

## Memories and Reminiscences of Bob Sharrock

I was born in 1925 at a small village called Digmoor in Upholland near Wigan. My father, Joshua, known as Jos, was a coal miner working at a coal mine in Bickerstaffe.

Mother, Alice worked hard looking after the house and the children.

I had an older brother called Eric and a younger brother called William or Billy who died when only three years old. I went to school at the age of five.

We lived in a small terraced cottage in Spencers Lane, which had two bedrooms, a parlour (front room), a living kitchen and a back kitchen. It had a back yard in which Daddy had a wooden hut in which he carried out his hobby of fretwork and other woodwork. The living kitchen had a coal-fired range, which had an oven on one side and water heater on the other. Alongside the fireplace was a brick built boiler for washing clothes. The back kitchen had a slopstone and a cold water tap. All hot water came from a kettle, which was permanently on the fire or from the wash boiler, which was only used on washdays.

Daddy would come home from work covered in coal dust and would wash all over in a galvanised bath in front of the fire or, if the weather was warm, in the backyard.

Sundays were spent going to chapel and Sunday school. We had no transport and Daddy went to work on his bike having to go over a fairly large area called the Moss. He fitted a seat on the crossbar of his bike and would take me for rides on it.

Times became hard when the Bickerstaffe pit closed and father was out of work. He and some other miners went to work in Kent but the conditions were so difficult that they came back to Lancashire. In 1935 he got a job at Cronton colliery and the family moved to Whiston, renting an end terrace house in Brook Street.

I went to a primary school in Prescott, in the final year class.

At the age of 11 I went to Whiston Central School until Easter 1939

when I left school at the age of 14. I then started work as an errand boy at the Rainhill branch of the Whiston Co-op Society. I earned 11 shillings per week and I gave my mother 10 of these and had one shilling as spending money. I could get to a cinema show for 9 pence.

War broke out on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sept 1939, and we were then living in a small semi-detached house 121 Dragon Lane. Whiston, from there, over ensuing months, we could see the effects of air raids on Liverpool, about 9 miles away. A few stray bombs fell on Rainhill but did no significant damage.

Some communal air raid shelters were built in the streets but as they were brick built and had concrete roofs it was doubtful if they would have been very effective. We were issued with an Anderson shelter, which Dad installed, in our back garden. He dug a pit about 3 feet deep, installed the corrugated shelter in it and covered it with the displaced earth. We only spent time in it when the air raid sirens went off. It was cold, damp and cramped.

Men were getting called up to the forces and as a result I changed to milk delivering. This meant being up at 5-30 a.m. 7 days a week. Loading a handcart with about half a ton of milk bottles and pulling it around Rainhill. It was hard work but I think it did me some good physically. Eventually I was equipped with a pony and milk float, which made the job a lot easier.

One day I met an old school acquaintance who was working for the local Gas Company. He told me that they were short-handed and it might be worthwhile making enquiries about a job. I followed this up and called at the office. The Manager interviewed me, asking a few questions on maths and general knowledge and then asked if I would like to start as a laboratory assistant. I accepted willingly and was soon involved in doing routine lab tests on calorific value, flue gas analysis, retort temperatures and other similar jobs. I started night school classes on maths, physics and chemistry, which lasted for two years until it was time to join the armed forces.

With a war going on these early teenage years didn't give much

opportunity for normal teenage activities. In addition to my three nights a week at nightschool time was also taken up by joining, with my friends, the Air Training Corps and the Police Auxiliary Messenger Service and it was the A.T.C that stimulated my interest in flying.

The A.T.C took up one night per week when we did aircraft recognition, elementary navigation and drill. There were two occasions when we went on a week's camp, once to Blackpool airport and once to Crosby on Eden. One day at Crosby I was hanging around aircraft that were being serviced when a pilot told me that he was taking a Beaufighter on a test flight and did I want to join him. I sat in the observer's seat and we flew over the Lake District, I was thrilled.

