THE WAR YEARS

An extract from the diary of John Hopkins

1939

The most eventful year of my life so far.

Father had a new job and we moved to a small village called Frieth. Frieth is situated a few miles almost due west of High Wycombe in Buckinghamshire. It was, and still is, a very quiet and peaceful village, then of around 800 inhabitants.

Our house was rented, and located about the middle of an unadopted, unsurfaced lane (now Hayes Field) with some five or six houses on each side ending at a fence with a style and footpath through the field beyond.

The field at the rear of the house was used for the local farmer's cattle. The farmer was a very friendly person, and I spent a lot of time with him learning about the rearing of the animals, including (much to the dismay of my Mother) the process of mating and birthing of them.

Grandad Pitchell died. He was my favourite person. I was already missing him and the thought of never seeing him again upset me terribly.

My second brother, Colin, was born.

I was picked to play cricket for our school team.

And later in the year the most exciting event of all was listening to the Prime Minister declaring war on Germany.

I was now into double figures and it was time for me to start growing up. My friend and I bought five Woodbines and smoked them in the fields as we made our way across them to Marlow. We were both very sick, but determined to try again.

The weather in the spring and summer was very good, with plenty of sun and warmth, and as a consequence my friend Peter from 'The Laurels' and I spent most of our time in the fields with our air rifles. We had a friendly, on-going rivalry to be the best shot, which never really got resolved.

The school was very old, but the head mistress, Mrs Hinton and her staff made attending the classes a pleasure. Her interest in geography was infectious, and I have had a deep and lasting thirst for it ever since. She spent a lot of time with me explaining maps and evolution of countries.

We had no playing field at the school, so all cricket, football, rounders, etc. were played in an adjacent field. It was always cut and ready for us but I have no idea who did it.

I think the total number of children at the school was around thirty.

For reasons I don't remember we often competed against a school from Bourne End, who arrived singing a song beginning "We're the boys from Bourne End College, we've got brains and we've got knowledge……. ……." I don't think their village had a college or even a senior school.

On the whole, life was ok, but I was always wanting something more, a lot of the time I were more or less aimless. Then it was September and everything changed. We were at war.

There was talk of invasion, bombing, gas, evacuation, even food rationing. These threats were very real at the time, and as the adults appeared to be doing very little, we nine and ten year olds felt it was down to us.

We talked of 'bravery' a lot, and to prove mine I would climb out of one side of my bedroom window, edge across on the sill, and get back in through the other side. This went well until our neighbour complained it was frightening her, and I had to stop

First we organised ourselves into a group. Six or seven of us. We had read and listened to the warnings of spies and the possibility of sabotage, from newspapers, the radio, etc. We did in truth think we would be able to help counter these potential activities.

First we armed ourselves with pointed broomsticks. Then we made assumptions based on total ignorance. One was the belief that only uniformed men or women would be using military vehicles and equipment. This led us to reporting a group civilians we found eating and drinking sitting by army lorries, to the police.

Looking back I can see how easy it would have been for the police to humour us with a pat on the head. Instead they explained that many civilians drove military vehicles, and what symbols and markings on them to look for.

The family in 1939.
Back row – Mother, me (with dog), and Father.
Front row – Douglas, Phyllis, friend, and Doreen.

Peter and I had a paper round that took us to the villages of Skirmett and Fingest. We were both avid readers, and noticed that a paper delivered to a certain house in Fingest had words underlined. Immediately of course, spy activity came to mind. Fortunately I mentioned this to my Mother before reporting it. She made me promise not to talk about it to anyone.
We continued to be watchful, but the enthusiasm waned.
(Her explanation made sense some years later).

Along with most of the lads in the village I was in the Boy Scouts. The meetings now took on a very positive structure. We were reminded that we boys were, in many cases now the 'man of the house'. What to do in the event of gas attacks, air raids, invasion, and so on. Make sure we knew the layout of the area as we may be called upon to act as messengers. Carry our identity card at all times. Rightly or wrongly, we felt very involved

One afternoon roaming the fields we heard the wail of sirens. To our disappointment no bombers arrived and fifteen minutes later the steady all clear sounded.
One solid achievement was our 'bomb'. I discovered that if the carbide used in old fashioned lamps was put into a bottle with a small amount of water, it exploded. By trial and error Peter and I established the optimum amounts to give the best results, and had great fun using the river and paper boats as our test site.
Peter had a large picture of Hitler in his father's garage, which we used as target practice with our air rifles.

So far the war had been a disappointment to us. Nothing had happened and everything seemed to be returning to a peace-time calm.
The only concrete evidence of the situation were the gas masks, identity cards, newspapers and the possible arrival of evacuees from London.
Father had joined the LDV (*Local Defence Volunteers)*. They had no uniform or weapons, just an arm band. They met twice a week at the school, but he never told us what they did.
The gas masks had a strong, unpleasant smell of rubber and were hot to wear. Breathing in them was sometimes difficult. Baby Colin's gas mask was an awful thing. It fitted over his whole body and as it was airtight it had a sort of hand pump attached to keep a flow of filtered air in it.
We each had our own identity card.

Frieth school. Two classrooms and a toilet.

The papers were reporting nothing but German successes, and the evacuees had not joined us.
Because of talk of the possible rationing of food, mother was stocking the pantry with tinned fish and meat.
Within the family, my main task was helping Father in the garden, where we grew vegetables and berries. Mother made loads of jam and chutney.

Father would not be conscripted as his left hand had been blown off while working in a munitions factory. He was working as a foreman on the construction of a small, hutted army site.

It seemed the adults had joined the children in not worrying about the war, and we all enjoyed a very happy Christmas. Sooner or later things would change, but for the time being, we were having fun.

1940
Nothing has changed.
We continued to roam the fields, make the bombs, help the farmer, and trying to make life interesting. If it were not for the newspapers, with their daily reports of even more German advances across the Continent, we would almost not know we were at war.

Almost. But the arrival of about twenty evacuees reminded us. They looked a sorry lot, not too well dressed, and many in tears. But to our shame we had little sympathy for them. As far as we were concerned they were involved, doing something exciting. They should have been happy.
Within a week or so they had all been settled and started attending school. It did not take long to see that the classes couldn't cope with the increased numbers (and the attitude) of streetwise young Londoners. There were about a hundred children now. Classes remained a mixture of local and evacuee children, but now attending only half days. I attended the afternoon sessions.
I can't remember when they actually started, but we began to have school radio broadcasts.

