

Memories of wartime Coldharbour

By Shirley Lane, née Hawtin

EARLY DAYS

I was born in Wellington, Surrey, younger of two daughters of Eric and Dorothy Hawtin.

At the outbreak of war in 1939, my father realised that, living so close to Croydon Airport, we would be vulnerable to bombing, and we moved to our tiny weekend log-cabin at the end of the garden of Wearewood in Capel. The big house was owned by the Rodwell family: terrifying, bee-keeping Denham, his wife Nester and their three children, the eldest of whom was Peter, an RAF pilot who was shot down and killed early in the war, .my first encounter with death. Their daughter Joan is still alive and lives in Cranleigh.

We went to the Rudolf Steiner School in Ockley run by Miss Napper and Miss Smalley. They taught us to make dolls out of fir-cones and to sing German songs which we hoped would protect us if a Panzer division came jack-booting across the tennis court, a real possibility in those days.

COLDHARBOUR

In 1941 we moved to Coldharbour, renting Roffeys from Captain Heath. I was 5 and blessed with a clear child's memory. "War" was normal, everyday and accepted, and having little knowledge of peacetime, we were not frightened. Until the bombs came anyway.

Coldharbour was in those days quite remote. Few people drove or had cars and petrol was rationed. People used the bus service, horses, bicycles and feet.

Village characters were much like those in "Cider with Rosie", Laurie Lee's wonderful account of his childhood in the Slad Valley. Gentry names included Heath, Barclay, Lee Steere, but it was the locals we loved and knew:

Miss Finch, Miss Bryan and Miss Burdett (no familiar first names in those distant days), Mrs Baldwin with 9 cats and a grandfather clock with only one hand.

Rae and Felix Baker and their tabby cat Dick Baker. Both Bakers were musicians and deliciously theatrical. They were not married but lived together, in those days thought to be scandalous.

Mrs. Gadd lived with her husband Jack and son Fred in Underhill, and kept us supplied with new-laid eggs. She was our village "granny" and if our parents were away we slept in her cottage on feather mattresses. We loved her.

Further up the village, the Lipscombs had the local farm, opposite The Plough where the landlord was Orville Westlake, married to Nora. Next door, the Lucas family, Mrs Lucas, her daughter and son Peter who was sewn into his liberty bodice in October and liberated from it in March. Dear Nelly Jelly who had to get through doors sideways, and Rose Sanders, a powerful village character who helped my mother in the house. Miss White ran the village school and Louie Weller had the village shop and post-office. She had a foster daughter Shirley James who became a friend of ours. Auntie Louie also managed Leith Hill and did teas there. The vicar was the Reverend Wale, unkindly known by some as the Reverend (Deadly) Wale.

MY FATHER

My father was a glove manufacturer. His factory in Manchester was turned over to manufacturing silk-lined leather gauntlets for fighter pilots, and bandages. He commuted every day to his London office, using a motorbike to get to Dorking station. Too old for the call-up and in a "reserved occupation", he joined the Home Guard in Ockley with a lot of colourful characters straight out of Dad's Army: Burt Ansell, Charlie Daly (think he ran the local garage), Tom the porter from Dorking North station, and Chris Millet who defused a bomb on Ockley green. My mother had just enough petrol to drive to

Ockley village hall, do teas and run the bar for the many Canadian soldiers stationed locally..my first introduction to chewing gum. Ma had an ancient Morris 8 which on one occasion in the pitch dark four burly Canadian soldiers lifted clean off the road, with mother in it.

ROFFEYS

Roffeys was a wonderful house for children, but a good deal less comfortable than it is now. Full of winding stairs, hidey holes and cupboards and in some places, slightly spooky. We never felt entirely comfortable in the captain's room nor in the big spare freezing bathroom.

There was a huge and smelly oil-fired boiler out at the back, but not much oil to put in it, so after school, we listened to Children's Hour sitting on a settle inside the open fire in the sitting room, and shivered in the rest of the house.

We had a wonderful Siamese cat (a rarity in those days) called Uncle M. He was a full tom so probably sired most of the village kittens. Joan Sari who lived at the top of our garden owned two bull-terriers called Tot and Chota Peg. Great friends of ours, but respectful to our cat. M would wait for the Bakers next door to go out and he would nip over the wall and beat up poor Dick Baker, leaving behind a scene of devastation.

