

Interviewee: John Ray

Interviewer: Malin Lundin

Also present: Anne Ray

Date: 01.10.2010

Interviewer: This is Malin Lundin interviewing John Ray on the 1st of October 2010. Would you be able to tell me your date of birth please?

John: October '32.

Interviewer: Ok. Can you tell me how old you were when the war started?

John: I was six and a half.

Interviewer: Ok, and where were you living at the time?

John: Greenwich, at Westcombe Hill.

Interviewer: Ok, and who were you living with?

John: My mother and, well, my parents.

Interviewer: Ok. Do you have any brothers or sisters?

John: I have a brother, he was a year old.

Interviewer: So you were quite young when war broke out but can you remember what the first day of war? So the 3rd of September 1939.

John: I can, because we were meant to go on holiday that day and it was the first day of the blackout and to drive down to Folkestone in a clapped-out old car in the blackout wasn't the best thing to do [laughs].

Interviewer: No. Do you remember, were you scared? Do you remember you parents –?

John: About the war?

Interviewer: Yeah, about the war.

John: No. We – I didn't appreciate what the war meant, really.

Interviewer: Did you get a sense of what your parents felt when they heard the news?

John: Eh, no, not really, because apart from the fact that they – my father ensured that my mother, brother and myself were evacuated almost immediately and we were evacuated to Hextable, which is just the other, well, it's outside Dartford. So you can imagine how far away from London we were, ten

miles. But that only lasted – we were there for about eight months. Then we came back to Greenwich, then in June 1940 a big evacuation of London took place and I was evacuated down to North Devon.

Interviewer: Ok. So the first time you were evacuated was that part of the official evacuation scheme – or ?

John: No. I went down and we stayed with my great-grandparents – great-grandparents, they had a smallholding down there. So it wasn't anything official about that [clears throat]. However, the second time it was and the parents – the parents stayed in London. My brother – I was the only one evacuated.

Interviewer: So your brother stayed in London –?

John: He stayed in Greenwich.

Interviewer: Ok.

John: But he was only two, couldn't mother, really.

Interviewer: No. Do you know why your mother wasn't evacuated with your brother?

John: They only evacuated some of the parents as carers. For about every six evacuees, there was one parent went as a carer and she was in charge of that group of six. That's how it seemed to be and it was a friend of ours she was actually our carer. It was my friend's mother, in fact. We were at school together, two young boys.

Interviewer: So was it your whole school that was evacuated to – to Devon?

John: Well, all those who wanted to be, yes. There were –

Anne: It wasn't compulsory was it?

John: No, oh no. It wasn't compulsory. There were I think in the area there was Invicta, no Invicta was taken over by the Fire Service. It was Sherington. I was finally evacuated from Sherington, Fossdene, eh, Lombard Wall and Halstow Road, they were the four local schools in Greenwich that went as a group to North Devon.

Interviewer: Can you remember being evacuated, so going down to North Devon?

John: Yes, I written all about it. I sent you an article about, 'My longest day – 18th of June 1940'.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about just for the record?

John: Well, we were collected quite early [laughs], we were collected quite early in the morning from the schools and transported to Westcombe Park Station, in London Transport buses, we then were

taken up to Waterloo by train, walked across to the¹ mainline station at Waterloo and got on another train which we didn't know where the heck it was going and we eventually arrived in Bideford in North Devon in the evening. Taken from there, picked up by coaches again, and taken through to Torrington where we were deposited in a nice big new school, all given snacks, you know, the iced buns and jellies and lemonade and then we were put into local coaches and sent out into the country and I was actually transported out to a village called Peters Marland, which is about six miles away from Torrington. Eh, we were put in the local school there in the evening, given more lemonade and buns and the like and then they lined us up outside the school and the locals came and choose what children they wanted. It was like a cattle market and fortunately for me I had masses of blond curly hair and they local Special Constable came up to me, he said, 'I've got just the place for you', and took me and then there was one other little boy left over when all the rest were chosen, Bertie Slater (??). So the big policeman put us in the back of his little Austin, a 1928 Austin he had, and took us to this farm and there was this group of Jack, Gwen and Harold, Dick, Will, Aida and Buzz. They were the family that ran the big farm and took us two boys into the farm house where they sat us on this bloomin' great big table, no electricity so we had oil lamps and moonlight and fed us clotted cream on scones and glasses of milk and I ate it both of them. Then they were speaking this funny language, it was all, 'oh, darn me', you know, 'hickey hakey' and they speak like that down there, they do [speaking in Devon dialect]. And eventually Bertie and I went to bed and that was our first day.

Interviewer: Can you remember how you felt that day, leaving your family and going on such long travel?

John: Initially, we – I think most of us were excited. Some children cried, lots of mothers cried, of course. But I think, initially, kids we were rather young and we were, I mean, I hadn't been – done long journeys and trains before. It was my first adventure on a train. Yes, we – I suppose we were excited, a little bit anxious but that's all I can remember.

Interviewer: Were you aware of what was going on? Did you know that you were being evacuated?

John: Yes, because having already been – had the short term down at Hextable, I had the idea – I knew what the idea of evacuation was. I appreciated what evacuation was. So that was it and I was very lucky because the farmer and his wife, eh, and his brothers and the old boy, the boss, they all took to me and spoilt me like nobody's business. Bertie left, he stayed down on the farm until the October and his father came down and visited him and took him back to London and I stayed there for the rest of the war.

Interviewer: Did you feel like you were well looked after?

