

CHAPTER III

Longfield School – Air Raid Shelters – Community singing – Radio programmes – Curriculum – School lessons – Teachers – Sports – The German bombers – Air-Raids – Searchlights - London Blitz – Total War – Rationing – The Nations Health – Make-do and mend – Meals – Diet - British Restaurant - Home Guard – Doodle bugs – A flying bomb fell - The tide turns - VE Day.

My mother took me to Longfield School in September 1940 - one year after the declaration of war. I was five years and two months old. I can still remember walking past North Harrow station holding her hand. I felt nervous, but very grown up!

The Introductory Class - the first classroom on the right from the main entrance and stairs, caused me the normal shy, worried fears all the other children had to cope with. This was the only time I ever remember my mother attending one of my schools - I am sure she must have at sometime but I do not recall it. After my first day at school, I continued my attendance walking with my brother until I was conversant with the route. This initial period did not take long and I was soon making my own way. Over forty children were in the first class, all sitting on tiny chairs in front of tiny desks. The whole room in keeping with the furniture – all on a Lilliputian scale.

As well as recognising letters and numbers every day of the week, we were taught how to sew - with very blunt needles and to paint and sing. On the windowsills, boxes of wet flannel grew mustard and cress, jam jars, lined with blotting paper, demonstrated the growth of peas and beans. I took to it all immediately... all my fears evaporated... so did my cap! Throughout my schooldays, the uniform was the same – jacket and trousers. I never had a greatcoat, raincoat... come rain, or shine the jacket had to suffice... It was the same for all my friends.

Joined up writing was the next stage in the art of writing. Individualism was not acceptable – up and down strokes were to be on top of each other, loops banned; each generation seemed to have their own preferences in letter writing form – with or without loops – continuing without space from capital to lower-case... more paper covered, more notebooks used, than any other task. Row upon row of individual letters, repeating page after page all designed to perfect the writing. Another daily task was repeating multiplication tables by rote in a singsong fashion every morning... on and on... it passed a great deal of time only to be interrupted by the air-raid warning... which we might make before the ‘all clear’ sounded... Then back to mental arithmetic - so many apples bought - so much change returned?

We learned music from visual aids - Tonic Sol-Fa draped over the blackboard. Music pieces played on a record player and the tune picked out on the piano – a demonstration of variations within the piece... the time rapped on the desk. Music increasingly became an important part of the curriculum. This was due to the government’s recognition that it was important; the public’s habit of listening to the radio and an increase in concert going in town halls and parks. Posters decorated the walls with multiplication tables, nursery rhymes and a nature scroll. There were painting lessons, highly coloured daubs with an almost hairless brush... reading Janet and John type books – fingers running across the page - each child having to read in turn.

The school’s air-raid shelters were installed in 1940. Large concrete pipes, originally made for enclosing streams or sewers, about six foot in diameter sunk into trenches in the ground. A bombproof entrance and exit steps built at either end then the whole lot covered in eighteen inches of soil turfed over. Duckboards covered the floors and slatted forms provided seating at the sides. They were dimly lit, smelly, cold and damp. When the sirens sounded, we left our classes and streamed to the shelters, each class having their own place. I do not remember any lessons being taught or even attempted to be taught whilst we were down there. We sang many songs in the round, took part in general knowledge quizzes. Using a cotton reel with four small nails over which wool was looped French knitting was produced., Eventually a long knitted tail was made which was

sewn together to make a round mat in turn could be further stitched together to make a rug. Wrapping wool round a cardboard ring with a hole cut into the centre was another craze. You continued threading wool round – from the outside into the centre until the centre totally filled with wool. The outside edge was cut, the cardboard removed, producing a ball of wool. My Infant school-days consisted of many such Air Raids which meant ‘going down to the shelters’ where teachers tried to occupy the children by keeping us entertained.

We all had our own gas masks in a square cardboard box equipped with string shoulder straps. Very soon, after the masks issued and the Battle of Britain fought the fear of enemy troops landing diminished. We were told gas masks need not be carried but must be kept near to hand, so they were consigned to the cupboard under the stairs never to be got out again. There was government propaganda put out over not only the air but also printed in newspapers extolling the need to be aware of the seriousness of the national position and that everyone should be prepared to do their best for the country and those fighting aboard.

