

Don't Leave in the Dark

The voice on the phone was full of excitement and was the way my youngest daughter, Anne, behaved when something pleased her. "Dad", she said "I have just finished reading it and its marvellous, I am going to read it again". What was it she had read'? The most recent best seller or one of the classics? No, none of these, it was some pages of foolscap that I had written with details of my life and some of my wife's, things that I knew we would never discuss with our children and putting pen to paper was the only way they could know about the family and incidents I went through during the Second World War in London.

What prompted me to write these things was the fact that I suddenly realised while doing some ancestry research how much more I would have known if I had asked the older members of the family about their lives. I decided there and then that I would leave something for those who follow me. At the time of writing I have three grandsons, ages 2, 12 and 13. Someone in the families they will have will take an interest in the past as I have done and I hope my writings are of help and interest to them.

If you who read this have a family and have a story to tell of your past life, why don't you put pen to paper for them so you don't leave them in the dark, not only will it be of interest for them to read but it will help should they decide to research the family history. In my grandparents day people lived in the same area all their lives. This is not the case today, we are scattered far and wide and this makes any writing you do important to those who follow.

Rescued from Retirement

During my first year of retirement we had many nice sunny days which allowed us to get the garden of our newly acquired abode into the sort of shape we desired, fortunately my wife and I find gardening therapeutic and it has always been one of our main interests. I I have always loved gardening but I am not too keen on DIY in the home, of course it soon became apparent to me that gardening was not going to occupy enough of my time and, having already been to the job centre, I had discovered employers consider you brain dead after the age of forty-five so, being in my sixties, I stood no chance. Work of a voluntary nature seemed the only answer. I scanned the local paper and considered many organisations, but could not seem to find my niche.

Well I found my niche and made many friends with an organisation known as Ryde Inshore Rescue, formerly Ryde Voluntary Lifeguards. When I went that first evening and spoke to the club president, Ian Jefferies JP

BEM, to explain my reasons for wanting to join I must confess I had no idea what my contribution would be, although I knew it would be restricted owing to my age. I take great pride in the fact that I am one of the oldest members and, despite having walking difficulties for the last couple of years, I am still able to make a contribution.

The club operates two rescue craft from its base at Appley and has an excellent look-out over Appley beach. The look-out is equipped with telephone, plus VHF radio for the necessary link with the rescue craft and HM Coastguard. The boat crew's ages are over a wide range and they provide cover night and day throughout the year through a pager system which is operated by the coastguard, all rescue operations within the Solent area are co-ordinated by HM Coastguard at Lee-on-Solent, all the nine voluntary units in our area come under the SSO (Solent Safety Organisation) and funding comes from a grant from the SSO, plus contributions from councils and other maritime interests. Of course the running expenses of the unit are considerable, particularly for fuel, maintenance and insurance, and reserve funds to replace craft.

This brings me to fundraising which is something that members are involved in every weekend and can be fun meeting and talking to the different people who come to our Appley HQ to support us by buying books we have for sale, or souvenirs from our stall -we are grateful for the support we get from the purchases people make to assist our funds and also very grateful for the books they donate for us to sell. Without this extra money the unit would cease to exist. They believe in the value of our work and I am proud to be one of the volunteers of the Ryde unit.

With this and my other interests on committees, I certainly won't get bored and look forward to many years of involvement with it all.

Seeing the light

The prison lights shone eerily through the misty early morning darkness and I could see why some locals referred to them as "the dog track". I was propped up on pillows in St Mary's looking at this scene, it was January 1971 and the embolism which I had suffered had caused me respiratory trouble - hence the pillows.

This illness and my stay in that hospital ward changed me in a way which is hard to explain. All I know is that being so ill made me look at things in a new light. When you can do nothing but think and watch other people you realise how fortunate you are to be alive and the world takes on a new look, any visitor is a tonic and those hard-working nurses always manage a smile, whatever faced them. Incidentally I have recently been a patient in the Eye Ward and the nurses are still smiling and working hard.