As a Boy Scout with a bicycle I was given the task of delivering telegrams to the villages of Skirmett and Fingest as they had no post office. I did not enjoy this because not only did I know that generally they were telling of the death of a serviceman, but it was also the first thought of the ladies who came to the door to receive them. Sometimes they were crying even before they closed the door.
The weather was getting better and better. By the middle of May most of us children were spending the days at or in, the river.
The sirens were still wailing, and totally ignored.

Everyone now had ration books covering food and many other things including clothing. This did not affect us much as we had chickens and the farmer helped us with beef and pork. Chickens were considered a luxury.

A few weeks after my birthday the Germans started bombing the south and east coasts. This of course had no effect on us at all. Some of the evacuees had gone back to London. Enough left us to allow full time attendance again. We thought they might return if things began to happen.

At about this time the news came about two of my uncles who were fighting in France. Uncle Ernie had been rescued at Dunkirk and was in hospital being treated for a number bullet wounds, but Uncle Arthur had been captured and was a prisoner of war.

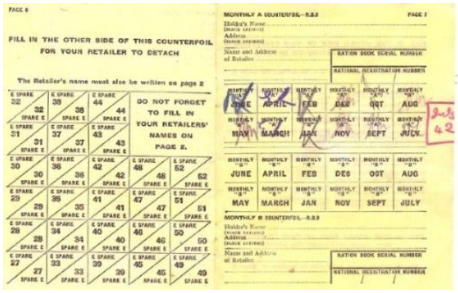
Brother Douglas ran into the road opposite the school one morning and was hit by a car. The car driver took him to Wycombe hospital, and after treatment was sent home. He had small flakes from the car's paintwork in his face until he died in 2008.

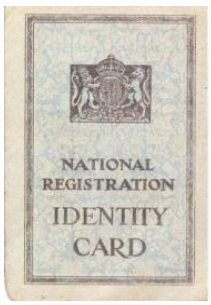
Baby Colin sat on a live uninsulated cable during one of Fathers 'work in progress' days. His rubber napkin cover saved him, but a deep burn in the carpet was a permanent reminder.
By mid-December air raid warnings became common and we heard German bombers passing over, but believing our little village was in no danger, gave them no serious thought.
That was until one night a few days before Christmas. The sirens sounded, and as usual Father and I went into the garden to see what might be happening. After a while I went back indoors leaving father standing by the open back door. Minutes later there was an almighty explosion that shook the house. Mother and I rushed into the kitchen to find Father lying on the floor covered in dust and glass from the window. He was only bruised, but some window glass and a lot roof tiles on that side of the house had gone missing. The explosion had happened a long way from the house, and we were told It was a mine, dropped by parachute, causing a tremendous amount of blast but not much of a crater

Mother refused the overnight accommodation that was offered, and we spent the night clearing up the mess. In the morning workmen boarded up the windows and spread tarpaulin over the missing tiles. A few days later the window glass was replaced, but nothing was to be done to the roof until after the Christmas break.
For several weeks our group used the crater as a make believe battleground.
(*I learned much later that Frieth was only some four miles from the headquarters of the entire British and American air command*).

Mother decided we would move back to Essex at the earliest opportunity, and Father would follow when she had found work for him.
Christmas this year was not the same happy time as the last one. Rationing and recent events had a negative effect on the attitude of the adults.
Immediately after Christmas mother began writing to her sisters and brothers in Essex. I was happy with that.
We would certainly be living near Colchester, a garrison town, and therefore likely to be so much nearer to the real action.
In the meantime I continued learning, scouting, delivering telegrams, helping Father in the garden, and praying for some excitement.

1941
This year started as 1940 had finished, although it seemed more was being done about rationing, helping the 'war effort', advice on various aspects of personal safety, and much more information on the course of the war. None of it really impacted on us young people, our thoughts and expectations were on a different wavelength.
Mother was not getting very far with her idea of moving back to Essex. The general feeling among the people there was that we would be better off where we were. They were however, our only hope, so she continued to hassle them.
She spent a lot of time trying to convince them that although nothing compared to London, there was an element of danger in Frieth. This was quite difficult as the locations of air raids were not published, and in any event bombs landing in the area were few and far between and random.





General issue ration book *Civilian Identity Card*

Father now had an army uniform and the LDV were called the Home Guard. He had no weapon, possibly due to having no left hand. I think he was secretly pleased to be involved, because he was always conscious of his disability, and this put him on a more or less equal footing with other men.
Our roof was retiled,

Some evacuees returned, and we started the half day sessions again. A common feature of our English classes was the competition for writing to the BBC for transcripts of teaching broadcasts that had been lost due to enemy action.

Air raid warnings were much more frequent now. It was quite obvious we were under the flight path of German bombers heading for the more northern targets. Occasionally we would hear bombs exploding in the distance, and Mother always took the young ones under the stairs, but I felt quite happy with the situation.

Our life followed this pattern until November. Then, great news. Uncle Ernie, now fully recovered from his wounds was being posted to an unknown destination, and was worried about his wife, Auntie Ruby, being on her own more or less in the centre of an army training area. This was Friday Woods, about four miles south of Colchester, and
according to her letter was in use round the clock seven days a week. This was music to my ears. I couldn't wait! Mother accepted, notice was given to the landlord, Father arranged temporary accommodation for himself, and we prepared to leave for Colchester about the middle of December.