Although adult conversation was about the war, children did not participate – their talk was about the latest film from Hollywood, the latest action in the Beano or Dandy... perhaps, about some sporting event or train spotting. For life went on, it appeared, as if, nothing was happening... much as always ... As children, we never noticed or commented on the lack of men - that the shops and town streets were only populated only by women ...!

Radio news programmes were highly censored giving a report on the wars progress in line with government’s plans. Newspapers took their line from a similar agency keeping in mind the necessity of keeping up moral. Everything was said and done to help the country’s war effort. Programmes such as Wilfred Pickles ‘Have a Go, Joe’, Tommy Handley’s ‘Itma’, Workers Playtime or ‘Bombed Out’ written to raise the spirits.

The period of the blitz was over relatively quickly. The Germans, before putting Operation Sealion into action - the invasion of Britain, planned to put Britain’s airfields and radar stations out of action... a sensible decision. Our airforce - guided by radio waves, could and would have caused considerable confusion and damage to an invasion force. Shortly after the German initiation of this policy - when many airfields and radar stations damaged or put out of action, Churchill demanded a retaliatory bombing mission on Berlin. This had the effect of prompting Hitler to return the attack to London, diverting his forces. Churchill never appreciated the result from this fortuitous order...

The German bombers were to be attacked - to ensure sufficient damage and loss that fighter escorts needed, if the policy were to be continued. For Britain, the raids continued further draining Germany’s resources... but most of all relieving the pressure on Britain’s fighter airfields and radar installations. Eventually Hitler put off the thought of invasion instead marched into Russia. This heralded the end of the blitz particularly raids towards inland sites - meant fewer air raids. The school’s shelters gradually became redundant.

As boys, watching from my parent’s bedroom window, Stan and I observed the air raids at night over London. The air raid sirens would start their interrupted pulsating wail that told you to take cover – approaching bombers were within range. The searchlight batteries would illuminate the night sky flicking their beams of light about in an attempt to locate the planes. The interrupted drone of the unsynchronised engines of the German bombers punctuated the night. Occasionally the searchlight beams caught a bomber making it look like a silver, midget fly. The bombs would be exploding making a dull crump then flames would shoot up eventually making the completely eastern sky glow orange and red like a semi-circular, northern-lights spectacular. We could see at first the searchlights seeking out and occasionally lighting up an enemy plane – the beams of light flickering across the sky forever probing for the aircraft. Then the ack-ack guns firing - trying to shoot the bombers down. At night, you could hear the pieces of metal shrapnel falling onto the roof. Finally, the sirens would give the all clear by a continuous tone and the searchlight would begin to

flicker out. In the morning, it would be a rush to see who could find a piece of shrapnel. These pieces swapped a larger piece for two smaller.

It is interesting to remember that Winston Churchill declared 'total' war early on. Germany's total war effort was not declared until 1944. Total war is about every person, involving every field of human endeavour. Pre-war Britain had more merchant ships than America and Japan combined. By the end of the war, 5,150 of those ships were lost [a total tonnage of more than its pre-war fleet]. The country lost its prestige, its world position and became deeply indebted to America, which would take many years to pay back.

As much as fifty percent of the country's food was imported before the Second World War. Food rationing started on the 8th January 1940, organized by the Ministry of Food, after the populace warned the previous November - it was scheduled to happen for the purchase of butter and bacon [sugar and all meat followed the next January; cheese cooking fat and tea soon afterwards] and to register - to a shop of their choice. The government believed that it was possible Britain could be forced to surrender by the sinking of food supply convoys and wished to share out the food available; they were also aware that hoarding - by the 'well off', was likely to occur.

By 1941, people began to get more accustomed to the limited supply - to experiment with unusual ingredients - imported tinned sausages and spam, powdered milk, eggs and potatoes. We hardly ever had to resort to any of these new foods in the home although school meals included them.

One of the changes to our diet, my brother and I made, was to take part in the government's Vitamin Welfare Scheme. We had a daily spoonful of cod-liver oil and malt [which was free for children under two]. Years later, the cod liver oil scheme was changed - to one of concentrated orange juice - to supplement the Vitamin C intake. At school, we had a third of a pint of milk thought beneficial for health - particularly Vitamin D, to prevent rickets.