John: Oh, God, yes. I was spoilt, absolutely spoilt. I had – nobody had any children and, in fact, at the end of the war they did suggest that I'd stay there and I could have inherited the farm. Part of it, if not all of it and we went back for – we used to call back most years when we were in the area until Jack

¹ 5 min

and Gwen died and that was more² or less, you know. Oh, we – unbeknown to me, Anne, my eldest daughter, who's in her fifties, she's been to the farm with us when she was very small and, eh, she brought a holiday brochure, holiday homes brochure round here. 'What do you think - don't you think that's Winswell Farm, dad?', and we looked at it and sure enough it was Winswell Farm but it was put down as Petrockstow Farm. Unbeknown to me Anne telephoned the letting agents, they confirmed it was in fact Winswell Farm so some, was it forty-eight, fifty-eight, sixty-eight years later we went and stayed and I slept in the same bedroom as I'd slept as a child.

Interviewer: How did you feel about that? About returning to where you had been evacuated to?

John: Oh, I loved it. I walked all over the – and leading from that, we went with some friends of ours to the farmhouse and stayed at the farmhouse and on the Sunday I walked up to the local church at Peters Marland to have a look at the gravestones, you know, for the people I lived with, you know, the Hanfords and while we were looking at that, the vicar came out, 'Can I help you, sir?'. I said, 'Well, just looking at the gravestones, that's all', and my friend said, 'John would like to know if his initials are still on the back of the organ', cos I'd pumped the organ being no power down, they used to for the show – during the war we used to have to pump it by hand. He invited us in – the vicar invited us into the church, my initials were still on the back of the organ [coughs], although the bellows had been mechanised and, eh, he then invited us to join the service. We choose the hymns, read the – I read the – the lesson for the day and that was quite an exciting day as well. But yes, I walked all over there, it's – I don't know whether you've heard of the Tarka trail? Tarka was an otter and they wrote books about him –

Anne: [inaudible]

John: Pardon? Ring of Bright Water, yes, and the old railway line which came out from Torrington was a single track line, used to go through to Shevier (??), I think it was, and you had two or three trains a day used to come down this line. That's now become the Tarka trail, the story of the otter but that was something I was saw while I was down there.

Interviewer: How was your education? Did you go to school when you were evacuated?

John: Throughout the war, I went to ten schools.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about that?

John: Yes. I started off pre-war at Invicta Road which is at Charlton/Blackheath, eh, we went down to Hextable and I went to the Hextable Village School for six months and we returned back to London by which time Invicta Road had been taken over by the Fire Service so I went to Sherington Road, which is a bit further up Charlton Road. Eh, I was evacuated from Sherington down to Devon so I went to the Peters Marland Village School for two years, came back to London in 1943/4 when the Blitz – the Blitz eased – the Blitz of London eased in 1943 so I came home in about August/September and I

² 10 min

went to Fossedene Road School which was a secondary school. Then the buzz bombs and the rockets start, well, the buzz bombs started so my brother and I were evacuated down to Devon again and I went to Torrington then, came home at the end of the war and Greenwich and Charlton Central were combined secondary schools down at Greenwich, Deptford actually, so I went down there. But then eventually they separated and I went to Charlton Central which was in Charlton. If you add that load up you'll find it's quite a few schools that I've been.

Interviewer: Did you that – that your education³ was adequate?

John: People, uh, people didn't worry about education so much in those days. It – it wasn't so important because not everybody, schoolchild, took the School Certificate. It wasn't available to all children, it – and therefore they didn't have the – the worry and trouble. I did, in fact, go in to a Central School, take what they call the School Certificate. Eh, Oxford, I think, won, when I took –. Eh, but then, of course, I went in to – as an apprentice I went to further education, to do with tech until I was twenty-one and then I went off to sea, became a sailor.

Interviewer: Ok. So you said that you returned to London in forty-three?

John: Yeah.

Interviewer: And then how –?

John: September forty-three.

Interviewer: How – how long did you stay in London for?

John: Until following May, May forty-four when the buzz bombs started.

Interviewer: So – so were you evacuated to the same farm in North Devon?

John: Oh, I returned to the same farm.

Anne: You just went, you weren't evacuated.

John: No, I wasn't evacuated the second time.

Mrs: He just went back.

John: We got in touch with the Hanfords and they took me back.

Interviewer: Ok.

John: But I took my brother with me then because he – by that time he was what? He had born in thirty-eight, so he was six, yeah. But can you imagine as seven or eight year old handling big Shire horses and doing things like – it was an absolutely wonderful life. Super life.

³ 15 min

Interviewer: Do you feel it was a good experience to –?

John: Oh. Yes, I was privileged to have.

Interviewer: So what did you used to do during the days? You went to school and –?

John: Caused chaos on the farm, mainly. No, you can do anything. You were com – completely free to run wild, if you wished. However, eh, one – there was a young nephew, who used to work on the farm, Dick, and he was like a big brother to me. He was, I suppose, in his mid-twenties and he made me a – he got rabbits for me and made a rabbits hutch and we played football and we – he was the one that used to find the gear to play football and so he spoilt me like a big brother, which was very nice.

Anne: He made your hoop and skimmer too, didn't he?

John: No, no, the blacksmith did that.

Anne: Oh, the blacksmith but that was still there when we went back.

John: I used to take the horses down to be shoed that – cos that had to be done about every two or three months, checked and where necessary new hoo, eh, new shoes put on and while I was down the blacksmiths I used to pump his foot – cos his brrrrrr – pump his forge for him and then once a year he'd say, 'Come on I'll make you something, John'. And invari- what they called – invariably what they called a hoop and skimmer and it's just a about that diameter steel bar made in to a hoop and they clip and metal handle on it, which is a skimmer and you ran behind the hoop with the skimmer down below. Skating it through the road, round the roads. And when we went back in 19 – 74, was it Anne? When the farm was derelict.

