

# Children's Wartime memories

## Mary Beck, Faringdon

### BARBARA LEARNS WHAT WAR MEANS

I used to go and stay with my Gran and Grampy. I used to sit in the corner on a chair with my feet up. I was sitting there one day when we heard this terrible, terrible crash bang and it was a bomb (it was the one that fell on the pub at Hatford) and my grampy said to my Gran "That child isn't staying any more with us until the war is over. If anything happens to her mum and dad I want her to be there. And if anything happens to us I still want her to be there." Needless to say it didn't do a thing and I was still there the next day.

Another thing that happened was: right at the back of my Gran's house an aeroplane crashed. It was an English one. That was exciting – we all went out there trying to stick our nose in to have a good look, as we weren't allowed. And that made me realise what a war was.

There was a family living two doors away with four boys and one daughter. Three of the boys were called up: one was killed at Dunkirk and one was drowned at sea (his shop got blown up and his body was never found). She was upset. Their memorials are in the churchyard – one was 22 and one was 23; one was Cyril and one was Basil. And I remember thinking: "They're killed; they're dead" because of course I knew them and then I realised what war was. Until then, I didn't.

I had an Aunt Mary. She was my Dad's youngest sister so more like a sister to me than an aunt. She got married at 19 to a man in the Irish Guards. One day she came over to see us and she was crying. Well, I cry with anybody so there we were, both crying. I asked my Gran why she was crying. She told me Auntie had just had a telegram - Her husband had just been killed. He hadn't been gone long, and my Aunt was 4 and a half months pregnant. The doctor came – she was terrified she was going to lose the baby, her only link now to her husband. Well she didn't, and she now has a daughter of 57. Uncle Tom's grave is in Belgium somewhere. He was in a tank and the tank got blown up.

That was terrible, terrible. And in the middle of that my Grampy died, aged 54. Even though it wasn't because of the war it made it a very sad time. And then, a week later, I went home to find my mother crying: her brother had been killed in Italy.

## **Barbara and the American Soldiers**

An army camp for American soldiers was set up in the woods on the Barcote estate. There were sentries at the main gates, but we children managed to get in. We had always gone into the woods to play, to pick blackberries and nuts and we weren't going to give that up now.

One day, my sister, who was only four, was going through the woods picking flowers. Suddenly we heard her screaming and screaming. Everybody ran up to her. "I've seen a real live golliwog, and he walks and he talks!" She was so excited. Of course we had never seen a black person: no telly in those days to show us what the rest of the world was like. All she knew was her much-loved toy.

It turned out that there were both black and white troops among the American soldiers, though they were kept separate. We found the black soldiers much friendlier.

The black Americans seemed so strange to us that even the grown-ups could be afraid of them. One of our neighbours was an old lady called Mrs. Thatcher. One day she came running round to my Mother. "Please help me! One of those Americans has got into my house! It must be, because there's a helmet on my table!". Well, my Mum wasn't very brave either, so they waited for a car to come by (there weren't many cars on the roads in those days) and asked the driver to come with them into Mrs. Thatcher's house. They were searching through the house when Mrs. Thatcher's red-haired evacuee boy called Peter came in. "What's the matter?" he asked. Mrs. Thatcher pointed wordlessly to the helmet. "Oh, that's mine," he said, "I found it in the woods."

Some of the military equipment was left along the side of the road, and we used to pass the soldiers on our way to school or to church. They used to give us oranges and chewing gum. On Sundays they would stand outside the cottages and whistle. My two cousins up the road, two evacuee girls with their mothers and us girls would walk down to church with them. One soldier in particular used to walk with me. He said he had a little girl back home who was a chatterer, like me. They were so friendly, but so polite. They never put a foot wrong.

## **BARBARA AND THE EVACUEES**

The next thing was of course the evacuees. We all waited at Littleworth (I went to school in Littleworth – it was open then) and the bus came down and the evacuee children got off. Poor things. They were all allotted out to different people. We didn't have to have evacuees because there wasn't enough room with us being three children (two girls and a boy).

