

Early days in Bircotes

Norman Jessop

Chapter 1

Mam was one of only three girls in a family of fifteen. She was born in 1910 at Scaftworth in North Nottinghamshire where Grandad George Tissington worked at the Hall as a chauffeur. I have seen photographs of him dressed in a long white coat, with cap and goggles, sitting proudly in the kind of car that you only see today in motor museums or on the London to Brighton rally.

Things must have been pretty crowded in the Tissington household in those days. Seventeen people living in one house seems to be a little bit of a crush, but although it was a large family, by the standards of those days it wasn't so unusual. Crowded or not, all the children survived to adulthood and that was fairly unusual in the days when infant mortality was high.

Money must have been very tight, but none of the fifteen children was ever in trouble with the law. An excuse often given for criminal activities is a deprived childhood. George Tissington was paid with one gold sovereign each week and I would imagine that must have caused the family to be deprived in some way or other on more than one occasion. In those days doors were never locked, so honesty in any family wasn't a remarkable thing. It wasn't any use trying to keep up with the Joneses; none of the Joneses had anything, either.

In the mid 1920s, Harworth Colliery was recruiting labour. The sinking of the mineshaft had been started before the war by a German company; the work taken up again in the early 1920s by the British. George and Eliza, my grandmother, took the huge step of leaving the rural way of life they had always known and had moved to the still developing colliery village of Bircotes, where George, probably for the sake of his sons, took a job as a painter on the surface of the colliery.

I often heard laughter when one or the other of my uncles recalled moving to their new home. The furniture and all the younger children were loaded onto a horse drawn cart. When the horse 'stalled' while trying to pull the heavy load up the long hill leading to Bircotes, all the children had to climb down and help to push their worldly goods to the top.

The village was still in the process of being built when the family moved in. There was a railway line running from the pit yard, across Scrooby Road and right up the middle of Shrewsbury Road as far as the place where the Miners Institute, the 'Stute', was later built. This was to carry building material from where it was unloaded to points where the houses were being built.

The eldest son of the family, Willie had been killed in the trenches during the Great War while serving with two other brothers in the Sherwood Foresters. This still left eleven sons looking for employment, so the sinking of a coal mine a few miles away must have seemed too good an opportunity to miss. The girls weren't a problem. Working 'in service' was an option that was always open, and no doubt extra hands were always needed around the house. In any event, all the boys started work at the mine when they moved into Bircotes, or as soon as they left school.

Mam started work at Tickhill Castle as a housemaid and from what I can gather, really enjoyed her job. Despite working in what was quite a large household, she must have enjoyed a much greater living space than she had been used to at home, even though by then, the older brothers and Annie, the elder of the three girls had married and had flown the nest. Annie, along with older brother Harold, were the only members of the family to leave the village for many years.

One thing that Mam always enjoyed looking back on in her old age was moving with rest of the servants each summer for the 'season' at the London house.

They all used to go, lock, stock and barrel, leaving just a skeleton staff to look after the castle until autumn. Of course, living in London made Mam feel very sophisticated when she was back among her family at the end of the year. She never tired of telling me when I was a small child, of queuing around the block in Leicester Square on an evening off to see Al Jolson in the first ever talking film 'The Jazz Singer.' It seems such a small thing to us now, but it must have been a momentous occasion for a young country girl all those years ago.

Around 1930, Mam started seeing a young miner from Bircotes. He was Norman Jessop, and had moved, along with his parents, elder brother and three sisters to the village just after the mine went into production. Tom Jessop, his father had been offered employment before full production. As a skilled 'road layer' he was already an experienced miner working at South Kirkby near Pontefract in the old West Riding of Yorkshire. When Tom saw the accommodation on offer, a primitive sinkers cottage situated almost in the colliery yard, he turned it down, saying; 'If I brought our lass here, she'd kill me!' He did, however bring 'our lass' and the rest of his family to Bircotes a few years later, but to a new house in the new village.

The influx of families from all over the mining areas of Britain was growing in pace during the middle years of the 1920s, and the Jessops were thrown into the melting pot which was to become the distinctive community which I grew up in a few years later.

Mam's family, the Tissingtons, had always been agricultural workers living in a ten-mile area within North Nottinghamshire at least as far back as the mid 1700s. The Jessops were from an industrial stock, mining in the Pontefract area from fairly early in the 1800s, and spinning and weaving in the woollen industry for at least a century before that. It was typical of the mix forming the population of Bircotes. The accents told the story. Yorkshire, Lancashire, Staffordshire, Geordie, Scots and Welsh; they were all there. Go to Bircotes now, and the predominant accent is South Yorkshire, with just an occasional trace of a regional voice emerging from one of the very senior citizens.

Late in 1932, Mam, twenty-two years of age and Dad, twenty-six were married and set up their home in Talbot Road in Bircotes. Home was a mixture of new and second-hand furniture; both families contributing what they could afford, the custom at that time. There was never any thought of buying a house. Indeed it was virtually unheard of for a working class family to live in anything other than a rented home. In a mining community as in farming or estate work, the rented accommodation was normally tied to the job. If you lost your work you also lost your home. It was a double edged sword, but one that was accepted as normal up to recent times.

Mam and Dad rapidly settled into the routine of married life. Dad was never much of a drinking man. Indeed by the standards of the time and place in which both of the families lived, they were remarkably staid and sober folk. Probably judged to be dull by many of their contemporaries. Miners were renowned for working hard and playing hard; enjoyed a few, or in some cases, lots of pints at the weekend. There were other ways of relaxing; going to the cinema was one and the dances in the 'Stute', the miners institute, or occasionally in the proudly named 'Comrades of the Great War' club were the most popular forms of entertainment amongst the young of the village. Almost all recreation took place within the village itself and the community spirit was unbelievably strong.

Christmas came and went; and as almost all both sets of relatives lived in the village, visiting around was easy. Mam's parents and unmarried siblings were just around the corner in Gilbert Road, while my Grandad Jessop lived in Norfolk Road with Dad's youngest sister Dot; Dads mother having died shortly after moving to Bircotes. Things seemed to be going well. Dad worked underground at the pit, while Mam, as was common with most married women of the day had settled down as a housewife.

Two things happened early in 1933 that changed their lives as if a bomb had been exploded in the home. Dad wanted a wireless set. It was a luxury that people had just started to enjoy, public broadcasting having been around for about ten years. While most men could knock up a crystal set, wearing a pair of headphones was becoming old fashioned. Sitting and listening to the radio was a sociable thing to do. It was rare to have the set turned on just to provide background entertainment; the wireless was there to sit around and be listened to, even if visitors came. It had taken the place of a 'sing along' around the piano; so as far as Dad was concerned, to provide the finishing touch to the new home a wireless had to be bought.

The trouble was that Dad didn't have the spare cash to allow him to buy one outright, so he, for the first and only time in his life, bought something on hire purchase. That was fine; he could manage the repayments and still have enough money left over to go to the pictures and the occasional dance. Life was good.

The first hiccup occurred when Mam announced that she thought that she was pregnant. It wasn't a financial disaster; in fact they were both delighted, but it did mean that from now on, every penny had to be counted. Then came a real blow. Dad caught a dose of 'flue, but staying off work with a baby due, rent to pay and a hire purchase debt around his neck just wasn't on. He decided to carry on working. Two days later and he was too ill to get out of bed. The doctor, Dr Ward, was called, and Dad was diagnosed as suffering from double pneumonia and pleurisy. Mam nursed him at home for just two more days, there being no money available to send him to hospital. There Dad died, just before his twenty seventh birthday.

