

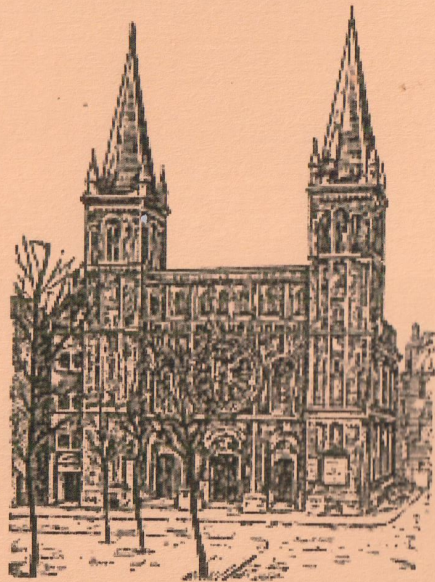
MY WORLD WAR II MEMORIES
OF LIFE AS A CHILD WITH
MY SISTER JUNE
AT BLOOMSBURY CENTRAL
BAPTIST CHURCH AND AS
WARTIME EVACUEES



Ruth Johnson (née Campbell)

© Ruth Johnson 2013

To Tommaso Nilani hoping you will
find this little tale interesting!
from Ruth Johnson 2013



MOTTO: "HOSPITALITY."

The Bloomsbury church as
Ruth first knew it

The cover: Ruth as a schoolgirl

MY WORLD WAR II MEMORIES
OF LIFE AS A CHILD WITH MY SISTER JUNE
AT BLOOMSBURY CENTRAL
BAPTIST CHURCH
AND AS WARTIME EVACUEES

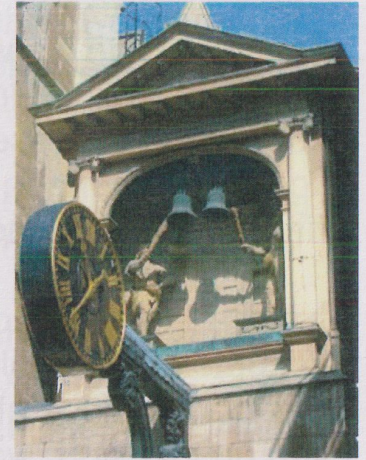
At the outbreak of war in 1939 our father was away on an expedition to the Baltic States, travelling in the famous Finnish Windjammer *Passat*, after which the car is named. He had gone in spite of our mother's protestations since he was confident Mr Chamberlain would save the day with his negotiating skills - alas! Our mother was left to organise in our small hotel the task of black-outing since no chink of light would be permitted, the filling of countless sand-bags and the protection of glass with sticky tape criss-crossing any pane to minimise shattering. I asked, 'What is war, Mummy?' She explained that it was like two naughty boys fighting - only this was two nations, England was fighting Germany.



Campbell family, with a friend holding the dog, Summer 1939

My sister June, aged just 7, and I, aged 8½, attended St Dunstan-in-the-West preparatory school in Fleet Street. With an older pupil, aged 10, we walked from Guilford Street at Russell Square down to Lamb's Conduit St, crossed Theobald's Road, via several lanes and passages around Gray's Inn Gardens, crossed High Holborn, and down Chancery Lane to Fleet Street - perhaps 2½ miles. The school consisted of boys' and girls' sections housed around the fine old church, which is famous for its striking clock performed by two giants who strike in turn the multiple hours. Over the school entrance is a statue of Queen Elizabeth I. We worked on slates with chalk in the 1st form and on paper thereafter.

The school had some quaint old customs, one of which was on Founder's Day pupils had to run as fast as they could around the church pews for each year of their lives. The prize was a newly-minted silver six-pence up to the age of six and thereafter an equally bright new penny for every extra year. On our way home June noticed a café which had very gaudy bottles of drinks in the window where she spent her sixpence on a glass of something excitingly new. I decided to refrain, choosing a milkshake instead with old pennies! June was obviously more adventurous!



The School Clock

Another oddity was a visit with our parents to a service on Midsummer's Day at St Clement Danes Church, famous for the London Bells' song, Oranges and Lemons. The church stands on the remains of a Saxon church on an island where the Strand meets Aldwych. Our school choir sang the famous song with great emphasis on 'Oranges and Lemons'. At the end of the

service outside we were given both fruits, which Mummy made into delicious pressed orange juice and lemonade - just the drinks for Midsummer's Day!