There was one family of four children – called Bassett. Edith and Renee were supposed to have gone to another lady but she wouldn't have them because they were scruffy. Normally you had to accept the evacuees that you were told to have, but she kicked up so much fuss, and the kids were crying, so my Mum said "I'll take them home with me and we'll have them for a little while until they could find somewhere else for them to go".

The four children really wanted a home together but Gran had Freddie and Jeannie and we took Edith and Renee home with us. All they had, everything they owned, was in a little carrier bag – not even a change of clothes. My Mum and Dad sat up all night, the night they came, and altered some of my clothes to fit them.

That night the girls slept with me in my bed. The next morning Mum said, "Right, we'd better wash your hair" – and they were lousy. Their heads were full of lice. Me and my sister had long plaits, but luckily we didn't pick anything up!

Edith and Renee were both older than me. Edith was a lovely girl but Renee could be quite nasty with my Mum. They stayed with us for a little while, and then they went to Faringdon where all four could be together. But they used to pop and see my Mum. At least Edith did.

It was so sad. Edith was so intelligent they put her name forward for the 11+ and she passed but they couldn't find their mum. It was as if their Mum had abandoned her children. She never wrote to them; she never got in touch with them. Freddy said, "I don't care if I never see her again." He told us how she used to lock them in the cellar (they lived in a big old house in London) and she used to go off out drinking. And they never, ever, saw her again. Edith used to mother them and look after them.

Of the twelve children who came to Littleworth they were the worst family I saw. We didn't have any more evacuees but my Gran did. They were a family called Bullen. They had come from a lovely family. There was Doris and Jim and Jeannie. There was a Rosie in between but she had had rheumatic fever and was in a hospital evacuation. Their Mum used to write every week and she used to come to visit – either them, or sister Rosie who was somewhere else. She always brought Gran presents. Jim went to University eventually and used to come and see my Mum. But Doris!

Doris was the eldest. I can see her now, more clearly than any of them. She was very tall. She wore a navy blue school coat and a brown velour hat with elastic under the chin. She had ginger hair and freckles. And she was the leader. So street-wise – and we weren't!

She borrowed a bicycle, once. She said to me, "Are you coming?" So Jim sat on the saddle, and I sat on the handlebars, and she stood on the pedals and pedalled. Needless to say, just by the Fox pub, we came off, right in front of a convoy of army lorries. Well, the convoy stopped. They shook us, and clipped us round the ear and told us that if they saw us again (they were stationed locally) they would get in touch with my parents. That was enough to frighten me to death!

Doris was so full of life – not bad – she didn't hit anybody or rob anybody or anything like that, but she would keep asking me "Where could we do so-and-so? Where could we find so-and-so?". I thought it was wonderful – I was her best friend.

I thought the evacuees were really intelligent, coming from London, so I couldn't believe it when I discovered they didn't know where ordinary things like milk, vegetables and fruit came from. When they came with us on our walks we'd say "The cows are going for milking." "Milking?" "Yes." "Oh we didn't have our milk from cows. Ours came in bottles. Then we'd go down to the allotments and they couldn't believe that peas grew on plants, and you dig for potatoes (one child I knew thought potatoes grew on trees!)

Once a group of evacuees got me on the subject of fruit and where it came from. "Do you like gooseberries?" Doris asked. "Oh yes," I replied. "Do you know where there are any?" she asked. I took her to a lady's garden where the gooseberries grew over the hedge. "Can you eat them?" "Oh yes." The lady's name was Mrs. Dixey, and she was a right old tyrant. She didn't like children and she didn't want us picking her fruit. I was the only one she knew so she went and told my Gran. Then she told my Dad and although he saw the funny side I was kept in for a punishment. We were never, ever allowed to annoy anybody

We had more success when we went scrumping for apples in Mr. Belcher's orchard. The other children saw him and managed to get away, but I was stuck up the tree and couldn't get down. He said to me, "You don't have to steal my apples. Just ask, and I'll give you some." He didn't tell my Dad.