There was no question of Mam staying on alone in her new home. It was a 'tied' property it and was a case of 'no worker, no house.' In any event, Mam was in no financial position to live alone. The widow's pension then was 10/- per week and indeed it remained at that figure until at least the late 1940s when I left school. There was at that time no social security and being pregnant meant work was out of the question. The only thing to do was to go back to the family home with my grandparents, George and Eliza Tissington. By that time, most of the family had married and set up their homes in the village. There were four of the boys' left, and one girl, Mam's older sister Florence, always known as 'Floss'. It was Floss who played a major part in my later life and upbringing.

Granny Tissington, by this time wasn't in the best of health. Although the family was greatly reduced in size, there was still an enormous amount of work to be done within the house, cleaning and cooking and looking after the remaining brothers. Floss worked as a conductress on the Underwood Bus Company's coaches that covered the local area. It was around this time that they were bought out and became 'East Midland.' With Granny's health failing and workmen not expected to help around the home, Mam's hands were more than welcome. Expecting a child was in no way considered an excuse to take things easy, especially in a family that had seen as many births as the Tissingtons.

Granddad Tissington was still working as a painter on the pit top even though by now he was approaching seventy years of age. The four unmarried boys also worked there; Ernest, the elder of the four worked as an electrician, Fred and Jim worked on the coal screening plant, while Sid was at the coking plant, usually known as the 'coke ovens.'

Jim was the youngest member of the family, being only sixteen years of age. He and Sid were both very good footballers, playing for the colliery team. Sid was also a very fine tennis player. Unusually, he was ambidextrous, rarely using backhand strokes, but simply changing his racket hand to suit the shot.

Mam soon settled back into the new way of life. It wasn't easy. Although the family was very supportive, the grieving process was slow and painful, and even crying herself to sleep wasn't easy to do, sharing a bed again with sister Floss. To be truthful, there wasn't a lot of free time to spend in feeling sorry for herself. Her mother was sixty years old. Not old by today's standards, but bearing fifteen children, had taken its toll, and without the household gadgets which makes today's housework so easy and quick, the days were filled with sheer drudgery.

I have only seen a couple of photographs of Granny Tissington and she really did look older than the late fifties, which is how old she was when the photos were taken. Mam wasn't at her best; pregnant and in mourning, but doing her best to help keep the household running. If Dad hadn't died, and Mam had not re-appeared on the scene at that time, Floss would have had to give up work and in those hard times, a job was something that had to be held on to wherever possible.

The months passed by, and October came along. On a rainy Monday evening, after helping to do the family wash, Mam suddenly went into labour, and just in time to save Mam from having to do the ironing, I made my entrance onto the Bircotes stage.

Chapter 2

There was never any argument over what I should be named. Granny insisted on William, after my Uncle Will who had lost his life in the trenches during the Great War and Mam wanted me to be named after my father, dead for only a few months. So William Norman Jessop I became; always Norman as far as Mam was concerned.

I must have been spoiled rotten during my first few months. Granny Tissington took over as her natural right. The only children ever to live in Grannies household had been her own and there had been a lot of those. Only Jim, the baby of the family, had never had the experience of living with a baby in the home, although he had about a dozen nieces and nephews scattered around Bircotes by this time and so was quite comfortable with them. Even Floss, as yet unmarried and still working, took the situation in her stride and now shared her bedroom with two other people.

It was a very short stage of my life. In January 1934, just three months after I was born, Granny walked to the single long row of shops on Scrooby road. She was intending to do a little shopping and then pay a visit to her son Walter's home in Colliery Road adjacent to the pit yard and on the opposite side to the shops on Scrooby Road. No one ever knew what exactly happened but Granny was discovered about an hour later. She had died in the back porch of her son's house. The whole family was in a state of shock, but for Mam, it seemed like the end of the world. In little over a year she had been married, widowed, given birth and now had lost her mother.

Floss gave up her job after the funeral. There was no other option available to her. Before Mam moved back in, Floss had worked full time and had devoted much of her free time to helping with the heavy housework. In those days, everything had to be done by hand and in the average working class household there was a complete absence of any of the appliances that we take for granted today. No washing machines, electric kettles, electric irons, vacuum cleaners, electric cookers, telephones, televisions and computers.

There were not even electric power points installed in most houses, certainly not in the colliery village houses. The 'pit' houses however were considered very modern at the time. All had flushing toilets, albeit they were all outside. Some, but not all, had hot water systems; a great luxury for most of the residents of the day and all had electric lighting. The electricity itself was generated at the colliery's own power plant.

My memory kicks in to when I was still in my pram. I can distinctly remember looking at the Greek Key pattern on the braiding around the edge of my pram hood. I can also remember being stuck on my Uncle George's toilet and howling to be rescued. It was, as all the toilets were, an outside loo and I had to howl a long time to be heard. I can't have been any more than two years old then.

Uncle George, dad's brother and his wife Aunt Ann lived in Droversdale Road, possibly about a quarter of a mile from home in Gilbert Road. Mam and I had a standing invitation for Sunday tea there, or maybe we just turned up. All I know is that every Sunday right up to my teens, we went to 48, Droversdale Road and I enjoyed being spoiled by my two cousins, both older than I, Lorna and Doreen. They were as close to me as sisters could have been and I have great memories of my visits there.

Up to the late 1940s, Bircotes seemed to be a village of two parts, divided by the wide tree lined Waterslack Road. To the east of Waterslack, all the gardens abutting the village roads were enclosed with very neat brick walls. Every house had a wooden front gate with large square brick gateposts topped with a shallow pyramid shaped copingstone.

The mine owners hadn't scrimped when designing the place. To the west of Waterslack every road was bordered with privet hedges with sycamore trees planted in every couple of gardens. It really was a pleasant place to live.

Those early years were very happy. I never felt the lack of a father in any way; indeed, I felt as if I was very special; I had Mam, 'Our Floss'-----never Auntie Floss, Grandad Tissington, and 'our lads' to fuss over me. I was probably spoiled to death. I had many cousins scattered around the village, and as Mam used to visit all her brothers frequently, I saw them all on a regular basis. Of course, they all visited Grandad at home as well, so life was never boring; the house and the days were full and eventful.

My special cousins were Uncle Wilf and Aunt Ida's boys, Roy and Sid who lived just down the road from us. I spent almost as much time in No.15 Gilbert road as I did at home. Sid was just a couple of months younger than I, and we were almost inseparable when we were young. Roy was a couple of years older and was always a steadying influence on us. While we were a bit 'giddy,' Roy tended to be more thoughtful although we often dragged him into scrapes with us.

In 1936, while the nation mourned the loss of a king, whispered the latest gossip about the new one and his beloved Mrs Simpson, then welcomed a third king, Bircotes had its own problems. The NMIU union, usually known as the 'Spencer Union,' was the recognised negotiating body at Harworth. Barber Walker, the mine owners were adamant that they would have nothing to do with the Notts Miners Association that most of the mines workforce belonged to and this led to a bitter yearlong strike, splitting the community and even families. Violence was rife, with hundreds of police being drafted in from all over the county and even from neighbouring county forces.

One of the more unpleasant features of the time was the 'chain gang' which had men who wanted to work or could not afford not to, being collected from their homes by heavy escorts of policemen and taken to a gathering point at the end of Droversdale Road where they were marched the quarter of a mile or so to the pit yard. All this with hundreds of both police and strikers skirmishing the whole length of the route.

Violence also spread to the homes, as gatepost copingstones were ripped off and thrown through house windows. The Miners Institute, out of bounds to the strikers also suffered this way. Police roamed the streets at nights and curfews were imposed. The village was a ghost town after dark, with gangs of striking miners and police playing deadly games of hide and seek amongst the streets.