The head teachers decided to evacuate the school almost immediately since air-raids, even an invasion, were feared imminent. So we had to say 'good-bye' to our darling Mummy, relatives and friends at Bloomsbury, where we attended morning service Sunday by Sunday, and Regent's Square Presbyterian Church for Sunday School, as Bloomsbury in those days did not have facilities for children.

We were bused to Middleton Stoney, a very small village in Oxfordshire, where children were billeted with local families or in nearby villages for several weeks. We were housed with three children and their parents in a Middleton Stoney cottage. It seemed at first very old and quaint with lots of beams and a cupboard door to the



Regent Square
Church

staircase. But reality came when we were told the lavatory was at the end of a very long garden and one had to wash in cold water until Saturday, when a hot bath was arranged in a tin tub in the kitchen. The shock was tremendous - we were used to central heating and running hot water!

Soon Lord Bicester's mansion nearby was reorganised to house the boys' and girls' school. That accomplished, it was decided a normal home would be preferable for us, since we were the youngest pupils then attending. Mr and Mrs Inchley were most kind and welcoming. Mr Inchley was Lord Bicester's head-gardener. He was extremely knowledgeable in all things horticultural and rural, both extremely necessary for the huge beautiful gardens and enormous green and hot houses he was responsible for. At weekends he would take us to see the magnificent collection of fruits and plants grown for the 'big house', and at the same time attend to temperatures and conditions in general.

That winter, 1939/40, was extremely cold, particularly in the country. Firstly it rained for what seemed like weeks on end, with water



Lord
Bicester's
mansion

coming over our little Wellington boots as we walked to school; once there, we were given hot towels and clean socks and house shoes, but it must have been a nuisance for our teachers! On Sundays there was a very long walk to morning service at the estate's Anglican Church. To begin with the estate carriage would pass us by - but soon they took pity on us and so we sat with Lord and Lady Bicester, with our school pals looking on in envy.

Then the waterlogged fields were transformed into ice as the temperature plummeted. Even the water-fowl, including white and black swans on the lake, had to poke with their beaks to break the ice around their legs. Some poor creatures were frozen to death. We, however, had great fun learning to skate. The Inchley house was

very lovely, built in Cotswold stone, as were all the estate buildings, and it was kept beautifully warm with wood-burning stoves; something we really appreciated.



Middleton Stoney village

Mr Inchley taught us many country skills, including sawing up logs from the estate's pruned and fallen trees, with a double, two-handed saw. That certainly kept us warm! Mrs Inchley was a serious Scot. She taught us to make our beds properly, peel fruit and vegetables, make Scotch pancakes, clean gas lamps, and generally be of use about the house.

Our parents and we were dismayed to be separated that Christmas. The Inchleys made it as exciting as they could. On only one occasion Daddy did make the most awful journey to us by a train which had run out of water and so was compelled to spend most of the night in the middle of nowhere without any heating. He almost froze to death. Arriving at Bicester, he managed to hire a pony and trap. We were

absolutely thrilled to see and hug him - it had been six months since we last were together. Mrs Inchley made him very welcome, warming him gradually, then plying him with hot home-made soup, Scotch pancakes with egg, tomatoes and bacon. I can still see his eyes lighting up with pleasure. Then he gave us our presents from Scandinavia: slippers made of reindeer fur with warm red felt lining, reindeer horn thimbles which I still have, and silver jewellery.

By March 1940 pupils were gradually leaving the school since no air-raids or invasion had occurred, so the school decided to fold. I was very pleased since I was subjected to daily beating with a cane on my hands for not remembering the list of ten words given the previous day to learn.

