

# Growing Up in Wartime

By John F Tillotson

I was born at Horsforth near Leeds, West Yorkshire in the springtime of 1935 and lived in Menston-in-Wharfedale, near Ilkley. I was the younger of twin boys, weighing only 3 lbs (pounds) at birth and not expected to survive, relying on being wrapped in cotton wool in the absence of incubators. But survive I did!

Brother Peter weighed 5 lbs. Our mother was one of few women Doctors at the time who practised as a single-handed GP (General Practitioner) with a surgery at our house. She had put her name plate out aged 26 when many male doctors were called up to serve in the war. The remaining male GPs in our area did not like the thought of competition and said "We'll give her 6 months". I accompanied her on medical visits by car (an Austin Seven) during school holidays for fun, interest and mutual company, and also helped in the surgery unpacking medicines and drugs, resulting in my wanting to be a doctor! Alas, she sold her Practice to the Labour government in 1948 when the National Health Service (NHS) came in so being keen to pursue a professional career I subsequently trained to become a Solicitor instead!



Our Family Home and  
Doctor's Surgery in Menston

My father, an assistant Bank Manager, sent out mother's bills as before the NHS only men in work could be panel patients. They paid five shillings a

week insurance and were then allowed free medical treatment. When the chimney sweep could not pay we had our chimney swept free of charge! Later, instead of conscription into the military, my father was sent to work in National Savings at York and Bournemouth. The Citizens Advice Bureau was formed to help people get information about welfare matters and the relatively few benefits available.

We lived opposite the Village Cricket Ground where Brian Close (Yorkshire batsman and bowler) played - I could see the cricket from my bedroom window and have been hooked on cricket ever since. Bill Bowes (also a Yorkshire bowler) lived in the Village and my father persuaded him to come to our house and autograph my bat, which sadly I did not keep!

I well remember listening to the radio, including the comedian Rob Wilton; his signature phrase was 'The Day War Broke Out' – he was very amusing! We lived near Murphy's munitions factory in Otley and AVRO, an Aircraft factory in Yeadon, now the home of Leeds & Bradford Airport and near to Guiseley, the home of Silver Cross baby prams. Women were taken into the factory workforce; others became Land Girls on farms.

We also lived near the Railway Station where we could see the tanks loaded on to trains and hear the trucks being shunted. Watching trains including train spotting and going into the signal box was exciting. All unnecessary iron or steel railings, posts, chains, bollards, gates, stiles etc were removed and collected for use in iron and steel works and foundries for the war effort. All signposts were removed in case of invasion. There was little or no advertising except on bill boards or tin cans. Robertson's marmalade jars were labelled with a Gollywog for children to collect. There was little or no racism, sexism, or anti-Semitism, but there was minor bullying at school.

We had built an Anderson air raid shelter underground in the garden and were provided with gas masks together with siren suits. There were Air Raid Protection (ARP) wardens who sounded a warning siren followed later by an 'all clear'. We could hear the enemy bombers passing overhead to northern cities with the occasional bomb being dropped nearby on the return journey. We clung to each other in the air raid shelter, really frightened until we heard the wail of the 'all clear'. My mother was the local St John Ambulance First Aid Divisional Surgeon and gave first aid lectures.

We were rationed to a maximum of 1600 calories per day or less with very little sugar, butter, cheese, bacon, and meat and definitely no bananas except dried ones. There were no oranges or lemons either. I remember Symington's packet soups and jellies. We had plenty of rabbit and chicken with some tripe and onions and the occasional pheasant. We also kept rabbits, chickens and bantams for their eggs.

The blackout meant car lights had shields and street lights were turned off - we had thick lined curtains drawn at all times and could be fined for transgressing. Vehicles had chains in the snow and starting handles. Petrol was severely rationed for reserved occupations only. My mother, wearing a racy hat, was stopped once by the Police who thought she was going the Races!

We had very little in the way of toys. We played a lot with Meccano and games like chess, draughts and monopoly indoors. Outside we had tricycles and sledges. I always had a playmate! When Dinky toys became available later on at Woolworths we were rationed to one each! Before mainstream TV became readily available we relied on the radio then known as the wireless listening to news bulletins, 'Workers' Playtime' and Tommy Handley. And there was self-entertainment. We went to the local Cinema. We had a cinematograph and watched Charlie Chaplin films! We also had a Punch & Judy stage - now outlawed!

We always ate 'en famille' (with the family), round the dining table having to eat up with no second helpings and could not be choosy! We grew our own vegetables in the garden under the 'Dig for Victory Campaign'. We were told that 'Careless Talk cost lives'.



Some of the Family outside our House: /-r ?, me, grandfather, father, brother Peter

We had to repair household goods which could not be replaced. Socks were darned and clothes mended. Without central heating, we put on extra layers of clothing. We mainly walked or cycled everywhere sometimes using the bus or train, including to School but generally did not travel far - say 10 miles maximum. There were frequent services to Leeds, Bradford, Ilkley and Otley. We hardly ever ate out.

Generally we enjoyed good health. I contracted Scarlet Fever and was taken to the local Isolation Hospital after which my bedroom had to be fumigated! In hospital I was quite frightened to ask for anything - being away from home for the first time was a bit daunting. The few patients with diabetes had to have their food weighed.

There was a lot of polio and TB (tuberculosis). Apart from M&B pills (manufactured by May & Baker) there were few drugs and, in the absence of antibiotics, patients with pneumonia had to have warm poultices put on their chests. Minor illnesses were dealt with at home without medical intervention. The doctor would come willingly at all hours for serious illness. He had an uncanny knack of kicking the gazunder (chamber pot) with his leather shoes!

There was very little house-building after 1939 until post-war prefabs went up. Only about one quarter of the population owned their own home with three quarters renting at a time when rent and mortgage interest were strictly controlled. A detached family house cost approximately £500 to build including the land. A large white £5 note was a rarity – anyone who earned £1,000 per year was thought to be well off! We went on holiday spasmodically during the war, then after it ended went once a year, usually to Morecambe - the nearest seaside resort - and visited the Yorkshire Dales in between times, but never went abroad.

Most people travelled to work by bus or train. We had a car – essential for my mother's work - and generally the population had either none or only one, but rarely two apart from the very rich! There were no fridges, freezers or automatic washing machines. We would use a toasting fork in front of the fire for making toast. Housewives found time to clean silver and brass and most of

the women living in terraced houses got down on their hands and knees and scrubbed their doorsteps weekly - to keep up standards and to impress the neighbours! Nevertheless in hard times we were very happy, with relatively little, and everyone pulled together.

The 1947 snow began in early March and lasted until early June with drifts up to 15 feet high, followed by severe flooding. We enjoyed sledging! There was very little crime with the Bobby (policeman) on foot on the beat, and no litter.

All the foregoing taught me to be resilient with Yorkshire native grit (if not wit!) and proved that one can be content with only basic essentials without luxuries in life.

My philosophy in life is that 'no-one is better than you and you are no better than anyone else - it is nice to feel you are important but it is important to be nice'.

John Tillotson  
May 2018

Editor's note: John moved south from Yorkshire and has lived in Leicestershire and Kibworth for most of his life. His memories of the Second World War match closely with children brought up in Kibworth.