Extracts from an autobiography of Raymond E Fisher

TO REMEMBER IS TO LIVE
Wartime Shotesham

Introduction

I was born before television, radar, credit cards and ballpoint pens, before washing machines and tumble driers, electric blankets and drip-dry clothes and before man set foot on the moon. We never heard of FM radio, tape recorders, artificial hearts or word processors. A 'chip' was a piece of wood or a fried potato, 'hardware' meant nuts and bolts and the word 'software' was not in the dictionary.

I felt that it would be a good idea to put on record in my autobiography as much of my own personal recollections of those bygone days as I can remember hoping that it might be of interest to someone in the years to come. Apart from the 18 months after the Norwich Blitz in 1942 when we lived with an aunt and uncle on their small holding at Falgate Farm Shotesham, l have never lived more than 3 miles from the centre of Norwich. The following paragraphs all refer to the time I spent as a country lad visiting and then having to stay for a short period in the village of Shotesham after our house was destroyed in the Norwich Blitz of April 1942.

Growing Up

Growing up in the 1930's was a happy and exciting experience. I seem to remember that all winters had lots of snow and all summers were hot and sunny, whether this is correct I am not sure but looking back that is how it always appeared. My mothers' sister Alice lived at Falgate Farm in Shotesham and was married to John (Jack) Haggith who carried on business as a Coal Merchant and Market Gardener and supplied many of the stalls on Norwich Market and also greengrocery shops around the city with vegetables.

When my mother visited her sister Alice Haggith, we would catch the Eastern Counties number 18 bus in Ber Street on a Sunday morning and this would enable me to play with my cousins most of the day. This was an exciting outing for me as the farm in which they lived was adjacent to the common and adjoining their property was a gate which closed off the main road so that cattle grazing on the unfenced common did not stray. This gate was one of four around the common the others were situated in "Hollow Lane", another at the bottom of the hill where "Shotesham Road" becomes "The Street" and the forth one was near the school.

Bearing in mind there were very few cars, my cousins and l used to play close to this gate waiting for any vehicle to come along so that we could open the gate for them. Invariably most drivers would reward us by throwing a penny out of the window for us. If it was a good day and several cars passed by we could finish up with 2d or 3d (1p) each, which enabled me to buy sweets from the local shop, when l got home. The number 18 Eastern Counties bus from Norwich to Hempnall used this road and normally it was the conductors' job to open the gate but if we were there we did open the gate for them although we never got any money for doing so.

Common Gate – Falgate Farm

On one particular Sunday during the 1937 winter, my mother and I arrived at the bus stop in Ber Street to catch the 10am number 18 Eastern Counties bus but it failed to turn up. I was only 7 years old at the time and my mother

asked if I would like to walk to Shotesham, a distance of seven miles, as my aunt was expecting us for dinner (lunch). I believe the reason I can still remember this walk was because it was a frosty, bright and sunny winter day with not a cloud in the sky and about 2-3 inches of snow lying on the ground. Our walk took us along Ber Street and City Road to Lakenham, then on through Arminghall, Caister St Edmund and Stoke Holy Cross. The complete journey of around 7 miles took about 2 hours and as far as I can recollect not one vehicle passed us. Thinking about it, this was quite a long walk for a seven year old.

When we visited Shotesham on a summer Sunday a Walls ice cream man sometimes used to appear riding a three wheeled bicycle cart. I am not sure if he cycled all the way from Norwich with his large tricycle containing his wares and sporting the company logo of "stop me and buy one", but we would be given a penny to buy a Snowfrute. How the box was insulated I do not know, but the ice cream was always cold and the Snowfrute (iced lolly) which we usually bought, was always completely frozen irrespective of how hot the weather was. If we did not have enough money for a complete Snowfrute we would ask if we could have a half of one and usually this request was met sympathetically and one would be cut and a charge of a halfpenny (½d) levied.

Typical Walls Ice-cream tricycle

Because of my uncles' occupation we were always getting various items of fresh vegetables from time to time. This was much appreciated especially during the war years and as they also kept chickens we were also able to supplement our 1 egg per week ration with some fresh eggs from them. This was strictly illegal, as, apart from a small quantity that they were allowed to keep for themselves, all eggs had to be sold to the Egg Marketing board. In fact my mother used to get a couple of dozen eggs once or twice a year which she would place in a large bucket and cover with a liquid called "ISN Glass" to preserve them. These could then be used for cooking over a period of months, which allowed mother to make cakes in the normal way with eggs, rather than having to use powered egg. My relations also kept rabbits and we often had one of these to supplement the meat ration. So in many ways we were much better off than a lot of families when rationing commenced.

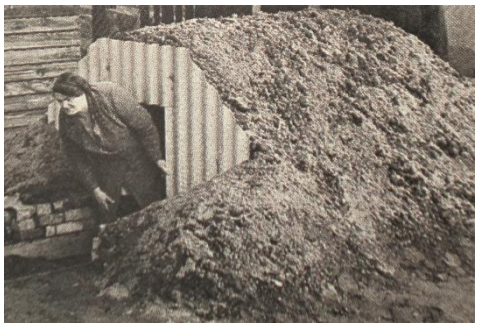
The War Years

Considering how close Norwich was to the continent, plus the fact that we also had a considerable manufacturing and engineering industry, the city had been spared the heavy and prolonged air raids which occurred in other large cities. The few raids, which had occurred since hostilities began, were of the hit and run type causing some damage and causalities. There were many false alarms and for a long period prior to 1942 there had been no alerts whatsoever. This resulted in our anti-aircraft gun and barrage balloon defences being withdrawn and sent to protect those cities which were being subject to heavy and sustained air attack. The population of Norwich became somewhat complacent and usually ignored any air raid alert preferring instead to stay in bed and sleep. My mother and I were no exception in fact I did not even wake up when the sirens sounded. Father was of a more nervous disposition and he would always get up. However all this changed on the night of Monday 27th April 1942.

