

Larkfield Grammar School in World War II (newsletter 9, Autumn 2002)

Extracts from Betty John's reminiscences of her time in Chepstow during the Second World War will be included in the Chepstow Society's forthcoming book on Chepstow in the Second World War. The reminiscences in this Newsletter deal specifically with her time as a Biology teacher at Larkfield.

I was appointed to the staff of Chepstow Grammar School at Larkfield, to teach Biology, early in August 1939 (well done Mr. James, Director of Education for Monmouthshire in 1933, who advised me to study Biology as there would be a need for Biology teachers). Only Botany had been taught in the school up to that date. The details of my interview have been given in no. 5 of this Newsletter.

The headmaster Mr. Webb (Mr James's son-in-law) wrote to invite me to his house before term started. When I arrived at St. Lawrence Road and walked up to his front door he and Mrs Webb were having tea in a slightly sheltered part of the front lawn so had a good look at me before I became aware of them (typical). Mr. Webb gave me the 'phone number of the Senior Mistress, Miss Dora Smith. I made contact with her and received two addresses for possible lodgings: Mrs Price, High Beech Farm, and Mrs Toms in Hardwicke Avenue. I tried Mrs Price first, but she had no room. I settled with Mrs Toms to have a bedroom and to live with the family (just the two of them by this time as both sons had been called up - one did not return). I think I paid 15/- a week for my room but supplied my food. My salary was £16 a month tax paid. In 1942-43 I moved to a house near the top of Hardwicke Hill which had recently been bought by Molly Smith, a Chepstow dentist's daughter with whose family I had become friendly. Molly had remarried, having lost her first husband on active service. I was to be company for her and two-year old son 'Bobby B' (Bullock I think) as her second husband was in the army and away. The conditions were the same.

After just over a year the situation changed and I moved to Ashbourne House, next door to the Three Tuns pub at the entrance to Chepstow Castle. Here I had a sitting room (ground floor front) and a bedroom (second floor front) and use of kitchen and bathroom for 25/- a week. Several other individuals and families had rooms in this roomy boarding house during my time. It gave me much more privacy. There was a gully directly outside my living room and many a soldier in the blackout stumbled off the pavement into this gully - I heard the full range of expletives during my time there. Luckily no-one came through the window on his way back from Chepstow pubs to barracks. I was able to entertain Mother there, and my sister Marie and her husband Len stayed with me there on several occasions. The Hardwicke Avenue house was demolished soon after the war to make way for the road to the new bridge over the Wye.

It was a terrific pull walking up to Larkfield from Ashburne House, but it was probably good for my health. Convoys of trucks carried goods and men along the same route by day and night - dozens of trucks in a convoy. The corner on Hardwicke Hill was the downfall of many an unwary driver weary of following the truck in front. On our trudge up the hill, we always checked to the left of the corner to see if any trucks travelling downhill had missed the corner and tumbled over the edge and down the field beyond. Frequently, there were one or more trucks turned over at the bottom of the field.

It was entertaining to see drivers of large trucks trying to get through the Arch. Quite a lot of the stonework at the sides of the arch was chipped away. Many times, letting the tyres of the truck down did the trick. Americans were at a disadvantage because they were used to driving on the other side of the road.

During my early months lodging at No 8 Hardwicke Ave. there was a gorgeous young man living with his parents next door. He was Bill Townsend, aged 19 and a pupil at Monmouth School (head boy, I think) but waiting to join the R.A.F. He was full of life, enthusiastic, bursting to take part in the war effort, voluble about everything. We used to talk over the back wall and walk the quiet roads in the blackout. He probably fancied association with an older woman (I was 24). Some time later, he had evidently trained as a pilot and while on leave he told us that he was doing a lot of low-level flying: but it was only after the Dambusters raid that we found out he had been pilot of the bomber codenamed 'O for Orange'. Having failed to get through the air defences to the primary target he had been directed to drop bombs on one of the secondary targets. O for Orange was one of the last bombers to

return to base. I recalled all this recently, in August 2002, when I read in the Daily Telegraph the obituary of the wireless operator on O for Orange. He had requested a position on that specific aeroplane because Bill was not an officer. Later, they both became commissioned. After being demobbed, Bill entered an Oxford college but did not finish the course. I understand that he married a local hotel owner's daughter and joined the business.

