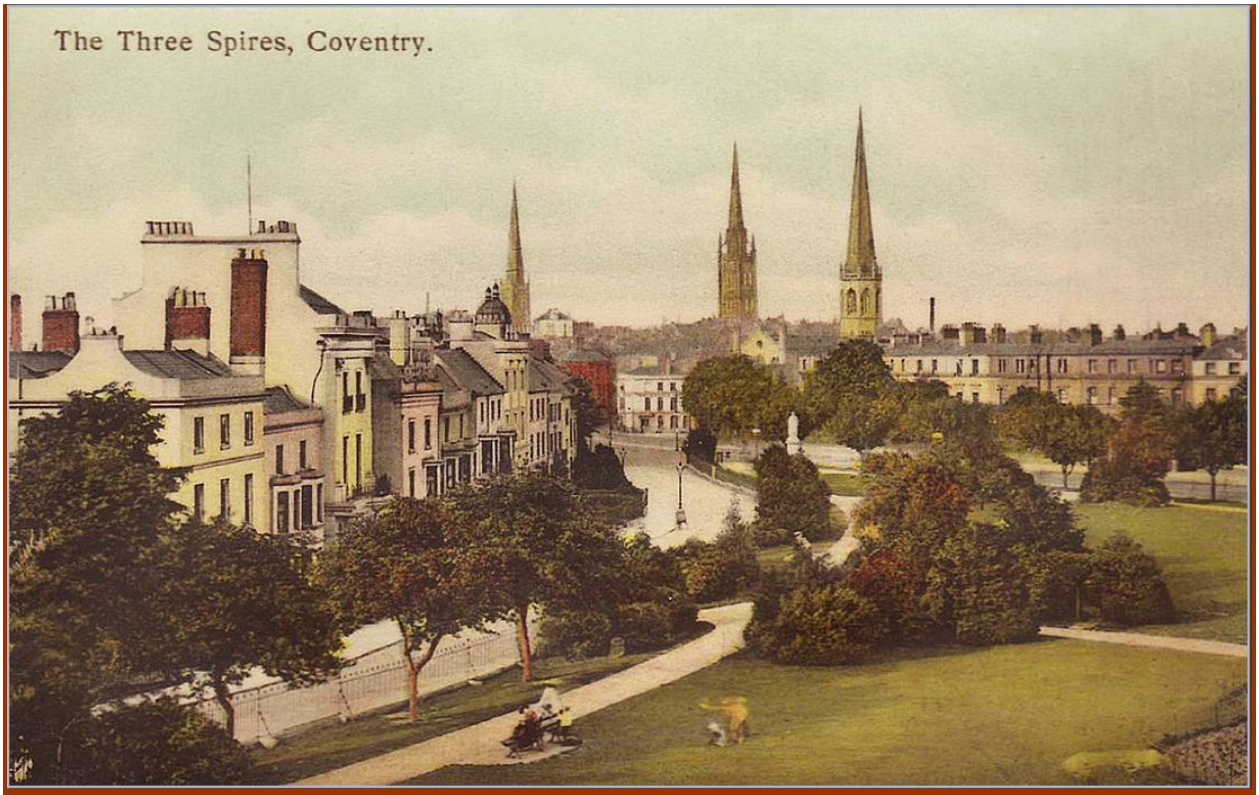

Kaga's Coventry

By Kaga Simpson

Cover Picture: "The Three Spires"

An early 20th century postcard view which gives a view over Warwick Row and Greyfriars Green

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This book relates the memories of Kaga Simpson who grew up in Coventry in the depression years of the Twentieth Century, experienced and survived the Blitz of 1941, and has watched the redevelopment of the City through to the present day. He tells his stories via the Historic Coventry Forum website (forum.historiccoventry.co.uk) and they have been combined into this booklet by John Walker.

“My nickname: - way back when I was a kid, a left-handed person was called kaggy-handed, but at two years of age I couldn't manage that, just kaga. It stuck until I was seventeen, now a family joke. And talking about my childhood down the Slough, introduced as Kaga on this Forum, let it stay. Many a kid has hated the name they were given at school, but too young to do much about it. Now I am well past my sell-by-date, thought I would share my unusual experiences with other people.”
Regards, Kaga.

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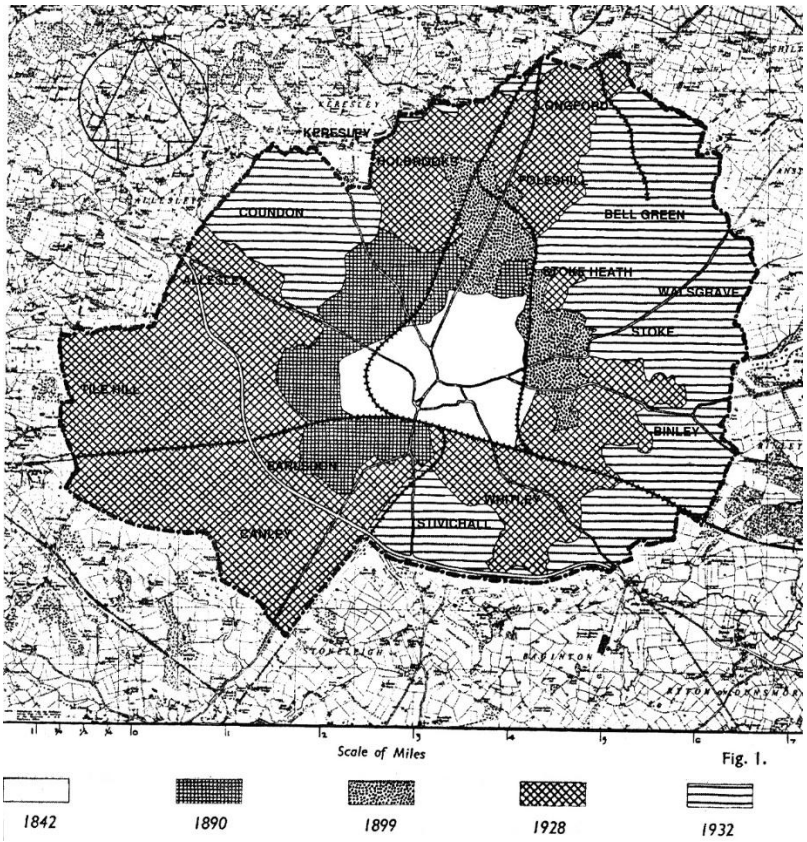
The Coventry You will Never Know

A few generations ago there was no city in the world that could match Coventry, with the most picturesque green belt of villages and hamlets, blacksmiths, streams and brooks, watermills, farmyards, and smithies working in their shirt sleeves. The air full of larks singing, women in little bay windows stitching pieces of coloured embroidery. It wasn't until 1926, the year before my birth, that Foleshill and about five other villages were swallowed up into its boundaries. The long low farm and its buildings looked across a meadow of buttercups, daisies and wild flowers to the Wyken pool known as the 'Slough'. A solitary row of silver birch and poplar trees separated the pool and the quiet road, the hedgerows of wild blackthorn covered in snow white blossom in May, hid the old colliery workings, but did not quite hide the wisp of smoke that curled up from the two cottages in the dip. Hazel, catkins and willow littered the water's edge at the far end of the pool. All manner of wild birds sang sharply on the young twigs, the morning full of young growth. At the corner of the pool stood the fishing shed with its rods and tackle, under the trees, and a little landing stage, where the house-boat was moored. A swan ran across the stage, I stood motionless, frightened in its swift launch bursting the water, the smooth ripples spreading out from its motion. The pool was full of activity, birds piping one against the other, and water mysteriously splashing, issuing from the pool. Where the stream flowed into the pool, with reeds and flowery marsh of pink willow herb, yellow celandine showed out from hedge bottoms. I looked back, in the spring air the pool gleamed. But Foleshill was a very large parish, already it became the first tramway in the city, the first Co-op, the first tallest chimney, heaths, fields and trees, to be demolished for estates and houses.



The Growth of Coventry – 1842-1932

Lythalls Lane was named after a farmer named Lythall, Windmill Road after the windmill near Foleshill water mill. Right round the north side of Coventry were beautiful large houses among fields and great parks of beauty, some with great herds of deer. Most men employed in agriculture, the women employed in weaving. But during the 1st war a great seam of coal was found under Keresley Green that kept it going through the strikes of 26. Neither was it swallowed up by Coventry in 26. But the collieries of Craven and Victoria of Sowe Common, closed, although mining in the area had been going on for a very long time, and so did the railway line from Deedmore Rd to Aldermans Green Rd close, and Foleshill came under Coventry in 26. But Little Heath had become Courtaulds before then and a second factory was being built, and the Heath vanished. Most of the pathways you have today were made by the colliers and the canal people of a long time ago. Livingstone silk mill was still there in Lockhurst Lane making silk pictures when they opened the Livingstone swimming pool in 1936. Alfred Herberts had opened much earlier at Edgewick. In the middle of the 19th century George Eliot had a lovely house in Bird Grove, so named because of all the beautiful birds in the area.

The Coventry I first knew had no markings on the roads, no crossings, and few traffic lights if any. There was no look left, look right, I could dash across the road and the only thing that would hit me would be a bike, but they all had bells so that would be hardly likely. We would go into town on the tram, wave to everyone. At the end of Stoney Stanton Road was the hospital - we would cheer and wave and hope for a wave back, this went on for some years, but in April 41 the hospital was hit badly. We were very saddened, and the tram rides ceased and we were older, so the buses took over. It was never going to be the same again, the end of an era.

Coventry slang. Taters, tuppunce ap-ny a poun, dos eggs luv, tanner to yer, here gamps only a bob, a stick of treacle toffee, a'porth. I loved it. The guy would have spent hours building an apple pyramid, but if he argued with us, we nicked the bottom one, ran out laughing. We took a nail with us, bought a coconut, knocked the nail in and shared the drink, then the nut, remember cracking a nut, slammed it against that tower. This could have been before they built Trinity Street. Oh, such happy days.

My first memory of a strange mechanical vehicle was when my mother walked us to Bell Green and found the road almost blocked by two tramcars, each one like a two storeyed coach with wooden frames surrounding the windows - each tram was two-headed. The trams had open platforms at each end from which right-handed stairs disappeared tantalizing into the open upper decks. Mother told us we would travel on the tram into Broadgate, Coventry. Cruising steadily through the mill of bicycles, horse-driven delivery wagons and pedestrians, my first real sense of excitement and mystery of the grown-up world. Even the place names of Broadgate and Coventry were mysterious and magical. It is hard to explain to people of to-day the awe-inspiring sight and fascination of those first days of transport. The first process that would shape our very lives in the future. That age has gone now when we were entranced by so much progress. No more mystery in the way we travel.

A Coventry Tram leaving the Station c1905

Over a century ago Coventry was more Art Nouveau than it will ever be again for almost every family had some form of art, people may not have had schooling and education but they were born into a world of art, in painting, iron work, woodcraft, etc. all around them was art in some form or another, even door knockers, railings had scattered acorn or oak sprigs in their design. My Granny had a large tablecloth about twelve-foot square, of silken damask, woven into it was horses, goats and trees, in one corner shows a man with a spaniel at his heels and a very short muzzled gun in his hands, and farm life thus, cleverly brought together. Children on the canal boats were taught to paint, flowers and scenes at a very early age. Boys learnt the tools of carpentry and the kind of wood needed for each and every job, it was a natural thing that was around them, people where more aware of the beauty around them and expressed it in many ways and forms. We only have to look around Coventry, to see the beauty and artistic designs that have stood for centuries to delight us still.

After the first world war, thousands of soldiers returned home badly injured mentally, but they found great peace in the garden or allotment and country life, but the sins of war could not easily be wiped away, Slump and strikes, poverty and unemployment, faced by a war-tired people. It wasn't until the 1930's that Coventry led the way, in industry, and peace. Coventry Council built 100's of new houses most with gardens of 30x100 yards, the layout that the Government called for. They built new sports centres, new cinemas, a new roadway and bridge, houses with bathrooms, and much more. Sewall Highway, the Morris Motors, in my area alone; throughout Coventry it was the same, buildings were springing up and Coventry was a great city to live in and enjoy. By the start of the thirties, with generous gardens with the new houses. the local flower and vegetable shows became more popular, with craft stalls, side shows and children's races, prizes for pot plants, jams and cakes, ointments and creams for healing. Throughout the summer there were May Queens, Rose Queens, Carnival Queens, it

was a wonderful time for all, for kids to race from stall to stall it was magic. All the old recipes came back, home made butter mixed with calendula petals gave it a wonderful golden colour and a taste - oh my! Dandelion and Burdock wine, and much more. Coventry industry was growing fast, the new large factories had sports grounds so we had days and days of local sports, all at little expense, if any. Times have changed. The sand pit replaces the lupins, the vegetable plot gives way to grass for football, the swing gone without trace.

Around the 1920-30's the outskirts of the city were one-sided streets, the other side being fields or heathland - Walsgrave Road, Bell Green Road, Longford Road, to name a few. Beyond that there were endless fields and spinneys, woods full of wild flowers and clear streams, bubbling and gurgling over the stones, when learning of plants seemed important to what you could eat, or what you could use for different ailments. As kids we drank from the streams, ate wild berries, rubbed different herbs and leaves on our arms and legs to get rid of stings and warts. Animals would lie down to warm the ground before a snowstorm or heavy rain, so we knew when to find shelter. Many days I would look at the cattle in the meadow before taking my scarf, if it threatened being windy not to take my scarf for it would blow in my way, and many things I've now forgotten. Gathered arms full of bluebells, ran through the fields of wild herbs and flowers, the scents almost overpowering us, the flowers tickling our legs, chasing butterflies, not a care in the world - never heard the word stress or boredom, didn't exist in those days. The rest of the world did not exist for us, neither for others - few people had ever been beyond the city. Only when both sides of the street had buildings did our parents call it the city. I believe it would be hard for you to imagine it as such, as there was no traffic, no background noise, only the rustle of the wind in the trees, the song of the birds, and the noise of cattle, dogs barking and the call of kids playing in the streets. So, when we did go into the city, seeing and riding on trams, the shops with the traders yelling and bargaining, hearing the phones, speaking tubes in shops, the many types of goods that were sold, most of it loose, dolled out with scoops or measures from tubs or drawers, the first cars - yes many were of three wheels only - we were very excited. Factory hooters mainly told us the time. The old cobbled streets and old buildings around the Cathedral where the tops of the houses hung in towards the buildings on the other side stretched my imagination.

Bell Green Road 1930s (Sourced from “The Illustrated History of Coventry’s Suburbs”)

Coventry is known for Broadgate as its centre, but it wasn't always like that - I was led to believe, the Market Place was the centre at an early age. I have no idea when the Market Tower was built, but it stood high, to be seen from most parts of the city centre, this was a beautiful crafted tower of coloured brickwork that dominated the markets, it had feet or buttresses at the base, probably saved its life during the blitz, and intricate brick designs, and small railings near the top. But at a time when men only had fob watches and seldom wore them to work, and housewives had no timepiece, the tower was known and relied on for its clock. The market stalls mainly were covered by a canopy, but stalls you will not see today, like one that only sold guzunders, jerries, or pots. The crates stencilled Staffordshire Potteries, or one that only sold Candles and Candle holders. Crates of veg and fruit from Evesham Vale, nothing graded or discarded by its shape. You could buy one candle or one apple without any pressure to buy more. There were handcarts, sack barrows, scales with iron weights, and many small drays, pulled by a donkey, a pony etc, but we didn't use those names, they were all 'mokes' to us. Fridays were paydays so Saturdays the place would be swarming with people - at Christmas the place was choc-a-bloc with turkeys, geese, cockerels, etc and from the week before people would be employed to pluck the birds, 'feather pluckers'. Try saying that when you've had a couple of pints, and you have the Two Ronnies sketch of fork handles.

During the 1920/30's people saw Broadgate as between the bottom of Trinity Street and the Burges up to the High Street. You could see the top of Broadgate from the bottom, shops all the way from top to bottom. With no cars in those days people alighted from the buses at the bottom of Bishop Street, outside the Gas Showrooms, and the bottom of Trinity Street, it was a wonderful way to shop. When they built the new Owen Owen's, 1950's, they split Broadgate in two. You could no longer see the top half from the Burges and people no longer got off the buses as they used to, so the Burges died, became more of a bus depot. It was more like closing the shop door, people are more prone to enter a shop if the door is open. Broadgate became a drab walled square with less shoppers. I have no idea about the Coventry today.