How to save scraps of food to make further dishes and how to conserve fuel and water was practiced. The radio doctor Charles Hill, later to be Minister of Health, told the listeners how to make simple diagnostic tests and how to treat basic health problems - what to eat to keep healthy. He became an established radio celebrity whose advice was avidly listened to and followed. He became a radio celebrity and an institution so fondly was he considered.

The population was coping becoming progressively more frugal. There were hints on how to make clothes last longer. Clothes rationing [a separate clothing book] introduced after food in June 1941. Early the following year each person allocated sixty coupons, which had to last for fifteen months. People were encouraged to Make-do and Mend. The government introduced the 'utility' scheme designed to save material. Much later, this scheme involved all household goods and brought about the utility kite mark.

Being Ink-monitor was a chore for the reservoir pot was large and heavy. Trying to fill the small inkwells was difficult and messy enough without having to retrieve them from each desk and return them full up. All pupils allocated a School House, which identified the member, by a coloured diagonal band, especially recognisable for sports and team games.

School Assembly held first thing in the main hall of the school. Mrs Gotobed, a person who would easily find an equal place alongside Chalky of Giles cartoon fame, would officiate. When the final announcement made we marched from the hall, to the tune of a popular march, back to our respective classrooms. At sometime in the school year we had to parade in front of the Nurse to have, our ears looked into and our hair searched for lice.

My co-educational primary education completed, without any streaming, selection or the altering of class position. I do not remember any child having behavioural problems - towards each other or against those in authority, or, not able to keep up with the rest in lessons. There were no tests, which would have blighted my day.

On Empire day, we were allowed to go to school in cub uniform. The Union Jack flown on the flagpole and The National Anthem sung. Even at home, if the anthem played on the radio one was almost made to feel disloyal if you did not stand to attention. The playing of the National Anthem outside the home in theatre, cinema, concert hall or park demanded total respect. No one would dream of being anti-royal or casting aspersion towards the hierarchy. King and Country maintained and claimed as the highest ideal.

School dinners served in the hall, sometimes divided to accommodate overspill classes. Some children went home for their meals – those who lived nearby. Milk drunk from third pint bottles with a straw at the morning break-time continued for several years. In the winter, the milk was cold - sometimes frozen solid and in the summer warm, often tasted sour.

Friday afternoons at school was the time when our teacher read us a story. Coral Island or Wind in the Willows – a great favourite. During the reading of these stories by the teacher, I can still remember how much they excited me. I could quite ‘get into them’ and could imagine all the descriptions - of places and people.

The other abiding memory at this time was playing submarines with my ‘best friend’ David Henry Villers, later to be nicknamed China [china plate] after the cockney slang for *mate*. Every school lunch time we would be playing, by the box hedge near the school gate, submarines. What prompted us to play that game I know not except that it was about this time that the action of German submarines was playing a significant role in the war and was therefore much in the news. As the land war was being won by a continuous string of enemy successes so too was the war at sea. It was a very frustrating period, which never seemed to end.

I continued with the same class of children throughout my period in the primary school. There were tests and reports in the juniors; whatever the result, in my case not too good, my parents took no action to motivate me to do better. They did not demand any homework or to my knowledge require any explanation as to what they should do to improve my education. Eventually I went upstairs to the Junior School and the educational process continued.

In 1941, my brother enrolled in the local piano teacher’s class. He practised religiously and throughout his many years of lessons took the Royal College of Music’s exams. Two years later my father asked me if I would like to learn too. To this, I replied “No” keeping to myself that I did not want to spend all my time practising whilst my friends were outside having fun. I do not think my father was very pushing. He knew that if I did not want to learn he would not have to spend the fees.

One of my elder brother’s great schemes – it may have come from stories during the war or through the scouts, whatever, his idea was that we should build an aerial ropeway from bedroom window to ground.

The clothes line running from garden shed to a pole, close to the fence, was borrowed and sneaked up to the bedroom – making sure that my mother didn’t realise what was going on by being stuffed up my jumper. The bedroom window flung wide open, one end of the washing line tied to one of the iron bedstead legs, paid out over the window cill, and the spare... dropped to the ground. We casually went down stairs out into the back yard. Using the mangle as an anchor tied the spare end to it and drew the rope tight. Back we went upstairs to begin our descent. My brother being the organiser and senior elected to descend first.

