DERRICK ROBBINS

His recollections of being evacuated to Deddington

Derrick Robbins

Derrick Robbins' 'Recollections' were originally published as a series of articles in the *Deddington News* and subsequently on Deddington OnLine. We are indebted to him for this unique and fascinating addition to the history of Deddington. What follows is almost verbatim with some additional editorial comments by Rob Forsyth in square brackets.

'I was born 6 October 1928 in East Dulwich, South East London. An early memory is of an evening in November 1936 when my mother got me out of bed and we walked a short distance to the top of Forest Hill to watch the Crystal Palace burn to the ground.

My mother was called Edith and my father Frederick. I had two sisters older than me, Constance and Lillian. I started school at age four and attended the same building, Friern Road School, until Friday 1 September 1939. I had a happy childhood - but all of this changed with the outbreak of the war.

I was at the tender age of nine on 1 September 1939 when at exactly 11am on that fateful Sunday morning the Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain spoke those unforgettable words "I have received no such undertaking so a state of war exists between Great Britain and Germany". So began the phoney war. Immediately afterwards, the "take cover" warning sounded and my father, mother, two sisters and I stood around the kitchen table with our gas masks in our hands waiting for whatever was about to happen. The all-clear sounded shortly after and I remember thinking "Oh well that's it, it's all over thank goodness." The Sunday roast was forgotten and was burnt to a cinder.

Evacuation to Deddington by train. Next morning we were all up early and I packed my little suitcase with my prize possession, my bus conductor's outfit, one set of change of clothes and Dad took me to Paddington Station in Praed Street, bought me a ticket and put me on the 9am Bicester slip train on platform 1 and off I went alone in the world to Aynho high level station. There, the guard blew his whistle, waved his green flag and off puffed the little push me-pull me train to Banbury, leaving me standing there with no one, not even a dog, in sight.

No porter, so what to do with my ticket? Oh well, down the sleep slope to the roadway and off through Clifton. I knew the way I had done it many times alone without any trouble to my aunt and uncle's home [the Ells], Tower View in the Bullring. So began my stay in dear old Deddington.

Market Place in the 1940s

School. The next morning I was taken to the house next door, to the post office where kindly Mr Harmsworth lived, the headmaster, and registered to attend the local village school on the corner of Banbury Road and Earl's Lane. Life there was good, easy-going, but my bubble was burst when I was informed that I had passed the scholarship exam and had to transfer to Banbury County School across from the Horton General Hospital, now Sainsbury's, I believe. So, equipped in my maroon blazer, cap with real silver badge and school tie, I joined others on the Oxford bus each day, boys upstairs, girls downstairs, never the twain must meet. Each lunchtime we would walk down town to a building in the Market Place where we were given a hot meal. After we would walk down to the station where a train carrying wounded troops would stop on its way somewhere up north. One Thursday, market day, an unannounced German bomber made its appearance and rudely dropped a bomb near the main signal box. War had come to Banbury.

Life at Tower View [now Wirral House] was so different from at home in London. In those days most folks would bathe once a week in a tin tub, usually Friday evening, and change their clothes. Here, every evening I had to jump into the largest bath I had seen. I should mention that Uncle Chris Ell had lost a leg in WWI and was now one of the finest boot and shoe repairers anywhere. Consequently, my weekday black boots and my Sunday brown boots were always in good repair.

One thing folks today would notice was the complete lack of motor vehicles. Dr Frost had his little Austin 7 which he always drove flat out, Johnsons had their lorry, and Arthur Canning his delivery van. Every one else walked, took the bus or if lucky had a horse, or horse and cart. Even the local bobby had to pedal a pushbike around his patch. I'll never forget though the fish and chip van which toured the local villages and stopped outside Tower View every Thursday and Saturday evening. Oh the great smell, the great taste, nectar for the Gods wrapped in newspaper! No rules and regulations in those days.

