

II – The Thirties 1931 to 1937 Rendcomb

Prelude

Time: Spring 1930
Place: A hill near Northleach
Characters: Mother) with
Myself, aged 10) bicycles
Melody: The Stern Song

This was the last time I ever remember Mother cycling. We were to go to Westwood's Grammar School, Northleach to meet the Headmaster. To the best of my knowledge my parents had been told that this interview had to take place even though they wanted me to follow Dick to Rendcomb, (which had a two year entry, the next in 1931).

So it was that Mother and I set out for Northleach. Of the interview I remember nothing but it must have gone well because, on hearing that they wanted me to go to Rendcomb, the Headmaster told my parents that if I didn't go to his school he'd make sure I didn't go to Rendcomb either. What then ensued I do not know. Probably they enlisted the help of the Headmaster, Mr Rigby ('Mr Rigby from Rugby' – May) and of Mr Household, Chief Inspector of schools for the County of Gloucestershire. Whatever it was that happened, I went to Rendcomb as I shall recount.

But of that Spring day in 1930, the only clear recollection I have is of Mother and I pushing our bicycles up the long steep hill out of Northleach towards Crickley Barrow. In those far-off days the white stone road was dusty and rough and we rested a while under a tree at the top of the hill. Mother, then nearly fifty years old, was out of breath and probably not really very well.

And there my memory ends – a clear, brief vision of the two of us recovering our breath in the sunlight of that Cotswold April day.

Prologue

Scene: The Shire Hall in Gloucester

Time: Sometime in the Spring of 1931

The Characters: Father, the Chief Inspector for the schools of Gloucestershire, Mr H W Household and forty or fifty small boys from those Gloucestershire

elementary schools which considered that they had pupils worthy of a place at Rendcomb. One of those boys, most certainly, was bemused and shy. I can vouch for it.

The Occasion: Selection for entry to Rendcomb College.

The Melody: 'I'm always blue,
When I'm thinking of you,
Goodnight little girl of my dreams.'
(who on earth could I have been dreaming of that time?)

We soon began talking to other fathers (mostly) and their sons, one, I recall, was a very small boy with a very tall thin father and we all indulged in cricket talk. About whom? Wally Hammond and Don Bradman of course.

As a result of the interview, of which I recall nothing, at a certain time in mid-September a suitcase was placed open on the floor of the big bedroom at Winson and Mother carefully packed all the items of clothing, shoes, sponge-bag full of things I had never had before, writing pad, a few apples, in short, all the things I would need on the brink of having to look after myself. My previous experience was far from equal to the challenge. Even electric light and WCs were not within my orbit. How unprepared I was!

But the resilience of the young is extraordinary.

After the initial shock (for two or three days I was in a 'daze') some things began to impinge on my conscious being. I can still recall the smell of the wash-room and of toothpaste (we used salt at home) and see in my mind's eye my red Bakelite mug.

Soon, too, the other boys began to emerge as individuals from the haze of confusion. My friend of the shire hall with the very tall father was one of the select. So too was John Gwinnell who within four years was to die suddenly in the night of a virus during an epidemic in 1935. We became great friends. His father was dead and his mother worked as a nurse to keep the family. We both loved working and used to 'race' each other through books and exercises and essays between roaming the Park and cycling far and wide. I recall that K A C Gross, the Classics master in 1935 and who was addicted to fast cars drove at breakneck speed to Cheltenham to collect medical equipment in an effort to save John's life. In the school photographs he looks the happy, smiling innocent with the freckled face.

Many people have written well about Rendcomb; J H Simpson, the first Headmaster, in 'Sane Schooling', Dick, of course [in 'Champagne Days'], Colin Middleton Murry in 'One Hand clapping' and many others. I do not intend to write about the structure or the system, but only as I personally reacted. As ever, vignettes of memory advance and retreat, incomplete and often incongruous. Why do I recall at random a group of us spending many happy hours plunging into seven or eight feet of dry beech leaves filling a deep ditch outside the surrounding wall of the College grounds? Or collecting apples from the Rectory orchard? Or roasting Spanish chestnuts (from a tree in the Park) between the bars of the grate holding a roaring log fire in the library? Or – a particularly horrendous happening during my first term when, playing football in the Gymnasium (the old Orangery of the original 1864 building), I performed particularly well and brought one of the big electric lights and their shades from high up in the roof. It crashed to the floor and I had, shaking

with fear, to go and knock on the Headmaster's study door (it was Mr Simpson). On being summoned into the room I discovered a senior boy also there (Jack Allen). With quavering voice I tried to explain my awful crime. 'Jimmy' as he was always called (though not, of course, to his face!) was firm and kind as always. What he said I do not, of course, remember, but he took the opportunity to link me with Dick (who had just left the College) and hardly spoke of the great crime at all. I do remember feeling that this wasn't such a bad place after all.

One misty summer evening at the cricket nets I discovered that I could bowl off spinners that broke in a phenomenal amount. I thought I was destined to be another Tom Goddard (then taking fantastic numbers of wickets for Gloucestershire) until Mr James (history master and cricket coach among other things), carefully explained that, in damp conditions, anything can happen to a bowled cricket ball. Probably I never did quite believe him and continued to think I really was a bowling prodigy manqué.

During that first year, too, when I was not yet twelve years old, a soprano Susan suggests that she may have been Elsie Suddaby whose 'signature' tune was 'The Lass...'] gave a recital in the music room. This room, on the north west corner of the ground floor looked out over the Churn valley and the Park. It had a dado painted dark green and several (plaster? Or were they really marble?) statues and two niches on either side of a raised dais on which stood a grand piano. One of the statues in the niches was of Ceres with her horn of plenty.

Everything about that afternoon was new to me – and magical. The soprano (of course I had no idea that was what she was) appeared as a glorious vision in a long shimmering blue (?) dress. She must have sung other songs but I was entranced by 'The Lass with the delicate air' and recalled it all immediately and effortlessly. Behind her, through the windows the brown/ochre colours of the autumnal beech trees in the Park were a foil to her magnificent presence. I see clearly now that I was introduced to the Pepysian dictum in reality that afternoon: 'However, music and women I cannot but give way to, whatever my business is'. Maybe I have followed that precept, unwittingly, ever since.

Sidney Shimmin was the music teacher. Once a week he came from Cheltenham, where he taught at the Ladies College, on the bus, carrying his brief case heavy with twelve-inch 78 records up the 'Village Hill' to the College. He was always soberly dressed in a darkish grey suit, rather ill fitting, 'boring' tie and rather colourless face and features. This all belied his passionate love of music; that dullness concealed a vast motivation to communicate something of his knowledge of musical terminology and structure as a necessary prelude to an appreciation of the classics. Occasionally he introduced a lighter note, as Ravel's bolero, interminable as always, but mostly it was the three Bs and Mozart, interspersed with Constant Lambert, concentration on all of which was regularly interrupted by the need to change or turn over the record and to wind up the gramophone. Beethoven's Ninth, for instance, stretched over twenty sides and two afternoon lessons. How heavy those records must have been for S S to carry up the oh-so-steep village hill. His lessons, poor man, were beautifully, quietly hilarious to most of the form (and I must, on occasion, include myself) - Friday afternoons were not the best part of the week in which to concentrate. He seemed old to us but was probably in his forties, had married one of his students at the College and stoutly maintained that his name was a corruption of Schumann. Ivor Gurney had been a fellow student.

What was his life after I left? He seemed to have such a hard time with us and looked perpetually worried. But I still see his tall, somewhat bulky figure standing beside the gramophone, head slightly bent over towards the horn, finger behind ear pressing it outwards to listen the more intently. Schoolmastering could be a hard life.

Always the College building was very cold, pleasantly cool in summer, but in winter despite central heating, devastatingly bitter. The rooms were so enormous and high in proportion that there was no chance that the old boiler would attain even a reasonable temperature. So it was normal for the boys to sit on the low radiators in the windows – what this did for their anatomy later in life is best not considered.

Right through my time at Rendcomb I devoured (metaphorically) enormous numbers of books, drew fairly constantly and spent not a few happy hours blowing the organ for Peter Lambert and Austen Magor in the village church a short walk away from the College.

All sports I played, none of them well but well enough to enjoy them, at a reasonable standard for tennis and athletics, hockey and football. Cricket I loved but my sight was not sharp enough to make any real progress. Maybe those endless hours reading at night by the light of a single candle contributed? Cycling and walking were second nature. (A cycle test was compulsory before boys were allowed out of the College grounds. This taken by the Headmaster required riding with no hands, completing a tight 'figure 8' and riding at some speed down the incline of the Back Drive without hands and not putting them on the handlebars until the HM shouted. The terrifying thing about this was that the drive led directly to a blank wall leaving a few seconds only after the HM's shout to apply the brakes!

The building, despite its discomforts, had an intimacy, enclosed, self-sufficient. Sometimes in the winter, there would be a log fire in the library and in the break between second and third prep (20.00 to 20.45?) a boy or boys would read ghost stories with all the lights out and only the flickering firelight on the faces of the listeners and high up on the ceiling.

Records of classical and popular dance tunes selected and bought by the boys sometimes occupied that evening break, 'Chu Chin Chow', 'Top Hat', 'Red Sails in the Sunset', 'Souvenirs', 'When it's Springtime in the Rockies', 'Tiger Rag' and the Jazz men all brightened our lives.

It was very early in my first term that I discovered that I was better read than most. H G Wells and Lewis Carroll I knew almost by heart, poetry by the yard, R L Stevenson, Henty, Ballantyne, some Walpole, Buchan and a sentimental poem 'The Old Fosse Way'. As small boys on Saturday nights we were allowed to talk for an hour in the big dormitory (about thirteen boys). Soon I was encouraged to tell my stories and almost invariably, [nearly] every Saturday night they would ask for certain favourites, H G Wells' 'War of the Worlds' particularly. I didn't know anything about Woking where the action takes place but it must have sounded real enough when I filled in the bits I couldn't recall. Cheesing Eyebright was somewhere in the park and 'The Old Fosse Way' was a tear-jerker which never failed. I have it still, in my recent transcribed poetry book cum journal. Father had culled it from the 'Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard' (a weekly newspaper) long ago. I see now (as I was then only dimly aware) how voraciously I read. Anything and everything – at home always at mealtimes

I sat on the far side of the 'kitchen' table away from the fire, book on table, eating my bread and butter and jam or suet pudding and golden syrup. Marie Corelli, O Henry, 'The Sacred Precincts of the Close', Dickens, Scott, Jefferies – they all passed before me. So I was selectively lazy as I now see. I would spend hours as a small boy perusing the Children's Encyclopaedia, and particularly reading the poetry. I wrote out many of these poems (which were adult of course), Browning, Poe, Belloc, Tennyson, Wordsworth and so on. Still my memory retains innumerable snatches of poems which once I could quote in their entirety. What a tiresome child I must have been! Most certainly Dick thought so. 'He's just a memory,' he would say disparagingly. When I was particularly obstreperous with my repartee (which was often and long long before repartee was generally fashionable) it drove him to distraction. Perhaps that is in part why, as well as the very considerable disparity in our ages, we were never very close. 'You never give anything away do you?' he would say and I think now I did not because of fear of criticism.

In any case, he had always gone from wherever it was by the time I got there – Bibury school, Rendcomb, Cheltenham Art School. We met only once in the Services during the war – for a drink in the summer of 1941 at the Wagon and Horses at Beckhampton before he sailed away as a Radar Operator round South Africa to the Middle East. We worked together in an institution only once – Birmingham from 1958 to 1962 and then at a distance educationally and geographically, Years 1 and 2 and for him Year 5.

But, back to Rendcomb. At the end of the summer term 1937 I acted as a go-between. Ross, who was rather more advanced than I in 'acquiring' girl friends, had become somehow friendly with the pretty daughter, Audrey, of the Headmaster of North Cerney village school. On the last morning of term, Ross had an assignment to meet Audrey by the wood near the Cirencester lodge at about nine o'clock. For some reason he didn't want to go, was unable to contact her by telephone and, as I would be cycling home that way, asked me to meet her. This I did. Of what we did I have little or no recollection but I do still recall the excitement and joy at seeing her in the dewy meadow on that July morning with the sunlight in her hair.

Inevitably my account of life at Rendcomb is fragmentary. Others have written eloquently as I have mentioned, about the structure and school life. Most of the work I found at once challenging and manageable. Factual material presented no problems. Creative thought I had to come to gradually and even now I am in awe of those few rare beings whose intellectual capacity is far in advance of what mine could ever be. But I still remember the huge satisfaction of achievement when the nature of abstract and abstruse thought dawned on me, for example, when I eventually broke into the creativity of mathematics through calculus. My problem, then as always, was that I did not really wish to specialise. I wanted open-ended study. Certain subjects I did not wish to pursue very far, such as biology, botany, zoology, though I enjoyed drawing copiously in those studies. But most I found enthralling, physics for instance, though never to the point where I would wish to pursue it professionally. So, with hindsight, I realised eventually that I was able, comparatively effortlessly, to achieve across the board what it took others endless hard work to achieve. Lee-Browne thought it 'clever', by which he meant that he did not think it true learning. He used to say to me something like, 'if you really try you could do anything but you are free-wheeling'. Robin Wilson, on the other hand, used to say that to be a dilettante was in the best Renaissance tradition.

Even now, virtually anything and everything is potentially absorbing so that, through life, many subjects have been taken quite a long way but short of the ultimate. To be fair Browne did perceive my strengths and weaknesses quite accurately. He conceded, for instance, when in about 1950 when we moved to Devon I felt it necessary to relinquish the Secretaryship of the O R Society that he was sorry I felt I should do so – ‘I thought you had just the right touch’ he wrote. That ‘touch’, however defined, did, I think, stand me in good stead in running various departments, units, organisations. Whatever problems there may have been presented no difficulty and I suspect, perhaps am certain, that again characteristically, it was all too easy and I found no real need to exert myself.

