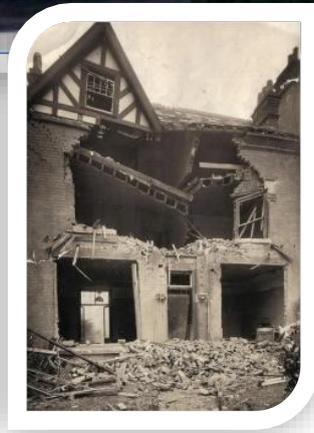


Reconstructing No71

(et al)



WHY ONE HOUSE IN SCHOOL ROAD, MOSELEY
LOOKS SO DIFFERENT FROM ITS NEIGHBOURS

COMPILED BY HUGH GIBBONS FROM FAMILY
MEMORABILIA AND OFFICIAL RECORDS

WITH THE VOICES OF MUM, DAD, SISTER BUNNY,
BROTHER PAUL, AND OTHERS INVOLVED IN THE
EVENTS AND AFTERMATH OF THE NIGHT OF
18/19 NOVEMBER 1940



Reconstructing more than 71

A PAGE ON WHAT AND WHY – AND YOU

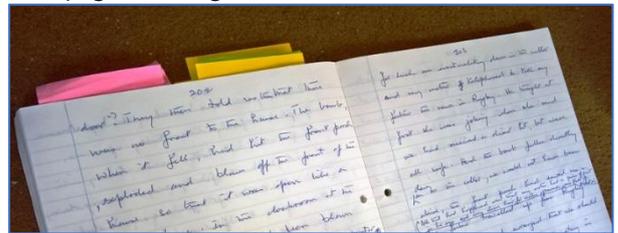
WHEN YOU STROLL ALONG A STREET OR ROAD IN AN OLDER CITY OR TOWN, LOOK UP. There's lots to enjoy in the architectural variety and embellishments. And if you see something out of kilter in the spacing or roof line of houses, ask yourself: what went on there? The visual difference can indicate a previous home – and all the human stories that go with it. A new house may mask an older story to enjoy – if you can find someone to tell it.

No71 School Road in the Moseley district of Birmingham is an example. Today's 71 is distinctly different from 69 and 73. It's a post-WWII house built on the site of one damaged beyond repair on the night of 19 November 1940. And that house has storytellers: us Gibbons family, who were right on the spot. In the cellar were Mum, Bunny, Paul, and me oblivious to the Blitz. Dad was away that night in Rugby.



We all had our oral histories. But about 30 years ago Bunny wrote up things that night as part of a highly detailed family history of 237 pages starting in about 1900 and ending at Christmas 1942. The core of

Reconstructing No 71 is essentially her text, set out in blue type. It's virtually verbatim as she wrote so clearly. Around it is material from our unusual collection of family memorabilia that fill two small suitcases – official documents, letters, certificates, citations,



school reports, photos, diaries. Expert sources and Ancestry UK flesh the stories out. And I've arranged everything as a set of self-contained pages to browse on-screen or paper – a bit like a buffet.

Reconstructing No71 should be of particular interest to several groups of local people: the current occupants and neighbours, as part of their history; Moseley Society and its own and other Local History Group; Birmingham Heritage Forum; the Holdsworth Club, perhaps; and maybe some families cited.

ET AL is very important, too. This document is not just about our house and family and aftermath..

It's about people today, much like you - and about common kindnesses, humanity, resilience, humour, understanding, coping with trying or tragic times. As examples, you'll find these pages are an appreciation of friends, neighbours, Wrens in oilskins, law professors with jokes, foster parents for Kindertransport, Blitz-night telephone operators, office colleagues with contacts, agents with the French resistance, jobbing carpenters, café assistants with sausages under the counter, tolerant teachers. Et al.

And it's also a reminder of two lessons from history then that still apply anytime and anywhere. Bombs don't distinguish innocent lives. And they end up with people being bloody-minded: who 'can take it'.

Enjoy the read – and our chorus of voices. And do glance up for stories as you stroll the streets.



Hugh Gibbons

Age 2 with Mum and Paul

outside No71 School Road in October 1940

*Age 82 with Anne at 75 Qualitas in Bracknell
in Summer 2020*

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Our 237-page handwritten history to 1942

A PAGE ON UTILITY FURNITURE – AND A 1988 CASH BAR WITH COINCIDENCE

CHRISTMAS 1942. It almost seemed like pre-war dinners and we were all together again in our very own house. I only went home from University for the long vacations, although Rugby was not so far away by train from Birmingham. Even with textbooks, my belongings all fitted into my father's old suitcase."

That's as far as my sister Bunny got on her detail-filled Gibbons' family history, densely written in ballpoint sometime in the late the 1990s. It's the main source for Reconstructing No71 - part of an unusual collection of memorabilia fitting into two suitcases. She wrote at this dining table in her flat in Linden Road in the seaside town of Clevedon in Somerset where she lived for most of her retirement until her death in 2015 at age 93. Writing came easy to Bunny, not least in the Christmas cards to dozens of people – all the family, friends, and my parents' - collected over many years.

