LOUGHTON & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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Life in the wartime WAAF – II

EVE LOCKINGTON

In Saffron Walden we were billeted in big houses opposite the town green. We, of course, had to keep these billets spotless. I had not been a Girl Guide but only a member of the Girls Life Brigade, a far less practical organisation. I remember the contempt with which one girl, who had been a Girl Guide, watched my attempts at step scrubbing!

We used to hitch lifts everywhere and with complete safety. I never heard of any airwoman being molested during a hitched lift and certainly most of my journeys whilst in the forces were made by this method of transport, with no problems. It is interesting to compare this wartime safety that we servicewomen had with the dangers young women encounter today.

We were attached to the Debden RAF station for about six months and, on the whole, the time there was quite enjoyable. However the 'Yanks' finally took over and we were moved again, this time to home territory, North Weald RAF station or rather Blake Hall, where the Operations Room was in the process of being sited.

I had made friends with a girl called Anne Sidebotham who was one of the other three girls with whom I had travelled down from Morecambe. Anne came from a 'county' family. Her father was the local doctor of a small Devon town. At that time social status was far more stratified and Anne's family seemed far above mine. Anne was a pretty girl with pleasant manners, a typical English rose, and liked by most people including the Americans. Most of the other girls I had come to know in Saffron Walden were also posted to North Weald and I was now feeling more at home in service life.

North Weald, also in 11 Group, had suffered much in enemy air attacks. It was unfortunately situated near tall radio masts, which made good markers for enemy bombers. The Operations Room at North Weald had received a direct hit and several airwomen had been killed. An emergency operations room had been opened in Ongar whilst a new one was being built in the ball room of a big manor house, Blake Hall. When we first arrived at Blake Hall the new operations room was not ready, so, when we went on duty, we were bussed to Ongar.

We lived in huts in the grounds of Blake Hall. The hut that remained my home until after Victory in Europe, was named 'Tornado' and housed 'C' Watch to which Anne and I had been detailed. The hut was very basic, warmed in winter by two black round coal stoves with two toilets and two cold-water washbasins in a room at the far end. In very hot weather dampness would seep up through the floor and I remember walking down the highly polished floor of the hut, leaving damp footprints behind. When it was cold, we tried to keep the two

stoves alight as long as possible. The winters, during the period I was in Blake Hall, were very cold.. I can remember walking back to the hut from the YWCA when it was bitterly cold but very beautiful with the hoar frost turning the bushes and trees into a fairyland of glitter. However beautiful it was, it was still very unpleasant walking to and from the bathrooms which were situated in the old stables and not very pleasant.

At first we used the temporary operations room sited in a drill hall in Ongar. I cannot remember anything about this temporary operations room and probably did not work there very long, maybe two to three months. I do remember that during the night watches we used to lie on mattresses in an adjoining room, waiting to be called for a spell of 'plotting'. Both WAAF and RAF were employed in the operations room and we all shared the same rest room. Most of the airmen were much older men, or at least they seemed so to the young WAAFs.

When we finally moved into the operations room in Blake Hall we were able to go on duty straight from our huts. Once however the watch personnel were in Blake Hall itself, they had to remain there for the whole of the watch. Blake Hall seemed a rambling old building to me. We mainly used rooms on the ground floor, so of course did not see much of the rest of the house. However the occupation by the RAF certainly did not improve the building. Of course, there was none of the active vandalism which occurs now and we were under strict discipline but many airmen and women stamping around the house were bound to have a detrimental effect on it.

During the night shift we would spend our off-duty time making toast and drinking tea. These make-shift meals played havoc with my digestion which took a long time to settle down after the war.

In our hut, 'Tornado', Anne had a bed space near mine. We had tin wardrobes in which to keep our kit but no other furniture. We remedied this by obtaining orange boxes which we turned into bedside tables. We also acquired electric rings which we ran off the light hangings. It was amazing that we did not fuse the light system nor set the hut on fire. On these makeshift stoves we cooked anything we could scrounge from the mess room. Opposite Blake Hall were fields in which cows browsed. These fields were a good place for mushrooms. Some of us used to get into the field and pick the mushrooms and then take them along to the Air Ministry Guards on the gate who seemed to know about such matters, and they would tell us if the fungi were edible. They obviously were because we all survived. The mushrooms would be cooked in margarine purloined from the mess and eaten on toast, the bread also obtained from the same source. These highly enjoyable snacks came to an end when the farmer put a bull in the field!

