



Vincent Harrison

Vincent Harrison describes his childhood in a mining village in the North East of England.

It was the 3rd of September 1939 and Dad, as usual on a Sunday, was at work until about midday. I had listened with Grandma to Mr Chamberlain's broadcast and I knew that war had been declared, but at eight and a half years old I had only a theoretical notion of what that meant, although it was obvious, even to me, from Grandma's reaction to the broadcast that it was a serious business. She seemed reluctant to let me go to meet Dad this particular morning, but after some wheedling on my part (this often worked when Grandma was reluctant to allow me to do something) she gave in, and off I went. Part of my theoretical knowledge of war embraced the need for 'air raid warnings' and in Langley Park the signal was to be given by repeated blasts on the 'buzzer', hitherto used to signal change of shift times at the pit. I was only mildly startled when, on my way over the footbridge and just as I got as far as the coke works where the buzzer was situated, our first air raid warning signal of the war burst forth with its deep throated blast about five yards from my right ear. I was not unfamiliar with the buzzer making peacetime summonses, and I soon recognised the intermittent blasts as the new air raid signal. With only a few seconds hesitation I came to the conclusion that this must be a practice to make sure the system was working now that it was going to be needed, and carried on to meet Dad. I knew he would show up at any time now and I felt sure that he would know what we ought to do. But I'd only gone a few yards further along the footbridge when my path was barred by a bunch of workmen returning home, "Come on son, that's the air raid warning, get yourself off home, the Germans are coming." I didn't want to turn back and insisted, "I'm going to meet my Dad", but they obviously thought this would be a bad move and pressured me into turning tail for home.



Vincent in 1938, aged 7

Grandma was out looking for me and looking very worried when I got back and Dad arrived soon after, just in time to hear the 'all clear' to end what had obviously been a false alarm. I don't think it was ever made known who had been panic-stricken enough to activate the warning system but it certainly made the first sixty minutes of the war something to remember. Fortunately, although the buzzer was to be sounded in warning many more times before the peace came, we never suffered any enemy attack on Langley Park at all, even though 'Lord Haw-Haw' claimed to have destroyed the coke work one night later on in the war.

Langley Park and its inhabitants went through all the preparations for war dictated by the Ministry of Defence and for a country which was supposed totally unprepared for



battle, a surprising amount was achieved. Gas masks were probably my first direct contact with the notion of hostilities. These were to be collected from the local council school and I can still visualise the scene when I walked into the classroom (this wasn't my school and the surroundings were quite unfamiliar). There seemed to be hundreds of people milling about and we had to find our way through the crowd to the location appropriate to our surname. As with many things remembered from the past, my clearest recollection is the smell which engulfed me as an unyielding rubber mask was jammed over my face and the straps forced over the back of my head and then wrenched up even tighter. Grandma too had to suffer the same indignity and she was even heard to make the rude noises which occurred as the outgoing breath forced its way beneath the sides of the face-piece. I very much doubt whether Grandma ever again tried on her gas mask but she dutifully carried it home, cradled in its cardboard box as we all did.

The gas masks were issued just before the war started but it was some time later that we got round to having an air raid shelter installed where the cupboard under the stairs had been. The cupboard under the stairs was the repository for all those forgotten things that we didn't need anymore but Grandma couldn't bring herself to throw away. As she often said, "keep a thing seven years and it will come in useful". But we were constantly being reminded that "there's a war on," and the cupboard had to be emptied, even right down to the pointy bit right at the back where the stairs met the floor. When the workmen arrived to start construction, their first move worried me quite a lot because it entailed cutting away the bottom five feet of the boarded sides of the cupboard all the way through from the doorway to the underside of the stairs and I was sure that this would allow the staircase to collapse. It didn't, of course and very soon the gap was filled with a brick wall and a roof of reinforced concrete. The space inside still went down almost to a point at the far end, and being the smallest I qualified for the innermost place on those occasions when we went in there. For weeks the kitchen had the musty smell that comes from fresh concrete and inside the shelter the same smell persisted for what seemed like years.