You may think that ordering and having groceries delivered is a new thing but no, back in 1930 the Co-op delivered weekly - during the week you left your order book with what you needed and it was delivered by horse and cart. The whole week's grocery would be tied up in brown paper and string so expertly that it seldom got damaged, even if there were a hundred parcels on top of one another in the cart. When I was a baby I would be taken out of my pram to stroke the horses, everyday there would be a dozen horses or more in the street, all different age, different colour and different type of cart. Some days there might be three different bakers' carts in the street. Only the coalman was different, he had a dray that had a cab - the bags of coal were stacked in rows along the side of the cart. His arm went over his shoulder, he grabbed the handle, pulled the bag on to his back, walked up the yard and dropped it upside down into the shed or cellar. Would wink at me through his dirty face and smile. Before getting into the cab he had to wind it up with a handle at the front for the engine to start - sometimes it would kick back and hit his arm and he would swear. The milkman had churns of milk and several ladles, half-pint, pint or quart - he ladled the amount you needed into your jug. We had a little hand water-pump attached to the side of the house - in summer you placed your face under the nozzle, cranked the handle and drank. Everyone used this in summer, all the deliverymen, friends and mates, often with much splashing and laughter. There was no transport in the village, you had to walk a mile to catch a tram to go into the town. The trams had wooden slatted seats, in winter the seats were often wet and cold from people's coats and our bare legs suffered. The city was so exciting to wander about the shops, the jangling trams through Broadgate - I marvelled at the streets, the shops, the restaurants, the smart women alighting from Hansom cabs, the wining and dining, a burst of music coming through half-open doors, policemen in white helmets, the towering spires, a market with a tall glass roof, a tall tower - it seemed the most fantastic place in the world to a small boy like me.

When I was a child there was a well-known company called Singer. They made the best sewing machine in the world. We had a treadle-operated Singer machine. Mother could turn a scrap of material into a suit, and a piece of rag into a dress. Mother would sit in front of the machine and sew, singing away to herself. She only stopped when the neighbour's dog howled louder than she sang. Mother let me sit and treadle away - only years later the skipping rope took its place at boxing sessions, then later the cycle-machine took its place in the gym. Isaac Singer was an American that sent a partner to England, to build the largest sewing-machine factory in the world on Clydebank. The factory employed over a thousand people, mass producing machines. He had a problem getting them to work on time so he built a clock tower that was larger than Big Ben. He also started the first hire purchase plan, for these machines were so expensive that ten of them would have bought a house. The need to keep us kids well clothed made the sewing machine so essential, so some winter evenings would find dad mending shoes at one end of our bagatelle table/dining table and mother at the other end sewing and we (5) kids slotted in wherever possible. This would be the early thirties and we had no idea that one day not far off we would use a booklet to tell us what clothes we could buy.

Singer Treadle Sewing Machine (Sourced from http://www.singersewinginfo.co.uk/13/)

I shall always remember the cold autumn evenings when making my way home from play, the houses down the street, the light from inside as you passed by, from a flickering fire, its light dancing across the walls of the house and spilling out, giving you that warmth of thought of home and comfort. Father sitting snoozing in his comfortable chair, mother sitting the other side of the hearth, me sprawled on the rug, looking into the fire and dreaming of my next fight with the crusaders, my brothers and sister sprawled around the house. Mother asking me to turn towards her with arms outstretched, Scamp our dog half opening one eye and daring me to disturb him. I reach out with my arms outstretched and mother drops a skein of wool over them and proceeds to wind it into a ball. In autumn time maybe, she is in the kitchen making jam, she comes in and offers one of us the wooden spoon oozing with hot sticky jam, we pass it to and fro, each licking the spoon until it stripped clean. Or spring, every shadow of the hedgerows was lit with the gleam of primroses, with occasional patches of blue, violets, and the spears of bluebells pushing up. Lambs skipped in the meadows, and little white clouds, skipped in the wider spaces above. Such days remain deeply in your mind.

When Autumn was coming, you could just feel it in the cool morning air. The season of soft fruits and mellow-misty-mornings had arrived. The sun would lift majestically from her nightly bath, refreshed for another day. The evacuation scheme had greatly depleted our school numbers and enlistment had depleted our teachers, no one seemed to know what to do with the children left behind at school. The firm of Delrosa had asked schools to let children pick rosehips from the hedgerows, and they had the backing of the government so this golden morning a dozen of us went off to pick rosehips. The path through the allotments led to a long hedge of wild rose damsons and sloes, finches squabbled over the elderberries that shone black and bright like magpies' eyes. A blackbird was busy demolishing a damson. The little rugby ball-shaped orange-red berries, or hips, the syrup made from these vitamin packed berries was welcome in the winter to come. The countryside was a lazy brown colour, and the pigeons were fat. The meadow flowers had turned to seed, mini-miracles that held next year's summer splendour and we had filled the baskets full of the rich fruit. Reluctantly I walked back to school.

Dad won a bird in a cage in a raffle at work, gave it me to look after. He placed it on a hook above the window and the settee, I loved the bird, and it sang it's head off. One evening months later, I was playing with my soldiers on the table, my sister was sitting side on to the table with a great yellow bowl of flour milk and butter, stirring with a wooden spoon, dad was sitting mending a pair of boots. He was hammering the leather onto the boot, the head of the hammer flew off, straight for my sister, she dropped the bowl and leapt onto the settee, hit her head on the bird cage knocking it off the hook, the door came open, the bird flew out, the hammer head caught my sister on the ankle, her hair covered in bird droppings, I dived for the birdcage and slipped in the batter on the floor. Mum came out of the back room, the bird fluttered by her, she put up her hand as she did not realise what it was, knocked her glasses off, my sister was crying, my brother said 'good I hope it gets killed' so I hit him on the nose and it bled so he was crying. Eventually I slipped out the front door, found my butterfly net, caught the bird, and everything was put right after a time.

As kids of those days long ago enjoyed the freedom and the adventure of growing up, it was not quite the same for our parents. The strikes and troubles of food supplies of 1926/7 - Coventry's big mining and coal industry was hit very hard, men were laid off from work, a year of anxiety, foreboding, yet at the same time a year of high endeavour. Big strides were being made in industry and Coventry was to the forefront - bicycles, cars etc, Courtaulds had just opened a new factory at Little Heath and was advancing in new fabrics. Coventry Council was falling behind, new roads were needed, water and sewage to the suburbs, new shops - the list was endless, and they did respond to the demands. So much achieved, so much destroyed, incredible in its speed, intensity, and incident. They were tremendous times, yet above it all the Coventry people were honest, cheerful and loveable people. A grim contrast to the waves of destruction that were so soon to enshroud the life of the Coventry people.

1937 was a great time to be in Coventry, the Livingstone pool opened in 36, the Hippodrome 37, Trinity Street, the new Owen Owen. Cinemas with new colour films, dancehalls and jazz all began to take a larger part in our lives. Education and employment offered more security and choice depending on how hard you wanted to work. People lived better. People tried to shrug off the dark cloud of Europe hanging over us - but alas not for long.

The Hippodrome in 1938 (Sourced from “The Coventry We Have Lost”)

The "New" Owen Owen 1938 (Sourced from "Images from the Past")

Coventry 1938 Mum, tell me about Dad. I'm shaking all over, I'm bolt upright with my arms out, she clings to me. "It's alright Arthur. I'm here. It's alright. It was a bad dream". She pulls me down to the bed holding me tight, I burrow my face in her hair, hiding myself. After sometime I raise my head. "The war is not over. A crater you fall into, and can't get out, the mud is too deep and it holds you, I left him there, he thought I was coming back, and I never did. I ought to have stayed with him." "No, he would have wanted you to get back live." "I had to get him to lower ground, I got him into another crater, the crackle of gun-fire overhead, I prop him up, I had to push and shove to get him there. I am wet and cold with sweat. It smells of damp and blood down here. There are dead men all over. I'm shaking again. I don't see or hear the shell-burst, one minute he's there next I am punched into the earth, the blast threw me back onto a ridge and I survived; if I had dragged him a little farther past the crater he would have lived too. The rain of earth pattered down on me, for a long time I didn't hear anything. They got me down in to a dugout and gave me tea with rum in it my clothes were rags they laid me on a blanket, the Sergeant's face was close, I tried to say I wasn't wounded but the Sergeant was already moving away and darkness closed in" That was your dad the first week we married. But he's okay now. He enrolled at Coventry Drill Hall, was examined, given a uniform, marched and drilled as if they were killing Germans every minute of the day - two weeks later the rain was coming down as they then marched to Coventry Station, there were crowds clapping and cheering them. The train took him out of Coventry, something he'd never done before. In London they sat in a siding while hospital trains passed by. In France they had more training then were sent up to the front line, but you can ask him about the army but don't mention the dreams.

1939 - like most kids I had a paper round, the evening paper being the local 'rag', the Midland Daily Telegraph. Delivering this paper, we took along our gas masks, had to be aware of the blackout and the sirens. We were asked to deliver from the outer and back towards the shop; if the sirens went to take shelter or get home as fast as possible. I read all the war news from that paper, I kept three papers back to deliver to Main Cottages as I also delivered milk to them in the evenings, sometimes I had letters and parcels to deliver as well. But in August 1941 gave up the paper round and started work full-time, and yes two months later they damn well changed the name to Coventry Evening Telegraph and I missed it. So, for almost two years (apart from a few weeks evacuee), I delivered the Midland Daily Telegraph, never delivered one Coventry Evening Telegraph.

All Coventry cinemas closed two days after the war started, for about two weeks. When I was about ten years old mother would let me go to the cinemas in town with older people. My elder brother, his mate, I and another kid went to the afternoon show at the Gaumont. When we left the cinema, we would walk up to the Council House then cut through behind it into Broadgate. We cycled to Roses Garage opposite the Morris works, parked the bikes and walked to the Gaumont, along the Stoney Stanton Road, up Trinity Street and through the churchyard. The cinema had two sets of blacked out doors, because of the blackout, the usherettes would only let you go through one set at a time, so no light was visible. At the end of the show we left the cinema about six in the evening and 'wham', in seconds we were lost; it was so damned dark you could not see your hand in front of you, and there was deathly silence in the city - nothing moved, and it was very cold. The only thing we could hear were cries of help. It must have been Nov/Dec of '39, a bitterly cold winter. We called to each other, took off our scarves, tied them in a rope, looped them over our wrists chain like, walked like prisoners one foot in the gutter and one foot on the pavement. We bumped into many things and people, heard cursing coming out of the night - we argued about what was where in our memory. We found the Council House - keeping one hand touching the wall, by the last man we could fan out to keep us in touch with layout as we thought. It was very scary - there was a rustle and sighing in the graveyard trees. Down Trinity Street, all was dead quiet, no trams, no people - somehow we managed to find Stoney Stanton Road. All traffic had stopped, we never saw or heard one tram or car. It was almost impossible to move, we ignored the bikes and kept on walking, feeling our way by what we knew - it was turned ten in the evening and mother was having a nightmare. We learnt a lot that night, about ourselves and the city. I believe there was something in the CET next day about the weather and the cancelling of trams.

I was reading a book the other day and it reminded me of an incident about 1942 time. One morning I went to work at the farm just above the Wyken Slough, and my boss told me that there had been a knock on his door last night about 10pm. He wondered if he had a chink of light showing, or if he had forgotten to sign the fire-watching register. He opened the door and it was a soldier, he was very upset, he said he had run into a cow in his army lorry and hurt it badly. It was pitch dark outside, my boss grabbed a torch and they walked through the field to the lane that led past the slough. Sure enough it looked as if the animal had its front legs broken, there was nothing they could do. My boss went back to the farmhouse to phone the vet, told the soldier to

come back with him - looked as if the soldier could do with a cup of tea. My boss phoned the vet who said he would come straight away. My boss asked the soldier about his name and unit for the Ministry of Agriculture, forms would have to be filled in. I think the vet may have lived in the Bell Green area for he turned in down the slough lane, looked at the animal that was not a dairy cow but one of the prime beef herd we were fattening up for the Ministry of Ag., put the gun to its forehead and put it down out of its pain. So we did the milking, and I prepared things for my milk round. My boss then phoned a friend of his, who had a farm up Bulkington straight, farmer, a huntsman with a number of dogs, knackersman and a lorry that had a winch.

As I drove my pony and trap out one entrance I could see the knackersman turn down the slough lane. As I returned to the farm at lunchtime four or five soldiers came from the gun-site, said to my boss they were sorry about the accident, they were off duty for a couple of hours, was there any little thing they could do to help solve relations. My boss said they could pick some apples for him, but not to throw them in the basket and bruise them. An hour later they had completed the job, he gave them a basket full for their cook to make something and relations were better. Two days later the knackersman showed up with a number of bundles of prime beef for my boss, and his bill. My boss gave me a bundle for mother, another bundle went to the vet, lasted us for about a fortnight. The vet sent his bill, stating the animal had been damaged in such a way that it was not fit for human consumption, my boss reported it was a prime animal ready for market, sent the whole lot off to the Ministry of Ag. or wherever.

Everyone got paid, the huntsman had a lot of meat for his dogs, the soldiers got a pie, everyone had meat at a time when meat rationing had been cut again. The Ministry of Ag. would charge the MOD.

The old world I once knew has long gone. The Coventry accent that was once so common in rural areas has all but disappeared. A time when the world turned at a slower pace and we all had time to laugh. I was standing in Bunty's kitchen with a cup of tea in one hand, crippled up with laughter trying to steady myself with my other hand on a table. I was watching the old dear run around her garden with a stick. She was screaming at the neighbour's tom cat while trying to smack it with the stick, her other hand was firmly pressing down upon her wig that was lifting off her head like a bird escaping from the nest. She was swearing that should not have been heard by any child. It had all started when she brought me a cup of tea for running an errand for her. We were both staring out of the window at her beautiful garden - we both saw what was taking place in her garden. Bunty's cat, a pedigree English Blue called Princess was romantically engaged with next-door's flea-ridden old tom cat. Bunty had protected her Princess ever since the new neighbours had moved in, now she screamed. Bunty had other ideas. The 86-year-old was out of her back-door like an Olympic sprinter chasing the amorous Tom. She cornered the hissing tabby against the fence, for a split second the cat was hunch backed, feet splayed, fangs out. She swung her stick at him. The tabby went one way, her wig went the other, and I spat tea all over the table. It was hilarious.

The Blitz

From around 1937 Churchill had been urging the government to re-arm, build aeroplanes to defend our land, although he was a Naval man he knew the future was in the air, but Chamberlain said no. Chamberlain had a strong ally in the young King, the King did not like Churchill but was great friends with Chamberlain, and backed him in his paper waving days. Had they just upped the building of planes a little, would the blitz not have happened - 60 or 70 nightfighters in the sky would have made a great difference. I wonder if the King felt a little guilty when he visited Coventry. Anyone interested, the daily papers for the week before Dunkirk may tell you the disarray in Parliament while British troops were being annihilated in France.

Our fathers' generation suffered the worst and most senseless fifty years in human history. They knew all about war, horrors of death and destruction, wounds and pain, bereavement. They also knew that 1939 was terribly different from 1914. 1914 was like a bolt from the blue. When you opened the newspaper in those days you did not read of wholesale torture, persecution, imprisonment or even liquidation of tens of thousands of people. But from 1933 to 1939 one crisis followed upon another. Europe had slipped into the hands of a madman. International affairs were dominated by the emergence of fascism, and savage barbarism in Europe and the menace of another world war, and Coventry would be right in the thick of this one.

There was something about my father's war that baffled me when I was young, he kept referring to 'Wipers' - later I found out it was the way the 'Tommies' liked to call Ypres. There were three main battles of Ypres, 1914-5-7, the third being called Passchendaele. A lot like Coventry it was a textile city, it also had a large cathedral. Both sides respected the cathedral so spared it for a time but the war went on so long and so savage that in the end it was destroyed - it took them ten years to re-build to its former self. My father told me when I was young the soldiers were wet, cold, hungry and tired, and were pinned down by a well-hidden machine gun for two days. A cavalry officer on a beautiful white horse rode forward, his cutlass held high in his hand, trying to rally the troops. The soldiers waited with bated breath for the machine gun to rip him apart, but forward he went, then a single shot rang out and the horse dropped dead. The 'Tommies' were so outraged they charged forward, losing hundreds of men but silenced the gun, found the sniper and shot him. But for all the stories of the WW1 my three aunts told me, they were not really touched by the war - they read about it but it was far away in another country. But when dad came home he was a broken man, not physically, but mentally. To the teenaged girls to nurse him, hear his nightmares, his screams upset the family far worse than normal wounds, they said they felt helpless and suffered for many years. Another young man that lived a few doors from us came home minus most of his left arm, there was no counselling, no help for them - the local people helped him to start a greengrocery business, became his customers to help him regain a little of his life. For us boys there was a weekly comic (Hotspur?) - each week a story of the Red Baron, a German ace pilot. In later years I found out the white horse and the Red Baron were completely true. It was in later years and dad recovered and me full of questions, that he told me the more gruesome tales.