Aunt Emily – companion to Lady Bowes-Lyon. Aunt Emily Tooth [sister to Uncle Chris Ell] was educated at a prestigious school where she became very friendly with a girl of her own age. When they left school Emily went to live with her friend, Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon [later to be Queen Elizabeth] becoming her paid companion. Also in the employ of Lady Elizabeth's father, the 14th Earl of Strathmore, was Arthur Horace Tooth, the family's chauffeur. Emily and Arthur fell in love and married. They enjoyed living in many lovely homes generously supplied by the Earl. Before WWII they lived in a Chelsea mews flat, but when WWII started they moved to a large house in Dartmouth. While I was stationed in Exeter in the Army after the war I would visit them. Arthur was a born prankster. When I arrived at Dartmouth station he would be waiting there beside the Earl's old Daimler resplendent in his old-fashioned uniform. He would call out so that everybody could hear: 'Over here, my Lord; her Ladyship has tea ready on the lawn!' We would then drive off and he would burst into fits of laughter. The old Daimler, by the way, was one of those cars where the passenger seats in the back were enclosed, while the driver sat in the open. I imagine there was some form of protection against wet weather. Communication between front and back was by way of a speaking tube.

Food was rationed, just enough to survive. Luckily living in a farming community had its benefits such as a large allotment up the Hempton Road. Also most folks had chickens and some had pigs as we did. The Ministry of Food and Agriculture kept a sharp eye on the limited amount of animals you kept, or thought they did. A large percentage of the animals had to be sold to the government at rock bottom prices. However there were ways around that rule and I for one never went hungry. In fact when I went home for short periods I would be carrying black market food. Who would suspect a schoolboy of breaking the law? Tower View had a large cellar and my uncle was an avid home wine maker. There sat very many barrels of wine and all sorts of wine was bubbling away in cauldrons all around. Ten o'clock every morning we would gather around the kitchen table and drink the health of the service men. Even me at my young age.

Air Raids. Not to forget the dreaded black-out. No lights to be shown after dark. 'Put that light out' became a famous cry especially when the drunks were being thrown out of their local boozer. Also we had *double* summer time which meant that on a clear evening during the summer months it could be almost daylight at midnight. Never could understand why they screw around with nature. With great forethought my uncle arranged for an air-raid shelter to be built in the back kitchen garden. This was a great playhouse for my cousin Chris and me. My aunt, being a glutton for punishment, took in two boy evacuees but they did not stay long. Country life was too quiet for them. The government paid 4s 6d each week per evacuee [Government records say 10s 6d]. In autumn, school would be closed to allow us kids to help with the harvest or whatever. I would help my Uncle George

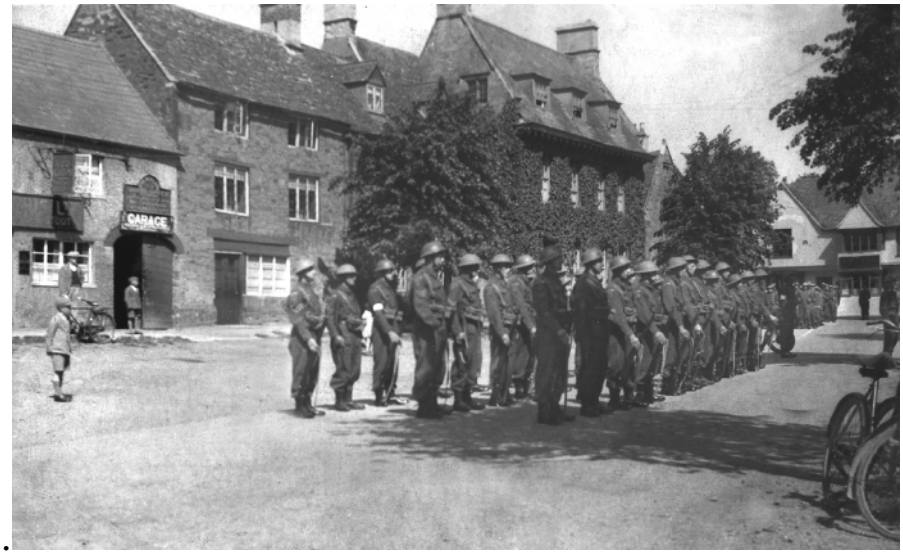
Clark's father who had a small-holding up the Hempton Road. Potato-picking was back-aching work for £4.

I was woken up one late evening and we all rushed off to the air-raid shelter. What was going on I know not but we sat there for about 20 minutes before going back indoors. Next morning I found out that two bombs had been dropped in a field just south of Deddington but they had failed to explode. What happened to them I do not know but they could still be there.