The bathrooms as indicated above, were situated in the stable block and dismal to get to in winter but in the summer evenings, as we walked to them through the dusk, bats would sweep around our heads. It was difficult to believe they would not hit us or become entangled in our hair, when their wings seemed to fan our faces. Living, as I had done in a London suburb I had not been in such close contact with bats before, and I was not impressed. I remember, on one occasion, a hot summer night when the windows behind the baffle wall of the Operations room, were open, a bat actually flew into the room whilst we were on duty. I can remember the officers on the observation desk taking swipes at it with their rulers. I think this happened towards the end of the war when there was little danger of raids. I don't know what happened finally but suppose the creature found the way out.

Outside our hut 'Tornado' was a large Azalea bush. I had never seen one of these before and I seem to remember that it had beautiful yellow flowers. In a field near the huts grew the biggest cowslips I had ever seen. I was picking these

one day when I realised why they were so large; the sewage from the huts ran round the field. Somehow those cowslips did then not seem so attractive.

We were still expected to drill at times and, on one occasion our watch was detailed for a 'Wings for Victory' march. We had only just come off night watch and thought we should be permitted to rest, not march. We complained, refused to take part, and were all put on a charge. We had to go before the senior WAAF officer at North Weald and I remember we got a hitch up to the camp in the car of the Commanding Officer. In peacetime he was a minor actor, but was very proud of the fact and very pleased if any of us mentioned it, so of course we did. However he was not the officer who would hear the charge, and the female officer who did, was not sympathetic and we were all confined to barracks for several days as well as having to do the march. I wonder how present-day young women would put up with this kind of discipline. Often the admin. NCOs did seem rather drunk with power, and may have been rather jealous of the Operations Room WAAFs. Anyway on the whole the admin. staff were not liked.

There were still Americans in the vicinity and we WAAFs. were invited to dances. Anne became very friendly with an American soldier and told her family about him. I don't think they were very pleased and, shortly after, she was posted to Wick in the north of Scotland. It seemed rather coincidental. I never saw her again and would have liked to have known what happened to her.

By this time I had become friendly with a WAAF who had moved to Blake Hall from Norfolk (12 Group). She also had a bed near mine. This friendship continued long after the war and it was due to her that I married. She and I are now sisters-in-law.

As the war progressed it changed. Raids from Europe became less frequent and our watches became rather boring. Then we were told of a new enemy weapon the V1 or as it came to be known, 'the doodlebug'. This was virtually a flying bomb and could be picked up by radar and the Observer Corps. The airwoman who received a plot for a V1 had to call out 'Diver, Diver, Diver', to alert the controllers as she placed the arrow in position. As we plotted these appalling weapons over the map, they would suddenly disappear and we knew that another home, factory or hospital had been destroyed. I knew the reference of my parents' home and, if a doodlebug ever crashed in that vicinity when I was on duty, I would always telephone home to see if all was well.

Sometimes when we were hitching back from leave these horrors would come chugging along overhead and we would hope that they would keep chugging. The danger always came when the sound of the engine stopped. On one occasion our watch were coming back to Blake Hall after a short leave, when a doodlebug crashed on the waterworks roundabout at Woodford. It was a miracle that none of us was either killed or wounded as this was a favourite spot to try for a lift.

We in the Operations Room at Blake Hall had little to do with D Day and the invasion of Normandy. We were aware of what was happening on the South Coast but we were well away from the scene of the action. It was around this time that London's next horror hit the population. This was the V2 rocket. There was nothing Fighter Command could do about this.

In the Ops Room, an airwoman might pick up one plot in Holland, but that was all, and, shortly after, an explosion would occur in the London area. These rockets were an horrific weapon. There was no air raid warning, no sound, just a killing explosion. My own home was badly damaged by one of these weapons. Luckily no one was hurt, although my mother just escaped serious injury from splintered glass which spattered her bed, immediately after she had left it to go to the bathroom. She was recovering from flu at the time but from that time and through the rest of her life, she suffered double vision from the shock of that explosion.

The only defence against these weapons was offence. The bombers sought out the launching pads and bombed them but still the explosions continued until, at last, the Allies overran the rocket sites and the horrific attacks ceased.