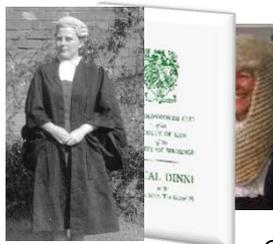


The table and chairs were themselves part of our wartime story. It was a Utility set, produced under a Government scheme using high quality design expertise to cope with raw material shortages and many households losing furniture to bombing. The furniture was restricted to newlyweds and those who'd been bombed out. We could tell it was Utility



because it carried the "Two-Cheeses" Mark. My parents bought it in Birmingham in 1943, and for over 70 years the table was a cheery setting for Gibbons gatherings and hundreds of visitors. (If we dined out, a highlight would be fighting over who was allowed to pay the bill – even on her 75th birthday here Bunny beat Paul and me to it.)

Bunny's ballpoint pen ran out at 1942, when she was up only to a quarter of her really full life. Her mini-history doesn't get to say that that after a WRNS-interrupted Law degree at Birmingham University, she became a barrister; and often went back to reunions of their Holdsworth Club. This produced a seriously happy surprise. During the spring 2020 lockdown, I thought it about time to share her Old No71 story with the current occupants of New No71 - just in case they'd ever wondered about why their house was so different. It produced a warm-hearted reply – from a barrister! Who had also trained at Birmingham....*"I just wanted to email you and thank you for the wonderful surprise that came through the door today. I can't tell you what a thrill we had from seeing the envelope and then reading the contents. Thank you so much for taking the trouble to send it to us. We have lots of lovely memories of living here since 2013. It has been wonderful to read about the house's rich history in the war and indeed more about Moseley."*



And the suitcases of memorabilia held a telling piece of evidence. In March 1988 – nearly 48 years after Bunny had hurriedly left Old No71, Bunny attended a Holdsworth Club Annual Dinner at the Grand Hotel in Birmingham. The programme shows that among those present was that current occupant of the New No71 (though not for another 25 years). Unknowing of past and future, maybe they got to chat to each other when Guests of the Club and Graduate Members took up the offer to retire with the President Lord Goff of Chieveley to the Cardinal Suite, where a cash bar was available (and the first round's on you, m'lud, cheers).

Overleaf, Hugh tells of how the Gibbons wandered their way to No71



Us back on the Moseley map of Brum

A PAGE ON WHY BIRMINGHAM WAS A FAMILIAR PLACE FOR US IN 1939

"REPARATIONS ARE WELL ADVANCED for the move to Kingswood, School Road, Moseley. We go on Wednesday." That's in my father's diary – well, a small ledger book, actually - for 12 December 1938. It's almost the last entry of the many in that turbulent year, including copied-out letters to and about Neville Chamberlain and Anthony Eden, a commentary on the crises in Europe, my birth, and job moves.

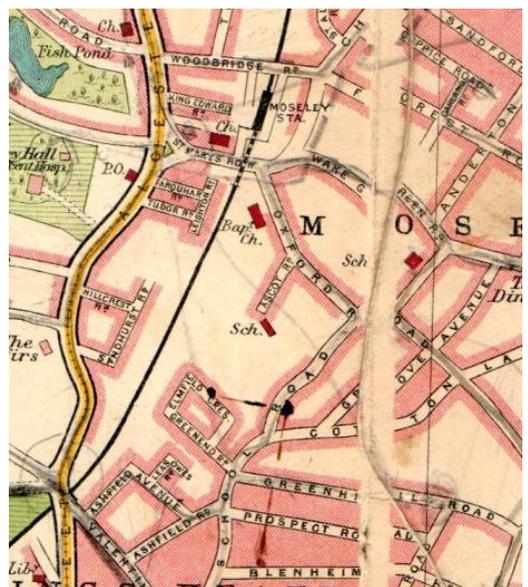
It was the latter that meant a return to Birmingham for my parents and Bunny, after a long gap. They knew the city. Though born in Heysham in Lancashire in 1903, Mum was really Birmingham-bred – in Claremont Road in Smethwick and 365 Rotton Park Road. Mum had an unusual first name: Ilma – short for the then Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands. In WW1, her three brothers Leo, Alan and Eric Sidebottom served with the Army in France. And it was essentially a Church of England family.

In contrast, our father was from a large Catholic family in Cork, given the good saints' names Alfred Charles – hence he was always known as Dick. After he survived the trenches of WW1 as an officer, local republicans with guns suggested Birmingham University might be a better bet for his tertiary education. (So I'm a son of a political refugee – and later, an Internally Displaced Person with a home lost to war.)

