

From: JW

Subject: Childhood

The autumn of 1939 became famous for a much better remembered event than my arrival but it was into the world I arrived three days before the second World War broke out though I like to think there was no connection! Born in a small coastal town in Scotland it was a time of uncertainty and sadness on a global scale but for much of the time I was sheltered from all this.

I have no seriously unhappy memories, my mother was a full-time housewife and as my father was in a reserved occupation he was not absent from home for any length of time. Indeed neither were my grandfather nor my uncle as traditionally all the men folks in my extended family were likewise exempt from military service.

Fathers and sons of friends and neighbours were of course on active service so I early realised that military service meant your family was somewhat disrupted and that occasionally people in these families reappeared and then went away again for long periods when they were serving abroad. I don't recall fully understanding what it meant but I do recall however the impact of the sight of the telegram boy in the street with his little round cap and his bag slung across his shoulder. Somehow I absorbed the feeling that his presence in the street brought anxious curtain twitching and the door on which he knocked and where he handed over his message was always keenly observed. Long after hostilities had ceased, my mother continued to regard him as the bringer of bad news (even years later after the introduction of telegrams of congratulations !)

There were lighter moments, such as when convoys of mainly American troops in tanks arrived at the mainline LMS station. They were transferring from flatbed wagons at the town railway station to complete their 6 mile road journey to a small and somewhat unknown military port nearby. Our home in these early days of my life was a short walk to the station and such an event enlivened our lives considerably. It was common practice to run quickly to watch the offloading and reassembling ready for the run to the port but essentially it was an opportunity to call out to the Americans who were kindness itself. Despite being one of the youngest there, I was able from a tender age to call out "any gum, chum?" with highly successful rewards coming my way.! Perhaps I just had the strongest pair of lungs for it certainly wasn't due to the speed of my running ?!

Saturday evenings were frequently spent at the home of my grandparents providing as it did an opportunity for the extended family to be together to exchange news and views of world events as well as local. It was also a time for the children in the family to listen and learn as the events of the war were discussed and the politicians latest pronouncements dissected and approved or otherwise in the ensuing conversations. Occasionally the radiogram would provide entertainment and we learned to join in with such items as Run Rabbit, Run... ,Any Umbrellas to mend Today, and Keep Right on to the End of the Road as well as the well-remembered songs of Gracie Fields and Vera Lynn. The finale of the evening was tea with scones and cakes made earlier in the day by Granny in her tiny kitchen with a big black range.

Before the arrival of the refrigerator, wartime shopping had to be carried out daily with all supplies carried home in a series of shopping bags. The favoured store was the local grocer cum wine merchant or the Coop branch which also had an adjacent butchery. It was not unusual to meet your teacher in the queue and on so-doing you were expected to doff your cap if you were a boy or if a girl, to give a polite bob of a curtsy before you bade him/her a good morning. Routine shopping was a time-consuming business then because there were always long queues for everything and all groceries were restricted in supply. Imagine the disappointment if supplies were exhausted by the time it was your turn . You not only had to have enough cash to buy but you also had to produce sufficient points or food coupons for your purchases. It was an early maths lesson for me realising how much was the ration allowed by the Government and how much juggling mothers across the UK had to do to create a meal but I can truly say I never felt hungry though I think in retrospect, my mother, in common with many another, had the smallest portion of everything to allow larger helpings to go to the man of the house and the children.

Other supplies such as milk, fish and coal were delivered door-to-door by horse and cart - what a relief it was to me to find that the horse had not left a deposit behind him after he passed my door as it was a requirement to race out before anyone else got there so that you could pick it up with the shovel and put it on the garden as fertiliser. It was considered particularly beneficial to the rhubarb crop. Perhaps surprisingly, rhubarb and custard was a favourite dessert in many a household!

My schooldays started in 1943 at the local primary school already attended by my brother - yes, I did suffer from comparisons! I recall with interest the amount of time my infant teacher spent on Monday mornings on administrative matters of several sorts. After calling the register, her first job was collection of dinner-money for

those staying for a school lunch (not me , I went home for mine as I lived not too far and could be there and back within an hour). Then came National Savings money collection and the issue of stamps to stick in your savings book - oh the thrill of watching it fill up though I think the bulk of the stamps were of the sixpenny kind rather than the half-crown ones- they were a purchase with your Christmas money or what you were given for your birthday if you were lucky ! Pocket money was often a sixpence and you were indeed fortunate if it was a silver one with Queen Victoria's head on it. Finally came the strangest one of all and perhaps the one most often forgotten - was it only in Scotland it was collected I wonder ? - the twopence ha'penny due for the daily third-of-a pint of milk taken at our desks before the mid-morning break. What a welter of money collections! Maybe that was why we all learned to read silently , that's what we were expected to do during all this counting and cataloguing of who had paid for what !

Final happy school recollections include realising I was a mixed infant - that's what it said on the door I went in whereas others, older and wiser, went in through doors marked 'boys' or 'girls' but what a feeling of progress when one was eventually promoted ! Teachers in the main were female though there were two males in my school - you will not be surprised to know that they taught the upper juniors and all the ladies taught the younger pupils - long before the days of equal opportunities!

Lessons were frequently of the ' face the blackboard and listen to me ' kind with short but sharp retribution for those who stepped too far out of line - my recollections are happy by and large , with the realisation that the rewards for compliance and enough progress led to jigsaws on Friday afternoons - a rare treat in those days. Those who had not complied or worked hard were put to times tables or reading practice. Which group was I in? That's another story!