The thought of leaving my friends had a certain sadness, but the overriding emotion was a mixture of excitement and impatience. At the time I don't think I was aware of it, but now I realise that from that moment I lost all interest in our group activities, and entered a sort of mental no man's land.
Mrs Hinton, the headmistress gave me an atlas, Peter gave me a box of air rifle pellets.
The weather was fantastic, and life couldn't be better, but Father seemed a little unhappy, and I had no idea why.
(*looking back, I can now see that when really difficult or important decisions had to be made, it was Mother that made them, and Father had to go along with them).*

The travel arrangements made, furniture stored, and goodbyes said, we were driven by a friend to High Wycombe rail station and joined the train to Marylebone station in London. For the adults the journey was a nightmare. The train was crowded beyond belief, mainly uniformed men and a few women. It was also slow, stopping many times. From Marylebone we took a taxi to Liverpool Street station, and then we saw what the war was about. The taxi driver, who seemed to be a very happy person, apologised for the detours we were taking to avoid burning and collapsing buildings, little realising that we hadn't a clue he was doing it. I had expected to see the heaps of rubble that had once been shops and offices, but the smoke rising from them I wasn't. In some places there was a sort of haze, and as we drove through it, the taxi was filled with a smell that was new to me and a bit disturbing. Parts of that smell I did recognise, wet earth, damp bedding and charred wood, but there was something else I couldn't place at the time.
(*I experienced that smell again, much stronger, when I was close to a bombing in Colchester).*

The train journey from Liverpool Street to Colchester was, if anything worse than from Wycombe. By now it was dusk and the carriages were completely blacked out and very stuffy. It seemed the whole British army was returning to Brentwood, Colchester and towns northward, standing room only, and no room to move.
Arriving at North Station we caught the bus to the town centre, amazed at how clean and free from any damage the town was.
We were picked up by a friend of Aunt Ruby outside the Fire Office at the top of North Hill and driven to her house at Friday Woods.
The house was a standard three bedroom, semidetached cottage, and it was obviously going to be crowded.
No matter, I had already seen troops in full battle gear, and Bren gun carriers on the way. Things were definitely improving.

It has to be said that we people who lived in the country had a tremendous advantage when it came to provisions for the table. We grew practically all the fruit and vegetables we needed, most had chickens and rabbits, and many had pigs, quite often to be shared with friends and family. In the country I think there was very little black market.

For the first time in my memory, Christmas was a huge family affair, but almost ladies only. Uncle Bert on leave from his ship was the sole adult male. Nevertheless it was a very enjoyable day.

Apart from the inevitable family chat, the main topic of our conversation was when, and how badly, Colchester, as a very important military town, would be bombed. We all thought it would happen sooner or later.

(Looking back I'm amazed that such a horrendous possibility was discussed in such a rational manner, as though it was just a normal academic subject)

Friday Woods was everything I hoped it to be. The fields to the side and rear of the house were used for mechanised battle training, with bren gun carriers, armoured cars and of course, soldiers.
This was good, but there was a bonus. Behind us was a farmhouse taken over by an anti-aircraft gun unit. The 3.7 inch ack ack (anti-aircraft) guns were set
in pits, surrounded by ammunition boxes and sandbags. The officers, men, and ATS girls were very friendly and I had free run of the whole area. They appeared not to be affected by food rationing and I enjoyed many meals with them.

Even during live firing I was permitted to be there, although not in the actual area of activity. I thought life was being very kind to me.
Our stay with Aunt Ruby was short. The house was a long way from shops and school, and in reality, well overcrowded. I was torn between the desire to be 'near the action' and the wish to be somewhere I could be with friends of my own age.
In the event the decision was made in less than a month. Mother had found a job for father at a hutted army base called Cherry Tree Camp, just outside Colchester, and a bungalow on a farm called Knights Farm, owned by the Greer family and managed by a Mr Collins, a small distance from the village of Layer de la Haye.

The village had no senior school, so I had to travel to Birch, around five or six miles distant. In many ways Birch school was similar to that at Frieth. Same general appearance, but not as old, no playing field, close to the church, and small class sizes. The school consisted of three main rooms in an L shape, one of which could be divided into two by a folding screen. At the end of one leg was the cloakroom, and beyond that the toilets. I also attended classes in a small separate building, equipped for both wood and metalworking.
The school had no means of providing any hot or cold food, so lunch was always sandwiches and whatever drink mother could get. We ate, (under very strict rules about leaving a mess) in one of the classrooms.
Along with the rest of the country, the large garden had been turned over to growing vegetables and fruit.

The headmaster was Mr Gill, a very firm, fair man whose main interest I think was mathematics. The craft teacher was known as 'Donkey', and I don't think I ever knew his real name. He had a very firm rule that no toy or non-learning item should be taken into classroom, and I have a strong memory of his obvious delight in confiscating anything he saw us playing with. He would destroy any item belonging to a boy (no girls in his classes) who did not 'behave'.

As at Frieth, one teacher stood out, Miss Victoria. Like Mrs Hinton, she also had an interest in geography, and we developed a strong bond.
One very popular part of the school regime was the option to 'swap' classes. For instance, gardening was treated as a subject, as was sport. I hated gardening and I chose to play cricket instead. Of course this did not apply to the main subjects.

Children from Layer de la Haye and the surrounding farms etc. were taken to the school by bus.
The bus was a bit of a joke. It was very, very old, as was the driver. I got fed up with the frequent breakdowns and late arrivals, once or twice never arriving at all. Eventually I cycled to school, sometimes beating the bus, although I have to admit, only when the bus either broke down or was held up in the narrow lanes, but I was always cheered on by the passengers.

On one trip we were 'buzzed' by a German fighter plane, which seemed to be shooting at us. We on the rear seats had a good view of it. Classes were interrupted or disturbed daily. Air raid warnings were sounded almost every day, and we would troop down to the air raid shelter that had been built on the edge of the playground.
Teachers and classmates talked of evacuees, but they must have gone home by the time I arrived, as I never saw any.

With no bathroom in the house I supplemented my daily stand-up wash at the
kitchen sink with a weekly visit to the public baths in Colchester. This cost six pence ($2^1/_2$p) for around twenty minutes in a small private cubicle with a large cast iron bath, huge brass taps that gushed water in great quantities. Soap and towel could be provided for a small further charge. This arrangement continued until we moved into Wellhouse, where we had a bathroom.

The style of our school bus. Ours was a little smaller, and not as well kept.

Our new home was set in the grounds of the farm, with a large garden, a running stream, and close to the Collins house where two boys of about my age lived. This would have been ideal but for several reasons. It had not been decorated for years, the structural condition was poor, and it had an outside toilet. Worst of all it was a three mile walk to get the school bus.

Once again Mother started a search for a better home.
In the meantime I helped on the farm and spent time with my new friends.
Father arrived and took up his new job, which he professed to enjoy and seemed genuinely to do so.