We ran wild over Leith Hill, only being told to watch out for adders. Uncle M caught one and stuffed it down the back of the settee. I took some grass snake eggs to school but they didn't hatch. We collected bilberries, blackberries, spindle berry and chestnuts.

There were ammunition dumps at the back of the hill, looked after by Italian POW's and targetted by the Luftwaffe and subsequently doodle-bugs.

We went to school at Stanway in Dorking, in those days run by a marvellously eccentric team of 'heads': Miss Bosley, Miss McGill, Alan Dane and poor adorable sweet Miss Short who taught me to read and died one summer weekend as the result of a bee-sting. .my second encounter with death, and a terrible shock.

EARLY MEMORIES

Walking to the top of the village with my mother and watching dog-fights over the Weald, searchlights, smoke, planes crashing in flames.. we never knew whose. Bombers returning home from night raids damaged, and sometimes unable to clear the hill and crashing into it. I remember climbing over wreckage and we were probably too young to realise that the men inside had almost certainly perished.

I don't remember any Anderson shelters but my mother made us sleep in the tiny cupboard under the stairs. No flying glass you see, even if the house collapsed on top of us.

Blackout was strictly enforced by the village bobby. I remember my parents having some fairly wild parties and sending PC Collins (I think) home (across the road) with a helmet full of sandwiches.

There was of course much village gossip. .most of it way over our heads.. not the least talk of Mrs. Lucas's stair carpet becoming very worn by the Italian POWs .

THE IMPORTANCE OF WIRELESS

The wireless was our lifeline to the outside world, and it provided much comfort with lovely programmes like "Monday night at Eight" "ITMA" and for us, Children's Hour with Toytown, Norman and Henry Bones and the immortal Uncle Mac with his poignant "Good night, children. .everywhere" .

News bulletins were closely followed. The announcers always identified themselves: Stuart Hibberd, John Snagge, Franklin Engelmann, Alvar Lidell. I'm sure we were told the good news. - successful night raids in the Ruhr Valley or North Rhine Westphalia. .but even that sent shivers down our spine.

FOOD

Food was of course rationed, but I do not remember ever feeling hungry. Long before the days of freezers, we had a small dilapidated fridge and a walk-in larder. We grew fruit and veg and everything that could be bottled or preserved (eggs in isinglass) was stored. There were plenty of rabbits. We kept some rather unsuccessful cannibalistic chickens and one handsome cockerel who disappeared. "Fox had he" said Harry Ede but we spotted the identical bird in Harry's garden two weeks later.

TOWARDS THE END

V1s started to come in about 1944 and they were very frightening. They looked primitive and had a particular monotonous drone. We could see and hear them approaching across the Weald, their engines would cut, and they would whistle overhead and crash into the hill. Mercifully, Coldharbour was spared, but I do remember the night that Shere church was hit. We became very good at distinguishing between the sound of "ours", Lancasters and Spitfires, and "theirs" Messerschmitts and Heinkels.

When peace finally came, there was much rejoicing. Bonfires on the village green for both VE and VJ day, singing, dancing and quite a lot of drinking. It was the only time I saw my father the worse for drink: arriving home, weaving up the steps to Roffeys in a bowler hat, draped in an enormous Union Jack, bearing a tin containing two goldfish: Churchill and Montgomery. They lived in an aquarium in the dining room and rather bizarrely died in a thunder storm..we found them floating belly up.

I won first prize in the fancy dress kitted out as Bo-Peep. Half-a-crown - undreamed of wealth, which I spent in Auntie Louie's shop on a shaving brush for my father and a jar of Shiphams fish paste for Ma.

AFTER THE WAR

We experienced one of the coldest winters in living memory and Coldharbour was cut off for several days. I remember deep snow drifts, snowmen, tobogganing and penetrating cold.

In 1948 we moved to Dorking and in 1949 I went to boarding school where, for the first time in my life, I was really hungry and very cold most of the time. There was very little food.

A lingering nostalgia for Coldharbour has stayed with me all my life, and the beauty of its setting and surroundings instilled into me a deep and life-long love of the English countryside.

Despite the war, we were all so happy in Coldharbour and when he died in 1984, we scattered my father's ashes in the Tillingbourne Valley.