So it was that the School Certificate in December 1935 provided a ‘Matriculation with Honours’ and led to the Higher School Certificate in one year with a Distinction in my Special Subject in History: the reign of Elizabeth. Already I had a provisional place at Merton College Oxford, J C James’ old college, to read History but acceptance was dependent on obtaining financial support. (There were no ‘grants’ as such in the 30s.) Without private means, to go to University required a State Scholarship, the numbers of which were limited in any one year. In 1937, State Scholarships were only available to those applicants who had taken three main subjects. I had two main subjects and two subsidiary subjects, as much as was considered possible for me in a single year’s study.

So what was I to do? Art was the obvious second choice but Browne was against it and arranged for me to see D W Herdman, Chief Librarian of Cheltenham Public Library. So it came about that, during the Autumn term of 1937 I spent two days weekly cycling into the mist (literally and metaphorically) on the way over the Cotswolds to Cheltenham to spend happy hours among the books. Working in the lending library, meeting the public, was definitely not my forte, being so shy as to be, in retrospect, almost unbelievable. But browsing among the dusty stacks in the basement was terrific. And Cheltenham appeared to offer untold romance to the country boy plunged not altogether unwillingly into its midst. Knowledge of the Dewey system too was pressed into service in reorganising the school Library and, on my last visit to Rendcomb in 1977 I noticed that some of my notices on the bookshelves were still in use forty years later (but now long since discarded).

But life in a Library was ultimately not for me. It was the life of the artist which held the breadth and open-ended milieu for research I was looking for. So it came about that at the age of seventeen I found myself, in January 1938, in the Life Room at Cheltenham Art School in a congenial atmosphere at last but ill-equipped to achieve artistic fame. This could appear strange but I believed my artistic ability was severely limited and that assessment proved afterwards to be correct. Not that it was non-existent. I think it no less than the vast majority of other art students/artists. But it was not adequate to be outstanding. I knew that at the time so was, in a way, always struggling to be something I was not. Then, as an instructor in the war and as a teacher in London, Paignton, Swindon and Birmingham I discovered an ability to convey ideas, thoughts and to ‘educate’. This coupled with an administrative sense (simply ‘common’ sense) and the confidence (belied by my shyness) to direct affairs inculcated at Rendcomb and in the war and as a Head of this or that using latent management skills meant that, through those various activities, I did arrive at what I do best. That this was recognised by others I knew, tasks at school, responsibilities in the

RAF and persuasion to apply for a commission, selection for teaching posts and eventually being asked to be the first Dean of Faculty of Art and Design compounded my realisation that I was one of GBS's betes-noir '...those who can't, teach'. My ability was to be externalised in discerning the ability in others and in enabling them to achieve in areas of creativity not open to me. Selection of staff too proved a fascination and we assembled a highly individual group of people who, nonetheless formed an outstandingly educational coherent whole and, together, we produced a lively and lengthy and happy period still looked back upon by many who took part as a high point of their careers in education.

But I again digress. The years between, those years between say 1932 and 1936 followed, very largely, the usual pattern of the life of an adolescent. I remained exceedingly shy but made many friends, was not lonely though liked to be alone, always had someone with whom to walk or cycle or talk to, went through the normal crush on another boy (brief, traumatic and innocent) and eventually emerged, with the sound of 'The Lass' in my ears, ready or not for the further heartbreaks of adolescence. Of course work took much of our time – I loved work, games, frosty mornings, bell-ringing on winter evenings, the College at night, the Library, music (classics and dance music which are with me still), dancing (odd that there were Saturday dances in a boys' school attended also by staff, teaching and domestic occasionally), dramatic performances in College and elsewhere. North Cerney Village Hall, for example, provided the unlikely setting for Masefield's 'The Tragedy of Nan'. I remember some of it still, performed by a competent touring company – 'The tide!! The tide! The tide be coming up the river'.

Not to be forgotten is the introduction of athletics and field sports, requiring the development of an area in the Park for the shot-put, discus, javelin, long and high jump, (the 'western roll' had just been introduced). As few people were available who knew about school sports of that nature, we had, successively, Herr Wolfram Lange and Herr (Bernard?) Ackermann from Germany (Salem?). I partook in all these activities though only ever achieving a moderate standard. Ross and I used to train for the javelin with Wolfram Lange and it was he who produced the never-to-be-forgotten remark 'Throw heem more upstairs'.

Current affairs permeated our lives through the newspapers (no wireless was available to us) but also in lessons, introduced by staff according to their personal interests. One morning in 1935(?) J C James came into the history room with the news that 'Lawrence' (of Arabia) had been killed. So we spent the rest of that lesson hearing about him, discussing the facets of his life, and some of us read from 'The Seven Pillars of Wisdom'. As I recall, many of the current events of history were so marked, the rise of the Nazis to power, the burning of the Reichstag, the march into the Rhineland and the Saar Basin, the first shots in the Spanish Civil War, Lorca's assassination, etc. And, with an avid instinct for 'cuttings' from the Times, I still have my Spanish Civil War scrapbook for 1936/37, the burning of the Crystal Palace and the Abdication of Edward VIII in 1936. Sadly, little of my 'journal' of the thirties survives. But my poetry collection remains, started in the early 1930s as part of Robin Wilson's English 'tasks'. The latest book, still in use, is kept in a HSC History notebook and was begun in 1938. To me, it forms a vivid, nostalgic 'diary' of thoughts, emotions, responses through my life. Naturally little was entered in the war years, or the forties and fifties but prompted into life again in 1961. Looking back on my early preferences I find I have changed little. The work/quotations are different, of course, but the content remains

substantially the same. So that I sometimes, even now, read through those compilations with pleasure – they are a source of instant memories as are the dance tunes of old.

‘Three times rang the passing bell’ takes me back to an English class in ‘Big School’. Through the windows the valley of the Churn stretched away to north and south and across the steep valley rose the high, steeply wooded ridge beyond which lay the High Cotswold and Penn Hill.

Likewise

‘And live alone in the bee-loud glade’

and

‘It is not growing like a tree

In bulk, doth make man better be!’

And I still see Robin’s beetroot cheeks and wise eyes as he so carefully introduced us to, not only Yeats, whose protégé he was, but Eliot, the thirties poets, Auden, Day Lewis, Isherwood, Spender and the host of Elizabethans and Jacobeans. I remember his glee when ‘Thou Shell of Death’ was published under Day Lewis’ pseudonym ‘Nicholas Blake’ when he attempted to get us to deduce from the writing and other clues who it was who had written it.

Life at Rendcomb had to come to an end. I was part way through the making of an armchair designed by myself following (I thought) the Gimson/Barnsley tradition. I left the incomplete structure to Ross to complete.

Some gesture seemed necessary to round off our time at school. For that final term Peter Lambert and I shared a study on the top floor. I recall working on Douglas Haig to make his legs longer – he wanted to join the RAF as a regular to train as a pilot and his legs, we understood, were not long enough to reach the controls, rudder bar, etc. So we sat him on the floor, held his body upright against the wall, bottom into the angle and pulled his legs one by one ‘for all our might’. We must have succeeded in something for he was accepted and later had a distinguished career in the RAF in the Second World War.

In our study too, eccentrically enough, we tried unsuccessfully to make oysters which would stand up (‘they hadn’t any feet’). These were needed because we had the absurd idea that we would present ‘The Walrus and the Carpenter’ to the assembled school. Fortunately for our reputations(?) we were not tested in our endeavour.

There must have been farewells but no memory remains. My time at Rendcomb I view with mixed feelings. It gave me much and the staff were outstanding but I was clearly not equipped to cope with some of its aspects. Academically there was no problem but, during my time there the extrovert was favoured by the Headmaster and I was never in that category though one thing I did learn was that there is little point in attempting to be something you are not. It stood me in good stead eventually.

Rendcomb and Edward Lear

From a recent reading of a biography of Edward Lear I discovered something I never before knew – that Edward Lear knew Rendcomb. In the 1850s, more than once, he took the train to Cirencester Town station and walked the Cheltenham road to Rendcomb through North Cerney. Sir Francis Goldsmid (who built Rendcomb as a private mansion) was a client who bought paintings from Lear for many years and, at that time, would be living in the old house (a few hundred yards below the present building, which was built in 1864).

So, during my years at Rendcomb, I, unknowing, walked the roads and tracks which Lear had walked, perhaps drew the trees he had drawn. Sadly, I knew little about Lear at that time – only his poetry. But I always found his masterpieces so sad and melancholy – the kind of yearning for lost love which appealed so deeply to me in innocent adolescence. Poor Lear never did find his Jumbly girl but wandered all his life in search of her.

Meanwhile there must have been paintings on the walls of Rendcomb – transferred from the old demolished house. What became of them? None remained in my time. Strangely, no-one at Rendcomb, staff or students, ever mentioned the Lear connection. Perhaps no-one knew.

‘The moon got in my eyes.’

J E Neale’s ‘Queen Elizabeth’ I read and reread in the Spring of 1937 prior to taking Higher School Certificate, in the branches of a small hawthorn tree growing on the slope of the hillside just above the first covert. From the ground it grew with four small separate trunks splaying out from each other and further subdividing about five feet from the ground forming a more or less horizontal area on which I sat most comfortably with my feet on a branch on the far side. History, Shakespeare, differential calculus, A E Housman, Brooke, all were enhanced by being absorbed with the clear, crystal Cotswold air. A great deal of dreaming too made part of the pattern, insubstantial as are the dreams and fears of early youth. I have dreamed all over the Downs of my youth, inbred with a nostalgic longing for the undefined, the places over the horizon of my dreams which held the romance of the unknown. They still do – those bare slopes of my childhood held within their ever-changing forms, the promise of the future as well as the melancholy of the past. I would sit in my tree and watch the shadows creep slowly up the hillside or on a wall above the secret valley and watch the moon rise over the eastern valley wall and wonder, as Palmer must have wondered in amazement at such beauty. Why me? Why was it all so overwhelmingly and hauntingly heart stopping? Did everyone see it this way? Did it affect so powerfully all those who, before me, had passed this way? Did some part of them really remain around the places they had loved so much? Was that why I felt such powerful floods of warmth as I walked over the Downs? My feelings reinforced by poetry of all kinds, Lewis Carroll, the War poets, Housman, Donne and Brooke’s love poems and the host of Elizabethans and Jacobeans?

The Downs for me constituted an area of great melancholy, the associations I have with them were all formed before I was eighteen. The walls on which I have sat to draw or paint or just to muse, meditate, dream are legion. Often I would remain a long while, well into the evening until darkness fell and the small sounds of the country surrounded me, reinforcing merely the immense silence broken only by a call or the barking of a dog down in the nearest village or perhaps the faraway sound of a late motorcycle staccatoing up the valley.

But on top of the Downs in the dusk the twentieth century fell away, dissolved and I was one with my ancestors.

And here and there are (or were) material evidences of my time on the Downs, a fixed gate here, a hunting gate, the roof of a cowshed, painted outbuildings of the field barns scattered around the countryside. No sandwiches ever tasted so good as those I ate during a vacation in the mid-thirties during a lunch break from painting a farmhouse up in the hills. Sitting in an outbuilding, on the floor, back against wall, with the two lads who then worked for Father – after a morning spent in the open air –

- or the wall on the hills high above Coln Deans that must bear the traces of yearning for lost love that last summer of peace before our world dissolved into the trauma of the second world war. Still uncomprehending, memory remains, after over fifty years, sharp as ever with the sense of loss.
- or those walks where every turn was quick with the excitement and anticipations of youth, the breathless desire for all that is beautiful, the girl one has just met, the country stretching away to the blue horizon, the sound of a slow foxtrot in the night.

‘Before the War’

‘You may not be an angel. Cos angels are so few...’

What were those old days of ‘before the war’ really like? Were the suns really hotter ‘In the Thirties’. Only the romance and the nostalgia remain of all that is inherent in that phrase!

‘The Thirties’ were when I grew up. I recall the cloudless spring and summer of 1933, the ‘Broadway Melody of 1933’, the first film with Ginger Rogers in the corrugated iron shed that was the ‘Picture House’ in Cirencester. ‘Twenty Million Sweethearts’ was the film and ‘You may not be an angel’ the main theme.

Sitting in the Upper Wilderness at Rendcomb in the July of 1936 when I already sensed those ‘queer, lovely corners of the earth’ around which I one day hoped to roam; the Spanish Civil War and what an effect it had on our generation, already, it seemed, doomed as that earlier generation; ‘evening on the olden, the golden sea of Wales’ in the summer of 1938 and finally, 1939, when the old world crumbled for ever and gave way to a much harsher, rougher, but nonetheless exhilarating world. ‘The Thirties’ contained, in essence, all my formative experiences and, despite desperate shyness throughout the decade, I remain continually amazed at how much I experienced which was to be the basis of all those beautiful friendships I was afterwards to make.

‘The smell, the feel of it all’

As a small boy the Valley seemed enclosed, complete, secure, safe, mediaeval and feudal. During the Thirties it began gradually to open out, its confines dropped away and the blue horizon lifted.

One final memory of my life in the Cotswolds ‘before the war’ remains. On a summer evening perhaps August 1939 a gathering of boys and girls from the villages assembled in the meadow by the bridge in Coln Rogers. What the occasion was or why I was there I have now no trace of memory. By then I had few contacts in the villages but it is likely that Frank Mills, the son of the village carpenter at Fossbridge asked me to go. My best friend in the country of those days, Frank was to die in a fighter plane in the following year on, I think, his first mission.

Maurice Guest (Mott) was there also, a tall, good looking, freckle-faced boy who went to Northleach Grammar School and who, strangely, was also to be killed in 1940 in a fighter out over the Channel.

That evening, whatever its purpose, probably remains fragmentarily in my memory because it brought to a close for me the thirties and village life. Never again was I to be a part of that life.

