My Early Life

Edition 2

Dedication

Leslie Ernest Swain is our Dad, Grand-dad and Great Grand-dad. He celebrated his 90th birthday on February 7th, 2012. This published account of his childhood and up until his mid thirties, written by him, is a reminder to us all how different life was, to be born in 1922 in a small village in Hertfordshire. His family love and treasure him, and we also treasure the memories of Joyce née Larder, our Mum, Nan and Great Nan, who sadly is no longer with us. Without them coming together, none of us would be here to read this and to understand something about his life as a boy and young man.

Chapter One: Birth to Adolescence

My story starts in post World War One, February 7th 1922. Looking back it now seems we were living in the Stone Age! A family of five living in a four roomed house, no running water, all the water had to be drawn up from the well at the end of the row of six cottages, very often the rope would break and then it needed a grappling hook on the end of a rope to recover the bucket. As well as water in the bucket, a frog would often have a ride up. There was no sewage disposal, the water after use was thrown out of the front door onto the garden which was just across the narrow lane. The only means of illumination was an oil lamp in the living room and candles in the kitchen and bedrooms, the draughts from the ill-fitting doors and windows very often making it difficult to keep them lit. An open coal fire with an oven to the side provided the heating and enabled us to cook, make tea and heat water for the weekly tin bath, generally on Saturday, one out one in arrangement. If we could not afford the coal or if, as in the bad winters, the coal man could not get to the village because the snow had drifted to a depth of six feet between our village of Walkern and the nearest town Stevenage in Hertfordshire, we would gather wood to keep the home fires burning. The fire was absolutely essential for survival, just like the cavemen.

In this day and age it is difficult to imagine three families all using one lavatory. There were three houses joined together, we lived in the right hand end one. The Swain family included Mum (Rose Emily, always called Em), Dad (Bertie Percy), eldest daughter (Dorothy, always called Dorry), born in 1920, myself (Leslie Ernest, shortened to Les) born in 1924, and youngest son (Edgar, known to us as Ed or Eddy) born in 1927. The Saggers family lived next door - Auntie and Uncle Saggers and Auntie's brother Pym Cox, and next to them was the Hawkins, two adults and a boy Ronnie. Altogether seven adults and four children for the one lavatory! It was supposed to be emptied by the menfolk in turn as necessary but "as

necessary" was very often when it had overflowed onto the floor. The disposal method was to dig a hole in the garden and bury it, making sure it was remembered where it was emptied the last time. The "privy" as it was colloquially called was next to a row of three barns, just wooden affairs built onto the gable end of the Hawkins house; unfortunately our barn was next to the privy so guess who took it upon himself to keep it as clean as he could, my Dad (Bertie Percy Swain) of course. Even in those dark days development took place, what a delight to have your own family lavatory even though it was still the bucket arrangement and further away down the bottom of your garden about fifty yards from the house. I hear you ask, who provided the toilet paper in the communal midding? The Daily Mirror or the Herald torn into neat squares and impaled on a nail was considered the civil way but often a magazine would be left on the floor, not that there would be time to read it or even to see the print in the darkness.

As well as the block of three houses we were part of, there were three other houses. Next door to us lived Granny and Granddad Cox (Mum's parents) with Uncle Bill (Mum's brother) and Thomas Morrison (known as Son). He was my half-brother from Mum's first marriage to an Australian who was killed in the war. The Young family lived next door to them, four girls and seven boys in a three bedroom cottage. At least these two joined cottages had their own privy and a back garden, what luxury! At the other end of the row there was a thatched cottage occupied by Mr. and Mrs. Miles. Mrs. Miles was a miserable woman, if our ball went into her garden she would take it into the house and we would see a puff of black smoke out of the chimney. November the 5th was a very hazardous date on their calendar one would imagine. The only occasion we might have been burned out of house and home was when the Hawkins family acquired a home cinematograph. This was the first attempt at home movies I would imagine, it obviously had a naked flame for illumination, as I said earlier there was no such thing as electricity. The film was celluloid, a highly

flammable material - put the two together and there are the ingredients for a fire. They must have called Dad when the thing caught fire and he burned his hands gathering the whole thing up and throwing it into the lane fortunately before too much damage was done. Had it not been contained the whole six houses would certainly have been burned to the ground, as the nearest horse drawn fire engine was at Stevenage, four miles away.

Across the bottom of the gardens between us and the river Beane was the waste disposal heap, the "dunghole", where all the waste from the houses was literally just thrown upon it and when it had grown into a six feet high ridge it would be reduced by throwing it onto the garden - little wonder Dad grew some marvelous crops, mostly potatoes our staple diet. It might be thought it would be very unpleasant to the nostrils but as I remember there was no smell and it did keep the river off the gardens when it went into flood. The dunghole was colonised by water rats, large brown animals the like of which few have seen, the ridge was riddled with their holes. Fortunately they did confine themselves to the river and we rarely bothered about them even though they were next to our privy. Earwigs were the worst pests; they were very big too, up to three quarters of an inch long. Brother Ed had one with its pincers in his bum and had to have it cut off with a pair of scissors! To lighten things up a photograph of Uncle Frank Saggers with the Stotfold football team was hung on the wall, things were really looking up!

The river Beane was fed from Spring-Head Meads a small field of about three acres only half a mile up river from our hamlet Church End, or Bockings as it is now more familiarly known. There were numerous small sandy-bottom pools where the pure spring water bubbled up continuously and even in the worst drought I can never recall the flow of water stopping. As children we would pick watercress which grew in abundance and receive a copper or two from the people in the village for our trouble.

Come winter and the river would quickly go into flood cutting us off completely as the only two ways into the village was over the bridge two hundred yards from the house, and the other a quarter of a mile in the other direction. These were just foot bridges. Normally it was always possible to negotiate the crossing by vehicles, the Ford Tin Lizzie had plenty of clearance through the water but mostly it was horse and carts. Fortunately or by design the houses were too high for the river to pose a danger of flooding. In the summer it gave us endless hours of pleasure, it was never a danger for the smallest child, I had never heard of anyone drowning. There were brown trout in abundance and the biggest we had ever seen was caught by my half-brother Son (more of him later) - it weighed five and a quarter pounds. Fly fishermen came from Stevenage but they never had the success we had with our very simple tackle and a worm. In the winter the river would be thick with ice, strong enough to walk on, or skate if one was capable and could afford the skates. We would chase the trout under the ice, the ice and water being crystal clear. There were ducks on the water belonging to the farm - we called it Cordells, the name of the farmer family - which was only just across the river from the houses. The hay and straw stacks were our playground until the farmer came along, then we had to make a quick exit. The ducks would lay their eggs in the water and it was shoes and socks off to get them.

The farm was also a source of income as we grew older, about eleven years old, we would work in the fields on Saturdays or school holidays, and we would most likely have gone onto the ploughed fields before the seed was sown “stone picking”. With a bucket the boys would walk in line up the fields picking up the larger stones and walking back when the bucket was full to deposit the stones in the hedge row bottoms, a back breaking job which would earn us a penny an hour perhaps. In the summer it would be first the hay-making in May and June followed by the harvest in July and August. The first job was to learn how to keep the horse going

round and round in a circle, harnessed to a pole which was attached to the elevator which carried the hay or sheaves of grain onto the stack. Before the combine harvester, all the grain crops were built up into a neat stack as in the shape of a house - and about the same size as a small house - then thatched to keep the weather out.

In the winter the thrashing engine (Granddad Swain's occupation) would visit the farms in turn and the sheaves of wheat oats or barley would go through the drum, the process of removing the grain from the husk. The husks, called "chaff" and used as fodder for the horses, and straw stacked up again to be used as bedding for the horses and cattle - or it could go through a "chaff cutter" that reduced the straw to very short pieces and again be fed to the horses.

To a small boy the shire horses were monsters and it was a daunting task to walk beside them, leading them in the fields from one corn stook to the next as the farm labourers loaded the sheaves onto the cart. Then the most daunting of all was to lead the horse with a great load of corn or hay back to the farm. The last hundred yards to the farm was down a very steep incline on a tarmac surface and very often the horse would slip and your heart would be in your mouth, but they were marvellous animals and always recovered. When the cart was emptied in the farmyard the best part of all was to ride the cart back to the field.

The summers as I remember them were always very hot and only broken by the occasional violent thunder storms so it was very rare for the harvest to be interrupted.

Until 1922, my year of birth, the village school was only a few hundred yards from the cottages going up "Dirty Lane" - so called I suspect due to the fact it finished on the edge of the fields and the horses and carts would bring all the chalky mud onto the road. The headmaster and his family, the Askews, lived in a thatched cottage very near to the school

which was first opened as a school in the early 1800s and, I believe, families had to pay a penny a week for each child attending. Mum and Dad attended this school and would probably have left at the age of twelve. Both were very literate and could certainly recite the 12x tables and the handwriting was probably better than many could perform in this day and age.

In 1922 a new school was opened at the other end of the village, about half a mile from Church End. This was the school Dorry, Eddy and I attended until we were fourteen years old. Eighty years on and it is still the village school with very little change, although nowadays children only go there until they are eleven of course and then have to go to Stevenage. Before the 2nd World War Stevenage was four miles away, but due to the New Town being built after the 2nd WW, now Stevenage is only one mile away! If a child passed the examinations, and if the parents could afford it, Grammar School education was available at Alleynes Grammar in Stevenage.

There were no school buses in those days and few families had a car, I would say if the family had a car the children would be going to a private school. The transport used in those days was the bicycle and the road between Walkern and Stevenage is very hilly and very twisting. In the good weather it was not so big a problem but in bad weather one had to resort to Shank's Pony (walking). The first bus services started about 1930 to Stevenage and Hitchin, a small market town eight miles from Walkern. Initially there would be two buses a day probably Tuesdays and Saturdays, market days. During the school holidays Granddad Swain who lived just a the top of the lane from our house, only a quarter of a mile away, would take me to Hitchin market on a Tuesday, a rare happy event.