In school I taught Biology and for a short period Historical Geography, where I simply followed the recommended book on the subject. I also shared games and P.E. as we had a P.E. specialist teacher only one day a week, and some years I had a class in Scripture (which I taught poorly but there was no specialist teacher). Various lady P.T. teachers taught in the school one day a week and younger lady teachers shared P.T. and games teaching the other days. Teachers shared responsibility for games practice after school and matches with other schools on Saturday mornings. The girls played hockey and netball in the winter and tennis and rounders in the summer. I coached hockey, netball and rounders, usually lunchtime because of difficulty with the school bus. Boys played rugby in the winter and cricket in the summer. The Domestic Science teacher was shared with the Central School in the town and a county peripatetic Art teacher came to the school one day a week.

Who were the other staff in 1939?

Mr. Webb, the Headmaster, had been called up during August 1939 so was not in the school when I started about September 8th 1939.

Mr. Robinson, who had been Senior Master, became Acting Headmaster. He taught Geography.

Miss Smith, the Senior Mistress (nicknamed 'Pullet'), who taught English, was an exceptionally astute teacher and disciplinarian. I admired her very much. She gave advice without being too intrusive and kept a very firm hand on all aspects of school life. She was undoubtedly the mainstay of the establishment.

Mr. Westcott taught Chemistry and became Acting Senior Master.

Mr. Anton Edwards (nicknamed 'Pluto' - maybe because of his elongated features?) taught French.

Mr. Glyn Ball taught Maths, was called up early during the war and later came back, eventually becoming Deputy Headmaster.

Mr. Bryn Jakeman taught Art one day a week.

Mr. Wilding was Woodwork Master.

Mr. Morgan taught Physics.

Mr. Mellish taught Maths and Science.

Miss Gillett taught English.

Miss Sally Davies taught History.

Miss Dolly Rees taught Latin and French.

Miss Marjorie Thomas taught Geography.

Miss Ceri Smith taught Cookery and Needlework two days a week.

I started the teaching of Biology in the school. My top forms, 4A and B, had only two years to cover the syllabus for the Central Welsh Board. Half of the pupils got credits which was very pleasing. That first year I also had a pupil for Higher School Certificate in Biology, Joyce Vicarage, the head girl,

from Caerwent. She had passed Botany H.S.C. in the previous July, had to wait a year before entering Cardiff University and decided to add Zoology to her achievements. She also passed. So I had made a good start. There were about 300 pupils - boys and girls - in the school, coming from as far north as Whitebrook and west to the outskirts of Newport and Llangwm. Buses picked up pupils along the 'bottom road' from Rogiet, Caldicot, Magor, Undy etc and along 'the top road' from the outskirts of Newport, from the Bridge Inn, Llangwm and from near Brockweir. Pupils queued up outside the school gates after school to make the return journey. Most bus travellers had school dinners especially when rationing became tight. I had school dinners except when I was living with Molly who wanted to have someone to cook for.

War had been declared by the time I started at Larkfield. Lack of street lighting was no burden to someone coming from the country. I spent all my weekends at home in Hendre Isaf, St. Mellons, for a couple of years, until I became involved with Philip, a local farmer. If I had charge of a match on Saturdays, I travelled home after lunch - a meal was served to visiting teams. I returned on Sunday evening, frequently after chapel in Castleton. There was an hourly bus service from Cardiff to Gloucester during most of the war. For a short time it was reduced to a two-hourly service, especially on a Sunday.

Soon after the London bombing became severe in 1940, West Ham Junior Tech. School was evacuated to Larkfield. Staff and pupils were billeted in the town. They had their own staff - only two or three in the beginning. Mrs E.T. Davies, wife of the vicar of Mathern, taught them part-time before her first child was born. We had little contact with either staff or pupils. They had a separate timetable and used free classrooms, and fitted into any odd spaces when classrooms weren't available - the little room beyond the staff room and under the stairs etc. One such, behind our staff room, served as the Biology 'prep' room until a demountable structure was put up on the front lawn. I set up experiments in this room and carried them all over the building. Another, upstairs, later served as a 6th form common room after W. Ham left. There was very little disturbance. W. Ham assembly followed ours at the beginning of school. At one stage, the first two years of Chepstow pupils had long morning sessions then went home, releasing the classrooms for long afternoons for the W. Ham pupils. As conditions improved in London so pupils slowly returned home.