Now it is so remote after a lifetime away from it all that I see it as an old painting in which the characters emerge from background shade, a haunting microcosmic illumination of a vanished world.

The Decade 1938 to 1948

Cheltenham Art School 1938-39

‘Malt and Molasses’
‘The Moon got in my Eyes’
‘Change Partners’
‘Twelfth Street Rag’
‘And malt does more than Milton can
To justify God’s ways to man’

In the centre of the town on the north side of High Street, stood the spreading complex of Pate’s Grammar School. The Art School occupied the northern end of the same building. Together, these formed an L-shape and, with the Cheltenham Brewery on the other long side, enclosed a tarmac playing area.

Entry to the Art School was at the northern entrance, across a large hall and up an open staircase to the first floor. On the ground floor were the Grammar School laboratories and the Art School atmosphere became a spontaneous fusion of the smell of chemicals, malt and oil paint, sometimes one being in the ascendancy, sometimes the other; occasionally the combination was particularly awesome.

Somewhere on the first floor, the Art School shop was presided over by a lady – Mrs Poulton – who still (in 1938) assumed an autocratic, not to say dictatorial responsibility for student morals. As we all needed to use the shop for the ordinary materials of the day – cartridge paper chiefly – we held her in considerable and reverential awe. One occasion I

recall when she took me aside to some admonitory advice (and possibly guidance) about my current girlfriend. Dimly I seem to remember her saying 'Didn't I see you with D—the other day?'. How the dialogue continued I have now no idea but the recollection pinpoints the problem. Becoming accustomed to life at the Art School took me a long time. After the largely (though not entirely) monastic existence at Boarding School, the close proximity of so many girls was unsettling. That I was strongly heterosexual I had no doubt (and I had some understanding of homosexuals from school through Robin Wilson and, unconnected, the expulsion of some boys for unacceptable practices and a single chance encounter on the cycle ride home from Cheltenham in the summer of 1938, when another cyclist tried to induce me to accompany him into a field, attempting to suggest how awful women were. At eighteen, in those days, my experience was so frighteningly limited but I already knew he was wrong. I was appalled at his suggestion. I knew what I wanted and used my common sense. Looking back at that episode, I am surprised at how vehemently I resisted the arguments and the inducements. Nothing of the kind ever occurred again.

So, on reaching the Art School, I was, at first, overwhelmed. All the girls were wonderful of course – my total upbringing and experience had taught me that women were to be cherished, respected, treated with the utmost courtesy. And, similarly brought up, they had responded. All of us were setting out on the great adventure, the gradual unfolding of understanding and relationships inbred with the boundless enthusiasm and curiosity of youth.

Looking back on the early years of the decade which began with my entry into Cheltenham Art School in January 1938, I see that they were devoted primarily to the gradual emergence from the cocoon of boarding school and the discovery of the world beyond its confines. This was helped immeasurably by the outbreak of war in a way hitherto unthinkable and unthought of.

That I was capable of working hard I knew. All those summer mornings in the Park at Rendcomb absorbing, reading, drawing, listening to music on any occasions presented confirmed this motivation. At Cheltenham we worked from nine in the morning to nine at night on four days a week and on Wednesday and Saturday mornings until one o'clock. Wednesday afternoons were for sport or other leisure activity, boating, swimming, dancing (tea-dances were immensely popular).

My talent was always moderate in a practical, creative sense. I knocked it into shape by work sufficient to get along but I see now how inadequate it was. Probably I knew then. But the balance of work and play was immensely rewarding and the company of other students vastly enjoyable. Unattached through most of this decade, the joy of discovery of each new encounter never faltered, each new face, the warmth and scent of each young body, the depth of each young mind, was as the very first – Brooke, the young man's poet, got it exactly, 'I dreamt I was in love again, with the one before the last...'

The songs of the thirties and forties, the dance tunes, banal and sentimental they may be, but they heightened the feeling, put into music and words the romance of being young. Some became inextricably linked with people and occasions so that, for ever after, they bring back instantly those days and nights of long ago. In 1938, the breathlessness of 'Twelfth Street Rag' could be heard most of the time in the Students' Common Room, 'the moon got in my

eyes' and 'Change Partners' remain vividly as an introduction to Art School life. I imagined myself in love with various girls though, in truth, I did not really know what that meant. My childhood sweethearts had been companions, exciting and marvellous but left without regret, a part of life. Quite early on at Cheltenham, Phyllis drew me into the circle. She was great fun and, with her parents, was immeasurably kind to me. We danced on every possible opportunity and had great, innocent times. We still correspond, met frequently during the war and after, and she and Felix came once to our Pimlico flat.

Another student at Cheltenham with whom I had a long, on-off affair was Cynthia, an exceedingly lovely girl. We continued to meet until a day in 1940 when she wrote to tell me she was getting married. I recall thinking, 'I ought to be upset', but I knew all along that we were not for each other. Too self-absorbed, she dazzled me with her beauty and added a little more to my growing experience.

At Cheltenham, my first deep love affair came in the summer of 1939 with a girl called Dae from the Welsh border country. All the bands were playing 'Isle of Capri', 'South of the Border' and 'September in the Rain'. Immediately life was real and beautiful and each new waking brought untold and breathtaking promise of the day to come. Most evenings of that time, after evening class ended at nine o'clock, we became classic young lovers in the back row of the cinema nearby where, with luck, the main feature would be just beginning (though of that, I suspect, we cared little). Or we would go to Sandford Park where, between the bushes of what had once been a hedge alongside some iron railings we held each other close, silent most probably, while the evening faded into the night. She was eighteen with auburn hair and (I expect) green eyes. One evening in late spring we had wandered on to the race course at Prestbury and it was here I recall the breathtaking moment of our first kisses.

And often we met under the lime-trees near the lake close to Pittville Pump Room and it is that memory and the scent of June lime blossom that instantly bring back those magical evenings of that last summer before the war.

The end of term came, there were letters – and one final memory still lingers. It is of myself, sitting on a stone wall high above Coln Deans [Coln St Dennis] and a little below Crickley Barrow, drawing a group of hedgerow elms. It was a glorious Cotswold evening in mid-August (I have the drawing still.)

I stayed there a long while. Slowly the sun went down and the smoke rising from the chimneys of Coln Deans and Fossebridge drifted down the shadowed valley in long swathes above the river. It was so quiet and still I could hear a dog bark in Chedworth far away over the hill beyond the valley. Perhaps this memory endures because, in all that beautiful land, my head was still full of the thoughts of Dae. Her trusting, loving affection, the warmth of her body, the scent of her young life. We were never to meet again – she went back to her border country and I to the war, but the memory of those shining summer days and evenings remains with me for the recollected beauty of young, innocent love in the bright Cotswold country of my youth.

'I get along without you very well.'

The phase of my decade which came so abruptly to an end on September 3 1939 had scarcely any time at all to be 'normal' – realistically, none whatsoever. At the time of Munich (September 1938) it became obvious that war was only a matter of time. We began to feel restless. We wanted to do something, to take some action. Thus it was that several of the students including me, began to drill two or three times a week with the Royal Gloucestershire Hussars, then a tank regiment in the Drill Hall near the Art School. We became physically very fit through the year 1938/39 and would presumably have signed up with the RGH on the outbreak of war. But for me that was not to be. On an occasion in August 1939 which should be for ever memorable in my personal history, Phyllis and her current boyfriend, already a Sergeant-Pilot in the RAF and I and my current girlfriend spent an evening dancing in Cheltenham Town Hall. After taking the girls home, we went back to the YMCA in the Promenade to an overcrowded dormitory. There, talking into the night, he must have said something persuasively like, 'You don't want to go into tanks. You should join the Air Force'. So I did and the future changed. Within days the war began and I found myself in the RAF recruiting office in Gloucester signing on for 'The Duration of the Present Emergency' (DPE) which, in my case lasted for six years and seven months and which did not officially end until the fall of Communism in 1990 when the Second World War was formally declared over.

But I leave the fragile thirties too quickly. One of the great influences of my eighteen months at Cheltenham Art School was Gerald Gardiner, the drawing master, a student of Orpen. The walls of the Life Room were always covered with reproductions of the drawings of Orpen and John, Ingres, Leonardo, Raphael and Michelangelo. Mr Gardiner (no student would have dared to call him anything else in those far-off days) lived in a small cottage with his wife in Bisley in the Cotswolds. Once or twice we were invited over. He drove an Austin Seven and parked it in the Grammar School playground. Often, a 'deb' student (part-time of course, to give time for preparation for and indulgence in leisure activities) would park her much larger car alongside his (deliberately we supposed!).

All who were fortunate enough to have been taught by Mr G would recognise his favourite ploy – to look over your shoulder when you were sitting on a donkey in life class, peruse silently your grossly inadequate drawing, lean over with his pencil at the ready, produce deftly a beautiful fragment of a drawing, a knee or some such, saying slowly, disdainfully and disparagingly but always gently and kindly, 'I don't know, but I should have thought it is like this...

Sometime towards the end of the Thirties a group of us went to see the 'Ballet Toos [or Joos?], then based at Dartington in performances of 'The Green Table' and 'The Three-cornered Hat'. Never before had I seen anything so dramatic or so beautiful. It had the same effect on me as the unknown soprano singing 'Lass with the delicate air' long before at Rendcomb.

During that last summer too, we spent much time at the Cheltenham Arts Festival of those days so that, as I see more clearly in retrospect, though I was committed to a lifelong love of the arts, I was continuing the 'Renaissance man' attitude to life developed so powerfully during my years at Rendcomb under the superb guidance of Robin Wilson.

Reggie Dent was another such character. Later to become Principal, he spent his whole teaching career at the Art School and brought a bluff, kindly hilarity to our endeavours. A rugger player in his youth at the Royal College, he still looked the part, high colour, eyes twinkling as he reprimanded us sternly. An etcher, he taught widely across the prescribed subjects of those days, always rather tight (artistically) in his approach to drawing, he contrasted with the flowing line of Gerald Gardiner.

Seaton White, the Principal in my time, a sculptor, was a very generous man and a considerable influence upon us. Miss Tickell taught us perspective once a week and Mr Salmond Architecture on Monday mornings. There were others who escape my memory. Every Wednesday afternoon we had sporting activities. Mine invariably were cricket in the summer (with Dennis Spencer, later to be ordained*[* at his home in Churchdown, below Chosen Hill]) and boating on the lake at Pittsville. But we worked every Saturday morning (Anatomy with Reggie D) and did, I recall, work quite hard.

I took the Board of Education Drawing Examination in April 1939 in four terms and in the Summer term of 1939 began to work for the Painting Examination. A six foot by four foot canvas would have to be presented as a carefully worked out figure composition developed over the whole length of the course together with a life painting and a still life. I studied Watteau's 'Champetre sur l'herbe', struggled with oils on a still life, stretched my large canvas (where on earth did it go?), carried on my first real love affair, was melancholy when not with her, saw exhibitions (the First Surrealist exhibition), went several times to Shakespeare at Stratford and generally enjoyed student life. (Stratford we reached by coach to Tewkesbury, rowing upstream on the Avon to Fladbury locks and then coach to Stratford where we played cricket by the river before going to the theatre.) It was quite a term.

I was looking forward to continuing my studies, planning to go to the Royal College and complete them about 1943, carefully, as I now see, avoiding all thoughts that the world situation was such that it might not happen like that.

It didn't.

I never went back to Cheltenham Art School as a student, nor did I see my sweetheart of that final term again. But one of the friendships of that time (with Phyllis) is with me still.

One of the dance tunes of that final spring and summer before the war symbolises for me those carefree years with the paradoxes of all their heartbreaks.

*I get along without you very well, of course I do
Except perhaps in Spring
But I should never think of Spring,
For that would surely break my heart in two
And I get along without you very well.*

In July of 1939 I travelled north with Jack Allen and John Lambert to Keighley to Dick and Molly's wedding. Meeting Molly's parents, the Claphams, opened a totally new experience of a well-off, Northern family. Had I accepted Uncle Sam's offer of a job, I might have joined his firm and become a northerner myself.

Within less than six weeks war was declared and the mental adjustment demanded for transition to a new way of life became imperative and absolute.

PS to the thirties.

During the summer vacation of 1939 Ross G and I had planned a cycling tour of the battlefields of the Great War which may have been prophetic had it taken place. It was subsumed in the greater melee and had to be cancelled.

But I did cycle for a brief holiday by the sea to Bournemouth where Auntie May, Peg and a girl called Aileen from Bibury were holidaying. The photographs of those days show someone (me) absurdly young, sitting on the sands at Swanage with Honeybone (from Rendcomb) and the others. I arrived home at the end of August 1939.

Further PS to 1938.

Gower in August 1938 was a never to be forgotten experience. As a background to life and relationships it was unequalled for me up to that time. But, oddly, though I remember it all in clear detail, no one episode stands out exceptionally. Was this because I was not really happy on that expedition? Perhaps, for the first time, I realised that some people are nicer than others; another holidaymaker, not in our group but well known to the Lamberts in whose huts we were staying, developed a marked dislike of me. Why? Did he see me as a threat to his security? I never knew but it was obvious enough for Jack Allen to come to my side on at least one occasion. It marred my holiday but, more importantly, it enabled me to begin to develop the ability to assess people which has often stood me in excellent stead. But I do have happy memories of that time as well, notably watching the sun go down on the Western Sea from the cliff top above Mewslade Bay and Jim Allen reciting:

*Evening on the olden, the golden sea of Wales,
Where the first star shivers and the last wave pales,
O Evening dreams!*

A lifetime away from it all!

The start of war, 1939

So it came about that, as the war finally started, I found myself in the recruiting office of the RAF in a school hall? parish hall? with a stage somewhere in the suburbs of Gloucester City not far from the Wagon works cricket ground.

Three of us joined the RAF that day, given a medical by a kindly oldish GP who pronounced me fit and said *sotto voce* (as I remembered it, probably with hindsight) 'Not all over again?'