On this night at around midnight, the siren sounded and as usual father got up and I believe, went outside. Once again I did not hear the siren, but something woke me up and I found that my mother was up and dressed and standing by the bed. She then asked me if I wanted to get up and go to our Anderson shelter which was at the bottom of the garden. To this day I do not know why she asked this question (unless my father had called her outside), or why I replied that I wanted to go to the shelter as this was the first time we ever went outside during an air raid and it was actually the first (and last) time we ever used the shelter. Mother then helped me to put my clothes on and we went through to the back door and outside. When we stepped outside, I remember thinking the moon is bright tonight, but then realisation crept in and I looked up and saw all these bright white lights on

parachutes just seeming to hang in the sky. I had never seen anything like this before and it was as bright as day and you could easily have read a newspaper as we walked to our Anderson shelter. At that time I did not hear any aircraft engines, in fact there seemed a deathly silence over the city; the calm before the storm.

When we reached the shelter, father, mother and myself struggled through the 3-foot square door and tried to settle down in the cold damp interior. Our only light came from a small torch and I was told to lie on one of the bunks and go to sleep. This might have been possible if it had remained quiet outside, but it was not to be, within minutes we heard the ominous and distinctive drone of German aircraft engines gradually getting closer. There was also the occasional burst of anti-aircraft gunfire, which I believe emanated from the airfield (now Norwich Airport) and was indicative of a real air raid. Little did we realise just what a terrifying ordeal we were about to be subjected to. Within seconds of the first bomber arriving over the city, we heard and felt the first explosions of bombs dropping nearby.



Typical Anderson Shelter

This was made more terrifying because some German aircraft had a siren fitted to the rear fuselage, which emitted a high-pitched whining sound and was activated prior to commencing the bombing run. The explosions and the noise of the aircraft siren, coupled with the fear and isolation one felt cooped up in a 6 foot by 6 foot steel room, half in and half out of the ground did scare me, and I began to shake uncontrollably. What my parents were feeling at this time I do not know, but they tried to comfort me as best they could. As the raid continued some bombs were obviously landing in our neighbourhood as we continually heard debris raining down on the corrugated iron roof of the porch over the shelter door. We did not know what the debris was, but it certainly did not help me and my shaking continued throughout the air raid. After about an hour or so there was a lull in the bombing and we thought perhaps it was over, but no, once again more aircraft were overhead and it began all over again. It is difficult to put into words the continual noise that battered our eardrums during the 2 – 3 hour raid, but to put it into context, around 185 High Explosive bombs were dropped within a mile radius of us equating roughly to one explosion every minute.

After the all clear sounded my uncle, who lived 4 doors away, came round and took us to his shelter. This was an underground shelter he had built before the war and was the height of luxury, fitted with bunks and electric (battery) lighting as well as a toilet. We extracted ourselves from our shelter and the sight that met our eyes was totally different to that which we had last seen some three hours earlier. The sky was now dark, instead of a nice tidy garden it was now strewn with brick rubble, broken tiles and chimney pots, glass and lumps of soil. This is what we had heard falling on to the top of our shelters' corrugated iron "porch". Treading carefully over all the debris, we made our way through the passage to the street and the same scene was repeated there. Making our way up the street we went through the passageway into the garden and then down the stairs into my uncle's shelter where my aunt and cousin Doreen were waiting.

On Tuesdays, Market Gardeners from around the county would come to the Norwich Cattle Market (now the top of the Castle Mall), to sell their produce to the local greengrocers. In spite of all that had gone on during the night, the market still went ahead the morning after the blitz. As usual, my uncle brought vegetables for his customers, but instead of returning home after concluding his business, he came to see whether we needed any help. Presumably when he saw the state of our house, he must have told my parents that we could stay with them at Shotesham until repairs could be completed. As he still had business to complete he arranged to come and fetch us later and on his return, we loaded a few pieces of furniture and personal effects plus the bicycles belonging to my father and myself, onto the lorry and then proceeded to leave the city. Little did we realise at the time that it would be another 18 months before we returned to live in the city once more. This was obviously going to be a new experience for me as

my previous excursions into the country had been limited to a Sunday visit to my aunt and uncle and now a whole new vista was to open up.

Haggith Family-Edward,Vera,John,Alice,Alice,Rosie,Donald

The farmhouse belonging to my uncle's smallholding was a large building and consequently the rooms inside were also quite large. We were given the use of their best room which today would probably be called a reception room, from which they had removed most of their furniture so that we could have somewhere to sleep. A double bed was installed for my parents and a camp bed for me and we had a chest of drawers in which to keep our clothes. Fortunately the Living Room was also quite large which meant that meals were going to be difficult as there were now ten people, four adults and six children, needing to sit down to eat. Luckily my aunt's dining table was large enough to seat eight and my cousin Ted and myself had a small table to ourselves. It was teatime in our new surroundings before we were able to sit down and have a meal, as we had not been able to prepare food before leaving Norwich. At least we were able to get a good nights rest after all the trauma of the previous 24 hours.