The strike finally ended in 1937. King George V was on the throne, the Spanish Civil War was giving the German Luftwaffe a little practice in its bombing and strafing tactics, and Grandad Tissington was telling me my once a week serial story about bigger, and more important wars against the Zulus and then the 'Boors' in far off Africa which even then was much of a dark continent.

By 1937, Grandad was coming to the end of his working career. He was over seventy years of age, and had worked continuously since leaving school at Carlton in Lindrick, about 6 or 7 miles away when he was thirteen years old. He still had his own hair, and most of his teeth left, and was remarkably fit for his age. I regarded him as my best friend and I suppose that all his many grandchildren saw him in that light, but I was lucky in so much as I lived in the same house. To me, the end of the strike, and Granddad soon to be at home all day long put life close to perfection.

The village had changed physically as a result of the strike. Apart from the damage to many walls and gateposts, quite a lot of the houses were now empty, with broken windows and 'scab' daubed walls. Shrewsbury Road, along which all the village children had to pass on their way to school, now boasted a newly built police station and the shrub and tree filled 'plantations', installed after the railway had been removed and which ran down the centre of the road, had large gaps in the rows of long spiked railings which surrounded and protected them from the ravages of the playing children. Presumably they had been taken as weapons in the year of conflict.

Life at home had returned to normality, but with just three of 'our lads' now going out to work; Ernest having been married just before the strike and was now was doing the unthinkable and buying his own house in quite a 'posh' area, Styrup Road in the old village of Harworth. Both Sid and Fred were also 'courting,' so life for me was undergoing another gradual change. But if anything, as 1937 came towards its close, things couldn't have seemed much better. Cousin's Roy, Sid and myself, along with another cousin, Bill, who had moved, along with Uncle Perce to next door, were having a great time.

Granddad had an allotment at the back of the house in a small field, which had been left open for mineworkers to grow their own vegetables. In actual fact Granddad was the only person to take advantage of the privilege, so we happy band of boys regarded the place as our own property and spent many hours making 'dens' and nuisances of ourselves in general. We knew that if we went too far we would, even at our early age, get our backsides tanned. None of us as far as I know has suffered any long lasting psychological damage as a result and we never thought any less of our elders. But then, that was the way of things in those bad old days.

I can still hear, in my memory, Granddad saying to me 'Watch it Boyk, your Mam will 'scutch' your bum!' I always thought that 'scutch,' like 'Boyk,' was just one of Granddad's own words, but have recently looked it up, and found it to be a word used to mean beating flax to produce the fibre for linen. My bum must have been worth yards of linen when I was little. Happy days!

Most miners took their own food to work in those days before the Second World War. Water was usually carried in round metal containers called 'Dudleys' which was slung over one shoulder and hung down the side, while sandwiches went in the 'snap' tins; deep metal containers, the lids fitting snugly over the top and around the sides of the main body, the whole thing being held together by a spring wire 'snap' clip. Food, even today, is known as 'snap' in mining areas, even though the origin of the word is largely forgotten. The last of the home based Tissington boys were always 'packed up' by Floss. Although the sandwiches went into a tin, they always took a glass bottle full of cold tea to drink during their break.

I sometimes woke early and looked through a front bedroom window when I heard the sound of clogs clip clopping along the pavement outside the house. Miners who were going to work had clean faces and if it was the night shift coming home, they had black faces. There was no other visible difference to my young eyes. They were still dressed in the same dirty clothes either way, and most wore the flimsy looking black safety helmets which I believe were introduced at the beginning of the nineteen thirties. The first pithead baths were opened at Harworth about the middle to late years of the decade, but many of the older men still preferred to clean up at home.

Washing dirty clothes, let alone pit work clothes that were full of coal dust, was a daylong job in the days before washing machines were readily available. An early start was essential because the normal day's start still had to be adhered to. Women had to be up before men in order to clean the fire grate of yesterdays old ashes, light the fire and get the kettle on for breakfast, then prepare breakfast; everything having to be boiled or fried on the open fire. While working men were eating breakfast, the women were packing the 'snap,' then lighting the 'copper' boiler fire in the kitchen, having first filled it with cold water with a bucket from the sink tap.

The men having left for work, 'dolly' tubs; galvanized metal washtubs, about three feet tall, were dragged into the kitchen ready to be filled with hot water. This was bucketed from the sink if the house had a hot water supply, or from the copper boiler if only cold was available. In our house 3 dolly tubs were used, so a lot of water had to be moved around manually. White clothes and bedding was always boiled in the copper, and coloured clothes were juggled around in the dolly tubs in ways that were always a mystery to me. The clothes were pounded around in the tubs by 'dolly legs', something that looked a bit like a three legged stool on a wooden shaft and had a cross piece on the top for hands to grip.

Collars of shirts and other extra soiled garments were rubbed on an appropriately named piece of equipment called a rubbing board. Finally, everything had to be 'mangled' to squeeze the water out between a pair of large wooden rollers operated by turning a large hand wheel on the big cast iron wringer.

By this time the kitchen floor was deep in water and the atmosphere resembled a very active Turkish bath. Usually the first clothes could be hung out onto the clothesline in the garden by about mid morning and the last lot around noon. Women's work truly seemed never to be done.

In the days before the war, an aeroplane overhead in Bircotes was a rare enough event to cause people to run outdoors. The one aircraft which did make fairly regular appearances, was the biplane we all called 'Golden Eagle' and belonged to Major Peake of Bawtry Hall. Whether or not that was what the Major actually called the plane, I never found out, but we all knew it as that. He used to fly it from a field on the Blyth-Bawtry road, opposite the end of Gibbet Lane, and I can actually remember jumping with excitement one day when I was walking to Bawtry and saw it take off.

Doncaster had an RAF station with plenty of aircraft that could be seen from the bus when travelling into the town. It was where the Dome leisure centre and the retail park now stands, but the planes there must have had instructions that they must never entertain the residents of Bircotes because we seldom had the opportunity to rush out of doors and enjoy a cheap thrill at the sight of them. All changed a few years later when Lancaster and Halifax bombers blackened the skies while they were assembling before their bombing missions over Germany. We had our own RAF station then, just down the road where the bluebells of Swinnow Wood once grew in such profusion.

As the 1930s moved towards its end, much of the grown up talk seemed to be about having to fight the Germans again. Mr. Chamberlain had waved his piece of paper and promised the nation 'peace in our time' but the general feeling was that sooner or later the trenches would have to be dug again. Uncle Perce next door had joined the Territorials, and impressed us all with his uniform, and Fred and Jim were keen for the talking to stop and the fighting to begin so that they could have a go at Jerry.

Grandad never seemed to say much about it. He had got himself a few chickens in a run on his allotment at the bottom of our garden and was enjoying his retirement.

It was about this time that Sid...Uncle Sid...got married. His bride was Sarah Vardy, always known as Sally and she, like Sid, was a keen tennis player. Her brothers, John and Ambrose were also, like Sid and Jim, good footballers who also eventually played in a very good Colliery team. Sally was a student teacher at the village senior school. At that time it was a common practice for schools to engage talented pupils as student teachers and if at a later stage they showed aptitude for the job, they were then allowed to take formal training and become fully qualified teachers. The village was being extended; East and West Streets being built and Sid and Sally moved into No. 1 West Street. The family home in Gilbert Road was slowly emptying.

That summer was memorable for me in that I enjoyed my first ever holiday by the sea. Grandad Tissington, Mam, and Uncle George Jessop and his family spent a week away in Skegness. I can still remember going every day onto the beach and catching shrimps in a fishing net under the watchful eyes of cousins Lorna and Doreen. I also remember hearing groups of people shouting 'Hi- de- Hi!' and replying 'Ho- de- Ho' to one another. Billy Butlin had recently opened his first holiday camp in 'Skeggy' and that really was the shouted greeting. It gave the name to a popular T.V. show many years later.