We were living quite near to the Abberton reservoir, and we spent time on the concrete edging on our bicycles, the only flat and level surface available. The reservoir had an unobstructed run of some two and a half miles, ideal for enemy seaplanes. As a deterrent, wires were laid across the surface, and sea mines were laid in it. It was particularly good fun in the really cold spells, as the freezing water detonated the mines, erupting in huge columns of water. The occasional nightime detonations were not such fun.

Well House, our first house with running water and a bathroom.

This was my life until April, when Mother informed us we were moving to a house. A real house. The end of a row of three, three bedrooms, lounge, dining room, kitchen and bathroom. This was really good news, not only was it two miles nearer the school bus pick up point, it was also two miles nearer all my school mates. The house was in excellent condition, with garden front and back. Adjoining the back garden was a fantastic orchard with plums, apples and pears. Best of all, my best friend Peter Cook lived only a few hundred yards away.

Our neighbour, living in the centre house was the wife of a soldier serving in the Middle East. She was young and (we thought) would not bother us.
The third house was empty and open, so it became our gang den.
We built a chicken coop and rabbit hutches and stocked them with our future dinners.

Father had never been fully fit since he lost his hand. The fire and smoke following the explosion seriously affected his lungs and he was subject to bouts of pneumonia and other problems.
Within a few weeks of moving into Wellhouse he was bedridden with a particularly bad attack. It was three or four weeks before he could return to work.
I continued to help on the farm, but had become a sort personal assistant to Mrs (Peggy) Greer. This made life very interesting as both her and her husband were quite odd. I can't now remember his name, which isn't surprising as I saw little of him. He spent much of his time driving his Lagonda. This was a truly magnificent car, cream or white, two seats, and completely open. Although I never saw it in position, I think it could have had a canvas top. Huge headlights and other lights and badges on a crossbar. The dashboard was a delight, and I'm not sure, but I think it included an altimeter. The one certainty is that he did absolutely nothing on the farm.
(I researched Lagonda Cars and the nearest match indicated it was probably a Rapide)

Mrs Greer on the other hand drove an old, small van, which was in a terrible condition. On one occasion I stood on the running board pouring water into the radiator while she drove it to the garage for repair. A distance of around four miles.
Colchester, as you would expect had a thriving Army Cadet Force. I joined as soon as I could and experienced the pride of wearing the uniform. At last my dreams were becoming real, and I determined to do my very best in whatever I was asked to do. Mother was not too happy, but she made no attempt to dissuade me. Meetings were held twice a week, one in the drill hall at Gujarat Barracks covering drill, care of equipment and so on, and the other at various locations for field training, including live shooting, exercises with the army and home guard, camouflage, map reading etc. The Boy Scouts were forgotten. I did what I could at the farm as and when I had time.

One of the most enjoyable times were the weeks of the harvest, and this year it was special. It seemed the sun would go on shining for ever. The clear sky enabled us to watch the scramble of German bombers and British fighters. The system of the actual cutting was to work from the outside of a field inwards, thereby at some point a small square of corn was left standing in the centre. The rabbits then had nowhere to go but out into the stubble where we were waiting.
The sandwiches and lemonade consumed during breaks in the corn cutting were as tasty and welcome as a banquet.
An awful lot of rabbit was eaten for a couple of weeks

Colchester had been relatively free from bombing. There had been one or two attacks, but the town had a feel of normality. In fact our only physical contact with the war was the discovery of around twenty butterfly bombs one morning, in the grass, and hanging from overhead cables. Fortunately some had been dropped near Ipswich some weeks earlier, and we were all aware of the danger.

Sevicemen from several countries were stationed in and around the town. The majority from various countries of the Commonwealth, and there were occasional differences of opinion that had to be settled in one way or another. Best to keep out of the way when they did.
The five cinema's and Empire Theatre were always full, and as time went on the queues for them seemed to get longer and longer.
British Restaurants were opening around the town, serving basic menu's, pretty much designed by the Ministry of Food, and not very tasty. But they were cheap. As I remember a shilling or so for three courses. Young people of my age could spend time in Milk Bars that dispensed hot, cold and non-alcoholic drinks along with light food such as cakes and rolls.

Land girls arrived at the farm. They turned out to be a young and happy lot, and we had loads of fun despite my age. One of them would always ask for my help or come to help me. She called me "her Adonis", but it fell on deaf
ears, I had no idea what or who Adonis was at the time. All I knew or cared about was the fact that she was fun to be with.

I made another attempt at smoking, but it still made me sick.

This was the year I became aware of the irregular heart rhythm that is still with me.

The Army Cadet Force was now more important to me than any other activity.
As the year ended the air raids became even more frequent and several bombs fell on the town.

I saw a 'gas bag' for the first time, on the roof of a car. The gas was used instead of petrol, which was rationed. Although widely used it was never a common sight.

Peter and I had obtained army issue steel helmets and during air raids we roamed the village wearing them, hoping to catch a German airman parachuting down.
(What we were doing then seems quite silly now, but at the time not a day passed without warnings of enemy parachutists, possibility of spy's, and so on. I think we had become adults in our appreciation of the situation, but still retaining the imagination of youth).

Corn cutting in the forties. A binder, drawn by a tractor cut and bound the stalks into bundles, which were stacked in 'stooks' of three or four. After a couple of days they were taken to a threshing machine which separated the seed from the husks. The seed, now called grain came down a chute into bags held by a labourer, who tied them ready for transport to a processing plant

During these walks we picked up shrapnel, the fragments of exploded anti-aircraft shells, which fell almost everywhere.
There was a fair amount of dealing between the boys. The aim was to collect a 'full set', that is, a piece from each of the various parts of a shell.

Birch school. Little has changed to this elevation, but extensive additions have been made to the far end and rear of the original building. The air raid shelter is now used as a store.

The family situation at this time was interesting.
Father was working as a civilian at an army barracks.
Uncle Ernie was in the Royal Engineers stationed in the south of England.
Uncle Bert was on a destroyer in the Atlantic.
Uncle Arthur was a prisoner of war in Germany.
Uncle George was in the Armoured Corps somewhere in Yorkshire.
Aunt Dorothy had trained as a nurse and was serving with the QARNNAS in Devonport.
Aunt Fon (Sylvia) was unable to work due to a deformed leg.
Aunt Ruby was doing voluntary work with the police.

