a very good reason.

One will probably ask why I did not tell my parents how we were being treated at that farm. I did. My father visited us once at the farm. When he left I walked with him up the farm track to the lane. As we walked I told him how we were being treated. When we reached the gate at the end of the track he opened the gate, went out into the lane and got on the bicycle. Then he said "Never mind son, you will get over it." With that he rode off up the lane. I stood there watching him go with tears streaming down my face. After that I never told anybody how we were being treated. Not until I was questioned by my Headmaster. I had decided that it would be a waste of time. Nobody cared. Later on when mother found out that I had told my father how we were being treated and never bothered to tell her she really told him off. If she had visited us instead of my father and I had told her John and I would not have stayed on that farm for long. I only remember mum and dad visiting us once. They both came on their own. They only visited the farm when they stayed for a weekend with grandmother and my sisters. But when my grandmother and my brother and sisters moved into a cottage further away I did not see any of my family until I ran away from the farm and went to live with them. Both mother and father attended the court when the farmer was charged with cruelty to John and I. He was found guilty and fined eight pounds. Outside the Court he boasted that eight pounds was a cheap price to pay for the use of two labourers for over two and a half years. My father stood there as he said it and never said a word. My mother told the farmer what she thought of him. But he only laughed.

I often wondered what happened to most of that eight pound fine the farmer had to pay. Eight pounds was roughly two weeks pay to a manual worker in those days. I was bought a suit. My first suit. It was made of grey flannel. The cheapest material you could buy. It probably cost no more than a ten shillings. I don't remember my brother John getting anything. So what happened to the remaining seven pounds ten shillings? As the money would have been paid to my father I doubt if anybody. Other than the local publican received any of it. Yet it should have been shared between John and I. My experience on that farm did not put me off farming in general. I worked on two other farms owned by decent farmers while I was on school holidays and in between leaving school and returning to London to start work. I was quite happy working on both of them. I think the farmers were a little surprised that a London lad could do any job on a farm as well as any farm labourer. They did not know of the hard apprenticeship that I had served. And I never told them. Much later I found out that when grandmother arrived with two of my younger sisters, then joined by Joan to live at a farm a few miles away my mother came with them intending to stay. But father did not send any money for their keep so mother had to return to London to earn some money to send to grandmother.

On one farm I worked alongside Land Army girls and a saucy lot they were. They were all over eighteen years old and enjoyed teasing a fourteen year old boy. They were a constant embarrassment to me talking intimately about their love life within my hearing and acting sexy just to see me blush. And if, while we were milking together, I happened to look at one of them and they happened to see me looking they always winked and blew a kiss. If I had been just a few years older I would have really enjoyed their company. But I don't think they would have been so saucy then. After the day's work was over the girls and I walked down to the village pub and during the warm dry

evenings into the pubs back yard where drinks were brought out to us. Other farm labourers joined us. Among them were Italian prisoners of war who were welcome and stood chatting to us while they drank. I remember that they preferred cider, as I did.

One day a fighter pilot frightened the life out of me. It was during one of the rare slack periods. I was walking around the fields with a sickle cutting down thistles before their flowers turned to seed and blew away in the wind spreading more and more thistles. It was while I was right in the middle of a large field when I heard a noise up in the sky. Looking up I saw to my horror a fighter diving straight down at me. I could not see if it was friend or foe as it was coming at me head on. But I feared the worst and fully expected a hail of machine gun bullets. There was nowhere to run for safety in time. So I stood there petrified. It roared over me very very low then climbed up into the sky and then did what was known as a victory roll and the merlin engine, for it was a Spitfire, gave a little cough and a puff of smoke as they usually did. I bet that Pilot was sitting in his cockpit laughing his head off leaving a very shaken boy standing in that field shaking his fists at him using all the swear words he knew. There were no Land Army girls working on the second farm. Instead there were Italian prisoners of war. Some of them were the ones that drank with us in the back yard of the village pub. One day. Unintentionally. I really upset one of them. We were all in the barn eating our dinner which was mainly bread and cheese or meat with either cider or homemade wine to wash it down. The Italians were using knives to cut pieces off their food. It was pleasant sitting there chatting. Most of them could speak some english. When, and I cannot remember what we were talking about to cause me to say it. I said to one of them. "What were you? One of Mussolini's blackshirts." I had no idea that Mussolini's personal guards were hated so much by the Italians. The Italian that I said it to dropped his food on the floor and came for me with his knife. I leapt to my feet and ran for my life. He ran after me shouting and waving his knife. The other Italians ran after him and lucky for me they caught him before he caught me.