There were, other than the poor quality of the rope, two main essentials to the success of this escapade. One, the need for a firm anchor at the top, two, that the bottom firmly held - to prevent ‘swing’.

The architect who designed the house believed that a semblance of balance was necessary in his design - the doors and windows were in alignment vertically and horizontally... beneath our bedroom window was the French doors.

After clambering out onto the sill my brother gradually descended. It was here that the first safety feature was missing. The bed took up the strain... our bedroom never had a carpet but relied upon linoleum to offer it a taste of luxury. The floor surface did not allow sufficient grip... the bed gradually slid towards the window. Perhaps, if the second principle of safety reliably put into place success achieved. There again, if I had been strong enough - by holding onto the other end drawn tight the slack... that may have sufficed, unfortunately, I was not!

Thinking about it afterwards the outcome might appear obvious but to us then it did not. The mangle, though of ancient lineage, still had the castors attached; these found to be necessary for us two to move the mangle to the other end of the yard.

This is where, had there been complete reliance upon total 'grip' [to use an expression much used by General Montgomery] help might have been to hand. It was not, the mangle started to move towards the French windows and the rope slackened. My brother wishing to stop the rope spinning and to give some semblance of order to his descent pushed out his foot, which found purchase on the main French window, which gave way under pressure.

Without going into too many details, he landed in a heap on the ground via the mangle. My mother now took a greater interest in the proceedings and flew out of the kitchen. She did not have to say that she would tell our father what we had been up to for the results of our labour were obvious.

It was normal to meet my father at the railway station every evening. It was on our walks back home that I was able to get my side of every issue straight before any nasty rumours broadcast later on. In this case, it was to no avail even though my brother and I often took to the top of the beech tree, into our tree house, as we did in this case, my father meant to have his say with the cane. I never enjoyed being up the tree looking down on my father who was stalking about at the bottom with a strap or cane. Time was not always a good healer...

From the time my father joined the Home Guard to the time he was demobilised we saw little of him. There were brief spells of home life but he was not around sufficiently long enough to change the way my mother ran things; she continued her placid way of life – nothing hurried, no upsets, nothing altered to show that there was a war going on or that rationing dictated the type of meals we were eating. There was nothing obvious, to the casual observer, to suggest we were nearing the middle of the twentieth century for we were locked into how she was raised back in rural Tatworth.

Mother was pregnant. At 54, my father had another son, Derek, who was born in October 1943. My mother had a home confinement. This did not alter the daily routine. I can only believe that Nan, an adopted Aunt, was there to hold the fort.

I enjoyed school and my classmates, but most of all, I appreciated my particular friend David. My life revolved around his family and home. Our conversations mainly taken up by the history of the Plantagenet kings, their castles - and the breaching of their walls. The lessons were not onerous although I was not keen on mental arithmetic: problems, especially those awful 'if you bought six apples at 2d each and four pears at 1d how much would you have out of a 10 shillings note,' were horrific - I always forgot the beginning of the question. There was no fuss about exams although we took classroom tests. However, we were becoming more aware of a horrid event looming before us. A scholarship examination, as the eleven-plus was, put into place.

All children were taught to read and write in a manner laid down by the education authorities. Conversational English based on the language of radio announcers – the Kings English. Sums were a compulsory part of the curriculum as was scripture, music, nature lessons and model making. Every year had its sports and Empire day, dancing round the May pole, cricket and football - when the field was dry, which seemed to be rare. It was a good school although unfortunately my period there coincided with the war, which interrupted most lessons. Sex reared its head in a very innocent

way with, 'I'll show you mine if you'll show me yours,' which never to my memory produced anything other than mild amazement.

Saturday morning cinema club either at: the Granada Cinema, Harrow, the Odeon, Rayners Lane or The Embassy, North Harrow. They all had their theme songs, which we children all sang loudly in time with the spot, which indicated on the screen the next word. Their special clubs, which passed out badges of membership, were much prized. I can still remember the songs and feel the tense excitement. Westerns, with Roy Rogers taking the lead, detective mysteries, with Mr Ching, the Bowery Boys who were led by Slip Mahoney. Laurel and Hardy comedies, Charlie Chaplin's slapstick humour and the Keystone Cop's mad antics were the most frequent comedies. There was the usual competition for small boys to try to get to the front by crawling under the seats to get nearer the screen. On special occasions, live actors and singers gave a concert during the middle of the show. The organ at the Granada would rise out of the floor and the white coated figure would strike up the tune to a roar from the whole audience. A two penny, round, Lyons ice cream cornet was a particular delight.