Mother was busy looking after the garden, father and five children.
Father was later transferred to the offices of the CRE in Flagstaff Road as a messenger. That meant I could spend more time with him. Mother of course was worried, as most of the bombs falling on the town had done so during daylight hours.

1942
I had my first brush with 'romance'. Barbara, who lived quite close to us wanted to be my girlfriend. No chance, the war was much more interesting.
Father's health seemed to be improving, and things generally were not bad at all.
(With hindsight I think the adults may not have felt the same)

I helped on the farm at evenings and weekends and took part in almost every activity, from assisting in the calving, (which I found a bit messy), to weeding large fields of beet. The one thing I could not do was work with or near swede clamps. The smell of rotting swedes is the worst in the world.
I decided I would be a farmer, and decided to leave school at the earliest possible time and work on Peggy Greer's farm.

The Americans had arrived. Their uniforms made them stand out from the rest, and it was obvious even to me that they had more of everything than us.
A small unit were quartered in a large house on the green. They had names like Duke, Earl, Chuck, and so on, and they told us such farfetched stories of their lives that even we didn't believe them. We pretended to though, as they always had plenty of chocolate and sweets.
We had no idea why they were there. They never left the house for any length of time, and appeared to have no transport.
(I discovered later they were engineers involved in the construction of the many airfields being built around us.)

Some of the most harrowing hours of my entire life happened in early spring. Brother Doug was out playing, where we knew not, when I heard that some boys had found a live grenade. They were playing with it, when it exploded killing three of them. I didn't know if Doug was with them and spent several hours on my bicycle frantically trying to find him. Eventually he returned home knowing nothing of the event.

During the year Peter and I went to see, two crashed B17's and a German Dornier, and collect ammunition from them. We also tried to look at a
crashed Bristol Blenhiem, on the Wigborough Road, but guards had been posted round it and we were not allowed near it.

The ammunition we collected was used in two ways. From some we removed the bullet , took out the propellant and made small 'fireworks'. The rest we 'fired'. We had discovered that a gate post in the orchard had a bolt hole into which an American 50mm shell fitted perfectly. It could be fired by inserting it into the empty bolt hole, and with a blunt two inch nail held by pliers against the percussion point, and hit with a hammer. The bullet never went very far as the shell case shot out the other way at the same time. Unfortunately one evening an incendiary round went further than usual, into our neighbour's front room and burned her sideboard. That put an end to that pastime.

My interest in maths, maps and geography was paying dividends for me in the Cadets. Also my hours of shooting in the fields with my father gave me an edge on the live shooting exercises. *(I had my own 4.10, but the use of it was not allowed since the outbreak of the war)* I was at the moment a lance corporal, but rumour had it I was going to do better.
The training was more intensive now and included use of radio communication, and tactics.

Bombs were falling on Colchester and the surrounding area. Many of them were random, but even so, buildings were being destroyed. Many of our evenings were spent in the garden listening to the sounds of the bombers, the anti-aircraft guns, the odd explosion, and watching the glow of distant fires.

The newspapers did not print the location of bombings. Peter, myself, and a friend decided we would like to know, so we devised a scheme. In our respective gardens we erected a table, on which we stuck a 1 inch map of the whole area, properly orientated. We each made a primitive sighting tool, and each of us produced an angle on our map by observing distant activities. The next day at school we laid the angles on our 'master map' and their intersection pin-pointed the location of a raid. This went well for two or three weeks, and created a great deal of interest, until one morning the police arrived and confiscated our map, making threats of possible prosecution.
When I arrived home that evening I discovered police had also removed my targeting map.

We never discovered who reported us.

American servicemen were now arriving in large numbers. They were not very popular with the servicemen already here. Mainly, I think, because they were much better off than anyone else, not subject to our rationing, and above all were loud and had no tact whatsoever. Also they were often billeted with families whose men folk were away. Often not a comfortable situation.

I had persuaded Peter to join me in the Cadets, and we spent as much time in Colchester as we could. One evening while watching 'Captains Courageous' at the Empire cinema, the screen showed the usual notice 'air raid warning' followed by directions to the nearest air raid shelter. We decided to stay in, but a little later 'leave the cinema' appeared on the screen, and an usherette told us nearby buildings were on fire, and the cinema was threatened. We came out to find the Hollington's clothing factory and other buildings well alight. We watched the efforts of the firemen all night, but around nine 'o'clock in the morning the front wall of the factory collapsed onto the road, and it was all over.
I went home that morning to very worried and angry parents.
(The depth of their concern did make me realise how completely thoughtless I had been).

Troop numbers in the town were reducing, and it was noticeable that ATS girls were taking over many of the duties normally carried out by the men.

One spot that was never quiet at any time was the large NAAFI complex at the junction of Circular Road East and Napier Road. This was open twenty four hours a day, and due to the number of civilians attached to the services, non military adults also had access.
It included snooker, table tennis, library, bar, dining, lounge etc.
(In many ways it resembled a present day night club without the excesses)

Almost the last bomber raid on Colchester could have been the most serious. The bombs fell very close to the main army administration complex in Flagstaff Road.
I was about halfway into town to meet Peter, when bombs fell on houses in South Street. This was less than a quarter of a mile from me, and a cloud of dust and rubbish came across like a thick fog, except it consisted of everything including feathers, clothing, paper, soot, and the smell. The same smell I couldn't recognise as we passed through London but much, much stronger. I went down to the site, but there were a great many people helping and I didn't really want to be there. Unlike the Hollington's fire this one had people in the buildings. As I walked away the sirens wailed their warning, a little late for some unlucky people.

I was now a Cadet Sergeant, and I relished it. I am by nature a shy person, but a combination of the uniform, the authority, and the knowledge that I knew what I was doing overcame that, if only while I was carrying out my duties.
(The irony of this was that very little of the training received in the cadets was of use to me when I was called into the army. After primary training my posting was to the Royal Armoured Corps, and from that time I never handled a rifle, drilled, or was called upon to carry out any other infantry activity).