Of course when they told me why he went berserk I apologised and was forgiven. But it frightened the life out of me. The other thing that happened to me on that same farm was for me very embarrassing. The farmers daughter was the same age as me 'fourteen years old'. One day she led a Jersey cow out to the middle of the farmyard and called me over to hold the cow. Then off she went. So there I was holding cow by a rope halter in the middle of the farmyard. When she returned she was leading the bull. What happened next I do not need to go into. Lets just say that nature took its course. While I stood there blushing scarlet. Of course that sort of thing was nothing new to me. But a fourteen year old girl holding a bull while it was doing what comes naturally I found very embarrassing. I have not named the Farmer or his wife as by now they will have died. Or those young village bullies who would now be elderly. I do not want to cause any embarrassment to their children and grandchildren. Nor have I revealed the exact location of where we were evacuated.

It was fortunate for the farmer and the bullies that I still had two and a half years left to serve in the army when I returned to England after serving in Malaya and Singapore for three years on active service for I seriously considered returning to where I was evacuated to sort them all out. I was

fighting fit and strong. While serving in the Far East I managed to reach the finals in a boxing tournament. I fought as a heavyweight. But if I had returned I would have certainly been arrested. Then I would have ended up in the Glasshouse, 'Army Prison'. I decided that they were not worth my going through that sort of punishment. But it was touch and go.

### **South East London. Doodlebugs and Rockets.**

Our house in Lewisham lay behind Lewisham Junction Railway Station. It unfortunately no longer exists, which is a great shame. It was a quiet secluded terrace of fifteen houses. The only entrance to it was across a narrow concrete and iron bridge. The Trains were noisy going in and out of the Station up on the embankment at the bottom of the gardens. And so were the porters shouting information to the passengers as to where the Trains were going. But after a while you got so used to the noise that you did not notice it. In front of the houses flowed the Quaggy where during the war a dam was built to create a large pool of water to use fire fighting when the German bombers came over on one of their nightly attacks. It was in that pool of water that my mother threw a nose cap from an anti aircraft rocket fired from Blackheath and also a nose cap from an anti aircraft shell that I was keeping as souvenirs. She thought they might explode. Sometimes during a air raid a Steam Engine came through Lewisham Junction pulling a rail truck with an anti aircraft gun on it firing at the bombers. It was deafening when it fired level with our bedroom windows and especially loud if it fired as it was crossing the iron railway bridge over the Quaggy. I started work in Lewisham in Nineteen forty four as soon as I came home from Dorset. I had only been home for a short while when the V1 flying bombs and later the V2 rockets started crashing on London. So the start of my working life was very unpleasant.