"How did you meet?" is always a useful conversation gambit. In our parents' case, according to Bunny "Rumour had it that he saw her climbing on to a tram and said, 'That's the girl I'm going to marry.'" Well, they had 60 years' journey together. The family grew. In 1922 Noreen Dierdre was born, but called Bunny by all the family and many friends – sometimes confusing colleagues and teachers not in the know. They all lived with the Sidebottom parents before moving to their own first home in Smethwick. My father's job was with Kynoch's, which through mergers became part of the mighty ICI – Imperial Chemical Industries. ICI Metals took them to a now-peaceful Ireland and homes in Stillorgan and Howth in Dublin. My father had a catholic reading list, so, ahem, Paul René Grinling Gibbons was born in 1933. In 1935 ICI moved them to Stoke Bishop in Bristol, where in 1938 I was christened, good gracious, Hugh Romain Honoré. (It was decades before the penny dropped with my father about the initials.)

A FURTHER ICI MOVE saw the Gibbons back in Birmingham at the very end of 1938. And this time my father chose Kingswood, 71 School Road in Moseley – a good house and setting. Our 1933 Street Guide pinpoints us. Moseley had long been a rural village about three miles south of the city centre. Birmingham had seen massive growth in population, industry and prosperity. In 1538 there were 1300 people; in 1891, 478,000; in 1939, 995,000 in the UK's second city.

With a new railway line and trams linking Moseley to the city centre, it developed into a fashionable suburb. What had been countryside estates were sold off, and many handsome Victorian houses were built for the business- and professional-class families, often accommodating several domestic servants. St Mary's was the parish church by busy shops – with more at Kings Heath. Nearby were primary and secondary schools, the famous Moseley rugby football club, Kingsway and Moseley Road cinemas, libraries, swimming baths, parks, and pubs. So: good move, Dad.



[What was No71 actually like to live in? Overleaf Bunny takes up the story on her P183.](#)



“A double-fronted house in School Road”

A PAGE ON No71'S INSIDE AND THE NEIGHBOURS OUTSIDE

“MOVING FROM BRISTOL IN LATE 1938, my father had chosen a double-fronted house in School Road, Moseley. It was much larger than the one in Bristol. There was a living room on one side of the hall, which went from front to back with French windows leading on to the garden. On the other side of the hall was a dining room with a gas fire in it. Beyond stretched a breakfast room with a triplex range, and beyond that again a scullery with the old original range in it. Upstairs, my parents' bedroom faced the front, with two large windows. Into it went the pride of my father's new purchases – a magnificent mahogany bedroom suite...



“My bedroom was next door, with a window overlooking the very large house standing in its own grounds opposite where, periodically, we would see a chauffeur drive the car up for the elderly lady occupant. Paul's room was at the back. Hugh was still in a cot in my parents' room. The house was really L-shaped and upstairs, along the length of the L, were storerooms, the bathroom and another bedroom. Up above were attics for all the clutter. Down below was a cellar. The garden was long and narrow with a lawn and, at the end, a garden seat”.

No 71 WAS OCCUPIED FROM ABOUT 1910 TO 1938 by James and Ellen Coulson and their son, though whether as owners or tenants is unknown. James was a buildings and land surveyor, born around 1856. He and Ellen lived for some years in terraced house in Kingswood Road in Moseley, where Eric was born in 1890. Perhaps as the business succeeded, James was able to afford the larger detached house in School Road, coincidentally named Kingswood. Eric went to King Edward's School, then still in the centre of Birmingham (so we shared schools if not their location) In November 1916 he was commissioned into the Worcestershire Regiment, and was at some time wounded. On 1 July 1917, he was a 1st Lieutenant with the South Lancashire Regiment. In July 1920, Eric married Hope Hughes who lived in Trafalgar Road, and they settled for decades at 34 Abbots Road, Kings Heath – so Ellen and James must have rattled about the big house. But in November 1937, James died, and Ellen in April 1938. If they now had ownership of No71, they presumably decided to let the house – and the Gibbons arrived that December.

Our right-hand neighbours at No 69 were the Farmer sisters. Eveline 49 and Joy 43 were confectioners; Gertrude 46 a piano teacher. To the left was a young family: Dr David Halpern, his wife Judith and daughter Peta, born in 1937 so about a year older than me. As my parents were sociable with a young family, we must have met, if only over the back fence! (Their poignant story is covered in another document in this series.)



Directly across the road, No 50 was a large house that Bunny said was “*standing in its own grounds where, periodically, we would see a chauffeur drive up for the elderly lady occupant.*” In fact, she was Mollie Padmore 69, six years a widow, with servants Elsie Gibson and the intriguingly named Famarri Habbitt (so the 1939 National Register has it.)

Diagonally opposite at No 48 – left in the photo - were Oliver and Bessie Langford, an elderly couple with two servants, Gladys and Rose. Next to them, No 46 was a mixed household, presided over by Mary Bradford. Mary Baird 26 was a clerical assistant in local government. Her brother George was a theology student. And Margaret White 24 was an architect's secretary. An ideal team to observe – and maybe help after – any unusual events in No71



Overleaf, Bunny takes up our story from Toulon to Dunkirk



“There was no talk of surrender”

A PAGE ON THE WEEKS BEFORE THE WAR AND AFTER DUNKIRK

“THAT AUGUST IN 1939, we all went on a cruise to the Mediterranean. We caught an out-going liner from Tilbury, The Ormande, and a home-coming one at Toulon, the Orontes. It was the perfect holiday to cope with a young baby, there were all the facilities on board for washing and drying the terry-towelling nappies...