Being resourceful, Dad persuaded the workmen to leave behind the boards which had been cut away and these were adapted to clad the inelegant raw brickwork and with an electric light installed inside (probably against the rules because it was 'let in' to the concrete roof) the shelter became less of an intrusion and since I was the only one who could walk into it without stooping, it eventually became a cubby hole where I used to do my model making. I remember the redecoration of the wood cladding because Dad let me have a go at 'graining'. This was a style of decoration much favoured then, which purported to imitate wood grain by dragging a comb over dark brown paint while still wet to reveal a grain-like pattern in the lighter colour beneath. My effort resembled a scale drawing of a very complicated railway crossing but I was very proud of it and even prouder of my efforts before hand with a blow lamp to burn off the old paint - a very hazardous business altogether.

In the event the shelter was never needed. The nearest bombs during the whole war landed some two miles or so west of us and even they were probably dropped more in



desperation than in hostility. That is not to say we didn't have one or two scary moments but, human nature being what it is our reaction to enemy activity wasn't always the most sensible.

There was one night when Jim and I had only been in bed a short time when we heard a strange popping noise coming from outside the house. We asked each other what it might be but the sound was quite unfamiliar and it was a while before we came to the conclusion that what we could hear was perhaps distant rifle fire or something similar. We could also hear sounds of normal activity from downstairs so we shouted down to alert Dad and Grandma who obviously hadn't heard anything unusual. Then Jim crept out of bed and peeped round the heavy (black out) curtains and said, "it's light outside!" It had been well after dark when we went to bed.

Before long we were brought downstairs and to our amazement, taken outside to see what was going on. There, we joined all our neighbours, gazing up at the incredible sight of hundreds of magnesium flares descending gently on parachutes and Langley Park was lit up as though it was day. We could see clearly the whole length of our back street with little groups of people all along it engaged in animated discussion. In fact virtually the entire village turned out that brilliant night and speculated as to the meaning of it all but, of course, no one could shed any (extra) light on the matter and mostly we just enjoyed the spectacle. The Air Raid Wardens on duty that night found themselves with a mutiny on their hands and no amount of exhortation to "get inside before they start dropping bombs" had any effect. There were even a few cries of "Get that light out" to spectators who had come out and left doors open but in the circumstances the glow from the odd sixty watt bulb seemed hardly relevant. In the event, whatever the purpose of the raider who dropped the flares, nothing further happened that night and the only damage sustained was a few dislodged slates where the empty canisters landed and a certain loss of face in the ranks of the A.R.P. wardens. Several hundreds of canisters were dropped that night landing, in due course, all over the village and for the next few days the A.R.P. wardens were able, with the assistance of the police, to restore some of their authority by confiscating the remains of the flares, many of which had been retrieved and hidden away as trophies by the populus. I felt slightly peeved that none landed near enough for us to get a chance to collect one as a trophy.

For a short period in the early part of the war an anti-aircraft gun and a searchlight were in position at Hill Top on the ridge overlooking Langley Park. The gun was heard to fire on a few occasions and the searchlight sometimes swept the sky at night during the first few months it was operative, but there was presumably too little air activity to justify their presence and they soon departed.

It may well have no connection at all with the military installations at Hill Top, but one afternoon on the way home from school, I was stopped by a man who asked the way to Hill Top. All sign-posts had already been removed from our roads. The propaganda machine had already got through to an impressionable lad like me and I was fully aware of the need to "Be like Dad, keep Mum" and that "Careless talk costs



lives" so, on the assumption that this stranger was probably a German spy I directed him in the opposite direction from Hill Top and continued on my way home, proud of having "done my bit". I have often wondered since who the unfortunate man really was and whether he ever found his way to where he was going.

There were three bombs dropped one night at Quebec, a tiny village two miles or so west of Langley Park and the sound was, I am told, loud enough to wake my Dad and Grandma. Jim and I had to be woken up to get us out of bed and that was one of the occasions when we all crammed ourselves into the air raid shelter. As on the other occasions when we were dragged, bleary-eyed and complaining downstairs to take cover there was nothing to take cover from and we were glad to stagger back upstairs to bed as soon as the 'all clear' was heard. This enemy 'attack' was probably entirely accidental; the bombs landed in a field behind the old church which was some distance outside Quebec village and the only damage was to some of the windows in the church. In view of the terrible suffering and damage being sustained elsewhere at the time it may seem strange that this event became a 'nine day wonder' in the locality and we even heard of passengers boarding the local bus and asking for a "return to where the bombs dropped". Such is human nature.