There was no chance of any of the Swain family having a Grammar School education although I know we would all have passed the tests. We were always clean and tidy and well dressed and top of our class.

It was a disaster when Dad died on Boxing Day 1933 after a very short illness. He was a master painter and decorator and had worked in Welwyn since 1919 after the First World War. Welwyn is a town about ten miles from where we lived. Dad would cycle to work on a very old bicycle, no "umpteen" gears in those days. Come rain come shine he would never miss going to work and very often had to take all his tools with him. He would never think of going to work with dirty boots, you could always see your face in them and he was so well dressed as people would not allow any Tom, Dick or Harry to work in their mansions and one had to be a master craftsman to decorate them, consequently Dad spent all of his time in these places. The working hours were 8am until 5pm, Mum putting up his "beaver" a half loaf of bread with a lump of butter and a piece of cheese or meat pressed into the middle of it. This would be eaten with a trusty penknife and washed down with cold tea carried in a can or an empty beer bottle. Some days there would be meat pie, a rare treat one would imagine.

I remember there was talk at one time of the family moving to Welwyn but nothing came of it. In 1930 Dad bought himself a new bicycle, a Raleigh with three speed gears, what a boon that must have been, and it was followed a year or so later with a motorbike. It was a BSA with "sit up and beg" handlebars, the type that many years later became the fashion for Hell's Angels; it had a transfer on the petrol tank "Sporty Boy". As in those days it had a throaty exhaust, everyone complained how noisy it was but Dad did not think it was too bad; nonetheless he would push it over the river bridge before he started it up, so as not to cause a nuisance. It was only after he had to have his ears syringed that he then agreed with everyone, it *was* noisy.

Dad was not to enjoy his leisure rides to work for very long. As a painter he would make all his own paint with linseed oil turpentine and lead. A small cut in his thumb would be sufficient to end his life, ironic when he

had survived being wounded five times in the 1914- 1918 war, one of the wounds being from a bullet passing through his side, the webbing belt he was wearing with a hole back and front was kept as a souvenir along with his uniform and other things in a brown trunk. There were also many "War Illustrated" magazines that I would avidly read. The death certificate showed Dad had died of a Streptococci germ; in the days before antibiotics, this was a killer.

Dad and Mum had been promised one of the council houses being built along Stevenage Road, just along from where Dad's brother Uncle Jack, Aunt Eva and family, Nancy, Peggy, Victor, Derek and Donald lived. Whether or not it was because it was Christmas, or for some other reason perhaps, Mum could not bear to go back to our house after Dad's funeral so we all moved in with them. Eleven of us in a three bedroom house with no running water. Even though these were nearly new houses, there were no facilities such as flush lavatories but at least there was electricity - but only for lighting, no such things as immersion heaters for hot water.

Looking back it was an act of great self-sacrifice to put us all up at a minute's notice, as it were, and we must have stayed there for several weeks until we moved into our new house number 15 Stevenage Road. Although there was a lot more room than at Church End, the facilities were little better. Cooking was still in an oven by the side of the fire which was in the living room, only a tiny kitchen with just a sink and a back door. The water tap was outside, between the houses. We had a back and a front door, and a large back garden. We had a new innovation that might have resulted in the house being burned down: to make a quick cup of tea or fry an egg perhaps, we had a Primus stove. Much on the same lines as a plumber's lamp, it worked on the principle of paraffin passing through a heated jet and atomising, when it was working properly it would burn with a clean blue flame but if the pressure was increased with the pump before the methylated spirits had heated the jet, neat paraffin would spurt out

and ignite like a flame thrower - a few times the whole contraption had to be thrown out of the back door.

The total income in the house was fifteen shillings a week, ten shillings for Mum being a widow and five shillings a week for us three children. I cannot remember exactly how much rent we had to pay, I believe it was something like two or three shillings, nonetheless there was very little spare and it was just a question of survival. Mum had worked all her time since leaving school "in service". This was the main occupation for girls, starting as a "skivvy" doing all the dirty jobs to eventually work your way up to being a cook - if you were good enough. We were fortunate in that Mum was a very good cook and was able to feed us well and cheaply. Dorry was fourteen in 1934 so it was only a year after Dad died when we had another income. Like her mother before her Dorry went to work as a maid in the Rectory, but only for a short time. The Industrial Revolution had spread to our part of the world at last and when the Bonder Stocking factory opened in Baldock about five miles from Walkern, and a bike ride away, Dorry changed her job.

It was not long after that, January 1936, when I left school. I wanted to train as a radio engineer and the only shop that repaired radios was in Stevenage. Mum took me over there to see the man who ran the shop, so long ago I cannot remember his name. He said we would have to pay him seven shillings and sixpence a week - there were no free apprentice schemes in those days. That of course was out of the question so I had to follow the same course that most young boys and men took, a choice of working on a farm or in the local beer and mineral water factory, Wrights.

Wrights employed 30 or 40 men in the factory and 10 or twelve lorry drivers who distributed the mineral waters, cider, wine and malt tonic as it was called, very much like beer but lower gravity (lower alcoholic value), around Hertfordshire. In the summer and especially at Christmas we

would be working 12 hours a day. There were no rules then regarding how many hours a day a juvenile could work.

In the evenings along with another boy Jack Hart we had a spare time job looking after the tennis courts behind the factory belonging to the Wright family. They were “hard courts” and needed constant weeding and lines painting for which we were paid a penny halfpenny an hour in old money (just over halfpenny in new money). It was a constant embarrassment always to have to go and ask for our money, it was never paid at the end of a week as normal wages were. The Wright family as factory owners were very rich people but very tight with money.

I was always available to earn a few bob extra and there were jobs we were paid a bit extra for. Every couple of years or so the two steam boilers had to be inspected by a Government authority. These boilers were about 15 feet long and four feet in diameter with a two feet tube running through the middle which meant there was only 18 inches headroom, the tube was offset through the middle of the boiler, where the fire was to heat the water into steam. Walkern was in a very hard water area so a considerable amount of lime-scale accumulated especially on the rivets which were the parts the inspector was particularly interested in, for obvious reasons. All this scale had to be removed with a chipping hammer, two men and a boy were employed on the job. No prizes for guessing who the boy was and who had to go in first and crawl the length of the boiler to work at the farthest end away from the 15-inch round hole which was the entrance to the boiler. On the first day or two the boiler was still very hot, imagine if you can what it was like, especially when the men were always playing tricks, shouting “Les is in there now, put the lid on and we will go home”!

Another very unpleasant job was grinding ginger root for the ginger beer, but there was no such thing as dust extraction and the dust up one’s nose is not to be recommended! Yet another unpleasant job was loading the

returned dirty bottles into trays that were then lowered into a tank of very hot water containing caustic soda. To speed the process one had to pick up the bottles from the crates one for each finger, so you could pick up four bottles in each hand. There was no problem putting the bottles in the trays but picking them up when they were hot and still wet with the solution was not so good, very quickly the skin was removed from between the fingers. We were constantly working in water during the bottling process which meant we all wore clogs. Broken glass was a hazard so cut fingers was always on the agenda, no first aid equipment either. Not a pleasant place to work.

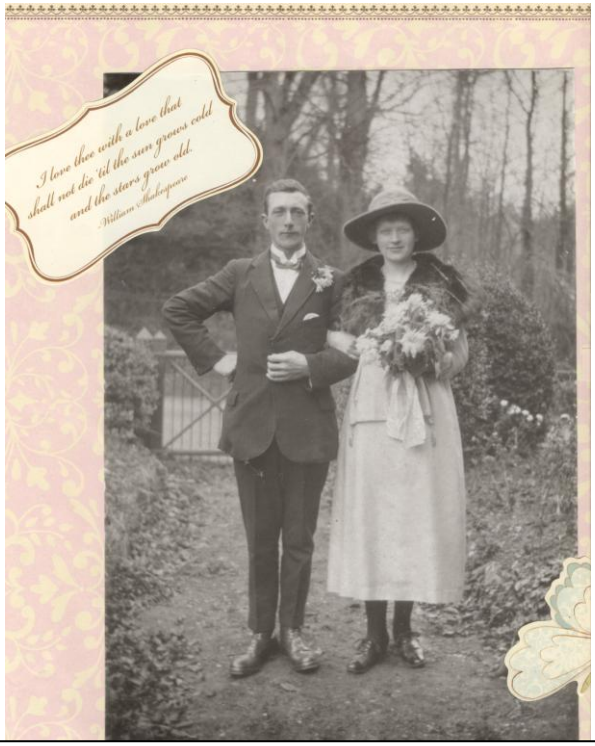
When I was seventeen years old I was offered the opportunity to take driving lessons. It all came about when the boss, Master Freddy Wright saw me driving a small lorry, a 1930 vintage Morris Commercial, round the factory which was used to collect all the broken glass each day from the two bottling plants. At four o'clock every day all the management would go over to the house behind the factory for tea and it was about this time the glass had to be collected. I was never taught by anyone how to drive the old lorry, one day I got in it and from then onwards I used to do it, voluntarily. I was not reprimanded for driving it but boy Wright, as he was affectionately named, suggested I should have proper driving lessons by one of the drivers. It was also suggested when I could drive on the road there might be the possibility of a job outside as a "traveller". The commercial travellers as they were titled in those days used small 5 cwt. Morris vans, same as the well known Morris 8. A driver, Jack Miles, would take me out and teach me to drive. As it turned out I would take him to the Rising Sun, a pub just outside the village, leave him there whilst I drove around on my own and pick him up on the way back. There were no driving tests in those days, of course, and I cannot remember having a Provisional Licence.