Later in 1938, Grandad was given a body blow that really affected him and seemed to finally take away his will to live. The colliery management decided to build garages on the field where he kept his chickens and tended his allotment. He was given notice to quit and within a few weeks of the decision, work started on the building of a terrace of garages for the use of colliery officials who were able to afford to buy motorcars. It was a sign of the more affluent times that had begun to affect the average working man in the country.

Britain had started to rearm itself in response to the threat that Germany was posing in Europe and with the gearing up of the armament industry came the knock on effect throughout industry in general. What was good for some was certainly bad for Granddad. With his hobbies taken away from him, he went into a gradual decline in health, and seemed to spend a lot of time ill in bed. At least that is how I remember it.

September of that year brought another milestone in my life. I ceased to be a homebound toddler, and started school.

Chapter 3

The first school in Bircotes was a large two-roomed wooden structure, forever known in the village simply as 'the wooden hut.' It was still standing when I finally left Bircotes in the early 1960s and had seen countless infants starting their schooldays during the previous forty years. My first teacher was a slightly built lady called Miss Swindon. I have no idea how old she was, but as all grown up people over school age looked old to me then, she could have been quite young. I can recall however that she was very kind, and must have had infinite patience to put up with all the new starters at the same time.

Getting to know my fellow classmates during the first few weeks at school was the first stage of creating friendships that would endure for the remainder of my schooldays, and in some cases until adulthood lead us onto our diverging paths. We all had friends among our immediate neighbours and relatives, but it was the first time that we had come into contact with children from what was to us then, the alien world of a few streets away.

Mam, with the help of Grandad and her sister, our Floss, had always kept me clean and respectably dressed. Some of my new friends were not so lucky. Some of the men in the community were averse to spending good beer money on their families and so a few of the children that I now came into contact with were, to say the least, pretty deprived.

One consequence of the lack of personal hygiene among the few was the regular inspection of the hair of the many by the 'nit' nurse; but being children, we took it in our stride and never felt any unease about playing with friends who were discovered to have little lodgers in their hair. A lot of the boys at that time had a haircut that made a comeback in later years; a skinhead crop, with just a small tuft of hair left at the front. I saw teenagers with a very similar cut and the thought crossed my mind that maybe a 'nit' nurse had recommended it.

As usual, a lot of our early school time was spent at play, but discipline was slowly introduced, and our first attempts at writing were made on a slate board with a slate pencil. It seems archaic when I think of it now, but Grandad told me that he made his first marks at the Carlton-in Lindrick School on a tray of fine sand with a stylus. He didn't start school until he was seven and left when he was thirteen, but he always seemed the wisest man alive to me.

Everyone walked to school, even the youngest infants who, after the first few days, were rarely accompanied by Mother. There was very little traffic and no one had ever heard of a paedophile (I doubt if anyone knew what the word meant) so there was little danger. Even in our first few months at school we were taken on quite long 'nature walks' by Miss Swindon and were often accompanied by the headmistress, Miss Mawson. I use the title 'Miss', although it is quite probable that they were married. All teachers were 'Miss' to the pupils.

On one occasion, we walked as far as Swinnow Wood. It was in the spring of 1939, because I remember that the floor of the wood was thickly carpeted with bluebells and we were allowed to pick some to decorate the classroom. This was the last year that anyone could pick flowers there because by the following spring the machines had moved in and were ripping everything up to make the new airfield.

It was at about the same time that an event that had a far greater impact on me than anything that Hitler and the Third Reich were getting ready to inflict took place. Mam had taken me to Sid and his new wife, Sally's house at No 1 West Street for Sunday tea. It was rare that we missed going to Uncle George and Aunt Anne's, but I looked forward to hearing my new Auntie playing the piano and listening to a new set of records on their gramophone.

Sunday was the day when gramophones were mostly used; the wireless only played church and classical music then. Not favourite listening in our house. Of course, I would miss playing with cousins Lorna and Doreen, but there was always next week. It was a lovely tea and we had been well entertained. I was feeling well fed and happy when

someone started hammering on the front door. That itself should have been a warning that something was wrong; back doors were for using; only insurance men and doctors came to the front. Sid answered the call, and it was Jim. Lots of whispering, looking at me, then floods of tears from Mam. Grandad had died.

After the funeral the house seemed empty and quiet. There was still Mam, Floss, Fred and Jim around, but I really missed Grandad. Floss was due to get married soon. Her young man, George Lee lived in Oldcotes and worked for Worksop Rural District Council as mechanic and driver of the dustbin lorries.

The Empire Day parade in the village was memorable, with schoolchildren parading in fancy dress based on how parents thought children around the Empire would be dressed. Very few of them had ever seen either an African or anyone from Asia in their lives, although most had been to the village cinema and had watched films such as 'Sanders of the River' or seen Sabu in 'The Elephant Boy'. Few people outside the large ports or London had seen a coloured face in their lives. Bed sheets took a hammering, and it was a lucky child who had make-up produced from cocoa; burnt cork took a heck of a lot of scrubbing to remove.

The parade, as usual was led by the colliery band, but the Scout drum and bugle band was there, as was the Boys Brigade, and a motley band of piano accordions and mouth organs leading veterans from the Boer War and the Great War; all wearing their chests full of campaign medals. It was a wonderful spectacle for all and most turned out to line the streets to see it. During the next few years, many such parades were held, mostly to try and raise money for the war effort. 'Wings for Victory' and 'Save the Soldier' are two that spring to mind. In 1939 though, the war wasn't yet a reality. Just a black cloud on the horizon.

I had been a picture goer as long as I could remember, Mam taking me with her from a very early age. The village had a neat little picture house, 'The Cinema', perched on top of the hill leading down to the old village of Harworth and it was a busy and thriving centre of entertainment for the community. It wasn't at all unusual to have to queue for half an hour or so when a popular film was showing; the queue stretching for 20 or 30 yards down the outside of the building. Funnily enough, it was the only place before the war that I ever saw an orderly queue. You could be killed in the rush for a bus or in the chip shop, but at the Harworth pictures all was orderly.

I think that the manager, Jim Lister, was to be credited with that. Anyone of my generation will remember Mr. Lister as a very imposing figure; always dressed in a black dinner suit and bow tie, even at the 'twopenny rush' on Saturday afternoons when most of the kids in the village used to go and see a very much cut version of the current evening film and the treat of the week, the serial! Flash Gordon left us in far more wonder than anything that Hollywood could possibly offer today.

The summer of 1939 passed by, and I can vividly remember how warm and sunny it was on the morning of Sunday, September 3rd. I had been playing on the concrete path that ran the length of the back of the house. The back window was open, and the wireless was on, and could be heard outside. I must have been making a racket that could have been heard loudly inside because Mam popped her head through the window and told me to be quiet. I remember her saying that Mr Chamberlain was speaking. Mr Chamberlain, the Prime Minister was telling us all that we were at war once again with Germany and his message signalled the start of another stage of my childhood, although just how big a change couldn't be imagined at the time.

Chapter 4

The men who had joined the Territorial Army, including Uncle Perce from next door, were called up immediately and were sent straight over to France with the British Expeditionary Force. Everyone expected the war to carry on from 1918 and be fought mainly from trenches. Indeed, within a very short time, possibly within days, I saw the first warlike preparations by the army in the village. Soldiers were actually digging practice trenches in the spare piece of land by the side of the billiard hall on Scrooby Road.

It was very exciting for all the kids. Of course we never doubted that we were going to win the war; I don't think that many of the adults were too worried either. After all we were British. We hadn't lost a war for donkey's years and we had the might of the Empire behind us. It's maybe as well that we didn't know then just how good and strong the Germans had become over the past few years.