Reflections

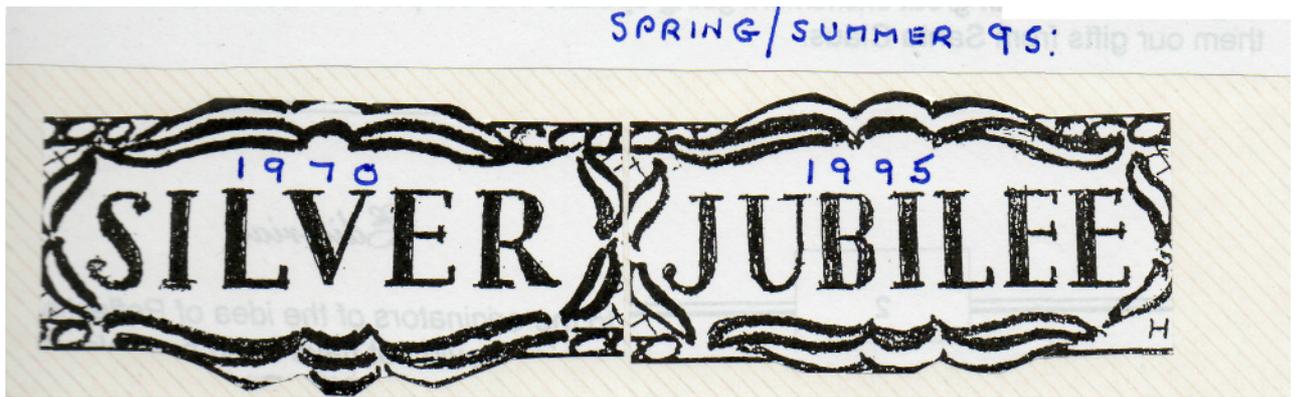
That long period of illness in 1971 made me decide that we should have a holiday at least once a year and see something of the world and its people. We went to many destinations, met many people and learnt a great deal about customs and how other people make do with a lot less than we have. In Estoril, Portugal we became friends with a family from Angola who managed a restaurant, lovely people, and the food they served was delicious. Also in Portugal on the Algarve we met a German couple from Cologne. Burt could not speak much English but his wife Eschi was an international telephone operator so she could hold a conversation with us. We had a lot of laughs in those two weeks, and it was hard to imagine that not many years before our countries had been at war, but you can't bear grudges forever despite the fact you may have had relations killed and suffered yourself.

One of our sons-in-law is in the army and this gave us the opportunity to stay with them when they went abroad. We have spent Christmas in Germany and Norway, and in those countries the Christmas atmosphere is different to back home. Shop windows in Norway have these little gnome-like men with what appears to be a bowl of porridge with a fried egg on top in front of them - now that's different! Not having had a Guy Fawkes the Norwegians celebrate with fireworks to see in the New Year, so it really comes in with a bang. Talking about celebrating, if you like the occasional sherry or whatever, make sure you take your duty free allowance in with you. I went with my son-in-law to Kristiansand on Christmas Eve and the only two (government owned) off licences in that town had queues. I understand that a lot of home brewing is done in that country.

In the summer Germany has its weinfests and the whole family enjoys the wine and the music from different types of bands around the weinfest site, food is cooked in the biggest frying pans I have ever seen, and all the generations of families are dancing and having an enjoyable time. The last time I went to one of these occasions was August 1989 and it was one of the best evenings I have ever had. With each bottle of wine purchased you got a souvenir glass decorated with the place name and date, but what impressed me most was the different generations all dancing together and really enjoying themselves. It took me back to my childhood and the parties my family had. We had a piano that no one in our house could play, it was purchased just for our friends to play at parties.

That box in the corner of everybody's living room has put paid to those days but then, on the other hand, that box has kept a lot of lonely people company and brought people into homes and taken away loneliness.

