

# *My War in Ruislip - a child's view*

by Colin Bowlt

A comedian called Robb Wilton used to start his act on the wireless (as we called the radio in those days) with 'the day war broke out, my missus said to me .....' and so he carried on with his slow monologue. As it happens I do remember the day WW2 did start at Ruislip - and elsewhere of course, but Ruislip was my world. This may seem surprising (it surprises me at times) for I was not yet at school, but I suppose it was an event that affected everyone's lives so one could hardly be unaware of it. I was sitting on the kerb where Dulverton Road meets Linden Avenue (no danger in those days from the very occasional motorised vehicle and the horse-drawn milk float) when my father came looking for me because Neville Chamberlin, the prime minister of the day, was about to make an important announcement on the radio regarding Germanys response to the Allies demand that they withdraw their troops from Poland.

Following this announcement some home guards (or other officials) appeared urging people to get back to their houses. Though what difference that would have made was not clear, since air-raid shelters had not been constructed by then, although there were piles of bricks in the streets ready to build public shelters. These mostly ended up rather smelly and unused.

I started school at Lady Banks in January 1940 with snow on the ground (winters were certainly colder then) proudly wearing my Wellington boots. With the war our school day had been shortened so we ate our sandwiches in class and went home early to avoid the blackout. Air-raids were signalled by the wailing of the siren. There was one in Ruislip High Street near St Martin's Church and another by the shops in Eastcote. At the start of the war these sounded as soon as it was dark and the all-clear did not sound until daylight.

In case of a daytime raid at the start of the war a temporary shelter was fabricated at Lady Banks by putting sandbags at the windows of the cloakroom. As I remember there was no special protection above our heads. Later this temporary shelter was superseded by large drainage pipes being half sunk in the field at the back of the school. Wooden benches were

installed inside. Day-time raids were frequent from August 1940 to the end of January 1941, but as the war progressed with fewer air-raids the shelters were hardly required.

Lady Banks School had opened in 1934 as Ruislip Manor Council School in the Victoria Hall, built as a general meeting hall by George Ball, along with the Manor Homes. During the war it was used for some of the junior classes at Lady Banks School, which was packed to overflowing. White brick air raid shelters were constructed in the small playground attached to Victoria Hall, rather late in the war. Prior to this, windows were sandbagged in a large room that served as the school hall. Victoria Hall had a steep sided roof open to the ceiling. In wintertime we could throw snowballs onto it and they rolled back gathering snow and to our delight becoming twice as big.

Parents came to the school to collect their children during air raids. On one occasion I waited for my mother to arrive, but my sister was a very young baby and my mother did not dare venture out. My anxiety mounted, but at last a neighbour took me along with her own daughter. I remember just before reaching Linden Avenue that a plane flew low just in front of us, but I do not know to which side it belonged.

The threat of enemy air raids had almost ceased by the end of March 1941, but unmanned flying-bombs appeared in 1944. These produced a chugging noise until they were about to fall and explode (when your heart was in your mouth). On one occasion we were all at Victoria Hall sitting-out a day-time raid when the chugging of a 'doodle-bug' was heard approaching. When it seemed to be close overhead it suddenly stopped chugging. Where was it going to explode? Then relief! It started chugging again and carried on flying until it exploded near Mad Bess Wood.

A very large number of incendiary devices fell in Ruislip Manor, presumably aimed at Northolt. They did so much damage to some of the Dulverton Road houses that they were dismantled and I found myself walking past empty spaces on my way to school. A parachute

mine fell in Shenley Avenue (see picture below), which opens off Victoria Road, directly opposite Linden Avenue and the blast blew out the side panel of our bay window.



**This picture is thought to show the damage in Shenley Avenue.**

At the beginning of the war councils installed corrugated iron, Anderson shelters in gardens (a rose-garden in our case). This was much to my mother's annoyance since it turned out to be in vain. The site was flooded before it had been properly installed and filled with water one torrentially rainy night leaving our suitcase of spare clothes floating with the dye from shoes colouring all. We had an alarm clock in the shelter to make sure that my father, tired from fire-watching in the street as well as doing a shift and a half at work, did not sleep late in the mornings. On one occasion, the clock was accidentally left outside the shelter and my parents mistook the sound of its ticking for an unexploded bomb! After that my father managed to extract the shelter from the ground and erect it in our kitchen where we all slept in it, comfortably and warm. This of course restricted the size of our kitchen and just allowed access to the larder. There was rather less to put in it during the war and I can remember my mother gazing at an empty egg-rack and remembering, pre-war, how it used to be full.

Occasionally at night, when Ruislip was not being bombed I was allowed to accompany my father outside to watch enemy planes twisting and turning in the searchlight beams to avoid the anti-aircraft gun-fire. A single German aircraft sometimes appeared during daylight hours, as the one I saw heading towards Northolt whilst

with my father on his allotment on the railway embankment near Wood Lane. I suppose they were attempting to pepper the Northolt aerodrome runway to interfere with our fighter planes.

Sometimes we children found and collected metallic strips dropped by German aircraft, to confuse our radar I presume. There was always sharp shell shrapnel on the ground from the guns placed all around. The gun at Ruislip Manor Sports Club (now Wealdstone Football Club) in Grosvenor Vale is now a Grade 2 listed monument. It is a Bofors Gun Tower erected in 1940 with ancillary shelter.

My overall memories of the war, however, are to do with food. My father had two allotments where he grew vegetables and fruit as well as in his back garden. One was in Southbourne Gardens, where Southbourne School (1948-86) later stood. I accompanied him back and forth, helping push the wheelbarrow and collecting manure deposited by horses and carts, which were occasionally a nuisance when we played cricket in the middle of the road. We also used to buy manure from Old Harry's Place (Old Barn Hotel/Hawtreys Restaurant). Stables in the yard were let to a riding school. The agreed price was half-a-crown for a wheelbarrow full. Old Harry objected when my father turned up with a barrow fitted with sides! I fetched water for our lineside allotment from the pump at Field End Farm, knocking on the Weedons' door first to ask permission.

My mother spent a great deal of time bottling and preserving the produce, which no doubt kept us healthy. To this day I cannot stand blackcurrant jam or juice having suffered a surfeit during the war years.

Also connected with the food was the shopping. I can still reel off my mother's Co-op number (456585) without a moment's hesitation. Food was in short supply and delivered at odd times, which meant that people, especially the children, queued so as not to miss their turn. There was clearly favouritism among shop keepers. I remember one in front of us in our butcher's shop saying, "I'll leave it to you Fred." Fred then disappeared backshop to emerge with a fine piece of steak (not available to mere shoppers).