In May 1939 my half-brother Son who was four years older than me wanted to join the Territorial Army. Although I know now there was a crisis in Europe with the rise of Hitler and Fascism but then we were just country bumpkins and no idea what was going on outside our own little sphere, there was no TV and few of us had radios or read newspapers, apart from looking at the pictures. It certainly wasn't patriotism that gave Son the urge, he just needed a bit of excitement I suppose, life was pretty humdrum in the village even for him who had a car and other luxuries very few others had, which brings me to Son's background. His father Thomas Morrison was an Australian killed in France in the first World War in 1918, he was one of the Anzacs. At the end of the war Mum married again hence I am here to tell this tale. Mum came into a considerable sum of money when her first husband was killed - the Australian Government was more generous in that respect than the British.

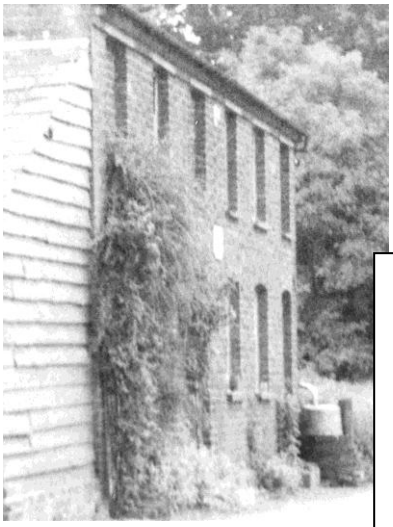
I do not know all the facts or the reason why Son did not live with us, but he lived just next door with Granny and Granddad Cox and his Uncle Bill. At this time he was a shop assistant in Kitchener's grocery stores in the village. The money Mum received from the Australian Government was put into trust for Son until he was eighteen, this was Dad's wish as I understood at the time. With the money, amongst other things, Son bought a Singer 8 car. I have to say he was a very selfish person and he gave none of his inheritance to anyone of us, in deed or kind, regardless of the struggle Mum was having financially. He would bring little luxuries home from the shop and sit and eat them in front of us. He would occasionally ask me to go out with him to local dances but that apart he never took Mum anywhere in his car or suggested I might drive it when I was old enough.

Let's get back to the story of the Territorials. I was only seventeen years old and could not enlist without mother's consent, which I knew for certain would not be forthcoming, but Son said "tell them you are

eighteen". There was no need for birth certificates in those days so that is how I became a soldier in the Territorial Army on the 15th May 1939. Looking back on it now Mum must have been devastated when she heard the news. It was quite a change to do something different and I enjoyed going to the drill hall Thursday evenings and Sunday mornings, doing basic training and learning how to bring the 1914-1918 vintage 4-inch Howitzers into action. There were no uniforms or rifles issued, simply because they were not available. This was still the case when we were called up in the middle of August 1939 with war imminent.



The wedding of Leslie's parents in 1919, Bertie Percy Swain and Rose Emily Morrison née Cox



Family cottage in Walkern

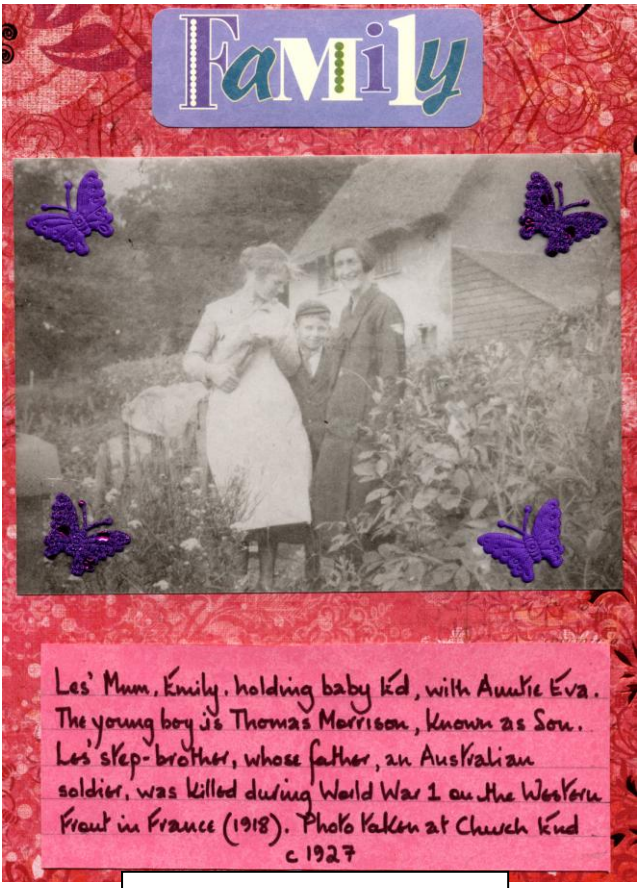
Leslie as a boy, and with his classmates

Eddy, Les, Uncle Ernie and Uncle Jack

Leslie's Mum

Wright's drink factory

Leslie and Dorry with their Dad



Uncle Jack and Auntie Eva

Joyce in her WAAF uniform

Chapter Two: The War Years

Men with the ability to drive were few and far between in those days so I soon had the opportunity to try my skill at driving and I was given an open top truck (like a pickup). It was only a small one and I cannot remember the make or very much about it. The members of the battery who lived in Hitchin were asked if they could billet those who lived some way away. I billeted with Sid Parker whose father owned a small greengrocer's shop with the living quarters over the shop. Sid's father was a Cockney and his Sunday tea consisted of a pint of beer, from the pub two doors away, and a pint of winkles. The premises straddled the river Itch, very useful for washing the vegetables. The bedrooms were three in a line, so to get to the far one you had to pass through the other two. Sid had two sisters who were in the middle room, Sid and I were in the far room so we had to pass through the girls' room but sorry to say nothing exciting came of it! On the 2nd of September we had been to church parade and on our way marching back to the drill hall the sirens sounded and we all dived into the ditches at the side of the road. It was a false alarm of course, just testing! We were only in Hitchin a couple of weeks and then moved to Wymondham in Norfolk - why we were moved there I have no idea, it was just a very small village with no significance at all.

It was to be a big chance for all of us who were under the age of nineteen. We were told the Regiment was going to France and we were classed as "Immatures" not old enough to go to the Front Line. As it so happened they did not go to France and in fact I went overseas before they did, but more of that later. I should have said earlier the Hertfordshire Yeomanry consisted of three Batteries: Hitchin, Peterborough and one other I cannot remember. All we Immatures were sent to Rotherham in Yorkshire to join the 67th York and Lancs Heavy Anti-Aircraft regiment. We were billeted in an old school at Parkgate just outside Rotherham but only half a mile from the gun site at Greaseborough Tops. It was now winter time and very cold, there was no heating in the old school so we used whatever was

available to keep the fire going. To say we were in one of the biggest coal mining areas in England, it was sacrilege having to burn rolls of music from a pianola that was in the school and any wood that was detachable. More wooden huts had been built on the gun site to accommodate us and here we were a little more comfortable, each hut sleeping about twenty of us. With an intake of conscripted men there were over a hundred of us on the site. A more cosmopolitan lot one could not imagine but as I remember we all got along quite well and, apart from being ribbed about the way we talked, the locals and the original members of the unit accepted us.

We were all "proper" soldiers kitted out with uniforms. Because the Y&L was formerly a cavalry regiment our uniform was a service jacket with knee breeches, puttees and spurs, would you believe it?! I wish I still had the photographs I had taken wearing it. On the first leave I had, back in Walkern, I was constantly asked what sort of horses did we have?

Life consisted of constant training on the guns and we were all given a particular job on the gun: a sergeant who was number 1; 2 and 3 were gun layers; my job was fuse setter number 4; the other seven members were ammunition numbers. There were four 4.5" guns, previously naval guns, and a command post with a Predictor which had four operators, one on each side of a square box-like instrument about 30" cube on an eye height stand. Two of the operators followed the plane through a binocular-like device (one followed the height and the other the horizontal flight path), the other two put in data given by the staff in the dugout. Information was constantly being given from the Meteorological office somewhere in England on wind speed at various heights.

Also on the command post was a "height finder" - it had three operators, two following the plane as on the Predictor and one calling out the height of the plane. Eventually this information was passed electronically to the Predictor and from there to the guns - all the gun layers had to do was follow the pointer from the Predictor but it was not for some time, a year

or more, before the fuse setting was done automatically and not before the blitz on Sheffield in 1940.

There were many small raids over Sheffield and Rotherham the targets being the large steel works of Steel Peech and Tozer, and other very large industrial sites. As the raids were always in the night and there were no searchlights in the area, the only defence the AckAck could provide was to try and stop the dropping of the bombs on the vital steel works. The strategy was to put up a box barrage, the 67th. It consisted of three batteries one at Brinsworth another at Canklow, both on the outskirts of Rotherham making twelve guns all firing over particular areas. To have a chance of hitting the target a plane needed to fly at a constant height, speed and course and the object of a box barrage was to prevent this. It was known some time before an air raid which towns were to be the target. The Germans having captured France and the Netherlands could send out two wireless beams from different locations that converged, there they would drop their bombs. There were means of detecting these beams, and the box barrage was designed to put the enemy off the path. There was only an isolated plane brought down but very little damage was done to the industry in the area, so was the box barrage a success or was it luck?