We don't go abroad now as we have decided to see something of this country, and our trip to Newquay, Cornwall last year brought us into contact with an assortment of people, but that's another story.



Something to reflect on.

When the editor of "Reflections" asked for articles for the 25th year issue I was at a loss, as being a newcomer I knew very little about the magazine's past but I can imagine the time and effort that has been put into producing it over the years and those contributions who have given so much to others.

This country fortunately has many who work for others without reward and many of us remember how they took one pace forward in large numbers upon the outbreak of the second world war, the jobs those men and women did then were varied, when we watch "Dads Army" on our television screens we laugh at the antics of the Home Guard and Air Raid Warden but how we depended upon them and many others in those dark days.

Many of those who work for the community today are those same men and women or are from the same 1940s stock, but don't let us forget the younger members of our community who don't have the job security we had yet they are still willing to assist others in many ways.

The 25th year of "Reflections" will also be the 50th year of the end of the second world war, so let us give thanks to all past volunteers, I am sure shoes will always be filled and the same standards upheld.

Childhood Larks

The gentleman on the radio was talking about birds and he mentioned the skylark which triggered off childhood memories of green fields near my home when as a child I would lay in the grass and watch and listen to that bird's song as it hovered above in blue skies, they say you remember the good memories and that you put all the bad at the back of your mind.

Well, this is the case with me regarding my childhood and the weather, all my memories have blue skies and it never rained.

Some of these fine days would be spent on the banks of the River Thames which was about four miles walk from home. We would watch the red

sailed boats sailing past, you can still see the red sail of one of these boats occasionally in the Solent today. Sometimes we would take a tent and just camp for the day, happy and enjoying the things around us until the sun told us it was time to make our way home. The journey home took us over a railway bridge and we would stop to watch the Southend train leaving the station belching steam and smoke as it went on its way, at the bottom of the bridge we entered a park which was a more interesting route home. Just inside the park gate was an expanse of water which had been created by the excavation of sand and gravel which was used to build the huge council estates which surrounded the park. This water had been made a feature of the park and swans glided across the water content with their man made home, another short walk would bring us to more fields before reaching the exit into our road. The field just before home was the one I lay in to watch the skylarks, unaware on those peaceful sunny days what a war would do to that field which would play a big part in the defence of the surrounding property and people.

The Z batteries had sixty four launchers firing one hundred and twenty eight rockets in a salvo, and this is what they put in the skylark field.

When silence came at last many changes had taken place in the area and the people all had scars, some visible, some not.

I had been working for many years when the war ended and never seemed to have the time to go to the skylark field owing to work and illness, but on reflection I regret not making the time to see if they had returned to hover once again in the peaceful blue sky.

BILL

The young soldier of the Middlesex Regiment had been a regular for many years when in the last days of May 1940 he found himself with not only British but French and Belgian troops on the beach at Dunkirk, he was given the job of looking after some younger men who found the incessant bombing and machine gun attacks too much to bear, it proved an impossible job as they would not heed his advice and he had to let them go their own way, he spent the next five days on those beaches before getting a boat home.

When he came home on leave to Hendon I remember him saying "I got on well with the French because of my name".

The next time this soldier saw the beaches of France was 6 June 1944 and it was the last thing he ever saw, badly wounded as he waded ashore he died on the ship back and is buried with other soldiers in Hollybrook cemetery, Southampton. This soldier was my uncle, Corporal W J

Roullier who died giving freedom to his ancestors' country France, his headstone reads:

Loved by us all
One of the best
His duty is done
He is now at rest

Granddad and Grandma

Being an only child people expect you to be a lonely child but this was not the case with me, as I had relations in large numbers within minutes of where we lived. Now I come to think of it, ours was the smallest family, maybe they took one look at me and said "enough".