Wednesday 29th April arrived and after breakfast, my cousins all went off to school, my father left for work in Norwich on his bicycle, a journey of 6-7 miles which he was to undertake many times in the weeks and months to come. With nothing else to do myself, I proceeded to take in the surroundings I now found myself in. Apart from being a Market Gardener, my uncle was also the local coal merchant and the main house was surrounded by several outhouses, which contained various items of equipment used in the operation of the two businesses. There was also a pigsty containing three or four pigs and a large fenced in paddock containing, what are now called free-range chickens and a few geese.

Although Falgate Farm house was large, the facilities available were very basic. There was no drinkable running water, the water from the tap in the kitchen was only suitable for washing. Drinking water had to be obtained, in buckets, from a spring situated on the common. This spring was about 2ft (600cms) below the surrounding surface. A wooden box had been built around it to protect the water from the soil and also to stop the cows grazing on the common from getting to the water. The water at the bottom of the box was crystal clear and you would see the level reduce as water was removed. Within minutes the level would be back to normal but it never overflowed out of the box. Every day, winter and summer, my uncle would walk the 200 yards to the common to obtain our drinking water. Unfortunately, with 10 people now in the house, two buckets of water did not last very long and eventually my uncle invested in a large galvanised container on wheels, which held around 20 gallons, thereby saving time and effort.

The Spring on Shotesham Common

Typical basic pre-war outside lavatory
Instead of a bucket, the Farm unit was built over a pit

Toilet facilities were even more basic. There was no flush lavatory as I had been used to, all that was available was a small brick building about 25 feet away from the house and built over a pit. Inside was a wooden seat, or rather a double seat, a lower one for children and a higher one for adults. Not too bad in summer, apart from the smell and flies, but very drafty in winter. Someone had the job of digging out the pit every 2-3 months and disposing of the contents. Phew!! This was my introduction to country living and I was not very impressed. So, at the end of my first full day in the country, I went off to bed.

Because Norwich had been virtually defenceless on the Monday night, mobile anti-aircraft guns had been strategically placed around the city on the Tuesday and Wednesday and by the 2nd of May there were also 35 barrage balloon sites in operation. Air raid sirens were not available to alert people living in country areas so the only way of knowing that an alert was in progress, would be if explosions of bombs or anti-aircraft fire was heard. This is what happened on the night of Wednesday the 29th April. I was woken up by the commotion of all my cousins coming into our room and was told to get up as there was another heavy raid taking place on Norwich. We could hear some muffled explosions plus the crack of anti-aircraft fire more or less overhead and all the children were told to get under the large heavy oak table in our room. Fortunately the noise of explosions was nothing like we had been through on the Monday so I was not quite so scared. After a period of quiet, the adults considered that the alert was over so everyone went back to bed.

Thursday morning dawned and my cousins went off to school as usual but my father did not go to work that morning. Whether this was because it was his half-day off in the afternoon, or whether it was because a decision had been made for us to collect some more furniture etc. and stay with our relations, I am not sure. However in the afternoon, mother father and myself squeezed into the cab of my uncle's lorry and off we went towards Norwich with the object of picking up some more of our possessions. I enjoyed the drive and was looking forward to seeing our house again and picking up some of my own personal things. When we turned into our road something did not seem quite right, there was a lot of debris strewn about, and we could only proceed slowly up the road.

Me and Father with my uncles' new lorry 1943

It began to dawn on me that there was a gap in the terrace where our house should have been and the first house left standing was my uncle Herbert's which was 4 doors away from ours. We could now see that a bomb had fallen in our back garden and destroyed all the houses. In fact, we heard later, that three 500kg bombs had fallen between our house and the houses that had been destroyed at the bottom of the road on the Monday night. Helena Road would never be the same again. All the houses from number 42 (my uncles) right down to several more on Dereham Road had now been completely demolished and the houses on the opposite side of the road had been seriously damaged.

Our trip to pick up more belongings had now become a nonentity. We got out of the lorry and surveyed the scene of utter devastation in front of us, at the edge of the bomb crater was our Anderson shelter, still intact. What would have happened to us had we been in there is impossible to say. Perhaps we may have got away with some serious injury but with the explosion in such close proximity it is probable that we would all have been killed by the blast. I remember seeing many of my comics (Hotspur and Champion) strewn around in the rubble, the pages blowing in the wind.

Although we were able to recover a couple of books that had not been damaged, all our furniture, crockery, personal

effects, photographs and toys had been destroyed. It must have been devastating for my parents to stand there looking at the destruction around them, knowing that all their belongings, which they had saved hard for, had now been reduced to scrap. I believe that there was a compensation scheme available to people who had lost all their possessions, but that would in no way help my parents to come to terms with the loss of home and memories. On this sad occasion we returned to my uncle's lorry knowing that our only possessions were those we had taken with us two days before. We also had to come to terms with the knowledge that we were now officially homeless and for a period of time, we would have to rely on the charity of our relations, for shelter.