Anne: Oh. Oh, yes, somewhere around there.

John: It was soul destroying, they sold –

Anne: Just after Jack and Gwen had died.

John: All the family had died and they sold – no, all the family hadn't died then. They still kept the Post Office and General Store, which we used to own as well. So , yeah, boy (??) it's always right (??) and, eh, we went down there in – I think it was seventy-four and the farm had been left to become derelict. They sold all the land of to one of the big corporations and my hoop and skim was still hanging on the stable wall.

John: Were you able to take them back with you?

John: No. No, we had a car but we got five children by then I think, Anne? It wasn't any room in the car [laughs].

Interviewer: Did you feel that you were well received by the locals? The local community, were they – ?

John: Well, initially, no. Initially they used to call us bomb-dodgers. 'You bomb-dodgers' [unclear], you know. 'Terrible people you be', 'Show us your yellow streak', always asked to see to yellow streak. But, um, you see⁴, most of the evacuees came home. They were only there for the – so – probably about ten months and slow they all drifted back to London, whereas I was there for, virtually, the whole of the war.

Interviewer: How did you feel about that?

John: I loved it. Because the people – the couple I lived with, Jack and Gwen Hanford, eh, they only been married to – they were in there forties, mid-forties, they only been married two years. She'd been in service up until getting married and, of course, he'd been round the farm with his brothers and father and therefore they weren't likely to have any children. And my mother gave me a big letter of you can and you can't do and she said, 'Treat him as though his your own child. If he misbehaves give him a good hiding', and that's what they – well, in fact, they never really did knock me about.

Interviewer: Do you remember what –

John: They disciplined me.

Interviewer: Do you remember what service your she was in?

John: Well, it was just one of the big houses in Torrington. She would have been, I think she was cooking rather than anything else.

Anne: Being in service means being a servant.

Interviewer: Yes.

John: Yeah.

Interviewer: How did you feel about being separated from your family?

John: It didn't mean a lot to me, actually, because I was put in to such wonderful environment. The farm and everything else. Can you imagine a townie, never been in the country before, well, I had, I had been down to Hextable. So I'm telling a lie there, aren't I? But I'd never been allowed to have the animals we had in the farm. It was a big general farm, we had four horses, or, yes, four horses and a pony, eh, used to run about. Eh, twelve milking cows, cos we used to supply milk for the villages, eh, run two hundred and fifty sheep, fifty steers (??). So I had the experience of all this and the farmers used to take me up the fields with them, I mean, every Boxing Day, it was tradition, in those days, on Boxing Day all the farmers got together with rabbiting. So all the farmers got together and they used to go out with their bottles of cider and go shooting rabbits. In the hay-time, all the villages always

⁴ 20 min

used to get together for making hay, they were cutting hay and so you'd have eight or nine people in a field. It was nothing was mechanised, it was all horses. We didn't and there – I think there was one tractor in the local area, apart from that everything was horses. Eh, so what us boys – those people that went and worked in the hayfields used to take [clears throat] their lunch in a haversack, a small haversack, and they always had a flagon of cider. So us boys used to go around – they put it in the hedgerow, you know what a hedgerow is? A bit of hedges. They'd hide their bag in the hedgerow and we used to go round as boys, find their bags, drink their cider and then the farm I was on, eh, we made our own cider. We actually had a cider press and we used to make up, I think, it was about four [unclear], big barrels, of cider a year and that was left in the barn. Jack the farmer I lived with was the local barber, he used to cut the hair, so once a month, thereabouts, five weeks, the villagers used to come up on Sunday morning and sit in the bales of straw in the barn and drink the cider out of the barrels and Jack would cut their hair. I mean, then in the – in the winter, the stables with the – with the – they always have to bed the animals down last thing at night and in the winter, you get two or three of the villagers come up about half past nine when it was dark and they'd all be chatting away in the stables while Jack was cleaning the – cos they, eh, brushed the horses and re-bed them with straw and that. So you got a gathering most nights in the stables talking to the – the local people. But it was a hell of a life. I mean, they – they'd get up five o'clock in the morning, bring the cows in, milk them, go out and plough a ten acre field, no⁵, about an acre a day, I think they can do, plough behind a team of horses. But, yes, it was lovely, it was a lovely experience.

Interviewer: Did your parents come to visit you?

John: Oh, yes. My mum – mum and dad were bombed out at Westcombe Hill, the back of the house was bombed and mum and Michael, my brother, came – my brother was then – in the October of 1940 –. They came down, they lived with the mother and two sisters of Gwen, the woman I was – farmer's wife, down at Claymore there's a huge clay mine, close to where we were. Still operating, actually, and they lived down at Claymore for – till about May 1941 and then mum returned to London with Michael. But cos the Blitz went on for quite a while, my dad was in the reserved occupation, he was a tug skipper on the river so he didn't have to go in to the forces but he was – are you interested in what on the river?

Interviewer: Yeah.

John: Or just me?

Interviewer: No, do tell me about that as well.

John: Well, he – he was a tug skipper, he ventured (??) down the river and Dunkirk – when Dunkirk was announced and Churchill decided to re – all the ships in the London docks and there were hundreds of them, were instructed to drop their off-side lifeboats in to the docks and the small tugs on the river went round and collected all these lifeboats, took them out of the docks and down to

⁵ 25 min

Gravesend and my father said the river at Gravesend was absolutely chock-a-block full of ship's lifeboats and the ocean-going tugs picked them up from Gravesend and they took all across to Dunkirk so that they could ferry soldiers off the shallows on to the ships. And that was on one occasion in the London docks.