At first our schooldays continued largely unaffected by the war except for the impact of hostilities elsewhere. We suffered some severe reprimands if we forgot to carry our gas masks with us, and when some of the cardboard boxes containing the masks started to show signs of rough handling after a few months the teachers were very stern and disapproving of the owners' ungrateful behaviour. When the school air raid shelters were constructed a regime of air raid exercises was embarked upon. Each class was allocated to a shelter and we were required to march in double file up through the school yard to where the long earth mounds had been constructed in what had been the school gardens. We were told to march quickly, but not to run, with two responsible 'big girls' designated to carry a candle lantern each and to take up positions at each end of the dark corridor-like interior. I remember the candle lanterns very well; each had a square tin base and tin corners and a tin roof with a ring for carrying. The four glass panels each had a diagonal cross of reinforcing tape and inside was a pristine white candle which, notwithstanding the darkness of the shelters, the teachers would never allow to be lit "as this is only a practice". The regular practices soon fell into abeyance as it became clear that the Germans weren't going to concentrate a lot of air power on Old Esh and the candles probably survived the entire war intact.

The industry situated along the River Tyne, however, attracted a good deal of attention from the Luftwaffe and our school at Esh suddenly was required to cope with an influx of evacuees from Gateshead and Newcastle schools. The indigenous pupils regarded this invasion with mixed feelings. The unfortunate evacuees were understandably reticent, and being 'townies' did not have much in common with us and I must admit that we mostly resented their intrusion into our lives, despite the nuns' exhortations to be kind to those less fortunate than us. On the other hand, their arrival in large numbers was more than our school could absorb into the existing system and it was decided to share the accommodation, the local children having



lessons each morning and the evacuees taking over each afternoon, changing over each week. The notion of going to school only half time did appeal to most of us and the brief encounter between the two factions at dinner time provided little opportunity for hostilities to break out. Most of the evacuees must have returned to their homes fairly soon because it seemed only a short time until the timetable returned to normal and the few remaining 'townies' despite their strangeness, became absorbed into their new surroundings.

The supply of food during the war years was a constant subject of concern, and we were bombarded with advice on how to maintain a healthy diet with the somewhat limited resources available. In fact, although the variety of different foods available was limited we probably were as well fed then as at any time. Perhaps the most significant change, although I was too young to realise it until the situation began to revert to normal after the war, was the almost complete disappearance of brand names. Baking was done with National Flour (which was brown but could be made white by putting it through a fine sieve such as one of Grandma's stockings, although it was illegal to do this) and such foods as bacon, butter and margarine all came from unidentified manufacturers. With the onset of hostilities, exotic fruit such as bananas disappeared, not to be seen again for the duration and oranges became available only on very rare occasions and in very limited quantities. These two shortages were a constant cause of complaint by the adult population but I was hardly old enough to have much memory of such pre-war luxuries and I don't recall any strong feelings on this subject on my part.



Vincent in 1938, aged 7

A source of constant chagrin to grandma was her inability to make yorkshire puddings to her own satisfaction. Apart from her reluctance to use brown flour, eggs were in short supply and these "new fangled dried eggs" which were sometimes the only available substitute never produced the desired degree of elevation to the finished product. Although she often murmured apologies as she served them up for Sunday dinner (one loaf-tin sized pudding each and no 'seconds') they were always consumed with enthusiasm.

Grandma was always keen on saving things "for a rainy day" and one or two treats such as tinned pineapple chunks survived the entire war at the back of the pantry shelf waiting for the rainy day to arrive but some of the unusual foodstuffs which came along actually found their way onto our table. One exotic example, I remember, was the cause of much speculation when it first appeared. Grandma was assured that she had got hold of some dried fish which presumably had come from somewhere like Iceland but when removed from its wrappings what confronted our gaze was what looked just like pieces of very old and dry leather. It was thin and dark brown and rock hard and about as unappetising as you could imagine. Grandma had been given to



understand that the dried fish had to be soaked in water for at least twenty four hours and so the bits of leather were duly immersed in a basin of water and left overnight in the pantry. When I got home from school the next day and nipped into the pantry (probably to get an apple, for as Grandma often used to say, "an apple a day keeps the doctor away") I could hardly believe the appearance of the fish. It had swelled from about a quarter of an inch to almost an inch in thickness and the flesh inside was gleaming white and when we ate it for tea later on the flavour was delicious. There was another strange variety of fish which became available later on which came in tins and rejoiced in the almost unpronounceable name of Snoeke. We managed to eat some of it but that particular variety of fish was so unpopular that it became something of a music hall joke.