Back in London we found many changes. There were ugly chimney-like stands, called smoke screens, made of black metal, erected every few yards on the pavement edges. Boxes under the two chimneys contained rags soaked in paraffin which, when lit, produced the most obnoxious smell, plus thick, thick black smoke. They were

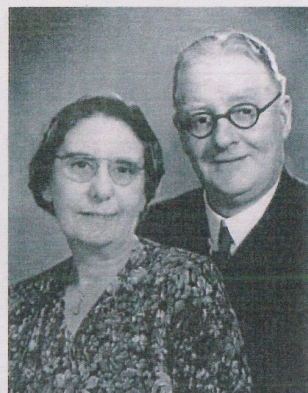
ready for air-raids, when enemy bomber crews would be unable to pin-point their targets! Most young men and women were in military uniform and every light, wherever it was, had been covered with black tape, leaving just a minute chink in the centre. Thus at night it was very difficult seeing one's way - even torches were not of much use and had to beam only downwards. All forms of street furniture such as railings and benches had been removed and melted down for ammunition. The beautiful London parks and squares were dug up to house huge air-raid shelters, with Red Cross, St John's



Barrage balloons over London

Ambulance and WVS (Women's Voluntary Service) posts situated nearby. Coram Fields in Guilford Street was a fully blown military station where ack-ack guns, enormous searchlights and a flock of barrage balloons were sited.

Bloomsbury church had been transformed. The ground floor was closed except for entering the building to use the two staircases down to a large air-raid shelter/church. I had remembered the place as a dark, gloomy space where the Boy Scouts met under Harry White's leadership, with Fred Mardell and others assisting. They were an impressive group. Now the air-raid shelter consisted of three-bed bunks placed in lines across the floor. I think lavatories and a small kitchen must have been added, while the windows were all black-outed. On Sundays the bunk tiers were re-arranged to permit rows of chairs for the services which Dr Townley Lord and Sister Elsie held without fail (except later when on two or three occasions bombs fell so close as to cause



Dr & Mrs Lord

danger to life and limb). Most of the meetings gradually ceased; however, Mummy used to continue attending the Women's Own group who used to knit woollen socks, mittens and balaclavas for the Merchant Navy in boiled wool to prevent matting.

Suddenly, in April I think, the 'blitz' started. All Georgian and Victorian buildings have cellars which were ideal for conversion into air-raid shelters. Seating and bunk beds were installed, plus electric lighting. The moment the siren wailed everyone who could would run for cover until the 'All Clear' sounded.

I remember one night there was a huge explosion very close to our shelter: the water main in Guilford Street had received a direct hit, leaving a crater large enough to swallow a London bus. A second bomb hit a gas main, also in Guilford Street, and this sent up a pillar of flames many feet high. The ARP set up stand-pipes where residents took any receptacle available to carry water. June and I had an enamel basin to wash hands and face in - which had to last the whole day. It was difficult trying to

Evacuation



keep clean amongst so much dust, broken glass and chaos.

Our parents had found an LCC school still in London at King's Cross - with them we were evacuated to Cornwall. We had to say our 'good-byes' at the school gate, then off to Paddington with one brown leather suitcase only, a gas-mask, and white labels pinned to our winter coats with our names, school and destination.

Arriving several hours later at Cambourne Station, we were told to stand in line on the platform, when gradually each child was ticked off to a waiting foster-parent. Perhaps because

we were so new to the school, we found ourselves last, without our suitcases; they were mislaid and so we had neither our sponge-bags nor night clothes. We were assigned to a very old lady, Mrs Littlejohn, and her elderly daughter who, quite obviously to us, had no experience with children. We spent a miserable week there until a replacement was found.

Mr and Mrs Gilbert were kind and sympathetic, but only a few weeks later he was called up into the Royal Navy and Mrs Gilbert was apparently pregnant. Not that that meant anything to us. It was arranged that Mummy would come to live with us since our hotel had been requisitioned for the Canadian Air Force and she was free. With her nursing expertise, she would care for Mrs Gilbert and us, and help at the town's Red Cross Centre.

Cornwall lived up to its reputation - it just rained and rained. June and I had to walk quite a long way to school which was held in a church hall attached to Tuckingmill Parish Church. The vicar had kindly spared the hall for two schools - thus we had to share the premises, which resulted in half-day lessons, a practice which was later to



Tuckingmill Parish Church with the hall to the left

affect our general education. The weather greatly affected Mummy's health - she developed severe sciatica and had to leave Cornwall for treatment in the saline baths at Droitwich Spa in Worcestershire.

Meanwhile in London our father had been directed to help run the catering facilities at King's Cross Station, where hundreds of people morning and evening required hot drinks, sandwiches etc. after leaving or before entering the Underground air-raid shelters. Three-tier bunks, like those at Bloomsbury, were placed against

the station walls, with the overflow of people lying on mats or mattresses which they carried in and out each day with pillows, blankets etc. etc. Many people on getting home would find they had no home, just a mound of rubble.