Although I never took part there were always 'crazes' going around the school. Either it was: special cigarette card collections, a particular coloured or sized marble to swop, flicking cigarette cards against the wall to see who got the nearest the wall or covered the other cards. There were gangs of boys who leaped upon each other's backs to see if they could get higher than another team, girls screaming at catch or skipping, or hopscotch. Boys playing football with a tennis ball or just riding on each other's backs to see who could knock another pair over. However, the greatest collectors were those who could produce the largest piece of shrapnel.

My brother had joined the cub scouts the year before me and when it came to my time, I was eager to attend. My father took me to the Scouts shop in Hindes Road, Harrow, where I was fitted with neckerchief, woggle, cap and jumper in the Headstone Wolf Pack colours. Tags and badges brought home - sewn-on by my mother. My life as a cub scout began. We learned our scouts promise, sat for badges for fire lighting, telling the time and tying our laces up. Learning special recitations like "doing our best, well dib, dib, dob", and going to summer camp.

One of my greatest regrets is that I was never able to swim. A whole group of us would go to the outside swimming baths in Harrow. There the group played team games in the water. Because I could not swim, I used to pretend by hopping about on one leg. It was awful not being able to join in properly.

Although having explained that the war for us children was exciting and a great talking point nothing frightened us. The blitz over London was visible, the searchlights lit up our bedroom and the ack-ack guns pumped their shells into the sky. Shrapnel rained down and could be heard bouncing on the roof... still it all seemed a long way away. Bombs did fall on Pinner in the summer of 1940 and some close to St Albans church, a number in the centre of Pinner later that year. All these were over quickly and soon forgotten. It was in the final year of the war that we were actively involved this was not forgotten...!

The V for vengeance bomb, or doodle-bug, was a jet engine powered, stubby winged plane, operating from a ramp which gave flight direction, the distance controlled by the amount of fuel it carried. This was the first of Hitlers vengeance weapons. The second was the VII rocket and the third an enormously long barrelled gun. All three were random weapons – used for scare tactics rather than pin-point accuracy.

The VI had an engine noise which was distinct – had a sort of spluttering sound. Everything was alright whilst you could hear the engine but when it stopped you knew that the plane was in a steep dive to the ground. Three fell in the summer of 1944. One fell in Parkside Way, another in Rowlands Avenue, and a third fell seven doors away, between numbers 49-53 in Cumberland Road, also damaging the British Restaurant and Home Guard hut. The doors and windows were blown in,

and part of the roof collapsed. At least five houses were blown-up and many more damaged. A number of neighbours died and others seriously injured. This occurred when Derek was just under a year old when the war was in its final year.

My brother and I were getting ready for school after finishing breakfast. My father was there also having just dressed into his uniform. We were all milling about in the kitchen mum was putting on my tie and my brother Stan still sat on the box seat. It was a normal start to the school day and we were about to head for the front door. There was a whooshing sound and then the explosion – not as you would expect an enormous bang but more a rumble, there was an enormous billowing of plaster dust – actually all quite unimpressive for the devastation it caused. There had been no air-raid siren sounded - we had been taken by surprise...

Naturally, my mother's initial cry was 'Derek', which stimulated the whole family to rush for the hall and stairs. Up, the family went and into my parents bedroom. There was the offending article, smiling, sitting in a sea of glass and dust. It was amazing that no harm had come to him for on closer look around us all the windows had blown in and most of the doors too.

A number of neighbours killed and one lost his sight. My father immediately headed down the road to see if he could offer any assistance and to organise the relief services. We meanwhile started to clear up the mess. Auntie Nan who was working at my Uncle Will's house in Pinner was informed. She kindly cooked our evening dinner and brought it over, walking all the way with the dinner on a plate with a cloth over the top later that day.