Uncle George was in the Royal Observer Corps which had a look-out post in the middle of the allotments off the Hempton Road. Sometimes I accompanied him and I became quite proficient in aircraft recognition. Although I was under age I joined the Air Force Cadets. We met once a week either in the village school or in a large barn-like building behind the big house in the Bullring. In charge of us was a fiery Scot by the name of Jock McCutcheon who lived next door to Miss Weaver in the Market Place. [There is no record of a Jock McCutcheon serving in WWI but two McCutcheon men did post-war National Service in the Army and Air Force.]

Church. My aunt never went to church but insisted that I did. Church to a young lad was boring, so I played hooky. She found out and took me to the Reverend Dr Maurice Frost and I became a reluctant choir-boy. We were paid one half penny for every time we attended church and that is how I became a millionaire. I was chosen to attend a two-week voice training course at the College of Church Music at Tenbury Wells, Worcestershire, under the tutelage of Sir Sidney Nicholson. It was somewhat monastic but I enjoyed it. I went with Mr Coles' (known as Lamby Coles) son. Dr Frost was a kind gentleman but if he thought that we boys were not giving his sermon our complete attention, he would march us out of the choir stalls and sit us in front of him with the congregation. I took piano lessons from the wonderful Miss Lilian Weaver who lived next door to the Co-op in the Market Place. That house was full of cats. I would do work for her in her back yard. I loved her.

The Army came to Deddington and were billeted all over the village. Some moved into the block in the Bullring and is now, I believe, apartments. The Bullring was made to be a perfect barrack square and drill took place every morning. This corresponded with an imitation battle dress my mum sent me. Uncle Chris made me a wooden replica of a Lee Enfield rifle complete with detachable bayonet. I used my little pocket money and bought a tin hat from Woolworths in Banbury for three shillings and six pence and made belt, puttees and ammunition pouches out of stiff brown paper. So dressed I would stand outside the house and copy the commands of the Sergeant Major, much to the amusement of the troops. This was too much for Sergeant Major smarty pants, and he yelled as only a Sergeant Major can "go away you 'orrid little man" or words to that effect. This I reluctantly obeyed like any British soldier would.



The Home Guard on parade: is Derrick the small boy in the background?

Family. My grandmother, Sarah Bull, was a rum one. She always wore a black dress down to the floor and as a child I thought she had no legs because I never saw them. She wore a man's flat cap and an apron at all times, even when out shopping or going to church. Granny Bull used the daily newspaper as a tablecloth, it saved washing and could be used each morning to light the cooking range. On my visits to her I was delighted to read *Rupert Bear* from the tablecloth. Grandma died just before war broke out at home in the Horsefair and Grandpa moved into a room at Tower View. Also Joe Ell, Uncle Chris's father, moved from Oxford into another room. I never gave it a thought at the time but both gentlemen kept to their respective rooms and never joined the family for meals, not even on Christmas Day. They both spent every day at their beloved allotments, come rain or shine. Each smoked a tobacco called thick twist which had to be cut up with a very sharp knife. When lit it smoked and smelt like hell. Each evening Job Bull would join Joe Ell in his room and they would put the world to rights as the whole room became thicker and thicker with the evil-smelling tobacco. I had to take them each a bowl of soup at supper time and could not get out of the room quick enough.

I mentioned the air-raid shelter my Uncle Chris had built. Well he also had a smaller and less luxurious shelter built for the two elderly gentlemen, his logic being that we might very well survive a near miss from a bomb but would be asphyxiated in a confined space if they joined us, puffing away on their foul pipes which hardy ever left their lips. These two gentlemen were as different as chalk and cheese but they got on famously. Grandpa Bull was rough and ready and he and I would kick a ball about in the large back yard. Joe Ell however was refined, smartly dressed and when indoors always wore a scull cap. He paid me a penny to clean his boots once a week. Grandpa never cleaned his boots. He was kind to me and I loved him. Thinking back before the war I would go with him, during the summer break, to work and sit on his lap and guide the horse pulling the binder, or reaper, at harvest time. Then we would go gleaning to help with food for the chickens.

