

War Years in Chepstow (newsletter 10, Spring 2003)

This is probably the final instalment of Betty John's reminiscences - unless she can be persuaded to continue the story with something on life in the Western Valley after the war.

There were large camps of soldiers all around the town - Sedbury, Bulwark, St. Lawrence Road, the Race Course (until it became a POW camp). Frequently we passed groups of soldiers on the roads looking for feminine company. I was rarely available as most of the time I was with Philip, but in the gaps I met a few itinerant servicemen. Bob was the only one who lasted. I met him at the bar of the Beaufort where I was waiting for a teacher friend. He just came up and asked me if I'd have a drink with him. I had a drink and then arranged to meet him the following evening. Bob was a good friend and we had a lot of outings together. He visited Hendre, took me to Officers' Mess dances in Mounton House, Welsh Street, the pictures, out to dinner, to most of the acceptable pubs in the town and within a few miles. We walked in the summer - one Saturday, we took the bus from Chepstow to Brockweir then walked from Brockweir to St. Briavels and back along the Chase to Chepstow, then back to Ashbourne House for tea. In 1946 he went back to Liverpool intending to carry on with his secretarial training. We wrote to each other occasionally. Just after I became engaged to Les I had a letter from him asking me to join him on a holiday in the Speech House in the Forest of Dean in the summer. I gave my reasons for refusing and didn't hear from him again.

The American troops were the most boisterous of all. Many would stop a girl anywhere and ask her for a date. This wasn't so bad in the daytime but not so funny in the blackout. They must have thought there were willing ladies in Bridge Street because bunches of them would walk up and down the middle of the street shaking money in their cupped hands. Margaret Vaughan Williams (a colleague) and I would look at them through the corner of the lace curtained windows in her first floor front bed sitter in Ashbourne House - I wouldn't have dared to look through my ground floor front sitting room window.

Ron Evans was my boyfriend when I started in Larkfield. He was staying at Hendre the weekend war was declared and the order came over the wireless for all servicemen and women on leave to return to their bases. He left by car that Sunday afternoon returning to Birkenhead where he was 'standing by' HMS Prince of Wales being built. Ron was a Chief E.R.A. so spent his time in the engine room. I spent a weekend with him in Birkenhead early in the war and was there on the Friday night that everyone in the country had to register, so I had an identity number very different from the rest in Chepstow. I saw him when he was on leave and we wrote in between times. Soon he went off to the Far East on the Prince of Wales and everyone knows what happened to the ship out there. The last few air mail letters I wrote were returned months after the sinking. Ron spent most of his war time as a P.O.W. on the Burma railway camps and suffered miserably. The next time I heard from him was in September 1945 when I received a note written in pencil on lavatory paper and a bunch of flowers delivered by the Red Cross. I was engaged to Philip by this time.

I met Philip in my second term in Larkfield, but I gather he had noticed me and checked up when I called at High Beech Farm looking for lodgings. A few of the local teachers and some of their friends in the town arranged to meet in Larkfield one evening to play table tennis. This was a great idea - there was so little to do. All the young teachers went along. Philip was there with a girl from the town. He gave me a lift down to Mrs Toms and a few days later stopped his car when he passed me on the road and gave me a lift up the hill to school. He asked me for a date, and when I hesitated he assured me that the lady with him on the table tennis night was not a regular girl friend. And so the meetings began. He was such good company, we had great times together. He worked long hours and very hard, rarely walking when he was delivering milk, always on the run. He deserved all the financial success he had, eventually buying his own Farm in Shirenewton.

When I knew him first he had a milk round on his own, but within a year there was a land girl living in (Muriel) and his cousin (Young Phil) helping him. By 1945 he had two more land girls and five vans all delivering milk from High Beech and picking up more from the centre in the town and farms around. After milk delivery he would be back helping his father with the general farm work. Winter

time he could be finished by early evening and down to pick me up but in the summer many an evening I walked or caught a bus up to High Beech and met him at whichever field hay was being gathered. Even at 9 p.m. we'd dash home, he'd be washed and changed in 15 mins and with the trailer and two churns attached to the back of the car would drive out to St. Arvans to the Piercefield pub for 30 mins or so. Cars couldn't be used for pleasure for much of the time since police would stop you and ask where you had come from and where you were going. Our destination would be to Bendall's farm a few yards beyond the Piercefield where Philip picked up milk for his milk round each day. We would be picking up milk or returning churns: sometimes this was the case and sometimes the excuse. One trip to Gloucester market or to Newport market was allowed periodically. These trips were made use of by the whole family.

