

Ron Pepper's Interview with primary schoolchildren in the Stour Street Museum in 2005

© Ron Pepper February 2014

I was born in 1934 and lived in Canterbury during the early part of the Second World War. We then moved to Blackpool but we kept coming back to the city and every time we returned, the German Air Force decided to bomb Canterbury!

Most mothers were at home during the war while most fathers were in the forces unless they had reserved occupations. Young women from the age of eighteen were either in the Armed Forces or were required to work in the factories or in the Land Army where they were known as Land Girls. My mother was at home with me, my sister and my younger brother and we lived in shared housing in Canterbury or with my grandmother at 26, Orchard Street, on the corner with New Street which was a shop with a bake house and is now a private house. It's where I was born. We went to Blackpool to escape the bombing although, in fact, we didn't. We had to share a house with a husband and wife and had two bedrooms and a room downstairs; we shared the kitchen and the bathroom so it was rather crowded but a lot of people had to put up with sharing because so many houses were bombed.

My father was a regular in the Royal Air Force where he served for 35 years so he was away a lot of the time. He was in France at the beginning of the war but he managed to escape in May 1940 from Dunkirk.

We children used to make rude jokes about Hitler and Mussolini. There were radio programmes like ITMA, *It's That Man Again* starring Tommy Handley where there were lots of jokes about Herr Schicklegruber, Hitler's nickname. We had comics like the *Dandy* and the *Beano* which is how I learned to read because I kept changing schools. I went to at least four or five before I was eight so I never really had time to settle down and learn to read so I taught myself with the comics which cost a penny a week. I'd got fed up because I couldn't understand the words in the bubbles and felt that I wasn't getting my money's worth. Later on, I came back to Canterbury and went to the Langton

and then on to university so the fact that I couldn't read until I was eight wasn't really a handicap.

At Holy Cross School, which was at the bottom of St Peter's Place, where the flats for older people are now, we had lots of 'gangs' and many battles, but not punching each other, just pretending to shoot each other because the war was on so we were the Brits and they were the Germans and the next day, we'd be the Germans and they would be the Brits. We made imitation guns with bits of wood, we even did sword fencing!

It was always cold in the winter and hot in the summer. A typical school day always started with an assembly and then lessons, all sitting at desks, no group work. It was all straight, rigid rows with ink wells and scratchy pens to write with and the teachers were mostly women. Only old men were teachers. It was pretty strict. I remember one morning at Assembly; we were being told that it was our Christian duty to help one another. I was about seven and later on I was helping a boy with his sums and I was accused of cheating so I was pulled out to the front and given four on each hand with a ruler and that hurt. It made me think, if they're telling me it's my duty to help people and then if I do it, I get punished, can I trust these grownups anymore?

In early 1940, about the time of the Battle of Britain, we had an assembly and our head teacher said, 'I'm sorry to have to tell you that Kenny won't be coming to school anymore because he was killed this morning on his way to school by a German fighter plane machine gun.' That was the sort of thing you took in your stride, you didn't fall about weeping and putting bunches of flowers and photographs where someone died. You just took it. That's what happened and you didn't let it throw you and there was no being traumatised. We were upset, of course, but it wasn't the end of the world.

It was quite interesting when an air raid siren went. We all used to have to go down to the school shelter just over the road which was dark and smelly. We had to take a little tin box like an Oxo box with two or three biscuits, some boiled sweets and I think we had a little bottle of water and a roll of comics to take down and that was our iron ration. The comics were in case we got stuck down there for a long time or if we got trapped down there; they were supposed to keep us amused. At the end of the shelter was some sacking

hanging down and behind that was a bucket. That was the toilet. It wasn't always fun but when we went down there it was getting away from lessons, waiting for the all clear to go, and then we would be back up, heads down, working away.

I was in Canterbury during the Baedeker raids and spent most of my eighth birthday in an air raid shelter at my grandmother's shop in Orchard Street. We had a Morrison shelter in the bake house and I spent most of the time under that because the bombers kept coming back and there were three ladies in their sixties who were terrified. I was in the corner, listening for the different sounds of the German bombers because we used to take pride in being able to tell, from the sound of the engines, what type of bombers they were, Dorniers or Heinkels or Junkers 88s or Messerschmitt. At the same time, the anti-aircraft guns were firing. You would listen for the bombs and you would hear them whistle and if it was far away, it was alright but if it was close, it would make me wonder.

When it was all over, we had to walk from Orchard Street to Canterbury East Station and we couldn't go up the High Street because everything was still burning, smouldering, and underfoot there was broken glass, bricks, burnt papers. What I remember most was the burnt paper floating about in the wind and of course the fire hoses as we made our way. We had to go along Stour Street to the station to get out of the city.