(2) Port at which Passengers have been loaded	(3) NAMES OF PASSENGERS	(4) CLASS (including the name of the Cabin)	(5) AGES OF PASSENGERS					(6) Proposed Address in the United Kingdom
			Adults of 16 years and upwards	Over 12 years and under 16	Under 12 years and over 6	Under 6	Infants	
289 Toulon	TILBURY	Gibbons Mrs I	"	"	"	"	71, School St., Moseley Birmingham	
290 "	TILBURY	" Mrs M	"	"	"	"	"	
291 "	TILBURY	" Mrs F	"	"	"	"	"	
292 "	TILBURY	" Mrs H	"	"	"	"	"	
293 Srinagar	TILBURY	" Mrs H	"	"	"	"	"	

“THE SHIP WAS CROWDED with those going back from leave to India as well as Australians returning from their visit to the old country – and also a great number of German-Jewish refugees, all bound for a new life and all learning English like mad because that was a requisite of entry to the country.



“ON THE WAY BACK WE CALLED AT PLYMOUTH, and there began to hear of preparations for war. Guns suddenly appeared on the top decks and many of the military personnel received their calling-up papers. There was turmoil when we reached Tilbury. My father, who was on the reserve of officers, expected to be called up and thought of a scheme to send us to a safe haven in Ireland. We did in fact go to Dublin and were there when war was declared. But my mother could not bear to be away and after a fortnight we returned to face the consequences. The mail-boat back to Holyhead zig-zagged to avoid submarines.

“WE DISCOVERED THAT MY FATHER, in our absence, had plastered the windows up to protect them from the bombs, so the house was dim. My mother in no time at all organised proper black-out curtains. As it tuned out, my father was not called up for the reserve list of officers, but instead was eventually was lent to the government by ICI to work on the small arms metal supply programme at the main control offices in Rugby, whose head was Oliver Lyttleton. He came home at weekends.

“CAMP HILL GRAMMAR SCHOOL HAD BEEN EVACUATED – not a school was left in Birmingham where I could continue my studies. So my father arranged for me to do a correspondence course. At home, too, my mother had turned the dining room into a school for younger children during the weekday mornings. My father could not get away for a break but in early June my mother, Paul, Hugh and I went to Clevedon near Bristol for a week. Then came the Saturday to return to Birmingham.

“THE EVACUATION FROM DUNKIRK HAD HAPPENED. Weary troops, rescued from beaches, were sent to places all over the country and many of them were briefly billeted in Bristol. We travelled on a train full of soldiers recognising their comrades when they had thought never to see them again. They were exhausted and in a state of shock. The strange feeling was that now they were back on their own soil and alongside their own people we would all be in the fight together. There was no talk of surrender.”



Overleaf, Bunny on health & safety kit – and Hugh looks at Dad’s armies.



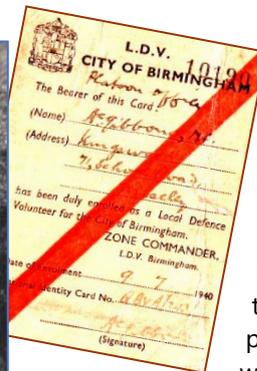
“Wearing a toy tin helmet of Paul’s”

A PAGE ON DAD’S ARMIES – AND THE LUFTWAFFE’S 1940 LINE-UP

“THE SUMMER MONTHS OF 1940 dragged on and we went for a brief weekend to Rhyl, but it was difficult to find the way back, as all road signs had been taken down in case of invasion by parachutists and people were suspicious of giving directions.

“ONE WEEKEND, when my father was home from Rugby, he went up to the attic to see the fires raging the other side of the City, where they were trying to hit the munition factories, but wearing a toy tin helmet of Paul’s as protection...

There’s the lad in his kit the back garden of No71



DAD WAS ENLISTED IN THE LOCAL DEFENCE VOLUNTEERS, the precursor to the Home Guard. It must have been very much like Dad’s Army, different from the one he’d first experienced 24 years before – straight from school in Cork. Though all Ireland was part of the United Kingdom, because of the political sensitivities of the time there was no conscription during WW1.

However, a few days after his 18th birthday in 1915, he volunteered with the Leinster Regiment. They passed him on to the Second Battalion of the Irish Guards, and service in the trenches during 1916. (One of his company commanders was Harold Alexander, later Field Marshal.)