We were an island, in 1939 we produced less than 40% of our food. The navy did not rule the seas, the U-boats did, Hitler wanted us to submit through lack of food and morale, so many merchant boats and supplies were sunk. Bacon, the traditional English breakfast, was rationed to 4oz if it was available, along with butter and sugar in the depths of a freezing winter. Britain needed to dig for victory, rations were cut again. Restaurants were restricted to so much they could sell. Community feeding centres were set up, new laws, boys of twelve could drive tractors and plough the land. Hundreds of little things were going on. The face of English farming was transformed. Meat was rationed by weight about 1 shilling's worth each person. Bread was not rationed but bakers were asked to keep it on the shelves for a day, so it was not so tasty (when they could get flour).

During 1939 the government passed a defence act that gave ministries drastic powers, no one owned anything anymore, the government did, Factory owners were told what to make and how much, farmers were told what to plant and how much, councils were told who they had to accommodate, and numbers, and given the power to do so. The council told my father we had to take in soldiers and my sister lost her room. The military told the agriculture ministry they needed a field. The ministry told the farmer, the farmer moved his cattle into the football field and the footballers lost their pitch. A guy had a lovely garden, '39 was a sweltering summer, he watered his garden before leaving for work - when he came home it had disappeared, the council had to get to the water mains (for some reason under his garden) to connect to the new army barracks. On one side of the road they placed a big gun to defend Coventry and the power station, half a mile away they placed a smaller gun, to look after its big brother from low level attacks. A low raider came over, hit Sutton Stop, drained the canal, that in turn put the power station out of action till the canal was restored, and the military changed the small gun to one larger. (One darn thing after another.)

There must have been well over fifty barrage balloons, all attended by gallant men, no way could they shelter, same with the searchlight crews, yet they hardly get a mention. On moonlight nights you could see the bombers pass by the moon, wave after wave, that's if you were brave enough, always in the same direction, on the way in, the damned quickest way, if one was caught in the beam of a searchlight, the other beams quickly latched on, and you had a battle of wits, the pilot doing his utmost to lose them, and the searchlight doing their utmost to hold him in the beam, and the bombers ditched their load to have more mobility. The number of bombs in a stick I believe was different, but that can be traced through records. Now I think it was half day closing; would it have made a bigger death toll had it not have been? Coventry people were asking that question the very next day. The very fact is, he was hitting strategic targets, and couldn't miss the people, or the Cathedral. Like when we broke the dam, and drowned over a thousand of our allies. Bell Green wasn't flattened, but the Morris was. Sometimes In the daylight hours, the barrage balloons would be moored above the city, like a giant shoal of silver fish, occasionally one would break free, stand on its tail, then shoot off into the heavens. Coventry was the richest, easiest target in the world, most major factories were in a mile of the city centre, they didn't need a bullseye, the whole damn board was a bullseye, and both sides of the Channel knew it. I've long praised the defence of the city, it was the best we had at the time, and they gave their best, no question to me. I knew a few of the AA gunners personally, most only five or six years older than me, and when the sirens went I was damn scared, with the power

station only a few hundred yards away. What the Germans underestimated was the resilience of the Coventry people to get the factories back into production, and to work even harder.

While the wartime defences were left to the war chiefs, the Council were left to defend the people, first they had to organize the ARP etc and find them meeting places, then they had to distribute shelters, I think they ran an ad in the paper, you had to apply for your shelter, bucket and stirrup pump etc, the council delivered them free of charge, but you had the back breaking job of digging the hole in the back garden or wherever, and god knows that turned up some funny relics. Then there were the sand bags, really was a hundred and one things. Old people were a problem, they could not climb in to shelters or such, or cope with the blackout very well, a lot of headaches for everyone. a trying time even before the bombs fell. Finding gun sites were much easier.

When I was around twelve years old, it was 7am and I was asleep in bed, when we were awoken by a sound out the front of the house, we kids ran into Mothers room that looked out over the street, on the other pavement across the street a soldier was blowing a bugle, Dad put his head round the foot of the stairs, told us to stay in the bedroom till the soldiers had gone. A few minutes later the two soldiers that had been billeted on us came out of our small box-room, dressed in uniform, tin helmets, rifles respirators, scrambled down our narrow twisting stairs and out the front door. Other doors were opening in the street and soldiers were trickling out, they formed up in ranks and marched off down the street. We learnt from them later they were here to build a camp and site for a large anti-aircraft gun, in the field opposite us. You could say we had a loud awakening in to the war that was to follow. I think it was probably before war was declared, (I no longer can remember dates and times) but I would think it would be in the local paper. After a few days the bugle ceased to be blown, I think the soldiers were with us a few weeks, but uncertain.

Just before the war started, the Government. formed the Mass Observation unit, these people were trained to monitor the mood and feelings of the country during wartime conditions, several were in Coventry the day after the blitz, and for several days, made reports to the Government. But there were some great people in Coventry. One was Pearl Hyde, head of the WVS in the city, by the Friday lunchtime she had vans up and running in various locations, serving free teas and sandwiches to the people, I think it was said she took over most of the central police station with her volunteers, making and distributing the free food and drinks, the vans and money were given by people all round the world People had read and knew about Dunkirk, the losses in N Africa, and the loss of France when Marshall Petain signed an armistice with Germany. June 1940, it was fully expected that Germany would invade us, the people waited and waited all through the long hot summer. The threat of invasion was high in the minds of the people. It was called 'the phoney war. Along with the blackout and the rationing, nerves were getting frayed. On top of that came the 'Blitz'. Whatever people thought of the Blitz' a few hours after the bombers left, to see these tea wagons up and running, gave Coventry a tremendous shot in the arm, when it needed very badly, for that Pearl Hyde and her team deserved all the credit one could give. After the war Pearl went on to run two narrow boats on the canal for pensioners' trips.

In 1940 the German army outnumbered all the other countries put together - men, machines, tanks and planes etc. He simply overran most. Hitting us in a weak spot he was able to encircle us like a vice and hit us from every side, apart from that little corridor the French and the BEF were being annihilated. Had BEF been wiped out we would have come to terms the same as the French did. We had nothing to fight with, and no real army left, there would have been no choice. This is not defeatist talk, 'plain historical fact' - we would have formed a Vichy Government same as France. At that time every village, every town, in the USA had bold placards displayed 'Keep us out of Europe's War'. Roosevelt asked for our Navy. But Dunkirk was a miracle, and Hitler saw us as a little island, still no danger, as long as he kept our factories from producing war materials (BLITZ time). He turned his army, scrapped the Russian pact, to drive out Communism. Around the 1990's a lot of material was released that squashed a lot of our myths, we now have a better picture of what went on. But no matter how you see it, that May month changed not only Europe but the whole world.

In May/June 1940 the cream of our fighting force was being fished from the sea. I don't think the fear in Coventry was defeatist talk, or sea battles, more not knowing what was going to happen, the only talk I remember was of German parachutists landing, and how we were going to cope. Every day that went by we got easier, the soldiers were recuperating and regrouping, the Home Guard were getting more proficient, and this was before Hitler really considered an invasion. It was the middle of July before he prepared operation Sea Lion and the general to rule England. Meanwhile his bombers were hitting convoys in the channel, and bombing our channel ports, and his bombers could use French airfields and travel farther, as we and other cities found out in Sept.

MAY 1940 - in one month it changed Europe. In that one month five countries came under the jackboots of Germany. Britain stood alone, even the USA refused us a loan of warships, or anything else, and we had lost eleven of our ships in Norway. That one month wrote the history of our nation's morale and willingness to stand up to aggression at great odds and sacrifices made by our parents and grandparents. Fear swept through Britain, this was about May 1940. Nine months into the war, Dunkirk was about to happen, the government then called for volunteers to join a fighting force the LDV, later called the Home Guard - the man given the job to train them into a fighting force was Ian Fleming's elder brother Peter. The phoney war was over. Within days of the fall of Paris, German troops were massed on the Channel coast, poised for invasion. People left the south coast in droves; southern towns were ghost towns. It was not factory workers that left the south, it was the well to do people. May/June 1940. The Battle of Britain officially claimed as Sept, had not happened at the time of Dunkirk. When we feared invasion. Forecasts of German airpower in the thirties were widely inaccurate, the government and most people thought the bombing would be confined to the south and London. Invasion committees were set up. The Germans had sped through France at such speed, tension gripped England - it was easy to think it would propel them to invade. Signposts were removed, farmers were asked to move hayricks to the middle of fields to stop gliders from landing. Hundreds of posters were put up - 'Keep calm'. Large houses in the Midlands were made ready for the Cabinet, Churchill, and the Royal Family to move to. Church bells could only be rung by military or police. But for some reason Hitler turned to the east and left England to his bombers.

The British forces were alongside the French on the Western Front again when the winter set in - hardly a shot was fired. But the British found a crashed German plane with a briefcase of all the plans of the German offensive. They copied everything then left it as they found it. The top brass thought they had an ace up their sleeve. For five months hardly a shot was fired. Russia invaded Finland - we sent troops, they were badly mauled. Then Germany invaded Norway - we lost eleven ships, tried to recapture and took a beating. Denmark and Sweden fell, but the middle of that May Germany invaded Belgium and Holland - the allies moved troops to rush to their aid, left weak spots. The Germans then sent their main force through France encircling most of the BEF force - it had been a trap. We had a corridor about 5 miles wide to Dunkirk - he ordered a withdrawal. He would not sacrifice the flower of England's army if France was about to fall. Thousands were leaving Paris clogging the roads. France asked for aid, especially 10 fighter squadrons. Churchill went to Paris to see for himself, promised he would do what he could. Came home and immediately asked for his war lords. The air chiefs told Churchill we were outnumbered 3 to 1 just to defend our home land. Churchill said then the Battle of Britain would be over the south of England, more time in the air for the RAF, less fuel. We pulled five times the number we expected to from Dunkirk. But they would take time to recover and re-arm. Invasion was imminent. The Home Guard was formed. A large number of our ministers and daily papers wanted to come to terms with the Germans - that's when Churchill delivered his finest speeches and brought the British people to their most gallant time. The morale of the people soared. But it left us to the mercy of night time raids. The Battle of Britain had cost us heavily. The Germans mined the Channel but left a corridor for invasion - most of our navy could not operate in the shallow Channel. Nine months after war was declared we had the blitz in our cities. The war started and finished within a month for so many countries.

We saw them coming, three dots appeared on the left hand side of the moon, then three more behind them, we could now see they were aircraft, and three more behind them and so on, about five in a row, then a gap, as the last three of the block left the right hand side of the moon three more appeared on the left and another block passed over the moon, all in close formation like guards on parade, not one out of step not one out of line, unmolested they flew on, as the third block came to the left hand side of the moon we dived back into the shelter as another lot of explosions hurled into the inferno below, for it was near ten at night, we had come out of the shelter during a lull, in the shelter we huddled together, it was the uncertainty of not knowing if the next one was ours that was the fear. Later we found out the aircraft were much higher than the barrage balloons ceiling, too high for the searchlights to be effective, and the guns had less than 15 seconds to fire from the plotter's position, all three just a deterrent to the aircraft not to fly low.

I don't believe the Cathedral was targeted. Incendiaries were dropped willy-nilly near a target, and the fire was under control until the water ran out - the water was at the bottom of Hertford Street and could have saved Spon End if there had been access to it. We did not know what the Germans called it until long after the raid and we were already calling it Coventrated. It is not hard to fight a fire if you have trained men and machines, and water or something solid, stop the air from it and you have no problem. I was a fireman and was in many burning buildings, touching a brass plate on a wall taught me much more than any training could. Laying on the floor of a bedroom, feeling to see if there were kids in cots or so, with the kitchen ablaze underneath fed by

ruptured gas pipes was no joke either. And the equipment in those days was not like today by a long way. All in Coventry. The Solihull brigade stood by and could do nothing. They were not overwhelmed at any time, no brigade was, to my knowledge. Water could have saved a lot of Coventry had someone had more forethought. But I have read many books and articles about the Blitz that had little knowledge of what really happened.

THE KING SALUTES A VERY GALLANT CITY

Thursday, November 14, will for ever remain a black day in the history of Coventry—but its blackness will be relieved by the memory of numberless examples of individual heroism and the supreme courage and resolution of the people of that city. From dusk till dawn waves of German planes—500 in all, the Germans say—dropped thousands of high-explosive and incendiary bombs on the city. Two hundred people were killed, 800 severely injured. And the coming of daylight revealed a scene of desolation. The main shopping centre was the heap of rubble you see above; so, too, were the houses of the residential areas. It was a stricken city physically, but there was no fear in the hearts of the people—only a passionate determination to carry on at all costs.

Like the shops and houses, Coventry's fine 600-year-old cathedral was a target of the blind and fiendish bombing. The war factories escaped with little damage. According to a famous American journalist, probably not more than one per cent. of the area bombed was occupied by factories.

Another scene in the devastated centre of the city. A few gaunt walls and chimney-stacks alone are left standing.

On the following day the King visited the city and went among the people to see what had happened. He paused before the ruins of the cathedral, where a tattered Royal Standard could still be seen fluttering from one of the windows. In swelling volume the crowd began to sing the National Anthem. Deeply moved the King saluted—not only in acknowledgment, but as a tribute to the courage of Coventry.

The Results of the Blitz (Sourced from War Weekly Magazine 29/11/1940)

The morning after the raid, most people checked their family, then their neighbours, then sat down and wrote letters, airmails etc, to their loved ones, knowing full well the raid would be broadcast round the world, and kin would worry. Ron Sephton lived at the Elephant and Castle, Tusses Bridge - a little older than the three boys that got killed in the blitz, he went to school with them, knew them well, at the time of the raid Ron was fighting in the jungle of Burma. He never heard about the raid until the Christmas, never saw the city again until early 1946, all those years fighting never got a scratch, the boys at home and …….

FIRST THE WORKERS' HOMES. In the arms towns, if work is to go on, houses must be made habitable. Patching up in Coventry.

Building Repair after the Blitz

Yes that morning we stood and stared at the ruins, but during the night we listened to the drone of their engines that went on and on, but no whine of them falling from the sky, no tangling in the wires of the barrage balloons, no nothing, Only daylight stopped the raid - so what everyone dreaded was darkness falling, the ruined city we didn't have to think about, it registered automatically but I think uppermost in our minds' thoughts were, they would be back, as soon as darkness fell . . ..

We waited for the follow up invasion, but the days passed. Church bells were banned, only to be rung if invasion, then in Sept, a week before our blitz they rang. The chiefs of staff issued the code word Cromwell to all military, police and Home Guard etc. - 'Invasion Imminent'. A large force of planes was crossing the Channel, turned out to be 1000 planes to bomb London.

I believe after the raids of 41 were over was when they filled basements with water and called them static water tanks. Half-hour after the blitz started Coventry Brigade was in trouble so it asked for help. A tender and crew raced from Solihull to Coventry, they were directed to the Cathedral to help. They drove to near the vestry door, length after length of hose were fitted round the Cathedral. But before any good could be done the water from the mains ceased, and with "no other water available" the firemen left the Cathedral, the pews caught fire, which meant the whole of the interior

woodwork would go. The firemen and the staff who had been on the roof of the Cathedral stood in the porch of the police station and watched the destruction unfold. Now Foleshill had those same signs, it also had more factories and targets than any area in Coventry, it also had the incendiaries and it had the 'water' besides the mains. Now I never heard or read of any serious fires in Foleshill in any raids, I believe the fires were dealt with quickly and efficiently, even the Dunlop (Rubber) never got burnt to the ground.

I believe most of the Luftwaffe were experienced, new exactly what they were doing, and Coventry was a sitting duck. To me the Armstrong Siddeley, Daimler, etc had their own brigade and static water tanks, so were not burned out. I believe the Cathedral staff coped with the first wave of incendiaries but had no water or sand for the second wave. The Hippodrome, the pub opposite, MHW (Matterson, Huxley & Watson, Iron Founders, on the site now occupied by the Coventry Transport Museum), and the pub and shoe shop on the corner of the Burges did not burn down either - was that because MHW had their own brigade and took water from the river behind the Rex Cinema? I believe so. I was told that half the MHW brigade had no water in West Orchard so they joined the team in Hales Street. Even though they had a second wave of incendiaries all the way down Corporations Street and Hales Street and Trinity Street, MHW had the roof blown 'off ' but I believe a score of tractors were saved. It was hinted to me that there were no fires in that area, and so they received a second wave of incendiaries. Water mains were broken in many places and that was expected except to the council who to my mind never had static water tanks or other sources of supply.

