

MEMORIES OF PENSURST DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

David Martin

Chapter 1

WAR IS DECLARED

I suppose that I cannot really have known what was going on at that time. After all, I was only just over three years old. Yet I sensed that something out of the ordinary was happening because of what was taking place around me and, no doubt, from my parents' changed behaviour. But to everybody older than me and, let's face it, most people were, I now understand that it came as no surprise when war with Germany was formally declared on the morning of September 3rd 1939.

What I do remember was that I was with my mother standing outside the Penshurst Village Hall where we lived. Small groups of our neighbours had gathered in the middle of the village in anticipation of the imminent announcement on the radio by the Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. Later, I learned what he said concluded with the fateful words '...we are at war with Germany'.

My mother quickly took me inside into our kitchen and plonked me down in the wooden armchair that stood by the fireplace in the corner near the sink and draining board. This stuck clearly in my mind because I had never before been allowed to clamber up into that chair which was where my father usually sat.

I don't know what they were expecting: an air raid with German aeroplanes dropping bombs, perhaps, or airborne troops landing by parachute? But nothing happened, Hitler was busy invading Poland; preparing to march into the Low Countries and counter the British Expeditionary Force in Northern France. The war, even called 'phony' by some, continued like this for several months, all the early action was taking place far away.

But at the end of that month on the 29th September, we had National Registration Day, a census of every person living in every house in the country. Using the information they gathered, the government issued everyone with Identity Cards and Ration Books. My National Registration Number was DJ/QJ 42.5 and this remained with me for some time.

Rationing and Local Shops

Food rationing was introduced at the beginning of 1940. Everybody had to register with a food shop from which their rations would be purchased. In Penshurst this was easy as there were only two grocers and general provisions shops, **Jackson's**, later renamed Buxton House, and **Chapman's Stores**. We lived within 100 yards of both, but we registered with Chapman's as they were bigger and generally regarded as the better choice.

Chapman's, the main shop in the village, was a family business. Henry Chapman the senior partner kept out of sight round a corner sitting at a desk shuffling papers. His wife Ethel effectively presided over all proceedings from her dominant position by the bacon slicer at the back of the shop. Willie Chapman, the oldest of the brothers, lived in an apartment over the shop. Willie was looked after by a housemaid called May, who wore a proper black dress, white apron and starched cap. He also had

a vicious little wire-haired terrier called Markie which had no hesitation in biting anybody who came to their back door.



Chapman's Stores, Penshurst

Willie ran the drapery and outfitters department. He also stocked what was euphemistically known as 'ladies sanitary wear'. The youngest brother Claude, always compulsively chewing his tongue, served behind the main counter with the two assistants, dealing with the walk-in customers and making up the orders for delivery. Loose dry goods were weighed out into small bags made of stiff blue paper. They checked the orders by calling out each item. "Half of lard, quarter of tea" and so on, "Roight" came the reply as the items piled up. They sometimes introduced a little humour to brighten the proceeding: a tin of peas was always known as a "tin of shirtlifters", and Ethel in particular was always ready for a joke. Claude drove the delivery van, which he also used for travelling to and from work. Local deliveries were made by one of the lads on a tradesman's bicycle with a big basket on the front and a stand to prop it up.

The other shop was Jackson's Stores run by Mr & Mrs Jackson. George F. Jackson cultivated a posh voice and a detached air, always trying to flaunt his supposedly superior intellect. This used to irritate Reggie Wiles the schoolmaster who never missed an opportunity to try and catch him out to deflate his ego. Mrs Jackson his wife, who ran the dressmaking and drapery department at the back of the shop, was a small, pretty and charming woman, who I later learned had at one time been a dressmaker for Lady Churchill who lived not far away at Chartwell. Not that I used to go down to her end of the shop much. My regular errand kept me at the other end of the shop collecting our supplies of loose soap flakes used for washing up. To this day I don't understand why Jacksons was the only place to stock soapflakes in bulk but being registered with the other shop, Chapmans, it was about the only thing we bought there as they were 'off the ration'.

Persil powder and a cube of Reckitt's Blue were used for the weekly wash, done in the built-in copper boiler in the scullery. Every Monday morning my father got up early to light the wood fire under the boiler. He always wore a long brown overall for work and I remember one day, with his back turned to the fire, he stood too close and set his coat-tail on fire. He had no idea anything was wrong until we smelt smouldering cloth.