My first job was in the Electro-plating department of a local engineering firm engaged on war work. The working conditions were terrible. I was working among vats of sulphuric acid, cyanide, plating chemicals, and a degreasing unit that gave off fumes that knocked you out in seconds if you were daft enough to breath them in. There was no ventilation system. When the doors were opened after they and the windows had been closed all night or weekends the air was thick with a cocktail of fumes. I did not stay there for long. This time nobody would force me to work in an unpleasant situation. I was free to work where I pleased until I was eighteen. Then. As was the fate of all eighteen year old young men. If you were reasonably fit. You were conscripted for service in the Army, Navy, or Airforce. Or if you were very unlucky you were drafted down a coal mine as a Bevan boy. So I left that job and started working for a local building firm. There I was involved mainly in repairing bomb damaged houses. We often went to help where a V1 flying bomb, or as more commonly called, a doodlebug or buzzbomb fell. Later on it was V2 Rockets. We replaced blown out windows and missing slates. If the damage to the roof was extensive we covered it with a tarpaulin to keep out the rain until the repairs could be carried out. We also knocked down any dangerous structures such as badly damaged chimney stacks or walls. We tried hard to make the houses as safe as possible and reasonably weather tight. And where there were elderly people we usually helped them to clear up the mess. Broken plaster from the ceilings, soot and dust and broken glass. Where the glass had been blown out of the sashes we replace it temporarily by fitting a clear plastic material re-enforced with wire on the top sash and a waterproof thin tarred sacking material pressed between two layers of brown paper on the bottom sash. That at least kept the worst of the elements out though a high wind did quite easily blow them out.

The first Craftsman I worked with (in those days they were Craftsmen ) was a Plasterer, his name was George Weedon. Unfortunately he had been gassed during the First World War So now and again he had to stay at home. It must have been rough for him as there was no National Health Service. I don't think he received any financial help to pay the Doctors bills from the Government even though he had been disabled while he was fighting for this country. George taught me the art of plastering. He was teaching me how to make moulds for decorative ornamental mouldings or how to repair damage ones. When George was ill I was sent to work with the other Craftsmen such as the Plumber, Carpenter and Tiler. Working with the Tiler I was not so keen on. It was not that I was scared of heights, I never panicked on a ladder or a roof. I just felt apprehensive and over cautious. But I got on well with all of the men I worked with. When George had to give up working the firm employed an ex sailor who invalided out of the Navy as a Plasterer. But I soon found out that he knew very little about plastering. At that time quite a lot of our work was plastering over bare breeze block parting walls in three storey houses that were being converted into flats. After looking over the job he would say. Right son you carry on here I have a couple of more jobs to look at. Then he would disappear all day to reappear when it was almost time to pack up or a job was finished. I would not have minded if he had told me that he was not much good at plastering. But not to blatantly use me to cover up his inability. I could have told the charge hand what was going on but I did not like to. That situation and the fact that I was refused a raise in wages caused me to give up the building trade.

Although I was only fourteen when I was employed by the building firm I had to do my turn at firewatching with the other employees. Businesses pooled their staff for firewatching duties. That way the staff had fewer disturbed nights. When it was my turn I slept in a concrete air raid shelter with the other firewatchers. Luckily I did not have to extinguish any incendiary bombs while I was on duty. I believe the pay I received for a night on firewatching duty was seven and sixpence in old money. About thirty five pence new money. I dont think the authorities would have been very pleased with me and a mate of mine when we actually tried to get an intact incendiary bomb to burn that we found lying where it fell in the road. We failed. It would not ignite. By carrying out firewatching duty I thought I would be eligible for the Defence Medal at the end of the war. But I was too young. There was very little bombing by aircraft during nineteen forty four and fortyfive but plenty of V 1 and V2 weapons. When a bomb fell it was over with in a matter of seconds, the same with the V2 Rocket. Those Rockets came down so fast that you did not hear them. You had no idea when or where they would hit. You could hear the sound they made coming down after they had hit and exploded. It was similar to a long rumble of thunder way up in the sky.

The V1 was very different. You could hear them coming from miles away. And you knew for certain that its Ram Jet engine would soon stop because London was as far as its fuel would take it and when that was used up, down it came and the thousand pounds of high explosive it carried wiped out two or three streets. Sometimes the siren did not sound so if you were doing a noisy job you could get a nasty surprise. The Ram Jet Engine sounded similar to a two stroke motorcycle engine so anyone riding a motorcycle with a two stroke engine at that time got sworn at quite often.