Interviewer: Did your father used to tell you stories about – about his work?

John: Oh, yeah, yeah. He was chased up the river by a buzz bomb. He was coming up the Greenwich reach, actually, and, eh, buzz bomb came over and he said it didn't matter where he turned this buzz bomb seemed to follow him and eventually [laughs] he called the engineer and [unclear] the engine room of the tug and they were all laid on deck with a buzz bomb dropped in the river about a hundred yards behind the tug but it – the – beca – the – because it actually damaged the tug, they had to beach it on the north side, opposite the Naval College.

Interviewer: Ok.

John: Mm.

Interviewer: So how was it coming back to London in forty-three? Ad it changed from when you left in 1940?

John: Well, yes, because of the bomb damage. It's – and the smell. Having spent all that time as I did in Devon, you don't realise the wonderful smell of the countryside and apparently the first thing I commented on when we came into London was the terrible smell of London [laughs]. Eh, so that was one – and, of course, all the bomb – the bomb damage was terrible. But then we – it was our playground. The parents would do their nuts now if they knew what we used to get up too. Especially, she was the one that –.

Interviewer: What did you use to do?

John: Well, you go into bombed houses to see what you could – just for the devilment of going in, eh, we used to collect sh – after an air raid and there weren't many in 1943, we used to go out and collect sh-shrapnel first thing in the morning. And I had –

Anne: They were hot, you had to have your jacket over.

John: Yeah, I know. I didn't go out until it was all finished but Anne's dad there, the fireman, he was a fireman up at Shooters Hill, eh, Fire Station and the art – artist, the chap, there on the right, isn't it?

Anne: Yeah.

John: He was always up at Shooters Hill.

Anne: Well, they were both – they were both artists. That's Norman Hailstone and then that's Heppel⁶ and that's my dad. They did – he was commissioned to do a portrait –

John: 'Of a London Fireman'.

Anne: 'Of a London Fireman' and the model was my dad.

Interviewer: Oh, really.

Anne: I've got the cartoon for it upstairs but the picture's been – that was going to the Royal Academy for an exhibition, they were taking it in to hang it and they, um, it's disappeared somewhere.

John: It was touring the country, wasn't it?

Anne: Yeah. Somewhere it disappeared.

John: Touring the country during the Blitz and they lost it so whether it was in a bombed building –

Anne: There was a fire somewhere so whether it was lost in the fire, I don't know. But London Fire Brigade have been trying to find – locate it ever since.

Interviewer: Ok. Do you – do you remember, did your father ever tell you about how he was portrayed or –?

Anne: Well, I was there all the time, it was just going on [laughs] all the time.

John: She was never an evacuee.

Interviewer: Was he proud?

Anne: Of being a fireman?

Interviewer: Of being portrayed in a painting like that.

Anne: Well, I expect he was very pleased, yes. He liked a bit of a show off, so [laughs]. But, no I don't think he ever thought himself as a hero or anything like that but –

John: He was missing two or three times.

Anne: Oh, yeah. But they – that was of the cause cos appliances would be sent from one job to the other and nobody knew where they were. Just hoped they turned up and they weren't under a falling wall. That – mm.

John: Well, you just missed the New Cross buzz bombs, didn't you?

Anne: Oh, I was on my way there, you know, when Woolworths was bombed at New Cross Gate cos that's where I lived, in Pepys Road. And my friend and I were walking down, we used to go every

⁶ 30 min

Saturday morning and spend out pocket money and we – there'd been a – a raid and we heard the rocket come down somewhere, big bang. We didn't really didn't take much notice of it. It hadn't hit you so it was alright and suddenly we saw all these people going up, turning around, bandages and blood and all sorts and Woolworths had been hit.

Interviewer: Do you remember how you felt when you saw that?

Anne: It was part of the war, you accepted it. It was – it was what happened. My poor mother went mad cos she'd have thought – she was down shopping at new Cross Gate and heard what had happened and thought, 'Oh, my god!' [laughs], girls have gone there. But weren't – not quite there so we were alright.

Interviewer: Did you have any other near misses?

Anne: I got machine-gunned, which I did take exception for cos that's personal [laughs].

Interviewer: What happened?

Anne: I was on my way home from school, I suppose. I can't remember how old – I'm not like you, I don't remember dates. It was just something that happened. It was lunchtime and we were on our way home and luckily we had huge plain trees, well, they're still there, on our road and we had heard these – we knew they were German planes by the noise. We heard, 'They are – my god, they're close', and when we looked they were sort of tree top height and they – as they saw us [laughs] they started firing at us.

John: Were they the ones that bombed the school at Hither Green.

Anne: I think so, so I was told afterwards but I don't know whether it was the same one. Someone told me that but I don't know.

John: They machine-gunned dad, down at Greenwich Pier.

Anne: Yes, so, um, we just hid, I mean, as far as I know nobody got hurt but grandmother apparently was under the hedge with the postman and –

John: Oh, yeah, typically your grandma.

Anne: [laughs] and we just hid behind the tree but I can remember being really angry, 'How dare you?! You saw me that was personal, that's not like dropping a bomb', [laughs]. But I don't really remember ever being frightened.

Interviewer: So how old were you when the war started then?

Anne: Four and a half. I just started school. The school shut straight away.

Interviewer: Do you – do you know why you – you weren't evacuated?

Anne: Yes, because my father – before the war he joined the ARP, cos he said there was a war coming and they were privy to what was going to happen and he said it was going to be absolute chaos, no, we sort things out ourselves if it's needed so. Mum was staying with him and I stayed most of the time.

John: You did go away for a short period.