In 1942 over 6000 troops, mainly Canadians, set out across the Channel to try invasion on Dieppe, backed up by 8 destroyers. Everything went wrong, one was the destroyers didn't lay a strong enough barrage down. The Channel was too shallow for U-boats to operate (depth charges) so how did this German force sink one of our destroyers? Hitler didn't need to invade, our Army and tanks were of no danger, we could hardly drive into Berlin, but the Russians could - what he did, he made better defences along the coast, with a smaller force, took his victorious army to Russia and knocked on Moscow's door. With the occupation of so many countries he had more than tripled his workforce, airfields, factories etc. He was driving us back to Cairo in the Middle East but his Army was stretched. Had he not taken his Army to Russia there would never have been a D-Day for us.
With the allies planning to invade France in the future, the troops needed realistic training, and in August 1943, ships of the Royal Navy put American troops on Slapton Sands in Devon. The landings went well in fine weather, the GIs making many friends with the Navy and civilians in the country pubs. But then in November the people of Slapton and surrounding villages received notice from the Admiralty that they had to move furniture, animals, everything, within the next six weeks - no reason was given. That they did not know because there was a tight security cloaking the event. Slapton Sands in Start Bay had a resemblance to Utah Beach in Normandy. 750 from 180 farms and hamlets were ordered out of 9 parishes. But it was the old folk that suffered most, some had never left their homes before. In one of the fields black GIs built a large camp, the first black people Devon had ever seen. Soon the place was awash with Americans, military vehicles growled along the country lanes. Eisenhower considered it essential to accustom the men to the noise and fury of battle. April 44 -

the first flotilla of slow moving LSTs set out from Plymouth the night before. The first landing was planned at 7.30 next morning, but right from the start things went seriously wrong. A British cruiser was to lay down a bombardment for thirty minutes, at the same time troops on land were to fire live rounds over their heads. But several of the LSTs were delayed, the officer in charge ordered the whole thing a delay of 1 hr - but some of the LSTs didn't receive the message and went ashore during the bombardment and were killed by friendly fire. But worse was to follow the next day. Another group left Plymouth that night, should have had two destroyers as escort. One was damaged in a collision, the other was left behind because of bad communication, leaving the LSTs without protection. German E-boats, fast moving craft, were regularly patrolling the Channel, based in Cherbourg - the LSTs were sitting ducks. That night 749 American soldiers and sailors died. Altogether 946 US servicemen died. A lot of them drowned, they had their life jackets on wrongly. Survivors were sworn to secrecy. On land in Devon, the disaster was suppressed for 9 months, then reporters were allowed to visit - they found black US troops clearing the area, but their reports were censored.

People since the war will never know how close they were to having no life at all, for had the Germans won, all British males would have been sterilized or worked in labour camps. Very few people before the war thought the German bombers would reach Coventry, and although we had a large AA gun outside our house and next to the power station, I have no idea of the placement of others - there was nothing within a mile of that gun site, no barrage balloon, no defence at all to my knowledge. I don't recall anything near the Morris, Sterling Metals or Riley. But in those early days, the war was far afield and apart from the rationing and blackout did not affect Coventry directly. When suddenly France was getting overrun and we were getting pushed back to the sea, people as well as military realised, with Germany being able to use French airfields and ports, they would be only a step away from Britain.

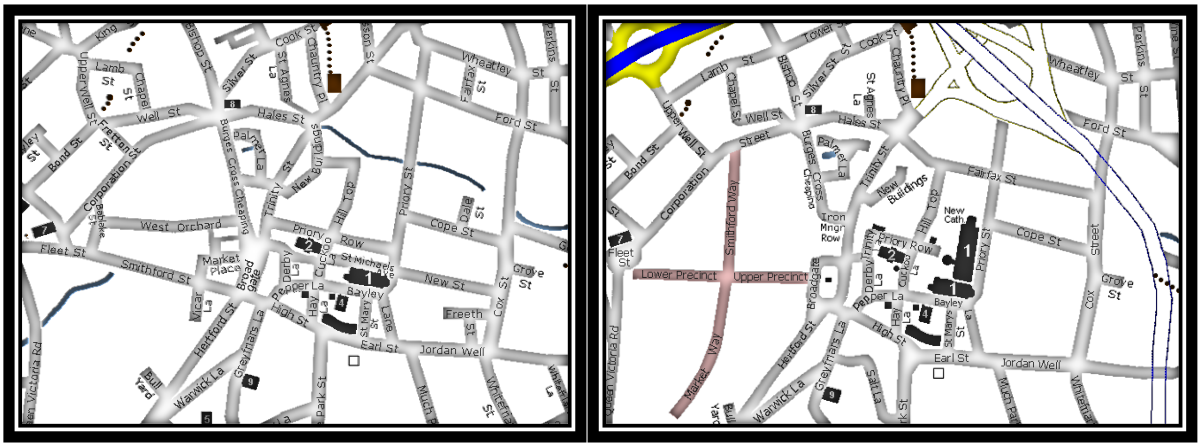
Wartime Entertainment

As I remember it there were only two channels, national and regional. We listened mainly to regional I believe, think it was Midlands, lot of music, was it Jack Jackson or some double-barrelled name. Mother also liked the Palm Court Orchestra, used to be a lot of organ music in those days too. Haw-Haw - we used to pinch our nose when we copied him, don't think anyone took him seriously. And wasn't there a French programme that followed the news? Me, I loved the outdoors, and with the presence of soldiers around us as well, Geordie, Scouse, broad Scots, all new to me, I was on a learning curve. Loved every minute of it.

We had a lad could take Haw Haw off well so when the teacher turned his back, he would say "Germany calling, Germany calling" to roars of laughter.

Broadgate and Surrounds

1937 1968



Source: http://www.historiccoventry.co.uk/covmaps/allmaps.php

In the early 1930's Broadgate seemed to be a hive of shoppers bustling about the streets, there was a triangular piece that ran from Hales Street across the base, with the Burges running up one side and Butcher Row and the huge Cathedral on the other side. Both streets came to a point which I believe was Ironmonger Row and then the shops on either side of Broadgate. Around the mid-thirties the council cleared some of the slums and built Trinity Street but still retained the triangular shape, making Owen Owen keep to the shape, this allowed the traffic to flow into Broadgate from the Burges and Trinity Street simple and easy. From Hertford Street traffic flowed alongside the shops down through Cross Cheaping, with access down either Smithford Street or West Orchard to the Market or straight down into the Burges, the shops and buildings with their plaster and beamwork and the humble dwellings gave colour and interest and pleasure to the eye.

Along came the war and destruction. By the 1950's we half-hoped, half-dreaded what the new planners had in store for us? The new planners couldn't be doing with triangles, and artistic work - first they built a box, placed it right across lower Broadgate (Owen Owen), said if you want get to the Burges you will have to go round, we want no more of Cross Cheaping and forget rebuilding West Orchard. Then they built two more tall blank-wall box buildings, one the called Broadgate House, the other Hotel Leofric, with a small gateway between leading to the part hidden Precinct. No more of the individual shops, with their colourful frontage and friendly banter. We would have to await what they planned for the other side of Broadgate. They built a circular green garden island to soften the stark blank walls of Broadgate House (didn't last long), they then thought, now we have trapped the smog and pollution in Broadgate we will create a restaurant over the top of Hertford Street, that will please the people. The character and buildings all gone to bricks concrete and stark walls. The fields, flowers and birds I knew of as a boy all went to modern housing, the quiet and peace now shattered by a modern highway of noise that vibrates day and night through the whole village, this has replaced the skylarks, and blackbird songs I once knew, (time to move on…!), Now I listen to the rage and roar of the sea, or it's peaceful murmur and song on the surf, seagulls have replaced the skylark Broadgate now a memory, left to a younger generation.

The exciting times of shopping in Coventry. Coventry was laid out better, or seemed to be when I was a kid. Get off the tram, top of Broadgate, down Butcher Row, across Bull Ring, across Burges to the Co-op, then into the covered market, up Smithford Street to Broadgate and the tram home. Remember one Sat morning going with dad into town, to Burges, there was a large shop that sold cobblers' 'stuff', dad bought some squares of leather to do our shoes, he also bought a load of tacks, the salesman weighed them out, then put them in an old cocoa tin we had brought for that purpose, I dropped the tin and there were tacks strewn all over the floor, a teenage lad appeared and swept them to one side, the salesman weighed out a fresh lot, no one got uptight, this time I held on to them tight, all the way to Highfield Road, watched the game, then walked across to Red Lane, down Stoney Stanton to Roses Garage where we had left our bikes, cycled home, still clutching the cocoa tin (I was about 6/7 years of age).

The Burges, also known as the bottom of Broadgate, was one of the most popular and busiest shopping streets in Coventry until 1936. It was a colourful and fascinating spectacle for a boy. I loved to browse those shop windows hungry to discover something unexpected, to press my face against sticky panes of glass and peer in through the window. There were two traditions in those days, boys left school at 14 could now wear long trousers, you had to wait until you were 21 before you were a man, and generally given a wrist watch or fob watch for a coming of age present. With our family both came from the Burges. After the war and the strikes of 26/27 only a handful of people could afford to buy watches. But in those days, everything ran to time, trams, buses, shops, factories, so the clocks in the streets played a big part in people's lives. Few people had watches. Only one shop sold rubber boots that laced up and had a wide tongue, that was suitable for farm work. The cobbler's shop sold the old elastic boot laces, a little stronger than elastic bands, they were good for shooting pieces of paper in the classroom. Another shop sold the old cut-throat razors with bone handles and the leather 'strops' for them. I hated the day when I would have to use one. But time and technology were on my side. Around 1936 they built the new Trinity Street and with it lopped off half of the Burges to build the ugly Owen Owen's. From that time on the Burges lost trade and went downhill.

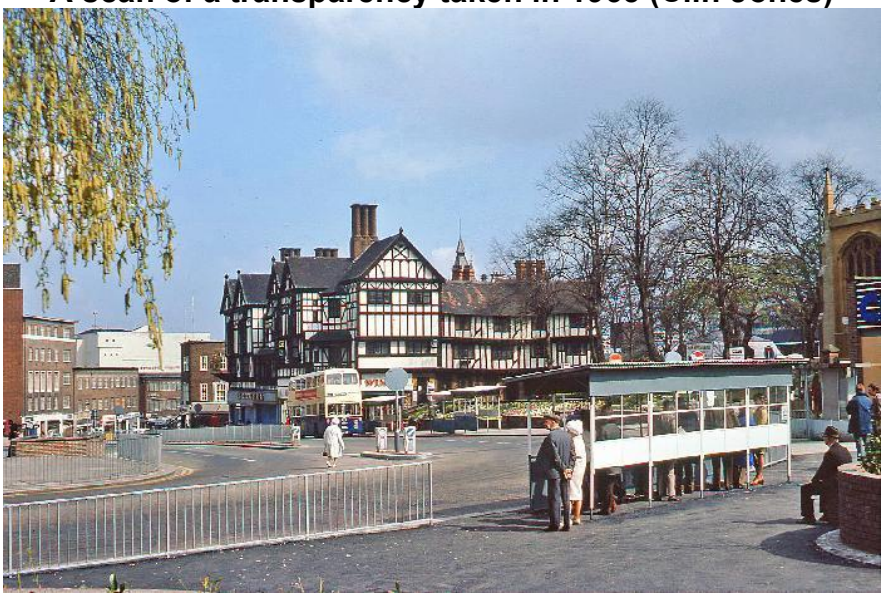
The 1860s view from roughly where the original Coventry Cross once stood - between Broadgate and Cross Cheaping

Long before traffic lights, no parking and no crossing signs I believe Smithford Street was a very narrow street with two-way traffic, mostly horse drawn drays and a few new cars, scores of cycles with bells ringing and bustling pedestrians. People sold laces, silks, matches, bobbins of cotton, all from an open case. New cars had klaxon horns that made you jump, and often frightened the horses, so in a crowded, bustling street you had to mind horses rearing, carts backing wheels on pavements, bike bells, traders yelling, and kids like us dashing in and out of the crowd. The Burges was two-way traffic, the clanging jangling trams sweeping down from Broadgate, scores of people, old ladies dodging across the road between the trams, had you holding your breath if they were going to make it. Shops with wide open doorways, different aromas, people with gaily knitted shopping bags that were more pleasant than plastic. Shopkeepers that were friendly and had time to pass the time of day, and so much more. Made to a whole lot of excitement and shopping a pleasure and not a chore.

Two photos of Broadgate, as remembered in the 1950s and 1960s

The area in front of Holy Trinity at the top of Trinity Street has changed over the last 60 odd years - A postcard sent in 1950

A scan of a transparency taken in 1965 (Cliff Jones)



Another Cliff Jones photo, dated Jan 2010

Butcher Row

Hey I know this street, used to walk down it, catch the tram at the bottom outside the Hippodrome. Time was much slower then, the pace of the world much slower, less complicated, lot fewer people, lot less traffic, the main traffic was the handcarts, you could get everything you needed in that one street, scissors that cut, knives that was sharp, you could buy a large wooden barrow or just a pencil from the same shop and get the same friendly greeting, the smells were under your nose. There would be the fish, I think next door they sold aniseed, there was loose tea in a wooden chest, lined with silver paper, or in silver packets, slabs of butter, cheese you could buy an ounce if that's all you needed, people bought for freshness and sweetness, not shape and size. No one pushed you to buy more than you wanted, carbolic soap smell mingled with treacle, you could buy a six-foot tin bath or a tin-tack. There were angles and corners, recesses, barrels and tubs along the pavement. Remember dad once buying huge balls of chalk to do the ceiling. At the top a few yards and you were in the peace and quiet of the churchyards, dwarfed by the churches and their richness, their towering spires. Inside was their beauty and their intimidating unknown. Remember sitting on an old wooden bench eating sandwiches with mum, pigeons our only company. The stone walls of the buildings, calm and stillness dwelt from their medieval past. Yes, those photo's long before the bombing, long before we used the word tourism.

Note: - Kaga's memory wasn't quite correct – a post in the Historic Coventry Forum website noted:

It didn't go down that far Kaga, you're thinking of New Buildings which began at the bottom of Butcher Row and did eventually exit opposite the Hippodrome.

Kaga wrote:

So, my memory was wrong about the Bull Yard, but with the abattoir, Bull Ring and Butcher Row on the north side of the hill, and assuming the bull pens were in the Bull Yard on the south side makes me wonder how they led the bulls from Hertford Street through Broadgate and down to the Bull Ring. What comes to mind is a five foot and a half guy clinging on to a mature bull, being pulled all over the place through Broadgate, hilarious and dangerous to boot.

Prompted by this question on the Historic Coventry Forum website: “I always wondered when I saw those pictures with it in, what is written on the shield, if it is a shield, and what shop was it?”

Kaga wrote:

I can only suggest a music shop, I was small at the time. My mother's favourite shop had a small bell above the doorway that tinkled merrily whenever the door was opened, along the wall behind the counter, that I could hardly see over, was rows and rows of glass jars of sweets, jams, marmalades, peas, lentils, tins of kiwi shoe polish, Camp coffee, boxes of black and brown shoe and boot laces, a box of candles, box of sealing wax. On the counter a large round cheese on a marble slab, portions cut free with a thin wire, the portion then weighed on shining brass scales, with polished weights. Behind the counter were stout bags of sugar, flour, rice and oatmeal, scooped from the bag into smaller brown bags then weighed in the same fashion. At the end of the shop were two barrels, one full of wooden clothes pegs, the other held mouse traps. A delicious smell hung in the air. The sweets in big glass jars, a bright array of colour, humbugs, mints, pear drops, caramels, liquorice sticks with a thick white centre, chocolates and my favourite, big slabs of toffee wrapped in greaseproof paper, so chewy that your teeth and jaws ached from breaking it down. Money was the key factor, but they would weigh just a halfpenny worth if that's all you had, even mix sweets to the right amount. I would run from the shop clutching my treasure. My second favourite was the condensed milk, I would slurp spoonfuls of it straight from the tin. Long days of childhood pleasure.

Another Forum post said:

I have two photo pieces, one showing it as Vaughan furniture dealer and upholsterer and the other as what looks like carpet maker upholsterer. Same building but with and without the shield sign. It may have been a music shop in some other decade up to 1936 when the street was demolished.

Kaga wrote:

Great work, shows it up more clearly, but I read it cake or candle maker, bottom word, patisserie, or plasterer, in the windows more like candles, needs better eyes than mine. Thinking more about this, in 32 I was five so could easily have been dragged through that street many times over the years. But what has come to mind, either that street or one like it I often saw a man with a peg-leg, like a cup upside down on a stick and crutches, and he had a beard, but no earring, used to frighten me, thought he was a pirate. I remember there was a wool shop, mother bought wool, and I had to hold it arms outstretched, I hated that shop.