The extent of the Chapman's family business connections spread into the shop premises next door owned by Cecil Barrow, the ironmonger and oilman, married to the Chapman's sister Edna. Even during the war years, **Barrow's** range of hardware was truly amazing and even included rabbit snares and catapult elastic. A sign hanging outside on the wall above the door indicated that they had, before the war, sold sporting ammunition: 'Ely Kynoch cartridges loaded with Nobell smokeless powder'.

A catapult was a highly valued personal weapon, farmworkers and others working out in the open country were skilled in its use and it was a poacher's favourite weapon because it was silent. We country boys were dedicated in our constant search for the perfect 'cattysprod'. The best ones were found in young ash tree saplings, but they had to have grown into a perfect 'U' with each arm the same thickness. When you saw one, you cut it out, trimmed it, peeled off the bark and put it away somewhere warm where it could dry out naturally and season. Two identical lengths of the special thick square catapult elastic were fixed one to the end of each arm, using strips of soft leather bound with fuse-wire. The same leather was used to make the sling pouch to hold the missile attached to the other ends of the elastic. These had to hang level and even otherwise the catapult would not shoot straight.

Smooth roundish pebbles made the cheapest 'ammo'. But if you could find some lead, the best source being electric wiring cable, you could cut it into lengths of just over an inch and melt it down in a tin held over a fire. Holding the tin carefully, you then poured the molten lead into a mould, the best for this being the round cavity in the back of a pair of pliers. When it had cooled and solidified you opened the handles and out came a squat cylindrical lead catapult pellet. There was nothing to beat these; in skilled hands they could kill a pheasant or rabbit at a range of up to 30 yards or so.

Our parents were great friends of Cecil and Edna Barrow and when later they bought one of the first television sets, we used to go over and sit in the dark to watch the Sunday evening play. We had tea and biscuits in the interlude while the screen was showing the famous 'Potter's Wheel' turning away.

Most houses in all the surrounding hamlets were dependent on paraffin oil for fuel, so Cecil Barrow's oil business prospered; after all, there was no competition. Although there had been extensive electrification of rural areas by the outbreak of war, this had by no means extended everywhere. Barrows also sold a lot of candles. Even in the middle of the next village, Leigh, my great-uncle Fred and aunt Kitty Faircloth, who lived in a cottage by the village green, only had gas for cooking and downstairs lighting. When it was dark, going upstairs meant that you had to take a candle.

Fred Fenner, the gardener at Latymers House across the road, used to go round to Barrows each evening to help prepare for his next day's delivery round by pumping up the paraffin oil from the underground storage tank and filling the required number of two gallon screw-top fuel cans. He also carried on the van a much smaller quantity of methylated spirit for Primus stoves. In addition to

paraffin, 'meths' and candles, his delivery service also included other hardware items like soap and washing powder that customers had pre-ordered the week before. The paraffin and 'meths' were measured out with a jug and funnel from the back of his Morgan three-wheeler van, the 'Chonker' as we called it. Sometimes when he went out on his round, he took one or two of us boys with him for the ride as company, the Barrows having no children of their own. It was my turn to be with him on September 8th 1942. We were at the row of cottages called Weller's town near Chiddingstone, when the six o'clock evening news came on.

Suddenly heads started popping out of the back doors: "Italy's surrendered", the people all said, in the mistaken hope that meant the war was nearly over.

Every weekday, before he went out on his oil delivery round, Cecil Barrow used to sit drinking his coffee and reading the distinctive pink newspaper 'The Financial Times', presumably to check on his investments. Apparently he used to play the stock market a bit as a hobby before the war. It was rumoured that, anticipating a prolonged German occupation, he had invested in black market bulk food supplies, notably tinned sardines and bags of rice. When he got back home in the evenings after his rounds, his devoted wife Edna, who had spent the day serving behind the shop counter and making up the orders, always had his tea ready. Without fail: sardines on toast and a rice pudding, for years, every day the same. That's all she could cook, but he never uttered a word of complaint.

When Cecil Barrow died suddenly from a heart attack, my parents stepped in to help Edna who had great difficulty coping. My father undertook to carry out the required stocktaking and drawing up a full inventory for probate. By this time I was old enough to help and such was the extent and variety of the stock held in their seemingly chaotic storage, it took us a whole weekend to find, identify and count it all. Small items sold loose, such as screws, nails and staples were weighed not counted.