Considering one thousand rounds of 4.5 shells weighing nearly a hundredweight each (50kg) from our site alone it must have been a deterrent. What goes up must come down, and it made one wonder how many of the hundreds of people killed in Sheffield that night were hit by falling shrapnel. If the fuse was not set properly on AckAck ammunition it either went off prematurely or came back to earth as a very devastating missile. The ammunition in a gunpit is stored in lockers around the gun, as the gun is traversed to follow the path of the target the ammo is loaded onto a trolley arrangement and, as the fuse setter, I had a ring spanner that fitted over the nose of the shell and a bicycle torch on my gas mask so

that I could see what I was doing. The fuse ring was marked in figures and I was responsible for setting the fuse. A 4.5 gun makes a lot of noise when it is fired and a considerable flash, there were four of them all firing a round every minute or less. The ammo numbers should not have taken the shell off the trolley to "ram it up the spout" (load the gun) until I shouted "fuse set" - it was inevitable that somehow somewhere the fuse was not set properly, if at all, from the 12 guns that were firing 3,000 rounds on that one night alone. Incidentally, every cartridge case (5" in diameter 30" long) had to be washed out with very hot water to be sent back to the munitions works to be reloaded. Not so long after the raid, a search light and sonar and eventually radar was installed on the site; but by that time we had moved to Ilkeston and Long Eaton in Nottingham to protect, as far as possible, the Rolls Royce factory at Derby and again the raids on the factory did no damage.

I have said nothing up to now about the romantic liaisons whilst in the army. I say whilst in the army because I had no commitments before joining, at all. Like all young men I had crushes on girls but either I got fed up or she did, they did not last.

To avoid hurt to others I will only say there was a young girl courted in Walkern for a short spell to the extent I took her home on a couple of occasions. Gwen worked at the new Rectory which was only a few hundred yards from the house we used to live in at Church End, before Dad died. Gwen was a Welsh girl who worked as a maid along with Sally, who incidentally married Ron Canning a mate of mine. He died but Sally still lives in the village. Gwen is living back in Wales I believe.

There was only one girl I really liked, Katherine. She lived in Stevenage very near to Uncle Joe and Aunt Emily. When I was at School I would go over to see them, and Katherine and I would play together but as she grew up and left school she became a very sophisticated young lady and had no time for a country bumpkin so I was left to worship from afar!

Whilst in Rotherham I was courting Lillian Booth for a while and would go to her house for a meal or to stay for a weekend but I cannot remember what went wrong but we parted company.

The same thing happened with Joyce and me, except I do not remember going to her house before I went abroad. Somehow or another we got together again briefly before I went abroad and she was my lifeline for the next four years, our love letters would have made a good book!

Chapter Three: Overseas

It was a great surprise when we moved to Bingley in North Yorkshire, May 1941. We took over an old cotton mill to be kitted out for going abroad. We were not told we were going, but giving us khaki drill and toupees left little doubts it was somewhere hot! We were given embarkation leave but were not allowed to say where we thought we were going and I do not remember much about it except brother Eddy and me, he was only 14 years old at the time, went fishing down at the Arch through Cecil Riches farm yard. I cannot remember if we caught any fish.

We sailed from Greenoch on SS Almanzora through the Firth of Clyde July 1941. I remember vividly going on board and being taken below decks to our home for the next 12-14 weeks. The deck we were on was below the waterline and our beds were traditional hammocks. I remember as if it were yesterday our first night at sea, waking up to a gently swinging hammock. It was only when I set my feet down I began to feel sick and was like it for the next week or so. Dickie Whittaker my pal at the time was unaffected and scoffed all the food I could not eat. One thing I remember about the food was the beetroot, we seemed to have it with everything. There were a thousand men on board, a full regiment on a boat that weighed in I believe at 1,000 tons?

Being a merchant ship it was allowed a single gun that could only fire to the stern, as I understood it this meant it was not a fighting ship and had a different status under the rules of war - what they were to this day I do not know as it would, like hundreds of other merchant vessels, be sunk if it came in the sight of a foreign warship.

Volunteers were called for to man this gun during the whole voyage, there was a distinct advantage in volunteering as it meant they would be in a cabin on the top decks rather than in a hammock with hundreds of others below the water line; the only disadvantage was that sleep would be lost

as the gun was manned 24 hours a day and there was no shelter against the weather. We were well out of the bad weather in the Irish Sea and in the Atlantic heading for South Africa when the manning started, so we had no inclement weather to face. Due to U-boat activity in the area the convoy had to constantly change course - sailing boats would call it tacking - this was necessary because a U-boat had to fix on a target that was on a straight course. This tacking obviously made the journey nearly twice as long as it would normally have been. At various times we saw great spouts of water as the escort vessels threw out depth charges, whether in earnest or just to be on the safe side we never found out, but there was a Fokker Wolfe Condor, a German flying boat, that stalked the convoy for what seemed like days on end and of course their intention was to direct the U-boats onto the convoy.

It took twelve weeks in all with a week in Sierra Leone; we did not dock, the ship was anchored in the harbour and we were surrounded by natives in small canoes shouting for Glasgow Tanners which were thrown into the water and they dived in for them. Many of the boats had fruit for sale, a rope was thrown up, it was tied to a basket which contained the fruit but the natives were wily enough not to send the fruit up until they had been paid for it, they obviously had dealings with British squaddies before!

The next stop was in Durban where we were feted to the extreme; people came to the dockside in their very expensive cars and whisked us away to their palatial homes. To have a bath in fresh water was a luxury we had not had for some weeks and then we were wined and dined for the day and finally taken back to the Almanzora, what a treat we had had. Evidently every troop ship that put into Durban the soldiers were given the same hospitality, wonderful people the South Africans. When the boats docked, and when they left, a woman stood on the dockside and sang an appropriate song - I cannot remember the song.

Very soon after leaving Durban the warships that had been escorting us, the cruisers Prince of Wales and the Repulse, the destroyers (I cannot remember the names) and the aircraft carrier Ark Royal left us to finish our journey alone up the Red Sea, first of all to Aden. Appropriately Aden is called "The White Man's Grave" due to the temperature of over 100 degrees Fahrenheit; the heat on the boat was intolerable, even worse than being on shore. All those who so wished were allowed ashore but I was in no condition to go anywhere, the ship's nursing orderlies never left my side sponging me down to keep me alive I suppose as I was in the throes of a heat stroke.

I was still very poorly when we reached our final destination Port Suez, the entrance to the Suez Canal, so poorly in fact it was touch and go whether or not to take me off the ship or leave me on and take me back to the UK. As it was I was strapped to a stretcher and lowered to the quay by a bosun's chair - in other words the stretcher was slid down a rope. I was then transported to a field hospital at Suez, just tents in the desert; fortunately I was only there for a few days and then declared fit enough to return to my unit. Whilst overseas, if for any other reason you left your unit, you first of all had to go to the Base Depot and from there back to your unit; hence I was taken to Port Suez railway station and told to get the next train to Cairo and I would be picked up by army transport and taken to the base depot at Almaza (what a coincidence Almanzora – Almaza this is not a fiction of my imagination), which is in the Heliopolis region of Cairo. I should mention here that whilst on the boat all our money had been taken off us to change into Egyptian currency and consequently I had not an "acker" (slang for Piastre), to my name.

Detraining, army language for getting off a train, the station platform was crowded with local ragamuffins eager to earn an acker or two for carrying a squaddie's kit bag; before I could say Jack Robinson one had grabbed my kit and was racing along the platform, he would not have been so eager

had he known my financial situation! Having reached the Bedford army truck he set down my kit and held out his hand for his reward, pity he had not seen the very large squaddie driver who gave him a clout round the ear and a size ten up his backside and appropriate words that meant “off you go”, imshi in Arabic.

Returning to the base depot, the living quarters again were tents in the desert but fortunately I was only there two or three days and I was taken back to Cairo station, this time with money in my pocket and a lot wiser about the tricks of the local populace, and told to catch the train to Alexandria. Anyone who was in the Middle East at that time will know what I mean when I say those who complain about British Rail should have experienced a train ride on the Egyptian Railways. Single carriages, no toilets, wooden slatted seats and more passengers hanging on the outside than there were inside, all this with the temperature in the nineties and vendors with their large plaited baskets full of all sorts of food pushing their way along the corridor. What with the smell of garlic and the locals not having the ablution facilities of the Western World it was an experience I would not wish on anyone. The flies were everywhere, there was no getting away from them and on a crowded train worse than one can imagine.

Eventually after what seemed ages I arrived at Alexandria and met up again with all my pals, what a relief to be back again with those I knew.

The gun site overlooked the harbour protecting the ships that were loading and unloading, refuelling and rearming the warships with ammunition. At least we were now in wooden huts on solid ground with most facilities needed for a civilised existence and it was a quiet period with no raids from the Italian air force who were the most likely visitors.

My stay with the family, 187 Battery 67th York and Lancs regiment was to be a short one.

Getting up the next morning I had a very sore throat and it was so bad I had to report sick; there was a very strict army rule for doing this, go on the first parade as usual and the order was given “fall out the sick” those who felt they needed to see the MO were then ordered to take one step forward march, left or right turn and marched off to the medical room.

I felt very ill and must have looked it, the doctor shouted at me to go out and come back in again, you look half dead man I was told, never a truer word spoken! I was told to gargle with salt water and if I was no better to report again in the morning, when I was much worse to the extent I was taken to the naval hospital in Alexandria where I was treated for tonsillitis. A new WREN doctor came the following morning took one look at my throat asked for a swab and put the entire ward in isolation, the sailor in the next bed was all packed ready to go home to the UK he was not amused. Within the hour I was transported off to the isolation ward an annexe to the main hospital.

I had diphtheria, a killer before the advent of serum. Luckily the serum was only just being tested and I suppose myself and another in the ward, Jack Brookes, a New Zealander who had just taken part in the battle of Sidi Rezege in the Western Desert, were the guinea pigs. I remember it was a very large syringe - about a quarter of a pint I should think - but it must have worked because we survived. The treatment consisted of laying on one’s back, not being allowed to lift your head off the pillow for two or three weeks. We were fed liquids through the spout of a very small tea pot.