It wasn't that the evacuees taught me to steal: they didn't, but they did have artful ways. One lady had a beautiful plum tree loaded with fruit. So we stood there saying "Isn't that a beautiful tree. Haven't you got a lot of fruit," until she gave us a plum each.

The evacuees made me realise that outside my village were a lot of tougher people that you had to cope with.

On Sundays we used to go to church together. Doris had a little sister, Jeannie – younger than me, about 4 or 5, who would come with us. One Sunday during the service little Jeannie's voice rang out, "Dowwis, I can't see! Dowwis!" We looked down and Jeannie had stuck chewing gum over her eyes. Doris looked down. "You stupid thing!" she said. We were all laughing; the vicar stopped the service. Needless to say I got told off again.

## **BARBARA AND THE LAND-GIRL**

Imagine my surprise when Major West came to the house one day and asked my Mum if I could help him. His Land-girl was so homesick she couldn't stop crying and he wondered if I would go and comfort her. In the war, of course, any men who could join the fighting forces were "called up" and they usually had to go whether they wanted to or not, and whatever their job had been. This meant there weren't enough men left at home to do the jobs, so the women were "called up" too, and were sent to do "war work". One of the jobs women could do was to work on the land, and they were sent to join the Land Army, and were called "Land Girls". They had a uniform of trousers (called breeches), a green sweater and a warm brown overcoat and a big hat like a cowboy hat.

Major West took me to the Land-girl's room which was her bed-sit. I didn't know what to do, because she was so much older than I was. She told me her name was Dorothy and that she was so unhappy because she missed her family. She told me all about her brothers and sisters (she was the oldest of five children) and her mum and dad. Afterwards she often came to our house for Sunday tea, so that she could be with a family again, even if it wasn't her own.

But the most amazing thing was yet to come. There was a knock on the door, and who should come in but Major West carrying a tray with cups of tea for Dorothy and me. I was absolutely gobsmacked! I couldn't believe my eyes! I would never have imagined that he would stoop so low as to bring a little girl, and one of his workers, a cup of tea! Suddenly he had stopped being a god and had become an ordinary and very nice person.

## YOUNG BARBARA ENJOYS THE WAR

I was only six when the war started, and 12 when it ended. I wasn't aware of living in a special time. Young children accept what is happening to them as part of life, so in some ways my life was no different for me after peace came. I had grown up with rationing, and two years after the war, when I had left school and was going out to work, there was still rationing.

Children's ration books were blue. All the shopkeepers knew who had a blue ration book and they would let the families know if there was a special delivery coming in, say, of bananas so you could take your blue ration book and have your share. (I never had a fawn ration book – I was still classed as a child, even though I was going out to work, when rationing ended!)

Everything was special for children. Once a week my Mum would get our sweet ration and dole it out into three little bags: "One for you, one for you, one for you". My brother ate his all at once, but I used to savour mine!

The butcher would let my mum know when there was offal coming in and we used to take our ration books (not that we needed them, as offal wasn't rationed, but to prove that there were kids in the family), go down and collect it: a couple of rissoles, a couple of sausages, and perhaps a bit of liver. It wasn't enough for a whole meal, but it helped.

Food was plentiful in the country. We kept chickens, so we had meat and eggs. Our Dad grew vegetables which we could eat fresh and keep. There weren't fridges in those days, but food would be kept in a larder with a stone floor and a safe. Our mothers still had the old country ways of preserving: bottling tomatoes and fruit in Kilner jars and making jam; bottling beans in salt (a layer of beans, a layer of salt, and so on until the jar was full).