Early on in my first autumn term we were given the opportunity to contribute to the war effort. I joined the Civil Defence, manning the 'phone in a room at the back of the police station (near the George Hotel), for a couple of hours one night a week and if there was an air raid warning during the night getting up and reporting there to see if anything was needed. After a couple of months of lack of activity the latter was cancelled. My uniform included a heavy navy overcoat which I kept for many years after the war. Mrs Hoare (wife of the S.W. Argus rep in Chepstow) chaired a meeting of ladies (at a well advertised venue) in September-October 39 to decide how best to help provide amenities for servicemen stationed locally. After this I spent a couple of hours once a week making and serving tea for the servicemen stationed locally in a chapel hall near the arch. This was somewhere the lads could gather and sit about and write their letters. Later on when it was decided to be necessary I slept one night a week on a camp bed on the school premises to keep watch in case of incendiaries. Philip frequently volunteered to be the other fire watcher when I was on duty, especially during the holidays when I had to travel up from St. Mellons. There weren't any incendiaries but we saw plenty of activity over Bristol from elevated points near Chepstow.

A number of times I saw festoons of incendiaries dropping around Bristol, from the Chase road, and from the Trellech road. The whole area was lit up and the crack, crack of anti-aircraft guns was quite frightening the first time but one got used to it in spite of pain in the pit of the stomach and thoughts 'perhaps its our turn next'. One just carried on. But those first few air-raid warnings at night in September and October 1939 in Hardwicke Avenue were quite frightening. Mr and Mrs Toms and I were out of bed in dressing-gowns, down the stairs and under the table in double quick time. Mr Toms, who was a dear man, couldn't stop breaking wind, 'pop, pop, pop', so there was that to contend with as well. Quite soon we didn't leave our beds except for the few months when I reported to the police station. The after-effects remain with me, though, and I screw up inside when I hear fire engines and ambulance sirens to this day.

When the bombers couldn't get over the city incendiaries and other bombs were dropped around the outskirts. Barrage balloons like floating whales in the sky over the bigger cities prevented bombers flying low. That's how my family home at Hendre Isaf in St Mellons got caught. A line of four 1,000lb bombs were dropped across the area in 1942 or 43. One of the bombs landed 100yds from the house. The blast damaged the roof badly and broke a variety of items inside. I wasn't there but was given a graphic account of the frightening experience. My family spent the rest of the night in the next farm, Hendre Hall. The animals were frightened and noisy. Items of china were broken, including the lid of my cut glass powder bowl and the large plate of my 'bottom drawer' tea service, which was wrapped up and in a box under a stone slab in the dairy. The grandfather clock fell to the floor. Within a few days tarpaulin had been spread over the roof, and windows repaired. I was informed in school and was sent home to give what help I could. I kept bits of shrapnel and coarse material collected from around the bomb crater for many years.

During autumn in the early war years the request was advertised for rose hips and 'conkers'. Pupils brought in quantities of each. I remember many sacks of conkers filling the storage area at the back of the school. Rose hips were used to make a syrup and Vitamin C and the conkers for animal food.

The Girls' Training Corps was another part of the war effort, as was the Air Training Corps for the boys with Mr. Robinson (the acting headmaster) as Commandant. I was Adjutant of the G.T.C. and kept the books and learned and dispensed drill training which occupied about the first quarter of each evening meeting. We met once a week for 1½ - 2 hours and had various courses going to keep the girls on a level with the boys and identifying more with the war effort. During my time we attended two conferences - in Birmingham and London. Miss Carey Evans, grand-daughter of David Lloyd George, was G.T.C. organizer for Wales. We paraded with the other groups on VE celebration day starting at the bottom of Hardwicke Avenue and through the centre of the town under the arch, then down Bridge Street and finally forming up on the open space in front of the entrance to the castle. Captain Bob Nelson (my boy friend at that time) led his troop of soldiers to a place nearby.

I wonder who 'did' the interior decoration to the 'cubby hole' given over as a common room to the sixth form in 44-45? I doubt it was ever established, but was widely assumed that Terry O'Neill had been involved in the splashing about of paint. Terry was rarely in the fore front of any mischief going on. He had that 'I'm not involved in anything wrong' look. Male members of staff however always checked on him first. He wasn't involved in the second escapade however and that is the one that sticks in my mind perhaps because of later repercussions.