When you heard a flying bomb approaching you got into the nearest shelter as quick as you could. Nobody thought any the less of you if you ran. It was a matter of survival. If there was no shelter near enough to reach in time. As was often the case. You found whatever shelter you could. Then you waited with nerves on edge for the engine to stop. Then for it to hit the ground and explode. Sometimes they dived straight down. Sometimes they glided. Sometimes for quite a distance. When they exploded the blast was widespread destroying streets of houses either killing or injuring the unfortunate occupants. Some passed over. Watched anxiously by hundreds of eyes as it flew on to kill or maim some other poor souls. Late one evening just as the light was fading my father and I were stood by the entrance to our Anderson air raid shelter. Mother was already in the shelter on one of the narrow bunks. Father and I were having a last cigarette before we turned in. The air raid siren started which did not surprise us as it had been going off all day. And as usual we heard in the distance another flying bomb on its way. As it got closer the engine stopped so we waited for the explosion thinking that it was too far away from us to worry about. How wrong we were. There was no immediate explosion which was strange. Then we both became aware of an odd whistling sound. Looking up and around the darkening sky we saw an alarming sight. Gliding towards us was the flying bomb that we had expected to hit the ground and explode a couple of miles away. I could see it wobbling about as it came closer so I dived towards and through the air raid shelter entrance and my father did the same falling on top of me. Mother, not knowing what had happened was very surprised by our sudden appearance through the entrance and both of us lying on the concrete floor. All father said was there is a flying bomb overhead. A few seconds later it crashed and exploded. That flying bomb had carried on gliding for a mile or so more before crashing.

One day a plumber and I were repairing a flat roof over a shop in Blackheath Village opposite the Railway Station when without warning a Doodlebug came over so fast that we did not have time to get off the roof to safety. It was frightening. I remember another one that put years on me. I was walking home to have my dinner down the narrow road from the Railway Bridge. The arches supporting the bridge were partially bricked up to serve as air raid shelters. Then down to the beginning of Silk Mills Alley behind the back yard of what was once the Lewisham depot of Whitbreads Brewerys. Now it is a Tesco's car park. Then across the bridge that I mentioned earlier that spanned the Quaggy and into the gravelly unpaved Terrace where I once lived. As I walked down that road on that particular day a crowd of workers were walking towards me from Silk Mills Alley on their way to the cafes in the High Street for their dinner and maybe a pint in one of the pubs. The road was full of people. Most of them came from the engineering firm 'Elliot's' where I had worked for a week or so in their Electro Plating Dept. When without any Siren sounding we heard a flying bomb coming fast. Those that were near the Railway arches air raid shelters hurried into them.

It was almost over the top of us when its engine stopped. There is nothing more terrifying to hear than a flying bombs engine stopping when it is right above you. You could hear the gasps of dismay from everybody. Including me. I know I stood there petrified. But it did not dive straight down. If it had I would not be writing this. Instead it turned left and glided over Lewisham Junction. Everybody sighed

with relief and waited for the explosion. But that flying bomb was not finished with us yet. It glided around in a full circle and came over the top of us again. But miraculously it carried on circling and disappeared once again over Lewisham Junction. This time we heard it explode as it crashed behind the now demolished, 'Gaumont' [re-named Odeon] Cinema. Also now demolished. I was nearly caught by another flying bomb when I returned to a house that a plasterer and I had just finished working in. It was only a short distance from the building firm that I was employed by. It was a Saturday morning and I was not in any hurry. I returned to the house with a builders barrow to collect the plasterers tools and other bits and pieces. When I had finished loading the barrow I mentally debated whether to sit on the front steps of the empty house and smoke a cigarette. I decided not to and started on my way back to the builders yard.