In time we travelled to Uxbridge together to begin our new life but before that we had a few weeks to await our actual call-up. During those weeks of September and early October,

1939, I worked for Father. During those glorious autumn days I was happy. Replacing roofs on farm buildings out on the hills, painting the outside of the farmhouse at Swinnerton's near Crickley Barrow, painting wagons, lettering their name boards, writing two or three coffin plates, it was a satisfying experience. I can still recall sitting on the stone floor in the cool of an outbuilding of a farm somewhere with the two lads whom Father employed at that time, eating our sandwiches at lunchtime – arguably the best I ever tasted in the clear air and the palpable silence of golden autumn Cotswold days.

But eventually this interlude had to come to an end. One day my 'papers' came and I again took to the 'high road', in this case the road to the station at Foss Cross, travelling then to Swindon and on to West Drayton, where we changed trains for Uxbridge, having met my two colleagues with whom I had 'joined up' at Gloucester the previous month somewhere along the line.

Uxbridge was a salutary introduction to service life. Great barrack blocks, each named after a battle of the Great War (mine was 'Ypres'), surrounded a vast parade ground. On the lower side of the parade ground was the cookhouse/Naafi. In the great hall of the Naafi we encountered our first Ensa concert, among the acts being Gracie Fields singing 'Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye', 'Nellie Dean', 'The biggest aspidistra in the world' among other songs. The vast hall was smoke-filled, 'our Gracie' was dimly visible on stage at the end acknowledging the wild cheers of we massed newly joined recruits.

At Uxbridge, we were introduced to the spartan life of a serviceman of those days, iron beds, palliasses stuffed with straw, no pyjamas, cold water for shaving, confined to camp for several weeks (to inculcate discipline into the unruly mob), rising at 0530, in short, a life for which boarding school was an admirable introduction. (As someone once wrote of boarding school life – 'It was cold, the food was appalling and there were no women'.) There was nothing much to look at either except each other and the barrage balloons over the east end of the camp (where Cynthia was afterwards to be working). There too, we met the 'prophylactic' – a euphemism up to that time unknown to me – and drill, from early morning in the fog to dusk (it was autumn and the nights were closing in). Oddly I learned to enjoy drill, there is a satisfaction about doing it well. Clearly I was acceptably good at it, for almost immediately I was singled out as 'marker', a responsible position requiring rather more intelligence than was normally called upon for most of the activities we were required to perform.

So I saw nothing of Uxbridge itself and when it was deemed that we were proficient enough to obey orders (after a few weeks) there came the day (yet another foggy day – perhaps the fog was symbolic of our life of those days) when we were embarked onto a fleet of coaches en route to Lincolnshire. This in itself seemed an adventure – I had never been to this part of the country. I recall stopping in some small town and descending on a café, obviously well primed to receive us (this was a well worn route) and looking back at Lincoln Cathedral from the long straight road that heads due north to the Wolds.

North Coates was an airfield on the north east Lincolnshire coast, below sea level at high tide, surrounded by a high earth bank or dyke. We were there at the very worst time of the year, November and December. It was bleak and cold but we were not miserable. Those months had their own peculiar satisfaction. Again I was picked out to lead in drill by a

Sergeant Carter, a rough regular who began by being extremely rude to me (and to others). But he was astute enough to perceive that I had at least some intelligence and that I could help him to make his squad the best and his attitude to me changed significantly. Life became less tough as a result. At North Coates my friendships were all male. Always happiest in women's company, this was the one period of my adult life when I had no girl friend. *[At this point see 'Apologia' on three pages at the end of this Volume (II).] There were only a few small villages for miles around, there were no buses and in any case the regular staff saw to it that we had little chance to meet any local girls there might have been. But I met Douglas there (907811 – my number was 907804). He had run a garage on the Woodstock road in Oxford. We met several times after North Coates and corresponded for some years, especially when he was in India. He married Noleen, whom I met once, and who, sadly, found herself unable to wait for him to come back from India. The last time we met was in the spring of 1946 when he rode over to Winson on his powerful motorcycle and we went to Bibury and had a great time. After that we seem to have ceased to correspond for no obvious reason that comes to mind.

Early in January 1940 I was sent to RAF South Cerney arriving in yet another fog which lasted at least a week before lifting. What was I doing there? It was a Flying Training School and my vision was not adequate to become aircrew. So I was given a variety of different tasks while awaiting posting to my Wireless Operator's course. At this point so early in the war the organisation had not expanded sufficiently to cope with the large numbers of recruits. It was still, in many respects, geared to the peace-time system, the 'phoney war' so called, was possibly the reason for the comparatively slow rate of change. So, in effect, I filled in time with Guard duties, accompanying the camp bugler to the roof of the station Headquarters building when he sounded 'Reveille' and 'Lights Out', temporarily attached to the camp Police, painting camouflage on the hangars(?).

Mother was very ill in the spring of 1940 and in a Nursing Home in Cheltenham. I went to see her as often as I could get a few days' leave. But leave was hard to come by. The 'real war' began in earnest on May 10. By the end of the month the BEF in France and Belgium was on the brink of a catastrophic defeat and all leave was cancelled. We prepared for the German invasion, practised our rifle skills, mastered the use of machine guns, obstructions (trucks, concrete blocks etc.) appeared on all flat areas where the Germans might attempt a landing.

When it was clear that the BEF was likely to be destroyed we all had to 'Stand-to' all night out on the airfield perimeter, waiting for the Germans to land. We practised throwing grenades, counter-attacking, making ourselves invisible. Clearly defined in memory is the recollection of the troops rescued from the Dunkirk beaches being brought to the RAF camp in lorries from the trains which brought them from the coast. They came directly with hardly any lapse of time to get them away from the coast. We helped them as best we could, they were totally fatigued ('flat out') – 'We've been through hell' I recall one saying to me. Mostly they still wore uniforms in which they had lived for days and weeks, the mud and sand gradually falling as they moved. One had a bulging battledress holding in packets of sodden cigarettes. They showered around him when he took off his battledress. The wounded had already been taken to hospitals and those we helped had survived, apart from being tired out, relatively physically unscathed.

We continued to be up all night. It was the beginning of 'double summertime' and by 0230 dawn broke. And it was summertime. One cloudless day followed another. England lay, green and beautiful and almost defenceless. The sun was hot on our backs throughout an endless succession of days.

Gradually the danger of immediate invasion subsided but airfields were severely bombed and the danger was real and yet unreal. What was all this death and destruction to do with God's wonderful world? For some weeks I believe, we continued to 'stand-to' in the early hours of each day and gradually we resumed something of the old routine though events in France moved at terrifying speed. After mid-June, when France finally capitulated, attacks on airfields increased, we all realised, I think, that 'this was it'. Whatever was to be done was up to us. No one was left to help us as a nation. The daylight war developed into what Churchill named 'The Battle of Britain' ('is about to begin' etc.). Periods of inactivity were interspersed with electrifying action. The culmination was on September 15. After that the Germans called off most of the daylight raids and the Blitz began. Men whose homes were in London, Bristol, Birmingham, Liverpool, worried about the safety of their families. Bombs at random, jettisoned by fleeing German planes fell in the open countryside or on villages. Real danger under cloudless skies was surreal. What was the point of it all? Not often, though, did such thoughts enter our heads, more often 'think no more, lad, laugh, be jolly' as AEH wrote.

Audrey

New friendships developed, male and female. Among the welter of acquaintances of this time, of chance survival from my journal of those days records my first meeting with Audrey. She was nineteen and I twenty and I was *[In fact, on re-reading the remaining fragment, I discovered that we first met at a dance and it was then that I was 'smitten' – meeting in the canteen was 'arranged' – she was a voluntary evening worker there.] smitten when she served me coffee in the canteen near the Museum. For four months or so we met often. That canteen became a favoured place where I would wait for her to finish her shift.

'They tease me about you,' she said. We danced, roamed Cirencester Park on autumn evenings, frequented Ann's Pantry in the market place, sometimes a pub. Her family had come from Scarborough and Audrey very much wanted to return, having left a boy-friend there whom she afterwards married. Looking back on that time I see that ours was a real friendship and we did become absorbed in each other. She took me home to meet her parents and, what could I do but fall in love? She was the one with perception and wisdom. I know that she did much enjoy our friendship but she did not want me to fall in love with her – 'it would spoil so many things' she said. But into my memory comes the recollection of an evening in November 1940. She had invited me to her staff dance at the Wellesley Hotel in Cirencester (she worked at the Texas Oil Company *[now Texaco] offices on Cecily Hill near the entrance to Cirencester Park.)

There, as the bombs fell, unknown to us, on Coventry, the band was playing 'A Nightingale sang in Berkeley Square' and 'I'm stepping out with a memory tonight' and, to me, it certainly felt like being in love.

After I had gone away we corresponded at length for several more months until her parents felt they had to intervene, thinking it not right for her to continue to write to me whilst having become engaged to someone else as I knew all along she intended. Undoubtedly they were right but I do recall that she did not immediately cease to write even after she was married. I still have the draft of the final letter I wrote to her. Our friendship was, I felt at the time, something very beautiful and it still seems so even after all these years. I remember her as a very lovely, sweet girl, who was certainly one of the most stunning of those influences that shaped the innocence of my youth.

Blackpool I

Then came Blackpool. My first memory is of the Empress Ballroom. Here, on the far top landing or balcony to the right of the band I waited to report to no. 13 Signals School. Through one entire day I waited. Why? In those days we just waited. Much of the war was spent by people waiting. 'Why are we waiting?' Just for something to happen. In my case for an officer to allocate me to a group for training. He presumably wasn't there but must have come eventually.

Despite such a dispiriting introduction I enjoyed Blackpool – twice. It was totally out of my experience. Billeted in seaside boarding houses, surrounded by the Lancashire dialect and by the lasses from the mill towns during 'Wakes' weeks (their annual holiday), it was supremely instructive in a social sense. They were super people. We had work to do, kept hard at it learning Morse interspersed with tough periods of drill, and swimming in the 'Derby Baths' (it was mid-winter) for our compulsory exercise. But, during leisure hours, there was non-stop dancing in those enormous ballrooms and always the golden sands and the sea ('seven miles of golden sands' the publicity proudly stated). Much of the time though, the weather was poor, the rain coming in across the Irish sea and the great waves roaring over the promenade were hypnotic. There was no dearth of girlfriends. From Bolton and Accrington and Rochdale and Oswaldtwistle they came, looking for a good time for a few days and then they were gone, to be replaced by girls from Clitheroe and Blackburn and Oldham and Farnworth. Life was unreal. It seems that I came to know every inch of the Tower Ballroom, the Empress Ballroom, the Palace Ballroom. A lifetime compressed into a few months.

During that first period in Blackpool (the second was in 1943/44) I was initially billeted with two or three others in 12 Sherborne Road near Stanley Park, with a Mr and Mrs Parkin and their daughter Josie, then about seventeen. They were very worried about Josie who, as I remember, was what now would be called 'streetwise' and perfectly well able to look after herself. Every Sunday afternoon she and her friend were allowed to have the bathroom to themselves and therein spent obviously happy hours. All of us mere males were obviously greatly intrigued at the eccentric screams of happiness which echoed round the little house. If memory serves aright, though, we all behaved impeccably towards Josie and her parents.

Later, I moved nearer the then Central Station among the vast central complex of boarding houses. These were large enough to house maybe twenty or more people. During the war years, in 'the season', seaside landladies were permitted to take in a limited number of civilians on holiday alongside their billeted servicemen. These 'civilians' were those very workers from the mills of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Each town (or group of towns) had its

holiday period allotted and all the workers came on holiday together, workers from the same factory or mill in the same town and often in the same seaside boarding house. Now, in these days of cheap package holidays, such holidays would be unthinkable but, in wartime, restricted travel, and long tradition, it was a warm, intimate, cosy arrangement. Those holidays were looked forward to all the year and the 'Wakes Weeks' provided much pleasure and untold amusement for us servicemen. What better way to get to know Lancashire people?

Perhaps I should here comment that what I write about the war years must be set against the reality of the war itself. Lest it be thought that our days in Blackpool were spent in endless pursuit of pleasure I must, almost in self-defence, emphasise that it was not at all like that. Blackpool was and felt remote from the action. Things happened elsewhere. But of course we were being trained to take our part in the action. Our instructor was a wireless operator from the Post Office (in those days the super-efficient operators were all from the Post Office or the Merchant Navy). He would come in to the Winter Garden complex which was set out as a vast training area at nine o'clock or whenever we began our day in his raincoat. Never a word was spoken. We put on our head phones and raised our pencils and he began to send perfect Morse at the precise speed we should have reached. Probably he did say something to us from time to time but communication was through morse code. That first time I was in Blackpool for three months. In that time we were expected to have reached twelve words per minute in sending and receiving. Not all made it. At one time I was billeted with a lad from Southern Rhodesia, desperate to become a wireless/operator/air gunner. Morse would just not come for him. So he was yet another person I knew briefly, quite well, and then our ways parted. One hardly ever knew what happened to people after parting company.

Those months were crowded, comfortable and, on the whole, happy months. But they were an interlude during which I furthered a little more my growing understanding (and appreciation) of people.

Compton Bassett

Then in April 1941 I was sent with the others who had survived the course thus far to Compton Bassett in Wiltshire for the second half of the course.

The twin camps of Compton Bassett and Yatesbury were situated just to the north of the Great West Road (the A4) between Calne and the 'Wagon and Horses' near the turning to Avebury at Beckhampton. Yatesbury was an airfield on top of the downs, Compton Bassett was nearer Calne below the escarpment and immediately west of Compton Bassett House and Park. To the south lay the long brooding line of the Downs into which was cut the White Horse at Cherhill and on top of which stood the Lansdowne monument. Both camps have long since been returned to farmland but, in their day, they housed many thousands of men and women, centres of tumultuous life but now all gone. Doubtless though, there must remain in some form some ghostly epitaph to our youth and to the time we spent there.