Both my parents worked and a great deal of my time was spent with my father's mother who lived with us, a practice that seems to have died out today. Both my grandmothers were nice old ladies who had had hard times bringing up large families. My mother's mother who lived in Peckham seemed to have been singled out by the German Air Force as their number one target, every so often my mother and I would jump on a tram and go to see her. I lost count at the number of times we turned the corner of a street to be met by the sight of a house with large holes in or one that was just a pile of rubble, they never did get her, she lived for many years after the war.

My other Grandmother taught me a lot mainly about people and I would talk to her for hours and go with her to her church. Although she had many grandchildren, I spent more time with her than any of the others and I am sure what I learnt from her has helped me during difficult times.

The one thing that was missing from my life was a granddad as both had died before I was born, that is why today I never mind my grandsons asking me questions. I will always find the time to sit down with a book from the shelf and look up any queries they might have, plus the fact that I end up learning something most times. With two of my grandsons I am their only granddad so that makes any time spent with them even more important.

As I write this Christmas approaches, and the presents lay under the tree, little parcels of chocolate hang from the tree waiting to be claimed by the winners of games, we are spending Christmas Day on our own but Boxing Day will see shining faces at the door full of expectancy and love. Yes it's great to be a granddad but what would we all do without grandmother or as she is known in this house our Nan, she is the backbone of the family, whose love none of us could do without and is loved in return by us all.

Bilbao Birthdays

A friend suggested the trip and seeing as my wife's birthday was about the same time it would solve the present problem, plus the fact we would have some good companions to celebrate it with.

Just before we left the Island we heard the sailing was delayed due to bad weather, but this did not deter us. The journey to the ferry terminal via hovercraft and taxi was uneventful but nothing could have prepared us for what lay ahead.

On our arrival at the terminal we sought out the rest of our party who told us of further delays, so we settled down to what we knew now was going to be a long wait.

They say the art of conversation is dead - don't you believe it. We talked about everything and the comings and goings within the terminal helped keep us amused. When our ship docked from its previous trip the disembarking passengers made comments about the inclement weather they had just experienced. Fortunately no-one in our party was squeamish, anybody that was would have headed for the door and home.

By the time we got aboard we had spent six hours in the terminal and none of us being young we were a little weary. Just after sailing the Captain gave us some advice over the PA system. "Anybody prone to seasickness take their tablets now", and this was before we had left Portsmouth harbour, so this gave us an idea of what lay ahead.

Well despite the odd noise we slept alright and woke up to seas like I had never seen before. A shower was out of the question, you even had to hold on the wash basin while washing. A member of our party being very elderly had to have a wheelchair as she was unable to keep her feet. This resulted in an episode which we laugh at now, but could have been serious. As they went to enter a lift the ship's movement let the wheelchair take over and it entered at high speed and nearly pinned another member of the party to the lift wall. Taking evasive action, he ended up on the wheelchair occupant's lap. Her comment was "I didn't know you cared".

As I mentioned at the beginning, it was my wife's birthday and also another member of our party, so each evening the dinner ended up as a birthday celebration with the obligatory wine and happy birthday rendered each evening, sometimes with more gusto than others depending how much wine had been consumed.

When we docked in Spain we had a quick turn around due to being late, no time for any trips but we went ashore for a short time.

On the return we sailed across the Bay of Biscay in bright sunshine and after a couple of plates of tapas myself and other members of our party soon dozed off in the warm sun.

The sunrise next morning was beautiful and we sat having breakfast as we headed towards the nab. In conversation we all agreed this was something we had to do again. Good company, good conversation and lots of laughs and memories. They say laughter can add years to your life, well we added a few to ours.

OLD TOM

He was not so old really but to a youngster like me fifty was getting on a bit. Sheffield was his home town. He had come south many years before looking for work and had put down roots in Ilford, Essex.

We met when I went to work for the local Council. I was put with him as his mate doing various jobs such as renewing slates on the Council houses plus a hundred and one other jobs that needed doing in schools, public buildings and parks.