Despite the friendships and interests at school I was more and more finding it difficult to concentrate on lessens. I find it hard to describe how I actually felt. It was, I think, a mix of frustration, boredom, and the knowledge that nothing I was doing was fulfilling my desire to be useful. I even envied my father, he had a uniform, an office, and most of all was amongst men who were making important decisions.

The end of a runway of an American airfield was only about two miles from the school, so the aircraft when using that one were very low and noisy Occasionally an air raid warning coincided with American aircraft either taking off or landing. Not knowing if it 'was one ours' or 'one of theirs' approaching was quite scary.
Our neighbour's husband and his friend were killed fighting in Italy. She spent a lot of time with us for several weeks after she received the news.
Disturbed nights now were caused more by British bombers flying out to, or coming back from Germany, than by enemy aircraft.
Uncle Ernie had been posted to Burma, and was in charge of a mule unit. In his letters he said they are sometimes the only way of transporting food and equipment through the mud and jungle.

With no thought of the consequences of doing so before end of term, I decided to leave school and go to work on Peggy Greer's farm. I had only been there a few weeks when Father returned home from an away job, and was very angry. He discussed the situation with the headmaster, who agreed to my leaving. He then took me away from the farm, and escorted me to CRE Colchester for an interview as an assistant in the drawing office.
CRE was the Royal Engineers centre for the Colchester District, controlling all army war works in the area south of the river Orwell in the north to the river Crouch in the south and extending some thirty miles inland.

The interview was carried out in the office of the chief engineer. The only requirement was to draw an accurate outline of the British Isles, understand scale and architectural language. My interest in architecture and geography made the whole interview a simple exercise. I was offered an appointment as an office assistant, which I accepted there and then.
I was to join another trainee named Harry, who had been a trainee reporter on the Manningtree local newspaper. He was a very interesting person, and still wrote articles in the paper.
My first duties were to keep the office tidy, assist the engineers and architects when requested, and spend a minimum of three hours a day under instruction.
My pay was 19 shillings (95p) for a five and a half day week.
It was far and away more interesting than the farm.

The drawing office was one of two brick single storey buildings. The other housed the finance team, responsible for cost, estimating, and expenditure. Some yards away was a brick and concrete surface air raid shelter, the site of my first silliness. All the staff were in the shelter during a particularly noisy air raid. I was talking quite loudly to Harry sitting beside me, when the
noise suddenly stopped, just as I said "we are losing the war you know". A wonderfully stupid thing to say as, at that time the tide was turning. My name was mud for quite some time

After a few weeks my duties extended to tracing drawings, printing maps and drawings, and learning to use the dumpy level and theodolite. I would have worked in this place for no wages, it was bustling with activity, and all of it to do with the war

The printing was done on what was known as a Dyeline system. Plans are drawn on transparent material. This was placed over light sensitive paper under glass and subjected to light from a carbon lamp. After a few seconds the light was extinguished and the paper passed through rollers covered in a developing fluid. The light has removed all the sensitive areas of the paper not covered by the black lines and lettering on the negative so that the remaining image is an exact copy of the original drawing.

The dumpy level is a basic surveying instrument used to record changes in ground levels, and ensure, for example, level floors of buildings under. construction. The theodolite is used in land surveying, measuring horizontal and vertical angles, and pre-construction setting out of new buildings etc.

1943
So far as excitement is concerned this could be called a rest year.
Air raids were becoming less frequent, and the number of German aircraft involved rarely exceeded two or three.
Peter and I continued our 'street patrolling' but in truth without the original enthusiasm.
(This may seem to be very silly now, but we were fifteen and the need to take an active part in the war was desperately strong. Could it have been the reality equivalent of present day computer games I wonder?).

To save money, I walked to Colchester in the mornings and came home by bus. The buses on the Colchester – Layer de la Haye route were run then, as now, by Chambers.

Both my involvement and interest in my work at CRE Colchester increased greatly over the year.
By the end of the year I was assisting the senior staff on surveys and inspections of military sites over the whole of north east Essex. The icing on the cake was the fact that I was being driven by an ATS girl in a military vehicle. Could it possibly get better than this.

The makeup of the office was really interesting, even odd. The chief draftsman was a captain Royal Engineers. We rarely saw him as he issued orders etc., on formal 'day sheets' as he called them. The other trainee and myself 'visited' his office one lunchtime, and what we found seemed to indicate that most of his time was spent drawing nude women.
Second in command was a Staff Sergeant Hunt. A normally quiet man but suffering periods of uncontrollable temper, caused we were told, by his experiences fighting in France. At the height of an attack he would think nothing of throwing a lead paperweight at someone.

Major Lockheart, retired Royal Engineers. In his sixties but living the life of a much younger man. His hobby was model making, mainly boats. On one occasion he took Harry and me out to 'a job'. The 'job' turned out to be a visit to his huge garden pond and giving us rides in a punt towed by one of his steam driven models. Lovely man.
The rest of the compliment was made up by two senior and three 'junior' civilian draftsmen, all unfit for military service, and we two trainee's.

We had at our disposal a staff car and two small 15cwt covered pickups. We drew drivers from a pool of ATS personnel.

One senior draftsman had the reputation of being accident prone, but an excellent surveyor. I always seemed to draw the short straw when he required a 'chain man', and I soon discovered he deserved his reputation. I only remember him as Vic, known as 'Venereal Vic' to all.
A couple of incidents (among quite a number) illustrate the fact.
I was assisting him carrying out a survey of land adjacent to a gun battery at Walton on the Naze when a buzzer sounded. ''It's OK'' said Vic, and we continued our measuring. Minutes later the firing began at an aircraft coming in over the sea. ''Target practice'' said Vic. When the 'target' started firing in our direction I jumped into a ditch, but Vic ran to a small tree, no more than a few inches in diameter and got behind it. It would have given him very little protection if the German had fired directly at us, rather than the gun battery.
(That incident made me realise, that bearing in mind the sheer numbers of coastal sites I had visited, how little I had seen of enemy action).