In 1917 Alfred Charles Gibbons was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Lancashire Fusiliers (like JRR Tolkein, who also lived in Moseley for a while). In March 1918, serving near Arras, he was awarded the Military Cross. He ended as a Captain, taking part in the occupation of the Rhineland based near Cologne until discharge in 1919. And briefly back to Cork before gunmen there suggested Brum.

Not surprisingly, he didn’t fit happily with the LDV’s Captain Mainwaring – and was happy when the government sent him to Rugby. But he served there with the semi-rural Home Guard.

IN THE LATE 1940S my mother started suffering agoraphobia, and I began years of bad nightmares. It’s not hard to find a reason – as millions around the world then and since can testify.

The city endured 65 raids and 2241 people killed, starting 9 August 1940. *Brum Undaunted* by Carl Chinn is the go-to book for Birmingham’s Blitz, and gives the last raid as on 23 April 1943. (By comparison, at the end of May 1942, the RAF was able to launch a Thousand Bomber Raid on Cologne, which suffered 262 raids and 20,000 people killed by 1945.)

The night of 18/19 November 1940 was a relatively quiet one for Brum. Over the countrywide black-out, two Luftwaffe Heinkel 111 squadrons droned north: 1/KG1 out of Montdidier near Amiens; and III/KG26 out of Poix Nord, just east of where my father won his MC. If one particular bomber had diverged by a fraction in track, time, height or speed, you wouldn’t be reading this.

Overleaf, Bunny tells of things that went bump in the night.



“So that it was open like a doll’s house”

A PAGE ON A 1940 NIGHT – AND ALERT TELEPHONIST – TO REMEMBER

“THE BOMBING RAIDS BEGAN IN THE AUTUMN. On moonlit nights, we discovered the bombers did not come and then we went to the cinema in Kings Heath despite the blackout. The German planes were quite distinguishable by a sort of chug-chugging noise their engines made.

“As the raids progressed, we had taken to sleeping down the cellar, although it had been declared not safe against bombs. We had proper beds down there, and Hugh slept in his little cot. The dampness had been dissipated by putting trays of lime down on Grandpa’s advice.

“On that particular night, I had washed my hair and climbed into bed by my mother’s side at about eight o’clock when the bombers would arrive. There was a great deal of gunfire as well from the guns in Swanshurst Park.

“Eventually, we turned out the light and fell asleep. Suddenly, we were awakened by streams of plaster falling down thickly upon us, so that the bed clothes were heavy with it and, when it finally ceased coming down, they were difficult to lift off. We were in darkness, but managed to find a candle to light. Hugh still lay in his cot, but, resting on a beam inches above it, was the gas fire from the dining-room. Had it dropped further, he would have been killed.

“The stairs up from the cellar were intact and we went upstairs and into the back part of the house where thing seemed normal. There was a commotion at the front as great, burly rescue men tramped in. My mother said in a bewildered voice, ‘How did you get in? I bolted the front door’. They then told us that there was no front to the house. The bomb, when it fell, had hit the front porch, exploded and blown off the front of the house so that it was open like a doll’s house. In the cloakroom at the back, the telephone had been blown off its stand and the telephone operator knew that something had happened and alerted the rescue service. In all the heavy bombing, it had taken them on a few minutes to reach us from the centre of town.”



Overleaf, Bunny tells of what happened in the next few hours and days.



“My mother found her engagement ring”

A PAGE ON GOOD 1940 NEIGHBOURS – AND GOOD LUCK

“WE PASSED THE REST OF THE NIGHT TILL DAWN UNDER THE STAIRS, Hugh with a bag of biscuits all to himself which he was always to remember. The next morning we dressed in the clothes we had prepared for such an eventuality down in the cellar and my mother telephoned to tell my father the news in Rugby. He thought at first she was joking when she said we had received a direct hit, but were all safe. Had the bomb fallen directly down on to the cellar, we would not have been alive; the front porch had saved us. All that had happened was that my mother had a piece of grit in her eye and my clean hair, for weeks afterwards, was full of plaster.



According to Paul – seen here on his first day at Moseley CofE School down the road - in the morning we were looked after by a family in a house diagonally opposite No 71 – probably No 48. This would have been Mr & Mrs Langford and their domestic servants Gladys Hughes and Rose Osborne.



“MY FATHER TRAVELLED UP FROM RUGBY IMMEDIATELY and arranged that we should go back there with him to stay in the digs with the family who looked after him until we could find somewhere to live. But Coventry had been bombed at the same time as us and thousands from Coventry had fled to Rugby and accommodation was at a premium.

“AGAIN LUCK WAS WITH US. Someone in my father’s office knew of a Flight Lieutenant and his wife who owned a two-bedroomed bungalow in St Mark’s Avenue, Old Bilton, a village about two miles out of Rugby and, as they were moving away for one of the RAF postings, they were willing for us to have the bungalow. It was furnished, which was just as well, because only a few pieces of furniture remained from our old home, mostly from the dining-room, and they were very badly battered, literally pieces of wood in some cases.