I had just entered the alley that led to the builders yard when I heard the flying bomb coming and it was close. So close that when the engine stopped I immediately crouched down by the wall and covered my ears waiting for the bang. It came almost immediately. It crashed somewhere close. I got to my feet and carried on pushing the barrow down the alley and into the builders yard. When I heard where that flying bomb had crashed I went cold. It had gone straight into the house that I had just left. If I had sat on those front steps and smoked a cigarette it would have been my last one ever. If there are such things as Guardian Angels then mine was looking after me that day. I was annoyed that the hard work the plasterer and I had done on that house was a complete waste. Another flying bomb fell close by a few days later. It crashed on to the Kings Hall Cinema that had just been repaired and was about to re-open. Unfortunately the manager, who they said was on the stage when it hit, was killed. Outside our house was an Air raid Wardens Post. It was an Anderson shelter. The curved corrugated iron plates bolted together type. This one was standing at ground level, not half buried as they were in back gardens. One evening I was standing by its door. Inside were two Air Raid Wardens drinking the tea my mother had sent out to them. The warning siren had sounded. For a change. In the distance I could hear a flying bomb coming. I said to the Wardens that I could hear one coming. One of them said " Don't wave at it son, you might encourage it to pay us a visit." I laughed and they carried on drinking their tea while I stood there listening to it getting closer and closer.

On Blackheath not far from where we were there was a battery of anti aircraft rockets. Previously there were also anti-aircraft guns but they were moved down into Kent when the flying bombs started to come in large numbers. Also a line of Barrage balloons were strung across the path of the incoming bombs but many got through, as this one had. And it was coming towards us fast. It was almost over us when the rockets fired on Blackheath and amazingly one of them hit the flying bomb. It was directly overhead when it was hit. I witnessed a huge ball of flame as it exploded. "Wow, look at that" I shouted, pointing up at the explosion above. A Warden took one look then quickly stepped back inside the Wardens Post dragging me in with him, saying. "Come in here you dozy bleeder." "Whats the matter " I said, startled. "Listen" he replied. Then I heard it. A shower of shrapnel coming down. I could hear it hitting the ground and the roofs of houses. Some of it was still red hot. I remember one Saturday morning when I helped my mother clean the house. Only the ground floor. The kitchen living

room and front room that was being used as a communal bedroom. Upstairs was so battered we did not use it.

We had just finished and were drinking a cup of tea when we heard a flying bomb coming. We both ducked down behind the settee. The flying bomb's engine stopped and it crashed and exploded quite close. The blast from the explosion blew the patched up window sashes in. The curtains also blew in and wrapped themselves around the gas light hanging from the ceiling shattering the fragile gas mantle. The settee with mother and I behind it was pushed across the room. But worse of all. Everything was covered with a thick layer of dust. Mother stood up and looked at the mess then she cried. I was so angry that I went out into the road and shook my fist at the sky and shouting just what I would like to do with the Germans.

Although scenes of death and destruction were nothing new during the war there was one scene of carnage that was too much for me. That was when a flying bomb crashed on Lewisham Market on Thursday the 28th of June 1944. I saw where it had come down and being close I went to see if I could help. What I saw was horrible. Smashed stalls, wrecked shops. One of them was Woolworths. There were bodies and pieces of bodies lying among the wreckage. Some of the injured were unconscious lying quietly, others were moaning, some were screaming. Some had their clothes blown off. Their bodies blackened by the blast and dust. The rescue services were already arriving. Firemen. Ambulance's. Light and Heavy rescue crews. People that were nearby at the time and were uninjured were helping as well. Comforting the injured as well as they knew how. Telling them that they would be alright. The Police and rescue services did not move you on and quickly cordon the area off as they do today. Everyone that could mucked in and helped. But I could not stay there for long. I had to walk away. My stomach was heaving. Remember I was only fifteen years old. I shall never forget the smell. I cannot describe it. All I know is that I never want to smell it again.