Tompsetts, the butchers, occupying the premises now known as Star House up the road past the school, were traditional butchers with their own slaughterhouse out the back. Although they may have handled cattle at one time, during the war years and immediately afterwards they only dealt with pigs. We always knew when they were slaughtering because the shrieks of the pigs were clearly heard by us inside the school, usually on a Monday. He earned his nickname 'Fridgie' because his shop was the first in the village to have proper refrigerated cold storage. 'Fridgie Tompsett' did the local deliveries himself on his butcher's bike, always wearing his familiar brown overall and cloth cap, while letting his assistant Fred Baker drive the delivery van and take it home to New Road after work.

But we did not buy our meat from **Tompsetts**. Before I was born, our family home was in Leigh, in a semi-detached house in what was called the 'Square', near **Whitehead's** the butchers shop. When my parents moved to Penshurst, **Whiteheads** continued to come once a week, not that they had much meat to deliver during rationing: you did not order, they brought what they had. They made their own sausages and could always fall back on them, though I doubt if they contained much meat, probably 10% meat with 90% filler, mostly breadcrumbs. Once though, there was a special treat when they culled one of the few remaining deer on the estate of Lord Hollenden at Hall Place in Leigh and Whiteheads shared the venison around the villagers. Goodness knows how they worked out the meat coupons for that.

Although food rationing was partially relaxed as the war progressed, it did not finally end until 4th July 1954 when restrictions on the sale and purchase of meat and bacon were lifted. People had freedom to shop around and change their nominated supplier. In the window of a butchers shop in St Johns Road Tunbridge Wells, by the bus-stop where I waited for the No 93 bus to go home from school, was a printed sign which one of our English teachers, 'Alfie' Sinfield, found highly amusing for its choice of flowery language, 'We would esteem it a pleasure to register those desirous of making a change'. As a boy of 11, it took me a while to work out exactly what they meant.

Living in the country meant that eggs, butter and meat rations could be supplemented. Towards the end of the war we started to get fresh eggs from Miss Louch, the housekeeper for Oswald Cunnington at Salman's Farm, but somebody always had to go and collect them. Luckily my sister Pam was often at Salman's where 'Ossie' Cunnington's niece Molly Cook lived for most of the war and the two girls became great friends, going together to the Tonbridge Grammar School for Girls. Pam began working on the farm during weekends and school holidays, learning to help with the milking and later, under supervision, being trusted to drive one of the Fordson tractors, but only in the harvest field.

Sweets were rationed, too. On Friday each week we were allowed to take our Ration Books and pocket money across the road to **Cooks the Bakers** the only sweet shop in the village. Mrs Cook had her selection of sweets, mostly in glass jars, lined up along the counter. But you had to make your selection carefully in order to keep within your budget and your allowance of sweet coupons, as well as bearing in mind that your purchase had to last for a week. My sister and I each had our own screw-top sweet jars kept on a shelf in the pantry cupboard. Access to this jar was strictly controlled by my mother. I found it infuriating that somehow my sister always seemed to make her week's sweet ration last longer. Offering round your sweets was unheard of. When sweet rationing was lifted in 1950, long after the war was over, people went mad buying them. Stocks in the shops were quickly cleared and rationing had to be reintroduced for a while to allow us to cool down and become more reasonable in our purchases.

We also had clothes rationing for which there were books of Clothing Coupons. These were colour-coded for different periods so that you could not blow the lot at one go. Each type of clothing had its own coupon value. Essential underwear or ankle-socks would only cost you a few coupons, but if you wanted a major item such as a woman's dress or even a man's suit, you would need practically your whole clothes ration for the year. The watchwords were 'make do and mend' and people became frantic knitters and dressmakers to make their own. Not surprisingly, a flourishing 'black market' in clothing coupons also developed.

Collecting Salvage

A contribution to the war effort was the organised collection of 'salvage'; waste paper, cardboard, bottles, tins and any other scrap metal. On a Saturday morning when there was no school, a few of us would borrow the Boy Scout's trek cart and go round the shops and pub collecting their salvage. This was great because we had the authority to go round the back of the premises where we were not normally allowed. Cooks the bakers was best because we could stick our noses right inside the



Collecting salvage at Penshurst, 1940

bakery smelling the warm bread straight from the oven and watching Grandpa Cook operating the big dough mixer. He had a longish white beard and we used to wonder if bits fell out of it into the mix.