I know where I caught the diphtheria: whilst I was waiting on Cairo station for the train to Alexandria I was very thirsty, no shops or anything like that on the station, only “Sahi wallahs” Arabs with a churn strapped to their back containing black tea and only one glass that all the customers used, no washing out or wiping or anything like that. I am sure that is where I caught it when I drank the tea.

When we were fit enough to walk we were allowed out in the town. The usual haunt was The Naval Club and we went there to play Bingo, have a beer or two; there were very big money prizes, to the extent anyone who won had to have an escort back to their ship or wherever. Being in hospital we had to wear hospital blues, a jacket and trousers in light blue, I understood the reason for this was to stop anyone in the forces who was in hospital from going into brothels of which there were many.

Coming out of the club I suddenly noticed my wallet was missing from my pocket; the "blues" had very inadequate pockets and the natives were adept pick pockets. Jack could speak Arabic like a native and we grabbed hold of any suspicious looking characters (they all looked suspicious) and Jack was doing his best to get some information from them without success. In the town there was a Services Investigation Bureau (SIB), I was told often all valuables would be taken out and the wallet pushed into a post box but it did not happen and all the photographs I carried with me from the beginning were never to be recovered.

Our main occupation to pass away the time was playing cards; Jack was the only one who could play Bridge so he had to teach some of us to play with him.

After being in hospital for six weeks I was sent to a convalescence camp at El Ballah, in a desert region beside the Suez Canal about halfway between Port Suez and Port Said, the two extremities of the canal. I must have spent a few weeks there, do not remember exactly, but it was in small tents sleeping about six men and very little headroom and very cramped with a strict allowance of water and on one occasion we had no water for a day or two - convalescence indeed!

I do remember one of our battleships passing through the canal on its way to be repaired, probably in India as it was going down towards Port Suez, evidently as we later found out it had been damaged by limpet mines

whilst in Alexandria harbour by Italian frog men getting through the submarine nets that were stretched across the entrance to the harbour. We also heard that the Prince of Wales and the Repulse were sunk by Japanese Kamikaze pilots in the Indian Ocean after they left our convoy - what a disaster!

It was not long before I was back at Almaza base depot again and this time for a longer stay.

My regiment the 67th Y&L had not stayed long at Alexandria and in fact were now in India. The question might be asked why did I not know this? There were no means of communicating with one another in the forces out there, and of course no one was allowed to say where they were, and it was only when I got back to base depot I was informed where they were and promised, as soon as sufficient numbers accumulated, we would all be put on a draft for India. The draft never materialised and I was put on a draft to Tobruk that was under siege by the Germans that were now down to Mersa Matruh, only 100 miles from Alexandria.

It is worth mentioning here, in the early stages of the war in the Western Desert we were only fighting the Italians and had driven them out of Tunisia and would have driven them all the way back to Algeria had not the Generals or politicians decided that Greece and Crete needed reinforcing and depleted our armies who had done so well in routing the Italians. When the Germans came in to assist the Italians, with General Rommel in command and his Panzer divisions against our puny Honey tanks and badly equipped and under strength forces, in a few weeks Rommel had swept down the desert cutting off the major port of Tobruk. The troops there withstood the siege for some time but, due to lack of supplies and being outnumbered, were eventually all killed or taken prisoner.

There were 13 of us on the draft and before going out each man was examined to make sure he was fit; at the time I had a sweat rash, a very common ailment and was told I was fit to go but sent to the MI room for treatment first. Returning to the office for further instructions I was told only 12 men were required and I was taken off the draft. Whether or not the others got to Tobruk before it fell I would never know, they were to be landed by boat of course because there was no access to the port by land.

The next draft I was put on was to join the City of Glasgow H.A.A. in Palestine. This was to be a new experience in that I had only had training of static heavy anti-aircraft guns; the C of G were equipped with 3.7-inch mobile guns which could be moved about very quickly. Within five minutes or so the guns could be unhitched from the Matador towing trucks and go into action; the operation of the guns was the same, it was only the procedure of lowering the four giant legs with a screw pad on each corner that lowered the platform to the ground between the wheels. The 3.7-inch was in fact a copy of the German 88mm AA gun that had proved so successful against our tanks in the desert - it could be used both for ground attack and against aircraft.

It was not very long before we were on the borders of Syria and Turkey at Allepo. By this time, late 1941, the Germans were taking the USSR apart and I suppose it was considered a threat that they would come down through Turkey into Syria and Palestine.

The conditions were appalling. It rained continuously, the field was a quagmire. We were in small bell tents, as the name suggests they were round like a wigwam and twelve of us slept with the feet to the centre tent pole. If you were unfortunate enough to be near the front flap where everyone came and went it was even worse.

Although I was not a driver I was very often asked to drive a jeep taking the officers into the town - why did I get all the good jobs?

Next door to our camp there was an RAF site although we never saw aeroplanes, only personnel walking about on tar macadam with wellingtons on, whilst we were up to our ankles in mud with just our boots on.

Who made the decisions regarding troop movements I do not know but all the way to the north of Syria for just a few weeks and then back down to Haifa the port of Palestine and on the boat to Cyprus. It seemed that Greece and Crete were now in German hands and Cyprus would be next perhaps?

This was a much better place to be, by the sea at Famagusta was idyllic, the natives were friendly and many of them spoke English and even the money was familiar in some ways, one pound notes but only worth about two shillings if I remember correctly and the old hexagonal threepenny bit was cut in half for some denomination. Wine was plentiful and cheap and there was a night club in the capital Nicosia.

We were under canvas of course (sleeping in tents), and all the facilities were primitive, just a hole in the ground with a pole across to sit on - try it sometime! They were eventually updated to a row of seats with buckets underneath and at the same time we were joined by a regiment of Sikhs who did not sit on the seat but stood up on it, not only mud on the seats very often they left their “chocolate on the counter”.

The only excitement was when the Germans sent reconnaissance planes over, the JU88 flying at forty thousand feet is out of range of a 3.7 AA gun so it was just a matter of tracking it, but we were not allowed to fire in any case, that would have disclosed our position.

Being a tropical zone there were the usual problems with insects; although mosquitoes were a nuisance the worst little bug was the sandfly, it was so small it could not be seen with the naked eye but it could be seen making

tiny funnels as it burrowed down into the sand. It could bite or sting, I am not sure which but it could, and often did, give the recipient a fever, very much like the flu. Although we had mosquito nets these were of little use against this mite.

Apart from these little horrors Cyprus was a very good place to be, swimming in the Mediterranean, night clubs in Nicosia, cheap wine and friendly natives, only the threat of invasion was always in our minds.

The feudal system in the country was very different from our customs; for instance the women did all the work whilst the men spent most of their time drinking and having meetings about which we never found out. Generally they were very poor and all dressed alike, especially the women who always wore long black dresses with a hood.

A new airstrip was being constructed and all the able-bodied females, young and old, would sit around a huge pile of rocks with hammers breaking the rocks into small pieces for making the runway; when their basket was full they would carry it and were told where to put it by the engineers in charge of construction. We left the island before it was finished, if it was ever finished? Whilst all this was going on the men would be sitting in a group drinking Cognac. The women also did all the work in the field and I have photographs of them in rows across a field cutting corn by hand with a sickle.

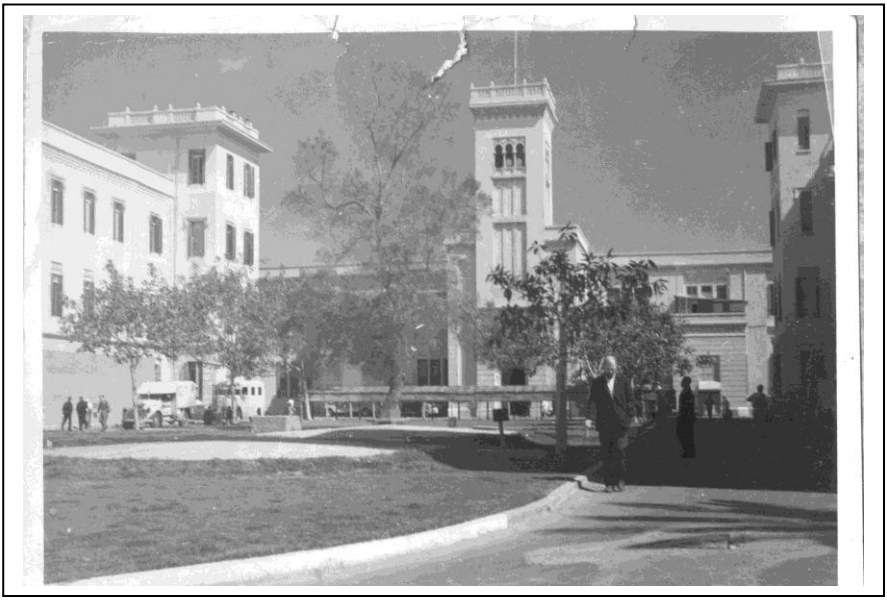
There was a gun site there but it was only manned part time. When we were detailed to spend time there, it was an opportunity to get rid of the awful cigarettes, Victory Vs - where they were made we never found out. They were just in a cardboard normal cigarette packet, no wrapping at all so it is not difficult to imagine what they were like in temperatures of 80 or 90 degrees Fahrenheit. The natives bought them from us, could not get enough of them.

I spent my 21st birthday at the site and there was a wedding at the same time in the nearby village of Timboo (that is what we called it but never saw it written up anywhere), and of course we were invited.