“MY FATHER AND MOTHER WENT BACK TO BIRMINGHAM to gather together what they could, and my mother eventually found her engagement ring, shining in the rubble. At the top, where the attic had been, was the large cabin trunk we had taken on holiday with us and this contained my mother’s and father’s love-letters. My father was adamant that all Moseley was not going to read them and so climbed up, perilously, and managed to topple the trunk down with a crash.



“OUR HOUSE WAS THE ONLY ONE which had been hit in School Road that night and my father always attributed it to his being on the Germans’ black list for having written rude letters to the German Embassy when Ribbentrop was ambassador there. But, in fact, the bomber had dropped a stick of bombs, some to the left, some to the right, lower down in Moseley and people said it was because a gun was mounted on an engine which hid under the railway bridges as the bomber came over and it had been trying to hit that.”

Overleaf you’ll see that a few fragments survived...

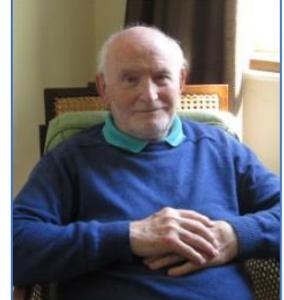


“A piece of a German bomb...”

A PAGE ON SOME NOVEL PAGES OF HISTORY

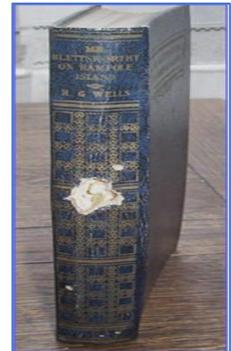
MOST OF OUR FURNITURE WAS LOST. And crockery, and clothing. But we made do. A happy earliest memory is the next week (as a 2-year-old plus a few months) sitting in bed in Old Bilton drinking tea out of a sugar bowl.

And a few things were saved. We had a bergère cane suite. The sofa was lost, but the overturned chairs were dusted down and carted away with us. And with recaning, they're alive and well and in daily use in the flat of our son Matthew in Bracknell.



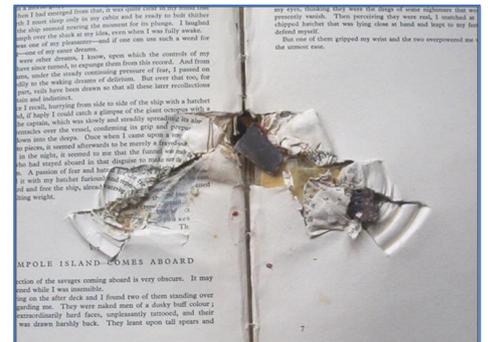
AND WE HAVE ONE TELLING MEMENTO. This novel is Mr Blettsworthy on Rampole Island by HG Wells – part of a series that must have been in the lounge or dining room.

The neat hole in the spine was made by what seem to be two fragments of the bomb. One is curved, thin metal; the other is thicker and shrapnel-like. Their straight passage into the gouging of the pages suggests that the explosion was at or about ground level – perhaps from an aerial parachute mine. If it had been a proper bomb, you wouldn't be reading this.



Student physicists might like to work out the forces involved that let the light and frail fragments punch their way through the thickish spine but got stopped by the paper.

My father's handwritten note on the inside cover says: *"This book contains a piece of a German bomb which demolished our house Kingswood, 71 School Road, Moseley, Birmingham on 19/11/40, in a great raid following that on Coventry the previous week. My family in the cellar had a miraculous escape: Ilma (Mum); Bun (18); Paul(7) and Hugh (2)".*



AND THOSE LOVE LETTERS? The ones that my father had perilously rescued from the top of the house? Bunny records that at the bungalow in Old Bilton, "They sorted them out sitting one fine day in the garden. First one would read one out, then the other would say *'Listen to this'*. The pace quickened. *'Listen to this then'* became more frequent and retaliatory until, in the end, they both exploded with anger and all the letters got burned on a bonfire and no further mention was ever made of them."

Overleaf, Bunny remembers close-by families who did not have our luck.



“Where a school friend of mine lived”

A PAGE ON 1940 FAMILIES THAT DIDN'T HAVE OUR LUCK

“THERE WAS A TRAGEDY when a bomb dropped in nearby Oxford Road on to the house where a school friend of mine from Camp Hill Grammar lived with her mother and stepbrothers and sisters. They were all killed. The step-father, being an Italian, had been interned on the Isle of Man and had no idea that Birmingham was being bombed, otherwise he would have arrangements to move the family”

BUNNY'S FRIEND WAS PHYLLIS WALDRON. She lived at 68 Oxford Road. When evacuation closed the school, perhaps Phyllis used to come round and see Bunny until our house was hit.

HER MOTHER WAS ALSO A PHYLLIS. She had been married before, but remarried an Italian marble merchant called Ernesto Piccioni. They had a child with a lively name: Gina Edvige Ernesta. His brother Roberto also got married – to Doris Townsend. Their daughter was Angela, and 1939 home was at Bills Lane in Stirchley. Roberto and Ernesto came from Bergamo, settled in England and ran a flourishing marble business in Hunters Road in Hockley. Ernesto in 1936 was at 62 Greenhill Road in Moseley but after a couple of years he moved to 68 Oxford Road named Chellington.