The advanced course took our Morse speeds to 22wpm, exceptionally to 25wpm and, most exceptionally, to 30wpm, almost the limit of human capacity. For me, sending and receiving

Morse was not difficult. Morse is one of those activities which either is or is not within your capabilities. If it is not (as is the case in forty to fifty per cent of people embarking on such a course), there is nothing to be done but give up. This is what happened to so many of those with whom I set out in Blackpool.

Babs

Time passed in work (Monday to Saturday late afternoon) broken only by visits to local pubs, the camp cinema and countless dances. The course was completed, we 'passed out', I and a few more were selected and recommended by our instructor, a Corporal Adie, as suitable for training as instructors ourselves and, in due time (early July) we were duly promoted to Temporary Corporals and sent out to wreak havoc among the trainees whose numbers we had so recently left. Colleagues were congenial, work was taxing and exhausting but rewarding and then, vastly appreciated by many if not most of us, in the late summer of 1941 the first Waafs arrived. Among the early arrivals was Babs. Very soon what now seems a barely credible period of my life began which I can still look back on with wonder. Did it really happen to me or was it all a romantic dream? Were we really in love? Or just infatuated? When we met she was, I believe, only eighteen, a charming and entrancingly pretty blonde – from Ruislip and from the well off middle classes of those days. Precociously enthusiastic, I see now she was revelling in a new-found freedom. We spent all the time we could together and must have persuaded each other that we were in love. But how young and innocent we must have been! She, it was, who decided that we should marry and I was carried along by her infectious enthusiasm, never having ever thought about 'being married' for myself. I do recall that for several weeks we were formally engaged and spent our time in a kind of deliriously happy bewildered dream of celebration.

But it could not last.

One evening, when I was waiting for her, her dark-haired friend, maturer and wiser than either of us and whose name, sadly, I can no longer remember, came instead to my table. She must have been wise, diplomatic and understanding for what she had to say to me was that we were both too young and that the engagement should be broken off. How shattered was I really? Babs was a delightful girl and no doubt I adored her. But her friend was right – together they had concluded what was undoubtedly for the best and, amenable as ever, I accepted without demur.

In retrospect, what was alarming is to see now how little we knew about each other. Mutual attraction was considerable and we certainly greatly enjoyed being together, walking, drinking, dancing, being with friends. This, though, was insufficient basis for marriage however enthusiastic we were. It was our romantic dream and her friend was a realist; we knew too little of the world, we would meet other people – which, of course, we did. There were then (1941/2) and are still, people entering marriage with no more knowledge of each other and possibly less than Babs and I. Yet there we were, blithely going into that state, would have gone, had not her friend dissuaded us, so gently and firmly. She was right. It would have been yet another failed marriage of which there were so many in those wartime years. Yet I still remember Babs with much affection and gratitude. We were, perhaps, an essential part of each other's growing up, she gave me much and I would like to think that

she, too, gained something from our friendship. We did, I recall, meet occasionally thereafter and, for a period of several weeks she wanted us go on as before, romance heightened by dance tunes always associated with her in memory, 'Moonlight becomes you', 'Whispering grass', and 'you mustn't make me dream 'cos I'm too romantic, moonlight and stars can make such a fool of me'. She took some resisting and we went around together happily but eventually I found enough strength to resist her very considerable charms – how?

Sally

Because by then I had met Sally, far more worldly wise than either of us. Lithe, sinuous, sophisticated, urbane and civilised Sally, a ballet dancer in a London company (which?). A city girl, elegant, knowledgeable, experienced, at home in the West End, she enjoyed the country in her own unusual way but never as a part of it. Her milieu was essentially urban and she took it with her always; even in the remote depths of the countryside she might well have been in Mayfair, detached and fastidious. Men probably filled her waking moments, it seemed unlikely that she had real girl-friends. How did we meet? Among the melee of of experiences in wartime Britain what chance was there of discovery of like-minded people? But meet we did and almost immediately found we had a great deal in common. Comparing notes on Fonteyn and Soames over the Dancing Times we disclosed ourselves as ballet dancer and art student. In my mind's eye I see us endlessly discussing art, dance, life, our hopes and fears – and I do recall her very well, how she looked, how she talked, how she walked. In some ways she was not the kind of girl I usually fell for and I wondered sometimes what she saw in me. But love was inevitable and from her I learnt much during a few long days in the country. She fascinated me I recall. I had not met anyone remotely like her before with a life of dancing, physical and sophisticated, both of which attributes she carried through into our meetings.

Cool and shrewd, it is strange that I see her with more clarity than most of the other girls I knew well all those years ago. Perhaps deeper feelings than at the time suspected? We must have had an affinity more profound than we realised. During those few brief months we each went off to other affairs in the way of the world but returned to each other again and again. A sophisticated lover, there was a powerful physical attraction between us but there must have been a real element of friendship. Cool and passionate, she added a totally new dimension to my experience, understanding and appreciation of the world.

Oddly, I never remember writing to her and when she was posted away, we did not meet again, our friendship probably overwhelmed by the constant succession of new experiences of those years.

With the exception of Frankie, of all the girls of that time hers are the face, body and mind most clearly defined in memory under the bright skies of noon, the darkening skies of evening and in the deep silences of the night.

My time as a Morse instructor

From July 1941 until late autumn 1943 my time was spent as a full-time instructor, taking, initially, classes of fifty, (the total was determined by the number of places in the hatted classrooms wired for sending and receiving Morse).

With me were those who became my old comrades: Paul (who spent the rest of the war at Compton Bassett and who was married there in 1945); John (who like me was eventually sent to a Mobile Signals Unit (MSU) but who never actually went to the Continent); Bob (who, I believe, also spent the rest of the war at Compton Bassett); Bill (who came with me to Blackpool in late 1943 and thence to instruction on the Gold Coast (Takoradi) where he contracted the malaria and jaundice that eventually killed him in the 1960s); Stuart (from a well-off Lancashire family who also married at Compton Bassett and about whose further career I know nothing.

We became close friends and after the war were brought together by Paul in 1975 and fairly regularly thereafter. Paul and I had met frequently in the intervening years – he came to Winson once, in 1946 while still at Compton Bassett. Stuart I did not meet again; to me he was on the fringe, musical and slightly distant. John used to tell the story of how he and Paul went to visit Stuart in Rochdale, or some such town. They drove in John's then small, battered car and parked it outside Stuart's 'palatial' mansion. When Stuart saw it he was furious – 'take that disgraceful object away' he said.

During my time at Compton Bassett I was also called upon to teach the theory and technology of Wireless Telegraphy, Science (was it called that?) which included not only the basics of electricity but also the fast developing visual element, the 'Cathode Ray Tube' (CRT)* [Cathode Ray Oscillograph], fundamental to TV and any VDU. We used it to test wave forms. Procedure too, (for the sending and receiving of W/T messages) to trainee wireless operators destined to become ground operators and air crew, to the RAF Regiment (briefly) (they used army sets as in tanks), and to Waaf classes then being trained to take over ground duties to free the male operators for preparation for the invasion.

Life during those years was made most agreeable by such companions, by the need constantly to keep abreast of new developments in wireless procedure (notably when the Americans entered the war), in the rapidly changing electronics technology (I filled many notebooks with such theoretical study), so that we were always in a position to teach such new developments and the use and working maintenance of the resultant new transmitters and receivers.

To further this preparedness I was sent on many courses during this period, though some I now have no recollection either as to content or, for that matter, exactly where they were held. Most, though not all, were held at RAF stations; some I remember are listed below,

Rednal (Shropshire), Direction Finding and radar (still to some extent embryonic in practice in 1940)

Swinderby (1942), between Lincoln and Newark to study problems encountered by w/operators in Lancasters.

Ashbourne (Derbyshire) What was I doing there? - but something impinged upon me – I include a brief glimpse of life there in 1942.

Scampton probably as Swinderby.
 Elsham Wolds
 Brockworth (below the Cotswold escarpment at Birdlip)

There were many others, gone from my memory. Two other notable places, Middle Wallop and Thruxton, were locations for a few weeks not course venues as such and came later when I was with the Mobile Signals Units.

There were also short courses of a few weeks at Technical Colleges, one only of which remains in my memory, not because of the course (it was to do with the practical repair system necessary if there were no radio mechanics around) but because of the people. It was at Bolton Technical College, Lancashire, where I was billeted with a family of three who all worked in the mill round the corner of the street. They lived in a back to back house with public loos beside the cobbled street. Once they took me to see the mill in action, the only occasion on which I wore clogs and had to stuff cotton wool into my ears to deaden the appalling noise. They were, in recollection, great people now anonymous, living in Great Lever.

Two lengthy courses not yet appearing in the list were at Cardington and Cranwell. They will appear elsewhere in this narrative, that at Cranwell not being completed because I was recalled to join the Mobile Signals Unit in 1944.

Somewhat alarmingly I find that now, details of ordinary daily life back at base at Compton Bassett (where I spent longest in the war years, just over 2 years in fact) have almost vanished from my memory. What the meals were like, the Naafi, HQ, The Guardroom, the huts no longer remain in my mind in any coherent form though the 'ablutions' do still stir a slight and almost faded memory.

But in our work we were, I believe, a very conscientious lot of instructors. Many had been teachers in civilian life and at sundry teaching courses I attended on which we had to give sample 'lessons' I do recall being very impressed by the quality shown by many.

For some reason, those recollections lead to to the camp musicians, a quartet supplemented by a few solo instrument players. They had been professional musicians in civilian life and were given time to practise and give short concerts, mixed classical and dance music I believe. They were extremely progressive in their programming and carefully avoided any allusions to the then popular 'Palm Courtish' approach to popular music. So my musical education was advanced a little more as I am sure was that of my colleagues.

Here I really must digress to talk about people, friendships, relationships again because they really did form a most important part of our growing up. Later generations seldom appear to have the opportunity we had of knowing and often working with such a variety of people from different backgrounds and different lives as those assembled here in the war years. Though the memory of many has faded and they remain only as names in my address books, some remain vividly in mind, remembered with vast affection and gratitude.

Frankie

'Only you' (will my happy heart remember)
'Always in my heart'

1943 was that haunted year when I met the great love of my earlier life. Frankie was to become the greatest influence on my growing up until I met Cynthia some three years later.

After more than fifty years I have now no recollection of our first meeting, only that for several summer and autumn months she was my life, always there, dark-haired, laughing, forthright, practical and loving. Jewish, married with a small son, separated from her husband, bombed out of London's East End and then living in Streatham with her mother (who looked after her little boy while she was away in the Waaf), she had been caught up in the overwhelming desire felt by so many to be a part of the great events unfolding around us all. So it was that she found herself (to our great good fortune) on a Wireless Operators' course at Compton Bassett. Doubtless, similar interests brought us together, though how is no longer in my mind. She loved reading – the classics Walpole, Rabelais, the Russian writers I recall, and she was a talented artist who could have been a good illustrator had she the opportunity. Witty and direct, her intellect was far ahead of mine. A city girl, she grew to love the countryside and, together we explored the Downs and country pubs through one never-to-be-forgotten summer – our shining, haunted summer of 1943. In memory she comes down to me as self-contained, relaxed and amusingly tolerant (her experience was far wider than mine).

When I married, I thought that the right thing to do must be to destroy all the old letters that girl-friends from the past had written to me over the years. Still I have no doubt that it was right to do so – and yet – one cannot so obliterate the past. It is what has made us what we are. It cannot be wrong to remember it and to remember it with pleasure. It is what has helped to create whatever attraction we have for each other. Our formative years cannot be entirely forgotten any more than can their effect on our growing up be eliminated from our personalities.

Thus it was that, sifting through documents, memorabilia and general remains of the past I happened upon, first, a Christmas card of Lacock Abbey, then a letter from Frankie, both of which had lain unread in the years between since 1945/6. Did I overlook them in my orgy of destruction? Or did I feel the letter so encapsulated a summer that I could not destroy it? But there it was, instantly transporting me in memory to that summer of 1943.

For so many years I had not thought of her at all – years in which a true love, great happiness and great sadness formed my life.

So it was all the more startling, on rereading that letter after more than fifty years, to realise how sharply – in what clear focus – she came back to me across the years and to be reminded that our summer of 1943 had meant much to her as well.

During those shining summer months she gently took me in hand, first as the sister I never had, then as the lover gently leading me to her experienced understanding that physical love is to be enjoyed as one of life's normal yet greatest experiences. Still largely unformed, my desire for women was naïve before I met her. Through her, the vision unfolded of the

beauty of companionship and love. Of wit and humour too and sometimes of the totally zany.

'We did enjoy ourselves that summer' she had written and I was astonished to find how little the passing of over fifty years had dimmed the newly recollected memory of her in those summer days and nights.

Of course it is easy to become lost in waves of nostalgia when looking back and remembering after so many years. But I recall that there was more than a touch of realism in our relationship. Being Jewish in the 40s, she could not alter the life to which she was committed. There was no divorce and indeed, after the war she was, as she quaintly wrote 'soppy word', 'reconciled' with her husband. But, through her, I experienced for the first time what deep love really means and when she was posted away at the end of her course (to Winslow) I was devastated. I can still recall the emptiness of that time. Summer was turning to Autumn, the first mists were rising, bringing to an end a fantastic, unbelievable period of my life. We met on and off throughout the next year or so in Streatham, then in Portsmouth when she had left the Waaf to look after her son again, but she was never again so at ease as during those magical summer months of 1943.

When I received that letter I was already in the midst of and absorbing new, exciting experiences in post-war London and a new true love. I hope I responded to her cry from the heart with sensitivity. She had remembered. She, too, was able to look back on that, to me idyllic, summer with wonder. We both knew that there was no way in which it could have changed the rest of our lives but it remains a love story encapsulated which, more than any other before I met Cynthia, formed me as I am and I am forever grateful.