When it came the time for registering for the armed forces. I made it clear that I wanted to join the RAF as a flier. I was eventually called for interview at the Aircrew Selection Board at Padgate, Burtonwood, near Warrington. I was asked what job did I want to do in aircrew and I said PNB or Flight Engineer.

PNB stood for Pilot, Navigator, Bomb Aimer. They all started their training together, the latter part of this in Canada or Rhodesia. As they went through their training selection was made. The best continued as Pilots, the next Navigators and the rest Bomb aimers.

When I mentioned Flight Engineer there was little further discussion. I was told I could train for this job. Whether it was because of my vaguely engineering background or because they were desperately short I don't know.

I joined the Air Force in June 1943, aged 18, and reported to the Lords Cricket Ground in London. We were billeted in blocks of flats nearby. Here we were issued with uniform, given numerous inoculation jabs, initiated into drill exercises and introduced to canteen food. Not a bit like home cooking.

About 2 weeks later we were posted to Torquay for Initial Training. Here we endured physical training, some theoretical training into navigation, drill, Morse Code, even skeet shooting on Daddy Hole Plain. When we moved from one site to another it was either running or at a marching pace faster than the army used. This lasted for about six weeks and we were fortunate to have good hot weather. Most of the time it was very enjoyable.

The next posting was to St Athan in South Wales. Here we started our technical training. Most of us were allocated the Halifax bomber, others the Stirling, the Lancaster and a few to Sunderland flying boats. I was disappointed not to be one of the latter. All these were four engined aircraft and it was only these that had a Flight Engineer. Most of the time was spent in lecture groups and my notebooks give an idea of the type of information we were given. We also had drill, P.T. swimming and other recreational activities

It was about this time that, when on leave, I went to a dance at the Parish Rooms at Prescot and met Dorothy Marsden.

The following March (1944) I was posted to 1664 Heavy Conversion Unit at Dishforth. This was where we met up with aircrews that had trained on two-engined aircraft and were moving on to heavy bombers. In this case they were Halifax bombers. We had further practical training and were attached to a crew. They were all Canadian with a pilot by the name of Willard MacKeracher. The unit was in 6 Group, operated by the Royal Canadian Air Force, which occupied the area of North Yorkshire.

We did six exercises of Circuits and Landings. These were a series of take off, fly round the airfield and land. They were mainly to familiarise the pilot and engineer with handling the aircraft. This took about 10 hours. A further hour was spent doing three engined landings. Three further trips were made to give the Gunners and the Bomb Aimer some practice but it was on this third trip that we crashed on landing. It was apparent and subsequently reported that we had suffered an engine failure which slewed us over to miss the runway.

It was a miracle that not one of the crew was killed. All I remember is being knocked about and then opening my eyes to see that I was a few yards in front of the nose of the aircraft.. The first person to reach me was an Italian prisoner of war who helped me to get out my parachute harness. Help soon arrived and four of us were taken by ambulance to Northallerton hospital.

Examination showed that I had a compressed fracture of the vertebrae in the lumbar region. A plaster of Paris jacket was applied which extended from the groin to the neck. I had a few days in bed while the jacket hardened and dried and then I was able to walk about fairly normally. The only difficulty was that I could not bend down. I was then given a couple of week's leave, which I spent at home.

I was then posted to a convalescent home in Hoylake on the Wirral. This was called The Leas and was previously a girl's school. It was provided to recuperate injured aircrew and there were a number of chaps wearing plaster jackets similar to mine.

We were made to keep quite active and spent most of the time doing exercises, playing games such as softball, (an easy version of baseball), tug'o war, football, cycling, etc. I was there for just short of three months. I was fortunate in that in weekends off it was quite easy to get home.

Whilst I was there the Normandy invasions took place.

In August 44 I was posted back to Dishforth and joined another crew. The skipper was R. Anderson. We knew him as Andy.