Anne: Yeah, but to stay with relatives, some in Woking, Dorchester, eh, I went to Yarmouth for about three weeks around the beginning of the war but not for long. Nothing much happened, I was there for most of the Blitz and all the rest of it.

Interviewer: Did you have a shelter at home?

Anne: Only a Morrison⁷ in the kitchen.

Interviewer: Did you use to go to the public shelters or?

Anne: No, no. No, I didn't want fleas or –

John: We had an Anderson shelter, which was the metal one in the garden. But it – they were nicely made out, I mean, alright it was a shelter, 'Oh, I've got to go to the shelter', but if the bunks were but in correctly and it was lined with wood and you had a decent blast box in the front of it and you could run an electric wire down to it and you could have an electric light to it.

Anne: As long as it didn't flood. That was the main problem with them.

John: But that was it, Westcombe Park Road didn't flood, did it? It was on top of the hill. And here they flooded, apparently they couldn't use the Anderson shelters in –

Anne: We got a stream at the bottom.

John: We got a st – Quaggy that runs in all the bottom of the gardens. It's in pipes now but cos it's been built there but –

Interviewer: How did you experience rationing?

Anne: I didn't – I was –

John: Well, your mum was very good at it, wasn't she?

Anne: My mother, well, I appreciate – I appreciated it at the time because I do remember on occasions seeing my mother on her knees praying that food would turn up from somewhere cos she's got all these people to feed cos we ran a bit of a boarding house and, um, I did appreciate how good she – but it's only as I brought my family up and to begin with money was so tight and I thought, 'Why am I complaining, it's only money that's tight', you know. It wasn't there to buy during the war.

⁷ 35 min

John: See on the farm we used to kill a pig, I think we were entitled to two pigs a year, eh, no butter, it was all cream. We used to make our own cream and the rest of the food came out of the fields. So, really, I was never affected by rationing and plus the fact that living on a farm with much older people, none of them wanted their sweets so I got all their sweet rations as well.

Anne: [laughs]

John: So –

Anne: Well, my aunt had a sweetshop and she did brilliantly. She just about kept her head above water before the war and because it was rationing everybody bought their sweet ration and as soon as she heard, well, it was well in to the fifties before sweet ration came off? I'm not –

John: Fifty-three, I think it was, yeah.

Anne: Yeah, she said, 'That's it, I'm selling the shop', because people won't buy sweets [laughs] and that's what she did. But, no, we didn't really run – I never had a lot of sweets as a child anyway.

John: Well, you got used to it, didn't you? It's like clothes.

Anne: I wasn't allowed.

John: It was like clothes, clothes were on ration for well after the war. And I – I was – joined the Boys Brigade and part of it, your uniform, was a navy suit. If you could get a navy suit you were laughing and, of course, you couldn't buy suits because of the rationing and the coupon situation but my mother found one in a second-hand, well, might have been – the one with the brass balls?

Anne: Pawnbrokers.

John: Pawnbrokers down at Greenwich and she bought this navy blue suit which I wore for about three years, isn't it and was glad to do so. But you muddled your way – your mum was a lovely dressmaker wasn't she?

Anne: She used to make all our clothes.

John: She used to make everything.

Interviewer: Do you know where she used to get the material from?

Anne: She had two huge trunks because all our life whenever she saw a bargain she would buy it, at least I – I think – what – Lux and things, you know, washing soap, things like that –

John: Lux, eh.

Anne: Sort of lasted her well in to the war because she bought the same every week so she had an enormous store cupboard and I'm the same. I have to have my store cupboard.

John: We got two freezers.

Anne: [laughs]

John: Two fridges, they're all chock-a-block.

Anne: I'm waiting for the next war [laughs].

John: Which happens when you – we've got five children, you see, lots of grandchildren.

Anne: We don't waste anything, nothing wasted.

John: It means there's always food at hand if people turn up at the off chance.

Interviewer: Do you feel that's because – partly because of what you experienced during the war and what your mum experienced?

Anne: It was the way I was brought up and I think war or no war I would have been brought up the same way but that just accentuated it. Thrifty – not mean, never mean my mum.

John: Well, I –

Anne: But she was thrifty⁸, don't waste anything.

John: Well, they're all after me because I won't throw anything away. So if I got a piece of wood with three nails in it, I pull the nails out and put it in a box and keep the piece of wood, you see. I've got a garden, well, we had a clear out, our youngest son came home – was it three or four months ago? Had a clear out, it broke my heart the amount of stuff I'd been saving for the last thirty years, you know. I was never going to use it [laughs] –

Anne: And the rest.

John: But I –

Anne: Fifty years.

John: I cannot bring my – if a washing machine packs up I strip it down, keep all the nuts and bolts and re-use the steel plate and things like that. And this is something which came about, I think, during the war.

Anne: No, you're mean [laughs].

John: Oh, I'm mean.

Interviewer: How did you feel about coming back to your family after having spent so much time away from them? Did you find it difficult to – to return to your mum and dad?

⁸ 40 min

John: Initially, I was excited because I'm going home, however, in a very short time I realised that I was much better off at the farm and I'd had probably been better off staying there. But I was the lucky one. Probably out of a hundred youngsters who went to the area, I was the one that was put into the right, eh, home.

Interviewer: Did you know other children then that had it worse than you?

John: Oh, I've been in touch with them. Yeah. In fact, I write an article which I passed on to you, it was published in the Mercury, Kentish Mercury, I wrote it for my club magazine but eventually it found its way to the Mercury and a young lady phoned up, I was out playing golf and I came home from golf and Anne said, 'You've had a telephone call from one of your girlfriends', and I always used to go out with Marjorie Jessop, you won't know her but Shirley Temple was a film – a child film star back in the thirties and, oh, was madly in love with her. Oh, absolutely – and this Marjorie was the same – she had the same curls –

Anne: All, girls had those little ringlet curls the.