Dad would keep root vegetables in what he called a pit: a hole in the ground that the vegetables were put in, then covered with a layer of soil like a dome. Root vegetables would keep right through the winter that way. When you wanted any carrots or swedes or turnips you just dug out a little bit, took what you wanted and covered it over again. Onions were strung up to dry. Potatoes were kept in a sack. Cabbage carried on growing in the garden right through the winter.

I was lucky, because my Mum was a good cook and knew how to make things to a long way. For example fats were rationed per person per week like this:

4 ounces of margarine  
2 ounces of butter  
1 oz of lard  
4 ounces of sugar.

Well, ten ounces of butter isn't much for a family of five, but Mum would mix up the margarine with the butter to make it go further.

Flour and bread were rationed, but there were other ways of filling us up. We had a lot of boiled puddings. If Mum had a bit of offal, she would make a suet lining (a mixture of grated suet and flour) for a bowl, then put in any meat she could get, put a suet cover on the top, and leave the bowl in boiling water to cook. If she hadn't any meat there would be home-grown eggs and potatoes and then a pudding made like the meat pudding, but with bottled fruit.

Every Saturday Mum would go shopping and come back with a bag of sprats. She would make up the range until it was roaring, cut the heads off the fish and roll them in flour and fry them in fat for our tea. Otherwise we didn't have much fish – except herrings.

Our little village was a close society, made more so because of the war. One person didn't have a fireworks party – we all did: everybody congregated in the school playground and everybody contributed something. If anything special was happening, like a wedding, everybody expected to come. There may have been little hardships, like not many sweets, but everybody having the same drew us together.

Every now and then a "Social" would be organised. The soldiers provided the food (we didn't have any, because of rationing); a lady called Kate used to play the piano, and there would be dancing, and people would sing. It wasn't just for children or just for adults: everyone would go. I wanted to go, but I knew my mum wouldn't let me, so I used to ask my Gran if she would take me. "Put flour on thee face," she would say, "And I'll take you".

In those days, too, children could roam freely. My Mum used to pack us Eiffel tower lemonade (lemon crystals, put in a jug of boiling water, and screwed down in a jar). It tasted very sharp, almost like real lemons. And off we'd go.

Schooling was pretty basic, too, and I was able to leave before I was 14 and go out to work. You didn't automatically take the 11+ exam to go on to Grammar School – only if you were really clever and were chosen to.

There were two teachers in our school. One teacher took the 5-6 year olds, and Miss Beaumont had the 6 to 11 year olds, all in one room, evacuees as well. We had a basic education. Everybody learnt to knit, boys as well. Everybody learnt to sew, boys as well. We did a basic geography which I hated. I loved Religious Knowledge, I liked my English and I loved maths. Well, I say maths, but it was arithmetic, the tables, division. (Even at Faringdon, where I went to senior school we only did basic things in maths.) We did quite a lot of art: painting and drawing. Miss Beaumont made recorders out of bamboo (she burnt the holes in the top) and we used to paint our own. We used those to make our own music, and we put on plays.

The only thing I hated at that time was the gas masks. Every morning we set off for school, down the road, past the piles of ammunition and the soldiers. But as soon as we got to school we had to practice putting on our gas masks. That really frightened me: I couldn't breathe.

When you got to age 10 Miss Beaumont would assess you, and give you a mark out of ten, and this went with you to the senior school when you started there at age 11.

You stayed at the senior school to age 14 and then you left – they gave you a reference. I got a good one, but then I was a little creep at senior school – never got into trouble! I didn't go on to college, because of the war, but my sister did. She stayed in education until she was 17, but she was younger than me and the war was over by then.

As I say, we children had a good life. We could roam freely in the woods and fields, we were spoilt with our extra rations, and sweets “just for us”. We had new, lively friends in the evacuee children, and exotic soldiers to give us oranges and chewing gum and parties.

To a little child, “war” means an argument or standing up fighting in the street, which was something we never saw. Then gradually things started to happen which made me aware of “The War”.