It was not long before workers came round to repair the damage – to make the house fit to live in. It was during this time that the floors were lifted and the void beneath was filled in with rubble. This to some extent cured the problem of damp. Many of the rotten joists were replaced and so too the damaged floorboards. During the weekends, it was my job to take Derek out in the pram when we went for miles mostly up to Hall's farm. Often I would take him to 'Snow White's Cottage', which was just up a cart track off George the Fifth Avenue and could be got to from Noah Hill in Pinner.

My father's, spell in the Home Guard ended in 1944, when it was clear to the government that Hitler was not going to invade. On leaving, his rank was made substantive – he was now a Major, although not on the serving list. His move back to the railway, which had two important effects on the family. One was that his car had to be given back to its rightful owner, and two, life got back to the routine left behind - four years previously.

When I was about ten, I joined the choir at Saint Albans Church, North Harrow. My brother was already in the choir and the whole idea was my mother's, whose friend, Mrs Green's son Peter, was senior choirboy. This was not a success as eventually it interfered with playing with my friends and it was all too confining for my tastes. Another call on my spare time was a paper round which gave my six and sixpence a week. It was the smallest round in the shop but it suited me and was to last for five years. This was the means whereby I could go to the pictures; buy a packet of five woodbine or turf cigarettes and round it all off with a bag of toffees. However, I did enjoy music and accompanied my father and mother to the Saturday or Sunday concert at the Moat Farm concert at Headstone Recreation Ground almost every Sunday after the war until I started work.

Our gang, which used to roam the streets of an evening, got up to many larks. The railway line tempted us - to put pennies on the line so that the weight of the train squashed them; or perhaps build another gang hut on the embankment. Quite often, we had to take to our heels because the railway police were after us. On one occasion I quickly jumped down from the embankment only to find at the bottom that I had cut myself badly on a piece of metal sticking out from the concrete side.

Playing 'knock-down-ginger' was another prank we got up to – tying a piece of cotton to a door knocker pulling it and watching the annoyed face of the house owner wondering who kept on

knocking his door. Tying a dustbin to a car bumper and watching it disappear down the road scattering the contents. Pushing a potato down someone's exhaust pipe crated mayhem or scrumping apples from the back gardens. Throwing fireworks – bangers, when we were annoying another gang – know where their hideouts were and creeping up on them.

There were frequent gang fights between the Canterbury Road and the Cumberland Road gangs using the bombsite at the top of the road. Broken roof tiles provided the ammunition and the many brick lined holes made excellent trenches. Scaffolding poles, which stretched, from roof to ground, gave us a thrilling slide to the ground. It was all a perfect adventure playground.

My father treated Christmas as time to massively celebrate - he loved it all - the hanging of paper chains, bells and balls... made the front and back rooms look like Father Christmas's grotto. Copper three-penny pieces wrapped in greaseproof paper added to the pudding mix - if silver ones not available. The pudding-cloth lay over the pudding the string tied round the basin and the ends of the cloth knotted over-all... the pre-Christmas preparations would be done well in advance. The lead-up time exciting... the rest, viewed with trepidation and concern...

Christmas was a time to look forward to with its fog and possible snow, which gave it a special atmosphere of comfort and togetherness. Presents gathered and spread around the bottom of the Christmas tree. Pillowcases hung on the stairs to receive masses of simple presents. Stocking hung up on the bottom rail of the beds. The sideboard groaned under dishes of fruit, boxes of dates and chocolates. The front room table lay with an immaculately ironed cloth and set using the best china and cutlery. Grandmother was the chief guest; unfortunately, she died in the last year of the war. Aunts, Amy, Lil and Nan were usually in attendance and the house used to vibrate with their chatter and bonhomie. The Christmas tree had strewn to excess, with tinsel and glass balls, the fairy at the top waving her wand. Tiny candles in their holders clipped to the branches and lit. Eventually the candles burnt away and no more obtained during wartime.

I had to queue up at the express dairy to get what cakes and sponges were available. The highlight of it all was my father playing all the old tunes on the piano with everyone else singing along. Song sheets distributed - cut out of the newspaper especially for the occasion. The blue covered Daily Express Songbook had its annual exposure to daylight. Mum and Nan would fuss around the kitchen stove and sink since early morning; for nothing spared to give everyone the best. Crackers arranged by every placing - everyone had to wear one of their paper hats, jokes read out and miniature fireworks set off. English sherry consumed whilst the nuts passed round. The fire banked up to the extent that sparks would fly up the chimney and everyone would draw back from the heat. The Kings message was eagerly looked forward to whilst the port and mince pies circulated.