Sleeping underground at King's Cross during an air raid

We in Cornwall had to help comfort pupils who learned of relatives killed in the raids. I remember one little girl who lost her mother weeping; we walked home with her, where her fostermother was very understanding, hugging her and making a hot mug of chocolate - a great treat. With our pocket money we bought aniseed balls for her and us, but generally for treats we ate carrots which we were told would help us to see in the black-out!

Well, a new billet had to be found; after another experience lasting a few weeks, we eventually

were sent to Mr and Miss Hackwell, a brother and sister from Devonshire. To Cornish folk they were considered aliens, while we were devils from London!

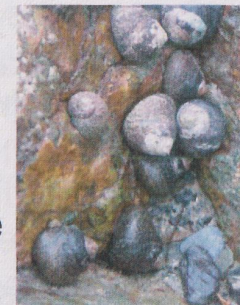
Mr Hackwell was a chemist at the Royal School of Mines, while his sister cared for him. He had had a dreadful accident riding his motorbike in August '39, colliding with a van. He was thrown high into the air, landing on his knees which unfortunately broke. The kneecaps were sewn together with wire by the surgeon in Truro hospital, who advised him this was a temporary measure until he could visit a consultant in London after the war! Thus the authorities gave him a ration of



On the rocks - with Daddy at Marazion, Cornwall

petrol for his car, since he couldn't raise his legs sufficiently to board a bus; he also had oranges and bananas which no-one else even dreamt of. Being a very kind man, he decided to walk daily to and from his office so that we might be shown Cornwall at the weekends. With them we saw St Ives, Penzance, St Michael's Mount, Newlyn, Falmouth, The Lizard and Truro, the capital.

The half-day schooling had extra-mural studies. We went on nature walks and learnt the botanical and common names of flowers and plants in the fields, by-ways and woods. Visits to the cliff tops on the north coast were exciting and climbing down the steep paths to the beaches, where we learned to gather winkles. Miss Hackwell taught us to wash them overnight to extract the salt and dirt before cooking them in boiling water for just five minutes. They were served complete with a large safety-pin plus bread and margarine.



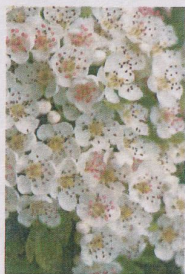
Winkles

We would play in the church yard after school before going home. We made friends with a



hedgehog, feeding him on bread and milk since no-one then knew it was wrong. The little creature died, so we asked for a shoe-box to bury him in, dug a hole in the cemetery and topped it with a wooden cross made of two sticks and letters 'RIP' which I noticed all the graves had on them. The vicar got news of this and paid us a visit in school to inform us very nicely that sanctified ground was only for humans, so we had to bury the hedgehog outside the fence. The vicar asked me if I knew what RIP meant. 'Oh yes, sir,' I said. 'Rise If Possible'!

On one occasion, while walking the Hackwell's old black retriever, Major, we saw fresh May blossom which we picked for Miss Hackwell. On presenting it to her, she howled since some petals had dropped on her newly washed, kitchen-tiled floor. 'You've brought a death omen into the house; go to your room immediately!' There we stayed in fear and trembling until the following morning when at last we were forgiven and had breakfast. Similar punishment was meted out if



we broke anything or used a slang word. However, they were genuinely fond of us and very sorry when we left, since Mummy was by then much better after her treatment.

While out walking Major on another occasion, we were exploring a large area of waste land, searching for flowers other than May blossom, when we heard running water. Being inquisitive, we looked for the source and almost disappeared down a huge hole hidden by tall grasses and weeds. On our return Mr Hackwell explained there were many disused tin mine explorations. They had just been left unprotected to capture any innocent walker or perhaps dogs chasing rabbits! If we had disappeared, one wonders what the outcome would have been! The reaction of Health & Safety plus the general public today defies belief at such negligence.