## **BILL IS AN EVACUEE**

I was thirteen years and four months when the war started, and I lived in the East End of London. In fact our street was between the London docks and the River Thames. We had always been very poor, and had never had a nice house to live in. Dad didn't have steady work. He had had a job in Tate and Lyle's factory, but when the workers pressed for higher wages, he represented them, and although they got their rise, he lost his job. That was typical of my Dad – he only had to see someone in authority to want to fight him. Perhaps because his own childhood had been very rough.

Although we lived near the docks Dad couldn't get a job there, as jobs were only given to men whose fathers already worked there. He was one of the many men who stood in line every morning, hoping to be picked out for a day's work. At last, not long before the war, he got a job in a factory at Woolwich, and was able to rent a terraced house for his family.

Everyone round our way was poor, everyone had it hard (rather like the life of the people in Afghanistan today, I sometimes think). It was very much about survival from day to day. You took what life threw at you and tried to make the best of it. We lived with hardship and grief: three of my Gran's children died soon after they were born. No such luxury of having the National health Service in life and death situations. Still, everyone knew everyone else, and we lived in the same street as our relatives. Perhaps this was why a boy on his own had nothing to fear in the streets of London. I used to roam about the streets, and for 6d you could get an "all day" ticket which allowed you to travel anywhere on the buses north of the River Thames.

Dad and I were very close, and as I grew older I was able to do many of the "man's jobs" in the home. I looked forward to leaving school as early as possible, which in those days was at age 14. School wasn't much fun: every teacher had a cane and knew how to use it. But within a year, I thought, I would be free to start the next stage in my growing up. Then came the War.

One dark evening a few days before the war started we assembled outside the local school to be told we were to be evacuated to the country. The day before war was declared my Mum got a message to take me and my brother Edward, who was 7 years younger than me, to the school. It was dark when we set out. From the school we were taken to the station and sent out of London. I don't remember the journey, but we arrived eventually at Uffington, and from there we were taken to the Girls Grammar School in Gloucester Street, Faringdon.

All three of us were billeted with a family in Coxwell Road, but after a few months, once she had seen us settled, Mum went back to London to be with my Dad who worked in a factory.

After six months Eddie and I were moved, on the orders of the Billeting Officer, to a home in Park Street, near the station. (At the beginning of the war the government asked each town and village to appoint people to look after the various jobs that needed doing. One of the first jobs to be needed was for someone to decide where people who had been evacuated from the bombing were to live. This person was

called the Billeting Officer. He or she could tell people that they had to take in “evacuees” as they were called, whether they wanted to or not.)

Everyone we stayed with was very nice. School was much nicer – no cane. I soon made friends with other children, though the adults took longer to accept us. I felt like a stranger at first, because I could hardly understand the Berkshire accent (it was much stronger than it is now) and that seemed strange to me.

I did know about the countryside, though. Before the war, the people round our way used to go hop-picking in Kent. Whole families went to the hop fields, babies in prams included, and stayed in little huts on the farms while the grown-ups and older children picked the hops. It was there I discovered that potatoes grew under the ground, and not on trees!

In the years 1940 to 1941 the Germans bombed London heavily – it was called “the Blitz”. Night after night the bombers came over, and targeted the industrial areas of London and the other big cities. At last the factory where my Dad worked, and our home, were bombed out.

Mum and Dad came to Faringdon and after a little time of living apart, we were given a “flat” as it was called, on the top floor in the old workhouse. Not much of a flat! There was just a kitchen and a bedroom for us boys (we had mattresses stuffed with straw) with a six-foot partition between the two and no ceiling - when you looked up you could see the apex of the roof – and a nicer room beyond, (with a ceiling) where we ate and my parents slept. The walls were painted green, and in the winter, when it was cold, water ran down the walls. Still, it was a lot better than what we had had before the war.

It was home, and at last the whole family could be together. Dad got a job and we had some good times. In the summer everyone used to go down to Radcot bridge to picnic, swim, and lie in the sun - just like people go to the seaside today. I can see my Dad, floating on his back, hands behind his head, spouting river-water from his mouth like a whale. That’s one thing you couldn’t do in the docks – the water was far too filthy!