Whatever job we did Tom would not have any slacking and everything had to be left neat and tidy. Our mode of transport were our own bikes and small amounts of materials had to be conveyed on a handcart which we pushed with one bike perched on top secured by a length of sash cord. Going uphill was a struggle but the downhill run even worse as the method of braking was to use the kerb. Can you imagine trying to do that today with the traffic and parking problems.

One thing Tom never let me forget was that ratepayers paid my wages and any head wear had to be removed when a funeral passed. We had to show respect, the same respect was shown when a member of the public asked a question regarding the job we were doing, politeness cost nothing. One of the highlights of the year was the gymkhana and flower show held over the August Bank Holiday in the biggest park in Ilford, "Cranbrook" (my house name). I always enjoyed being involved in the preparation for this event which required us putting up fencing and making a show ring for the horses which consisted of metal pins, rope and bales of straw. While we did this marquees were erected for other exhibits. The event, held over three days, always attracted a large number of people because of the variety of the show.

Much of our other work was the maintenance of schools which was alright unless it was in the playground when all you got at playtime was "what you doing mister?" which could get a bit tiresome after a while. In the winter you had a nice warm boiler house to have your lunch in. I am sure it was Tom who got me into the habit of a bit of shut eye after lunch.

The years we spent together I enjoyed because I learnt a lot and despite the difference in our ages, most of the time we saw eye to eye. He was not only a workmate but a good friend who played an important part in my life and it is only now I realise that.

Ten years after coming to the Island I went back to Ilford and called in on Bill, Tom's nephew. He told me on taking retirement Tom had returned to Sheffield and his daughter by his first marriage. No doubt wishing to spend his retirement in the town he was born and look up old friends.

Rocket

It was an October morning in 1944. Most of the people in the area I lived were sleeping as the German rocket (V2) headed towards us with its 2,000 lb of explosives in its warhead. According to the time our clocks stopped it struck the green between our houses at 6.20 am

To be awakened by such an explosion and blast is hard to imagine. The ceiling comes down, the windows come in and the walls open up. You find yourself on the floor amongst the plaster, glass etc, trying to gather your thoughts and figure out how you got in that position. When my head clears I pick myself up and look through the gaps in the front wall. I can see flames lighting up the sky and other properties. Checking that my parents are OK I get dressed and make my way downstairs. The front door is no more and the front room window has been blown in, but the tea cups are in the front garden with the rest of the breakfast things. Blast does funny things like that. Neighbours' houses who had taken full force of the explosion had no fronts or roofs. Rescuers were getting people out as beds hung perilously on sloping bedroom floors, and flames came from a gas main which was burning in the crater giving the whole scene an eerie look.

As I stood talking to friends and looking at the devastation around me a shiver went through my body, not from the cold, but a reaction that I had experienced before when you suddenly realise how near you came to the end of your life.

Nobody lost their life that morning, but glass caused some horrendous injuries such as lost eyes and badly scarred faces. I became ill shortly after and was told in all probability what I experienced that morning was the cause.

Houses were rebuilt and nothing remains except memories, not only of the event but the comradeship that existed in those days. It is a pity that we don't have more of that comradeship in peace-time, but unfortunately it seems to take a war.

This is just one small chapter of my life and I pray that my children or grandchildren never experience anything like it.

AN 'OLE IN THE GROUND.