Having spent a couple of days as a "country boy" and not really liking it that much, I realised on the way back to Shotesham, that I would probably be staying there for a time, so I would have to get used to a different way of life. I did not really appreciate at this time of my life, just how peaceful and tranquil life in a rural village could be. This was especially true of Shotesham, probably due to the fact that its situation did not attract through traffic, thereby allowing it to retain, even to this day, its own quiet charm. In those days there was a great community spirit, generated no doubt by the fact that the village was reasonably compact and the inhabitants socialised as they met up in the butchers shop, grocery store, post office and the Globe public house. Village Fetes and Whist Drives were always well attended and a poster in the various shops usually advertised these events. These posters were "works of art" produced, at the request of the Head teacher of the village school, by myself and an evacuee boy from London during our art classes at the school. Sadly many villages have now lost this togetherness due to changing lifestyles bringing about the demise of the village shops and with it the daily socialising that used to occur.

I did not realise that I would be expected to attend the local school and in my naïve way thought I would be able to wander about all day and eventually return to the city. I was unaware of what was really happening and spent the first few days wandering around the farm getting to know where everything was waiting for my cousins to return from school. I was expecting that I would eventually have to return to my old school in Norwich and was surprised when my mother told me that I was to start at the village school the following week. I did protest, as I wanted to return to my old school in the city, but my protests fell on deaf ears. So on Monday 11th May 1942, I set off up the hill with my cousins, into the school playground where there were many new faces, although much to my surprise there were also one or two from my old school who had also been made homeless on that fateful night.

This small school consisted of approximately 50 – 60 pupils and was completely different to those I had previously attended in the city where the infant, junior and senior pupils were always completely separate from each other. Here all ages from 4½ -14 years were being taught under the same roof in two "classrooms". I say "classrooms" but this is not really an adequate description. When entering the building you walked into a large, 30-foot by 60-foot room, which was divided by a curtain across its width. The curtain between the senior and junior class did not actually reach across the entire width of the room as there was a fire place in the way which provided heating during the winter months. On one side there were three or four rows of desks of the "senior" school and on the other side of the curtain were more desks catering for the "junior" school. Those children between the ages of 4½ - 7 had their own separate classroom off the main room.

As I was 11 years of age, I was told to go to the senior side of the curtain, where to my amazement they were still sitting in the old "cast iron" twin desks which I had long since left behind in the infant school. So began my country education experience, sitting in the same class as my cousins Donny and Ted plus around 20 other children between the ages of 11 and 14. Because the school catered for such a wide and diverse age group with only three staff, I suppose it was inevitable that the educational standards achieved by the pupils would not be as high as a city school. The pupils also had to contend with the distraction of different lessons being carried out on either side of a curtain, which presumably did not help their concentration. In fact, one boy slightly older than myself was in the "senior" class and he could neither read nor write let alone comprehend the subjects being taught. Although I always considered my city schooling hard work, here I found that I was way ahead of my country schoolmates, which made it much easier to become top of the class. This was embarrassing at times, as I kept getting whispered requests on how to arrive at the answers to some of what I now considered to be much easier maths problems.

One of my favourite lessons was woodwork, mainly because it was held at a school 4½ miles away in the village of Kirstead. There were no school buses to take you there, so every Tuesday afternoon there would be a mass exodus of senior boys, cycling out of Shotesham, hell bent on arriving at the woodwork class by 2 pm while all the girls remained at Shotesham doing needlework. The journey to Kirstead was all very nice when the sun was shining, but it was a different story when it was snowing or pouring with rain. However this was tempered a little by the fact that

we were paid a penny per mile, for wear and tear to our cycles, every time we attended. As the total return journey was 9 miles we were credited with 9d (3p), which was usually handed to us by the headmistress every 6 – 8 weeks and became a handy addition to our pocket money.

School Photograph taken at Shotesham School 1943
wearing my Army Major's Rank Badge

At Shotesham school we did at least have warning of an impending visit by the dreaded dentist or doctor and nit nurse, with the arrival of a caravan in the playground. As spare classroom space was virtually none existent in country schools, these professionals travelled around with their own mobile surgeries. We would be called out one by one for our examinations and if the dentist found any problems he would return at a later date to carry out any remedial action.

On one occasion we came out of school to find that a strange dark green caravan had been parked in the playground. This caused some speculation as to what its purpose was, especially as it was completely windowless but with a door at each end. We had been told to ensure that we had our gas masks with us the following day and assumed that this caravan had something to do with an inspection of some sort. On arrival at school the next day it was explained to us that our masks were to be inspected for a good fit, after which, we would be taken outside to the caravan. Then came the exciting part, the van would be filled with tear gas and after putting our masks on, we would be led through to ensure that our masks did not leak. After all the children had passed through, the senior class had the option of going through again but this time without putting the mask on. Needless to say all the lads went through, but we regretted it later in the classroom as our clothes had been contaminated and we spent the rest of the day with streaming eyes.

Shotesham School, Head Teachers House and All Saints Church

On Sundays all my cousins went to Sunday school. This was held in the normal school after which the two boys, Donny and Ted, would go next door to All Saints church, where they were members of the choir. I was eventually coerced into going to Sunday school but it required a little more persuasion before I succumbed and joined the church choir. Each Sunday the choir would form up in the sacristy for the procession to the choir stalls. All the choirboys would usually sit in the same place each week and my position was facing the organ on the opposite side of the gangway. Because the church did not have electricity, it meant that the organ was operated by air and this required someone to pump air into the bellows. One of our school friends had this job and he sat in a small alcove

beside the organ. When the organist was ready to play, he would get up and start pumping a large wooden bar up and down to keep the bellows filled with air, continuing until the hymn finished. The alcove he sat in, was tucked out of view of everyone except myself and the boys next to me, so while he was taking his rest periods, or during the sermon, he would pull faces and do all in his power to make us laugh. On many occasions he was successful and we would get a fit of the giggles which would bring a disparaging look from the men sitting in the choir opposite us and we were usually told off after the service. Mind you it did pass the time when the vicar gave a long sermon!