Although I still had to go to school, I couldn’t say I was really a boy. You had to grow up quick when there is no-one to take care of you. My little brothers, Eddie and John, had a happy time in Faringdon, free to play (there might have been no money for toys, but they could, and did, organise themselves and their friends) and go anywhere by themselves.

There was no traffic on the roads, either. No-one owned a car in those days, apart from perhaps the doctor and that kind of person. Even after the war no-one went by car: everyone took the bus to work.

When I left school, just before my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, I got a job as a messenger boy at Watchfield – this was a training airfield for “blind approach” flying. I didn’t have much choice about what job I went into. You were told what work to do, and if you didn’t fancy it you had to appeal. I was told to go and work in a coalyard in Wantage. I didn’t fancy that and I had to go to Oxford to appeal. (Not many people know now that

there was a German prisoner-of-war camp at Shrivenham: high fences, watch towers, the lot). Two years later my Dad and I joined the forces and went to be aircraft mechanics.

After the war, we came back to Faringdon and had to find peace-time work. Many of the jobs had to be kept for the servicemen to go back into as they were “demobbed”: that is, after they had left the forces. We got work on the buses and worked as bus conductors for 12 years and our whole family made Faringdon our home. In 1948 we were able to move out of the “flats” and into one of the council houses.

The family decided to stay in Faringdon because there was nothing to go back for. Dad and I had jobs, and Eddie and John were getting a better education than they would have got on London (they both went to Grammar School). Everything had been destroyed by the bombs. When I went back to where we used to live, a year after the bombing, there was nothing left of the house. In fact there was only one street left in an area the size of Faringdon: everything had been destroyed by the bombs. All our family who lived in our street had been evacuated to different parts of the country and we didn't know where they had gone. One cousin was not far away in Alvescot, but we never knew. But now my brothers and I are married and have our own children and grandchildren here in Faringdon it is as if the family has started again.

I'm not sure whether I think of myself as a countryman or as a Londoner. I go back to the East End from time to time for a look. The area has changed such a lot. Before the war it was streets and streets of terraced houses. Then – just a flat expanse of rubble. After the war there were high-rise blocks of flats, 23 storeys high. Then these were demolished and the place has gone back to little streets of houses.

I don't know ... . The war certainly changed the lives of our family in ways we could never have expected, and mainly for the better, probably.

## **KEN THE BEVIN BOY**

Stanford-in-the-Vale born and bred, I was. My Dad had a bicycle repair shop in the village, and when I left school at the age of fourteen I went to work alongside him. That's what it was like in the country: sons worked alongside their fathers, and everyone knew everyone else because most of our families had been in the village for generations. It was a gentle pace of life. I'd never been away from home except to visit my Aunt in London a couple of times.

Still, the war came along and I knew that once I had had my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday I would be called up to serve in the forces. I had my heart set on the RAF. Then this government minister called Ernest Bevin had the bright idea of sending some young men to do "essential work" instead of going to fight. You didn't have a choice: everyone had a number and if your number came out of the hat you had to go.

Well, my number came up and I was told I had to be a coal miner. I was sent to Askern, near Doncaster in Yorkshire for a month's training. That wasn't so bad: We had PT (Physical Training) every morning. When we were taken down the pit everything was clean and white-tiled. It didn't give you much idea of what the real thing was going to be like.

At the end of our training we were all sent to different collieries. I was sent with one other chap to Snead Colliery, near Burslem in Staffordshire. We were billeted with a very nice couple in a little cottage. Every morning at about 5 o'clock we would set out for work.