John: She was got – and she was my mate's little sister.

Interviewer: Ok.

John: And I was so madly in love with Marjorie, it was her mum that was the care mum that took us away. Anyway, eh, she saw this article in the Kentish Mercury cut it out and sent it to her brother, who now lives –, Brian, who lives in new Zealand. He tried contacting me five or six – and he sent me letters five or six times and they kept getting returned so he sent all the letters to – over to his sister and said, 'Look, see if you can find him from your end', and so she went through the phonebook and I was out playing golf and came home, 'Your girlfriend's been on the phone for you'. I said, 'Not Marjorie?'. How about that?

Anne: I knew who it was straight away and I never spoken to her [laughs].

John: And, yes, so I spoke to her and she sent me the letters but I've never met her. She lives at Lee Green, at least the last address was Lee Green. But – yes, that was a coincidence, wasn't it?

Interviewer: So have you been meeting up with people that you were evacuated with? Are you –?

John: No.

Interviewer: A member of any –?

John: I – I'm joiner, I do join these things but that's the one association I haven't joined.

Anne: Well, the people who now – or did – I don't know if they still do it – own the farm did write to us and say they were all having – all those were having a meeting, the people who took them in and who was still alive and the evacuees but we didn't go, did we?

John: Cos the chap who bought the farm, the derelict farm, was a wholesale hair products, wasn't it?

Anne: Yeah.

John: He used to do wholesale of hair, shampoos and the like in Essex and he'd been evacuated down there as well and he's attitude was, 'I want to get back there when I retire'. So he sold his business in Essex, saw this farm up for sale, bought it and he started building – converting it in to holiday homes and, of course, I've gone down there with my pictures and the bits I've written and I'll go and get it for you in a minute [laughs]. He⁹ said, 'Will you know all about this place?', I said, 'Yes, I do'. It was like when we went up to the church, the congregation didn't know anything about the village. I knew all about the village throughout the war so I spent a lot of time chatting to them about it.

Anne: One of the buildings right on the end that he'd converted he said – he was advertising it as a Post Office and we said, 'That's not the Post Office, that's the oil house. The Post Office is up the road' [laughs].

John: Funnily enough we – Brian and I were out walking cos I used to do a lot of walking in those days and we came back past the, eh, Post Office and across the from the Post Office is a big orchard and a barn, paddock, it's what we called the paddock. There was this woman and I know she's twenty years younger than me at least.

Anne: Joan.

John: And I said to Brian, 'I wonder if that's Joan?', because the nephew had a daughter. I never saw her but I know she was born after I came home and Brian called out and said, 'Are you Joan?'. 'Who be ye then?' [unclear]. So he said, 'Johnny Ray', and she didn't know Johnny Ray was, of course. But it was Joan. We, you know, we went – she was still living in the old Post Office. I go and get the pictures. You talk [unclear] young lady.

Anne: Alright. Ok [laughs].

Interviewer: So you stayed in – in London throughout the war then?

Anne: Well, as I say, I did go away several times. Eh, I think I missed the very worst of the rockets cos I went to stay with – I – I used to go with my grandmother, leave my mum at home with dad and we went to stay with one of her sisters who lived in Dorchester, which was quite nice cos we went away [unclear]. The only thing is I nearly got drowned down there [laughs].

Interviewer: Ok. How did you do that? Did you fall into –?

Anne: Well, it was full of American ships and, um, tanks, everything cos Bovington, which is now the Tank Museum, was a huge American base and all round [unclear] and in the harbour. The whole place was just full of warships, American warships, and, of course, they used to have like scaffolding

⁹ 45 min

with barbed wire all across along the beach and you'd have a little gaps so that you could beyond that to get to the sea and I was in the sea and I wondered why everyone else had come out. What used to happen, if one of these big ships came in that end of the bay the wash from upwards wash you out when you're quite small. I got washed out a bit [laughs]. That's –

Interviewer: Did someone come and save you then?

Anne: Yeah, well, I don't, you know, oh, I know what – I had one of those awful Mae West lifesaver thing on that the Am – from the American base. That was awful, that's probably out but I think they drowned more people than they saved.

John: Yeah, [sighs] forty years.

Anne: [laughs]

Interviewer: Wow. So how did you two meet than?

John: [laughs] I was cheeky. She was a schoolgirl [pause] I threw a tennis ball at her dog and he ignored the lot.

Anne: He was well trained.

John: That was the first time article I ever wrote. [Pause] that was a follow up cos people kept saying 'When are you going to do part two?'. That was the actual time – there the two copies I sent to [Interviewer: Yes, yes] your office [Interviewer: I recognise these, yes]. I better show you in order I suppose.

[Recorder paused]

Interviewer: If you could summarise your war, how would you summarise it? In just a few words?

John: Well, I had a very pleasant, happy war, really, because I wasn't in London much. I was in ideal surroundings, I experienced things which I would never have done in normal life as a townie and it gave me a lot of confidence.

Interviewer: Do you feel that that changed you as a person¹⁰?

Anne: Yeah.

John: Oh, it must have done, yes, yeah. Yeah. Yes, it's – it makes you – it made me independent as well. I mean, alright, your mother and father are still your mother and father but I could manage to get on without them.

Interviewer: Mm.

Anne: Well, it's that wonderful freedom isn't it?

¹⁰ 50 min

John: Oh, absolutely.