Our hotel had been hit by huge flares, which brought the roof down, breaking an enormous water tank, so it was out of commission. Our parents accepted an invitation to run a friend's hotel outside Slough. Miss Grieg, the owner, was a Jewish lady. She had decided to move to South Africa with her aged father. Before the

outbreak of WWII he had managed to escape Nazi Austria. Our parents' business was known as a 'Safe House' which is where he came. I can remember him: he wouldn't leave his room for weeks in fear of the Gestapo finding him. Eventually he took courage and walked as far as Russell Square benches - but no farther.



Russell Square

Salt Hill Hotel was a charming Christopher Wren building with beautiful gardens, stables and room for chicken and duck runs. Since the ration of one egg per person per week made catering very difficult, the chicken's eggs were very

useful. However, as a consequence no egg ration could be permitted. Any eggs not used were preserved in 'water-glass'; however, their flavour was not pleasant, so mustard powder was added to beaten eggs, the preferred method for scrambled eggs which, with sauté potatoes was a wholesome breakfast dish. Another minute ration was 1 oz of cooked meat per person per meal. Mummy arranged with someone in Scotland to send down venison, not available generally. On one occasion a Ministry of Food inspector incognito praised her for her ingenuity: she was expecting a fine!

It was great being a family again and, with many most entertaining, semi-permanent guests, we had an interesting time learning how other people lived before the war.

Our hotel was partially repaired so it was decided we should return, since we had our names down for the City of London School for Girls. The school was still away in Yorkshire so, as a pro-tem measure, we joined the LCC Central School, part of St Martin's Art School in Charing Cross Road.

Lunches there were cooked and served in the Institute at Bloomsbury Church - what a coincidence! We walked, two by two, down St Giles' High Street into Dyott Street and up the back staircase, making the most awful racket, to be served, sitting on benches at trestle tables, lunch which we had to finish, yes, even fat and spinach! Ugh!

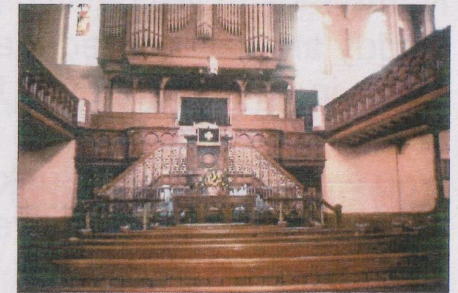
London was by then much safer but bombs did fall, leaving more huge bomb sites. Everywhere men with pneumatic drills filled the air day and night, trying to make life more tolerable for pedestrians and traffic.

Eventually the City School returned and we had to be kitted out with their famous red and white uniform, the colours of the City. Our clothing coupons had all been used up so we had to make do with 'hand me downs', which today would be intolerable. Studies were intense to help redeem many of the educational failings we had undergone due to lack of teaching, many different schools, and separation from our parents. There was some let up. We had PT twice a week and one afternoon a week played netball in Lincoln's Inn Fields, where we were the

objects of amusement to passers-by in our red and white striped blouses and deep red knickers.

We resumed attending Bloomsbury Church (proper - no longer in the basement). The congregations were enormous, both morning and evening, with many service personnel. I remember particularly Fred Mardell, Leonard Dye and Francis Lord when they were on leave.

I had joined Mr Young's choir as I loved singing. The choir was divided into two halves on either side of the organ, set in the middle of the west wall.



Sopranos and tenors were on the left, while altos and bass were on the right.

From my vantage point as a soprano I could see practically everyone. On the left were Bert and Mary Ransley, Ena Earnshaw, Francis and Daphne Lord with Mrs Lord, Mr and Mrs Edwards with Rena and Hilda, Mr and Mrs Neale, Fred and Iris Mardell, Cyril and Florence Bray, later Leonard and Judy Dye and John and

Margaret Britt, while always in the front row sat the Rt Hon. and Mrs Ernest Brown. On the right were Ernest Matthews, Mr and Mrs Saunders and their sons Peter and Colin, Dr and Mrs Ernest Payne, and always in the front row Sir Guildhaume and Lady Myrddhin-Evans and their two sons. In the middle section were Mr and Mrs George with Roy and Victor, Leslie Brice, George Foss, my family, amongst many, many others. Name tags in the pews did help, However, Daddy always insisted that we endeavour to arrive in good time, even though with a business to run it could be difficult. Daddy would say to us, 'You wouldn't attend Buckingham Palace in your working clothes and arrive LATE, would you?'