Over a period of about four weeks we did 98 hours of flying time in Halifax Bombers.

Then we were told that future flying would be in Lancasters so, after a few lectures and 10 hours flying time in three days we were considered to be fully trained.

The next posting was in October to 428 Squadron based at Middleton St George, which was where we were to do our operational flying. In the 6 months that we were operational I did 28 ops and was "screened" on the 17<sup>th</sup> April 45, some three weeks before VE Day.

My flying logbook lists every flight that I made, including training flights and operational trips. The operational flights were mainly at nighttime, bombing German cities. We were fortunate to evade being attacked by night fighters and being hit by flak. Only on one occasion did I find, on

returning, a piece of shrapnel embedded in the fuselage.

With the war in Europe ending in May 45 and operational flying finished it was apparent that the authorities had to find something for aircrew to do before demob and I was posted, along with other Flight Engineers, To Credenhill, near Hereford and put on a Flight Mechanic's course. After that I was posted to Kinloss where we spent time inhibiting engines on bombers in case they were needed again.

Whilst I was there the manager of Prescott Gas Company applied for my release from the R A F and I was demobbed on the 1<sup>st</sup> Feb 46 on a "B" class release. I had served 2 years 8 months.

Some time later I learned that the Institution of Gas Engineers had arranged some courses for employees who had their technical education interrupted by war service and I made application.

I went to Aston Technical College for 6 months to get my Ordinary Grade Certificate in Gas Engineering (Supply), then to Liverpool Gas Company for 6 months practical training followed by a further 6 months at Birmingham Central Technical College to get my Higher Grade Certificate.

On the 19th July 1947 Dorothy and I were married.

Soon after finishing the course and going back to Prescott Gas I got an invitation to apply to Liverpool Gas Co. for a job in their Industrial Sales Department. This I did and started with the company later in 48. The job involved visiting manufacturing firms and getting them to use gas for their heating processes. These included space heating, water heating and various manufacturing processes such as furnaces, tank heating etc.

From getting married we lived in shared accommodation in various places, usually the homes of widows and consisted of a bedroom, a ground room and shared kitchen and bathroom. Whilst working at Liverpool we bought a small semi in Cable Road, Whiston. This cost



£900 and we lived there for about a year until we moved to Burnley.

The Gas Industry at that time was formed from towns having a gasworks run either as private companies or mainly as Departments of local councils.

In 1951 the Industry was nationalised and these undertakings, apart from the bigger towns like Manchester and Liverpool, were formed into small groups. This gave the opportunity to create special departments specialising in a particular activity. One of these was sale of gas to Industrial and Commercial premises. One of the Groups was known as the Burnley / Colne Group and I got the job of Industrial Engineer, starting in June 51. This also coincided with the arrival of Robert, our firstborn.

We bought a house in Sycamore Avenue, Burnley. Finances were tight but we managed. It was here, in 1953, that John was born. My job involved selling gas to Industrial and Commercial customers and I had to get around in a small van but after a while I got my first car, a Ford Prefect.

In 1954 The North West Gas Board reorganized and larger Groups were formed. One of these was The Northern Group which took in Lancaster, Morecambe, Kendal, Barrow-in-Furness and other smaller undertakings in the Lake District and as far away as Millom. Harry Robinson, the Manager of the Burnley/Colne Group was made Manager of the Northern group and I got the job of Industrial Gas Sales Engineer. Among the customers that I had dealings with were Jas. Williamsons and Storey Bros. of Lancaster, K Shoes of Kendal, Vickers Armstrong, Barrow Steel, Barrow Iron works and Millom Iron works.

The Gas Board bought a house, which I rented, in Beaufort Road, Morecambe and I got a decent increase in pay. Life was comfortable.