The Post Office

Until 1830 the only sign of postal services in Penshurst was a letter box in the window sill of the Leicester Arms (Penshurst Online). The **Post Office** then moved to a house on the corner of Leicester Square. I remember that William Eagleton and his wife Gladys ran it in my early days and after her husband's death Mrs Eagleton continued as postmistress for many years. The automatic stamp dispensing machines, standing against the wall outside, produced one penny and halfpenny stamps. Post was collected and delivered by van from the main post office in Tonbridge.

Public Houses

The **Leicester Arms** near the church was once part of the Penshurst Place estate and in its early days was called 'The Porcupine'. It was renamed early in the 1600s when Viscount De Lisle was appointed Earl of Leicester. Well before the war it became privately owned and known to locals simply as the 'Leicester'. It was a country hotel with about ten bedrooms, a fine dining room, lounge, saloon bar and an entirely separate public bar for the locals. As boys we were always intrigued by the framed menu hanging outside the door. This was typed in brown, set out in both English and French, changed each day and represented a totally unknown way of life. I have recently (January 2013) heard that the Leicester Arms Hotel closed at the end of last year, leaving the village without a pub at all.

The only other pub near the centre of the village was the **Bridge Inn**, long since closed and now a private house, down by the river Medway at the foot of Rogues Hill. About a mile out, on the southern end of the village at the top of Smart's Hill was the **Spotted Dog**; even further away, was the **Bottle House**. My father only ever went to the 'Leicester' always at Sunday lunchtime. The Spotted Dog had, at the time, more of a reputation as a restaurant than a pub. The Leicester Arms

certainly, and I think the Spotted Dog, too, kept their restaurants open throughout the war and some customers even used to come down from London.

Like everything else during the war, the supply of beer, cider, cigarettes and tobacco for the pubs was rationed. Sales had to be carefully controlled by the landlords in order to keep their regular customers happy. There were rumours that some of the beers were even watered down in order to make them go further, although I'm sure nothing of the kind happened in Penshurst. Service personnel, even if only passing trade, were usually given favourable treatment if beer was available. Royal Marines from the detachment housed in 'Latymers' were classed as regulars in the Leicester. Saturday nights, especially if gypsies and hop-pickers were around, could become quite lively at closing time. The local social scene was also occasionally enlivened by dances in the village hall, much to the delight of the young ladies of the village, several of whom found both temporary and permanent partners and opportunities to enlarge the local gene pool.

Gas Masks

The government was well prepared for the introduction of rationing as soon as war had been declared. Ration books and clothing coupons had been printed well in advance and were immediately ready for distribution. We all had to have gas masks and by the end of September 1939 everybody had been issued with one. There were special all-enveloping masks, more like large bags, for children under two years old. The next size up for children was the 'Mickey Mouse', a red rubber mask with a nose-flap which if you blew out while wearing it, made a rude farting noise. When you outgrew the 'Mickey Mouse' you moved on to the adult mask which was the same size for everybody. Also provided was a small can of 'Anti Dim' a gooey substance rather like Vaseline, which you were supposed to smear over the inside of the see-through window panel to prevent it from steaming up and to counteract the effect of mustard gas. I have no idea if it worked because nobody ever wore their gas masks except during practice drills and then not for long.

At the beginning of the war, when many still remembered the lethal use of gas during the 1914-18 First World War, there was a great fear of an attack from gas dropped by German bombs. So everybody was required to carry their personal gas mask with them at all times and could be fined if they were caught not doing so. When I started at the local primary school in 1941, my mother made me a waterproof tartan mackintosh cover with a shoulder strap to carry my gas mask box around in. During lessons it sat on the floor by my desk ready to be picked up at a moment's notice if we had to make a rapid exit to the air-raid shelter. Eventually, when it became clear that gas bombs were no longer a risk, gas masks were withdrawn, although some people did not hand them in but kept them as curiosities. There are still some around today.

The school communal air-raid shelter, with thick brick-built walls and a concrete roof, was partially equipped with some bunk beds. This solid structure remained in place long after the war was over: it certainly was still there when I left the school in 1947. It was built alongside the wall in one corner of the senior boys' playground near the outside lavatories. While air raids were threatened and later during attacks by flying bombs, one of the older boys, wearing an Air Raid Warden's tin helmet and carrying a whistle, kept watch seated on a chair placed in the front porch. When he, it was always one of the boys, heard aircraft approaching or the unmistakable throbbing sound made by the engine of a 'Doodlebug' flying bomb, he blew his warning whistle. Then the whole school, starting with the infant's class and working up in seniority, had to get out quickly and into the shelter. This

rapid exit strategy was exciting and somewhat chaotic. Late in the war, in 1945 when all the older children had gone to secondary school, pupil numbers were much reduced, and I was the only one left in the senior class, I got my chance with the tin hat and whistle. Inevitably, the temptation to set off a false alarm and bring them all charging out, was too great. But no doubt the interruption was welcome.

