

# Growing, Up in Wartime Kemnay,

(Aberdeenshire, Scotland.)

To the post war generation the last war will appear as distant as the 1st World War does to those of my generation. To those of us who were around at that time however it appears very close and as the war years coincided with my teenage years in Kemnay, growing up in Kemnay and the war are closely linked. In retrospect I find it surprising how I accepted the war and the changes it entailed in everyday life. To a schoolboy this was something new and I suppose I regarded it as something of an adventure, not being aware of the full implications at that age.

Certainly being in the country we were shielded from many of the unpleasant aspects of the conflict and there were many advantages to living in a country village. Food rationing for example was never felt by country dwellers to the extent it was by those in the city. I can't honestly remember being adversely affected by rationing and if one was on good terms with the local grocer, as mother appeared to be, additional items could always be obtained "under the counter" as the saying went.

In addition my father's work which was connected with milk production took him around the farms in the North East and farmers were always generous with eggs and other items. We were in the happy position that we could send items of food to less fortunate relations and I can remember parceling up portions of

cheese to send to my grandparents in Glasgow.

I suspect many city friends and relatives took advantage of the generosity of their better off country cousins in this respect when they came to visit them. In those days travel was mainly by bus and the main event of the week in the village was the departure of the 9pm bus on Sunday evening to Aberdeen. There was quite a fleet of buses required for the numbers involved and in the summer months the village would turn out in force for this event, when city friends and relations would return home with in many cases a few extra tit bits of food which they had obtained from their better off country cousins.

Looking back it was surprising the amount of military activity there was in a country village. Army transport appeared to be constantly rumbling through the village and one of the local garages was taken over for a spell by the Army to service their vehicles. The RAF also took over the village hall for a time for some of their administrative staff, the airmen were billeted in the village resulting in a few marriages to local girls. One of the Church halls was also used for food storage for most of the war years.

Following the evacuation from Dunkirk, I recall a number of troops being stationed nearby and my parents inviting some of them home for a meal. There

was also a contingent stationed in nearby Castle Fraser where on one occasion and feeling unduly important I had to deliver an official telegram by bicycle to the Brigadier in charge, I'm not sure what that says about the state of Army communications in those days!

I'm sure there were many incidents relating to the local Home Guard but one event stands out in my mind. During the war large quantities of oil drums had been buried throughout the country to be set off in the event of invasion; the event in question was to be a demonstration of the effect of such an explosion. For this demonstration a large number of the Home Guard from area had assembled near the Kemnay Quarries where the demonstration was to take place. Need less to say, we the local kids had turned up to see the fun. We were ordered back to the rear and the bold warriors assembled well ahead of us in front of a stone dyke. The explosion duly took place and it was certainly a spectacular affair with flames and smoke shooting high up in the air. Although we could feel the heat from our rear position it quickly became apparent that the assembled warriors were much too close to the explosion for comfort. There then followed a most undignified rush to our position in the rear with Boer War and 1st World War veterans clambering over the dyke with an agility that belied their years!

Italian POW's from the nearby camp at Monymusk were also to be seen in the village in the latter war years. These gentlemen provided labour for the local farms and were often transported

through the village on lorries to the various farms. They were generally a friendly and amiable lot with little interest in the war, they seemed to have more interest in ogling the local girls. I remember that that one of my friends had told me a rather rude and offensive Italian phrase and on the next occasion when the POW's were being transported through the village I shouted this phrase at them. My Italian was obviously understood for an enraged Italian jumped from the lorry and rushed towards me, I took off up the main street pursued by the Italian followed in turn by a rather bemused guard. I decided there and then to avoid any further experiments with the Italian language.

At that time Kemnay had connections with two Naval Admirals. Admiral Sir Robert Burnett was the brother of the local Laird, Arthur Bennet of Kemnay House, and I recall him coming to school to recount his part in a previous naval engagement when the German Battleship "Scharnhorst" had been sunk. When he entered the school hall to deliver his lecture we greeted him with "Rule Britannia" much to his embarrassment I suspect. Admiral Sir Rhoderick McGrigor who later became 1st Sea Lord had also local connections and could occasionally be seen in the village hall on leave. The story went that on one occasion the two Admirals had met in the local Post Office when both on leave and exchanged greetings; surely a unique event for a small Aberdeenshire village.