Looking back. The difference between the ordinary Londoners and those people where I was evacuated was very clear. In London. Where bombs, incendiaries, V1, and V2 missiles rained down almost daily throughout the war. Killing thousands of people and destroying thousands of homes. People really helped each other. If you were bombed out. Your home destroyed. Someone found you a bed and a hot meal without hesitation. Or thought of reward. If you were distressed and suffering from shock. Someone would give you a cup of hot tea and offer a cigarette. That weed that most people now regard as harmful and noxious really helped to calm you down when you were shaking like leaf. Your nerves shattered. And of course there were the never ending jokes to cheer you up. Perhaps if the residents of that area where my brother and I were evacuated experienced some of the danger and hardship that not only Londoners but also the inhabitants of other Cities and towns went through year after year then maybe they would have learnt something about compassion and helping each other. I came to realise that living in danger among those that cared for each other was preferable to living in a place of safety among those without compassion. Eventually the enemy airfields and launching sites of the V1 flying bombs and the ingenious but deadly V2 Rockets were over-run and the daily fear of death from the sky ceased. At last we could relax. But speaking for

myself it took a long while to unwind. Even now, many, many years later I still get a shiver down my spine when ever I hear a siren start wailing.

At the very end when everybody knew it was only a matter of days before the war would be over people started talking about decorating the streets and arranging street parties. I thought it would be a good idea to decorate the front of the Plough Public House. My fathers local. It was closed due to bomb damage caused by the flying bomb that crashed on the Kings Hall Cinema opposite where the manager was killed. I had been in the Pubs back garden and Club House before and I knew that there were flags and bunting there so I decided to use them to decorate the front of the empty building. I knew a back way into the Pub garden along the banks of the Quaggy. So I made my way there. Pulling a loose board aside I squeezed through into the garden and walked up the path to the Club House. But, as I stepped through the Club House door I had one of the biggest shocks of my young life. For standing just inside the doorway was a Police Constable. "Identity Card" he said. Yes we all had I.D cards then. And when he had read it he said. What are you doing here ?" I told him and lucky for me the bunting and flags were still there. He believed my story and gave me back my Identity Card. With a warning not to break in to any more properties. Then he told me to hop it. But I have always wondered why was he there. No one knew I was going there. Perhaps he found the side gate unlocked and was investigating. Perhaps he was having a crafty smoke. Or just maybe he was having a look at the very saucy photo's that I also knew were there. And by sheer coincidence I turned up. Anyway the Pub never got decorated.

The day the war actually ended I remember clearly. The streets were packed with cheering people. Everybody was smiling. It was such a tremendous relief knowing that you would not be hearing that dreaded siren again warning you of the approach of bombers or the V1 flying bomb. I celebrated by going into a public house on my own. A Pub that has long since been demolished and ordering a pint of beer and no one questioned my age. I was still fifteen. Then I stood outside the pub drinking my beer and watched the crowds dancing and having a good time. And for some reason I felt proud of myself. I don't know exactly why. Perhaps it was because I had survived it all?

I feel very sad now whenever I visit my old home town of Lewisham. All those buildings. Good solid buildings that Hitlers bombers and V weapons failed to destroy the local authorities have torn down. And I warrant that not one of those responsible for tearing them down were there when we fought to save them as death and destruction rained down almost daily from the sky. I worked for the building firm until nineteen forty six. The war was over and as a labourer who had worked with all of the craftsmen on the firm I had learnt a great deal. What they taught me then has really helped me throughout my adult life. Saving and earning me money.

I was a grown lad in nineteen forty six and could work as hard as any man and would have probably stayed in the building trade if the pay had been better. I was only getting a boys wage and I wanted to enjoy myself. Buy a decent suit. Take a girl to a Cinema or Theatre. Or have a holiday. But by the time I had paid my mother for my keep and other expenses I could not afford any of it. So I plucked up

courage and asked the Boss for a raise. But "No boy" he said "You are getting the rate for the job " So I left the firm. One of the men I had worked with told me that it would not have hurt the skin flint to pay me a mans wage" after all you were doing a mans work." But he would not. So I left. My next employment not only paid a far higher wage but it was also many a young boys dream. I started employment as a Cleaner Acting Fireman for Southern Rail at the Hithergreen Loco Dept where I drove the Steam Engines that needed cleaning and servicing in and around the Dept on my own. I was Sixteen.