Sunday afternoon meetings were resumed, when a speaker would entertain/educate us, followed by a super afternoon tea, catered by Florence and Cyril Bray. Somehow, in spite of severe rationing, Florence with her team of helpers managed a range of delicate sandwiches, since bread and various pastes were not rationed. The cakes were made with preserved eggs plus medicinal liquid paraffin since butter or margarine were too valuable.

After the evening service we would assemble downstairs amongst the bunks when we could choose our favourite hymns and choruses. It was a great opportunity to meet other members and visitors where many true friendships were made - and romance was in the air!



A wartime wedding
Roy George marries
Monica Lord

June and I kept rabbits which were ultimately killed for meat. One day while cleaning them out as a Saturday morning job I experienced severe pain in my abdomen which lasted several days, gradually getting worse. The doctor, on his final visit, ordered an ambulance which took me to the Royal Free Hospital, then in Gray's Inn Road. Peritonitis was diagnosed. I was operated on that night - the same night that the hospital was bombed.

All patients who could be moved were placed in Green-Line buses which had been converted into ambulances. I was placed on the bottom

bunk at the rear and felt every lump and bump we drove over all the way to a huge asylum in Arlesey, where the grounds had been taken over by a huge military hospital,



A Nissen hut

which consisted of very long white Nissen huts with some huts for civilians. This is where I ended up with a ruptured and septic wound brought on by the frightful journey. I was given penicillin which I was later told was the first batch of the new drug earmarked for civilians. Up till then it was only available for the military.

There were servicemen convalescing who walked about the grounds in their bright blue uniforms - to distinguish them from normal service personnel. Otherwise they might have been sneered at on the streets for shirking their duty. As I got better, I too was able to go out for exercise, since I was there for a month. I visited the huge fence on one occasion to peer at the

Inmates of the asylum who moaned and shouted abuse as they moved about very slowly since they were hampered by a large ball and steel chain. Thank goodness those days are over!

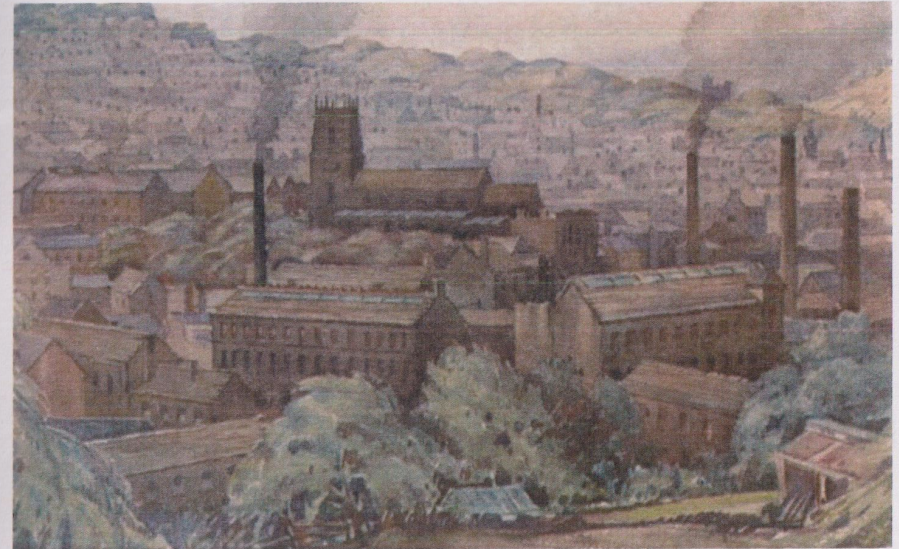
For convalescence I was sent to delightful friends of my mother whose home was in Preston, Lancashire. Dora Smith had trained to be a nurse with Mummy in the early 1920s at the London Hospital. Her husband, Alan Smith, was a stationmaster who proudly showed me his regalia of silk top hat and frock-coat for use whenever the royal train flew by or dignitaries visited his station!

They were living in a small village outside the city to escape the bombing raids which were aimed at the huge cotton mills. I was made aware of their importance to the war effort since the manufacture had changed from ordinary bolts of cotton to materials suitable for service uniforms, camouflage, air-raid balloons, parachutes etc.