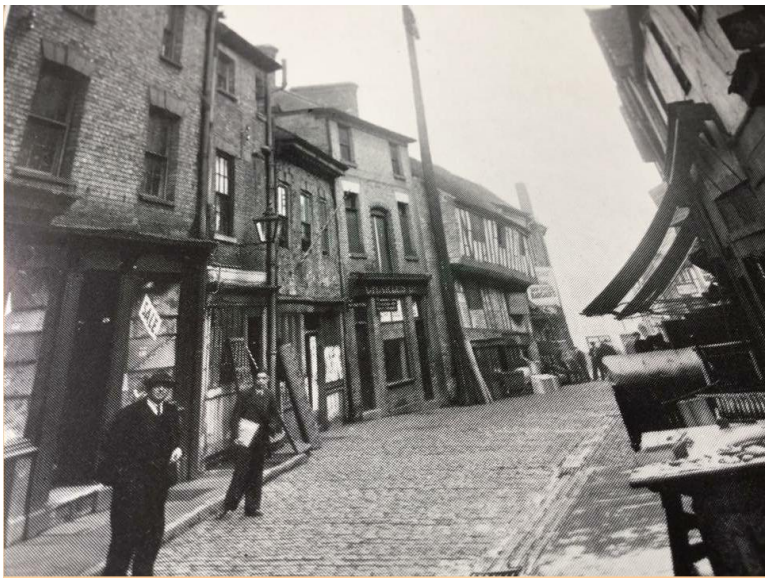
On Sunday I went to a car boot sale, and lo and behold, a 'rag doll' - I haven't seen one of those in years, but memory came flooding back. A rail with scores of rag dolls and golliwogs, most popular in those days, a clothes basket full of strips of material

cut from old clothes, today it would be called diy. On a box or table, a rag doll. Chimney sweep stood about three feet high as centre piece, bobbins of cotton in all colours, shoe laces all sizes and colours, tin tacks, and drawing pins. I don't think anyone knew the name of those streets except the residents for it was like one big market from top to bottom, with traders not resident of the street, just 'pitches'. There was a shop similar to Maypoles with rows and rows of jams, syrups, 'Out of the strong comes the sweet', a mountain of lard and butter, tea chest with scoop. A shop with big rolls of linoleum stood against a wall, colours and designs spectacular. There were boys a few years older than me pushing hand-carts or sack-barrows, shorts about two inches below the knee and two inches above the waist held up with braces. They would 'cuss', that had me embarrassed in case my mum or aunty heard. You could buy wheelbarrows, rabbit hutches, dovecotes and garden tools. A cake shop with large lemon-curds that made you count the halfpennies in your pocket. A shop that sold all manner of pipes, including clay pipes, that we put suds in and blew multi-coloured bubbles in the air. Middle aged women buying curlers, a tub full of cards with buttons attached in all colours and shapes, half dozen. If you wanted soaps from about six inches in size of green or yellow carbolic, down to scented soap or small glass jars of lavender or rose water. A shop that sold fish of all shapes and sizes in little wooden boxes, everything you wanted, was in that street. At the top end near the church lane stood a man in a shepherd's frock coat, red muffler and pork-pie hat, his shoes had steel edge soles and in his hands were bone clappers, and he would play and tap dance (today he would be a busker). I believe in those days it had to be the street of streets for Coventry.

There was a shop in one of those old streets I vaguely remember - there were oriental fans and trinkets in the window so you couldn't see in. The entrance door had a large colourful advert of some eastern circus or such on the plate glass window, so you couldn't see much through that either. As you entered the shop a small eastern bell tinkled as you closed the door behind you. A large room with narrow tables full of antiques, Chinese porcelain vases, trinkets, gift clocks, fans, in a mass of colour. Pieces of statuary pictures on the wall, faded print dresses, small foreign stamp albums of decorated wood. More antiques on shelves. Chop-sticks, small boxes of coloured candles and a sweet smell of perfume. As a kid you just couldn't take it all in in one visit, so I went a few times. I have no idea of what the shop was called but the shield does jog the mind.

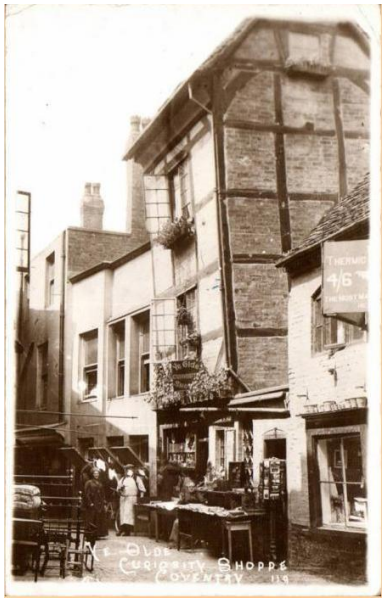
I see little difference in what the old folk called Yocs and Antique shop of course the main difference for me are all the old photos were taken with few people and very clean. But I as a kid with those narrow streets felt they were packed with people and could see little of the big picture of today, or little difference in the streets, all narrow, over jutting and the streets very messy. As you say shopkeepers, they could talk to one another and still be in their own space to conduct business. I had a young aunt who was still in the mood of the twenties with beads and loose flowered dresses, head bands etc. who we all adored but would drag me and my sister into that particular shop. It sold a lot more than I can remember. I believe it was a great place to live in those days despite the setbacks (toilets etc) we see of it today.

In this photo, it looks like Victor McLaglen just stepped into the picture - he later starred in 'Lady Godiva of Coventry' film with Maureen O'Hara.



But the photographs recall so much of the past to me, the irregular-shaped shops with decorative panelling inside, beams held up the ceilings that take you back to even a longer age. The different shapes and sizes of the chimneys that tell they were once homely old houses. the street, narrow and winding was a treat to explore.

But in the middle thirties all talk was about the coming war, plus Coventry being foremost in motor production. I think councillors would be more geared to widening roads than to losing the character of the city. Radio and cinema newsreels, China and the Japanese war, the Spanish bombing in the civil war, so they anticipated destruction on a large scale. Many predicted levelling of cities by aerial bombardment. So, we have to look back at the minds of people in those far off days to understand some of the things they did.



Nice clear photo, I do so wish we had a date, those iron bedsteads, where we used to have to polish the brass corner knobs, we used to unscrew them and leave little notes to each other inside them.

The Olde Curiosity Shop, note the window box at the top and the side, and I believe on the balcony just above the word Olde was a bird cage with a lovely singing bird that filled the street with song. Both the Row and Little Row were just called 'Market Row' - as everyone got pay packets in their hand on Fridays then the Row stayed open till it was almost dark. Most women knew the stall sellers and shopmen. The crockery man was called the Potman, he sold pots and pans; the fish man was Sourpuss, always grumpy; the fruit man was Gabby, talked too much; the carpet man was Lino, and so forth - the women named them well. It was like a shopping lane, bootsale, and market all rolled into one. By the time I was six/seven my mother would embarrass me. She would stand at the pot stall, admire a painted mug or cup, ask "how much?" "Eight pence to you, lady", shake her head and walk away - few minutes later she would walk back, pick it up, "how much?" "Eight pennies", shake her head, walk away. Come back later, both she and the pot man had an uncomfortable feeling by now. "Do ya want it for six-pence?" he said. Mother picked up the mug, counted out six pennies, gave them to the pot man, who wrapped it in newspaper, grumbling to himself. Mother walked away smiling - times were hard but she gave me the two pennies she had saved, it took me to the tuppenny rush at the Rivoli next morning.

For people from the north parts of the city the trams stopped right outside the top of Butcher Row. So it was first point to visit, and to me always seemed crowded. There was always something cosy about Butcher Row, which always seemed longer than it really was there was so much to see, the pleasant aromas and bustle of the Row and more than what the address can tell you today. You could spend a good time looking at what was around you, the overhanging buildings, the nooks and crannies. The butcher's shop, besides all the meat, there were pork pies, some a foot across, tubs of lard, tubs of dripping, shelves of tins of oxo, gravy granules, jars of mustard, spices, and both metal and wood skewers (good for tent pegs). Across the yard wicker baskets and tin baths full of crockery, plates, pudding basins the like you won't see today, painted crockery with birds, fish, flowers. A shop had loads of pen-knives tied on thick paper, the knives about three inches long, half inch wide, with gaily coloured casing, all hung down the side of the door. A barrel full of mouse traps of all sizes and strengths, wooden clothes pegs, kids' paint boxes. The choice was endless, I loved it. All in a friendly way without agro.

I believe there was a shop near the top of Butcher Row, sold brown paper bags in all sizes, they had great rolls of the stuff that would be cut to any size you wanted. Have no idea where they moved to when the street came down, but a few years later they would have been put out of business anyway. When it really became clear we were to have bombs and blackouts, brown paper was snapped up, to cover the windows, so were drawing pins, the shelves ran down and the price went up. Where people used to keep things for special occasions, like crockery, a lot of people wrapped up their best china in brown paper and stored away, and all paper became shortage.

P.S. If they find my yo-yo, can I have it back please.

Coventry's Coalfields and Canals

Before the turn of the twentieth century Potters Green was known as Wyken of the Sowe, mainly farms and fields with only a scattering of houses, but mainly the men worked at the Pottery just two fields away and the Wyken Collieries, Alexander-Victoria and Craven. But Alexander shaft ceased in 1870 time and Victoria shaft in 1907. The Craven was much larger, known after Lord Craven of Coombe To accommodate the colliers more houses were built and rented out at about six shillings a week, the houses themselves were substantial - the kitchens were the back rooms looking over the scrubby back gardens and the ash-pits, the front room became the dwelling room. The colliers I believe worked in the little gin-pits, donkeys plodding wearily in a circle around what was called a gin bringing the coal to the surface. Some boys went down the pits when they were only ten years of age, risking their lives daily. Most of the miners drank heavily, most stayed in the pub Friday, Saturday and Sunday till closing time, but they rarely missed work from their drinking. The men worked in stalls, so many to a stall, depending how good they worked they moved to different stalls, some stalls the coal was thin and hard to get at, their wages dropped and there was shadow over their families. The money would be short on Friday. Most miners gave their women 30 shillings to cover everything, they never saved or gave their wives a chance to save, it all went on drink. Schools closed early on Fridays to give the kids a chance to collect the wages if the man could not get there. I think they were paid from the front room of one of the managers' houses near the Jolly Colliers.

I was told that when the colliery was started, they built the railway and basin for haulage, but they needed key men on the spot, so they built five cottages on the slough side of the railway, one alongside the track, the other four in a three sided square, but they needed provisions, so they built a road from the green past the slough, up to the railway turned right alongside and fed the road into the square, a hundred yards or so before it reached the railway, a cinder road was built to the left, about the width of a football pitch along it crossed the railway turned left again passed by the farm ran almost parallel with the railway and in to the road halfway up Tusses Bridge, the train crossing at the foot of the bridge. Also, where the road met the railway there was a stile, led over to the basin ran alongside and over to Lentons Lane. A path led from the railway embankment behind the cottages down across the white bridge and in to Aldermans Green, I was told the men made the paths, from work to home. Of course, in those days everything was horse drawn, still was up into the early thirties, people walked or biked everywhere, had to, the trams turned round at the top of Bell Green. No phones, no hand radios, and we kids could play in the street for hours without a car bothering us, and if a car passed over Tusses Bridge it would scrape both sides.

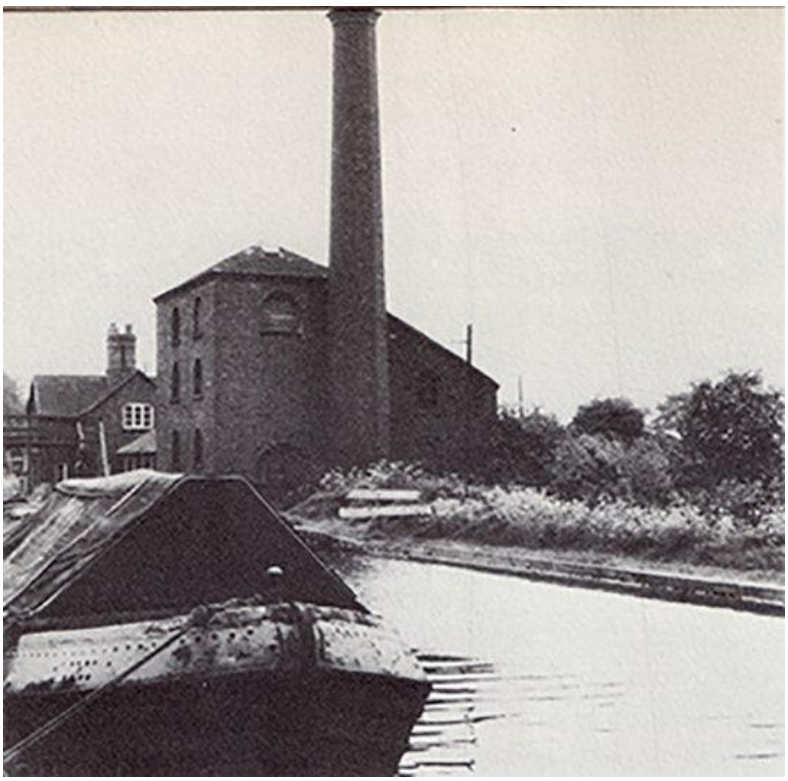
Now almost all those old cottages, you opened the front door and stepped into the living room, but the cottage I lived in the door was about a foot from the side wall, so when you opened the door people automatically stepped into that corner. But we were gas-lit, so the gas board in all their wisdom put the metal gas-meter there at head height; 'ouch' even the gas-man hit his head on it a couple of times. You put a penny in a slot turned a handle and you got gas. When the gas man came he would put a

small cloth on our dining table, take the small can of the meter and empty the coins onto the cloth, put them in piles of twelve, then put them in small bags, enter into his ledger, and the bags into a larger bag. Weighed a ton. Never ever heard of him getting mugged. System worked, no credit card, no pin number.

There were still a few houses in Aldermans Green Road that had the old iron hand wash pump over the kitchen sink when I was a boy. Most houses had a garden with the 'loo' a coal shed, and a wash house, our wash house was as big as our living room, it also had a sink with a pump, a very large mangle with a wooden dolly that was bigger than me, in the corner there was a copper bubbling away, a copper stick that you rolled the clothes around to lift them out into the tub, there was a ladle, Sunlight soap, soap crystals and a blue dolly. We kids took it in turn to turn the handle of the mangle or feed the sheets through and keep the fire under the copper going. Our house must have had history, there were six hooks in the ceiling about a foot apart in two rows of three, yet it had never been altered for it to have been a butcher’s. It was also one of a pair, I once asked my father why gran's back door was round the side and not like ours, he said that when his grandad built it he didn't want the women to spend too much time, talking over the garden wall.

Coal had been found all around that north side of Coventry, as far back as the 18th century, pits were established around Nuneaton, Bedworth and the area around Potters Green. To move the coal, they built the Coventry Canal then the Oxford to take coal south. To move the coal from Potters Green they went to great lengths, first an arm called the Wyken Basin, to load the boats, and a railway from Hawkesbury Halt to Potters Green. The railway fed the basin and the boats and the main railway. Three pits were established at Potters Green. The five houses were built for staff to control the loading of the railway and the loading bay of the basin, so the village was mainly miners and boatmen, some families had sons on the boats and in the pits at the same time. But in 1926 the government subsidy to the mining industry ceased, so the owners cut the wages of the miners and work stopped. The canal boat owners, mostly small family businesses, were in dire trouble, within days they were facing ruin, so brothers were now blaming brothers. Then the trade union bosses pulled everyone out in sympathy, and throughout the country work ceased. No newspapers, no trams, empty milk churns lay for days at the railway stations. The military were called in to help get the food through, police or army guarded the tram depots, and the food supplies. I believe Gosford Green was closed and used by the food people. The whole canal system stopped, there was no coal, about seventy percent of the boat owners went bust. The only people that thrived was the police, they recruited hundreds on a temporary basis. For Potters Green, two pits closed, the Craven pit struggled on till 1927. A line of empty coal wagons from Deedmore Road to Aldermans Green Road stood empty for about ten days. It created fights and arguments, little food got through, shortage of money, there were thousands in the dole queues. But with last pit closing in Potters Green, there was not enough other business for the boats. The Wyken Basin became derelict, and so did the Coventry Canal from Sutton Stop, the two boatyards went bust, boat horses were sold cheaply. The whole area was in complete disaster, but it was friend against friend, brother against brother, that it created that was the real disaster.

The Engine House at Sutton Stop



The engine was called Lady Godiva. I wish people would refrain from calling them bargees, there were few barges on the canals, these were narrowboats and boat-people. On a night in August 1865 five boatmen stood at the bar in the Bird in Hand public house in Aldermans Green Road, there was Billy Phipps, Billy Linsell, Enoch Wood and two of the Simpson brothers, the landlord was a Simpson also. Around midnight they had had a good deal of beer, were all drunk but could walk, and all friendly. They staggered along Aldermans Green Road as far as the Mill Lane, then crossed over and scrambled over the stile into the field that led down to Wyken Pool (The Slough). Here they stumbled across the rickety wooden bridge and up the slope between blackthorn trees and gorse bushes (this just after midnight), through the gate, across another field, through the little tunnel under the railway and out alongside the basin of the Wyken Colliery where they all lived on narrowboats. They saw Billy Phipps, the eldest, into his boat, they all parted good friends, bade each other goodnight. But next morning there was no sign of Billy Phipps. The water was black with coal dust, the water was dragged, and the body of Billy Phipps brought to the surface - verdict, drowned. I once knew this path well, the thought of staggering along it at midnight - ugh.