Most of the time we ate well enough and we certainly never went hungry but it was at times like Christmas that the shortages used to bite. Rations were allocated on a weekly basis and if Christmas Day fell in mid-week, we had a choice. We could have our weekly meat ration as usual for Sunday or we could have it for Christmas Day but not both. One year Dad found some enterprising local who had some rabbits (probably poached) and that year we had rabbit pie for Christmas dinner. New Years Day was less of a festive occasion but would still have been marked by a special dinner in normal times. In the war years, conditions rendered any significant celebration by a large meal on New Years Day impractical and I can remember one year when the best that Grandma could come up with was a tin of 'Casserole Stewed Steak', culled from our 'rainy day' supplies. I also remember, although I'd rather forget, that for sweet one Christmas we had stewed prunes. I didn't like the look of them and I didn't like the smell of them but despite my protests I was prevailed upon to eat some. They didn't stay down for long and I have never been able to face a prune since then without feeling slightly unwell.

Despite the shortages, Grandma managed to get together the ingredients for a Christmas cake each year and the making of the cake was usually quite an event. Jim and I were sometimes allowed to help with some of the chores such as skinning the almonds and picking the stalks out of the currants and then, perhaps, have a go at stirring the mixture. Once the cake was in the oven we all had to be careful not to slam any doors and no one was allowed to interfere with the fire and upset the delicate control of the oven temperature. Then as we were pleading to be allowed to scrape out the remains from the mixing bowl, Grandma always started to worry in case she'd left out the salt or some other essential ingredient and at this stage she usually accused us boys of "talking too much and making me forget." But she never had forgotten and the cake was always up to her usual standard and along with a glass of ginger wine (made from Castles' Ginger Wine Essence) would be much appreciated by any visitor at Christmas time.

I suppose that I was extremely fortunate to avoid the horrors and deprivations of war but eight-year-olds are not noted for appreciating their own good fortune in life and in fact I was probably slightly disappointed at the time that I had no war experiences to boast of. The nearest I came to enemy activity was to be caught in the only air attack



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on Darlington of the war. We had all, Grandma, Dad, Jim and I, been on a visit to see Aunty Collis and Uncle Harry who lived in Darlington and we were just starting for home when the air raid warning sounded. Within minutes an incendiary bomb had been dropped on the town centre, setting fire to the 'Savoy' bakery and disrupting the traffic thereby. We heard the bomb as we waited to catch a trolley bus and then we heard the sound of machine-gun fire as one of the raiders strafed the next street from us. We only discovered the full details afterwards but at the time the situation was alarming enough to have us crouching in the shelter (?) of a garden wall and glad to be safely out of the place and back to peaceful Langley Park as soon as we could manage.

We had our frights in Langley Park too, such as when a damaged Spitfire zoomed over the village and crashed. The pilot managed to direct the burning plane into a field, beyond the houses but falling short of the hospital before bailing out. Rumour had it that his parachute brought him down into the coke works area, narrowly avoiding the top of the high chimney stack, only to be arrested as a possible German spy by the local officialdom when he landed.

Local officialdom was one of the hazards of the war in many instances, always of course with the best of intentions, but sometimes with unfortunate results. We had an exercise involving the local Home Guard which caused more bother in the village than ever the Germans did.

The event was well advertised, the scenario being that the Home Guard were to defend the village against a mock attack staged by some regular troops. The attack was to take place on a Sunday and members of the public were ordered to remain indoors, but being Sunday, the Catholic population felt obliged to attend Mass as usual and elected to ignore the curfew. So it was that we set out to travel the two hundred yards or so to our church but the defending forces, feeling aggrieved at the wanton disregard of orders, planted as many mock bombs as they could and diverted the Catholic civilian pedestrians by every conceivable alternative route possible. The Home Guard also took into custody several well-known members on their way to church who had forgotten their identity cards and were therefore adjudged to be possible fifth columnists. Moreover, the mock bombs were actually very large and very powerful fireworks and in this colliery village where every house had a large coal fire the force of the explosions caused falls of soot, right, left and centre, in some cases effectively destroying the Sunday dinners which were in preparation.

It happened that next door to us, at number twenty three, there lived Major Penny who was the Commanding Officer of the Home Guard and the attacking forces managed to infiltrate the defences and plant an extremely large collection of fireworks in the Major's front garden in order to destroy the defence headquarters. When the charge went off it not only terrified many of the local residents and destroyed numerous Sunday dinners but it also managed to break windows in several houses and a shop on the opposite side of the street.