Since both Dora and Alan, known as aunt and uncle, worked through the week, their close-by neighbours who had a dairy farm offered to keep me occupied. They were extremely kind and



welcoming. We ate delicious homegrown food and meat which helped to build me into a healthy young girl again. I learned to improve my skill at milking and assisted the Land-Army girls on their muck-spreading forays, as they termed it.



At weekends aunt and uncle accompanied me on long walks through the beautiful scenery of the Ribble Valley. Huge mills were sited along the river Ribble. These were, of course, strategic targets for bombing raids. One was always on the alert since air-raid alarms were not possible in the open countryside. I returned to London full of energy and a lovely country-air colouring. It had been a great and happy experience.

In 1944 the Germans attacked London with their new inventions, Doodlebugs and rockets. Returning home from school one afternoon on the 81b bus, a rocket hit Regent's Square Presbyterian Church, where as tinies we had

attended their Sunday School. A conference of clerics was in progress - the direct hit killed the entire group and left the church a heap of rubble. My bus was lifted quite two feet off the Gray's Inn Road but fortunately it fell squarely on its wheels and no passengers were hurt, just shocked.

After that experience all parents sent their children away for early summer holidays. We went with our mother to a farm in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, where we quickly learned all things connected with farm life, e.g. sex (seeing cattle being moved to be served by the prize bull at the adjacent farm for producing calves, attending the birth of piglets), cleaning out stables and byres, etc. etc. Shire horses were used on the arable fields, with huge farm workers walking alongside them. We were amazed to see these great strong men eating for their main meal of the day perhaps 12-16 boiled potatoes in their skins, with a ladle or two of what was beef tea, plus a few pieces of carrot and swede which they mashed into the potatoes. Ever after we have held that vegetable in high esteem for its strength-giving properties!

We were glad to be away from the capital, Belfast, with its great port, the famous Harland & Wolfe shipbuilding yards, and much heavy industry. Likewise, just across the Irish Sea, were the tremendously important docks of Liverpool. These strategic sites were consequently pounded with bombs.

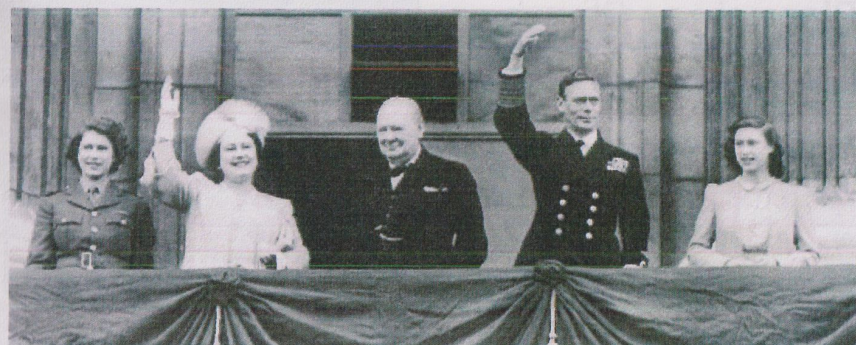
As an interlude, Daddy joined us for a short break and took us by train to Dublin. As a neutral country Eire had no restrictions: food was plentiful and lights shone everywhere, which must have been a great boon for enemy crews calibrating their targets. Chocolate, our first priority, and clothing were freely available so shopping was a joy. However, we remember seeing young boys running about in their bare feet and ragged clothing. It all seemed terribly unfair to us who knew little of the political hatred between the two countries then.

Northern Ireland in those days had a thriving linen industry. Flax, the linen fibre, was grown in huge fields. Once ripe, it was cut, baled into stooks, and placed head to tail in enormous trenches alongside the fields. Then the stooks were covered with water and left to rot. Once the

chaff had rotted, the remaining cellulose (linen fibre) was left to dry on the land before being carted off to the linen factories for processing. Perhaps you can imagine the horrendous odour one had to endure! Local people called the smell 'Country Perfume'!



We returned to London where by that time Daddy was in charge of a Thames craft named *HMS Titmouse* (since it really was extremely small). He conveyed documents from the Houses of Parliament at Westminster to the Royal Naval headquarters at Greenwich. During those months he used to see enormous blocks of concrete being towed downstream but he never mentioned it to anyone, even Mummy, since he had sworn not to divulge anything untoward. Those blocks were, of course, destined for the construction of the Mulberry Harbour for D-Day.