That time was quickly overlain for me by so many new experiences and left no room for perpetuation of longing. Indeed, even before our happy and successful marriage in 1948, it never entered my head.

But there, in her writing, after so many years, was her recollection of our shining, haunted summer. There it is, as I now recall it, up to that time the happiest summer of my life. Still so unsure of myself with women, I could not believe that she was seeing and feeling as I was. 'What lovely times we had!' she had written. 'Wherever we were coming from it was always late.'

We did exchange cards at Christmas, I recall, for a few years and then we faded from each others' lives. Perhaps it is best that such intense friendships end in that way and maybe our feelings were mutual. What an incredible length of time has passed since those far-off days when we were young. Maybe irrationally I do hope that she, too, had a great life.

Through the mists of memory I still see her in the Wiltshire countryside of long ago.

Blackpool II

'Only Make Believe'

Shortly after Frankie left, Bill Chavasse and I were sent back to Blackpool to take charge of the Final Trade Test Board (FTTB) for Wireless operators at the end of that part of their course. This was an important job, and, in retrospect, I see that we were given great responsibility. Our pitch was in Burton's Ballroom (viz: 'Gone for a Burton') on the first floor overlooking the Promenade and the sea on Blackpool's North Shore. [*Opinions remain divided as to whether or not going for your FTTB was the origin of the saying 'Gone for a Burton' (or whether it was a beer!) - see the entry in Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable which mentions specifically 'Burton's Ballroom in Blackpool as the possible origin of 'Going for a Burton']

Burton's Ballroom – Blackpool

We worked long hours in those winter months of 1943/44. Wireless operators were required for all the additional jobs created by the preparations for the June invasion of 1944. (One notice which appeared on DROs (Daily Routine Orders) read something like – 'volunteers required for w/operating under difficult, cramped conditions afloat', a thinly veiled reference to the landing craft.)

There follows a memoir written on June 7 1988.

It is forty four years since Bill Chavasse and I sat side by side at the sea end of Burton's Ballroom on the first floor above Blackpool front to conduct the FTTB (Final Trade Test Board) of no. 13 RAF Radio School. Together we interviewed several hundred airmen and women over a period of many weeks on their knowledge of the scientific and technical side of the course and the duties of a wireless operator. Our job was to ensure that no one passed out at less than the required standard set by the Air Ministry Regulations. This was not easy. We had only about half an hour with each to ask a set number of questions and assess understanding. (I still have my assessment book of Waaf interviews.) Thinking of it all now I am alarmed to remember how much responsibility we had.

In retrospect, too, I realise more and more as I go on writing and recollecting, that my real memories are of thoughts, emotions, feelings, people. Places of course, had their importance for me but their significance was in how they were peopled. Burton's remains real to me because of Bill. Sadly, he died many years ago but he was such a civilised, urbane, charming fellow, a Catholic, music lover, architectural student from a family of considerable repute, that he had a profound effect on me in so many ways.

We were billeted in a seaside lodging house, no. 30(?) Albert Road with a Mr and Mrs Butlin and their daughter Cambrai who was then about twenty eight. (The Battle of Cambrai in the Great War, 1916, was when tanks were first used. Mr Butlin had fought at Cambrai and his daughter was born on the opening day of that battle.) Often we went back to Bill's house, No. 1 Connaught Road, Wolverhampton, which seemed to me palatial, set in large grounds. He, it was, who really introduced me to concert going. Blackpool in wartime provided many exceptional concerts (Solomon, Denis Matthews) and we sampled many different forms of sophisticated entertainment both there and in London. Bill always carried a five pound note, neatly folded, in his wallet, to pay for restaurant meals. At that time I had almost never even seen a five pound note (which was white, watermarked and with copperplate printing). This

he would use to treat us to wine and somehow he always had his note replaced from some mysterious source. (When I joined the RAF in 1939 my pay initially was two shillings a day – after deductions, about ten shillings a week! (50 pence now).)

It was here in Blackpool that Bill and I both fell for the same girl.. Laura was a Geordie from Jarrow and one of the most delightful girls I have known. Bill it was I think who first knew her and, through him, I looked on her as a friend. She took me into her confidence, making it clear that she had a boyfriend in Jarrow who she was likely one day to marry; 'promised to another' I remember her saying. They did afterwards marry for we continued to correspond occasionally for a long time after the war. She was full of zany fun – I still have an envelope from her containing 'peas on a string' – an 'in-joke' with the two of us in those days. And we did fall for each other. I remember the occasion well. We were in some 'club' (which proliferated in those days for service people), or other playing table tennis. Both of us stooped to pick up the ball, looked up and our eyes met. Instant recognition. She, it was, who gently shook her head. We continued to have a great time, though, swimming, dancing, 'clubbing' of those days to use later jargon. Irrationally, perhaps, I still have two photographs of her. One she so aptly and succinctly signed 'Yours, sincerely, Laura the cherished'.

My recollections of Blackpool are sharply divided between work and play and, if they seem to centre on play it is probably because work could be repetitive with not much in the way of highs and lows. So there was still time to dance in those enormous ballrooms and to make more friends. Elma was a Scottish girl from Falkirk, tall and chic. We had an intense relationship for a while, spending all possible hours together, writing each other long letters even though we were to see each other in a few hours, dancing, walking the shore and cliffs, living as sophisticated a life as was possible in those days, she clearly being more used to that kind of life than I who was happy to follow her, a delightful companion. Warm and passionate, our relationship did not long survive our parting as was the case so often in those rapidly changing days. Looking back, I do see how important combined experience is to an understanding of other human beings. Even then it is difficult enough. Several of my friendships in Blackpool survived the war however, and I corresponded with at least a dozen people, mostly women, for some while into 1946/7, being best man at the wedding of one male friend in 1947 and meeting several in London during the year or so after becoming a student again. But times change, friends change, and gradually, mutually, correspondence and contact ceased.

The second spell in Blackpool had to come to an end and I was posted to Cranwell sometime in the spring of 1944 to a course the content of which remains no longer in my memory. It was to last something like six weeks I think, but before I was two thirds of the way through, things began speeding up in preparation for the invasion and I was sent to Chigwell to join a Mobile Signal Unit, 55011E. This was a super unit, about twenty five of us and a dozen or so lorries. We were self-sufficient, all our kit, bedding, food, equipment being carried in the lorries, some of which were wireless transmitter/receiver working vans. One of the feelings I still retain about service life is that of packing up and leaving countless camps, virtually no trace of our sometime existence remaining to mark our sojourn there. We were once there and then we were gone.

Chigwell was a strange place, not an airfield but a camp down in the Roding valley between Buckhurst Hill and Chigwell village on the eastern fringe of London. Virtually all its inhabitants, including ourselves, were passing fairly rapidly through as Units were formed and sent away for practical experience in the field. I remember it chiefly for its vicious assault course (preparation for invasion), the V1s which became constant; every morning at 0800 hours one would cut out over the camp to glide noiselessly down to explode in nearby Chingford, which took a terrible battering. The explosion always shook the tannoy system out of its groove and interrupted the call to parade – 'Colonel Bogey' – and the most pleasant of my recollections of Chigwell by far – Edna.

Edna

She lived in South Woodford, two stations down the line from Buckhurst Hill and, by chance, in the back of one of my teaching notebooks of those years I found, many years afterwards, my contemporary account of our first meeting – in the Majestic Ballroom in Woodford. Our relationship clearly developed with a rapidity which was unusual. After a few dances with relaxed conversation 'our eyes met and held each others'. I had fallen in love'.

Later, after we and her sister left together, her sister left us with a cautionary warning 'not to go into Epping Forest' across the road (clearly an in-joke). We walked on and stopped near her home. 'I wonder if I may kiss her'. Then I knew that she, too, had fallen in love. 'I know I shouldn't but I love you Pete' (almost invariably the girls called me 'Pete'). Married, with two children, she was a vivacious blonde, gentle and endearing. We were, I think, astonished that so quickly we had fallen for each other. The current popular songs of that time heightened, as they were intended to do, the sad romance of the beginning of the end of the war: 'I'll be seeing you', 'With someone like you', 'I'm going to love that girl like she's never been loved before'.

Sometimes, looking back on such chance meetings, there often does seem to be an inevitability about them. That between Edna and myself though was unique in those wartime years for its almost instant reaction on us both ('fancy meeting you on the first time I had been to a dance for years!').

We met on a number of occasions thereafter and wrote often at considerable length. We both knew, of course, that we were on dangerous ground but felt powerless to end our relationship though accepting that it must come to a close. I do not think that either of us saw ourselves as or wished to be the breaker of Edna's marriage.

A clear recollection remains in my memory of an evening's dancing at the Roebuck Hotel in Epping Forest. After a carefree evening ('Every time we say goodbye I die a little' lingering in our memories) we left the hotel into a London pea-souper long after midnight. No traffic was moving and we walked the considerable way to her home, barely able to see our hands in front of our faces.

We didn't say goodbye...

Shortly thereafter, I left with the Unit for active manoeuvres and we corresponded frequently and at length. Once, I remember, she wrote 'You shouldn't be sending me these letters'.

In the fulness of time the Unit was sent abroad. After I finally returned from Germany early in 1946 we did meet once more. The old attraction was still there – as powerful as ever. But we knew our romance had to end and, after a final long, long goodbye we parted

My last memory is of standing on Liverpool Street Station, watching her walking away down the platform, turning, smiling and waving and then, as it had to be, she was gone – out of my life.

To Germany with the BLA

From Chigwell, sometime in the early summer of 1944 the MSU (Mobile Signals Unit – my second MSU, the first was 55011E, was 55078B and attached to Shaef Special Echelon, Control Commission for Germany of the BLA (British Liberation Army)) found itself at the village of Thruxton, not far from Andover. We organised ourselves on a wartime airfield (a satellite of Middle Wallop). It is now a racetrack. Night-shifts, which I used to take with the lads though in charge of them, remain vividly in the memory. Those summer nights were so quiet the silence was almost tangible, punctuated only by the hours struck by the clock on the old church tower close by. Around four o'clock on those mornings the mists rose and shrouded the airfield and I would often go down the steps from the Signals lorry and walk through the chill morning air rather as I used to do at Rendcomb seven years before.

Though we were at Thruxton for only a short time before moving on to Middle Wallop (though I do believe it was Middle Wallop first), there was time for John Thacker to come to see me. He was on another MSU stationed somewhere fairly near that never actually made it to the Continent. We were at those sites practising our procedures, familiarising ourselves (as Wireless Operators) with our contacts (American and British), putting up our tents, aeries (forty foot masts complete with guy ropes from each six foot stage), making sure the cooks (pressure and always used outside) were in sound order, getting used to shaving in cold water – in short, ensuring that, as far as possible, we were self-sufficient. Our Thruxton sojourn was, in memory, a Dad's army affair, thirty men as a close-knit unit alongside a tiny Hampshire village in the summertime. That memory includes a vision of the whole unit except the watchkeepers, setting off to walk through the narrow winding lanes to the pub at Kimpton, an even smaller village a mile away into the even more remote countryside. We would certainly have had a cheerful though all male evening but the only remaining memory trace is of our slow, erratic walk back to the Unit by the light of the full moon through the scented stillness of the summer night.

Here my exact chronology is faulty. Did we from Hampshire go back to Bushey Hall Hotel near Watford or have I again reversed the order? Bushey was, I believe, the assembly point for units ordered across the Channel. Here it was, I think, that we became a slightly larger unit 55078B with about forty of us and maybe fifteen lorries. We were briefed to be the liaison wireless contact between American HQ and the 'Shaef Special Echelon of the Control Commission' when it was set up at the end of the war. Our time was set up with

vaccinations and inoculations, lectures on survival, first aid, darning socks, concerts. Imagine a hangar filled with airmen, smoke hazy, and, on a platform, a Waaf officer giving a talk on the way to use the contents of a 'hussif' (housewife) so that we wouldn't become too ragged. She managed to keep us all in fits of laughter with not an audible 'F' word between the lot of us.

So, in the fullness of time we drove off to Newhaven* [Somewhere in time between leaving Bushey and arriving at Newhaven the unit was in Dover. I recall clearly Dover Castle with its huts and accommodation and walking back up the steep hill from the town but how long we were there and what, if anything, we did, escapes my memory.] and embarked on an 'LCT' (Landing Craft Tank). The lorries were in the body of the craft and we sitting on the roofs of the lorries. The crossing was euphemistically 'bumpy'. Was I the only one not sick? Self-heating cans of soup kept us in some sort of shape. Eventually we drove off on the other side and we were off on our final European adventure. Through the French countryside we drove, losing our motorcycle despatch rider after very few kilometres when he was seriously injured, passing through towns and villages with the people waving, offering petit-pains, vin, or drink at any rate, and we thought 'but we haven't done anything yet'. But the enthusiasm was tremendous and we couldn't but join in. Sleeping in the partially ruined convent at St Omer we came to Amiens. Here I found a billet for myself 'Chez Suzy' who let chambres meubles in a small house very close to the Cathedral. It was all so reminiscent of what I imagined Amiens must have been like at the time of the Battle of the Somme. The Cathedral was shrouded in sandbags up to a height of fifteen or twenty feet and was dusty and dark.

So to Versailles. Here we set up our camp on the golf course Touy en Tosas to the south of the town where we had a glorious view stretching away to the south-west. Touy is now the Municipal Airport but I remember no airfield. We were at Versailles for maybe six weeks, perhaps more. What we were doing there I now have no idea. But it was a superb spot to be at semi-leisure. The mansion itself was partly used as an American Hospital. We used one of the coach houses (to the left of the main town entrance going in) as a bath house. True the showers were ramshackle contraptions but to have your shower in Louis XIV's coach house was an event to be savoured long after. The trains were running and visits to Paris were many. In those days the lines ran into Montparnasse and the boys made a beeline for Montmartre and particularly Place Pigalle (Pig-alley of course). The cafés were beginning to reopen, there was cabaret, the Folies Bergere, Fernandel at the theatre, the Tour Eiffel to be climbed (to the deuxième etage). Not much in the way of Art Galleries or rather, not much in them but the bookstalls on the Left Bank were there, much went in Paris of those days for a bar of soap or a packet of cigarettes. It was my first visit to Paris and six weeks enabled more than a passing acquaintance. As a unit we were probably fortunate to leave with all our personnel in reasonable order.