I remained at Blake Hall until Victory in Europe. By that time there was nothing for us to do. It was, however, decided to release WAAFs. according to their length of service. I had joined relatively late in the war, so there was need to find some sort of occupation for me and other late joiners. Olwyn, my friend, was released quite early on but I, with others, none of which were my particular friends, was sent to Biggin Hill in Kent. This was a famous Battle of Britain station, but we were no longer needed for Operations Room work. We went there to help check that refugees, flying in from Europe, were genuine. Not many did fly in to Biggin Hill. Most of the people that came through were VIPs. or reporters. I remember seeing Bob Hope and the Duke of Luxembourg and his family. Again there was not much for us to do, but we could not be released until the correct time.

Whilst at Biggin Hill we lived in bleak, but sturdy, barrack blocks and all sorts of trades were in the same dormitory. I remember putting one girl to bed, maudlin drunk. Her evening's entertainment had not cheered her and I spent ages trying to bring her out of her drunken depression. The food at Biggin Hill was awful and most of our wages went on meals. On one occasion when the mess staff were dishing up rice pudding they dished up a cooked mouse as well! It was at Biggin Hill that I realised I had a double. On one occasion I was refused a meal because I had already had one. I would not have willingly chosen to eat two meals there and I did manage to persuade the mess staff that they were mistaken.

The authorities still did not know what to do with us and I was sent on indefinite leave. I can't remember how long this lasted but it was definitely over a month. My friend, Daphne Gage, who had remained at British Drug Houses throughout the war, was working in the Export Credits Department and needed help in the office. As it was impossible to obtain shorthand typists then and I was bored, I suggested I should come and help her. I would not need paying as I was still being paid by the Air Force. This idea was put to the Office Manager who agreed that I could help Daphne but said that I would have to be paid. So for a period, I was paid by both British Drug Houses and the Air Force. I remember that with the money I obtained from British Drug Houses, I bought a very nice suit.

Finally I was sent to do office work at the Air Ministry Unit in London. I was billeted in a block of luxury flats opposite Regents Park. I honestly cannot remember much about the time I was at the Air Ministry Unit. I know I did office work, but cannot remember what sort. Really the authorities were just concerned with keeping us employed. I remember one of the sergeants for whom I worked was so foul mouthed, that I asked for a change. I must have got it for he disappeared from my memory. I also remember that we had to be on call at night but were allowed to sleep in the duty room. On one occasion they changed the WAAF duty room into the RAF duty room and there was I happily in bed when the airmen walked in. They were horrified and so was I. I hurriedly dressed and when I left the room found a string of airmen outside waiting to go in. The Admin Office had not found it necessary to inform WAAF personnel that the rooms had been changed.

At last the time came for my demobilisation at Wilmslow RAF Station. There I handed in my kit and was finally discharged as a civilian after just under four years in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. I still have my 'Demobilisation Booklet' which includes, among other items, a reference stating that they could

recommend me to anyone needing a good shorthand-typist/secretary. During all my time in the WAAF I had never done secretarial work!

I have never regretted joining the Women's Auxiliary Air Force. The experience broadened my outlook on life. I mixed with a far greater variety of people than I would have done in my fairly restricted home environment. In fact, the WAAF was to me my University of Life course.

'1912 and all that'

RICHARD MORRIS

Judging from the following particulars of five plots of land for sale in Loughton in 1912, Estate Agents hyperbole even existed in those days:

'This estate, which from its position is the finest and most exclusive in the neighbourhood, being on a hill, with views (that can never be shut out) over Kent and Surrey, is on the verge of an extensive Woodland of over 5,500 acres, and the portion of the Estate now offered having formed part of a Gentleman's Garden is in splendid cultivation and includes, besides valuable timber, an exceptionally well made full size Tennis Court.

Loughton (according to the Local Board's Report and Statistics) one of the healthiest localities in England is, unlike most of Essex, hilly, and for country scenery a revelation to the Town Visitor who has thought it impossible to find rural beauty within 12 miles of the Metropolis.

Quiet lanes and Forest paths afford rest for tired eyes and wearied brains, while for the socially inclined there are Golf (3 courses), tennis, Hockey, Cricket, Football and Rifle Clubs, dramatic and Musical Societies, with Hunting and Polo, Good Public Hall, Library and Reading Room.