We had a lot of freedom because most of the men folk were away and there weren't many cars. From the age of six, I used to be able to go out and roam the streets as long as I was back at a certain time. One of the things I used to do was collecting bottles because I could get a penny for every ten. We also collected cigarette cards, newspapers for salvage for the war effort, and shrapnel.

The London Road Estate used to be orchards and fields and I was up there with my friends watching the Battle of Britain in 1940. The sky was full of thin, white vapour trails and every so often you'd see something grey and black coming down and we'd say, 'I hope it's a Jerry,' but it might have been one of ours. As we stood there, watching the sky, there was the sound of the planes and the bombs and the anti aircraft guns with cannon shells and red hot casings falling.

One came down a couple of feet from me. We collected all sorts. I had a German bomb fuse and we used to swap shrapnel between ourselves. German bombers used to sneak in under the radar, assemble over the water tower at the top of St Thomas' Hill and then sweep in across the city, all guns blazing.

The cinema was very popular. Where the Marlowe is now used to be a cinema and there was the Regal at the top of the town. There were certain films you could only see if you were accompanied by an adult so we used to see someone going in and say, 'Take us in, mister?' and they would. No one thought twice about it.

During the Dunkirk evacuation, you could hear the rumble of the guns from across the Channel as our soldiers were being rescued. The British and the French were brought back, trainloads of them going through the level crossing at St Dunstan's, leaning out of the windows in bandages, rags and tattered uniforms after being landed at Ramsgate. I stood there watching this on my sixth birthday.

A few weeks later I was in Victoria Rec and there was a bench right on top on the right and the whole rec was covered in old farm wagons and tankers to stop the German gliders landing. I remember a big scare when we thought the Germans were going to invade. I sat on that bench with my catapult and the boy who lived next door was with me and he had his Boy Scout sheath knife and next to him was a thirteen year old boy who had his air rifle. Our job was to guard the Victoria Rec. because if German parachuters were coming, we weren't going to let them into our rec. That was how people felt. We honestly believed that we were doing our duty. Three boys, a catapult, a sheath knife and an air rifle against the German army.

When I'm asked about my favourite food, my answer is, 'What you could get.' What people can get now for one day had to last us a week! A little bit of meat, a bit of cheese. As children we got extra. We had powdered egg and lots of vegetables, really, lots of vegetables. If you were lucky and lived in the countryside, you could get eggs and cheese. Mostly, the food was very plain and weight wasn't a problem; there were no fat people. We were told to Dig for Victory and everyone who could planted vegetables in their gardens, even in the parks. One of the things we used to get from America was chocolate

powder and also Spam. I loved it and anything with fat in it. Chicken was rare and I remember having it at Christmas at my grandmother's and we had two or three slices each.

Of course, all food was rationed from the start of the war. You had so much butter, so much meat and so much cheese. I remember being given my cheese ration for the week and I made seven marks across it with my knife, one for each day. I'd have the first slice, and felt like eating the next one and within about half an hour, the whole ration would be gone! There was no hope of bananas but after the war, the Labour government decided every child should have a banana, the first time many of them had ever seen one. The government wanted to keep the children healthy so we had free milk in little bottles but they would be stored outside and when we went to get them, they'd be frozen so they had to be thawed next to the fire. It tasted horrible. In the summer, it was also stored outside and then the cream at the top would go off.

We didn't have much choice when it came to sweets. We used to have substitutes like Victory V lozenges. We had no soft drinks so I used to make my own with a stick of liquorice root that looked like a bit of old tree in a bottle of water. Cork it up, shake it and let it stand and you had your own liquorice water drink. There wasn't much choice for many of us before the war because people weren't well off but the things I mostly missed were things like oranges and bananas but I didn't really notice going without.

Shoes were very difficult to get. One of the greatest delights of my life was when I was about seven or eight and had my first pair of boots, boots that went up to the ankle and on the bottom, to save the leather, we had iron studs. It was great fun to run and then skid because you'd have a shower of sparks behind you. You'd have great fun seeing who could skid the furthest.

The blackout was another thing. As soon as it got dark, there was to be no light showing. The cars had headlights but they had little slits to make them point down. When people went out at night, they usually walked or biked or went by train but the trains were smoky and smelly and cold. There were torches designed to shine downwards and the air raid wardens and the police, if they saw the slightest crack of light they'd be banging on the door and telling you to

put the light out. You could be fined although I had a step grandfather who was an air raid warden and he used to go outside and smoke a cigarette, looking up at the German bombers with his cigarette sort of flashing away.