The evenings were light until so late in mid-summer with double summer time. It had its advantages for farmers working late and conserving electricity but it also had its difficulties. I remember mother complaining bitterly about not being able to shoo the chickens into their shed at 11.30 p.m. Dad would have had to go to bed earlier because he was up at 6 a.m. to milk his 7 cows (by hand) then deliver milk around St. Mellons village. The milk would be measured out into jugs with a half pint measure and always a little extra added.

I recall a snap taken in High Beech yard. Five vehicles in line with the two men and three land girls, one beside each vehicle. Joan, Philip's cousin, chose the land army rather than factory work or nursing in 1940 and came to live in High Beech, when her husband joined up. All single women and married women without children had to register and give a preference and if they didn't find 'war work' themselves were soon directed. Joan left the land army when she became pregnant with Jane.

Milking was done by machine and so was the bottling at High Beech. The hours were long, from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. with mealbreaks as a rule but it wasn't heavy back-breaking muscle-tiring work as some land girls experienced. I've talked to my cousin Lynnus about his experiences with land girls in the Vale of Glamorgan. He worked on his farm with his father, but during harvest time he took a threshing machine around the farms in his area working for the 'War Ag' (War Agricultural Committee) as he called it. He had 4 land girls working with him (not necessarily the same ones each morning). They were billeted in purpose-built barracks off the Peterston-super-ely Road near Sycamore Cross (now turned into animal sheds), very bare accommodation, and were delivered by van each morning to the point of work, bringing meagre sandwiches for lunch.

A lot of these girls had never done any hard muscular work and they had to wield a pike or shift sacks of grain all day. One land girl showed Lynnus the blisters on her hands the second day on site and told him what her father threatened to do to him if they ever met, as if it was L's fault. In fact L said when he saw girls flagging he would take the pike for 10 minutes and give the girls something easier to do. The girls would find a way of telling him when they were menstruating and he would help them by giving them lighter work.

The first time landgirls were used with the threshing was unexpected. They just arrived at the site delivered by van. A local farmer said he didn't want them. L took his four. One of the girls said to L (at 7.45 a.m.) 'Are you mad starting work at this time of day'. L replied 'I started at 5.30 this morning, I've already milked 5 cows (by hand), had breakfast and been here 30 minutes getting this machine ready'. Once the landgirls got used to the work L said they worked well and did a great job.

Landgirls did other farm work as needed - a 'phone call to the billets and they were delivered. They were needed for haymaking, potato picking, lifting and clipping turnips and swedes which were staple animal feed (usually sliced). Conscientious objectors also were available. The farmer would ring the labour officer at the 'War Ag' office in Cardiff and if available they were delivered by van or lorry. If living at home CO's had to meet at collecting points early each morning. Lynnus also had help from 'Ack Ack' men (anti-aircraft gunners) stationed near the Weycock roundabout and from searchlight battery men stationed at the top of the village. This was when things were quiet and the officer in charge would release a couple of men for the day

Many of the farms were not kind to the land girls. One farmer wouldn't let the girls use the farmhouse lavatory. They would tell L they had to look for a secluded spot and he would make sure none of the men working with them moved from the machine. This was because early on he found one of the workmen wandering off after the girls. On the farm where they weren't allowed to use the lavatory one of the landgirls found a 'stolen' nest of eggs. She told L and he said 'do what you like with them'... They were hidden in the hedge up the road and the landgirls took 2 dozen eggs back to their billet to supplement their meagre diet (at one stage one egg a fortnight was the ration and goodness knows how long that had been about). I was lucky in being able to take a couple back each week. Mother used to put eggs down in Isinglass, a preservative solution, in large crocks when eggs were plentiful. They didn't have the flavour of fresh eggs but were very useful for cooking. And of course there were dried eggs, useful for cooking - some good cooks claimed they could make a decent omelette with dried egg.

Very few farmers' wives gave the landgirls any sort of refreshment at lunchtime but Rhoswen, L's wife, had them in for a good cooked lunch when the threshing machine was at New House Farm (and the girls remembered this for years afterwards). Well they killed and cured pigs each year. The allowance was two - so only two were in sight, hams and bacon sides hanging from hooks, because the rest were hidden above reeds over the rafters in the farm barn.