The Local education facilities for Boys and Girls are exceptional, and the whole sanitary condition of the District as perfect as modern science can make it.

The Daily and Season Ticket rates are very moderate, the First Class fare return being £4 3s 9d and Second, £3 4s 3d per quarter, Liverpool Street.'

The plots for sale were on the northern corner of Pump Hill and Church Hill.

Tales from Chigwell

ALAN W SMITH

A Chigwell martyr

John Rogers (1500–1555) became a priest and the rector of a London church just as the Reformation was gathering momentum. In 1534, perhaps seeking a more friendly environment, he went to Antwerp to work with Tyndale in translating the Bible into English and continued Tyndale's English version of the Old Testament. He published a complete version of the Bible under the pseudonym Thomas Matthew.

While in the Netherlands he came to accept the reformed faith and married there – an indication of how far he had travelled from his former priesthood. In 1547 he came home with his wife to a new officially Protestant England. He was made Prebendary of St Paul's and absentee rector of Chigwell.

When Mary Tudor came to the throne he preached the doctrine as taught in the previous reign, warning against popery. Rogers was the first to be called on to renounce the new doctrines and was imprisoned in Newgate for refusing to do so. He was brought before the commission appointed by Cardinal Pole and

was sentenced to death as a heretic by Gardiner. He was the first to be burnt at Smithfield and is, therefore, this country's Protestant 'Protomartyr'.

The matter on which he was particularly pressed was the Headship of the Catholic Church. Was it Jesus Christ or the Bishop of Rome? One might think this was a clear issue and Rogers had a plain rule to guide him through such difficulties. He simply said, 'I must first find it in Scripture' – the principle which was and remains the basis of Protestant teaching. The Roman alternative, put crudely, was that the ongoing teaching of the Church, led by the Pope, should be the believer's basic guide.

So here was one of the big Reformation issues: the authority of the Bible versus the authority of the Church. John Rogers, who had himself been a translator of the Bible, suffered a cruel death because he was for the Bible.

And a non-juror

Another Chigwell priest who was not a martyr but who simply disappeared from view was Samuel Dod, vicar and governor of Chigwell School, 1672–1690. In his last year he was ejected from his living as a non-juror: one who refused on grounds of conscience to swear allegiance to the new joint sovereigns, William of Orange and his wife Mary who were installed after the so-called 'Glorious' or 'Bloodless' Revolution of 1688.

Never a prominent person Dod just slipped away but with his conscience inviolate. He was not of course an isolated figure. The non-jurors were headed by Archbishop Sancroft, eight other bishops (the best known being Bishop Ken the hymn writer) and 400 priests. The government, insisting on a declaration of allegiance as a condition of office, failed to find a form of words that would satisfy both parties and so clergy were 'deprived' and new men appointed.

Chigwell parish registers

The oldest registers, covering 1555–1662, which have been rebound into a substantial volume, are totally illegible in places because of serious water damage and are very hard to read in other places due to fading ink. It is fortunate that these older records were copied in the 1890s by Robert Browne and, even then, much was quite unreadable and his transcription shows many blank spaces, sometimes of up to half a page. Other early records had apparently been disbound, shuffled and reassembled out of order and sometimes even upside down. In 1813 new printed pro forma registers begin and everything becomes easier to follow.

Therefore. the parish has almost complete records of baptisms, marriages and burials from 1555 to the present day, though some are in transcription only, but they make a fascinating archive of Chigwell over four centuries.

The marriage registers clearly show the changing social composition of Chigwell and the outlying communities. In the early nineteenth century, farmers, farm labourers and a few craftsmen were the majority, leavened only by 'the Butler at Chigwell School' and various 'gentlemen' (those of independent means living on their own property). At the end of the century there is more diversification with entries such as 'author' and 'entomologist'. By the 1920s City men are on the increase and soon predominate. In the post-war years development brings totally different occupations: factory worker, plumber, security guards and local government officers.

Papers have been pasted into the fly leaves: in the Baptismal Register 1850–1900 there is a note that 'Jonathan Saville has brought his Tythe Milk to the Church'; a letter to the churchwardens from the vicar in the 1850s (though meant for the farmers) saying that, if the church is to be enlarged, they must all share the cost and many more, including sketches and letters.

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