Each of the two elderly gentlemen had an oil-burning stove in his room. One extra cold night Grandpa Bull pushed the stove under his bed to warm it up. Beds were

higher in those days. Fortunately my aunt came in or else the whole house would have burnt down. My Aunt Win worked at the Banbury aluminum factory as a cook. My cousin Chris Clark, who lived at Tower View, needs some explaining. He was the son of George and Win who lived just down from the then police station on the High Street. Two rooms up and two down and each one was no more than six feet each way. Tower View was a better environment. Their landlord was Tom King who charged them two shillings and sixpence rent. Each Sunday young Chris and I would go with Uncle George for a long walk around Deddington. I learnt a lot about nature that way and of course it was good exercise.

Other evacuees. The two boys who stayed at the Ells for a short while were cousins and also evacuees. One was about my age and the other younger. I do not recall the name of the young one but the other was Ronnie Hale. They came with a large group from East London but were tidy and well cared for. For what it is worth, there was a mother and two young girls who came from London and lived in a cottage in Clifton. I do not remember names but they were the only ones in that village. The girls went to Deddington School and would bring their packed lunch meal and picnic at the Ells. We would play in the yard until it was time to return to school. This was early in the war.

Johnson's timber yard fire in 1941. I remember with clarity the night my Aunt Mill Ell got me out of bed and took me down through the Market Square to watch the horrendous fire. Deddington at the time only had a very old hand-cranked trailer pump which had no effect on the fire. I remember vividly going the next day down to the yard to see the utter devastation caused and to witness the horrid smell of burnt timber. The delivery lorry was just a pile of twisted metal giving proof to the great heat that was generated. Some folk said it was sabotage and some, God rest their souls, said it was the only way the man from the Ministry of Labour could move Uncle George to send him to the aluminium factory in Banbury where aircraft wings were made.

[The fire was first spotted and reported by a passing low-flying aeroplane.]

Miscellaneous memories. During the winter, on Saturdays, I would go down to the Castle Grounds to watch a football match played on a very uneven surface. There was also a bowling green immaculately kept by Uncle Chris and Joe Ell. It was laid out with Cumberland turf and you were only allowed to step on it if you had special shoes. Occasionally I was allowed to bowl, wearing the special shoes of course. At the time these were the only sporting activities going on. However at Banbury County School I did get to play rugger, football and cricket. My aunt took me to Oxford on two occasions and we took a tour of the University and along the river to see the house boats.

There were two means of transport during my stay, the double decker bus which ran from Oxford to Banbury without deviation, and the Midland Red which ran from Banbury to Deddington branching off into Adderbury and Bodicote. Of course there was the private bus owned by Stanley Hall, publican of the King's Arms, but he mainly only ran on Banbury market day, one trip there and one back. Later in the war he was given two extra small buses, with hard wooden seats, to run workers to and from the two aluminium factories - one in Banbury and the other beside the railway station south of Adderbury. All day long trailers would pass through Deddington on their way to these factories, carrying parts of crashed or damaged aircraft, British and German. On windy days parts of these planes were blown off the trailers and we children would race each other to see what treasures could be found. My biggest souvenir was a bomb release switch off a German bomber. I believe these two factories built wings for the RAF. One day we came out of school to find a repaired and rebuilt ME109 in the Market Square. We children were allowed to crawl all over it and I sat in the cockpit letting my imagination fly.

Each day a must was to tune into the news at 1 and 9pm, read by Bruce Belfridge, Alvar Lidell or Wilfred Pickles. Also, of course those 'we will never surrender' speeches by the Right Honourable Winston Churchill, Prime Minister. I often wonder what would have happened if he had not been around at the time. I guess we would eventually have won the war but I feel it would have taken longer. Up the Hempton Road beyond those very old cottages known as Windmill Cottages, where Joffer Clark lived, was the village tip smouldering away where we lads would go to throw stones at the rats that lived there. What a way to spend quality time. Somewhere close by in a home-made hovel lived Uncle George's brother who was well over six feet tall and was therefore called 'Titchy'. He had opted out of the world for some reason or other.

One Christmas time a gang of rowdy youths gathered outside Mr ('Doughy' sometimes Dicky) Dodwell's bakery on the square behind the Town Hall. Needless to say he was a little peeved due to the fact that he had to get up each morning to get the bakery going. Unable to sleep he opened his bedroom window and poured a bucket of water down. Unfortunately Uncle George had just turned into the square from the Tchure and caught the lot. What George said was never recorded but a blue cloud was said to be seen hovering over his head. Oh to taste those lardy and dough cakes just once more like he could bake them! I have both their recipes but they are not the same. It's the oven that does it. He also took in folks' Sunday roast which he would cook to perfection for a very small fee while they attended church or goofed off.