At Parkeston Quay we were checking a pillbox on top of a railway embankment some forty feet high. I was a few yards behind. As we approached the entrance he turned to warn me of the restricted headroom of the entrance. He turned back just in time to hit his head on the concrete lintel, and roll semi-conscious down the embankment. He spent the rest of the day in Harwich hospital having several stitches to his forehead.
A 'chain man' is a surveyor's assistant. It derives from railway engineering. In the early days all measuring was carried out using a metal 'chain' consisting of a hundred links and was sixty six feet long, giving eighty chains to a mile. During a survey the chain man is the person dragging the chain. (A cricket pitch is one chain between stumps).

There was a pecking order in the civilian staff. As we frequently spent one or more days in military bases, we were given a military rank equivalent to our post in the CRE.
We trainees for instance had to eat and sleep in the senior sergeants mess. I once met a friend on one site, a corporal. I ate lunch with him in the ordinary ranks mess, and was reprimanded for it when I returned to the office.

My first real purchase with my own money was a Claude Butler racing bicycle. It was my pride and joy until racing down St Johns Street I ran into the back of a stationary bus. It never looked the same after that. Although I now had a cycle, I continued to walk into town with Peter, who was also on low pay and saving.

Some evenings I went down to the reservoir to watch Lancaster bombers flying very low with what looked like two small searchlights shining down onto the water. Occasionally they would drop what looked like barrels, which splashed and bounced across the surface.
(*I had no idea then that this was practice for the bombing of the dams in Germany).*

I had my first beer. Three of us went to a pub and got rather drunk. I hate to admit this but in the interests of the story I have to tell. After the pub closed we went back to the office and set what we thought was a harmless booby trap for the cleaner, due in the morning. Unfortunately it backfired and she suffered a broken arm. We paid (money) dearly for it.
On another occasion we printed a five pound note on light weight map paper on the print machine and used it to pay a taxi driver one evening. We had intended to tell him and have a laugh, but we got scared and left without telling him. We never knew what happened to it. He probably blamed a serviceman.

We were now the central printing office in the region, printing plans and maps for all military units. Generally, plans for printing for the Americans were delivered by uniformed servicewomen. This was a delight to us, as the American service uniforms were much better than ours, being made of a finer material and fancier insignia. Also, whereas the ATS girls had thick skirts ending below the knee and horrible thick stockings, the American service women's skirts stopped at or just above the knee, and the stockings were silk (or seemed so to us). Harry and I were always willing to assist in the print room.

My sixteenth birthday. Among my presents was a very special one. A bolt action, .22 bullet firing rifle, given to me by Major Lockheart.

Towards the end of May onwards the activities of both day and night bombers increased dramatically. The routine of large formations flying out and after several hours returning changed. Now it seemed there was a continuous stream of aircraft, coming and going in a much shorter time scale.
The morning news on the 6th of June told us why. The invasion of France.

I think it was a week or so later, the Home Guard unit on duty in the early hours, on the roof of the waterworks building in Layer de la Haye reported an aircraft, on fire, crashing and exploding in the fields towards Birch.
Wrong!! The V1's had arrived. This was one of many that arrived that night.
The next afternoon, our chief was called to a meeting, which lasted well into the night
Next morning a meeting of all drawing office staff was held in the main office to be advised of the work to follow. Two or three days passed and we each received our instructions.
Mine was to carry out a survey of two locations of open ground between Frinton and Clacton, and peg out a given area on a true north bearing to be levelled to a firm surface. At that time we were unaware of the reasons for this work, but were told quite forcibly that it was urgent in the extreme.
I carried out the surveys and plotted the results.
The reason for the urgency became clear.
The V1 flew too fast and too low for the standard 3.7'' anti-aircraft gun to be of any real use.
Gunnery experts had designed a system thought to be an answer to the problem of shooting them down. The theory was that twenty guns with a high rate of fire would have the best chance of success if aimed to form a group of exploding shells, roughly a three hundred metre cube.

The final design required two rows of ten 40mm Bofors light anti-aircraft guns to be connected to a radar controlled command centre, which located, and locked all twenty guns onto the target. As soon as confirmation that all guns were on target the order to fire was given. With efficient loading, the target would receive around sixteen hundred rounds a minute.
I did see several shot down but never discovered whether it was a total success, but it was truly strange to see twenty guns with only one loader on each platform, all moving and firing in unison.

By now it seemed that the war would soon be over and I would have no part in it. I couldn't let that happen, so I devised a plan.
I stained and tore my birth certificate to obliterate the date of birth, and applied to join the Royal Marines. The application was accepted and I reported to Bush House in London for the physical examinations. At reception I handed over my certificate, which was received with a comment about its condition but nothing else. The medical and aptitude tests took three hours and I felt I had done really well. I went down to the main office, expecting to be given information about when and where I had to go next. The officer at the desk handed me my birth certificate, told me I had done really well, thanked me for attending and suggested I returned when I reached the correct age.
I returned home disappointed and feeling a bit silly

1944
Difficult to know where to start, this was a year so full of activity, I have a problem putting the various events in their correct chronological order. So I beg forgiveness from any purist who knows better.
Sister Joyce was born in Colchester maternity hospital

I continued to enjoy my work at CRE, especially as I was being given more responsibility.
As the numbers of German air attacks dwindled, so the business of setting up ack ack sites drew to a close.
In addition to the day to day work, the office was very busy compiling schedules of land and buildings requisitioned or damaged by the army. This involved a tremendous amount of travel and paperwork.

Day and night, British and American bombers and fighters were passing overhead in ever greater numbers. We counted them in hundreds now, as they circled waiting to complete their formations. We were surrounded by American airfields, several less than twenty miles from us.
The Americans had a very relaxed attitude towards my age group, and I had, over the past months, been allowed on to their airfield at Boxted and given tours of the aircraft there. They were mainly the B17 flying fortress, P47 Thunderbolt, and P51 Mustang.

The major event of the year for us occurred one night in September. Father and I were standing at the front door, watching a particularly heavy air raid. The bombers were so close and low that Father sent Mother and the other children under the dining table 'just in case'.
Minutes later Father shouted something and pushed me into the kitchen and under the table. Before he could join me, four bombs straddled the house.

From under the table I saw a sight that will never leave me. The vibration from the exploding bombs caused the cooking range to jump up and down, and at the same time, soot, dust and most of the cooking utensils showered down on us. Climbing out, looking like coal miners we surveyed the damage. Most of the windows had gone, as had some ceilings and many of the roof tiles.
Very quickly an air raid warden was on the scene to assess the situation, and I accompanied him.