BUT WITH THE WAR, their origins came into question. Moseley Society's Local History Group say that British Intelligence officer Guy Liddell in 2nd February 1940 reported: *“Two town councillors in Birmingham are complaining that an Italian called Piccioni, who is Italian consular agent in Birmingham, is serving in the Birmingham ARP Central Control and Report Centre. The Centre gets all reports on bomb damage and transmits them to the HO (Home Office). Later information is to the effect that he is a member of the Fascio.”* In June 1940, Italy declared war on Britain – changing the brothers' status to enemy aliens - thereby maybe saving their lives.

RESIDENT ITALIANS WERE CONSIDERED FOR INTERNMENT. About 4,000 were known to be members of the Italian Fascist Party. Others between 16 and 70 who had lived in the UK for fewer than 20 years were ordered to be interned. The latter included Ernesto and Roberto Piccioni. Both brothers were classified A and interned in the Isle of Man, meaning limited family contact.

ON THE NIGHT OF 11 DECEMBER 1940, both their families were in No 68 Oxford Road, together with a lady of 63, Florence Elliott, and a young bank clerk William Howard Watson – who doubled as a firewatcher. They were all killed. The photo shows what may have been No68. In the Moseley Society's WWII publication it's not identified. But comparing the chimneys on the house next door with those on No68 in Google Streetview today, they look similar. The house seems to have tipped forward – bomb falling on the house from behind released from a bomber coming up from the south.



THE BROTHERS WERE RELEASED ON 11 SEPTEMBER 1941. They returned to Hockley to pick up the pieces and their lives. In 1946 Ernesto married Florence Nellie Spencer, rebuilt No68, and lived there until his death in January 1970 age 68 – just three months before Roberto who was 73 may have lived next door. They'd had 30 years of extra life.



NINE OTHERS IN ST MARY'S PARISH DIED THAT NIGHT – one, two doors away. Lost nearby too was refugee Suzanne Marburg, age 5 and all her foster family, the Lloyds at 167 Swanshurst Lane. From Prague, Suzanne been in the Kinderlift evacuations of Jewish Czech children urged by Sir Nicholas Winton. Her mother survived the Holocaust, and several times visited Suzanne's grave – and the Lloyds' - at the cemetery at Kingswood Unitarian Church in Wythall.

Overleaf, Bunny talks about life going on - at our new home in Old Bilton



“With rifle – and umbrella if raining”

A PAGE ON SCARLET FEVER IN 1941- AND SAUSAGES ON THE MINISTRY

“THE BUNGALOW IN OLD BILTON was very cramped for all five of us. There was a double bed in the front room for my mother and father and Hugh’s cot had been saved and went in there. At the back, there was a room with two single beds in it for Paul and me. Otherwise there was a fairly small living room on the dark side with the kitchen off it. But no hot water system, only Ascot heaters and, of course, a coal fire in the living room. It had a longish garden. The bungalow was part of an estate built at the back of the village connected by a pedestrian passageway.

“FOOD WAS RATIONED TIGHTLY and any extras were very scarce, as no provision was ever made for the 12,000 Coventry people who were living in the town. Petrol was rationed, and as a government employee my father had no car. So he bought a bike and cycled into work. His assistant was a young Londoner named Peter Collingwood, and his sister and mother lived in Old Bilton too, and we soon made friends. They had come originally from Richmond in Surrey, and his sister Dorothy worked as a secretary in one of the other control centres.

“IT WAS DECIDED I WOULD GO BACK TO SCHOOL to complete my studies, if possible, for Higher School Certificate, the deadline being about six months to the examinations. So I started at Rugby High School. As we had no extra coupons for the clothes we had lost, they allowed me to go to school in the clothes I had and not the uniform. How I did my homework in the cramped conditions of the bungalow I cannot remember, but all went well because in the following summer I attained higher school certificate.

“MY FATHER BELONGED TO THE HOME GUARD and would go off to duty at nights dressed in his uniform with his rifle slung over his shoulder, but riding his bike and, if it was wet, with an umbrella up. He would go up to London frequently to Ministry of Supply meetings at ShellMex House, and always made a point of walking from Euston and stopping to have a coffee at the ABC Cafe in Southampton Row. The woman behind the counter came to know him and would very often give him a large slab of current cake. He was also able to get us sausages in London. But there was never any paper for wrapping, and he said many times he pulled the papers and sausages together out of his briefcase.

“PAUL WENT TO SCHOOL IN THE VILLAGE in the village and learned words not in polite usage in those days. These were passed on to Hugh so that when my father went in one day to say goodbye to him as he lay in his cot, Hugh replied “Bugger off!” My father could hardly believe his ears but had to laugh.