Whilst living in Morecambe Jeremy and David arrived and I got involved in various activities including the Masons, Round Table and Scouts. Also whilst there I bought a second hand dinghy, a GP 14, called



William Younger with the sail number 347. I joined the Morecambe and Heysham Yacht Club and took part in races with Dorothy as crew. This lasted sometime and the boys also took part. John and I sailed together at the Southport 24hr race as part of the MHYC team a couple of times, one year using our boat as the team boat. One year we took part in the Race Across the Bay to Gibraltar (the one near Jenny Brown's Point) and managed to come last as our launching trolley had broken the previous day so we were loaded down with the canvas cover and all sorts of other heavy gear. John was the keenest sailor and eventually he decided that I was too slow to act as his crew so he got various girls to crew for him, including Dorothy's niece, Patricia. His main crew was Rosemary Cole with whom he won many trophies. We did do some work on the boat, when we first got it it had a jib and mainsail in white cotton, this was changed for red terylene sails including a genoa.

I joined the RNLI as crew on the inshore lifeboat and acted as survivor on more than one occasion to give the holidaymakers a thrill.

We spent several holiday at Fell Foot Park a National Trust site on Lake Windermere. We would travel towing the boat with all the camping gear in it and two canoes perched on top of it. We had a wonderful French six berth frame tent which seemed the size of a small marquee.

I also had a go at gliding with a club near Tebay. This didn't last very long though. Dorothy, Robert and John used to have to hang around whilst I was doing circuits.

I tried all sorts of activities golf, various musical instruments and even started to build a hovercraft, up to the point where I needed an engine.

The church of the Ascension in Torrisholme had a well-organised rambling club. Every month they had a day in the Lake District, travelling by coach, and splitting into three groups. Hard, Medium and Easy. Dorothy and I thoroughly enjoyed these outings.

I was very keen on walking and kitted myself up with light weight camping gear and did a few long distance walks.

After living in the house in Morecambe for 12 years I realised that to be financially secure we ought to own our own property so, in 1963, we bought a house in Bolton-le-Sands. This was an old stone built semi-detached in St Michael's Lane named Thistlebrake. I spent about 6 months getting it into reasonable shape for living in. I rewired the electrics, and with help installed central heating and got a contractor to install a water closet and drains to a soakaway in the rather big garden. Each bedroom had a sink and there was an upstairs bathroom and a downstairs toilet in the utility room. For a few years we retained the copper under which you could light a fire to do the washing. We put in a solid fuel rayburn which heated the water and did the cooking and it was wonderful producing the most wonderful food, Dorothy helped of course.

Robert went to Lancaster Road County Primary School as did John. For John's final year we were living in Bolton-le-sands so he was taken there every day. Jeremy and David both went to Bolton-le-sands Primary school. Unusually John and David went to Lancaster Royal Grammar School whilst Robert and Jeremy went to Morecambe Grammar, no-one can remember why this was the case.

It would be about 1972 that further reorganisation took place and the Northern Group expanded to take in the Blackpool and Preston areas. The headquarters was based at Blackpool and I was put in charge of a sales department dealing with Industrial and Commercial customers. I was given the title of Technical Sales Manager.

I was given the opportunity to be provided with finance for removal expenses but to avoid disruption of the education of the boys I decided to stay in Bolton-le-Sands and commute. This meant doing about 50 miles a day in the car. It was during this period that Robert, John and Jeremy left to go to university.

It would be about 1975 that Dorothy got a job at Preston Hospital as a phlebotomist so we were both commuting, in two cars. We needed to move nearer to our jobs but it would have upset David's way of life so

we continued to live there until he went to university.

We moved to Garstang in 1982.

At some time in the eighties some of my colleagues invited me to join them on a sailing holiday on a thirty-five foot sailing yacht owned by the British Gas Sailing Association.