You'd walk down into the canteen for a quick cup of tea and then go into the clean lockers, take your clothes off, walk through into the dirty lockers, put your dirty clothes on, get your "snapping tin" with your sandwiches in and a round water-bottle and hang them round your belt. Pick up a little disc with a number on, go into the lamp room, hand your disc in and they'd give you a lamp which you hung on your belt so you could see where you were going down the mines. Walk to the pit top and have a cigarette while you waited for the cage to come up. The blokes would come up and sometimes you would see someone you knew. You probably had half your cigarette left and you would give it to them because they'd been down all night and not a cigarette. Get in the cage and go down from the pit top to the pit bottom and a long way down – it used start off slow and all of a sudden it used to go down and frighten the life out of you – your heart and soul used to come up into your mouth.

Get there, get out, and start walking to one of the lanes to the coal face, through air doors. There was a line of trolleys at the top of a little hill, with a cable which went back to the engine room, get on one of these trolleys and lay down and one of the chief firemen or supervisors used to press a little bell on the side of the tunnel walls which would ring in the engine room and you would be let down towards the coal face. You had to hold your light up and just watch yourself because the roadways had these iron half-arches and where the weight of the roof had been on them for years some of them were hanging right down. You had to bend right down so that you didn't cut your head on them as you went down.

Down and down and down, get off, walk again for about another 20 minutes, probably get on another lot of trolleys, get to the end of the coal face where the conveyor belt was. Crawl along the surface of the conveyor belt right to the coal face which was 3 foot 6 high. You had to dig the coal and load it onto the conveyor belt. Then the fireman who used to drill the holes in the coal and put the charges in used to say: "We're going to do some firing now" so you had to stand back while they exploded the charges to loosen the coal.

Then you'd hear a banging on the conveyor belt and you knew it was 10 o'clock and time for "snapping". You used to sit and eat your sandwiches for about ten minutes and then get on. At last somebody would knock on the conveyor belt and you'd think that's time to start walking again, jump on the trolleys and get pulled up, more walking – it took you about an hour to get from the coal face to the pit bottom where you caught the cage to go up into the daylight. If there was a mate up there that you knew he'd probably give you his cigarette, you'd have a couple of drags and think "That's nice," go to the lamp room, hand your lamp in and get your check. If you didn't hand your lamp in your check was still there and they knew you hadn't come up and something must have happened to you.

Then into the dirty lockers, put your dirty clothes in there, walk through into the showers, have a shower then walk through into your clean locker and put your clean clothes on, into the canteen for a cup of tea, then up to catch the bus back to my lodgings to be home by about 5 o'clock in the evening. Often I'd go straight to bed because I'd been up since 4.30 in the morning.

It was horrible. I hated it. Everything was filthy. You wore your oldest clothes as your working clothes and changed into the same dirty clothes each day until they rotted. You took your lunch with you down the pit, and ate it with hands filthy with coal dust. At the weekends I would go for long walks in the surrounding countryside – but even that was filthy with the coal dust from the mines. When I dug coal I might be lying in a narrow seam just 3 foot 6 inches high, hacking away at the coal with my pick. My back used to get cut about, and of course the coal got into the scratches – I have black lines on my back to this day.

There were days when I just couldn't face it at all, especially after the weekend. I rarely worked a full week. I don't know how many times I was called to a Tribunal to explain why I hadn't been to work, and was made to pay a fine. They kept giving me different jobs but each one they gave me seemed worse than the last.

The real miners used to say to me "Once a miner, always a miner. You'll be down this pit for the rest of your days, my boy." But I hated it.

At one time I was put at the bottom of the lift shaft. The cage wasn't just for taking the men up and down to the coalface. It also took the trucks of coal up to the surface. You might think being a lift attendant wasn't such a bad job, but often miners were hurt in accidents, and weren't a very pretty sight as they were carried back to the lift to be taken up top.

They had me putting in packing to hold up the roof of the coalface. Once the roof collapsed and fell in on a man. We dug like mad, but he was dead when we got to him. That was it. I didn't go back for two or three weeks.