Anne: I – I just – I feel so sorry for kids these days. They're so monitored.

John: But they're not allowed to do anything.

Anne: Oh, dreadful. You should climb a tree and fall out of it.

John: I mean, I used to live next door to Greenwich Park and [unclear] the Vanbrugh Castle throughout the war cos we were bombed out of Westcombe Hill and the time – at the end of the war we stayed there, we used to go to Greenwich climb on – alright so the park keepers chased you and told you off.

Anne: Part of the fun.

John: But that was all part of the fun. It's like going in bombed buildings, it was all part of the fun.

Interviewer: Did your parents know that you were doing this?

John: Oh, yeah, of course, they did.

Anne: Well, I don't – I'm sure mine didn't. Eh, there was only one thing that dad impressed on me and I did always stick by that, it didn't matter how hot it was, you never ever swim in a reservoir.

John: Oh, no.

Anne: It's the most dangerous thing you can do.

John: Well, there was no way out, was there?

Anne: You could break bones. There was no way of getting out of them. They were just like brick tanks.

John: What the idea was when the house was bombed if part of the upright wall would still stand, they'd fill it with concrete lining and fill it with water. So you had a water tank so if there's a – because you used to run out of water when the fires broke out. But kids used to make up rafts out of all drums and go in there – put them in the water tanks and, I mean, I've done it, we did it up by the Roan School. There was a big tank there we used to, eh, go in and play in that in hot weather and the trouble was getting out cos usually the wall was much higher than water level.

Anne: And there was no way of getting out. It was just a wall.

John: Yeah, yeah it was.

Anne: Nothing to hang on to cos it was all flat –

John: So if you didn't make arrangements before you got in there, tank to get out of [unclear] plank of wood or something like that, you didn't get out [laughs].

Anne: [laughs]

John: Yeah, but it was an adventure. Kids wanted adventure. I mean, we – we didn't have television, we didn't have radio.

Anne: We did.

John: I didn't have radio.

Anne: We did.

John: We certainly didn't have television.

Anne: It had an accumulator in it but we had a radio.

John: Yeah, that's right.

Interviewer: How would you say your war experience compares to John's experience of the war?

Anne: Well, I was always with family, um, I did sort of shift around from school to school because everybody made sure you went to school even if you were only in a place for a few weeks. But, um, to be perfectly honest after the first euphoria, I can remember when VE-Day came and everyone was out waving their Unions Jacks, 'We've won' and the church bells were ringing and it was exciting. It was fantastic and then I came indoors and saw my grandmothers face cos my – her son youngest son was Japanese prisoner of war so our war wasn't over until we knew he was home safely, which took a long time. So really that sort of put a damper on it and then from then on I can remember thinking to myself, 'Life is now going to be boring. I'm not going to wake up in the morning and find that I can't get to school cos buses and trams aren't running', cos I had to go to Blackheath to go to school by then. And I did – I – it was a bit of a like the day after you get married then you suddenly realise, what was all that about? You know.

John: I didn't know about VE-Day until two days later because we didn't have a radio or anything down in Devon. It was no means of – we used to get the newspaper two days late. The postman bringing out two days [laughs]. The war has ended, Whoopi! [laughs]

Interviewer: Have you talked much about your – your war experiences with – with each other?

Anne: Oh, we – we talk to one another but, I mean, we've known one another so long we sort of know, especially, everybody knows his life history [laughs]. The man at the bus stop [laughs].

John: I talk to everybody.

Anne: [laughs] But, yes, we do sometimes but we had such totally different experiences, didn't we, really?¹¹

¹¹ 55 min

John: well, totally different lives.

Anne: Mm. I –

John: Until we were sixteen.

Anne: I think it was brilliant in that we did, well, my father used to say till the day he died, 'Our trouble was we had to bring you up to be independent and you've always been too bloody independent' [laughs]. But, no, you had to be, didn't you? And –

John: I think we were both lucky in that we didn't lose a lot of people in the war. I lost my grandmother and uncle were killed with a rocket up at Blackheath, Old Dover Road. Eh, Alice was badly injured, wasn't she, but she lived on for quite a few years after the war. Apart from that I don't think – I had school friends that were killed.

Anne: Yeah, I did too.

John: Well, one of your school friends lived at the back of us he.

Anne: Mm.

John: And – but generally speaking it – you weren't faced with this traumatic experience of seeing dead bodies.

Anne: Anyway, it was happening to everyone. It was just part of life, you got on with life. That's what I liked about it. I wish life was like that now. People – didn't matter what happened, you got on with it. It was – you know, a completely blasted out shop front and they put a big notice up, 'Business as usual' and people struggled in to work to work in those shops and that. It was brilliant from that point of view. Not everyone pulled their weight, it was full of spivs and gangsters but most people.

John: [laughs].

Interviewer: Were you aware of –

Anne: Oh, yes, we were aware –

Interviewer: Looting and the black market?

Anne: Yes, yes, and it was, oh, to my father that was the biggest crime out. Absolutely dreadful, we're all in the same boat and he – he just – he used to get so cross cos a lot of that went on in the Fire Brigade and he just – shoot the –

Interviewer: People who were actually in the Fire Brigade?

Anne: Mm. Well, because everything was so short so if there was something you could grab, people grabbed it but [sighs] I must admit for all his faults he wasn't like that my dad, was he?

John: No.

Anne: He was, eh, very, very honest.

John: My father never took anything out of his reach.

Anne: [laughs]

John: For being a tug man [unclear] on the river, they're notorious, Dockers, they're notorious so I think he helped himself.

Anne: Well, it's a different kind of life style, you fought for your job, you fought for everything in those days, didn't you?