Most Christmases, before Martha, grandma Kearey, died in 1944, Dad would fetch her and Auntie Lil from Eastcote in his car to spend the day with us. I well remember on those trips to fetch them how foggy it was, to the extent that Stan or I had to walk in front with the torch to show the way. On other occasions, the snow was so thick driving was difficult and we had to take a shovel to dig the car out of the ruts.

The money I needed to afford recreation - going out with my friends, visits to the cinema and buying sweets came from money earned from my paper round [my father had stopped paying pocket money immediately I started]. Although this method of earning money was illegal for I had lied about my age to the newsagent - was under the age of eleven years. Taking jam jars and pop bottles back to the shop to receive a halfpenny each and doing errands for my mother also brought in an additional sum.

To afford Christmas presents my friend David and I went carol singing. I painted stripes onto a jam-jar and lit a candle that was stuck in the bottom – to make it look like a lantern, and strung it on a pole. With that, we lighted our way and presented a Yuletide image. At first, we had a song

sheet but eventually this became discarded when we had learned the words. Every evening we earned pounds and saved it away to give ourselves treats and pay for our present giving. When people were coping with the war and afterwards when rationing was still in place people were very generous and concerned about those less well off - particularly children.

Victory in Europe [VE Day] was in May 1945. I was almost ten years old in my penultimate year at junior school. I do not remember any particular fuss about the ending of the war – we had no street party or bunting flown, although the local church bells rung. War was still being waged in the Far East and there were still many shortages. Ration Books were still in use right into the fifties.

After the war, many men needed to repair and reconstruct the damaged homes and factories. Most major southern cities of England were war torn and ravaged with many levelled bombsites, very bare of buildings or holding just the skeleton. The houses in our road, blown-up by the flying bomb, rebuilt to the previous design; the damaged houses repaired - this included our house - which also had the void under the floor filled in and the rotten floorboards replaced. The men doing the work were only using hand tools adopting standards that were pre-war mixing up plaster with horsehair and mixing cement by hand.

Every Sunday Stan and I would go to Sunday school in the morning where we would contribute to the farthing collection and in the afternoon go to my grandmother's house in Eastcote where my Aunt Lil would make us honeycomb and treacle toffee. It was there that we explored our Uncle's garage and looked at the lines and lines of military vehicles parked in the field at the back of the house.

Looking back at that time it was a difficult time for my father to adjust and the family fortunes were at low ebb. This was no so much in monetary terms, although that was hard, but in my parent's social well-being. The age difference between my parents began to become more obvious; their appreciation of the latest industrial advances and current changes in social behaviour became more distant. There had been little change in social behaviour and working environments since the twenties. Now, under a thrusting new workforce looking for change and greater distribution of wealth, everything associated with the past challenged. It was much later when the same thing happened to me and I began to appreciate the feelings he must of felt. My father began to face impending retirement, the advent of 'the nationalisation of the railways', younger men coming out of the services and modernisation as a threat. His career had reached its peak just before the war in the late thirties and felt distanced by the integration of the railways and road services. My mother was increasingly left behind by city and town life – she progressively relied upon my father – trusting that he would be able to provide for the future – a future that was totally different from those experiences previously inculcated.

The eleven-plus examination was brought into being by the 1944 Education Act. This was a system of secondary education made to fill the number of grammar school places then available. In some counties, the child who failed this 11- plus exam could re-sit the following year.

For those who failed there was the chance to sit for a Technical or Art School - both for boys or girls wishing to be trades people and could be sat at the age of twelve. Girls tended to go on to secretarial schools or catering colleges and boys into engineering and commerce.

Those children who failed both these exams and were not in 'O' level streams within the Secondary Modern Schools system became an underclass of poor achievers. They could re-enter the higher educational system by applying for Polytechnic places. This was not its intention - to make young people feel of lesser importance, but a hard fact of life. I was one of those who felt belittled by failing those tests. In this, I am not necessarily blaming the system for there must be a hierarchy of learning with a place on the scale for technical and manual ability... but it did play a part in my mental attitude to education.