Floss had married her young man, George Lee, a few months earlier and they were both living in our family home until they could find a house to rent. There was plenty of room now in such a large house. Fred and Jim were still at home, although Fred had recently become engaged to his young lady, a girl from Retford, Phyllis Stokes. He was spending a lot of time in Retford and had bought a motorbike in order to make the journey without using a bus. I sometimes had a ride on the petrol tank in front of him; not really a safe practice even in those more liberal days.

Both Fred and Jim had volunteered for the armed forces within days of the war breaking out and George had joined the A.F.S., the Auxiliary Fire Service. It wasn't long before Fred was called up and went into the army. George now was spending his time in Worksop while being trained to fight the fires that were certain to be caused once the Germans started to drop their bombs. Jim however had volunteered for the Navy and was fretting at home whilst the powers that be decided how best to use him. It became a standing joke within the family that Jim's first words on arriving home from work each day were 'Have my papers come yet?' Eventually his papers did come and Jim found himself at the shore base H.M.S. Raleigh in Plymouth. The family home was really empty now.

A blackout was imposed from the very beginning of hostilities. Air Raid Precaution wardens were enlisted from each community and a major part of their duties was to ensure that no light was to be seen escaping from any house, shop or industrial plant in their area. All streetlights were closed down for the duration of the war and what cars and lorries that were allowed onto the roads had to have their headlights restricted to a narrow slot, with even the light from that source having to be angled downwards. Walking around the streets at night was a real hazard, and walking around a strange town or village in the dark was a nightmare.

The stars have never shone more brightly than in those war years. I read about light pollution nowadays and I suppose that only people who lived through the blackout can remember the sheer brilliance of the night sky and appreciate what we have lost.

Great things were happening at school, even though the war seemed a bit slow warming up. The village had received its share of evacuees from the London area and the school had gone on to a two-shift system in order to accommodate the extra pupils. We natives were not very kind to the newcomers. They 'talked funny' and had different habits and games to us. Impetigo and scabies broke out amongst children and we blamed it all on to the southern kids. I'm afraid that we didn't show a lot of sympathy for the fact that they had been torn away from their families and they must have had a very bad impression of us when they disappeared back to London a few months later, after a quiet period when nothing warlike seemed to happen. I wonder how many of them were killed when the bombs started to rain down on London later in 1940.

We had all been geared up for the bombing raids almost from the outbreak of war. Sticky brown tape criss-crossed all the windows at school, this we were told was to prevent the glass flying and cutting us if a bomb dropped close by. We all had our doubts about this; if a bomb could blow a building down, how could strips of brown paper tape stop the glass breaking? Brick air raid shelters were built in the schoolyards. They were like long brick shoeboxes with a door at each end. We weren't allowed to play in them, but never wanted to do, they being dark damp places.

Gas masks had been issued to everyone in the country right at the very beginning of the war and gas mask practice was a regular relief from lessons. We all, on the given word, had to pull the mask on as quickly as possible and leave them on for a set period of time. It was great fun, especially when we found out how to make rude noises by blowing hard into the mask. Another innovation was the 'billeting' of children from the areas of the village that were the furthest from the school with families of nearby children. The idea being that as soon as the air raid siren went, the children would disperse, but only about as far as Wateslack Road at the most. I can only remember running home to Gilbert Road a couple of times in the first few months. From the air it must have looked like a disturbed ant's nest, with all the ants disappearing within a few streets of the nest.

The evacuation of the army from Dunkirk brought Uncle Perce back to England. Worry started to creep into the adult population as to how the war could be won now the Germans were only just across the Channel, but I honestly can't ever remember hearing anyone express any doubt that we wouldn't, even now, win the war. Certainly at school we were sure that we would thrash Jerry in the end and maybe if any of the grownups did have any fear, it would have seemed treasonable to show it. Uncle Perce forever afterwards insisted that he hadn't any idea how to swim until Dunkirk, but learned in one easy lesson from the French beaches.

As the first summer of war passed slowly by, and the air battle intensified over southern England, the civilians in the country were asked to start making sacrifices. Iron railings throughout the country were cut off and carted away for scrap, although the remaining spiked railings around the islands of shrubbery down the centre of Shrewsbury Road, where the railway line had once been, were somehow overlooked. The trees and bushes that they were originally intended to protect were by now looking neglected and very much worse for wear. The village itself had, in that first year of the war, started to get a run down and neglected look with many of the houses empty. I don't pretend to know the reason, but whole blocks were shut up and many had broken windows where schoolchildren had thrown stones on their way to and from school.

The demand for scrap metal even extended to the kitchens of the homes. There was a campaign during one week when all housewives were asked to donate their aluminium pans. 'We need your pans for Spitfires' the government demanded, and it was a patriotic duty of the beleaguered housewives to comply. There was a huge pile of aluminium household equipment in the schoolyard that was duly carted away to be flown at a later date against the foe. Fortunately for Hitler, most of the pans in those days were designed to be used on open fires and were for the most part made of iron, otherwise the R.A.F. would have been bogged down with fighter planes.

Rationing had been introduced and by the latter part of the year most of the population were starting to go on what could best be described as a very low fat, low everything diet. Had Rosemary Conley been around in 1940, she would have been trying to get people to put weight on. The schoolchildren were hit by the severe shortage of sweets and these too were rationed. It must have been a nightmare for housewives to provide a varied diet for their families on the little that was available. Many meals were just potatoes and one or two other vegetables. Bread and jam was always a good standby for any other meal during the day. This was only the start. The war was to last almost for six long years and the rationing grew more severe as each year passed.

By September, the daylight raids by the German bombers had decreased due to the heavy losses that the R.A.F. had inflicted on them. There were still the occasional hit and run raid by one or two planes at a time and some men who were working on the aerial flights; the bucket chain that carried the slurry and waste from the coal screening plant

to the waste tip were actually machine gunned by a lone raider. I can remember hearing the rattle of the guns while I was out at play. No one was hurt, but the war seemed a bit too close for comfort right then. It got a lot closer later on.

It was around this time that the village had a regular set of visitors who came every Saturday afternoon for a few weeks to use the pithead baths. They were a troop of Indian cavalry soldiers, and were I believe, stationed for a short while nearby. They rode up onto the 'rec' and left their horses there while they used the pithead baths. They certainly looked warlike; bearded and turbaned, they carried long lances as if they knew how to use them. All the kids in the village used to turn out to watch the spectacle and we were disappointed when they stopped coming. I have often wondered what happened to them. There can't have been much future in charging at German tanks and machine guns and I expect that they were turned into infantry later on. They were good to watch though.

The next, and final wave of evacuees arrived from Great Yarmouth and Gorleston at the end of summer. Unlike the earlier children, this latest intake had already suffered the agony of air raids as German planes had hit the Norfolk coast hard in the daylight raids of the previous few months; Yarmouth suffering a lot of damage. Uncle Perce had moved his family from next door and gone to a house in Torworth, his old home becoming the refuge for what remained of the Stone family from Great Yarmouth. Mrs Stone had lost her husband and father on the same day, their converted trawler, acting as a minesweeper had struck a mine while entering Yarmouth harbour. I became great friends with the family, and remained in touch with them long after the war ended.

As the autumn turned into winter that year, Moaning Minnie, as the air raid siren was often called, very often interrupted the nights. At first, we always got up and dressed, but later on in the winter, unless we actually could hear the German bombers flying overhead, we stayed in bed. Their engines had a very distinct sound; more a throbbing noise, which I believe was caused by the twin engines not being correctly synchronised. The RAF night fighters, however always had a steady drone. We were all experts by this time. On the night that Sheffield was badly bombed, the rumble and flashes of the bombs were clearly visible from Bircotes and the probing fingers of the searchlights could also be seen in the night sky. Later, the glow of the burning areas of the city showed up as a red flickering in the sky. Almost all the population of Bircotes was up and dressed that night.