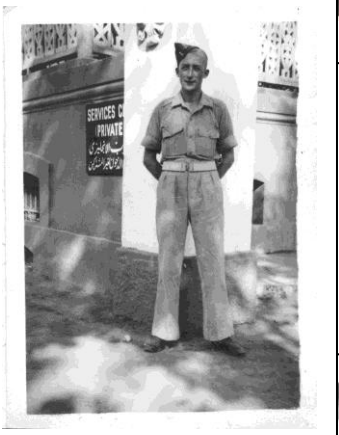
The ceremony was in usual Greek style for that period: after the vows the couple, arm in arm, walked round the circle of friends and family who pinned money on their clothes.

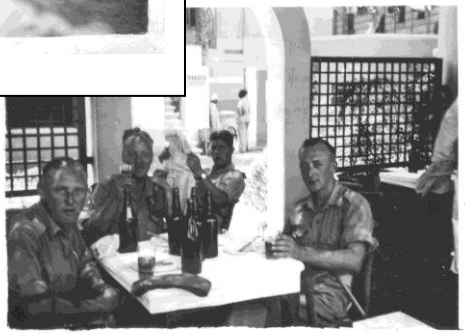
The refreshments, as such, including the drink were served individually so when you were given a glass of wine or whatever you had to drink it and give the glass back for the next person. I was quickly inebriated and had to be assisted back to the camp.

The celebrations went on for three days, the groom according to tradition had to build a house before the wedding - it was really just a mud hut, there were some properly built houses but even so not with bricks and mortar as we know.



Alexandria Hospital.
Les is standing 4th from the right.






AUSTRALIA
AND
NEW ZEALAND
1916-1918

So life went on until it was decided in late 1943 that anti-aircraft was no longer required. The Germans and Italians were out of North Africa and the Allied armies were in Italy so big changes were about to happen, to me and all the other members of the City of Glasgow 168 HAA regiment.

It was also decided at this time the Artillery would have their own Signallers, up until now the Royal Corps of Signals had provided communications for the RA. Volunteers were required to go back to Egypt and attend a course learning to be wireless operators. The course was held at the signals HQ at El Mena, right by the side of the Pyramids, and I spent some time there learning how to operate various wireless communication receivers and reading and sending Morse code.

Knowing how interested I had always been in electronics it was no surprise I committed myself very well and got a good result. I then had to go back to the RA base depot at Almaza at Heliopolis, near Cairo, and was sent from there to attend another course on Mines and Weapons at the Black Watch (famous Scottish Infantry regiment) base at El Kantara on the Suez Canal.

This was exciting to say the least, practising finding mines digging in the sand with a bayonet whilst machine guns were firing tracer bullets over us to make us keep our heads down - it certainly achieved that. Although not exactly my cup of tea, again I came out with a good result to the extent I was promoted to Lance Bombardier and given one stripe - the lowliest NCO in the army!

So it was back to base depot where I had to spend some time kicking my heels waiting for a suitable posting to another regiment. In the meantime, as I found out later, all the gunners from the 168 regiment were transferred to the infantry and sent to Italy again - another lucky escape, I was not nicknamed Lucky Lal for nothing!

After a period of time everyone who had not a regiment to return to was posted to the X list, as it was known, of course I was in that category so I was reduced to the ranks again, lost my stripe I had tried so hard to win.

Eventually I was posted to the 14th RHA in the 7th armoured division and back to Syria where we were equipped with Priest 100mm self propelled guns and Sherman tanks. The Priest was a new concept, a 4 inch howitzer mounted on a cut-down version of a tank i.e. the turret removed and the gun mounted in the well of the tank operating the wireless. We were the eyes of the guns, reporting back to them where their shells were landing so we were in the forward position; formerly there would have been a signaller with the artillery officer in what was known as the observation post sending the information back, so now it can be seen why it was felt necessary to train artillery men to do the job. The observation post was not a very healthy place to be - if you can see the enemy presumably they can see you, and if they could knock you out the guns would be firing blind. In the old days it would just be an officer and signaller in a pothole communicating to the guns by a telephone and a mile of cable.

Our role was to go to the Far East, fighting the Japanese, but it was never to come to that; by the time we were ready to go, it was all over. The war in Europe was over and before very long the Atom bomb had put paid to the Japanese so I had come through it unscathed but a much wiser man, in more respects than learning how to fight.

I do not remember there being a lot of celebration for the fact the war was over and we would all be soon returning home, the only real thing I remember is being transferred to a transit camp in Haifa Palestine, as it was then.

Every member of the armed services overseas was given a Python number, an acronym I cannot remember what the interpretation of it was, sufficient to say it was determined by one's age and length of service. My

Python number was 28 which meant they started at No. 1 and cleared all those then onto No. 2 and so on.

My date of release was provisionally May 1946 and my first and foremost aim was to get back home. I was not very long in the transit camp and the day came when my name and number were called out to pack up my kit and be ready to board the troopship Duchess of Athlone, a luxury liner before the war. Soon I would be back in Blighty or so I thought, but it was not to be quite as quick as we hoped.

We set sail across the Mediterranean, next stop England. In the army no one tells you anything, so we had no idea why we were going back into port after just one day at sea, it was the port of Alexandria Egypt.

We were all paraded on deck and ordered to prepare for disembarkation. It transpired the Polish refugees were a more deserving case than us so we were again put into a transit camp. Can anyone imagine the feelings of the men, we were all ready to mutiny - of course we never did.

I should say that these transit camps were out in the desert under canvas, small marquee type tents; there were no sides, it was just a cover over a six feet deep square hole, the reason being when the Khamseen wind blew up sandstorms it would have piled up the sand onto the tent and eventually fetch it down. Whilst waiting for your number to come up there were no other duties and nowhere to go, so it was a very boring time filled mostly by playing cards or having a beer when the NAAFI opened which was infrequent. We would go on parade first thing in the morning, hoping your name would be called to pack up ready to go.

I cannot remember how long I was in the camp but eventually I was one of the lucky ones and taken to the docks and boarded the tramp steamer the Batory. It was a very rough crossing of the Med, storms in the Med are supposed to be as bad as they can get but strangely enough I was not

seasick as I had been on the way out 4 years previously. The accommodation left something to be desired also! Who cared, we were on our way home at last.

It was only a few days journey to Marseilles, then on a train across France to Newhaven, that took us about two days if I remember right, with stops for food and drink, always with a great reception as they thought we were the liberators I suppose? At Newhaven we were prepared for the channel crossing and fitted up with life belts and warned that the channel was still a hazardous crossing because of mines that were floating around.

I could not believe my eyes when I saw the boat we were to board: the Isle of Thanet! I had been on this boat before, in my choirboy days. Each year we were taken on an outing in the summer school holidays and this particular year we went to London and were taken on a cruise down the Thames, yes the boat was the Isle of Thanet. I know we had only just come through the greatest war in history but surely there ought to have been something a little more prestigious? There was standing room only unless you were fortunate enough to be one of the first on - I wasn't. The fact I am writing this says we arrived in Newhaven safely and boarded a train for London and eventually to the home of the gunners, Woolwich Arsenal. Now you know how the football team got the name The Gunners. The artillery depot at Woolwich is (or was) probably the most regimental barracks in the UK, something we had not been used for a long time and we received many a ticking off for one thing or another, walking across the barrack square was particularly frowned on, you had to go round it.

We were only a day or two there until we were given clothes more suited to England than Egypt, travel warrants, food coupons, etc and we were on our way home.

There were no banners Welcome Home Les, anyone would have thought I had just been to Stevenage or something, poor Mum was not there to welcome me just sister Dorry, baby Geoff and husband Don. I had nowhere I could call home, and after spending a few days with Dorry and visiting all friends and relatives in the village the thing I wanted most was to get on the train for Rotherham and to see Joyce.

I have said very little about Joyce and our relationship in four years apart. One of the most important things when you are away from your friends and family are letters from home; that is the only communication with the outside world. The two most important people in my life were my dear old Mum and Joyce. Joyce kept the letters Mum wrote to her before she died in 1942 and we still have them now.

I have said earlier about our letters, there was a method called Airgraph. We were given a sheet of paper, about A4, on which to write a letter; this was censored by an officer to make sure we were not giving away information that would be of use to the enemy. The letter was then put onto microfilm and when it reached its destination it was reprinted onto a piece of paper about Quarto size, so to write legibly was most important. There was also the facility to send Airmail but they took a long time, two or three weeks. Each time there was a Mail call, which depended on where we were and what we were doing but it was not very often, we would be called on parade and waited anxiously for your name to be called and a letter or on the very odd occasion a parcel. The firm I worked for in the village were very good and would send me a parcel every two or three months with cigarettes (Senior Service) the very best money could buy, two boxes of fifty as well as cakes and biscuits always in tins so I received them in pristine condition.

Most of all I looked forward to the letters from Mum and Joyce and they never failed me.

Chapter Four: Back in England

Somehow, and I have no idea how we arranged it, Joyce and I were to be reunited in Rotherham. Joyce was still in the WAAF so she would be travelling on the same day as me and would meet at her house in Lord Street. By an amazing coincidence we both had to change trains at Peterborough and, as I was going up the stairway from the platform, who should be in front of me but Joyce, a million to one chance I would say. There was no jumping into one another's arms as you would think from seeing all the reunions in films and on the TV today, I cannot remember if we even kissed; our letters apart, I suppose we were nearly strangers. So we continued our journey to Rotherham together.

The rest is just a blur on my memory except I do remember our wedding day. There were very few people at the service on the 13th of November 1945 at St. Barnabas church just off Browning Road. It has since been pulled down and old folks' bungalows built on the site. There was no one from my side of the family and just Joyce's Mum and Dad, brother Colin and Bill Nicholson a close friend who worked with Colin. We had a quiet celebration at the house, remember we had just come through the most traumatic time of our lives, everything was in very short supply; how Joyce managed to get her lovely wedding dress I do not know, as virtually nothing could be purchased without coupons.