The defence of the village was something of a failure on all sides. We heard afterwards of several rather cheeky infiltrations through the lines of defence. One of



the 'enemy' slung a plate-layer's hammer over his shoulder and walked down the railway line tapping the odd key as he came whilst about a dozen of his comrades simply boarded a bus and entered the village in comfort. By early afternoon Langley Park had fallen to the 'enemy'. We were all thankful that it was only an exercise.

The shortages during the war provided all sorts of opportunities for an inventive chap like Dad to pit his wits and exercise his skills. In such circumstances a more business-like approach to the situation might well have turned a profit and, in fact one local business man did suggest that Dad should start a commercial enterprise and "bring the lads into it as they grew up." That was, perhaps an opportunity missed but the spirit of 'make do and mend' thrived in our house.

The black-out made life very difficult at times coupled as it were with a severe shortage of torch batteries. Dad hit on the idea of manufacturing a hand torch which would accept a 'bicycle lamp battery' (and thereby have a longer life than the more common 'number 8' battery) but which would be compact enough to go into a pocket. The raw material came from empty food tins, carefully washed and cut open and then reformed by much hammering, bending and soldering. The finished product left much to be desired aesthetically, but in those austere times nobody bothered too much about appearances and the demand was such that it outstripped our supply of empty tins at times and kept Jim and I busy on many a winter's evening.



On the beach at South Shields 1939. Last hols before the war. Vincent, Rita and Jim.

It wasn't all hard graft for us during the war, we had the radio (Tommy Handley et al) and the picture houses kept going (although we went only rarely) and we had 'Sunday night Wings for Victory Concerts' at the Kings Cinema; film shows were not allowed on Sundays. The concerts were to raise funds for the war effort and the performers were all local volunteers. We saw a variety of conjurers and heard comic monologues, recited with great panache. Nichol Anderson would sing 'Because' or 'Trees' or on a night when the audience were in a good mood he might even sing both songs. Mrs. Jones usually sang 'Me and my Shadow', accompanying herself rather hesitantly on the banjo, but the most popular amongst the singers were The Langley Park Male Voice Quartet who had a good repertoire in comic ditties. Everyone enjoyed the comedy numbers and even the ladies in the audience would smile at the final lines of one of their numbers entitled simply 'Women' which went:

"There are women who are frisky, there are women who are risky,
there are women who don't gossip but they're dead."

Almost every situation and activity we encountered or engaged in (or more often were prevented from engaging in) was coloured by the often recited reminder "there's a war on!" And my notion of the arrival of the end of the war was much like my anticipation



of Christmas, but magnified several times over because of the years of waiting. In fact, for the first few years of the war the 'end' was beyond my imagining. But as the years dragged by and I got to be a little more aware of the broader view of life the hope and anticipation took hold and started to grow.

I can't recall much of VE Day except some of the enthusiastic reports on the radio and a slightly disapproving feeling hovering over Grandma's comments about "people going to pubs and having too much to drink on a night like this."

On VJ Night I was staying in Darlington with Auntie Collis and Uncle Harry, together with two of my cousins, Jack and Rita Downie. Jack and I were alone in the house for much of the evening of the announcement of the end of hostilities and I remember that we celebrated in a small way by going out for fish and chips and I think we also had a bottle of beer between us. We had only just finished eating this celebratory repast when Rita arrived back at the house (from I don't know where) and she too had decided that in the circumstances we ought to have some fish and chips and had bought some on the way home. We considered that the circumstances were exceptional and we managed to eat the second lot of fish and chips too.

Looking back on it, VE Day and VJ Day were both a terrible disappointment to me at the time. We didn't have any television to show us the jubilation in towns and cities around the country but I was well aware that people everywhere were celebrating, sometimes with a singular lack of reserve and, as at the declaration of war, the sense of importance felt by adults around me was strong enough to penetrate even my self-centred view of the world. I knew that it was enormously important but no matter how much I tried, I couldn't make it feel any different.

And so the beginning of post-war times had arrived and I can now see that, from this time onwards, vast changes were going to come about in my lifetime but austerity was going to stay with us for a long time yet and in fact we still had 'bread rationing' to come. The only difference was that now we couldn't use as an excuse, "Don't you know there's a war on?"