Being in the choir also had its advantages, as it allowed us out of the house every Tuesday evening to go to the vicarage for choir practice and during the dark winter nights we would take a torch to help us on our way. When we made our way home around 8 o'clock the village would be very quiet, deserted and dark which gave us the incentive to be a bit mischievous and turn on our torches to see how far the beam of light would travel. We considered this to be very daring, as we knew that we were not supposed to show any light but it certainly lit up the branches of the trees. Occasionally the local Air Raid Warden might be out and about and we would get a shout to turn the lights out.

The choir practice only lasted for about half an hour and then we could play games for another hour, which made it more like going to a youth centre. The vicar was also a bit of a magician and each week he would demonstrate a trick and if someone could tell him how it was done then they would get to keep the items he used. We also had the advantage over other boys in the village when we had snow during the winter as the vicar had a small professionally made wooden sledge that he let us use. This would only seat one person so we used to take turns riding it down the hill at the side of the church and because it was properly manufactured with metal runners it would slice through the snow at an astonishing speed. As the hill was quite steep we had to sit, rather than lay, on the sledge and this meant that we were unable to steer or stop it properly. The outcome of this was that we usually finished up on the very edge of the Beck (stream) and sometimes we were caught up in the barbed wire coils, which had been placed around the small road bridge.

From time to time the government issued posters advertising, or suggesting, ways in which the population could undertake something to help with the war effort. One of these posters advocated, "dig for victory" by growing your own vegetables and I think the headmistress, whose cottage adjoined the school, considered this to be a good idea but did not like all the work that this would entail. So as a compromise she decided to divide up her front garden and give a small plot to each of the senior boys in the school to cultivate. One period each week was set-aside for the boys to go out and look after their patch. Because there were only a limited number of plots available I had to wait until someone left before I could partake of this outdoor activity. I suppose I did learn something about the growing of vegetables and what weeds looked like, but it was not really my forte and I suspect that I must have had an ulterior motive for taking it on.

One good thing about going to school was that I was able to make my own friends and become more integrated into the country life. A bicycle was a virtual necessity as friends could be spread over a wide area of the village and it was lucky that one of the items we brought from the city on that first day was my bicycle. With my new friends we would roam around the surrounding countryside and villages, through the fields, woods and common land, climbing trees, looking for bird nests as well as plodding through the Beck and ditches. One thing I soon found out very quickly was that shoes were not the ideal footwear for roaming around in the wet and muddy conditions of the countryside even in the summer. It was not long before I was wearing the more realistic leather boots with studs in the sole (hob nail boots), or the ubiquitous rubber boots.

As a city lad roaming around the countryside, it was no surprise that I was on a considerable learning curve, one, which could not be taught successfully by textbooks. You were very aware of the changes occurring through the seasons. In the spring, the hedgerows came back to life, the birds began to sing, wild flowers appeared and everywhere turned green and bright. Come the autumn, conkers fell from the trees as did the sweet chestnuts and acorns, the colours changed to brown and gold prior to the leaves dropping and the drab look of winter beckoned. I soon became proficient in identifying the various species of birds and wildlife and their habitat as well as all the different bushes, trees and wild flowers growing in the hedgerows.

All this knowledge was an asset to me as I began to participate in the various country pastimes of my new friends. One of these was the collecting of birds' eggs, which is now a criminal offence, but then it was a hobby on a par with cigarette card collecting. Children living in the countryside had a great respect for the birds. Nests were never vandalised and if you came across one with only two eggs in, none were removed, even if it was one of those you

desperately wanted. Also, if you had an egg that someone else wanted, you would exchange it for one that you did not have. In this way the number of eggs removed from nests was limited. Because only the shells were collected, my friends taught me how to prick a hole in each end of the egg with a pin and then blow through them to remove the yoke. For some reason this was the part I disliked most and it was a long time before I could bring myself to do it. With the shells being very fragile, collections were usually kept in cardboard boxes lined and covered with cotton wool. By the time I returned to the city I had a large collection housed in old shoeboxes. It would have been difficult for me to look after it when we moved, so I left the collection with my cousins.

In the spring, my cousin Ted and I would go out into the fields and hedgerows on the day before my uncle was due to go to market, to pick wild flowers. We would then tie them into small bunches and my uncle would take them to market to sell to his customers. Sometimes we picked enough to fill two trays and we looked forward to a return of around 5 shillings (25p) per tray. This gave us two shillings and sixpence (13½ p) each, which was quite a sum in those days, bearing in mind our pocket money rarely exceeded 6 pence (2½ p) per week. It was a little more profitable in the autumn when we would seek out the sweet chestnut trees on Shotesham Park. It was much harder work to obtain these as it necessitated throwing lumps of wood into the trees to dislodge the chestnuts and then open the shells and place the nuts in bags to take home. There we would weigh them out and put about 7 lbs (Approx 3kilos) of nuts into a tray which my uncle would once again take to market and sell for us. We tried to make up a total of two trays each time and could look forward to a return of approximately 10 shillings per tray. Another advantage was that we could get the nuts for a period of two and sometimes three weeks, so it was well worth all the effort collecting them.