In common with many schoolboys, one of my main interests in the war years

was being able to identify aircraft or aircraft recognition and I had plenty of opportunities in this respect. In those years the sky was full of aircraft, mostly on training flights. I can honestly say that I knew all of them, most of them by the sound of their engines and I could therefore never understand why so many of our own aircraft were incorrectly identified and shot down by our own side. Occasionally there was the added excitement of being able to identify a high flying Heinkel, and on one dull day I could clearly see the crosses on a low flying Heinkel as it flew over the village. The engines of the German aircraft could be recognised by the distinctive sound of their engines and I remember the activity in the night sky prior to the bombing of Clydebank when it was obvious that a big raid was in the offing. The rattle of machine gun fire above the clouds when a fighter engaged an enemy aircraft on one occasion and the occasional distant rumble of German bombs, usually unloaded by single aircraft, all added to the excitement.

I was also a cadet in the ATC (Air Training Corps) and a Civil Defence Messenger although the latter was hardly an arduous assignment. I think I attended one lecture and my main occupation was collecting 7s 6d (about £0.40) for the upkeep of my bicycle which I never had to use, at least for Civil Defence purposes.

Air raid warnings were sounded in the village by the local Police Constable cycling round the village blowing his whistle (long blasts) although on occasions if the wind was in the right direc-

tion we would get advance warning from the siren in Inverurie. The all clear was 2 short blasts on the whistle and armed with a whistle from the constable I would occasionally help in this respect.

I was also organ blower in the local Church when on Sunday services I would climb up to an attic room adjoining the organ and by means of a hand operated bellows pump would provide the necessary power for the organ when required.

Another of my occupations at that time was the delivery of telegrams in the area and assisting with the local mail delivery when required. I should perhaps add that few people had telephones then and telegrams were used frequently. Payment for telegrams depended on the distance involved, around 2p was the minimum and around 7p was the maximum, useful pocket money then. This was an agreeable occupation in the fine summer months but less agreeable on a cold winter evening if I had to cycle to a remote farm in the pitch black with only a minimum of light on my bicycle, luckily I knew the roads well and there was little traffic on them.

Taking over as relief postman in the summer months when the regulars were on holiday was much more agreeable however, especially during a fine spell of weather. I realised that in many cases I provided the only daily contact with the outside world and had to be prepared to spend a few minutes passing the time of day. I'm sure I was always a welcome visitor although on one hot Summer day I was surprised when I was accused of

being “half naked” a somewhat extreme remark as I only had my shirt sleeves rolled up at the time.

There was a more serious side however as occasionally I had to deliver an official War Office telegram containing news of casualties. On these occasions Alex Smith, the postmaster, who was himself a 1st World War veteran would always warn me beforehand that the telegram contained bad news and that I should not wait for a reply as I normally did. I still remember how I felt having to deliver these telegrams and then beating a hasty retreat.

In the evenings during the black out a hand torch or flash lamp was necessary, making sure it was directed downwards. I also wore a circular lapel fluorescent badge to assist being seen in the dark and carried an identity tag around my wrist for identification purposes in case one became a casualty.

Getting around at night was made easier as street corners, pavements etc., were painted in black and white stripes, no doubt particularly appreciated by late night revelers making their way home from the local hostelry! Of course there was no TV in those days, entertainment and news was obtained from the radio or Wireless with frequent visits to the local Garage to have the batteries recharged. There were also occasional visits from mobile cinemas showing Ministry of Information films on various aspects of the war. For entertainment films however we cycled to the Victoria Cinema in Inverurie, happily still

flourishing today.

Schooling at the local secondary school had its share of war time difficulties and restrictions; male teachers were called up for military service and we had a succession of temporary teachers, some more competent than others. Windows were covered with tape in case they were blown out by bomb explosions and gas masks had to be carried in the earlier part of the war. The numbers in the school also increased as a number of families had moved to the district from various areas in England which were more liable to be bombed.

The Headmaster at that time was Mr. J. Minto Robertson, a scholar with a particular interest in Shakespeare and the school became well known for the annual open air Shakespeare play it produced in the grounds of Kemnay House. Despite many difficulties these plays continued throughout the war, I particularly remember *Midsummer Nights Dream* being produced at the height of the Battle of Britain in 1940; a welcome and pleasant interlude during those momentous days.

As can be seen I had plenty to occupy me at that period with little time to get into mischief. I started playing golf and tennis but following the closure of both the golf course and the tennis courts for the duration of the war I with other local youths took up bowls, one of the few activities that continued during the war.

Shortly after the war I was called up for National Service in the RAF and while I was away the family moved to Aberdeen

so I did not return to live in Kemnay. Although it is over 50 years since I left the village I remember the many characters who were around then and also the friendly and strong community spirit that existed during those years and no doubt still does. On a recent visit to the village I noticed many changes that inevitably occur over the years, numerous new houses, many more under construction, a new school and even a one way street. I imagine it is still a pleasant place to live in however. What else can I say of a village that has a Paradise Road and a Paradise Lane.