One winter, 1941 I believe, it snowed for a week. Uncle Chris made me a sled and off I went to test drive it down the slopes at the Castle Grounds. This was too tame so I joined others and went up the Banbury Road, turned left into a field with a long slope. Banbury County School was closed for the week. Unfortunately tragedy struck one summer. The gentleman [Denis Washington] who owned the fish and chip van also owned a large combined harvester and his son slipped and had his foot amputated in the machine.

Sweet rationing. How I loved to take my sweet ration coupons to the sweet shop of the two Misses French who had their shop on the square opposite the Post Office. Such an array of goodies. Liquorish pipes and boot laces, sweet cigarettes, lollypops etc., all at one penny. Also Smith's potato crisps one penny with salt

inside wrapped in a little piece of blue paper. There were two other sweet shops. One in Hopcraft Lane and the other down by the entrance to the Castle Grounds, run by a Clark relative. Once a week I would accompany my aunt around the village when she would collect a small sum of cash for a health club which helped pay for ambulance or hospital fees. No National Health service in those days. That way I got to meet a lot of people. One thing that has changed: dinner was always eaten at mid-day. The evening meal was light and was supper. Maybe this is why obesity was not so prevalent in those days.

The King came to Banbury. One day we were marched out of school and assembled along the Banbury Road by the hospital. On both sides of the road for about a mile were troops standing smartly to attention. A car drew up and out stepped King George VI to inspect his soldiers. I remember saying at the time "he is wearing make up". At the time we did not know he was sick.

The Home Guard. The Local Defence Volunteers (LDV) quickly changed their name to the Home Guard as people were calling it Look – Duck - Vanish but then became known as Dad's Army! It was first introduced by Winston Churchill on 23 August 1940. As a point of interest, my father was in the Home Guard formed by his employers J Sainsbury at their warehouse in Blackfriars. They had a secret weapon: as the German tanks passed by below they were to drop sacks of flour on them. Hope it was self-raising flour, and then the tanks would rise and float away![1]

In case of invasion church bells would be rung and certain officials would run about like scalded cats blowing whistles. I knew nothing of this, it was grown-up business. In the kitchen was a scrubbed table with a large drawer in which every thing that did not have a home was thrown. In there I found a whistle and promptly put it in my trouser pocket. Later in the evening I was playing hide-and-seek with friends around the Bullring area and as nightfall came I realised I was alone so, you guessed it, I took out the whistle and blew. No one came so I went home. Unbeknown to me some thought the invasion had started but by then I was fast asleep and not found out or shot. By the way church bells could ring to bring people to church. Deddington has always had a great bell-ringing team which I for one hope they keep even though I never hear them now unfortunately. Strange as it may seem, Tower View was close to the church and the Westminster chimes would register in my mind even though after a few days they would not register. However, believe it or not, when I returned home I would hear the clock chiming in my mind and if I looked at a clock or watch it was always at the time I heard. One of those unsolved puzzles. I loved to climb to the top of the church tower and look around at the surrounding countryside.'

[1] The idea of dropping flour into an open tank hatch was not as hare-brained as some of the other schemes the Home Guard thought up. Flour dust would have temporarily blinded the crew, giving an opportunity to follow up with a home-made petrol bomb which would ignite the very combustible flour dust and set fire to the inside of the tank. Fortunately the need to test this system was never called upon.

Group outside the Unicorn Commercial Inn (*l to r*) Fred Davis, Nancy Lambert (née Sanders), unknown US serviceman, Queenie Sanders (née Hunt), Alfie Hunt
(courtesy Clive Sanders)

In the lead up to the D-Day invasion, US Army troops were billeted behind the Unicorn, in the British Legion Hall and at Adderbury Hall.

Postscript:

Derrick returned to London in 1942. In 1946 he was called up for National Service and afterwards joined a law firm. He married twice and moved to the USA to Sarasota, Florida in 1977. In our frequent email correspondence he often said how much he would like to see Deddington again but sadly he died in March 2010.