So one morning orders came to proceed to the German border and in due time we set out again. Travelling was slow, our fifteen lorries wound their way through Paris and by nightfall had reached Chalons sur Marne, grim and depressing and we were among the places made 'memorable' in the Great War. We passed through Verdun and made a detour to the cemetery and the brooding forests and hills impressed and depressed us all.

Now we were passing through more and more signs of battle, Metz, Saarbrücken, Kaiserslautern, Gernsheim, Worms and into Frankfurt am Main to billet ourselves in the I G FarbenWerke. The signs were already out at the roadside as we crossed the German border 'You are now in Germany' and 'No fraternisation'. From Saarbrücken the devastation was indescribable and after Frankfurt, Marburg, Kassel, Paderborn, Detmold, Hameln, Hannover, Berlin, all passed before our bemused eyes each (with the exception of Detmold) with its own peculiar form of destruction.

Detmold. HQ of the British Air Division of the Control Commission for Germany

Our address:
British Control Commission Component
SHAEF Special Echelon
BLA

When the unit finally came to rest in Detmold, we became HQ Signals and were mobile no longer. (The Units in which I served, 55011E and 55078B were formed as active service units (mobile signals). It was with 78B that I went into Europe. So far as I recall it was when we were at Versailles that we received orders to proceed into Germany (via Paris, Chalons sur Marne, Verdun, Metz, Saarbrücken, Kaiserslautern, Worms, Frankfurt, Kassel etc.). We did not then know that we were eventually to come to rest in one of the few small towns in Central Germany to escape wholesale destruction. From here we were to make many journeys far and wide through the countryside and gain some idea of the attitude of the German people to the war, to us, to the future.

Detmold was a beautiful small town left largely untouched by the destruction elsewhere because it had long before been designated as the future CCHQ. Taking the road from the Town Centre in a North-easterly direction, the Schloss and the porticoed, pedimented theatre on the left, up a slight, longish hill was the airfield. The hangars and aircraft (fighters) had been destroyed by the departing Luftwaffe but the substantial brick built barracks blocks, cookhouse, Messes and HQ were intact and we billeted ourselves accordingly. We were the first Allied servicemen to enter the airfield joined soon after by other RAF personnel so we had a wide choice. I had a wonderful room on a first floor extending into a turret on one corner covering three quarters of a circle. On the wall I inherited an over life size German mural of Lili Marlen and her man under her Laterne, a crude, coarse coloured drawing.

The 'no-fraternisation' ban which had greeted us spectacularly displayed on large roadside billboards when we had crossed the German border, was obviously deemed to be necessary but rapidly became shown to be unworkable. It was, I suppose, a precautionary measure because there were no clues to what the reaction of the German people to the advance of the BLA might be. There were no recent precedents and perhaps antagonism and outright hostility were to be expected. In the event, immediately after the end of the war, the people were too dazed, too occupied in living even on the unbelievably primitive scale which was

universal, too busy trying to keep warm, to stay alive, to avoid starvation, to find somewhere to inhabit, to find relatives, families, to be really aware of us at all. As always, the children were the first really to make contact, 'caowgumme' and 'chokolade' being the first American words they had picked up. It was some weeks before I personally made any real contact with the people as people rather than the inhabitants of a grotesque theatrical stage set of unimaginable ghastliness.

At this time the amount of work coming into the Signals Office was small, chiefly concerned with contact with the Allied Military Administration down in the Rathaus, visits by the hierarchy and consequent arrangements, food supplies and general logistics together with organisation of local services. Numerous panics ensued, I recall because water/electricity supplies were either non-existent or erratic.

The weather that summer and autumn was often glorious and Bill Wood, my friend from Huyton, Liverpool, a cypher buff, and I made many and frequent journeys far into the surrounding countryside, often on foot. Those journeys I recall as exhilarating though why is now difficult to recapture. We had known little of Germany and were eager to absorb the feel of the country in any way we could. An enduring image from those days was that of unending lines of refugees, 'Displaced Persons' (DPs) who often filled the roads, pulling their belongings on carts, trucks, anything wheeled.

Notes

* What do I remember of life in Germany after the end of the war for us – for the Germans?

* What was it about our life in the Signals Unit that had anything specific about the Control Commission?

* What specifically did I do personally between May and the New Year in Germany?

* For the Germans – all transportation and distribution had broken down, there must have been severe malnutrition, there were few habitable dwellings in the bigger towns and cities – Detmold was an exception for particular reasons – there was no fuel, no medical staff, even services were erratic, electricity, water. Above all, I was aware that seemingly the whole population was on the move, endlessly moving from one place to another.

* In retrospect, I see that we, the British, eased unconsciously and effortlessly into the imperial role as if by tradition. Orders were given and were expected to be obeyed by the (civilian) population. We changed from being the British Liberation Army to being the occupying power but, in my personal experience, our relationship with the population was relatively problem free. It was almost as if the Germans felt that we were not out to change the nation, only to ensure that it recovered.

... the people other than to give them orders. It must have been several weeks before this ruling was cancelled and we could at last make personal contact with the Germans. And many did want to be friendly – eventually I made some good friends there and almost never came across any aggressive attitudes, resentfulness or open bad feelings.

For weekends away, we opened a kind of Services hotel up in the forest beyond Berlebeck. This had been a Nazi 'Strength through Joy' hostel where German soldiers could meet and sleep with German girls. It remains clearly in memory because of its enormous duvets filled with duck down and with which I was wholly unfamiliar and for Annie Averswald. She came from Breslau, spoke Polish perfectly and was able to convince the authorities (Russians) that she was a non-German refugee and was allowed to travel westwards. She and others had walked all the way*(there was no other way for them to travel) to a village, Heiligenkirchen near Detmold, where another member of her family had found shelter. Heiligenkirchen was a lovely small village in rolling farmland and the tram to it from Detmold ran alongside the road.

Annie had come to a dance at the Club – local girls were invited to join the various activities though, as I remember it, few did. But Annie came and became my companion until I finally left Germany. Though I had lasting friendships with men in the war years I was always happiest in women's company and remained so throughout life. Annie and I were good friends. We danced at the club and elsewhere in bierkellers in the town, wandered the forest tracks, had picnics on the hills, went to the German cinemas when they reopened, to the fledgling restaurants which were beginning to open with very sparse menus. My recollection of Annie is hazy; tall and slim certainly, good company – she had been a student too (of what I no longer remember) and was always ready to join in anything. Eventually, as it had to do, my time in Germany came to an end and the lads of the unit invited her to the farewell celebration in a village*(Hakedahl) gasthaus which they organised for me when my (demob) number came up.

From Annie I learnt much about the German people. Though I wrote to her, no reply came and we never met again. Long afterwards (thirty years) in a flash the thought came to me that her letters may have been intercepted. A chance remark made, the full import of which did not occur to me at the time. We enjoyed each other's company and had good times together but a meeting of two people in a 'ruined' country, finding solace in being together. We were not in love or infatuated but did undoubtedly like each other very much and perhaps we might have remained good friends had our contact continued.

Germany in those days of 1945 was a paradise for the unscrupulous, the manipulator, the opportunist. One such I remember well, Charlie E DFM, an ex-pilot or navigator, playboy, debonair, womaniser and such a likeable person. We became good friends (he and I shared control of the work of the MSU at one time) and we travelled far and wide, visiting business men, 'liberating' (administratively) goods we needed for the Unit or for our teaching – for example, from the basement of the Pelikanwerke in Hannover (or was it Hameln?). Charlie was incorrigible and irrepressible, the 'prototype' for Harry Lime and would 'liberate' or 'flog' anything. Always with girlfriends, I had several times to appease and console (in the nicest possible way – his tastes were not mine) those who had fallen out of his favour. And in those far off days, to have an English boyfriend was what all the girls wanted, so when Charlie discarded them they were often in the depths of despair.

The Black Market was rife in the country and there was vast competition among the women (there were, to begin with, almost no young men) to work at the then 'RAF' camp, formerly, of course, the Luftwaffe. It was well known, but benevolently tolerated, that the women

were smuggling out food at the end of the day's work, hidden in various unlikely parts of their bodies.

Detmold was dominated (at a considerable distance) by the vast 'Hermann'sdenkmal' on the crest of the Teutoburger Wald. Much of the forest and the farmland was very neat except that often one could be walking and, on turning a corner, come upon burned out tanks, or the remains of a plane, or guns in profusion.

Some of my time was spent in teaching English to a variety of Germans, some of whom were Nazis who would be taken off from time to time for interrogation. The teaching was relatively easy; they were all eager to learn and the lessons were virtually all conversational.

Our Mobile Signals Unit was mobile no longer. We housed ourselves in a superior barrack block on the Luftwaffe Flughafen at Detmold. It had kitchens and a dining room and a cellar full of the stores of the German Air Force including a fine relief carving of the German eagle and swastika measuring about seven feet six by maybe four or five feet high.

When I finally left Germany the lads of the unit were happily 'getting their feet under' the various tables in the town where they often lived for days and nights at a time provided that they turned up for shift work (which I seem to remember they always did).

Shortly before I left, I was asked by the CO to join him for a drink one evening. He gently suggested (and made a very strong case) that I join the regular RAF for a four year fixed term (commissioned rank), ('the Control Commission needs men like you!'). It was tempting indeed but I had wandered the lanes of England and latterly of France and Germany for not far short of seven years which, to me at that time, seemed a lifetime. I wanted to get on with the rest of my life elsewhere. But the RAF and the war had given me much in many different ways. I had met some marvellous people many of whom live on in memory or can easily be recalled and for whom I still feel vast affection and gratitude.

'I'm going to love that girl...'

Thoughts on the closing months of war and the following months when I was a member of the occupation forces, of the long farewell to a way of life (six and a half years) that had appeared to be without end. Those experiences had offered an unsought but unique opportunity to grow from the callow young nineteen year old student slowly emerging from the cocoon of public school to the twenty five year old who had seen, met, related to, experienced so many different people and situations and so many incredible changes.

Those final months in Europe during 1945 before (I believe) the division were to remain in memory as a time of wonderment and disbelief. Free, after the lifting of the 'no-fraternisation' ban, to wander the country and meet at least some of its people, the memory of those experiences has lasted a lifetime. That peculiar feeling of detachment among the endless streams of displaced persons (DPs), forever walking through the ruined towns and cities and countryside of the Third Reich left a lingering and perverse kind of nostalgia for the shadowy, grainy, sepia film-world images of destruction on an undreamed-of scale.

My friend of those days, Bill Wood, from Huyton, Liverpool and I often walked for many miles during those months after the war's end and when fraternisation was allowed (although, in truth, the policy of non-fraternisation was breaking down and becoming untenable anyway) through villages, towns and countryside. As I recall we encountered no obvious animosity towards us. The people were correct but, in any case, were too dazed, cowed, hungry, concerned with survival, of keeping warm, of finding something to eat, somewhere to shelter among the indescribable chaos all around. The memory of them sunk into their own problems, forever pulling their little carts with, often, their only worldly possessions remains an abiding memory of abject misery. They were almost all old people or young women and children, obviously almost all of the young men were absent.

The journey home

Eventually, after the passing of summer, autumn and the first taste of a German winter, my demobilisation number came up (no 21 I believe) in late December 1945. So it came about that, at the year's end, I became one of those millions of Service men and women who began making their way home after all those years of war. My notes of that journey survive and I find that I left Detmold for the final time at 1200 on December 31 1945 to travel first to Bad Oeynhausen where I was to catch the main line train ultimately to arrive at Blankenberghe on the Belgian coast. Annie, my friend from Breslau and Heiligenkirchen, was at Detmold to see me go (I never saw her again).

The train travelled at a maximum speed of perhaps ten miles an hour but most of the time at far less than that. Stops were frequent and some of the more exuberant servicemen aboard would jump off the train and run alongside to clamber back again a few hundred yards further on. (Going home at last created a powerful feeling of exhilaration for us all.)

Our journey took us Bielefeld, Gutersloh, Hamm, Gelsenkirchen, Oberhausen to Duisberg at about 1940. Here a memorable encounter occurred which has partially remained in my mind ever since. The train was to wait for some time and, leaning from the window, I caught the eye of a Fraulein, quite smartly dressed, among the crowds of people who always populated the stations. She made her way towards me, came into my compartment and I recall giving her chocolate and maybe sandwiches. We conversed in German (mine was quite fluent by then). What we talked about of course, I no longer recall, but my notes say 'gute deutsch' and then the memorable remark of hers 'Sie sind stolz und Ich bin stolz'. After she had gone I do remember turning her words over in my mind and thinking that she would be one of those who had a future among so many who were destined to remain in the past.

The train continued on its way through Krefeld, Munchen Gladbach, Geilenkirchen, Aachen, over the Dutch border on the Rhine on the Bailey Bridge at Wesel and on to Ghent, Bruges and Blankenberghe where we clearly must have stayed in a hotel, walked along the seafront 'full shops', 'pier', quoting from my notes. We had reached Blankenberghe at 0915 on 1/1/46 and left at 0730 on January 2 for Ostende, sailing at 1000 2/1/46 once again on the old pre-war paddle steamer the 'Princess Maud', arriving at Tilbury at 1600 that day.

So ended my European wanderings. It was to be twenty years before I returned to Germany.