A century ago there was a single-track railway line that ran from Hawkesbury Halt to the Wyken Collieries. A train from Deedmore Road to Hawkesbury with say 40/50 loaded trucks of coal, if the last truck or van was at Deedmore Road the engine would be at the side of a field, here ran a man-made ditch across the width of the field, the earth from the ditch was piled along the banks. A small brick bridge for horse and cart spanned the ditch. I don't know if the ditch was for a suction hose for the train, or was it built earlier as for a horse trough for horse pulled coal trucks? The area from Potters Green up to the Boat pub was called the tramway, because of the lines of rails, used

by the surface miners to filter and grade the coal - the trucks were about waist high and 3ft long, easy for men to push along. There was only a dozen or so houses in the area but they had two pubs, but plenty of boats stopped there and miners from all over Foleshill worked there. It was a very busy place but almost overnight it became a dead end. The mining industry around Coventry lasted for about two centuries. That seems to be overlooked these days. There were three paths that led from the full length of Aldermans Green to Woodway Lane, each was known as 'going up the main'. One went past Main Pit Farm, the other two, one at each end of the 'Slough', led to 'Main Cottages' across the tracks from the basin. Close to the basin there was three giant slabs of granite, on one was scratched Kaga, it was still there in the fifties. I visited Wood End in the fifties to walk the foundations of the streets. On one side of Wood End lay the Sowe and water mills, on the other side was the overflow of the 'Slough' and the two streams that fed it, so it had always been a marshy area.

The Boat Inn – still popular (Sourced from https://whatpub.com/pubs/COV/3311/boat-coventry)

The Slough 1920-30s through the eyes of a child. Owned by my uncle, and private. The privacy though is by the giant reed beds that stretch down either side, almost to the little rickety white bridge at the far end, hundreds of bulrushes bending in the wind. Thirty-forty dabchicks, moorhens, and coots on the pool at any one time. The water teeming with fish, carp, bream, tench, etc. The little reed island in the centre waiting for the swans to nest. Peaceful and majestic. Beyond the little bridge the water trickles on through the willows, becomes marshland, pair of kingfishers flit by (who can describe the beauty of the kingfisher?) two hundred yards or so on it bears left, around the 14-acre meadow until the hedgerow meets the railway embankment. The meadows sweep down to the pool in a carpet of colour. At the edge of the pool, marsh, marigolds, and lady's smocks, four or five skylarks, singing on high, a dozen peewits swooping. And this was my playground.

Boating on the Slough

(Photo taken by 20A-Manor House of his younger brother on the Slough, 1975.)

A long lane led to the cottages before the war, halfway up there was a hedgerow that led to Aldermans Green Rd; just above the hedgerow was a pond, being on a slope the ground below was always soggy. Large golden patches of kingcups, wild iris and all the company of marsh-loving plants, the field in spring and early summer, the wild primrose was abundant, walk where you will about the area, a joy to the eye. But the Army came, demanded two fields higher than the pond. Hen huts had to be moved, cattle crowded into that field. When the guns fired the cattle stampeded, within six months the pond was a quagmire, great clods of earth dislodged in the field, roots torn up. The cattle were moved onto the football pitch, a calf-pen built on the tennis court, but the field and pond never fully recovered, another part of the slough lost. About two years before then, one of the cottagers was clipping a yew tree, he threw a few sprays over the hedge into the field where the horses were grazing, they ate the sprays and within a few hours they were dead. When the meadows, went under the plough for food crops, most of the birds left the area, lack of seed.

The Lock and Lock house at Hawkesbury Junction

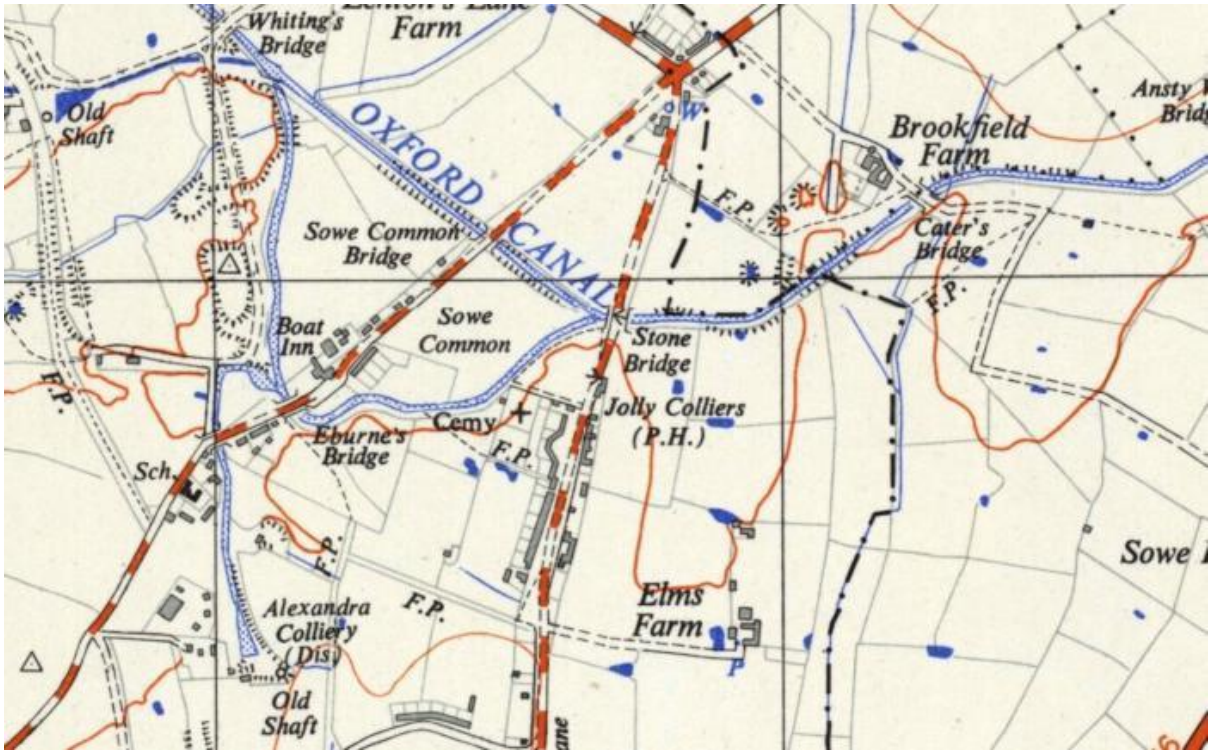
When they built the Coventry Canal, most of the area in Foleshill was fields and heathland. It was reasonably straight from Bedworth to Grange Road, then they looped across fields, under Longford Road, looped round to New Inn Bridge, looped left under the Foleshill Road, then right, then left again under the Stoney Stanton Road, right again, looped round Bridge Street and Eden Street and the Red House and cut off the whole area of Stoke, before switching back under Stoney Stanton Road and Foleshill Road and round by Cash's to the Coventry Basin. So what was wrong with Stoke or was it Freddie Birds, or even the Bantams?

During the 1950's I worked in the woodyard alongside the canal basin, along the canal's southern bank, straightened and strengthened with great stone blocks along a 200yard stretch. The blocks were chiselled and expertly fitted. They made a quayside A wharf, they had fat mushrooms or uprights to tie up ropes, stone paving slabs made the wharf 20 feet deep. All along its length were tall brick buildings, open on the canal side, and open on the street side. The street was cobbled. A hundred years ago there would have been a large number of narrow boats tied up and unloading. There would have been swarms of men at work. There would have been horses and carts clattering on the cobbles, a number of them would have been my ancestors. Some of the buildings had faded names on them. The buildings were standing strong, ripe for renovation. There was construction going on all over town - they could have built a small museum laying out the history of the canal, maybe a cafe.

A long narrow towpath made its way towards 'Tusses Bridge'. I stopped close to the angling shop, the sun shone on the water making it sparkle, clouds cast great shadows to dance on the water, and on the inside of the bridge, small oil patches on the surface, dazzled with green and blue colours. But what caught my eye, the picture up above may have been taken from the history of the Middle Ages. A long narrow dray, containing sacks of golden wheat, being drawn across the bridge by a team of six handsome farm horses. The sunlight sparkled upon the ornamental horse-brasses, the horses brushed and manes combed, leathers polished to perfection, the leading pair jet black in colour, the sheen of their coats glistening in the sunlight. Steadily and carefully the carter guided his charges down the narrow and somewhat precipitous descent of the humped back bridge, the old tackle shop, almost concealed by the bridge, beauty and simplicity.

Tusses Bridge

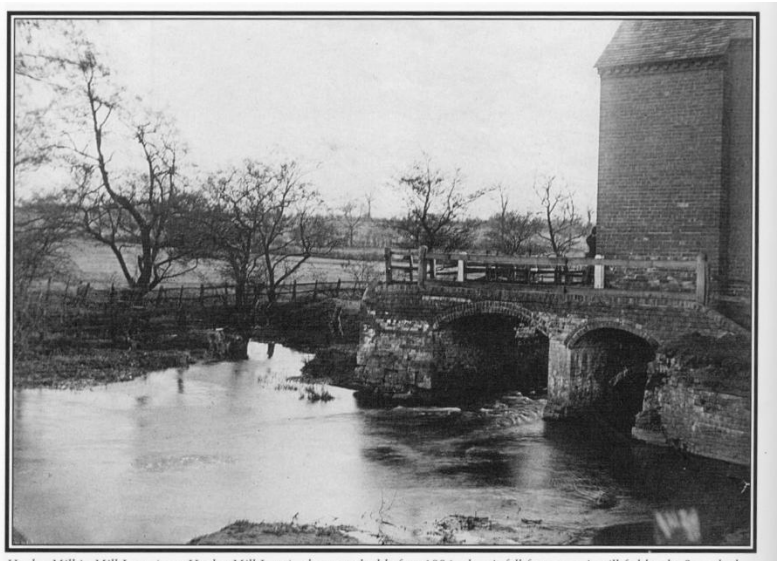
The blue-black way of the canal wound softly around towards the back of the Boat Inn.



On the south side the whole agitation of the colliery and railway workings and Bell Green, and Henley water mill, on the right-hand side were the lush green water meadows of the 'Slough', with willow and alder trees along its overspill, the faint cry of birds and wheeling pee-wits came to meet the stuttering noise of the pits. Near to the Boat Inn there was an empty boat, painted in red and black cabin hood, but with a coal-black hold, lying moored. A man, lean and grimy, was sitting on a box against the cabin side, smoking and holding a baby that was wrapped in a drab shawl. Children's voices were heard from inside the cabin, a thin blue smoke ascended from the cabin chimney.

'Good afternoon' said a young woman walking the towpath.
'Good afternoon' said the man.
'May I look inside your boat?' asked the young woman.
'If you like, there's nobody'll stop you'.
Stooping from the bank, she peeped into the cabin, there was a red glow of fire and the shadowy figure of a woman, saucepans were boiling and some dishes on the table. It was very hot. The man was talking to the baby. It was a black-eyed, fresh faced thing with dark flowing hair.
'Is it a boy or a girl?' she asked.
'It's a girl. Aren't you a girl, eh' he said to the infant. Its little face wrinkled up into the oddest, funniest smile.
'What's her name?' asked the young woman'.
'She hasn't got a name, she's not worth one', said the man.' are you, you fag-end o' nothing?' he shouted to the baby, the baby giggled.
'No, we've been that busy, we've never took her to th' registry office' came the woman's voice. 'She was born on th' boat here'.

'But you know what you're going to call her', asked the young woman.
'We did think of Gladys', said the mother.
'We thought of nowt o' th' sort,' said the father.
'Hark at him!, What do you want?' cried the mother in exasperation.
'She be called Emma after th' boat she was born on'.
'She's not, so there', said the mother, viciously defiant. 'Let me hold her,' she asked. He yielded her the child.
'What's your name?' the man suddenly asked her.
'My name is Selina, Selina Simpson', she replied.
'Hey, mother' he called. A bright flush came over the mother's face, 'it's not a common name, is it!'
'Yes, we will call her Selina'.
'Then I must give her something', said the girl. 'Could I give her my necklace?' she asked, and she went to the infant and fastened the necklace round the soft little neck. Then the father bent over his child.
'What do you say?' he said. 'Do you say thank you, Selina?'
'Her name's Selina now, said the mother, stepping forward to examine the necklace on the child's neck.
The woman wanted to go, she kissed the child, which was in its mother's arms, then turned away. The mother was effusive, the boatman watched her go.



Henley Mill (Sourced from "The Illustrated History of Coventry's Suburbs")

When they built the new Aldermans Green Road bridge a man died. People saw him drinking with a couple of strangers in the Old Crown, at dawn the next morning he was found upside down wedged in a framework of girders sunk into the canal (like a chimney with no pot) his arms wedged in too. He was quickly hoisted out and laid on the towpath, while someone went for the authorities, only his head had been in water, the two strangers were never seen again in the area. The rumour was he had upset someone at some time (payback time). We kids were told not to talk about it, of course we did. I have no idea today what the papers made of it then, but it quickly faded away. Some years later a local business man was found in the cut at the entrance to the basin, he too had rumours of bad business relations with a hard man and had been dumped over Lentons Lane bridge into the water, there were a lot of evidence to

support these accusations at the time in both cases, but people did not want to get involved and kept tight lipped.

At the side of the Navigation pub in Stoney Stanton Road was the terraced row of Bridge Street, the street little wider than a cart, the pavements no wider than one flagstone. You entered the living room straight off the pavement, front room and backroom, the same above, just two rooms. I believe they were a lot smaller houses than streets like Matlock Road. Opposite was a small wasteland the width of the pub, then the canal, the end of the street was cut off by the canal looping round to the Red House. Early 1940, drizzling with rain, still dark (dawn), as I entered the street a woman was about to throw something out the bedroom window until she saw me, then changed her mind. I couldn't help thinking it must have happened a lot in the early twenties when opposite was just Stoke Heath.

The Canal House at Brinklow I've been told is now a pleasure boat centre. The house stands end on to the canal, it also stands on the two-way slopes of the hill, this means it stands on small brick legs. If you go in the field and look under the house you may find my old bike, it sure knows its way about the towpath between Brinklow and Sutton Stop. Outside the house you will find the canal narrows to one boat width, for planks to be inserted if a breakage occurs through that length, although my young brother and I used to jump across. A few yards on are the showings of the old canal. As you pass near the aqueduct the train veers away from the canal behind the hill, here there was another narrow plank width, but this one had a plank firmly fixed alongside the canal on a swivel, so you had a long pole with a hook to pull the plank across the canal. Here there were two horse stables, one on either side of the canal - on the towpath side there was another Canal House, it was built on the old canal that had been filled in but the old canal was still there behind the house and garden until they built the golf course. This old canal went under the railway round near Withybrook and Mobs Wood and back to near Canal House, Brinklow. Through the cutting nearing the dreaded 19 bridge, at the side of the towpath, was the 'well' - boxed in and locked.

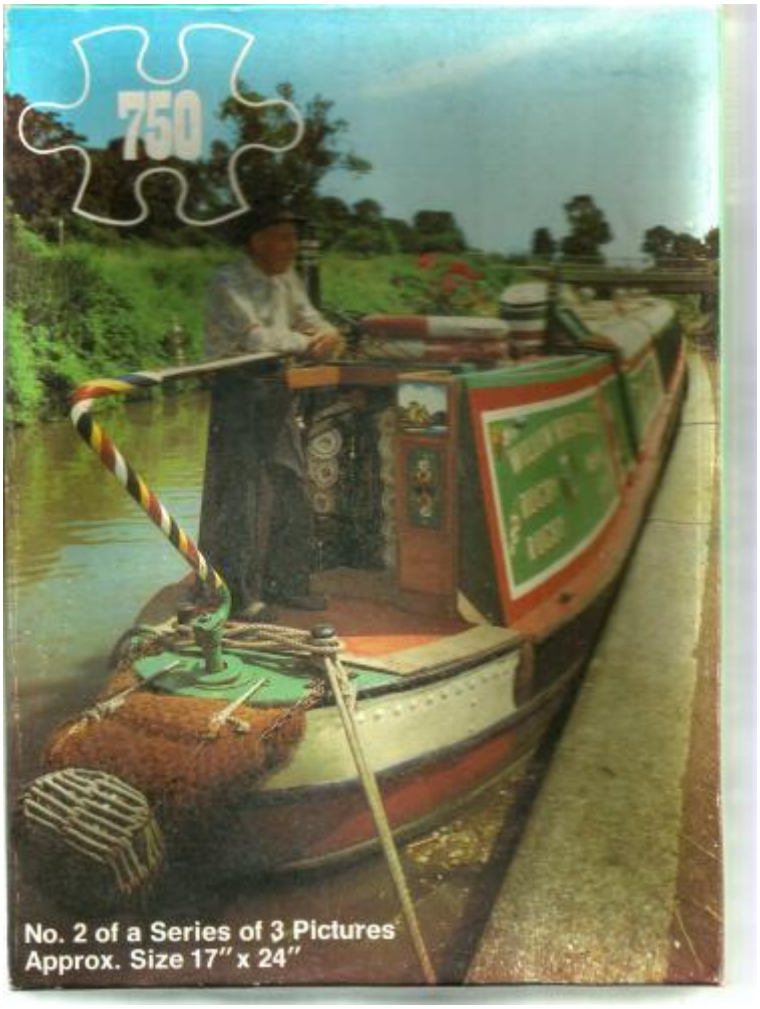
Ice Breaker, Hawkesbury 1947.

