

THE DAY WAR BROKE OUT

By J.S.Hawkins

To quote the very late wartime comedian Rob Wilton 'The day war broke out' I was at the Upton-cum-Kexby C of E School near Gainsborough. Our junior teacher was Miss Sally Gage a spinster of, to us of great age, and a crackshot with the wooden blackboard rubber at ten paces. I was most impressed when her forecast of the impending hostilities came true. I later progressed to Len Green the head teacher's class where I got a taste of his cane every day without fail, I could never understand why.

As it was a C of E school, Rev Nugent Wilson, the local vicar called to check the registers. He would walk everywhere to save money and get a free meal where ever and when ever he could. He was'nt very generous, he used to provide a prize for the church whist-drive, a bottle of Brillianteen hairoil which was diluted 50/50 with warm water, by the end of the evening the water had cooled and settled at the bottom of the bottle. He saved the rest of the hairoil for a future prize. No one wanted first prize. During the period at school we witnessed the extra traffic servicing the construction of the new airfield between Upton and Heapham which was to become Sturgate. The contractors Geo. Wimpey & Co. used old steam lorries, traction engines, steam rollers and a whole assortment of strange machinery. Once complete Sturgate became a satellite of R.A.F. Waddington and eventually housed Lancaster bombers.

At one stage there were some Free French airmen stationed nearby, they were the first 'Furriners' we had seen so were a bit wary of them.

My own contribution to the war effort was as an official salvage collector, I used a barrow made by my father out of a large box, from Marshalls of Gainsborough, with two old motorcycle wheels (no tyres). I collected any household waste, not food that went to the pigs, tin cans, papers, clothing in fact anything that was surplus, this was taken to a room at the rear of the village hall for sorting, once sorted it was collected by truck for recycling.

At school all the pupils had an allotment and grew vegetables for distribution around the area. At home we had a large garden and grew all our own food where possible, we kept a pig, chickens, pigeons and rabbits, our fox terrier Spot also caught rabbits in the hedge bordering our garden so we never seemed to be without food.

The pig was usually a wreckling acquired at a reduced rate from a local farmer and fed on scraps windfall apples etc. pigmeal was available from the village mill but we had to forfeit some of our meat ration to qualify for it. When the time came to kill the pig the whole family were involved, one of my tasks was to hold it's head up so that the slaughterer could slit it's throat, (humane killers were not in use at that time). I could manage this by getting a noose around it's snout then passing the cord over a suitable apple branch and swinging on it with all my weight, the carcass was then scalded in a large tub, mother had already boiled the water in the wash copper then shut herself indoors so she couldn't hear the squeals. The scalding and scraping process removed all the hairs and cleaned the skin, it was then hoisted and hung from a large tripod for cutting open and cleaning out the carcass, most of the internal organs were taken into the house for processing whilst we were given the bladder to blow up and use as a football. After a few hours the meat would have cooled enough for it to be cut into joints but as it would be winter time darkness would be on us so my job then was to hold a torch for the butcher whilst being aware of the need to observe the blackout, I often received a clip on the ear for letting the light stray.

During the day I had had to convert a large block of salt into a granular form ready for my father and brother to rub into all the raw meat, meanwhile mother and sister were cleaning the intestines for use as sausage skins, washing all the heart, liver, kidneys etc., rendering the fat into lard and scraps, they were also preparing the ingredients for sausages and pork pies, whatever was left was all boiled up together to make braun. In those days we had no fridges so the liver, heart, and kidneys were plated up with some sausages and covered with stomach lining membrane called apron (we would use clingfilm today) then we delivered these to friends around the village who would return the favour when they killed their pig. These deliveries were made in the salvage barrow (also the mucking out barrow) washed out and lined with hessian sacking, and still we survived.

A visit to the nearby River Till or some ponds would often result in a clip around the ear for getting wet, but worth it when you consider the number of moorhen's eggs that we collected, a real delicacy, we always left a couple or so in the nest so the hen wouldn't desert, pheasant and partridge eggs were also nice but harder to find. In those days my own appreciation of the war was mostly from the Daily Express headlines and maps, but we were well aware of the activities in the sky above, as a six year old sitting on my dad's crossbar we had a distant view of a Hamden bomber trying to land at Hemswell, the resultant plume of smoke showed that he didn't make it. I well remember the thousand bomber raids leaving the area, there were bombers from horizon to horizon, the sky was nearly black with aircraft.

One extra break from school later on was the potato picking break, we were allowed two weeks to work for the local farmers to pick spuds, it was hard work as we had to find the tubers after they had been ploughed out but this process seemed to bury them at the same time, it was better when spinners were available, these machines left most of the potatoes above ground.

Life was fairly basic in those days, we had to dig a hole in the garden to empty the toilet so you had to remember where you last dug, we only had collected rainwater for washing and drinking water had to be carried 150yds. from the village spring after pushing aside the weeds, frogs and frogspawn.