



From the web Site of The History of Sawbridgeworth Fire Brigade

<http://www.sawbridgeworthfirebrigade.co.uk>

Child War Memories - the early war years.

Setting the scene...

I was born at Vantorts Road, Sawbridgeworth, Hertfordshire in August 1935 and therefore was just over 4 years old when war was declared in September 1939. I cannot remember this at all but do remember the Summer holiday that I had with Mum and Dad in August that year at Clacton on Sea in Essex. I can vividly remember the Boarding House we stayed in for a week and even some of the guests. Similarly I can recall walking down to the sea front with my Father before breakfast and watching a Paddle Steamer arrive or depart from the pier. I expect like many children of that age, I had woken early each morning! I can also just remember the train journey from Sawbridgeworth to Bishop's Stortford, from there onto the single line that went to Dunmow and on to Braintree, Colchester and Clacton. The line to Dunmow was closed to passenger traffic in the early fifties and then became one of the casualties of the Beeching axe in the Sixties. On the return journey we stopped off at Colchester where my Great Grandparents, on my Mother's side of the family lived, close to the Station at the 'bottom' of North Hill. My Great Grandparents had been undertakers in Colchester. I can remember being fascinated by the goods trucks on the railway bridge over the North Hill Road being shunted, which were viewable from outside of the house. On the way back home my bucket and spade were left on the train.

Early war years...

The first thing I remember about the war was that we went each night to our neighbours cellar - this must now be into 1940 and after the 'phoney war' period, not that I can remember that at all. Our neighbours were Vantorts Farm, owned by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Balmer. Much later I learned that Robert had come South from the Northeast to farm sometime in the very early 30's and my Father had purchased a part of his stack yard in 1933 to have our house built. Apparently in the year immediately following the house being built there were two hay stacks in the back garden, but I digress. The farmhouse was pretty old with timber framed walls and the exterior just lathe and plaster. However, it did have a substantial brick constructed cellar (walls and floor) which was fairly large and it had been temporarily equipped with basic furniture, including a couple of single beds. As cellars go it was 'normal' I expect - I can still smell the damp and musty atmosphere and the smell of candles and an oil lamp. Robert Balmer, being a farmer had a car and this had been adapted to carry a Siren. He was one of two car owners who toured the small town (a population of only around 3,000) to give the Alert and All Clear. This was my first knowledge of Red, Amber and All Clear that became so familiar. Of course as a farmer he also was the proud owner of a telephone and this had been extended to an extension in the cellar. He had a grey Sunbeam Talbot car, something he cherished and kept to well into the late fifties. In fact I actually drove it after my National Service 1953-55. Having received the Red Warning he would rush up the stairs and reverse the car out of the barn/garage and once on the road, start the wailing siren. Similarly of course the All Clear later. The only time I remember being frightened was when a stray bomb was dropped on Cambridge Road outside some council houses. Although about a mile away, the explosion was very loud. Three houses were demolished and several people and children lost their lives.

An evacuee from the East End...

Sometime in 1940 we took in an evacuee from the East End of London. All I can remember was that his name was Frankie. Frankie was not happy at all and only managed to stay about 2 months I think. All I

remember of this was that he suddenly disappeared and later my parents were told he had caught a train and went back home. I seem to recall he was sent back but again this did not last - he was very unhappy. For some reason he was the only one who was billeted with us. The only other evacuee that I recall in the road was Joan Osborne from Clapham in East London. She was a couple of years older than me and was billeted with Mr. and Mrs Cole in the road. She stayed on throughout the war and was sort of reluctant to go home I think!

The Blitz...

My Father was in the Fire Service which he had joined as a volunteer in 1921. He was also the foreman of the local Malt Extract Company - H. A. and D. Taylor. With both these occupations he was exempt from call-up. Although things were beginning to get 'organised' it was not until 1941 that the National Fire Service (NFS) was formed. My Father spent very little time at home as he was at work for long hours each day and in 1940 was on duty all night at the local fire station. A little later it became one night on and one night off. The closest the local brigade came to the Blitz of London (Sawbridgeworth was just 25 miles from Charing Cross) was to be called into Leytonstone to replace the local brigade(s) who were then backing up the central London brigade. They apparently dealt with several incidents while there on several occasions. In respect of my memories of this time the most vivid is going out of our house front gate in the dark and turning to look South towards London. The sky was lit up red for as far east and west as I could see. I can remember to this day feeling very scared and my Mother saying to me 'come on we must get down in the cellar'!