We found two craters, one fire bomb burning, and the location of and an unexploded bomb.

It was obvious we could not stay in the house, so Aunt Ruby housed us once again. Mother had a meeting with the chief warden the following day, and was promised the repairs would be carried out as soon as possible, but of course they could not be safely started until the bomb had been made safe.

The bomb disposal unit requisitioned a pair of houses as a base, which meant that we, our neighbours, and two other families had to find alternative accommodation for an unknown period of time. The bombs were made safe and removed in ten days. The unit left and the ousted families returned to their homes.
Repairing, that is to say making liveable, our two houses took a further two weeks. I have a feeling that after a month Aunt Ruby was pleased to see us go.
The roof which had moved slightly, remained in its new position, and I dreamed about it for several years. Not nightmares, simple things, such as it was leaking, or the water pipes in the roof space were damaged. Peter, whose house admittedly was shielded by a bank and thick hedgerow, slept through the whole event.

Another new (to us) type of anti-aircraft gun was the 'Z' battery. A very strange piece of equipment.
It consisted of a circular metal plate about six feet in diameter onto which was built a metal frame supporting the guide rails for two rockets with warheads. The rockets looked like four inch drainpipes with fins at one end.
The ignition of the rocket was electronic, powered by two AA batteries.
We set up two 'Z' batteries, one at Walton and one on Abbey Field in Colchester, each with about forty guns firing two rockets each precisely together. The fuses were set to explode at different heights and angles, giving a box of bursting shells. About a mile cube.
The battery on Abbey Field was stood down following an accidental rocket launch that narrowly missed the Town Hall tower.

At the Frinton site, efforts were made to fire them only out to sea, as some eighty metal tubes around six feet long crashing to earth caused havoc. For obvious reasons these batteries were not popular and very few were actually used.

Despite all the efforts to shoot down the V1's, many got through, and our part of Essex suffered a good number of strikes particularly towards Kelvedon.

The garden of Wellhouse rose to higher level than the house and gave a good view of the surrounding area. V1's passed over almost every day and from time to time I would shoot at them with my rifle. I doubt if the bullets reached them, but one afternoon I was shooting at one when its engine stopped. It came down at least a mile away, but Father, when he had finished swearing at me, threatened severe punishment if I ever did it again.

Walking to work one morning with Peter along Berechurch Road, we watched a V1 crash into a field quite close to a barracks and a row of flat roofed houses. We had seen it coming down and were in no danger, but the blast from it was incredible. The roofs of several houses were lifted off and the fronts badly damaged.

Late in the year I was involved in the design and supervision of a new prisoner of war camp on the Berechurch Hall Road. (*Now a military correction establishment*).
It was to be built by the prisoners, who would live in a tented camp until its completion.
As the drawings notation had to be in German we worked with a German architect, who translated for us. I learnt quite a lot of the language.

1945
Everything was still rationed, even sweets.

Work at CRE continued, but all that could be done about the V1's had been completed, and as nothing could be done about the V2's, the office felt relaxed and good humoured. We were soon to embark on the process of derequisitioning and evaluating damage to property and land.
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Although the V2's landed without warning, anyone out in the open, looking up, and in the right direction might sight the vapour trail of one as it entered the atmosphere.
Despite spending hours searching the sky, I saw only one. It landed about two miles away in open fields just south of the built-up area of Colchester.
That evening Peter and I went to inspect the crater and pick up a couple of souvenirs. I still have what appears to be part of the electrical circuit made by Siemens.

In March we were told that Allied troops had advanced to a point where the launching of V2's against Britain was no longer possible, and in April we started working with the War Damage Commission.

In May the war in Europe ended but not in the Far East. I was almost seventeen years old and along with most of my friends felt no real joy. It was an anti-climax, a sort of mental no man's land that we didn't want to cross. What could possibly provide us with excitement and responsibilities to compare with the last four years.

Uncle Ernie was still serving in the Far East, Uncle Arthur would soon be home from the prisoner of war camp. Uncle Bert was on his way to join the Pacific Fleet. Uncle George would be waiting for news of demob.
May 9th was declared a holiday, but Peter and I found no pleasure in it. We both understood how much it meant to all the servicemen who would no longer be in danger, but we were seventeen and felt very strongly the loss of the chance to join them. In our minds we could only see a bland and boring future.
My birthday followed nine days later, almost unnoticed. However, among my cards was a letter inviting me to join the Army.


Daily Mirror
MAY 9
Wednesday, May 9, 1945
No. 12,912 ONE PENNY
Registered at G.P.O. as a Newspaper.

LONDON'S GREAT DAY OF REJOICING

17

Daily Mirror 8th May 1945.

I returned to work, and after a period of relative idleness, mainly chatting about events of the last few years, we got down to our new role, sorting out the return to normality.
I have never seen so many forms, before or since. Everything established or requisitioned as part of the war requirement, anti-aircraft gun sites, searchlight sites, hutted camps, buildings, and land, was to be inspected and an inventory of all equipment and materials (including ammunition) made, and set down in a standard form.
These forms were then sent to various units for assessment and action. The scope of this work was huge. For example, we had requisitioned Butlins Holiday Camp in Clacton for the army, and now every chalet and facility had to be inspected.
The imagined boredom of the work we were to carry out didn't happen. Although the form filling was a drag, the amount of travelling and 'eating out' involved, made it reasonably interesting.
During that time though, some of the work did become boring, at least half of the working days spent filling forms and bringing drawings and records up to date for final filing.
We celebrated the first peacetime Christmas for six years with much the same constraints on food and drink as in the war. Not a lot had changed.

1946

Although 'day release' did not officially exist then, I was allowed time off to attend courses in architecture and building technology run by the Colchester Chapter of Architects at the Technical College in Colchester.

On June the sixth all that came to an end. I caught the eleven twenty train to Shenfield, on route to Warley Barracks in Brentwood.

Apart from the technical experience I gained, the main benefit derived from working in such a high profile environment, was to change a very shy person to one able to talk to almost anyone in any situation, and to my surprise, I entered the gates of Warley Barracks, without any worries about the next two years.