We set sail from a port on the south coast in the evening for an overnight passage to Cherbourg. The weather deteriorated and progressed into a storm. We sailed on under heavily reefed sails, secured ourselves with harnesses and tielines and suffered seasickness. We eventually reached France, about a hundred miles East of Cherbourg, and found a sheltered port where we sorted ourselves out. The rest of the week was in good weather and we visited the Channel Islands. There were many more trips. Later we sailed around the Western Isles of Scotland. I was very enthusiastic and attended evening classes at the Fleetwood Nautical College to learn navigation. These sailing trips went on until the Sailing Association folded on privatisation of the industry.

In 1986 the Gas Industry was privatised and I was made redundant. I got redundancy pay and I could also be paid my pension. Dorothy continued to work for a couple of years.

I was not very involved in politics but had voted for the Liberal party. I got to know a few people in Garstang and learned that there was a particularly active Liberal group so I went to their meetings and in 1987 put my name forward for election in the town and borough elections. Five of us gained seats in the Wyre Borough Council and I was elected to Garstang Town Council. The following year, 1988 I was made Mayor of Garstang. Elections were held every four years and I was re-elected on the next two. In the last year, 1998/99, I was Mayor of the Borough of Wyre and with Dorothy, who was Mayoress, had a wonderful time, being entertained by many organisations and making many friends. May 99 saw the end of my time in local politics and, at the age of 74, just as well.

In June of that year Dorothy and I celebrated by taking a lovely holiday doing an Alaskan Cruise.

Some three months later I was diagnosed with cancer of the stomach and had a gastrectomy at Chorley Hospital. Recovery from this was slow but with great care from my dear wife I made gradual progress.

In August 2005 Dorothy died of cancer of the pancreas.

The commemorative address given at her funeral by her sons gives a better record of her life than I can give

"Dorothy did many things throughout her life and looking back it seems that nearly all of them carried a sense of public or private duty and that in doing them she gave real pleasure to those around her.

She was, perhaps above all, a mother and a wife. She somehow found time even during the busiest years, when she was raising four sons, to channel her energies into other activities.

But she never lost sight of a belief that her primary responsibility was to her family. I suppose that everybody believes that they have the world's best mum: and I am no different.

Dorothy was born eighty years ago in February 1925, not far from here, in Longridge. She trained as a confectioner – which probably accounts for the fantastic scones which we will all now miss so badly - but with the outbreak of the war she moved into war work.

She used to tell us great stories about those times, some of them involving a dashing Lancaster Bomber flight engineer called Bob. She met this young man at a dance in the Parish hall in Prescott while he was on leave from the RAF.

They married shortly after the end of the war and, with Dad making his way in his new career as a gas engineer, there began a peripatetic

period during which they lived in Birmingham, Whiston, Burnley, Morecambe and Bolton-le-Sands.

Dorothy gave birth to four sons, the first in 1951 and the last in 1962. It's true to say – because she did and why not, she was proud of the fact – that she taught each of us to read and write BEFORE we started primary school.

I think that says it all about her determination to give her children the very best start in life, in which she succeeded. Thanks mum. She gave us all a well-rounded view of life and the world and she did it with a real enthusiasm, which was truly infectious.

We were all inveterate hillwalkers, often even before we had taken our first steps! Mum must have walked every fell in the Lake District ... and run back down every one of them as well. She was still walking her beloved mountains well into her seventies – and giving her four sons, six grandchildren and three great grandchildren a run for their money.

But she was also active in other areas, dinghy sailing and scouts among them as well as working as a volunteer with the Citizens Advice Bureau in Lancaster.

As her boys grew up and learned to fend for themselves, Dorothy decided she wanted to resume her working career. She trained as a phlebotomist and worked at hospitals in Lancaster, Morecambe and Preston. I think that she got a lot of satisfaction out of this valuable service – especially when she was mistaken in the hospital wards and corridors for a doctor because of her white coat!

In the mid-70s Bob and Dorothy moved to Garstang, nearer to Dad's job in Blackpool, and her job in Preston, and a new era began in their lives, now that their sons had all left home for university. David refused to move from Bolton-le-Sands until he went to University so the move to Garstang was delayed. I suppose you might call this their "Golden Age", because they have had such a wonderful time living here and making such good friends.