A German plane flew very low...

Sawbridgeworth was home to a then very well known Building Company, Walter Lawrence and Son, who had their pretty large Joinery Works on the banks of the River Stort. The works were in fact sandwiched between the river and the main Cambridge Railway Line, about half a mile due East from our house. They became a major manufacturer of the fuselage of the Mosquito two engined aeroplane for DeHavilland at Hatfield. Obviously the Germans were aware of this and something else that sticks in my mind was, in the middle of the day a German plane flew very low over the works (South to North) without any resistance being shown at all. The siren had announced Red Alert and my Mother and I had been advised by Robert Balmer to take shelter in his cellar. However, before we got there and as we turned into the farm drive next to our house this dark black plane, on which one could easily see the swastikas, flew over the works only a few hundred feet above ground level. It was obviously a reconnaissance aircraft taking photographs as within a week or two the works were pelted with incendiary bombs and the part next to the river - pretty well of all wooden construction - was burnt out. Because the boundary of Hertfordshire and Essex is the river Stort and the joinery works was therefore just in Essex, the then 'rules of engagement' for Fire Brigades meant that the local brigade were unable to attend. Something that some members in the brigade who worked there could not get over for a number of years! As well as the Work's destruction those who worked in that part lost all their precious tools.

All we could see was a wall of fire...

My maternal Grandfather worked at the Joinery Works as a Carpenter and Joiner and lived only a few hundred yards from the works, in Sheering Mill Road (now Sheering Mill Lane). He was fortunate in two respects, firstly the part of the works that he worked in largely escaped massive damage and he was able to recover his tools and secondly, the house that they lived in was also left undamaged. However, several of the houses in the 'block' and in the road did receive stray incendiaries but were dealt with successfully and little damage occurred. It is the only time in my life that I really saw and experienced my Mother being very very upset. From our house we overlooked the Joinery Works and on the night of the attack all we could see was a wall of fire. Knowing that my Grandparents house was only just beyond the works it looked as though they too were on fire! I suppose one should congratulate the German pilot(s) really, as their target aim was excellent! What was said afterwards though was that with the works neatly sandwiched between the river and railway they were easily guided towards their target - it was a clear moonlit night!

Water in the dugout..

The houses in Sheering Mill Road were, and still are, terraced. The couple living on one side of my Grandparents were both rather deaf. One of my jobs, when at the house when the siren went, was to knock on the wall to warn the neighbours. I knew that I had been successful when I got a knock back! Sheering Mill had a dugout in the then small field on the North side of the road immediately beyond the local general store. I can never remember it in use because it was for ever rather full of water! I can recall my Grandfather, with others, having borrowed the Walter Lawrence trailer Fire Pump to pump it out on a Sunday morning. I don't know how many times this was done!

The home dugout, rats and all...

My Father dug a shelter in our back garden, I suppose this was early in 1940. It was certainly complete when the RAF were fending off the Luftwaffe as I can recall only going down in it a couple of times. Once, was on a Saturday afternoon when my Father was at home and there was a dog fight very high over us. I can remember seeing the vapour trails high in the sky and hearing the shooting. I was not allowed out to watch though and I never heard of any downed planes in the area. My Father, working at the local malt factory had access to wooden barrels. The timber slats from these were used to shore up the sides of the dugout. Corrugated Iron sheeting was used over the top and this covered with the earth from the hole in the ground. This arrangement was not very successful though as the local rats from the farm thought this was a haven and soon settled in behind the boarding! It was probably useable for less than 6 months really! Later, an indoor Morrison shelter was applied for and this meccano type affair was erected in the kitchen in place of the kitchen table. It was very strong though with a steel top supported by about 2" x 2" steel angles top and bottom with strong square steel mesh at the sides. Entry was through two of these wire panels which were sliding - we felt very safe in it. We ate our breakfast at it until the end of the war. After its disassembly it got used for all sorts of things including some of the main frame angles making the top of a cold frame for the garden. The sliding mesh panels made an excellent front to my rabbits hut cage and I still have some of the spacers that were used in the assembly.

Child War Memories - the later war years.

A Molotov Basket..