The 'BLACKOUT' came into force immediately after war was declared. It meant adding light-proof curtains all around the house. Cheap dark material was available to make up and use under normal curtains. I had wooden shutters in my Ashbourne House sitting room. Any chink of light and there would be a knock at the door by the policeman patrolling the streets. Another common slogan: 'don't you know there's a war on?' I had Philip's car to drive home to Hendre for the weekend on a number of occasions - this was to get me back early on a Sunday when buses were uncertain. Shades were added to car lamps. In rain and misty conditions it could be very difficult to see the road - no white lines and cats eyes. Signposts were taken down for obvious reasons. Philip taught me to drive. Frequently, on the quiet roads, I started by steering, leaning over from the passenger seat while he did the foot controls. Eventually I got a learner's licence and was allowed to sit in the driver's seat. He was an excellent patient instructor.

Of course there were blackout restrictions on trains and buses as well as houses on roads and in vehicles. Blinds were drawn as well, after dark. Trains were very crowded too, it was difficult to see empty seats. One just opened the door and asked and frequently sat on someone's lap by mistake. Trains had 'Ladies Only' compartments. You never see those now. Many carriages didn't have corridors which was alright on short journeys, e.g. Chepstow to Cardiff. On longer journeys even when there were corridors they could be so crowded with servicemen sitting on their duffel bags and civilians sitting on their cases it was difficult to get past to toilets at the end of the carriages. Trains were late, one missed connections. I was late for my Cardiff and London college friend Sally Davies' wedding when she married George Tyler in Birmingham because my train from Chepstow (early in 1940) missed the connection in Gloucester. I was supposed to be bridesmaid but arrived and took over after the ceremony.

I suppose my near disaster on the road comes under war-time conditions. During his last couple of years Dad was failing. He died in 1945. He was tired most of the time and would drop off to sleep any time he sat in a chair. To help out, whenever possible, my nephew David or I would deliver the milk on a Sunday morning after Dad had milked and put churns on the milk cart with Bonny in the shafts. David was with me this particular morning so it must have been early on and before he was allowed to go on his own. We delivered through the village and along Druidstone Road for a hundred yards and then down the Began Hill. When we were half-way down the hill a loaded waggon drawn by a heavy horse went out of control near the top of the hill. It was coming down quite fast with the lad alongside unable to slow it down. The horse was stepping out with its front legs but the back legs were sliding along the road. We couldn't get to the bottom of the hill before it so I drew the milk cart close into the side expecting the waggon to collide with it. But no, that knowledgeable horse pulled to the far side of the road and very cleverly he managed to squeeze through the narrow gap still racing with his front legs and skidding with the hind legs. A memory I'll never forget.

What about our living conditions? We soon got used to coupons - the thing was, everyone was in the same boat. There were clothing coupons, but farmers had extra coupons for 'industrial clothing' - overalls, etc - and these could be used for normal clothing in some shops. Then there were coupons for food - books of stamps with the dates and the items specified so that we were able to buy so much meat and butter and tea and sugar and eggs, etc a week or a fortnight or a month, and the coupon was given up with the money on purchase. The allowance was 2/6 worth of meat per week, I think it was 2oz of butter at one stage, so many eggs a month, so much sugar, and cheese and bacon, and extra points that could be used for cereals, dried fruit, flour, tinned fruit (very scarce), jams and marmalade, all of which were short and frequently not available. There were Women's Institute prizes for 'the best eggless sponge' etc., recipes for jam with less sugar. I was lucky in having a few slices of bacon and an occasional egg from home when I returned to Chepstow after the weekend. Meally sausages and offal (off points) was shared out among customers. Tins of Spam were a standby. In the food ration books there were spare points that could be used for the rarer products - so many for a tin of Spam, so many for a tin of fruit (these were rarely found on the shelves).

As you would expect, fish was rarely in the shops. There was the occasional chunk of salmon from the Wye (usually poached) if you knew the right people. I had several cutlets of salmon from 'under the counter' from my butcher, and a few times I saw salmon wrapped in sacking being taken from the boot of a car into the back premises of Tuck's butcher's shop which was next door to the George Hotel. Fresh fruit, apart from apples, were unavailable. We bought and stored apples for as long as we could - by Spring they became quite wrinkled and soft but were better than none. For a short period even bread was rationed. Allotments were popular, and potatoes and other vegetables were in adequate supply in Chepstow. Flower gardens were dug up to plant veg. A common slogan was 'Dig for Victory'.

The other butcher in Chepstow (beside Hugh Tuck) married a nurse in the hospital at the bottom of town. She was pregnant when he was drafted overseas and he promised to find some way of letting her know where he was. The baby boy was born and Dad was informed. His reply included 'I'd like you to call him Algy but I know you would only jeer at me' - meaning he was in Algeria.