Field Cowslips were made into bunches for selling

It was still possible, in the 1940's, to purchase carbide, which is a compound of carbon used for making acetylene gas and some country people were still using it in cycle lamps. I am not exactly sure how it worked in these lamps but I know it was necessary to wet the carbide to produce a flammable gas, which was then lit to provide the light. Very few of these lights existed but when some of my friends found a few crystals in their fathers shed we would go off to a quiet spot in the woods with an old treacle tin and proceed to have a bit of fun. What we did was to place the piece of carbide in the tin and then spit on it. This would start the gas process and we would quickly put the lid tightly on the tin and clear the area. After a minute or so there would be an extremely loud explosion and if we were lucky the lid would be blown off and we could start all over again. If we placed the lid on too tightly then the gas built up to such an extent that the tin would split at the seam thereby spoiling our fun.

Occasionally we would dig a small hole and quickly place the tin in this and cover it up and wait for it to explode throwing dirt in the air much like a real bomb. Sometimes, if we could not find a suitable tin, we would use a Corona drink bottle. This was a dangerous exercise as the bottle had a sprung cork held shut by strong wire. If we used these we would carry out the same procedure as before, close the top and then ensure we moved a long way from our "bomb". This was necessary because when it exploded the cork could in no way be blown off and the bottle itself exploded with glass flying everywhere. Although Health and Safety had not been invented we all knew there was a serious risk of injury by doing this but we always ensured that we took suitable precautions to minimise the danger. Nowadays children are not supposed to play "conkers" without wearing safety glasses, in case the conker breaks and hurts them.

Another country pursuit was the making of 'pop guns', which used acorns for ammunition. These were made from a branch of the elderberry bush, because it had a soft pithy tissue, about ½ inch in diameter, running through the centre, which could be easily removed to form the barrel. We would search the hedgerows looking for a suitable bush containing a branch of about 1½ inches diameter and a straight section of 9 – 12 inches in length. Once found, the branch would be removed with a sharp penknife and a suitable length cut off and the pith removed. A piece of scrap wood was then procured which we proceeded to cut and whittle to form an integral handle and plunger so that it fitted loosely in the barrel. Then came the technical part, this necessitated wetting the end of the plunger, either by dipping it in a puddle of water, or more usually just spitting on it. We would then batter the wet end on a hard surface such as the road or a concrete post until a brush was formed. When this was large enough to form a tight fit in the barrel, all was ready for use.

An acorn would be placed in the both ends of the barrel and then knocked on a hard surface so that they were squashed to form an airtight seal. The plunger was then inserted into one end and with a strong push, one acorn would be propelled from the barrel. This may now appear to be a very childish activity, but it should be realised that the projectile could travel over 50 feet and we were always striving to improve our techniques in order to achieve the greatest distance when competing against each other. If anyone got in the way of these flying acorns, it could be a very painful experience. I cannot recall seeing children making or playing with these self made toys over the last 60 years, but having said that, they would probably nowadays be branded a dangerous toy.

Living in the country made the war seem like a distant dream, it certainly did not affect us as children and village life continued as it had always done. Our parents might have had a different outlook, but it did not permeate down to us as we carried on with our normal activities. Things may have been different if the Germans had carried out more air attacks during the day, so I suppose we were fortunate that they confined most of their raids to the night time period. However this disturbance was not as great as it would have been in the city because we were not assailed by the wailing of the air raid sirens, although, occasionally, we would have to get up during the night when loud explosions were heard nearby.

Obviously we were aware of all the daily movements of the allied aircraft from the amount of engine noise we heard, as bombers climbed and formed into squadrons, before departing for the continent. The only outward sign of the war in Shotesham were a slit trench in front of the war memorial and coils of barbed wire along the Common fence from the Beck Bridge on Rogers Lane to the small gate entrance to the common on "The Street". It is believed that these were constructed by the local Home Guard detachment to provide a defence position in the event of an invasion. This would be quite logical when taking into consideration that there were no trees then to block the panoramic view available from the war memorial towards Stoke Holy Cross and Shotesham St Marys and together with a barbed wire fence and appropriate tank traps across the The Street and Rogers Lane, this would make an ideal defensive position

Coiled barbed wire protection similar to the
layout of the wartime Shotesham Common Fencing

There were occasions when an army unit would come to the village to carry out attack and defence manoeuvres using Falgate Farm as the defence position. I assume that my uncle was advised that these exercises were to take place, as it was impossible for him to continue working or move about the farmyard until it was all over. The attacking force started from the Hollow Lane end of the common using the hedgerows as cover while the defence force deployed around the farm buildings and I suspect that the military chose the farm for these exercises as the officer's and umpires could watch the whole battle scenario unfold from the top of the church hill less than 100 yards

away. This position gave them an unimpeded view across the fields and common and enabled them to see that the soldiers' tactics were effective. After 60 years this view has now disappeared due to self-sown trees and bushes growing both on the hill and alongside the stream at the bottom of the hill.