Miss Dolly Rees had a small Austin car which she used weekends to get home to Blackwood (when there was a petrol allowance) She always had a car full of staff travelling in that direction - Glyn Ball, Ceri Smith (domestic science in the early war years). The car was parked in a garage in the town during the week, but on Fridays left in the area in front of the front entrance to the school building. One Friday after school she had great difficulty in getting the car started and it made funny noises. Once it was moving there was obviously something wrong, but she managed to coax it out on to Newport Road, phut-phutting along past the rows of pupils lined up on the pavement, waiting for their buses. They were all very amused and showed it. The journey to Blackwood was very trying and once there several mechanic friends tried to remedy the trouble without success. Eventually on taking the car to a garage it was discovered that the leads had been changed over. The car was put right but Dolly came to school on the Monday morning in a very cross frame of mind. Mr Robinson and Mr Westcott led a special assembly asking for information and stressing the danger of tampering with engines etc. Known trouble makers were interviewed separately and for several days every effort was made to find out who had done the deed. No one confessed and no one told tales or gave hints of any kind.

Forty to fifty years later when I attended one of the Larkfield reunions I think it was Gerald Robbins spilled the beans. Bruce Bullock and two helpers were the culprits. Of course I told Dolly about it when I returned to Blackwood and between us we decided we should do something about it. By this time Bruce Bullock was Head of Catering at Colchester Avenue College. We made up a fanciful bill including 'stress' and 'interest' over forty odd years and sent to him at the college. He replied immediately, confessed, stated just what had happened and enclosed two tickets for one of the

Catering Department's special evening dinners that the students put on. He entertained us that night and apologised abjectly to Dolly. He was the one who changed the leads (he had become very interested in car engines at that time he said) He named the other two who were involved but I have forgotten who they were. Imagine an entire school keeping mum. A lot of pressure was put on them.

Another tale - not mischief - stays in my memory. Beefy Bevan was a typical six-foot Rugby forward. Miss Gillett his English teacher in form 5 was no more than five feet tall. Bevan was mis-behaving in class and Miss Gillett (Gilly to her friends) had had enough of him. She is reported as saying 'get outside Bevan or I'll throw you out' He went outside the classroom.

Communities, as in Chepstow seemed to be like cocoons during the war. People didn't travel far, or stay away for long - that is the established residents. Children in the services might have surprise forty-eight hour leaves, and would expect Mum and Dad to be at home. Also there was little to encourage travel. Crowded trains, sitting on cases in the corridor, reduced bus services and the blackout. Only the service men stationed locally, came and went.

Within the community everyone knew what was going on. I arrived in Chepstow in September 1939 but within a few years I received letters addressed to Miss Betty John, Teacher, Chepstow; and one with the 'Teacher' missing! I had those letters without delay. (They were letters from servicemen who had been moved away quickly or from people met on courses.) Of course I could have taught the post girl or the son of the postman, or the postman's family could have had milk delivered by Philip. My mother-in-law once told me she and my father-in-law didn't want to go on holiday while their only son was on active service in North Africa, they preferred to save that money for him to have a start after the war. (They put down the half cost of the first house Les and I bought, after we married, with that money)

When my romance with Philip was in one of its 'off' periods, I remember drinking with an army captain friend in one of the local pubs. A slight acquaintance passing quietly whispered 'Philip is drinking in the other bar'. Philip told me, later, that he liked to keep tabs on me when we weren't actually courting. Everyone knew what was going on. My stormy relationship was part of the local entertainment. It's on, it's off, Oh no it's back on again! That closeness lasted several years after the war ended (as well as rationing and various shortages).

When I started in Larkfield, married women were not appointed to teaching posts, and if I had married I would have had to resign, but within a year, with male teachers being called up, married women were in great demand and we had a few on our staff. When I married Les in 1948 I stayed in my post until I was pregnant and there were two other married ladies on the staff at that time.

Les was appointed to the staff of West Mon Haberdasher's School in Pontypool in December 1947 so we were engaged at half-term the middle of February and married five weeks later on Easter Saturday March 29th. (I was told a few days later that Philip watched the wedding party coming out of church, from behind the churchyard wall in Chepstow). We lived in a flat above the doctor's surgery in 'Town Gate' (what an address:- Town Gate Chepstow - I wish I could have kept it). There was no bathroom but from the entrance hall a door and steps led down into the cellar which continued into the Arch. I bought a very fashionable voluminous (most material available - no need to skimp) 'tent' coat in the spring of 1948. Within a few months of leaving the flat I met Barbara, an ex pupil from the first bunch I had put in for 'O' levels at Larkfield in 1941 (she passed). Barbara congratulated me on being pregnant. She was quite disappointed to hear the rumour was wrong. After all I was thirty three and should have been thinking along those lines. It was a genuine and interested comment. What ex pupil would have that interest these days?

But conditions deteriorated in Larkfield. It was no longer the halcyon school it had been (hence the plaque erected in September 2000.) About eighteen months later I conceived my daughter so the tent coat proved very useful.