John: Well, they used to get what they called the sweepings.

Anne: Mm.

John: He come home with a bag full of tea, that was full of, eh, –

Anne: Bits of hessian.

John: Hessian and –

Anne: Rat spilling [laughs]

John: Well, the sack and the bag had been split, purposely or otherwise, and they split it up and grabbed handfuls each and it was the same with sugar. So we used to plenty of tea and sugar.

Anne: Oh, everywhere you went there was black – you could buy anything on the black market, anything at all. But – my mother did once – cos she could do anything as long as she got her cup of tea and she bought a quarter of Typhoo tea on the black market and I think she – I wouldn't be surprised if in the end she threw it away cos it played on her conscience so much.

Interviewer: Did she tell your dad that she had?

Anne: She hated herself for it. Oh, yeah, she probably did. I knew and – and she said that, 'I – I've done absolutely –', she thought it was the worst thing she could possibly done, awful, dreadful thing to do. I wouldn't be at all – I don't know what she did with it. Whether she did drink it, having bought it she might as well have done but knowing my mum she could easily have chucked it away or given it away to somebody else, I don't know.

John: I don't think she'd thrown it, she probably – might have [unclear].

Anne: Might have given it away.

John: Yeah.

Anne: Yeah, cos she didn't feel she should benefit from her crime [laughs].

John: I was one of these lucky men who had the best mother-in-law in the world. Yeah.

Anne: My mum –.

Interviewer: I don't have that many more questions is there something that you feel like you haven't talked about that you haven't – that you would want to – to add?

John: Not really.

Anne: No, I think really for us because we were young most of it was fun. We had our moments but most of it was fun. Even hard – really hard times were fun because nobody had anybody had anything, it didn't matter¹². How do you know you're poor if everyone around you is poor? You don't.

Interviewer: Did you sense any fear or anxiety in your parents?

John: Oh, you – there were times when you were frightened, yes. I was, anyway.

Anne: Oh, I think cos you – your parents are that much older and they're frightened for you, aren't they?

John: I actually experienced about four weeks of the V1s, the buzz bombs, and cos all schools were shut and I found bell in a bombed house somewhere or other, ding-ding-a-ling bell and went up – cos in those days the sirens didn't go for the buzz bombs and rockets, did it much?

Anne: Well, they – they often – they used get under the radar, didn't they, so you didn't know when they were coming.

John: And I'd sit out in the garden wait – listening for the buzz bombs when I heard a buzz bomb I'd ring my bell and all the neighbours used to come out and go down [laughs] the shelters.

Interviewer: They must have missed you when you – when you went back to Devon then?

John: Well, I doubt it but that was all part of the fun.

Anne: It was all good job.

John: Yes, it was all part of the fun.

Anne: Like fire watching and all the rest of it. Everybody did their bit.

John: Yes. We had a bomb drop very close to our shelter on one occasion, it dropped on the garden fence actually. It was a phosphors bomb and we thought it blown the house down cos there was flames everywhere when dad looked out of the shelter front. But, eh, it wasn't it was just a phosphors bomb dropped n the garden and they weren't very big, however, all the food stuffs in the garden cos

¹² 60 min

we used to grow quite a bit of – it was condemned because it was contaminated with the phosphorous out of the bomb. And you'd be walking down the garden two or three days a week afterwards and a flame would come up and go out. That was the phosphorous from the bomb, mm.

Interviewer: Ok.

John: That was another mild experience of the [laughs].

Interviewer: Was there anything that you could do about that?

John: No.

Interviewer: No.

John: No.

Anne: They used to put sand on them, didn't they?

John: Yeah. Just earth whenever you found, well, we put earth on them.

Anne: Everyone had buckets of sand and buckets of water and stirrup pumps and all the rest of it. Yeah.

John: Yeah.

Anne: No, it was – I don't know. It was – it was horrible of – yes, of course, it was horrible. What was going on abroad was horrible and all the rest of it.

John: Yeah, but, as you said, everybody was in the same boat.

Anne: Well, yeah, that's right. Everybody had someone who was serving.

John: We weren't in Devon, we weren't in the same boat by any means. But –

Anne: Yeah, but you still had people down there who'd gone in the Navy or something.

John: Have you ever watched *Dad's Army*?

Interviewer: I have now and again, yes.

John: The Home Guard, well –

Anne: That is so true to life.

John: Our village had a platoon of men who were identical to that. All good shots, they could all use a gun. But their hats didn't fit right, their uniform and Jack, the bloke that I lived with, he had a grenade launcher which was a rifle with copper wire all the way up and a cap on the end. He fired a charge and it logged hand grenades but they were such an ill – [laughs] ill-fitted lot. Oh, funny they were. But we had lots of fun, we used to have the village dance twice a year and we had one searchlight up in

one of the other villages manned by the army and they – those – half a dozen blokes chasing all the village maidens, they'd be. Yeah, and I was allowed to go to those dances.

Anne: Well, all the children went –

John: Christine Hopkins used to take me. She was a seventeen year old.

Anne: I think it was another good thing, the brides at the end of the war when all the parks – cos they all had bandstands, didn't they in those days and the bandstand was surrounded by big asphalt type place and used to have bands up there and have dancing and that was good. Yeah, we used to enjoy that.

John: They used to have bands on Sundays in Greenwich.

Anne: No, this is dance bands.

John: Mm.

Anne: We go – we go dancing and we had double summer times so it was a good long evening [laughs].

John: Yeah.

Anne: I used to like that, mm.

Interviewer: Well, thank you very much for talking to me.

John: It's been a pleasure.

Anne: You're more than wel –

End of interview.