There was no problem with my attire, I only had the clothes I stood up in - the good old Battledress as it was called, whereby hangs a tale. Army uniforms were being supplied from the USA, they were much superior to the very rough British Khaki, more green than khaki and fitted better, but getting hold of them unless you had holes in your backside was nigh impossible. The Quartermasters in charge of all the army supplies were renowned for their reluctance to give out new clothes but somehow I had managed to get a tunic and trousers of the USA variety so, although I was not a Beau Brummel, I looked respectable. I had not worn a tie for six

years so Colin helped me tie it! There was no going away for our honeymoon. After just a week I had to go back to Woolwich and Joyce, I believe, was at Penarth in Wales or it may have been Trimingham in Norfolk? Back at Woolwich and returned to normal duties, there were so many of us I am sure they did not know what to do with us. It should be said I was not a member of a Regiment, none of us were, just odd bods who had no attachment.

Eventually my name came up on the notice board. I was to be posted on a certain date: WEF meant "with effect from" but I thought it meant Western European Forces! Four and a half years abroad and they are sending me overseas again? As it happened I was posted to the School of Artillery at Larkhill on the Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire. My job there was in the observation post and I was trained to send signals back to the 5 inch Howitzer guns, correcting their fire onto the target. Officers were being trained as Artillery men and we had one or two narrow escapes when their aim was not quite as good as it might have been; a 5 inch shell makes a big bang and a big hole! We were given leave every weekend and travel warrants issued so we could go home if we wished. By this time Joyce was demobbed but it was too far for me to travel to Rotherham, so I just used to go to Walkern and stay with sister Dorry and family for Saturday and Sunday morning, travelling down on Friday night and back on Sunday night. Lorries waited for us at Amesbury station to take us back to the camp, passion wagons as they were called. One night two of the lorries collided; one going to the station hit the one going to camp loaded with men, it tore the side of the lorry and many men were killed. You needed all the luck there was to survive. Eventually Python number 28 came up and I was sent to York to be demobilised on the 6th of May 1946. I was given some civilian clothes. The suit I wanted was out of stock so I had to wait for that, but had flannel trousers and a jacket overcoat, etc and all the necessary coupons to get my food rations, clothes and petrol - if you were lucky enough to have a car, not many had.

Chapter Five: Back in Civvies

Now I had a decision to make that would probably determine how I lived the rest of my own and my family's life: what sort of job did I want and where would I get such a job? A baby was on the way. Joyce gave me the news that she was pregnant, I cannot remember throwing my hat in the air and shouting hooray, such things in those days were taken as being commonplace! It obviously made a difference as to what sort of job I looked for.

Jack Brookes, the New Zealander I was in hospital with in Alexandria in 1942, had offered us the opportunity to emigrate and to settle there, we could live with him and his family until we found a place of our own, we could also have the use of his car to go job seeking. I had no ties in England and we would probably have taken up the offer were it not for the fact Joyce still had her family and relations all living in Rotherham so it was never a difficult decision.

On leaving the army we were given the opportunity to take training courses in all sorts of occupations; one I was particularly interested in was training to be a wireless correspondent with Reuter news agency. Communications were not at all like they are today and messages were mostly sent by Morse code, hence the need for wireless operators all over the world. The pay was only a subsistence allowance and certainly would not support a family, as Joyce's father Sydney was quick to point out to me; nonetheless I imagine some married men took up the option.

Sid worked at the steel works Steel Peech and Tozer, as did 50% of the Rotherham inhabitants, some 9,000 men and also women, who had been working there during the war, doing men's jobs. The steelworks itself was half a mile long on both sides of the Rotherham to Sheffield road. I had no conception at all of what it was like in a steelworks, there was no showing you round when applying for a job. There were vacancies in the laminated

spring shop. They were all called “shops” - why I do not know, they bore no resemblance to a shop at all. At each end of the works were the steel furnaces. At the Rotherham end there were 6 furnaces, each capable of making a hundred tons of steel every 36 or 48 hours depending on the grade of steel being produced, and at the Sheffield end there were 12 Bessemer process furnaces, so called because they made a different grade of steel also capable of 100 tons each. Imagine the smoke and grime produced by these! It should also be remembered this was only one of many companies producing steel in the area plus all of the other processes associated with steel production. Each time a steel furnace is “tapped” it is like Dante’s Inferno: clouds of yellow sulphurous smoke filling the melting shop. This is where Sid (Joyce’s father) worked in the weighbridge, little wonder he died at the age of 58 with bronchial pneumonia. As well as the smoke from the tapping process there was a constant black smoke emitting from the 200-feet-high chimneys. What a place to start a family!

Laminated springs are used mainly as the shock absorbers between the road and the body of a vehicle, and are made up of plates of steel: long pieces at the top tapering down to a short piece at the bottom, one spring at each corner of the vehicle. Up until the end of the war all laminated springs were made by hand with lengths of steel varying between 3” to 6” wide and 3/8” to 5/8” in thickness and anything from 2 feet to 5 feet in length. A spring 5 feet long having six plates would be fitted on railway carriages and the engine or locomotive would have 22 plates; railway wagons only had 5 plates and were only 3 feet long. To give some idea, a wagon spring would weigh 25kg and a locomotive spring 100kg. The longest plate would be put in a furnace and heated to about 1250 degrees Centigrade then bent on a former to set camber, held in water until it cooled, then re-heated to about 600 degrees C to temper it; subsequent plates would again be heated and shaped to it.

As I was saying, all of these were made by hand until a mechanical spring making plant was put in at the end of the war, all of the equipment coming from Germany as war reparations as they called it, so we had all their old machines and I supposed they had new? So this is what I was letting myself in for when I applied for a job there. The foreman was a Mr. Maurice Senior - I still remember his name 55 years later! He expressed his doubt as to whether I would be strong enough but decided to give me a trial. I also had my doubts about the job!

Initially the hours were 8am until 5:30pm with just half an hour meal break. Everyone except the charge-hands and foreman were learners, as the machinery had never been used in this country before and the concept of making laminated springs by mechanical means was new, hence the name Mechanised Laminated Spring Shop. There was another spring shop just across the river Don from us, where springs were made entirely by hand and had been there for 40 or 50 years.

The mechanised spring shop itself was about 200 yards long and 40 yards wide, situated right on the banks of the river Don which ran through all of the steel works. Unfortunately the machinery in the new mechanised spring shop was old and not in very good condition so there were many visits by the maintenance gangs. It was ironic that most of the equipment came from Germany taken as war reparation! The equipment consisted of a shearing machine capable of cutting 6 inch wide by 5/8 thick high tensile spring steel; the shears were operated by two men, a very noisy operation I can say! The plates - cut to length - then in some cases had to be drilled with a 5/8 inch hole in the centre of the plate.

The next operation, forging, entailed heating the end of the plate to about 1200 degrees C and the end of the plate shaped and slotted. The forging furnaces, of which there were two, were gas fired about 4 yards long with two men on each forging machine one loading the furnace and placing the heated plates adjacent to the machine. As in every job in a steelworks it

was very hot work and the Sweat Towel was an essential item of clothing, a white scarf about 9 inches wide and perhaps a yard long.

After forging at both ends the plates were stacked in hundreds and moved to the next furnace. This was the biggest furnace in the spring shop, 15 yards long and about 3 yards wide running again at about 1200 degrees C; the tunnel was arched as in all of the furnaces, the reason for this being ease of building, needing no roof supports and built with refractory bricks capable of withstanding temperatures of 1350 degrees C. The spring plates were loaded onto trays again capable of withstanding very high temperatures. The springs were loaded in sets of 5 or 10, the longest plates first and so on down to the shortest; as I said earlier a locomotive spring could have as many as 22 plates. A ram operated as necessary by the team at the front of the furnace pushed the trays of plates through the furnace. They were taken out by an operator with a pair of very large tongs and placed on a machine that bent it to shape, hence the necessity for getting the pates white hot.

Next to the bending machine was an oil bosch as it was called, filled with whale oil - mineral oil would have instantly exploded of course. When the still very hot plate was put into the carrier, a very large wheel with slots for holding the plate, as it rotated submerged the plate and cooled it to black heat. When the plate came up on the other side of the bosch it was put on a conveyor belt of the tempering furnace at a temperature of 600 degrees C and took half an hour to temper. For the uninitiated, to make a piece of steel springy it is first necessary to harden it by getting it very hot then quenching (cooling) in oil or water hardened steel, at this stage it is very brittle so that is the function of tempering to make it springy, capable of flexing without breaking. At the end of the tempering furnace there were 5 machines arranged in an L-shape called rectifiers, beside each machine there was a thick plate 4 feet wide 4 inches. The plates being loaded as they were, long ones first down to the shortest, came onto the

rectifiers work plate in that order, one to each rectifier, so at the end there would be 5 complete springs made.

Rectifying was the job I was given.

The plates distorted in the cooling process and had to be reset by the rectifying machine, or with a 7lb hammer wielded with one hand, depending on the nature of the distortion. There were three old hands from the hand fitting shop who were there to show us how to do the job. Although I was without a doubt the least muscular of the Rectifiers I quickly learned the trade and could match any of them in the quality of my work and the quantity although I probably spent more time getting it right. All the springs were assembled and tested before being submitted to the Railways Inspector who had a stamp to mark his acceptance of the springs. Any that were rejected had to be put right; because I was more particular about getting it right in the first place, I was able to earn more money as I was not wasting my time by doing repairs. I should explain that we were all on "piece work" - the more springs you made, the more you earned. When a batch of 5 or 10 springs came out of the furnace some of the others were doing their repair work so I would take their new work. I soon learned the trade.