It was fortunate for us youngsters, that, for some reason, these exercises were always carried out after school and when we saw the lorries disgorging troops we would hurry indoors, and change our clothes then run up the hill to get in position behind the officers to watch the battle unfold. The officers used to sit close to the church wall above what is now the Boudicca footpath as there were no trees or bushes to block the panoramic view they had of Falgate Farm and the surrounding fields and common. As the soldiers used blank .303 ammunition and thunder flashes (representing hand grenades) we would keep a watchful eye those on them as they approached the farm to see where and how many of each were used. The army never cleared up after these exercises, so my cousins and I would dash back to the farm after the cease fire to pick up the spent brass shell cases and also look for any unexploded or partly exploded thunder flashes. The reason we looked for the thunder flashes was because they were like large tubular fireworks about 8 inches in length and ¾ of an inch in diameter, and the exciting thing for us lads was that they exploded with a loud bang. All that was needed to ignite them was to rub the side of a safety matchbox across the top of the thunder flash and this would set off the fuse giving about a 15 second delay before exploding.

I well remember we were lucky on one occasion to find both a partly exploded and also a complete thunder flash, which we surreptitiously picked up and casually walked off to the nearby woods to examine. The partly exploded thunder flash just had the cardboard "lid" on the end blown off leaving a ¾ inch diameter tube, the inside of which was thinly coated with a grey looking powder. Not knowing what to do with it, I convinced my cousin that it was alright for him to hold one end while I placed a lighted match into the open end. Having struck the match and standing to one side, I more or less threw it into the tube and the next thing we knew there was a searing bright flash of flame about 4 feet long shooting out of the end. For a second we were both blinded and my cousin quickly dropped the offending article and we ran hell for leather up the path. Fortunately for us it did not explode, but the experience frightened us and we threw the complete thunder flash away and went back to our normal safe country pursuits.

The local Home Guard detachment also put on a display for the villagers one Sunday morning in 1943 in the school playground to show off their weapons and expertise. In the afternoon their demonstrations moved to the trench by the war memorial where they actually set up their Spigot Mortar and Smith Gun. Many of the villagers gathered on the hill behind the trench to watch as the gunners demonstrated the use of the mortar by firing several dummy bombs down the length of the common. There was an incident during the firing of these "bombs" as one left the mortar without its tail fin. Although it travelled in an unorthodox manner it was fortunate that the projectile carried on in a straight line and landed at the far end of the common. Although most bombs landed before Hollow lane at least one did travel beyond the common and landed on the far side of Hollow lane.

Spigot Mortar

Smith Gun

Today this would have been considered an extremely dangerous exercise as there were houses as well as people on either side of the common and one of the bombs could easily have deviated from its intended trajectory. However no other problems occurred and after completing this exercise there was a mass exodus of Home Guard from their trench to the far end of the common where they had to search for the bombs, which had landed in the marshy ground over a half a mile away. They also fired three or four real phosphorus bombs from their Smith Gun into the marshy field next to Falgate Farm and these were left smouldering for quite a long time afterwards.

Like most youngsters during the war, my friends and I became interested in all the aeroplanes we saw flying around and on Sunday afternoons we would meet up to decide which airfield to visit as Shotesham was roughly midway between the two American airfields of Seething and Hardwick. Both airfields were approximately 5 – 6 miles from the village but we usually opted for Hardwick which for some reason as this seemed closer than Seething. Surprisingly we had no difficulty finding our way to the airfields, even though all road signs had been removed to confuse the enemy should they invade!

It would usually take us about half an hour to cycle the 5 miles and once in the vicinity we would check which runway was in use and endeavour to get as close to the end of it as possible. Once there we had a grandstand position to watch the B24 Liberators taking off and landing and on occasions we were lucky enough to see the odd captured German aircraft, usually a Heinkle or Dornier, flying around. Considering there was a war in progress, security at these airfields seemed virtually non-existent as we would sometimes go as far as the aircraft dispersals and watch the servicemen carrying out maintenance. Mind you we did occasionally get told to move off by the American police (Snowdrops) if they happened to be patrolling around, but otherwise the ordinary servicemen did not seem to mind us being there.

It was while living at Shotesham that I tried smoking cigarettes, as most boys did. Some of my friends decided that this would be good fun, so we would go to either the shop or the post office, where one of us would ask if we could have a packet of cigarettes for our father. As this was the countryside, we would then go to the nearest woods and split the cigarettes between us and try a smoke. I am glad to say that I never liked the smoke getting into my eyes, and therefore did not enjoy the experience. I probably only tried 2 or 3 in total during this period and fortunately the experience choked me off cigarettes for the rest of my life. When I was in the RAF in 1949, we were each given four cigarettes on entering the Mess Hall for Christmas lunch, I tried one and again did not like it, gave the rest away and have never fancied smoking since.

Another of our little weekend expeditions involved cycling to Shotesham Mill and climbing over the fence into the park of Shotesham Hall. The reason for this was that we got to hear that soldiers had built a raft, for I presume, river crossing practice and this was usually tied up to the riverbank. I am not sure whether soldiers were actually living in the grounds of the hall or whether they used the area and river for training purposes, as we never saw anyone when we were down there. We did, however, find the raft, made from wooden planks roped together to form a 12-foot square, which in turn was precariously roped to four floats consisting of empty 50-gallon oil drums. Once we had made this discovery, we hunted around and found several old tree branches about 9 feet long and 2 inches thick, which we could use to punt the raft around on the river. Then half a dozen of us would jump on this contraption and spend the afternoon punting up and down the river but keeping clear of the back of the Mill so as not to be seen. I know this does not appear to be very exciting, but bearing in mind that the river was 5-6 feet deep and we were not supposed to be there in the first place, plus the fact that not one of us could swim, it did give us a thrill.