The aerodrome at Swinnow Wood was by now operational, and had a squadron of Avro Manchesters bombers stationed there. They were the forerunners of the later Lancaster bombers, but only had two engines. I would have hated to fly in them because they seemed to be crashing all over the place. I think the Air Ministry realised that they were not much good because they soon disappeared and from then on our neighbours were usually Wellington or Lancaster bombers. The days when we used to run out to watch Major Peake fly over was a distant memory now. The air was always full of aircraft, British by day, German by night.

Chapter 5

Our Fred came home on leave one weekend and married Phyllis, his girlfriend from Retford. He was in uniform and I thought he looked great. Somehow he had managed to get posted to Uncle Perce's unit and they were both waiting to be sent overseas. Of course, no one knew just where that would be; the war seemed to be spreading all over the place.

When they had their embarkation leave, neither of them spent it in Bircotes. Fred went to Retford and Uncle Perce was with Aunt Dorothy and family in Torworth, so we didn't see a great deal of them. Jim however did manage to get home on his first leave; bell bottomed trousers and all. He was the last of the Tissington boys to still regard the family home as his own and the house was now in his name. George Lee, Flosses husband, had been posted to Nottingham which also was taking a bit of a pasting from the German bombers and was now in the National Fire Service.

The winter of 1940/1941 stands out in my memory as being long, dark and cold. There were now only three of us living in the house where so many had been only a few short years before and it must have been the lack of body heat which made the nights seem so much colder. That winter was very cold though and keeping warm was top priority. Mam, who always took a glass of water to bed with her, tried to have a drink during the night only to find that the water had frozen in the glass at her bedside.

Although we were never short of coal during the war, many that didn't have the good fortune to live in a mining community were. It was always cold in the house unless you were sitting close to the fire. If you stopped the draughts up under the door, the fire smoked and so you had the situation where you roasted on your front and froze on your back. Every so often, someone got up from their chair and toasted their bottom and back close to the fire. A common complaint among the women was a rash of mottling on the backs of their legs, scorched by the heat of the fire.

It was impossible to go to bed and get to sleep without taking something to warm the bed first. If a hot water bottle was available, all well and good, but anything that held warmth was acceptable. Oven shelves and bricks wrapped in old sheets were a good standby. Of course, it wasn't only that particular winter that these methods of heating were used; it was a common practice throughout my childhood, but somehow memories of the blitz winter are always cold and dark.

During the whole war, many bombs fell in the local area and a lot of planes, both German and British crashed and if carrying a load of bombs, very noisily.

We eventually became blasé about such things, but in the early days, they created a lot of scared interest. The first bomb crater I saw was in the wood at Scaftworth. Mam, having been born and spending her early years there, was still very friendly with the gamekeeper on the estate and still visited Mr. Tagg and his wife and daughter, Lilly. Of course, when we heard about the bomb, we had to take a cycle ride and get Mr. Tagg to show us the crater. I remember being very disappointed that it wasn't as deep as I had expected. Mr Tagg achieved fame later on in the same winter when he rounded up two German airmen who had parachuted into Scaftworth after their plane had been shot down. He marched them into the police station at Bawtry at the point of his shotgun.

Children of my generation were never fashion conscious in the way that kids of my grandchildren's generation are. There was never the available money for one thing and when clothes became rationed during the war, it was enough just to cover up with whatever was available. Most boys wore shorts until they left school, the school leaving age then being fourteen. Hand-me-down shorts, and sometimes cut down dad's long trousers were perfectly acceptable so long as they covered the essential parts. I can never ever remember anyone being laughed at because of the clothing they wore. None of us were elegantly dressed, so the idea of deriding anyone else's clothes never occurred to us.

Queues outside food shops were now a way of life. Although we received a ration allowance of most of the basic foodstuffs such as sugar, butter, tea, meat, etc, and had to be registered with a particular grocer or butcher to receive them, other food items were available on a points system. These little sheets of squared, numbered papers could be used at any shop, where the required number of points were given up when buying certain kinds of food which were regarded as luxury items. Silly as it seems now, a luxury could be as simple as a packet of custard powder. When a queue was seen outside a shop, it sent a signal that some hard-to-get titbit was in stock and housewives would join the queue without actually knowing what they were queuing for. Very little of the food products still carried brand names. It was all 'National' butter, or 'National' flour etc, most of which was weighed out and packed up in the store.

All the shops that served Bircotes village, with the exception of the quaintly named Bircotes Trading Company situated on Droversdale Road, were and for the most part, still are, sited in a long row along one side of Scrooby Road. The population of Harworth and Bircotes must now be more than double what it was in the 1930s and 40s, but I don't think that there are as many shops now as were there during my childhood.

Certainly there are far fewer grocery shops, although that is true throughout the country as a whole. The advent of the supermarket sounded the death knell to most of the small independent stores. The two biggest shops in the village were The Co-op, which boasted three departments; grocery, butchery and a chemist, and The Meadow Dairy, which seemed all tiles and marble. The Co-op had a pay desk in one corner and the shop assistant sent the bill and the money whizzing across to it in a cylinder, on a system of overhead wires. Customers then had to wait while their change and ration book came whizzing back. It was all highly entertaining for children.

Grocery shops were spread out all the way along the row, starting with Simons at the end opposite the pit yard, to Kidsons (later Chapmans) at the end nearest to the Comrades Club. Along the way, apart from the Co-op and the Meadow, were Melias, Gallons, Thrift Stores, Cowlshaws, and Longhorns. We also had three fish and chip shops, Greys, Bennets and Broughs. Gilberts chemist shop also doubled up as the village post office and various shoe shops, hardware and clothing stores, along with a couple of newsagents, stretched out along that particular length of the road.

Life wasn't too bad for schoolchildren at that time. Sweets, like most other things were on ration and ice cream vans had disappeared from the streets for the duration of the war, but we still had the Saturday afternoon matinee to look forward to each week and if something suitable was showing, maybe a trip to the pictures during the week as well. We spent a lot of time playing outside in the streets, or in the woods, either at Snipe Park or near the top of Wrights Hill. There was then a large disused sand quarry where sand had been excavated for use when the village had been built almost twenty years before. It has totally vanished now, but it was a popular playground for village children for at least forty year

Jim's first ship was a small converted merchant vessel called 'Salopian.' It wasn't much, but it had a few guns and it floated. He was soon posted to another similar craft, a little bit bigger and better, the 'Penelope.' Meanwhile, my other two uncles, Perce and Fred had been shipped out to somewhere in the Middle East. We didn't know where exactly, they weren't allowed to tell anyone, and in any event, all wartime letters to and from servicemen were opened and read by an officer who cut out anything that wasn't allowed, and then stamped it 'Passed By Censor.'

The luck that had allowed Uncle Perce to get off the Dunkirk beaches unscathed must have been passed on to Jim. He arrived home on a short leave running a high temperature and looking really ill. The doctor diagnosed influenza and Floss had to telephone the base where 'Penelope' was docked, and follow up with a doctor's certificate. Jim was still ill when the newspapers reported that the 'Penelope,' which had sailed without him, had been sunk with a heavy loss of life.

Quite a few of the servicemen from the village hadn't been quite as lucky as the Tissington boys. Two of the village shopkeepers were killed in action around this time. Hugh Burke from the newsagents, and Arthur Bryant, who had the shop next to where the village library now stands, were both lost.