This was one of the photo's we had until the seventies when we lost the lot. That looks awfully like my old man at the tiller, can't remember what they told me when I came home. The picture is at Sutton Stop. I think they were iced in for almost six weeks, they certainly didn't get along the Oxford Canal from there. The bars you see in the middle, three or four men would stand either side of, holding the bar and proceed to rock the boat, it was that that broke the ice, probably the guys under the bridge. But that looks to me a fairly recent boat, as the one I knew as a kid was like a steel large rowboat. At Tusses Bridge, before the turn of 19th century, the dockyard belonged to the Simpsons, a repair yard, there's a photo of the owner on his own boat at Tusses Bridge on the 'slough' topic. The dockyard at Sutton Stop belonged to Sephtons who built boats, but as I have posted before, they merged through marriage. Hawkesbury was a little used name, it was Sutton Stop for the boats, and Hawkesbury Halt for the trains. Hawkesbury Hall was the far end of Parrotts Grove. Grove Farm was opposite the hall, both occupied at some time with my relatives. Parrotts Grove was named after a guy named Parrott.

Sinkholes kept appearing all the time, there were two in that small field at the bottom of the slope behind the "Crown" and the farm, both very deep, but we kids still played in the field. But there was one large one near the clod banks, I saw it the morning after it had appeared. You could have driven a lorry into it and it would have disappeared from sight, but then it was less than 200 yards from Craven pit. The land was undulating as well, they left soil in mounds too. The 'Slough' was reputed to be through sinking ground, it was not a natural valley - there was also a lot of water about. We were amazed when they said they were to build Wood End on all that marshland.

A few evenings ago, I was watching a programme about sinkholes. A woman had a large crater in her garden - alarmed, she called in the experts. They told her that her house was sitting over the top of old coal-mine workings, that a part tunnel had collapsed, dragging the earth into the shaft. They said there were thousands appearing in the UK - made it sound as something new. But we know around Coventry they had been appearing throughout the twentieth century. Binley, Craven, Exhall, Newdigate and Keresley Collieries, to name a few, shafts and tunnels spread out like giant spiders' legs underground, and part tunnels collapsed, dragging the earth down to form craters - but we called them pits, in the fields. The farmers left them to fill with water, for cattle to drink. Scores of them around the north of Coventry. But nature hated bare ground and gradually willow, hawthorn bushes, grew around the edge of the pits, followed by reeds, rushes, irises, king cup marigolds, and a profusion of bog plants, and so we now called them ponds, no longer pits. Never sinkholes. With the bushes and plants came the colourful birds, the thrush and the blackbird, with their wonderful songs, the chaffinch with its call of pink-pink, and its nest of woven sheep's wool. Where the willow spread its branches across the water, moorhens would make their nest of old reeds, the eggs being a buff colour with dark spots resting on the branch on the surface of the water, the snow white blossom of the hawthorn, the drumsticks swaying in the breeze, the golden king cup marsh marigolds, along with the golden irises, the blue-white-purple lady's smock, the reed warbler darting in and out the reeds, the occasional kingfisher with its flash of blue, the dragonflies with gossamer wings, and the skylark on high to add his song. All this in the meadow were a blaze of colour, and a heady scent of wild flowers danced merrily for me. No money but richness that money could not buy.

People who did not live in the suburbs of Coventry and its rural ways have no idea of the excitements. No, I remember one hole that appeared in the street - people stood about looking at it nervously, while horse and carts edged by them with annoyed expressions. Quite soon two local roadmen's well-known faces appeared on the scene, carrying large spades and rammers and pickaxes, they circled the hole a couple of times, then one of them pushed a ramrod down the hole. "What done that, Joe?" called out one of the villagers, from his battered bicycle. "Mouse working, overtime" answered Joe. Then he pulled up the rod, then he began shovelling out loose stuff until he was waist deep. Humorous remarks were exchanged - "Send us a cable when you reaches Orstralia". The second roadman had disappeared, returned with a handcart and rocks and shale and filled the hole, rammed it down well, smooth and even, stood back with pleased faces, then they placed those red-painted and red-eyed lamps around, although there was no hole, lit them, job completed and went off for tea. Yes, a few days later the gas people came round and ripped the whole road up.



Well, well, look who's turned up here! My wife bought me a jigsaw from a boot sale and the picture is my dad's old mate Joe Skinner. Not on his own boat, not even his nephew's boat but on a pleasure power boat. For sure it's a posed picture of an old boatman in a modern setting. Joe is posing, not a bit relaxed, modern silk shirt and tie, he would have been laughed off the cut in the old days in that gear. Not as they were around in the old days. Yes, the name of pleasure boat company and Rugby are on the side of the cabin. I feel people are painting the wrong picture of the canal life, it

was hard, dirty and dangerous life, the only good thing about it was the open air. One slip and you were down under the boat in very confined spaces. Working the boats - completely different to pleasure boating. I remember my father telling me when I was very young, they were being loaded with a cargo of Golden Syrup, something happened with the crane and a net full of large tin cans fell, serious injury to a couple of boatmen, and covering the boat in syrup, took several weeks to get the boat clean. It attracted animals and insects galore.

The last time I saw Joe was April 1948 when he delivered us 10 cwt of coal, my young brother and I wheeled it in barrows into the coal shed while Joe and my dad shovelled it out the boat into the barrows. Both of them were bitching about the power boats, Joe because they didn't slow down when they met him and dad because too much wash ripped the banks apart. Joe vowed he would never step on a powerboat. Yet here he is on a powerboat, with modern shirt and tie, 'not Joe at all'. We all know the story on Joe, but when everyone jumped on the bandwagon Joe got scared, he was made guest of honour at a dinner, but Joe had hardly ever stepped off his boat, so he came to see my dad, the only way he would attend the dinner was if my parents would attend, so it happened, but the two couples were in different worlds to the rest of the people. Dawn to dusk almost from when they could walk they would walk behind their horse guiding and working the ropes, in all weathers talking more to the horse than to people, a hard life we can hardly understand but all part of our history.

Joe Skinner actually had the last laugh as you might say. We all tend to see Coventry as a city that grew up with the car industry because of our age, but that is not true. To me Coventry's real age was when they found the coal throughout the north of the city, this brought wealth and power right into the centre of the city. In turn the power gave the city to build and harness the skills of its people. But in 1926/7 the strikes of the north infected Coventry and a lot of smaller collieries closed, this in turn affected the transport by the coal boats. The younger ones turned to power boats, but Joe didn't have the money, and was stubborn anyway, he clung to the horse power for his boat. This irritated the younger boat people who were always in a bigger hurry than Joe and gave him a lot of stick. But the trade died, and Joe carried on in his own way as usual. But Joe had his problems - when the power boats got popular they no longer needed stables and feed and they closed but Joe had one old friend - my dad. We had feed and a stable he could rely on for both when in that area. The Elephant and Castle pub, Tusses Bridge, could accommodate about 15 horses in its stables behind the pub, but they lay empty from the mid-thirties until the Civil Defence used them in the war.

Miscellany (including beating the bookies!)

I suppose today the word 'scam' is what we used to call con-men. And Coventry had their share back in the fifties (or do we want to hide it under the carpet) but then it was more open. Young Coventry lad I knew of slightly, was working on Victoria Station, with a chocolate and soft drinks kind of trolley. With time to spare we talked - he told me he had to get out of Coventry (police attention). While talking I noticed he was short changing everyone - when I asked him about it he told me to clear off. Later I heard he got 'hot' in London, went to Marseilles, joined the French Foreign Legion. Three days later they dumped him back in Marseilles, in a pair of torn shorts, an old vest and his passport, no money, no anything.

After some years of trying, three Coventry con-men finally conned me out of a sum of money. Luckily some six months later, with the help of a young lady and a guy of authority, I did the same to them, retrieved my money and a little extra. The great days of the fifties, I was known as a 'character' and I loved every minute of it.

So, I'm sitting here my walking stick between my knees and looking in the full-length mirror and see the spitting image of my granddad. Granddad was selling tickets for fishing when I arrived with his dinner, a big basin of hot stew, so he gave me a penny like he often did. I raced home to the 'bridge', went to Mother Polly's and bought a large toffee apple. After two bites the toffee cracked and broke, so I'm eating with my right hand and had a fistful of toffee in my left, and the stick broke, the apple I caught in the crook of my elbow and front of my shirt, so I sat on the bridge steps to eat the remainder, but I dropped it a couple of times and it rolled in my lap. So, my hands are all toffee, so is my face, sleeve and shirt, and some on my pants, I'm one sticky little boy. I ran home. Mother took one look, "right, off with everything, it can all go in the wash". I stripped, climbed on the chair, sat on the draining board with my feet in the large sink. We only had a cold tap so mum brought in the huge kettle of boiling water, tipped it in the sink, refilled the kettle and put it back on the front hob. Toffee was in my hair so she washed my hair, when the kettle got hot again she filled a large bowl of water to swill away the soap and put it on the opposite draining board. Then she went upstairs to get me fresh clothes. The back door opened and in walked my sister with her girlfriend, and they both started giggling, I grabbed for the towel and knocked the bowl of water off the draining board, it drowned Scamp, our pet dog, he shook himself vigorously, wetting the two girls, they scrambled back out the door. My brother had come in with them, saw his chance, picked up the bowl half-filled it with cold water and dumped it over my head. I yelled, picked up the large square of soap and threw it as hard as I could at his head, he ducked and two jars of jam fell to the floor from the shelf. Mother came in, furious at all of us, handed me a bath towel, told my brother to fetch the hand shovel, clean up the glass and jam in to an old biscuit tin, mop up the water and take the clothes to the washroom. We never had pop (lemonade) for two weeks as a punishment.

Someone once said I put on idleness like a well-worn coat, but my lifestyle annoyed and sometimes angered people. At the bottom end of Pool Meadow, on the left was a

shop and another building then Ford Street. On the opposite side was also a couple of buildings, next to them was waste land that was used as the coach park. Further along next to the baths was the Midland Red Leicester bus stand, opposite the Pool Meadow cafe, I think with a clock. The Red House coach was waiting, Harry the driver was waiting by the door, I handed Harry a ten-shilling note, he gave me some loose change, we climbed aboard and Harry pulled out into Ford Street.

Pool Meadow Bus Station

The coach had less than a dozen people aboard, the usual crowd of Coventry misfits, Frank the 'dipper' (pick-pocket) Bill and Tony the 'close and run' bookmakers, a con-man, and others. I sat and thought of the frustrations of people, no one had really thought what the rebuilding would be like, but everyday people came into town only to find the shop they used had moved or disappeared altogether. I had a very successful afternoon, I saw a Coventry businessman, I think his name was Arthur Thomas, an owner of horses, talking to a jockey in the parade ring. As he left the jockey to walk by me he nodded to me, so I asked if the horse the jockey had just rode belonged to him. We chatted awhile, then he said 'That jockey will win both big races at Cheltenham next March'.

When I got back on the coach I pulled out the form book and read. When we reached the outskirts of the city I was amazed at the rate of council houses and estates that were going up. I think someone told me the new council rent would be about 25 'bob'. Coventry was gobbling up all the little villages of the suburbs at an alarming rate, I felt the Coventry I once knew was disappearing before my very eyes. People would no longer wander in and out of each house for a cup of tea and gossip. I pulled my mind back.

Once I was back in my flat, I made out a betting slip for ante-post betting on the two races and the said jockey, for ten pounds, on average, two weeks wages for most men at the time. Betting was illegal, unless at the track, or an account by post to a bookie. I posted it as I went to meet the young lady I had a date with, after dodging through the building site that the centre of the town had become. I would live from day today.

It's strange how the mind works, but from 2000 to 2010 I have no recollection of anything, not one government minister, nothing about the weather, wars, nothing, yet the fifties are as clear as a bell, except dates. The war changed my character, and three years with toughest and roughest regiment in the British army changed me further, trained by the best, taught to kill, weapons, explosives, unarmed combat, and dirty fighting, gives an insight to my character in the fifties. With the racing I met some very unsavoury as well nice people, some from Coventry, that normal people never knew existed. I will call him Kevin. I knew him as a toddler and at school for a few years, then he moved, he was known as a sneakthief, a tell-tale and a thief, conkers, marbles etc. I saw him a few times at race meetings, just to nod to, but one afternoon he approached me and asked if I would loan him twenty quid, he had a certainty. In the end I loaned him a fiver. In the race world he was known as a con-man. "I'll pay you back Kaga" "That you will" His certainty came in third. I had friends in the police force, I checked him out, I was warned to stay clear of him. It was three or four months later I was walking along Hales Street, he spotted me and dived into the pub, The William (maybe Kaga is thinking of the Smithfield Hotel?) opposite the Hippodrome, I dived in after him (I hate welshers). He'd gone to hide in the gents, I held out my hand and threateningly. "Fiver" "I don't have". I slammed him against the wall, honest Kaga. I slammed even harder. "Ok, tomorrow night, trap 1 will win". He named the race. I went to ….. "look I'll get cut if you tell anyone". I released him, if he feared getting a razor across his face that was good enough for me. I went to Lythalls Lane, took an early price about trap 1 and waited, the dogs entered the traps, the price dropped. Trap 1 shot out the traps, and won, the bookies were moaning, it looked dodgy, but no word from the stewards. I collected my money and went home - nothing further. A couple of months later in the sporting 'buff' a small piece said an employee had been sacked from a well-known stadium, traces of margarine or butter had been found in a number of traps. The stadium had no comment.

In 1950 parts of Coventry didn't look familiar anymore, the new buildings going up, to say my feelings were mixed is to put it very mildly. The daily exodus from the factories flooded the streets, the workers seemed reluctant to change their drab clothes and cloth caps. They had little leeway for luxuries or money for such, but there was kindness, and the restless urge of change. As I hurried to Pool Meadow, I saw a figure I hadn't seen for some time, but familiar in the streets of Coventry, carrying a board across his chest, with wild prophecies, the end of all things. Harry was standing at the door of the coach, his boss, Tommy Venn, had great worries about petrol, he needed it to come off ration. He gave Harry instructions about the number of passengers, if they didn't justify him running the coach then it was abandoned, several times the cap was passed around the coach, and seats were just bought so we could attend the meetings. The weather had held until late March. Tuesday, I had done my homework on the form book, I backed what I thought the only danger to my horse to cover my ten pounds, but I needn't have worried, my horse won in a canter. On the Thursday, I gambled more on my horse, and again on the danger horse, I would win or break even if either won. The danger horse with the great jockey Tim Moloney aboard outjumped my horse at the last, I thought it was consolation day, but the great Aubrey Brabazon drove hard up the hill and snatched the race. I threw my hands in the air and whooped. Friday, I spring cleaned my flat, bought £15 of groceries from under the counter.

Sunday, I caught the Midland Red bus from Pool Meadow and visited my parents with the goodies for the day. Saturday morning, I received my cheque, I had cleared well over a £100. I had a youth hostel badge, and Monday morning saw me on Coventry Station about to fulfil a promise and a wonder journey I had made four years ago.

1953 was a year of years. Started off with great storms and floods, hundreds died when sea defences couldn't cope with high tides The Thames and the Seine rose to dangerous levels. Sheets of water rushed down Trinity Street, Bishop Street looked like a mountain torrent, water pumps were spread round the new foundations of buildings round the Precinct, the fire brigade answering many calls. But the feeling of 'live today, grab what you can' philosophy still prevailed. In April/May I was at a race meeting, one bookie was offering 7/1 whilst the others were 4/1 I took the 7's, the horse won and the bookie paid me 4/1. I argued but he stuck firm. I found the ring official, he cautioned the bookie but there was little he could do without catching him red handed. I seethed, but there was little I could do but break his arms. Instead I bided my time as I had been taught. A few weeks later at a dance I met a charming young engaged couple; dancing with the girl she told me she had never been to a race meeting, how exciting it must be. I let it go. I worked alone at gambling, no one to distract me. Sept/Oct, reading the sports page I saw what I thought as a possible revenge, but I needed a partner, the girl came to mind so I rang her at work, briefly explained, she was all excited, she was no longer with the guy, could I meet her out of work and explain. So we met. Saturday was Stratford races, I needed day to day things to run normal and a huge slice of luck. Saturday we were at the races, so was the bookie, the favourite was short priced, but I fancied the second favourite, and he was offering over the odds again. I left the girl and found the ring official, I was in luck, the same guy, I asked him to accompany me. Then I gave the girl thirty pounds, she knew what to do, she approached the bookie, he expected her to bet ten bob, instead she asked the price and handed him thirty pounds. Under the eyes of the official he had to accept, but also thought the girl was dumb. The second fence and the favourite fell and my big slice of luck and knowledge of the second 'fav' held, under the eyes of the official he had to pay out and I walked over and said to the girl, 'Good girl'. The bookie was seething, he knew what I had done, the official was grinning, it was a good pay day. But this was the fifties and I knew he wouldn't leave it at that, but that's another story.