There was quite a bit of activity from German aircraft as we were very much on the route back to Germany from London - there were very few nights went by that we did not clearly hear the drone of German aircraft. Some of the planes either did not drop all their bombs on their target or were being chased and just dumped their load for speed! We had some landmines around too and a Molotov Basket - this was a landmine with several hundred incendiary bombs inside it apparently. When the landmine exploded the incendiaries were distributed over a large area around. This one was dropped in the bottom end of Pishiobury Park, right at the end of the lane from the bottom of Vantorts Road. The crater was evident for years afterwards as it was never filled in. Another landmine fell by the railway line South of what was Luxfords Nursery and below New House Farm on the Sheering Lower Road. This one went off after a couple of days delay and because we had gone to that cellar again and were told to leave all the house windows wide open it blew one window back against the wall and broke a small piece of glass out of the corner. It was never repaired for years! Had we not opened all the windows though I expect there would have been no glass left at all. Yet another landmine dropped along the riverside beyond Keckseys bridge. This one exploded and emptied the river between locks. My neighbour - seven years older than me - and I went to see and I had a collection of shrapnel for years after.

A Lull before the Storm - Doodlebugs (V1's)..

From late 1943 or early 1944 the frequency of raids by German aircraft had diminished and there was a period when it seemed that we were a little freer to move around. My Mother decided that a trip to London on the train was overdue so off we went. Sure enough all was quiet but the bleakness of the journey through the East End of London and into Liverpool Street Station was something else! The sight of all the massive damage and burnt out buildings still remains clearly in my mind. That same night, after returning home, the first Doodlebug arrived in London! From my bedroom window, facing East, there was a good view towards London and although initially the V1's were delivered singularly,

eventually, and I suppose in some desperation by the Germans, they were being despatched in groups and I remember my Father getting me to look out of the window to see seven of them all in a line heading into the East End of London. They were very visible at night from the fiery jet exhaust. We experienced several strays in Sawbridgeworth - they were steered by gyroscopes which obviously went astray at times. My Father was at home and although the red warning had gone he was upstairs watching out of the window - my Mother and I were in the Morrison shelter - he suddenly came flying down the stairs and threw himself down by the side of the shelter saying "there's one coming straight at us". By this time we could hear it and then "Silence" which meant only one thing... that the jet engine had stopped and it was about to fall! Curiously the silence prevailed and we never did hear the explosion. This was one of the later variety that we had only just heard about - it was one which glided after the engine stopped. A few days later we heard that it had glided as far as Hertford, 15 to 18 miles away to the West. Phew! Some of the night workers where my Father was employed told him afterwards that they saw it and thought it was heading straight into our house, it was so low.

Operation Market Garden...

I find it quite difficult to believe now - the freedom that us children seemed to have in those days. My Mother was quite a protective type but I really cannot recall being inhibited in any way in my movements during the war, certainly as I got older anyway! We still wandered off and investigated the various bomb craters etc. hence my knowledge of the Molotov Basket already mentioned. My next door neighbour and I were again at the end of the lane of Vantorts Road on a Sunday morning. Suddenly the noise of many aircraft could be heard. As we looked up so we saw that they were Dakotas towing gliders. What a sight this was, there were hundreds it seemed and they just kept coming - we just stood in awe. Obviously what we were witnessing was the assembled planes and gliders from around the country of the force to undertake Operation Market Garden - On 17 September 1944.

From my bedroom window looking due East, just in the very distance the then Matching Aerodrome was just visible. It was developed just for the war effort by the Americans and in 1943-44 occupied by the American Air Force. Anyway they were training their glider pilots and standing on my bed I could watch - well what I could watch was their attempts at making landings! I don't think I ever saw one go right head over heels but it must have been close.

There was a sudden very loud explosion...