I saved up until I had enough money to buy a train ticket to go home. I hadn't told my mother and father I was coming home but when I got to Didcot station late at night I rang my father to say "I'm at Didcot station; I'm on my way home" and then set off walking. My father came out and picked me up and took me home.

There was a man called Major King living in a big house in the village. Father had a word with him, and he had a word with Airey Neave, the MP for Abingdon and he did a lot for me. Usually you can't get out of "essential works", but I was sent to Swindon to have a medical examination and they graded me Grade Three (unfit for underground work and the forces). I had been graded A1 fit when I'd had my first examination when I was called up.

I was given a choice: either I could work in the telephone exchange in Gloucester, or I could work at Shellingford Airfield which was three quarters of a mile from where I lived. It was where they trained RAF pilots on Tiger Moths

You can guess which one I chose! Back home at last! So I took the job on. I went to No 1 hangar as a rigger, repairing the Tiger Moths and doing other jobs, but in the evenings and weekends I used to help my father with his cycle repairs and taxi work. When they finally took the Essential Works Order off I went back to work for my father and we called ourselves W. H. Day and Son.

Some quite famous people were Bevin Boys, and some might have enjoyed it, but it ruined my life. It broke my health, and I can't go in planes because I get the same fear I had in the mines – that you can't get out; I can't look over bridges, even in a car, or climb up high places and look down.

Do you know, the Bevin boys (which is what they called the young men who were sent to do "essential works") were never thanked or recognised after the war? Servicemen had their medals to show where they had been – even prisoners of war had medals. King George VI (the present Queen's father) sent letters to all the children but we got nothing. But if it hadn't been for us, helping to bring up the coal to run the factories, they wouldn't have been able to make the weapons needed to win the war.

On November 11<sup>th</sup> there are special services and parades for Remembrance Day, and there is a really big parade in London, ending up at the Cenotaph. It's only in the last couple of years that former Bevin Boys have been asked to march alongside the old servicemen and women, the nurses and ambulance drivers.

## **BARBARA SEES LIFE CHANGE FOR THE “LORD OF THE MANOR”**

I didn't actually live in Faringdon, but at Littleworth. You can see where I lived today. As you go along the A420 towards Oxford, you pass the turning to Littleworth on your left, and then the pub called *The Snooty Fox* (it used to be called the *Fox and Hounds*). Then you see on your left a row of semi-detached houses. These were "estate cottages" the landowner had built them for the people who worked for him. Ours was the only cottage that paid him in rent instead of in work. My Dad was the local blacksmith.

The estate was called Barcote manor and it was owned by a Major West. There was a manor house, gardens, farm, lodge and eleven cottages. Eight were on the main road, one down the drive and two down Sandy Lane.

In those days we were brought up to look upon the landowner as almost a god. If he went by, we had to stand still and behave respectfully until he had passed by. ". He had two chauffeurs and he used to go out and put his finger round the cars and if there was a dirty mark he would go out in the other one His wife liked to be called "Madame". One day I was sitting on a wall with my little brother. He was only five years old and didn't know any better, so he called out "Hello, Mrs. West." She turned and said, with great dignity, "You call me Madame."

During the war Major West changed so much we couldn't believe it was the same man. His wife didn't. When we used to go out to catch the bus he would actually stop, touch his hat, and - "Would you like a lift" - he would take us into Faringdon. If he saw us in Faringdon he would say "Would you like a lift back home?".. Amazing.

I realised that the war had changed his life in a lot of ways – I wonder which he preferred, to be a king of his own little kingdom, or an ordinary person living in a community which had learnt to give and receive help regardless of who you were.

Of course his chauffeurs may have been called up – either to join the forces or to do war work. .The house servants went, as well. And later on he had to have outside help with the farm work (But that's another story!).

As the number of servants got less and less my mum was asked to go down and help sort out the linen and do any sewing. Ours was the only cottage that was rented so she should not have felt obliged to do anything the manor asked her to do - she could have refused, but it put us in an awkward position and she did make a bit of pocket money.