VE-Day eventually came when with thousands of others we danced and sang in Piccadilly and outside Buckingham Palace, where King George VI and Queen Elizabeth (later the Queen Mother) came out onto the balcony with the two princesses, Elizabeth and Margaret Rose, and Mr Winston Churchill. They stayed for ages, acknowledging the crowds. It was a joyous, happy, happy time.



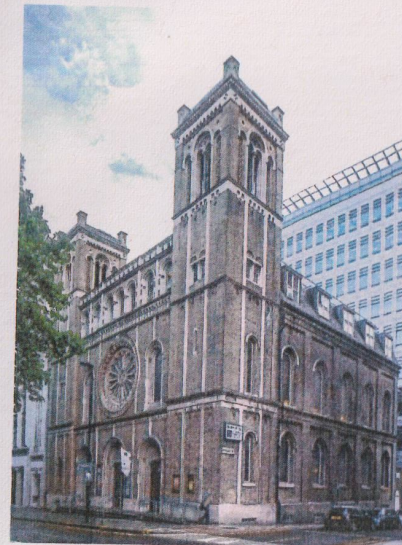
Bloomsbury Church held a splendid Service of Thanksgiving, when Mr Young pulled out all the stops in celebration.



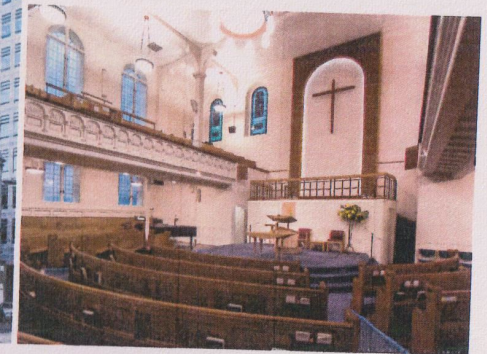
The people with whom we came into contact, plus the countless experiences during those momentous years, helped us enormously in our lives. We are extremely grateful to them and to our beloved parents.

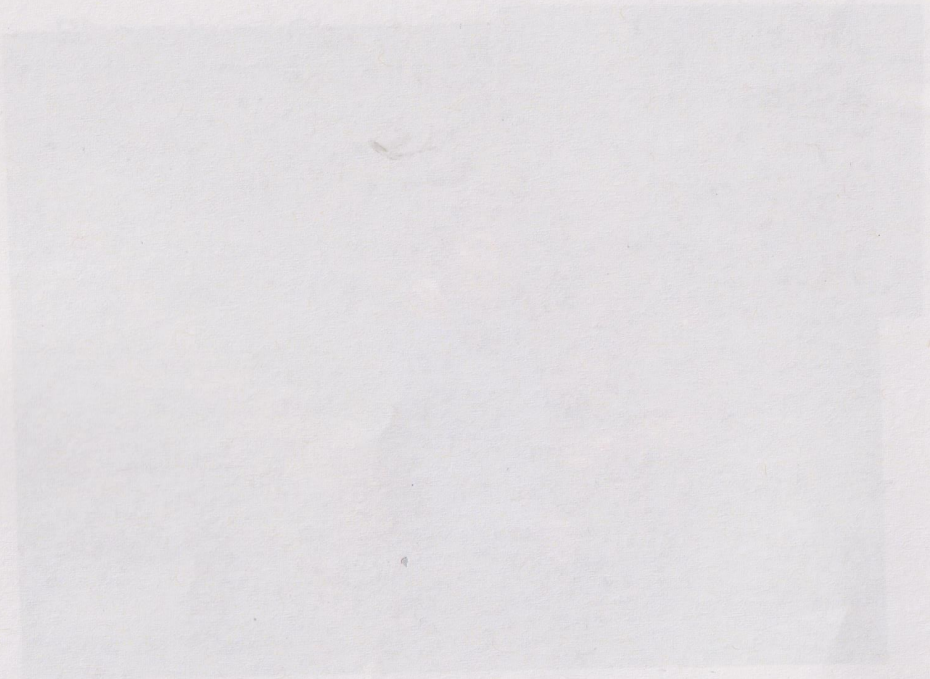


Ruth and June, now octogenarians, in June's bluebell wood, Kent



Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church in 2013





From and time, now old general in June's baseball wood Kent



Bloomer's Central
Baptist Church in 2013