The launching sites for the Doodlebugs having been overrun by our advancing forces in France and Holland, created a short lull in attacks but this was shattered by the arrival of the more sinister Guided Missiles (V2's). There was rarely a warning of these and it seemed uncanny to say the least that there was just immediate destruction. Sawbridgeworth had just the one experience of these dreaded 'bombs' while I was attending my friend's birthday party just two doors down the road. We had just finished our tea but were still at or around the table - there was a sudden very loud explosion which shook everything around and everyone shot under the table - then 'nothing'. We somehow knew that this was something strange but it was not until the next day that we heard that it was a V2. It had thankfully exploded before reaching the ground and fairly high still. The main part of my story though is another couple of days afterwards. Another friend lived in Springhall Road in the end house of those that, at the time, backed onto allotments (now retirement type bungalows) between that road and Vantorts Road. We had gone to his house after school and for some reason decided to go into his back garden that backed onto the allotments - the sight that met our eyes was beyond belief. There was a huge metal object three quarters buried in the middle of his Father's garden. It was about 4' - 5' across and circular with all nuts and bolts all round the periphery. It turned out that this was the rocket engine - if it had hit his house or any others in the row then the damage would have been immense! Not knowing then what it was we just ran like mad to tell my friends Mother and I shot off home. It was several days before the bomb disposal people and others removed it.

A birthday to remember...

The only other birthday, mine this time, that I can remember during the war was my 7th (1942). It was a brilliant summers day and it must have been at the height of daylight raids because all I can remember of it was that the siren went 11 times that day! I don't think it ruined my party as such but obviously was

something to remember quite easily. It was something that my parents recalled on numerous birthdays afterwards. As for birthday presents and presents at Christmas I can never remember feeling deprived in any way. My parents seemed to get some things together somehow. I would think it would have been either Christmas 1943 or 1944 that I had a Meccano set. It was second hand and my Father had painted it up - I would imagine that it had been originally new in the early 30's. I had it and played with it for years after and added to it with new items when they became available again. Fortunately, I had been given a basic Hornby clockwork train set at Christmas when I was three, apparently with the acclamation from me of "Oh boy a train". That too was added to after the war. We also always had a Christmas tree and my Father managed to keep the original Osram lighting set of 16 coloured candle lamps with brown Bakelite lamp holders going all through and even after the war. Paper chains had also been carefully preserved and were embellished here and there with the foil strips that as children we found scattered around, having been dropped by enemy aircraft to confuse the radar. At first I would not pick these up as it had been drummed into me that anything unusual could be dangerous - it was not unusual to hear of unexploded incendiaries or tail fins of these being found and I remember seeing the white phosphorus deposit all around one in the field between Vantorts Road and Springhall Road.

German prisoners of war...

Towards the end of the war, I guess from the latter part of 1943 the farm next door had by this time developed and transformed from a general farm of a Ayrshire milking heard to include vegetable growing for the London Market at Spitalfields and locally. At this time German prisoners of war were starting to be brought in to assist with the work. The nearest camp was at Hatfield Heath or Hatfield Broad Oak (I am not sure which) and the prisoners were transported in each day. They were generally a friendly lot and it was quite evident, even to a small boy, that they were glad to be out of the action. I got quite friendly with some of them and I never felt out of place talking to those that could converse in English - surprisingly a number of them spoke reasonable English. One of them made my Mother a lovely oval wall plaque from a slice of tree branch as a thank you for some fruit from our apple, pear and plum trees in the garden, when in season. The plaque was decorated with carved flowers which were then painted. My Mother was very fond of it and it hung on our stair wall for years, eventually falling apart from woodworm. Another of the prisoners was a good looking and blond Austrian in his very late teens or early 20's - his name was August. He was charming and a very hard worker. After the war he volunteered and asked to stay on for about two years and continue on the farm. Robert Balmer was very pleased as he was so good. He eventually returned to his home area and then returned for a short period again. He corresponded with the farm for several years afterwards.

A very great sense of relief...

The war was over at last. There was for me a very great sense of relief because for what seemed the whole of my life experience I had known only the state of war. It seemed quite uncanny that the constant anxiety from day to day was gone. I was lucky really because my parents were able to be around me throughout. Those children who were without a parent or parents and who would never see a parent again, well what must that have been like!

Victory streetlights...

As in most towns and villages there were celebrations for the end of the war in Europe and by that time some sense of assuming the war with Japan would not last much longer. I can recall the evening celebrations in Sawbridgeworth only from one thing that sticks in my mind. For the first time that I could remember the street lights were switched on. As well as the lights being on I was fascinated by the manner in which all the moths were attracted to the lights - they had not seen them before either! There was dancing in the street (Knight Street) opposite my school and the music for this was from loudspeakers mounted on the top of one of White's Garage hire cars - a big black saloon. Happy days? Well yes in some ways but the war time was very much a situation of making the best of a bad period in my life and the peaceful times afterwards were very short lived too. The Cold War brought more and greater fears!