She supported Dad in his political and civic roles, becoming Mayoress for Garstang and Wyre Borough Council. She also threw herself into a host of activities, including support for the Leonard Cheshire Home and the St John's Hospice and Meals on Wheels with Cabus WI.

Dorothy was active in the bowling club, she swam once a week and she continued to walk. She was fit and active right up until the end, her enthusiasm for life undimmed.

As we remember her this morning, the word, which most aptly comes to mind, is "selflessness", because she always put the needs of others above and before her own needs. She was the least selfish person I know, she was always ready to help in any way that she could. She was – and is - our mum, Dorothy."

That gives a summarised account of our lives, which, on the whole was a happy one. Good fortune, in many respects, came our way. My career started modestly as a youngster from an elementary education but a series of events led to me having a well-paid job and a comfortable retirement. Family life was pleasant, bringing up four boys who have done well in their careers and kept in close contact with us.

Another part of my life was my association with Scouting.

This started with Robert joining Cubs and me offering to assist with transporting the pack members to their various activities. The Scout Group was attached to Church of the Ascension at Torrisholme and I joined the Parent's Committee.

About 1964 the Senior Scout Unit needed some help so I took the necessary training and became the Senior Scout Leader, my scouting career was as follows.

March 65 Senior Scout Leader      16<sup>th</sup> Morecambe  
Oct 67 Assistant District Commissioner (Venture Scouts)



May 71 District Commissioner - Morecambe & Heysham District

April 74 District Commissioner - Lonsdale District

June 80 Assistant County Commissioner - West Lancashire

In 1984 and then living in Garstang, I had retired from the Lonsdale District and was appointed Assistant County Commissioner (Personnel) for the West Lancashire County Scout Council. The County had two full time campsite wardens and I made arrangements for improvements to their conditions of employment including salaries and pensions.

June 93 Assistant District Commissioner (Venture Scouts).

I took an active part in training these teenage lads in various outdoor activities such as Rock Climbing, Hill Walking, Orienteering, Sailing and Canoeing, some of them gaining the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

My scouting involvement was for about 28 years and I enjoyed it immensely.

ROBERT SHARROCK C.Eng .. M.I.Gas E.

D.O.B. 12th February 1925

Whiston Central School    Left 1939 aged 14 years

Started work as errand boy Whiston Co-op Society.

1941 Started work at Prescott Gas Co. Junior on general duties in the laboratory, works and distribution Dept

June 1943 Joined R.A.F. Trained as Flight Engineer (Aircrew) completed one tour in Bomber Command. Attained rank of Flight Engineer and then Flight Sergeant

March 1944 Crashed in Halifax Bomber on training flight and ended up with a broken back

Sept 1944 Resumed training

Posted to 428 Squadron (Canadian) Ghost Squadron at Middleton St George. Flew 28 operational flights

Feb 1946 Released from R.A.F. on a B Class Release. Returned to work at Prescott Gas Co. manager of gas works applied for Bob's release

Jan 1947 Started intensive course in Gas Engineering at Aston in Birmingham Technical College sponsored by Institute of Gas Engineers

Nov 1948 Joined Liverpool Gas Co.

June 1951 Appointed Senior Industrial Engineer - Burnley following Nationalisation

June 1954 Appointed Group Industrial Gas Sales Engineer - NWGB North (Lancaster)

Feb 1971 Appointed Technical Sales Manager, West Lancs (Blackpool)

April 1986 Early Retirement due To impending privatisation of British Gas 42 years' service in Gas Industry

#### FAMILY

Married to Dorothy 19th July 1947

Children - Robert Eden 16th June 1951

John James 18th May 1953

Jeremy Mason 1st June 1958

David William 19th Feb 1962

Stomach cancer Aug 1999 stomach removed

Moved to Abbeyfield House 2011