At that time caravanning became very popular, but cars were not built to tow caravans and it became necessary to increase the carrying capability of the laminated springs all cars were equipped with, by putting extra plates in or often a plate would break which had to be replaced. The spring had to be removed from the vehicle, disassembled, a new plate or plates fitted and reassembled. I would work overtime after the shift was finished and do this rewarding work, only repairing or altering the spring, not taking it off or putting it back on the vehicle. Of course I had to clock off - although no objections were made to me using the firm's equipment, furnaces etc, they would not have tolerated me doing it in their time!

Things were very unstable at work, you never knew whether or not you would be stood off for a dispute or if the orders were erratic coming in, meaning we would go from one shift with everyone on days (8 till 5) then two shifts 6am until 2pm, 2pm until 10 pm then things would really look up and it would be three-shift working with a night shift 10pm until 6am. In all of these situations I was never set off as were many of the others, and there was always overtime to work 12-hour shifts, and weekend working was always available, no matter how many shifts we were on.

So we continued in this vein until 1955 when I was promoted to shift charge hand. It was a move up the ladder, and of course the work was more to my liking consisting of clerical, making out all the "chitties" for all the men showing how many pieces they had produced, supervising their work, checking quality and precision - a very important aspect - and of course allocating work to them. Previous to being promoted I was the Trade Union representative for the shop; the Shop Steward Frank Hines worked in the hand fitting shop, I was given the position of rep. with a show of hands in our shop, so I was not the most popular man in the shop when I went over to the management side: a cross one had to bear to get on the management ladder. By this time of course on the domestic front we had another mouth to feed.

When we were first married I was still in the army, we lived with Joyce's parents when I was demobbed in May 1946. We first of all lived at number 14 Shenston Road, on the Herringthorpe Estate on the outskirts of Rotherham. Colin (Joyce's brother) lived with us until he married Pearl Rose. Not sure how long we lived there but not much more than a year because we had moved to a bigger house in Doncaster Road number 192.

It was there we had perhaps the worst moments of our lives when Barbara was not yet 2 years old, and Joyce expecting another baby. Barbara was taken seriously ill with gastroenteritis. It has to be remembered medical facilities in those days were not as they are today and we had a few days

of real anxiety until she pulled through. It was said at the time that Sid gave her a sip of brandy and that was the life saver! So Stephen was born on November the 1st 1949, at the nursing home at Meadow Bank, Kimberworth, the same place Barbara was born on the 18th January 1947. Very soon after that we were given a house of our own but a long way from Doncaster Road - at Blackburn in fact.

A new estate had been built out there, some 4 or 5 miles from where we had been living. Nonetheless it was a place of our own and we were thrilled, I remember, at the time. We had a lovely position right at the top of the hill with trees and rhododendrons along the top of the garden - but there the dream became somewhat of a nightmare.

There was a narrow gauge railway track between the house and the trees; at the end of the track was Droppingwell Colliery and a little engine pulled truckloads of coal from the colliery, puffing out clouds of black smoke as it was an uphill pull, the biggest snag of course if the washing was out. Worse than that was the factory at the bottom of the hill, Acheson Electrodes, they made very large electrodes from carbon. The electrodes were used in steel making furnaces. The smell was awful, and first thing in the morning when I had to go to work on the 5am bus it was choking! I did not feel this was the best place to bring up a family, so I was constantly at the council office after an exchange. Being on top of the hill had its advantages of course but not much fun when 2 babies in their prams or pushchairs had to be pushed up the hill, which Joyce and her mother when she visited had to do. Do not forget we had no motor cars in those days, it was all on the buses shopping, visiting or whatever, backwards and forwards to work.

As in all our future houses I was very keen to have a nice garden but there was little scope here as the front was very small and on a slope down to a low brick wall; the back garden too of course was on a slope, so at least that is more interesting than a flat aspect. Bill Nicolson the family friend

was also a keen gardener and I got many tips from him, as well as plants, so I soon had it to my liking.

This house gave me my first attempts at decorating. The first disaster was in the kitchen where I emulsioned (distemper in those days) the walls. The plaster must have been very thin, we were still living in austere times, and after I had distempered the walls every brick was showing through! I was given some advice that I ought to have "sized" the walls first but doing this only made things worse as it pulled up all the distemper, the effect was, as we call it nowadays, artexing . Washing off size mixed with distemper is not a task I would wish to repeat. I papered the front room and the thing I remember most about that was trimming both edges of the rolls with a pair of scissors! Yes, things were much different then, no supermarkets to buy all your needs and everything ready to use.

After all our endeavours to make our first house a home, at last we were offered a house nearer to the town and more importantly a clean environment; this was in 1952 and was to be our home until 1963. It was on a brand new estate, Broom Valley, and a much nicer house although there was only a very small triangular shaped back garden, a side garden compensated to some extent, but unthinkable to use it to hang the washing out so it was soon a lawn for children to play on.

Without a doubt there was a selection process at that time, and Broom area was considered suitable only for carefully selected tenants: we were moving up! As neighbours we had a policeman on one side, next to him a car dealer, and our semi-detached neighbours were a professional couple, cannot remember their stock-in-trade.

The front garden was very small too, on a slope down to a low wall. More houses were still being built lower down the hill so there were plenty of very large stones to be had. Although I worked long hours and doing shift work, at every opportunity I would go down the hill with the wheelbarrow

and collect the best stones to build a wall halfway down the slope to the front of the house to make a tier. I set a privet hedge at the front by the brick wall.

We very soon had a nice home, probably the happiest one in our lives and then in March 1957 to be blessed with another lovely daughter Virginia.

Les and Joyce's wedding
13 November 1945

Barbara was born 1947,
Stephen 1949 and
Virginia in 1957

5 Renway Road. The last family home before moving south

From left: Eddy, Peggy, Jeff, Dorry & Les

Les enjoying a fishing trip

Spring Shop outing from Steel Peech and Tozer steelworks

I have said nothing about how we spent our leisure time, they were very simple really and one way or another always seemed to involve pubs. Every Saturday night was pub night and I was a very small drinker, the same as I am now, so I cannot say I really looked forward to Saturday night. Northern England was well known for its clubs and pubs and although we, the Larder/Swain family were never club members we often went to the East Dene working mens club. We had no means of transport until our first car in 1959 (more of that later) but Bill Nicholson always had one so it was with him we visited the outlying pubs in the area. He would turn up at 7 o'clock "come on let's have you or we won't get a b---- seat", or words to that effect. We would be drinking until 10:30 then we would drive home much the worse for wear; how we are still here to tell the tale God only knows. At every opportunity, the slightest hill or long and steep, Bill would knock the car out of gear and career down it, no breathalyser in those days. As well as drinking there was the smoking, never seemed to have one out of our mouths and the atmosphere I remember could be cut with a knife.

There were occasional trips to the seaside, nearly always Mablethorpe, this too was in Bill's car. One paid week's holiday a year was all working people were given, plus Bank holidays, Easter, Whitsun, August, Christmas and Boxing Day, five in all. Our week's holiday at Mablethorpe was always spending our days lazing on the beach, swimming, playing cricket and the inevitable pub at night - sitting outside after the children were born.

I was a keen follower of football and watched Rotherham play at every opportunity, very often going to their away matches at Lincoln and other places not too far to travel. It was on one of those trips the bus coming home left the road about 6 or 7 miles from home. Bill Nicholson and me were sitting right at the front of the bus. The seats were not properly secured to the floor, so everyone was flung forward; there were no serious injuries because everyone was drunk I suppose (not I), some were

stood in the aisle, as usual everyone singing their heads off. I hit my head on a rail in front of me and was taken to hospital at Rotherham. They put a very large bandage round my head and when I eventually arrived home at 2 o'clock in the morning Joyce was worried, sitting waiting for me, and when I came in with the bandage on my head feared the worst. I was due to go to the bus insurers, Bill got a new pair of glasses, said they were broken in the accident, in fact they had been taped across the bridge for a long time!

It is worth remembering in those days very few people had telephones in the home and no other means of communication. No phoning up to tell the boss you would not be coming to work, or tell anyone if you were late or sick or something or other.

Eventually we became the proud owners of a car! We were friendly with the Bithrey family living just a few doors away. Joyce went to school with their daughter Jean, Jack her father was a tuner and, having a trade such as that, was better paid than most of us. Jack bought a car, a 1933 Ford Y model, but could not drive so I was teaching him. We would go fishing together often on the river Trent at Dunholme Bridge - I think about it every time I go up the A1 and pass over it, not a dual carriageway in those days but a toll bridge. Although Jack was a tuner he was very naive, not much of a fisherman and a worse driver; I thought he would never learn but eventually he passed his driving test and straight away wanted another car and sold me his for £45. That was a lot of money in those days and I cannot think how I financed it but somehow I did.

We had many long journeys in it, on one occasion going down to Walkern to see sister Dorry and brother Eddy, about 110 miles, all on single carriageway but of course much less traffic. The top speed was 45 mph and it used a pint of engine oil about every 100 miles or so. It broke down on the way, would you believe it in Huntingdon, Godmanchester to be exact, fortunately only half a mile from a garage (which is no longer there).

Joyce, her Mum and Dad, with Barbara and Stephen went into the Engineer pub only a few hundred yards down the road while I walked to the garage. A mechanic brought me back in a van, fitted a new set of points in the distributor and off we went again.

Whilst in Walkern I noticed oil on one of the wheels - it had been running on the brake drum, brakes were very poor operated by rods, no brake fluid or anything like that to worry about but one had to be very careful with stopping distances! George Young was the local mechanic, he had repaired the three-speed on my bike when I lived in the village, he diagnosed a leaking oil seal on the wheel bearing, and soon fitted a new one.

Do not remember who we spent our time with in the village but I suppose we would visit relatives, still one or two left there, and also visit the pub and surely do a bit of fishing on the river Cam.

STAFF ONLY