The doors of the shelter were never locked, but the punishment for unauthorised entry was severe. Nevertheless the shelter provided a handy hiding place for games like 'Sardines' but, well aware of such goings-on, it was regularly patrolled by the teachers at break-times. Thinking back, perhaps this was just as well, but I'm sure I never knew the half of it.

The Blackout

Right from the outset, everyone took the blackout extremely seriously. For some reason, people expected air raids to start straight away. Instructions were given regarding suitable blackout material for curtains and how to make shuttering to encase the sides of roller blinds. Some windows had to be masked or painted over. Air Raid Wardens, wearing a tin helmet, carrying a whistle and their gas mask, patrolled the village streets to check that no chink of light was escaping. "Put that light out" was a frequently heard no-nonsense command. Viewers familiar with Mr Hodges in 'Dad's Army' on television will get the picture. Bill Fuller, chauffeur and handyman for Miss Clive who lived in the village, was one of the Penshurst special constables and wardens, as was Harry Johnstone the builder and undertaker. Exactly what the crew of an enemy aircraft flying at night at an altitude of at least 10,000 feet, could possibly have seen down on the ground, even on a cloudless night, baffles me still.

Nor could they see moving vehicles, which all, even military vehicles, had to drive on dimmed lights with the lens covers painted out except for just a narrow slit. Moreover all vehicles were fitted with downward pointing shutters so that their dimmed lights pointed at the ground. Riders of bicycles had to stick thick black paper over the lamp glass.

Pedestrians who ventured out after the curfew were most at risk, especially from cyclists whose approach was silent. So there were many 'accidents in the blackout', but by no means were all of these caused by moving vehicles. 'Walking into a door in the blackout' was the excuse offered for many a bruised black eye.

Road Markings

To confuse the invading enemy, all the road signs and finger posts were removed for the duration of the war and stored away. So to help motorists and military vehicles see their way in the darkness, white lines were painted to mark the middle of the road. Until he was called up midway through the war, painting the lines was the job of Frank Coulstock who had been a notable seam bowler for the Penshurst Park Cricket Club and was our local roadman. Like most countrymen, he was also handy with the catapult he kept ready in his back pocket should a rabbit or pheasant be so unwise as to show itself when nobody else was in sight.

Painting the lines by hand and making them look neat was a tricky job for the council roadman. Broken lines were required for straight sections, solid lines round bends. First he measured across to mark the middle of the road and then ran a length of twine down the centre of the road along these

marks. To make a clearer guide for the line painter to follow, the string was chalked so that when it was then stretched tight, picked up and snapped back it left a white chalk mark for a guide. There was little or no turpentine or white spirit to clean brushes at the end of his day's work. As much as possible of the residual paint was worked out on the rough road surface then the brushes were rubbed in the dust at the side of the road to get rid of the rest. Wrapping the brushes in a bit of rag overnight kept them soft, ready to start again in the morning.

When Frank Coulstock was called up for the army, he was replaced as roadman by another well-known local cricketer, Ernie Grayland from Chiddingstone Causeway. Ernie was a good friend of my father, so my parents, who were busy running the Village Club and cafe during the day, did not mind if I hung out with him while he was painting the white lines. In the summer of 1943, I was seven years old and had been given my sister's handed down bicycle on my sixth birthday. So I was mobile and able to follow him while he worked his way round the village. When one day we reached the bridge over the River Medway at the bottom of Rogues Hill by the Bridge Inn, I remarked on the large number of names and initials carved in the soft sandstone of the parapet. So Ernie took out his pocket knife and added mine, scratching 'DM 1943'. This inscription remained on the bridge for many years after the war and although at one stage ivy grew all over it, I could still find it. Sadly, when I last looked about 30 years ago, I found that the original bridge had been rebuilt after having been damaged and the old stone parapet had gone. To be sure, using the <Penshurst Online> website and Google Maps, I have just zoomed in and checked again, but it's not there anymore: sad really.

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