From 1941, the war seemed to settle into what I can only describe as a period of normality. It seemed normal to make sure that all the windows were properly 'blacked out', it seemed normal that food had to be queued for, and that things like bananas and oranges were only a distant memory. It even seemed normal that for much of the time there

was only Floss and myself in the house, as Mam, like many other of the village women, worked at the newly built munitions factory situated between Ranskill and Lound.

Coaches ran a shuttle service between the surrounding villages and the R.O.F. factory as it worked flat out around the clock producing the cordite that filled the shells and bullets needed to fight the Germans, Italians and as the year came to an end, the Japanese.

The fear of a German invasion had receded, and although the bombers still came over regularly, even they seemed part of normal life. We even had a stick of three bombs fall on Bircotes. They landed roughly where the Plumtree school and sports centre now stands and much to our schoolboy delight, two of them failed to explode and were detonated a couple of days later during daylight hours when we could watch the column of earth fly up into the air. It was much more satisfying than listening to the bangs during the night.

Uncles Perce and Fred were with the army in North Africa. Things were a bit up and down out there, according to the newspapers. First the army, the 8th Army as it was called, chased the Italians, who didn't seem over keen on fighting, then the Germans who were dead keen chased the 8th Army back almost into Egypt again. It was all a bit confusing. Jim meanwhile had gone to a real warship at last. It was the cruiser 'Mauritius' and while we were all glad he had gone to a ship that we thought was big enough to be safer, it was the last we were to see of him for several years as the ship was destined to sail in distant waters for almost the rest of the war

When I moved up into the junior school, the teachers were still all female apart from 'Pop' Riley, the headmaster. All male staff had been called up into the forces at the outbreak of war and apart from Mr. Riley; there was only the head of the senior school, and one other male teacher who was too old for conscription. The classes were overcrowded because of staff shortages and extra pupils created by having evacuees with us for most of the duration. I think we averaged about 42 students to a class all the time I attended school. Whether or not our education suffered is debatable. Teaching methods were probably old fashioned, but discipline was much tighter and corporal punishment in the school was an accepted part of the system of discipline. We had to learn the hard way and I for one am grateful for it now.

When the Americans came into the war, it was quite an eye opener for us. We had become accustomed to having the streets full of uniformed men of all nationalities, most of them wearing their own version of the British uniforms. All had flashes on their shoulders announcing their country of origin. The 'Yanks' however were very different. Their uniforms were well cut, and made from a much finer material. They seemed to be well paid, too, and not ungenerous.

We soon learned that if an American troop convoy passed us on the road, a few shouts of 'Got any gum, chum?' would get us showered with sweets as the lorries passed us by. I suppose they felt sorry for us, because by this stage of the war we must have looked pretty poor. Most of the boys by now wore bits of army battledress and if it was cold and we hadn't got a home knitted balaclava helmet, it was acceptable to have an army or R.A.F. forage cap, with the earflaps down. The girls were no smarter. Hand knitted 'pixie' hoods kept their ears warm. No wonder the rich Americans took pity on us.

The events of October 1942 changed the whole aspect of the war. Up until then, the general feeling was that however long we held out against the Axis powers, they always had the upper hand. The battle at El Alamein in North Africa changed all that forever. It wasn't long after my ninth birthday that Floss called me up from bed early in the morning and told me to listen to the news broadcast on the radio. The Germans were in full retreat! I had never heard news like that before in my life, and went to school feeling on top of the world. The general feeling of celebration throughout the school was something that can't have been matched since the armistice in 1918. The Germans were on the run and this was the first time it had happened since the war began over three years before. It proved at least they were not a race of supermen. At about the same time, the Russians finally destroyed a German army at Stalingrad and at last there was a feeling we were winning the war.

The air raids had slowed down to maybe a couple a month and by the time the light nights of spring and summer 1943 came around; days made longer by double British Summer Time having been introduced to help the farmers; the massive build up of our heavy bombers as they assembled in the late evening sky showed us the Germans were now suffering as we had not so long before.

It is hard to describe the numbers of heavy bombers that flew over the village in that summer of '43. The drone of their engines seemed to go on and on. The sky was filled with aircraft all heading one way. In the early hours of the morning some of them flew over again, but they came back singly or in small groups and it was rare they disturbed my sleep. They were as much a part of the background noise as was the distant clashing of the colliery locomotives buffers as it shunted the wagons of coal ready for dispatching to the less fortunate and fuel rationed parts of the country.

As the year passed by, we were aware that both my 8th Army uncles were in the thick of events in the Mediterranean theatre of war. Italy had been invaded, and we also suspected that Jim's ship, the 'Mauritius' could have been involved in the landings; but of course, we had no means of being certain about anything. Censorship was still as tight as ever, and unless anyone with a relative serving in the forces actually had them home on leave, there was no means of knowing where in the world they actually were. All mail was addressed to the forces post office, and a service number usually guaranteed that the letter eventually got there.

At home things went on as usual. Rations were cut again and the routine of going with Mam on the bus to Worksop to pick up the new ration books from the 'Food Office' situated in the library there was carried out once again. I remember sitting around and looking up at the domed ceiling while waiting for Mam to get our guarantee of a food supply for the next few months. Ration books were different colours according to your age. Under five years of age, and you had a green book, children over five, a blue one and an adult's books was fawn in colour. This entitled you to the amount of food that the government decided was needed to sustain a body at different ages. It seems crude, but it worked and nobody starved.

By early spring of 1944, all the roads that had sufficient tree cover along the verges, were turned into ammunition dumps: huge mounds of boxes covered with tarpaulin sheets. This was, as we eventually found out, in readiness for the invasion of Europe. They were not guarded or protected in any way, but kids were used to having live ammunition around them by then. I don't know of anyone who even bothered to look under the covers. Most boys had a collection of bullets and shells at this time; most of which were spent cases or bullets that had the explosives removed, but a fair amount, usually taken from crashed aircraft, were still 'live'. Beach Tree Avenue, and Serlby Park were just two of the ammunition dumps within an easy walk from Bircotes, but larger dumps were in places like Clumber Park and these were closed to the public.

Beaches around the coasts of Britain had been mined and fenced off with barbed wire since the beginning of the war. This was a necessary measure taken when the threat of a German invasion was very real and although this threat had receded over the years, the mines and wire had stayed in place. By the spring of 1944, some of the beaches had finally been cleared, and the way was open for children to take up their long stored buckets and spades again and head for the seaside. It was with a sense of real adventure that in early June I boarded a bus and set out for the coast for the first time in six long years to enjoy the delights of a paddle in the sea at Cleethorpes. I don't know who organised the day trip, but I can remember that there were several coaches in the convoy, all filled with wildly excited Bircotes children and their mothers.

The weather was lousy, but it didn't stop us from enjoying ourselves and having a dip. Most of us had home made swimming trunks devised from old woollen jumpers and when these were wet, we were in constant danger of losing them with the weight of water overcoming the strength of the knicker elastic holding them up. We didn't realise it then, but at the same time many thousands of men were heading for the beaches in Normandy and unlike us, many would never make it home.

After 'D Day,' as the invasion of France was known, the air raids had just about stopped, and the only aircraft to be seen general feeling in the country was that the war couldn't last much in the skies were either British or American. Most of them were bombers, but a fighter plane which we saw quite a lot of was the twin tailed Lockheed Lightning, and this provided us with just about the best crash we had ever seen. We were in the junior school playground one afternoon and the plane came over quite low, trailing smoke from its engine. We had a great view of the pilot bailing out, and watched the aircraft crash somewhere towards Tickhill. At that time there were no houses or even prefabricated classrooms built to spoil the view in that direction, so the spectacle provided us with a great talking point for weeks.