The sun burst through the clouds as I stepped off the coach at Towcester, the weather had been reasonable most of the week although it was September, but there was a big crowd at the meeting, the course looked splendid, a fine day for a day's racing. The whole course could be seen from the stands as it sloped downhill in an oval shape. In the centre there was a large holiday type of crowd. The day went well, the horse I was interested in was in the fifth race, some papers said it was prone to making mistakes. Well the jump on the uphill slope would catch him out if such, so after watching the horses walk round the parade ring I felt very confident and my money was down. I would watch the race from the inside where I would be close to the uphill fence. I raced round to the track to cross to the inner course before the horses came out onto the course. The first thing I noticed as I crossed the track was the 'lookout'. The race progressed. At the uphill fence my horse jumped it like a stag, came round

the bend and sprinted away to the line. I walked casually back towards the rail to the stands. In the middle of the course the ice-cream van stood locked, but as I got closer to pass it the ice cream man also appeared from the direction of the toilets. But there were tears running down his face, as he climbed in the van and locked the door. I knew immediately what had happened. The con-men were about 5/6 in strength, they posted a lookout near the course crossing for officials, if one appeared they would scatter among the crowd. Meanwhile they set up a table, placed three cups on it and played find the lady. They placed a pea or dice in one of the cups, then moved them around. You named the cup it was under you won. Meanwhile the other part of the gang looked for someone with 'real' money. Once they found him they would form an arc around him and edge him nearer the table. The nearer they got him to the table they would be like the crowd and encourage him to bet. They would let him win a few times, entice him to bet heavier, then systematically take all his money. It was obvious to me the youth had sold all his ice-cream that belonged to his employer, put the money in a satchel to go to the toilet, and the con-men got him. I glanced down the field, spotted the dealer making his way to the far edge of the course and the coach they came on. They would split the money later.

I was one of about two hundred soldiers in a camp just outside Dorchester awaiting to go abroad; the day before embarking I was rushed to hospital with glandular fever. On leaving hospital and returned to camp it was practically deserted, except for a skeleton crew and about half-dozen mis-fits like me. Next day, the orderly board told me the next morning I should report to the guard room at eight am, my dress code and to report to a Corporal ---- (redcap - military police) who would instruct me to my duties. I had no idea what this was about. Next morning, I arrived at the guard room, a jeep with two redcaps was waiting outside, the corporal asked my name and number, said jump in the back, we drove out the gate to the railway station, the corporal and I got out of the jeep and entered the railway station, the other guy drove away. The corporal handed me an arm band, gave me a load of instructions as to what he wanted from me given a few situations that might crop up. Apparently, we were to escort a soldier from New Street Station back to camp at Dorchester. The civilian police would meet us with the soldier at New Street Station. The soldier was AWOL, was violent and had smashed tables and glasses in a local pub. We changed trains at Rugby, arrived at New Street. The police met us, took us to the railway police room, police handcuffs were taken off the soldier, the corporal put handcuffs on the guy, we signed a form for his release, and strode out on to the opposite platform, the corporal giving the soldier some advice, like go to the toilet now if you wish, for there will be no drinks, food or toilet on the train, and until we get back to camp. Everything went smooth until Rugby. We changed trains (it was amazing how other uniforms gave us a wide berth), got settled in a compartment with a table, the soldier was put near the window, the corporal sat next to him, I sat opposite. About five minutes later a couple of middle aged women came and sat on the far side of the corridor, can't remember if the train had stopped, but the two women started to complain loudly about the war, the rationing, about neighbours, after a few minutes of this the soldier opened his eyes, looked across then suddenly he brought his arms up from under the table and crashed them down onto the table, his handcuffs quite visible, the old ladies shrieked and ran up the corridor, we pounced on him. "No trouble" he said, we eased, he put his arms back under the

table and went back to sleep, we had no further trouble from him, the jeep was waiting at the station, we drove back to camp and I was dismissed, duty done.

Coventry was like a safety valve to me through the fifties, every time I stepped down from the coach in Pool Meadow, or the train in Coventry, I felt the town envelope me like a well-worn coat. I had a nice comfortable three roomed apartment that cost me £2.50 a week in Barras Lane that gave me freedom to come and go wherever I chose. I went to stay in London for a few weeks, there were a few racecourse meetings ahead that I was interested in. I became friendly with a young lady who introduced me to Beryl Bryden the jazz singer, she in turn told us of a jazz club in the West End (Coventry or Oxford Street I believe), we went a few times, it was little more than a 'sweat box' but the guy who led the group was out of this world at the time. His name was Humphrey Lyttelton. Through those meetings I met another tall guy who obviously was an ex-guardsman, he was interested in my background. I couldn't make out if he was a 'cop' or gangster. He handed me a slip of paper, asked me if I could work out a few answers, I told him I was too busy. The Kray brothers were becoming notorious, voices were raised in government circles, the police were told to clamp down on anything that moved. Time 'not' to get involved. I came home. Ten years or so later, 1963, reading the reports of the train robbery, the slip of paper came to mind.

It was Monday morning, and on Mondays mother got up early and did all the household washing, at what unearthly time she rose I never discovered. Before we went to school my brother and I had to do some mangling, we took it in turns, one to turn the handle, the other to feed the washing through the big rollers. I was turning the handle and my brother made some nasty crack at me, so I slapped him hard on the back, he lost the chewing gum from his mouth onto the clean sheets and it all went through the mangle. Mum went through the roof, made us scrub the rollers, made us late for school and more trouble. When we got home from school we were made to stay in, so we put on the wireless, tried to find some nice music for her to soothe the anger. But when it was time for the news, and if Campbell had broken the world speed record in the rebuilt Bluebird the wireless conked out, the accumulator needed recharging, and that was a twenty-four hours job at the shop, so now dad was angry because we had run it down needlessly.

I believe that when I was a boy it was one of the most amusing times for us kids. Coventry had scores of streets that held very small terraced cottages with small sash cord windows. But the people had king sized beds of iron, chests of huge heavy drawers, that covered one wall, huge sideboards, etc, and I would think a lot more pianos, so almost every day you would see a 'Laurel and Hardy' scene. Headboards of iron railings would get stuck between stairs and ceilings, often you would see a couple of men on ladders each side a bedroom sash window, trying to push something through. Two men trying to take a settee into a house, they took off the front door, then one at each end carried into the house, still a tight fit, but then they had no room to turn it into the front room (always front room or back room, never heard of a lounge), so they lifted it on to its end and gouged a chunk out of the ceiling, still wouldn't fit, so

they brought it back out again, they then took out the front sash windows, with a lot of huffing and puffing they finally got it in, an all day job just to deliver one settee. And of course, tradesmen used horses, on occasions the horse would move on leaving the man chasing on bandy legs. Coalmen often tripped up or found the door to the coal shed was too small so half the coal went inside and half outside, and little old ladies would come out and bully them. They had to take off the front door when we had a piano delivered, but then years later the council widened the road, took most of our front garden, built a wall, with five-foot iron railings two feet from our front door, no way of getting furniture in or out.

Mum came out of the pantry, alarmed, said there was a rat in there, but as we were about to go to bed dad said he would set a few traps. Next morning, mum, being first up, said there was a noise in the pantry, so dad went in, said yes, there was a rat, and its tail was caught in the trap. He found one of our cricket bats to kill it, by this time we were all up to watch. Dad swung the bat at the rat, but all he did was knock a big jar of pickles off the shelf that crashed onto the floor and broke. He took another swipe, this time he slipped on a pickled onion, knocked a big bowl of cream off the thrall. Mum made us all go back to the breakfast table, then dad raced out the back door chasing the rat. We all went to race after him but mum shouted "Sit down, finish your breakfast". As we sat down my brother threw an old fur hat at my sister, shouting "Here he goes". My sister screamed, knocked her hot cup of tea over, that landed in my lap, I leapt up, knocking my chair on to the baby's arm in the high chair. So my sister was crying, so was I and so was the baby. My brother was laughing so my mum boxed his ears and now he was crying. Dad walked in jubilant, the rat had raced out the back door making for the garden hedge, had got the trap wedged in our garden swing chain and dad had killed it and then buried it deep in the garden, trap as well. Mum said "We've never seen a rat round here before". My brother said "It's him", looking at me, he feeds his rabbits on crushed oats - threw my spoon at him - that attract rats. Mum said, "Kaga you will have to get rid of them, get something else". I didn't mind, I was thinking in those terms anyway. I swapped them for a piano accordion from my mate.

It was a fine clear morning as I strode through Pool Meadow. I was on my way to catch the Red House coach to go to Newmarket Races. I loved travelling through England's beautiful countryside, I loved to see the flashing hooves of the horses over the green turf, I loved to breathe in the clean fresh air, I loved the idleness that fitted me like a well-worn coat. I entered the coach and sat down next to Di-Di, who was reading the sporting 'Buff' - the paper was a buff colour and printed in Manchester. Di-Di the son of the ice-cream vendors in Coventry, gambled far heavier than I mainly on the Buffs favourites. But Newmarket was known to be the punters' graveyard. So many trainers in Newmarket entered so many horses to give them experience you got some very surprise results and the form book was turned upside down. It was around the 4th or 5th race, a moderate little race. I fancied the fav, it had remained steady at even money for some minutes. The horses had gone down to the start, in those days a flag start, I had my bet, not taking the price hoping it may go out to 6/4, when there was a great commotion. Several men had rushed down to the bookies line and laid money on a rank outsider at 14/1. Bookies started to scramble to hedge their bets, the price tumbled to 10's then to 6's - this was known as a 'springer', a horse trained specially

for a race to win money. I laid a small wager at 6/1 to cover my money I had laid on the fav, that had now drifted out to 5/1. People who followed the money were still rushing to get a price but the bookies wiped the horse off their boards, and then the tannoy announced the horse was 'disqualified' on a technicality about its headgear. In the same breath it said "they're off". Some of the medium bookies breathed a sigh of relief, if the horse had have won they would have been wiped out. The horses flashed by, the fav way in front. All bets on the disqualified horse were refunded, the market had no time to re-form so the fav paid out five to one. I was jubilant. After a few minutes I made my way back to the coach, just in time to see Di-Di carry a crate of beer onto the coach. He had bet heavily on the fav, groaned when he saw the 'springer' then rejoiced when the fav drifted and the springer was disqualified. He handed round the beer to the regulars, people on the coach had come back early so we got underway before the usual traffic jam. Over the next few days we learnt the stewards had become suspicious of the horse's trainer, had disqualified it on a small infringement, they also stopped the trainer as he was about to leave the course with the horsebox. A French trainer with stable boy and girl that spoke no English, he had brought over a very good horse that had won races, the animal's records had been swopped over. I believe he was banned from entering any racecourse in England.

Do you remember the old-fashioned grates with the big ovens either side, we had one in both front and back rooms. Mum would put two inches of jam in one of those white pudding dishes, cake mix and greaseproof paper when it came out the oven tip it upside down on a plate, the hot jam running down the sides, spoons were flashing in from all sides under mum's arms, you just couldn't resist. Rabbit and veg stew with thick brown gravy, chunk of bread and the gravy running down your chin. Toasting bread in front of the fire with the old toasting forks on a cold winters night. Dad would dampen down some coal slack at night place it at the back of the fire, in the morning one poke with the poker in the morning and a blazing fire, mum would place all our clothes on the guard, when we came down in the morning lovely warm clothes to put on. Upstairs we had enormous wooden sets of draws. Autumn time out would come the woollen blankets and eider downs, leave the draws open for a few days to air and in would go the newspaper and apples and pears, every week one of us would go through the drawers removing the fruit that needed eating or throwing away. As bread and flour was not rationed during the war this continued for us. We were poor but never hungry.

Around the time of the late 1920's the suburbs of Coventry were mostly farms and fields and heaths, in spring and summer fields clothed in beautiful wild flowers, hedges abundant with wild fruit and berries, birds of colour and song, the sky filled with song from many skylarks, the slough teeming with fish fed by two clean streams. The houses rang from laughter, crying, squabbles. Street life was the same, the village like one big family, ten-twenty kids playing football in the street ages from five to 16, we grew up as a friendly community. and the city for shopping, entertainment and pride. This was the world I was born in. But mid-thirties the streams began to get polluted from industrial waste, the fish and birds began to die and the world was talking of war. And my life turned upside down. Gone was the laughter. 1939, elder brothers and sisters, friends, were called away to war, and the houses died, the laughter and life

were missing, so was the local football team, the team of our friends that we had grown up with, every one of them enlisted. Parents with a couple of teenage boys now had anxious faces, the smiles gone and everywhere was talk of 'Destruction'. The beautiful flowers were ploughed under, the birds fled from the gun-fire, lorries full of soldiers, tanks, guns across the fields, where people once picnicked. Teachers taught gas mask drill, first-aid etc, real lessons curtailed at a very early age. Bombing - relatives and friends died, the city I knew and loved, destroyed, hate took the place of laughter, my education was now learning how to kill and destroy, for more years than I had at a normal education. Buildings can be replaced, but memory remains the same forever.

Main Pit Farm, Foleshill, came in to the boundary of Coventry in 1926, a larger farm than Hawkesbury Grove Farm or Hall Green Farm (Manor Farm). It was a more pleasing and interesting building than both, in fact it would be in line with any building in Warwickshire for sheer versatility for its job, whatever its origins. It was built with all the main farm buildings as one building, in a large L shape - with huge beams and granary it was most impressive, comfortable for both animals and man to live in, work in. Even the loo was in a passageway, the rear wall being part of the cow shed behind it, so was never cold or draughty to enter. The buildings were enclosed behind two huge wooden gates. The house was on the south-east corner, surrounded on the outside by lovely gardens and orchard, it looked over a lovely meadow and down to the 'Slough Lake'. The inner corner of the L shape there was a large archway in beautiful brickwork design, that covered the kitchen window, on the right and inside the archway was the door entrance to the house, on the left a door that led down steps into the huge larder that was six feet below ground level. There was a tiled path that led between the thralls of the larder, huge hams adorned the walls, rows and rows of home-made fruit jams and preserves stood on those thralls, and everything that was needed to feed a family. The archway gave shelter from the weather. Inside the door to the house, in the hall was a beautiful carved wooden staircase, to the left and right were the two main living rooms, so well-protected from draughts by the archway, within each room were great hearth-wide chimneys with magnificent fire-back casts, no doubt by famous ironmasters. On these casts were oak leaves and acorns, to the left as you stepped was a charming kitchen, an elaborate oak overmantle above the enormous range, carved oak supports on either side, dainty cupboards let into the panelling. Under the window, a sink with a solitary tap, the water fed from a spring by pipes from two fields away - the pipe also fed the water trough for the animals in the yard outside, two yards from the kitchen window. The yard also led to the passageway that ran the other side of the great larder, held the toilet and on into the gardens. The cowsheds and animal buildings on either side of the L shape, the cross that ran the length of the building. The far end was the mighty granary with its massive beams, horses below, tackle shop, etc., a huge and beautiful building that gave the farm character as well as the workings of the farm. There is so much more, I could fill a book. It was a great and wonderful building, the like I have never seen since.

The house I lived in the 1930's was attached to my granddad's house - in both houses the staircase was opposite the front door and curled to the centre, the fireplaces were back to back in the central wall and joined into one chimney a little way up. My dad had a large chair on the left-hand side of the fire, that no one else sat in. Mother had

a smaller chair on the other side and alongside a sofa. So, mother was expecting the vicar to call one day - she had us washed knees, hair brushed, sitting on the sofa all spick and span, my sister sat in the middle of me and my brother nursing the baby. The vicar duly called and mum sat him in dad's chair, made him a cup of tea and they were jawing away when there were noises in the chimney and a great amount of soot came down the chimney, hit the fire and a cloud swept over the vicar, just as dad walked in. Dad looked at him, black face and clothes in his chair and promptly said, 'Dost tha want my pit boots and all, vicar?' Of course, we were doubled up with laughter. Mum scowled, took the vicar into the back room and gave him hot water and towel. When he had gone mum had a row with dad, the first and only time I saw them really row. Apparently, the chimney sweep was next door. In those days the sweep used to sign a card when he finished, something to do with insurance.