We knew that Army dispatch riders and the local Home Guard occasionally used a local disused sand quarry close to Stoke Church at the top of what was known as Skeets Hill (Norwich Road), in which to practice their skills. The army would practice riding their motorcycles in the sandy terrain as well as riding them up the steep sides of the quarry and the Home Guard used it for firing practice. So when we felt like a little excitement we would cycle to the quarry and try to emulate the dispatch riders by riding our bicycles down some of the less steep sandy slopes. Even these modest slopes appeared steep when you were balancing on the edge before moving off at what appeared to be a terrifying angle and speed. I must say that we found it very exhilarating riding a bicycle in this way, but I suppose that it would have been much easier on today's mountain bikes.

While we were there we would also look around to see if the Home Guard had left any empty shell cases after their firing practice. These were mostly small .22 cases, although we sometimes found some larger brass .303 cases. If we found any .22 cases during the winter months, we would use these to make a small banger. To do this, we would cut the end off a couple of matches and place them in the shell case, then flatten the open end and fold it over to seal it.

The reason for doing this in the winter was that a coal fire heated the school classroom and we were allowed to throw waste pieces of paper on it during lessons. This meant that we could easily hide one of these small explosives in the paper and on at least one occasion I can remember casually walking up to the fire during a lesson and throw this concoction into the flames and return to my seat. After a few minutes the metal case became hot enough to fire the match heads and as it was all sealed up, there was a small explosion that was powerful enough to sometimes

throw the odd hot ember from the fire. The teacher never caught on as to what we were doing and blamed it on the poor quality of coal that was being sold during the war! It was surprising that we were never found out, because the .22 shell case would have remained in the ashes when these were removed prior to lighting the fire the next day. I must add that the fire did have a fireguard surrounding it for the safety of the pupils, so any hot embers falling from the fire remained on the hearth and did not reach the classroom floor.

After leaving school one afternoon, my friend, Joe Larter and I were walking to his house on the common when we became aware of the noise of a very low flying aircraft. As it came into view over Falgate Farm we saw that it was a B24 Liberator from Hardwick and it was so low that it had to pull up in order to clear All Saints Church tower. We only caught a fleeting glance and less than 30 seconds later we heard a loud explosion and saw a huge pall of black smoke appear over the tops of the trees. We ran the rest of the way to my friend's house to get his bicycle and then dashed back over the common to the road where I jumped onto the crossbar and we set off towards the smoke. The aircraft had crashed into a small wooded plantation close to Grub Street about half a mile beyond the village and 1 or 2 fields from the road.

We left the bicycle in a hedge and proceeded across the fields towards the smoke. At the edge of one of the fields we came across the body of an American officer, probably the pilot, still attached to a partly deployed parachute, who, we could only assume, had stayed with the aircraft to ensure that it missed the houses on the edge of the village. The wood where the aircraft had crashed was only about 400 yards away and the adults who had arrived on the scene stopped us from going any further and told us to "clear off". We would not have gone any closer anyway as there was a large amount of ammunition exploding and Very lights were shooting into the air like fireworks. Fortunately there were no bombs on board otherwise there could have been pieces of shrapnel passing very close to us. After watching for a while the local policeman arrived on his bicycle and cleared people from the immediate vicinity. As it would have been extremely difficult to get fire vehicles to the site, plus the fact that there was no danger to people or buildings, the fire was left to burn itself out. The next day we learned from our school friends who lived further away from the village, that all the crew had been killed as they also bailed out at low altitude between Shotesham Park and All Saints Church. We never did hear why the aircraft came down and can only surmise that it was because of some malfunction.

By early 1943 things were somewhat quieter in war terms and as I was missing the city life, I asked my mother if I could travel up to Norwich on Saturday afternoons so that I could go to the cinema and bearing in mind I was only 12 years old to my surprise she said yes. So for the rest of my enforced stay in the country I would catch the bus after lunch on a Saturday and take myself off to the pictures. I eventually extended my excursion so that I could go on the morning bus as this allowed more time to get to the appropriate cinema in time to see the start of the film and come out early enough to catch the bus back. My mother eventually arranged with her sister Maud, who lived in Pottergate, for me to go there for some lunch before setting off for the cinema and this became a regular Saturday outing for me until we eventually returned to Norwich.

Postscript

Prior to going to school on the 20th September 1943 I remember standing in the living room at Falgate Farm when the hall door opened and a woman who I did not know told me to ask my aunt to send for the doctor. I had no idea what was going on but I passed the message on and went off to school. I now know that this strange woman was the district nurse and she had arrived sometime before I came down for my breakfast. What I also did not know was that my mother was pregnant and therefore, when I arrived home for dinner, I was surprised to be told that I now had a little brother (Peter) and was taken through to see this little sleeping bundle.

With the arrival of my brother I presume that my parents decided that it was about time that they found alternative accommodation and as my father knew just about everyone in Norwich he soon found someone who might have a house available. The only problem was that this house had been hit by an incendiary bomb and had been damaged by fire and was being repaired. Nevertheless the landlady told father that he could rent the house provided he moved in immediately the repairs were completed. The reason for the quick move was that housing in the city was at a premium and the council had powers to take over any houses that stood empty and put in their own occupants. This compulsory letting was something that landlords disliked during the war as they were unable to put in tenants of their choice. So it was that, on Saturday 11 December 1943, we left the countryside and returned to the city and our new home at Bowthorpe Road.