The Anderson shelter was second home for those who had to stay and face the blitz in cities such as London. One of the biggest faults with the Anderson was the amount of condensation that collected on the walls and made everything so damp. Our clothesline and all our neighbours were full of bedding on fine days before it went back for another night. When darkness came our family and neighbours would all troop down our garden paths as the siren sounded (or as my mother called it 'moaning minnie'). People called goodnight to each and made other comments mainly about b Germans. My grandmother slept sitting in one of those high backed wooden chairs that you used to find in many households in those days. The rest of us managed to lay down to sleep even if we did have to share our bed with the odd insect now and again. One of the most amazing things of those times is how quickly people got used to those sleeping conditions and also the gunfire which went on for most of the night with shrapnel raining down on roofs, with some of the larger pieces going straight Through. It became a hobby of youngsters of that time to collect the pieces on the way to school from roads and gardens. Getting back to the Anderson shelter, it was in ours one night that I experienced fear which in the end had some humour. On this particular night a bomb decided to come our way and it announced itself by sounding as if an express train was coming straight at us. When it exploded it seemed as if gigantic hailstones were raining down and it seemed to go on for ever. We were sure at least part of our house was no more. As it became quiet my father pushed open the door with some difficulty as soil had piled in front of it. Much to everyone's surprise we could see the outline of our house against the sky - at least we were not homeless. Our neighbours eldest son Jim called out he was going to see if he could find out where the bomb fell, so he made his way to the front of the house which, due to the fact it was on a corner, had a large front garden. Jim's voice suddenly got fainter. He had found the crater by falling in it, but to make matters worse the bomb had fallen on Jim's newly planted seeds which now were distributed over a wide area, mainly in gutters and the gardens of neighbours. At a time when people grew vegetables to eke out rations it was a blow for poor Jim but he could see the funny side of it and it was a talking point for many years. A group of Anderson shelters including ours were no more than twenty five yards away from that bomb crater and although it was not a large bomb we were lucky that night.

The next morning people went to work and I went to school. Life went on and the word 'stress' was never mentioned, unlike today when people seem to get stressed just getting out of bed.

The time I spent in air raid shelters it's a wonder I can write, let alone count. I left school in 1943 with the V1's and V2's to look forward to but I made it through the war and I thank God for that. The Anderson shelter saved many lives and in the future many a gardener is going to come across concrete bases of shelters and will be heard saying "who the devil put all this concrete here?" On the other hand it might be a TV Time Team.

FOGGY DAYS IN LONDON TOWN.

One of the best days of my parents' lives must have been when they got that council house on the Becontree estate at Dagenham. They had previously lived over a restaurant on the Old Kent Road (my birth place) and then in a flat in East Street which is off the Old Kent Road. Although I was quite young I can remember enough about the dark dirty place to understand my parents being overjoyed at getting a council house.

As was to be in all their married life, Dad left everything to Mum so come moving day Dad left for his newly acquired job in Ilford (he was a dental mechanic), never having seen the house but no doubt looking forward to putting his feet up in his new abode that evening.

Now for you who have never lived on a LCC council estate I will paint the picture. When you step out of your front door on one of these estates you can have houses very similar in appearance for about three miles in any direction, which is fine as long as you don't get a fog and I mean a fog, not mist. Unfortunately Dad met one of these fogs when leaving work for his new abode. The buses seemed to be running and he was lucky in only having to get the one which stopped about two hundred and fifty yards from his new front door.

Two hundred and fifty yards is not very far is it? In one of these fogs you could cross a road and not realise you had done it and you had to walk right up to a house to see the number. After wandering about for some considerable time he found home and was met by a very worried wife and sat down to a very warmed up dinner.

These fogs or smogs went on for many years and in the nineteen fifties I had led a line of traffic from Ilford to Manor Park. The reason I was the leader was because being on a bike I was the only one who could see the kerb and the first vehicle was following my rear light which was fine until I reached home, then it was a case of you're on your own now fellows.

One thing fogs could do is make you take more exercise. For instance you could go to the pictures when the weather was fine and then at the end of

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the show you step outside to find thick fog and all the buses had stopped running, so you got walking and young ladies seemed very pleased to have a young man escort them home on such nights.

I stopped writing at this point to search my memory regarding mugging and I could not remember one case in our locality in those days. Was it because we never had much worth taking, or has society gone downhill? A case of cleaner air but a dirtier society. The fog caused many deaths among the elderly and it was the bringing in of smokeless zones that improved things. When I left London in 1961 to come to the Island the London air was a lot cleaner than in my youth, but clean air seems to be in danger again in our towns and cities with traffic exhaust fumes. It took them many years to solve the smog problem so I don't think the answer to that will come in my lifetime.