Return to Berlin

August 13 1981

The Twentieth Anniversary of 'the Wall' and here we were, maybe two thousand feet up in the darkening evening, the lights of the City twinkling below us and rapidly growing larger and nearer as we banked and descended very steeply over the wall on the western perimeter to land at Tegel in West Berlin.

Thirty six years before it was all so different. Then, the unit made its way slowly, oh so slowly, along the shattered autobahn through scenes of utter destruction to Helmstedt and on to Berlin. We were already almost immune to the sight of such destruction, twisted railway lines, burnt out engines, destroyed bridges, bomb craters, fragmented shells of buildings, rubble and that often nauseating, damp smell which was all pervasive. All this almost ceased to register on our minds, such scenes, in fact, became normal. But we were continually amazed at the adaptability and ingenuity of the people living in their miserable cellars and walking their saturated/dirty rubble-strewn streets.

Berlin, as we saw it then I frankly do not really remember though one memory remains – a corner of the Tiergarten in the centre of the city with a vast dump of jerry cans of fuel from which we filled the tanks of our vehicles.

As in Kassel, so here. The units, about fifteen lorries in all, became separated trying to negotiate the rubble and we posted a man at what we thought was a crossroad to direct the rest of the Unit. Then, when we returned to pick him up we couldn't find him. One pile of rubble looks much like another.

Fragments

Bath 1942

For a few months early in 1942 a coach ran from Yatesbury/Compton Bassett to Chippenham and Bath on Saturday evenings, returning late so that we could spend the evening in the city. On several occasions I remember making use of the opportunity.

The Pump Room

Empty now of all its sophisticated trappings, it was still possible to discern what it must have been like when the elite of society met here in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Impressive still in its pale green and white décor.

Here, too, I had a dancing partner. Every Saturday evening she faithfully appeared and we danced the evenings through. About her I recall little save that she was Irish and that her name was Kathleen. Probably it is an enhancement of memory that she was auburn haired and had green eyes. Maybe we had little in common except dancing and no real emotional relationship, just an enjoyment – pleasure in each other's company. This I found throughout the war years, that almost wherever I was stationed there was always a dance partner with

whom happily to forget the great depressing outside for a few hours. With some, of course, I did become emotionally involved but many were companions with whom to share a few warm cheerful hours. Whether or not I remember them they brightened my life immeasurably – I hope this was reciprocated.

In April 1942, Bath City Centre was almost destroyed in appalling air raids on the 25th and 26th (one of the so-called 'Baedeker' raids on historic cities). On the 25th, a Saturday, we had shortly left the City and saw the beginnings of the raid from Lansdowne. I had parted from Kathleen – what happened to her? The dance halls were virtually destroyed and I never saw her again.

Wartime dance halls were always crowded. In retrospect it seemed that everyone danced and the venues for dancing were of seemingly endless variety. At Covent Garden a floor was constructed over the stalls and we danced through the proscenium arch to the far recesses of the stage. It almost rivalled those great ballrooms of Blackpool for romance. But these were exceptional – anything could become a ballroom of romance – hangars, huts, village halls, Corn Halls, Church Halls, Town Halls, tin sheds, Assembly rooms, Pump Rooms, messes, canteens, YMCAs, pubs, hotels. We all went dancing, I think, to gain some kind of intimacy. Wherever we were, Service men and women and civilians alike, company and warmth were what we all looked for. Outside, wartime England was often cold and bleak, inside were a few hours' reprieve.

The Rural Scene – Wartime

Inconsequentially, isolated memories come to mind, not necessarily related to anything significant, having lain dormant for over fifty years. They have no meaning – just short passages of life which left their imprint for some reason long forgotten.

In a remote corner of a field half a mile from the aerodrome at Ashbourne in Derbyshire once stood a barrack hut. All by itself save for a latrine against the hedge. For a month or two this was home to about twenty NCOs. Outside, the rabbits played, the owls owled, the larks sang, the cows mooed – what on earth were we doing there?

The aerodrome was on high ground to the south and east and high above the little town of Ashbourne. Around it were several 'satellite' stations. At that stage in the war (1942?) all living quarters were 'dispersed' for safety during bombing raids by the enemy (or, more crudely, so that not everyone would be killed at once). That is why we were in a corner of an English field far from anywhere.

A green gloom, the cacophony of country sounds, staggering across several fields to the Mess in the early morning, down to the town in the evening. Nothing there – Ashbourne for me draws no melodies, no female company – just a flicker of memory of an unlikely juxtaposition of war with a green, bucolic landscape. We were once there, then we were gone and left no trace.

On leave in the summer of 1941, probably between courses, I went, in uniform, to a dance in the village hall at Chedworth. (This was before Chedworth airfield had been constructed.)

The occasion remains somewhere in my memory because of Jean. She was a land-girl, at a remote farm beyond the Whiteway and she approached me as the only boy in uniform. This led to several delightful evenings on the hills around Chedworth woods above the then railway line and we later corresponded copiously for several months. Once I spent a weekend at her parents' house in Bedminster, in Bristol where she lived with her sister. The air raids were at their height over Bristol and on the first night I was there a terrible raid developed. The family all went to the shelter but I was asleep throughout, heard nothing of it, and they had debated long and earnestly whether or not to wake me. They took the risk not to and I was grateful!

On Temple Meads Station on the Sunday night where she had come to say goodbye, she exhorted me to come back again to stay. For some reason I never did. We wrote at length for a long time but eventually she wrote to say that she wanted more than a 'pen-friend'. So I wrote to say goodbye - 'so, on the ocean of life we meet, we greet and we sever'.

On another leave that autumn I went to a dance in the village hall at Coln Rogers for the first and last time(?). There I met a vivacious girl who was a nanny employed by Mrs Henriques. A Londoner, Clare was so out-of-place in that environment, scintillating and quick in her conversation and movements – all that the natives were not.

It was a chance encounter. We walked back down the valley to Winson and turned up the hill towards Lampitt's Barn. The harvest moon was full, the air was still and we lay beside the sheaves of wheat and sank into ecstasy – 'but heart, we did not care'. Maybe it comes back to me as the ultimate paradox, a sophisticated and glamorous city girl in the remote depths of the country.

We walked down the hill through the warm scented autumn night and out of each other's lives.

Early Loves

Of course, many of these early experiences of developing relationships were afterwards to be not only repeated but incorporated into a way of life. Nevertheless, there is something about the recollection of one's early loves which seems to make them different, indeed, special. It is, of course, that that they are encapsulated within a finite span of time under other suns and stars all those years ago. They are shades, delectable and thrilling, recalled instantly from the shadows by, perhaps, the dappled sunlight of the beechwoods, the haunting uplands of the Downs, the banality of a remembered song. 'Moonlight becomes you' and I recall B and the blackout, the bright moonlight and the shimmering stars across the Park, closeness, warmth, discovery and the limitless expansiveness of youth.

There must also have been melancholy, frustration, puzzlement, shattering, devastating and some of these recollections do remain in the memory – the reluctant loss of innocence on

our way to knowledge and experience. This was an essential part of our lives and no later memories 'muddy the image'.

Meditating on memories of the war years I am mildly surprised to discover how often they are of personal relationships and how little they are concerned with the great events of history. It is not that those events passed me by. I was as fully aware of what was going on as most of us and far better informed, I suspect, than most. In 1939, though, having been translated into experiences, places and environments hitherto undreamed of, I could only make sense of this extraordinary panorama through my personal responses. Even as late on as 1945, in ruined Germany, I recall first the people and the friendships. The unit, close knit and interdependent, a great group of lads; Bill Wood from Liverpool, my companion on journeys, often on foot through the devastated countryside; Annie Averswald, the girl from Breslau who first gave me a genuine insight into the feelings of a German family about it all; the girl on Duisberg station at midnight on New Year's Eve 1945; the Wesleyan family of woodcarvers who kept their Bible hidden throughout the Nazi period.

These friends and chance encounters formed the reality of life through which I learned the import of the major issues of the war and of our existence. Our perspectives are not normally panoramic; we can make sense of where we are and what we have to do only through those we know and meet and through the friendships we form. And I was fortunate in the extreme. Some of these friendships are with me still.

Why do we remember some people from the past more clearly than others whom we knew well at the time? For example, in my old address book appears Isobel Shenton and she is mentioned here and there among my jottings. Yet, apart from being dark and pretty (naturally – they all were) I have no real recollection of her at all though I must have known her well at one time.

And Joan Wiltshire from Ladywell, Lewisham. Shortly after the V1s began to fall on South London, she invited me to stay with her at her home and we spent the two nights in a large communal air raid shelter in or under the railway station. It was my only protracted experience of life in the shelters. Of Joan I do have a dim recollection and we must have been good friends for her to have invited me home but nothing else remains in memory, on the surface at least.

Wartime Goodbyes

On recently looking through these nostalgic jottings I am again surprised at how often memory records 'I never saw her again', 'We were never to meet again' or some such variant.

Sometimes this was perhaps deliberate – a 'forgetting' to be in touch, to write – sometimes circumstances were against ever meeting again, sometimes a promise to write was made and kept for a time. Sometimes, in memory, it seems that those strange wartime years were a period of goodbyes – a time when we really meant to keep in touch but so many new experiences crowding in, so many new friendships following the old with astonishing rapidity precluded that possibility.

Sometimes, of course, last goodbyes were spoken without knowing that they would be the last. One could never be certain that one would meet again a friend, a companion, a lover. Wartime was a time of exhilaration, of heightened and often speeded up relationships, but also often of great sadness as the war went on, fatalism counterbalancing tragedy.

Our priorities sharpened wonderfully in that strange time to discard instantly that which was trivial and to discern what was really of importance in life. We lived then by different and more attractive standards.

Apologia **(for some parts of this journal – in Volumes II and III)**

C [Cynthia, whom he met in 1946 and who became his 'last love' and wife]:
Many of these recollections you may not have heard before and most had totally slipped from memory, after sixty or seventy years until recalled by the conscious act of remembering. Very soon after we first met and were exchanging some outline of our lives, I judged that you would not be impressed by any recounting of past 'affairs' however serious and sincere they were at the time. In any case, that was never my way. Always reticent about personal matters (as may become clearer if you read on), I did not, from its beginning, wish to risk clouding our own relationship. And that is why, when it became clear that ours was likely to be the 'last love', I destroyed letters and photographs from the past. I do not regret doing so and now, recalling memories for this 'journal', I do not regret either such recall of those people, mostly women, and those relationships of long ago. We two must have realised and tacitly accepted that, as normal human beings, we did not reach our mid-twenties without the experience of friendships, pleasant, sad, profound perhaps, with other people. It was what made us what we then were.

And now, we have so long been confident of each other's love and trust, that we have, perhaps, reached a time when we can, if we wish, accept and absorb any fresh disclosures of events long ago. Since ours became clearly 'last love' there has never remotely been anyone else but you. But recollection of the past makes me very conscious of how fortunate I was to meet and enjoy the company of those lovely people, with some of whom deep relationships developed, still capable of giving pleasure – or indeed, the pain of loss.

Safe in our trust, we can both still enjoy the company of attractive people. It is one of the pleasures of life.

As for my relationships of the war years with women, I believe that I was supremely fortunate. Not least though, I am glad that I did not, as I might have done and so many did, marry during that time. Life during those strange years was totally abnormal – seen across so many years, more than ever a lasting memory is of ordinary people (ourselves) cast into extraordinary situations and doing extraordinary things. Into those years were packed the experiences of a lifetime and some of these almost inevitably might now be considered 'over the edge'. But they must be put into context and you know what the war years were like. We

were all living on a knife-edge ('in a small boat rushing ever nearer to the edge of Niagara'). The future was uncertain. We could have been 'dead tomorrow' as, sadly, so many were.

Friendship and love were the most valued elements of our lives. So many of us were led to do things which in the cold light of 'now', we perhaps should not have done. But there was so often the real likelihood of never meeting again that feelings and emotions were often heightened immeasurably. We were all cast into the powerful role of taking our enjoyment and pleasure 'now' for we 'might not pass this way again'. We found, in closeness and tenderness with those lovely people all those years ago, solace from the bleak outside wartime world.

So, C, should you read these memories, I do ask you to see them in their time and to recall that, since around the middle of 1947, there has never been anyone but you.

Notes on 1940

The Battle of Britain. Two of the boys with whom I went to Bibury School were fighter pilots, Frank Mills and Maurice (Mott) Guest. Frank flew Hurricanes as probably did Maurice. Both were lost either out over the Channel or possibly over Northern France. They are commemorated on a carved oak panel (carved by my father) in the porch of the church at Coln St Denys, along with three other village inhabitants who were killed during the war.

Fifteen Old Boys from Rendcomb lost their lives in the Second World War, several from my form, the rest mostly from boys who were at Rendcomb with me.

Popular dance tunes:

1939: 'Wish me luck as you wave me goodbye'

'We'll meet again'

Blitz: 'A Nightingale sang in Berkeley Square'

'It's a lovely day tomorrow'

'Arm in arm together'

'Till the lights of London shine again'

BEF: 'Somewhere in France (with you)'

A bomb dropped (was jettisoned) from a German aircraft in the middle of the road up the Coln Valley midway between Calcot and Coln Deans (Coln St Denys). The crater was filled in of course, but there was a distinct dip in the narrow road (on the W side by 'Splash' cottages) for at least forty years (and possibly still is).

Many bombs were dropped in the open downland, some unexploded.

An airfield was constructed on Ablington Downs (near the Fox Covert and 'Old Walls' (cottages)) in 1939, It was a satellite airfield and was strafed by German planes in 1940 – at least one airman was killed.

A small plane crashed in the centre of Bibury at the back of the Village Hall.

There was a beacon (flashing) beside the road from Winson to Barnsley.

An airfield was constructed at Chedworth across the road from the Whiteway to Cassey Compton.

Spring 1940. All the signposts were taken up and often piled together in ditches.

There was a barrier across the road out of Winson (to Foss Cross). It consisted of a single pole about three feet above the road surface.