At last, the day came for me to sit the exam. I was sure that if I prayed hard enough my request would be answered. The night before I had knelt down and said my prayers, hands tightly placed together, eyes firmly shut, Lord's Prayer intoned and the special prayer my father had taught us to say... God bless mummy, God bless daddy, make me a good boy, Amen. However, most of all I made a promise to God that I would worship him forever, come what may, if I passed. I polished my shoes and smartened myself up. Pencils sharpened, pen nibs cleaned, special fountain pen bought specially for the occasion, rubber and ruler to the ready. We all had to file into the main hall and sit at desks spread apart in long lines – all neatly arranged with the teacher sitting at the desk on the stage and other teachers walking about between the desks.... I was quite right to be nervous. I knew there was no way I could pass that or any other exam. It was all a massive shock to the system. There had been by me no preparation whatsoever and it was easy to compare myself to those special others, a very few, who I knew would undoubtedly pass. I just had not a chance. One look at the paper convinced me that what I had thought would happen was a total certainty.

There were so few places in so few schools. The numbers, which passed, obviously corresponded to the number of places available. Those that passed were the exception – perhaps there were just half a dozen in my class of thirty-five. I mention that but do not know how many for sure. What I did know was not one of my friends who did. Some children were to go to fee paid schools others like myself sent to the nearest secondary modern, which was Headstone School. All the boys that I associated with failed. As an individual, I somehow knew - even at that young age, the divisions wrought between those that did go to a grammar school and those that did not would never be joined - the stigma would attached itself. We who did not pass were failures, our parents knew we were and the community did too.

The grammar schools particularly the most well known like Harrow took the elite and they were known to be quite as good as the best private fee paying schools. There was a feeling at the time that this was a fair system for progressing bright pupils. Those that failed could have a second chance at taking the 'twelve plus' and after a year one could sit the entrance exam to a technical school. The thought that if you were not clever using your head you might be clever with your hands and go to an engineering, building or art school. It believed that children had aptitudes - if not up to standard at one subject then better in another. It was never discussed or explained openly that some parents who understood what was going on, cared sufficiently to do something about their children's education at a time when it would count - in a positive manner, and would make all the difference. That a caring attitude towards what was happening to their children would count It was not much good thinking about what would help little Jack just before the exam or even a year before. It had, by preference, to be thought about even before the Childs birth, certainly soon thereafter, as a mindful planned exercise when the child is adaptable, obedient and capable of being directed towards discovering through games and challenges. This should be a plan just to get the child through the Scholarship but as a way of bringing-up your child. There is no doubt that there were some parents who did think about such things because they were either deprived themselves and meant to make sure their children did not end up as they did. They could have been social climbers or even to show off to their neighbours, friends and relatives. However, by far the best way was by the parents having the intellect to know what was best and sensible. Perhaps they may even have had a good education themselves and therefore appreciated the value of a good education - were going to make sure their children had an equal chance. No matter the reason behind their motivation, the fact was they recognised that an effort made and they needed to direct their children. There were some parents like that but they were rare. The majority of children slotted into the prescribed pattern and to some extent that suited the limited provision obtainable.

There was no feeling of relief after sitting the exam. I knew deep down that I had failed. When, some weeks later, the letter from the Education Department arrived the truth was out and

what I had thought would be the result came true. All my friends failed too which was a relief and we all found ourselves bound for Headstone Secondary Modern. A new uniform bought and a new life began. Each new part added more pressure and challenges – the golden years of having no responsibilities - of permanent blue skies, gone for good.

I now realise that to make a difference, for any improvement in learning skills, the child has to make a sustained effort. To do this, if it has not come about naturally, the parents have to make an equal effort too to see that that effort made is not wasted. It is a matter of the correct state of mind which must come from the parent first... To ensure that the child's efforts become a natural habit... then it will last a lifetime.

Passing the eleven plus did not necessarily guarantee a secure permanent job nor an ability to earn more money than those who did not. That the Grammar Schools gave a better education is not in doubt for they most certainly did. Secondary Modern Schools, or Comprehensive Schools later on, failed to reach the educational heights of the old established Grammar Schools. Breaking up that system by Shirley Williams and the Labour Government was understandable but at fault. They should have considered building more Grammar Schools, opened up the intake, and selected by Committee rather than exam - referring to the child's yearly reports.