Coal was shared among regular customers by the coalman. I remember Mrs Richards (landlady at Ashbourne House, Bridge Street) directing the coalman to deliver 1 cwt of coal to one corner of her back premises for me, another elsewhere for Margaret Williams (first floor front), another for the family first floor back and a fourth lot for herself.

Petrol for private use was tightly rationed and for most of the war only available for authorized journeys. Philip and I cycled a lot outside his permitted range. One summer we put the bikes in the guards van and took the train to Kingham station in the Cotswolds where we pushed the bikes most of the way up to the Talbot Hotel in Stow on the Wold. Our luggage was delivered by van from the station. We cycled out in all directions from Stow. Philip would hang on to the back of a lorry to get back up the hill. I couldn't.

Make do and mend was in operation. A dress got worn under the sleeves. These were cut off and it became a pinafore dress - and so on. We darned socks and stockings, patched trousers, and cut up old clothes to make smaller items. Everyone had knitting on the go - jumpers and sweaters and men's socks. Wool was on points, so old woollens were undone, the wool washed and reknitted.

When I started in Larkfield, the lady teachers were expected to wear hats and stockings to school. Trousers were unheard of. Miss Smith was a stickler for standards. Eventually, when coupons got short, in summer we would draw dark lines down the back of our legs with eyebrow pencil to imitate stockings and use suntan lotion to darken the legs.

Little pleasures became more significant. Outings were few and more precious. The wireless kept us in touch with what was going on. ITMA (It's that man again) was a very popular comedy programme (ginger cats still remind me of it).

I joined the Chepstow Young Farmers' Club where Philip was a member. Another cousin of his, Johnny, who later farmed near Itton, was chairman at the time. Johnny had been a pupil at Larkfield School earlier in the 30's and did very well academically. I remember Miss Smith (Senior Mistress) saying she was very disappointed she failed to persuade him to go on to university after H.S.C. But Johnny always wanted to be a farmer and he excelled at that as well. Others in our crowd were Jim Pruit (still farming), Derek Dawson, the manager of the Co-op Dairies and his wife and several more I remember but can't recall their names. I went to all their dances and several of their evening meetings if I was free and interested in the programme. I was in their quiz team and went to other clubs to compete. Chepstow Young Farmers' Club had been established for several years before my time there, and was one of the earliest in South Wales. It was a big asset for the farming youngsters to have some means to meet and extend their interests.

The tennis club in Welsh Street was a focal point for young people in the summer months. I belonged but didn't play much because Philip didn't play. Rimmer Clarke, who owned the chemist's shop next to the George Hotel, was a leading light and very particular who he played with. There was also the Amateur Dramatic Society which put on something each winter. Some of our teachers took active part but I didn't - no aptitude. And once again Philip didn't belong. One of the leading ladies (from the Dibden family) painted the water colours of Chepstow Castle and the Arch that Larkfield staff gave me as a leaving present.

The two main hotels in Chepstow were the Beaufort (where we had our wedding reception) and the George. A Miss Philips managed the Beaufort, helped by her brother. Someone once said that Chepstow was famous for three Normans - a Norman castle, a Norman arch and Norman Phillips. He was a homosexual and rather effeminate but pleasant and easy to talk to. The term 'gay' wasn't used in the homosexual sense when I was young: hence, I find it quite difficult not to use it meaning 'jolly', 'full of fun'.

War-time licensing laws added to the complications. Monmouthshire had 'dry' Sundays whereas Gloucestershire opened on Sundays. There was a trek of both servicemen and civilians over Chepstow bridge on Sunday evenings. Frequently I returned to Chepstow on a Sunday afternoon to spend the evening with Philip (or Bob). The two pubs in Tutshill were The Cross Inn and The Star. When petrol was available Philip and I used to spend our Sunday evenings at the Beachley Ferry Hotel meeting the same crowd there each week. The table tennis room was very popular. Summer evenings Bob and I would walk from Ashbourne House, over the bridge, and up the steep slope opposite which was the old road rather than taking the longer curving road which went around the hill. There would be much saluting as soldiers walked this route a lot.

I wonder if the wild lilies of the valley still grow in the woods on the west side between St. Arvans and Tintern. And did widening the road between the Race Course and St. Arvans destroy the wild cyclamen on the east side. (I dug a clump of wild cyclamen from the bank where the garage is now). And does the harvest moon shine as brightly through the round window in Tintern Abbey?

Extracts from Betty John's reminiscences will appear with a lot of other reminiscences, photographs etc in the Chepstow Society's forthcoming book on Chepstow in World War II.