I had gone up into the senior school after the summer holidays in 1944, and was enjoying what was to me the best part of my schooldays. The headmaster then was Mr Larwood, a cousin of the great Notts and England fast bowler Harold Larwood of 'bodyline' cricket test match fame. He was a remarkable man, very well-liked and respected by the pupils; a headmaster who could walk into a classroom at any time and add to our education by sitting and telling stories about many things we probably would never have heard about in the course of our normal education.

I first discovered Haley's Comet in one of his little talks. The 'Titanic' was sunk for us in another. All things that happened in his lifetime were passed on to the pupils in his own brand of story-telling. I didn't see him again after I left school for about thirty years until I bumped into him in Retford one day in the late nineteen seventies. I recognised him instantly, although by this time he was very frail. To my utter amazement, he also recognised me, and even remembered my name. I only had the one headmaster to remember, but many schoolboys had passed through his school in his days at Bircotes.

The Stone family from next door had returned to Great Yarmouth and most of the evacuees had by now gone home. We missed them at first. We had got used to having the 'vaccies' around, and their absence was another pointer that the war was drawing to a close. By the end of 1944 though, the south eastern part of England was taking another pounding, this time from the V1 pilotless flying bombs, or 'doodle bugs' as they were generally called. We started getting air raid warnings again right at the end of the year when the ever resourceful Germans started launching them from aircraft just off the east coast.

On New Year's Eve, Jim was on leave, his ship having returned to British waters to take part in the bombardment of the Normandy beaches. The siren sounded just before midnight and shortly afterwards we heard a noise like a motorbike without a silencer approaching. Jim, who had been in the south of the country recognised the sound for what it was and roused us out of our beds. The flame from the back of the doodle bug could be seen quite clearly as it passed overhead and a few minutes later, after the engine noise faded, we heard the explosion somewhere to the north of us. The crater that it made at the side of the Great North Road near to the Mount Pleasant Hotel was visible well into the late 1950s. The V2 rockets that caused such havoc around London as the second stage of Hitler's terror attacks were much worse because there was no warning before each one fell. We were thankful that they didn't have the range to reach us.

Early in 1945, a shipment of bananas must have been allowed into Britain for the first time since the beginning of the war, because news spread like wildfire that they were available, but only for green ration book holders. That of course meant only for children less than five years old. There were no kids of that age in our house, so I had to enjoy the description of how good they tasted from school friends who had younger siblings. One of these friends then brought a blackened piece of banana skin to school so we who were less fortunate could at least smell the luxury. It's amazing how one sniff brought the memory of the fabulous fruit flooding back to us.

When May came around, we had been expecting the war to end at any time. News had broken that Adolph Hitler was dead and we all thought that the war would end at the same time, but although we heard that first one then another of the German armies had surrendered, the official announcement wasn't made until about a week later. That was the signal for celebrations that were simply out of this world. Bonfires were lit in the streets, flags and bunting were strung up everywhere, and people went silly with joy. Many houses were daubed with huge painted 'V' for victory signs and street parties were organised as quickly as possible. It didn't seem possible that the war that had dragged on for so long was finally, at least in Europe, over. There were still the Japanese to deal with, but at least we knew that they were not able to bomb us. Hitler had been for so long our number one enemy that now that he was out of the way, our war, our own personal war, seemed to be at an end.

Chapter 6

Jim had left his ship, the cruiser 'Mauritius' and was stationed at a shore base in Blythe, Northumberland. Shortly after VE day, Floss received a letter from him telling us that he now had a girlfriend, and would be bringing her to meet us all on his next leave. We were all looking forward to this and shortly afterwards Lavender Brown was introduced to the family. I was invited to spend a week with Lavender's family in the North East, and found them to be lovely people. Lavender's mother really looked after me and I enjoyed my stay with them. It wasn't too long afterwards that the last of the Tissington boys still nominally based at home got engaged, and the end of my life in Gilbert Road drew near.

Although the war in Europe was at an end, the Japanese still had to be beaten before we could be at peace again. The troops who had been fighting the Germans started to come back to Britain, although I don't think that they were being discharged from the forces right away. I can remember Uncle Perce and Fred coming back from Italy, still in the army and Jim was still stationed in Blythe. The village was seeing lots of its men coming back for the first time in years and for a few whose wives and girlfriends had found the waiting too lonely to endure, the homecoming wasn't very happy.

I had a holiday in Great Yarmouth with my Uncle Harold and Aunt Lizzie from Bawtry, later that summer. We spent it with our old evacuee next-door neighbours, the Stone family who had settled into a council house there after returning home. Yarmouth was bomb battered, but starting to try and get itself geared up for the holiday trade once more. Some of the beaches were cleared and opened up for bathing and Billy and Brian Stone were delighted to take me under their wings and show me their town. One of the holiday attractions that had opened up was a display of blown up photographs of the horrors found in the recently liberated concentration camp of Belsen. I have to confess that we found it enthralling, but as I have grown older I realise that it was in the worst possible taste that such human suffering was exploited as a money making venture.

While I was in Yarmouth, The final victory over Japan was announced and this was the signal for even greater celebrations. We boys spent the day on board a motor torpedo boat that was part of a flotilla based in Yarmouth. All the boats were decked over with all the bunting they possessed and we had a wonderful time playing all over the craft; sitting at the machine guns and canons, sending signals from the bridge to the engine room via the telegraph, making tea and sandwiches in the galley and generally having the complete run of the boat. That evening was spent at a huge bonfire that had been lit on a cleared bombsite. I couldn't recall ever having such a good time. When I arrived back in Bircotes, there were big blackened circles in various roads throughout the village, where bonfires had been lit as part of the celebrations.

As 1946 came around, men from the services were coming home at last and the poor souls who had been prisoners of war in Japanese hands returned as well. One of these was George Hill who had a barbers shop in the village. His wife, along with her sister had carried on running the business while George was away, but now he was back with his scissors while his wife ran a lady's hairdressing shop. George was emaciated and had clearly suffered in the prison camp, but was able to carry on as usual. He soon had a young assistant in the shop with him, Reg Urien who carried on with the business for many years after George moved on.

Male teachers suddenly appeared at school, all released from their wartime duties in the forces. We came back to school after the summer holidays in 1946 and found that Messers Stone, Thompson, Keyworth, Kenyan and Eyre had started at the school; Bob Eyre having been released from a German P.O.W. camp, having been shot down over Germany while piloting a bomber in the R.A.F.

Up to that time, the school leaving age had been 14 years, but I was in the first class to have to stay on until I was 15 years old.

Having prefabricated classrooms built in the schoolyards extended the school, and our age group were simply assimilated into the year below us. It was a stopgap arrangement, and it would have sorted itself out in later years, but for us, we simply had an extra year going over the previous years lessons, but with mainly male teachers.

By this time, Floss and George, back with the Worksop Rural District Council after his years in the Fire Service, had been housed in a prefabricated bungalow that had been erected at the bottom of Sandymount.

About twenty had been built there, the first of hundreds of council dwellings that were put up in Harworth over the next couple of decades. Mam and I meanwhile moved to Langold for about six months, Mam having taken a job as a housekeeper there. Jim had married, and it was clear that we couldn't expect to share a home with the newly weds for long. We had nowhere else to go; so for six months housekeeping it had to be.

This period covered the hardest winter that anyone could remember. The snow was so deep that walls and hedges were invisible, there just being level plains of snow to be seen across the fields; the hedges having been buried. It wasn't a very happy time for us. When Mam decided to leave the job, the biggest problem was finding a place to live.

We were lucky though. Jim and Lavender took pity on us and let us stay with them for about a year until the council allocated Mam a prefab bungalow. For the first time in my life, Mam and I had a home of our own. By then, my schooldays and childhood were over. The early days were gone. I, like Bircotes, was growing up.