“THAT EASTER, PAUL AND I DEVELOPED SCARLET FEVER. My mother diagnosed it accurately from the two old medical books we still had with us. Our faces were flushed but there were whitish rings around our mouths. It was quite hopeless to cope with such a disease in the small bungalow and Paul and I went separately one after the other to the modern isolation hospital in Harborough Magna. As soon as Paul and I were back home again, Hugh went down with the disease and had to go away to the hospital on his own. He looked such a forlorn little figure in his cot when we went to see him and refused obstinately to have anything to do with us until we were leaving, when he would follow us down the driveway. He was then less than three years old.



WHERE WAS ‘AVALON’ IN THE AVENUE?

One of our father’s notebooks names the bungalow as ‘Avalon’, with Bunny’s reference to the 1940 owner being a Squadron Leader on RAF service. The 1939 National Register lists John Langley and his wife Mildred at No8 in the Avenue, and that he was a Technical Electrical Engineer “serving with the RAF. Acting Corporal 852270 with 917 Balloon Barrage Squadron” (which was sited in the Coventry area). Later records suggest they had three children. Today’s No8 is not a prewar bungalow but a large postwar house – with large garden. A Gibbons-sized bungalow at No6 next door in 1939 was occupied by Lewis Evington (then 31) and his wife Flora. But he didn’t make Corporal till 1942, and there’s no record of children.

Overleaf, Bunny applauds our next home Rugby, tombstones and Sam Robbins!



“Dive back among the tombstones”

A PAGE ON A HAPPY 1942 PLACE TO LIVE - AND TOTE A CATAPULT

“THE FLIGHT LIEUTENANT AND HIS WIFE required the bungalow back as she was expecting a baby, and a rush was on to find another place. In the end my father’s secretary, who was the daughter of a rugby solicitor, came up with the answer. A local farmer was persuaded to let a large empty house he owned in Elsee Road, which lay behind the parish church [unidentified but among those on the left in the photo].

“THE SMALL BACK GARDEN with stables in it backed onto the churchyard. The house seemed enormous to my parents after the bungalow. It was formerly a school house for the borders at Rugby school and just a few doors down from the house where Rupert Brooke lived.



“WHEN THEY CAME TO MOVE IN the remaining fragments of their furniture, it all seemed to go into one corner and to be little more than matchwood. But Rugby was a one-man town, and that man was Sam Robbins. He did

everything and in no time at all he had taken the old sideboard and bureau away and somehow stuck them together with glue into a presentable and recognisable form again. There were also salerooms in which my father and mother scoured; and we acquired a three-piece seat for the sitting room in the front with its big bay windows and even a piano. The rooms were very large, the sitting room being the larger, but the dining room at the back was also a fair size with a French window looking on to not much of a garden. There was an immensely long corridor with a baize door in the middle that led to the kitchen where there was a very efficient stove for heating the water. The baize door foxed everybody carrying pots of coffee along to the sitting room - the pots would be on one side and the carrier on the other. My mother was delighted to find that there was a plentiful supply of slack left in the cellar which augmented the meagre rations of coal and logs when they were obtainable.

“UPSTAIRS WAS ONE ENORMOUS BEDROOM in the front which became my parents’; another sizeable one across on it which was mine when I was home; and down a long corridor another bedroom that looked like a dormitory where Paul and Hugh slept. Along the corridor was the bathroom with its piping hot water, so different from the bungalow, and cloakrooms for storage. Similarly, downstairs was a cloakroom with lavatory and wash basin. In the scullery of the kitchen was a large brick tin copper where my mother put all the washing to boil by stoking up a fire underneath it. There were also storage rooms.

“NOR HAD WE ANY CHINA which had all been smashed in the bombing. But one day, in Lewis’s in Birmingham I saw a set of half a dozen teacups and saucers and plates going and struggled home in the vacation with them. Before that everyone had been drinking out of sugar and other bowls, finding the teacups very small by comparison when they finally arrived.

“MY MOTHER BEGAN TO LOVE THE LIFE IN THE CENTRE OF RUGBY. It was just a question of walking to the end of the road, down church walk and there were all the shops and, what is more, we were right on hand to queue at the market stalls by the parish church. People did it patiently and with good humour.

“MY BROTHERS ALSO ENJOYED THE FREEDOM OF PLAYING IN THE CHURCHYARD. Well, the grass grew high amongst the old tombstones. With catapults they would station themselves at some vantage point ready to knock off a sailor’s hat as he walked along the main road, then dive back under cover of the tombstones again and make their way home.”

Overleaf, Bunny on being a war-time law student – fighting some preconceptions!



“Amused at having to tutor a woman”

A PAGE ON SHREDDED THREADS, FOLK DANCING, AND 1942 SWITCHBOARDS

“MY FATHER HAD WRITTEN TO BIRMINGHAM UNIVERSITY to inquire about a place for me there in autumn 1941. He had given me a choice of subjects: Law or Medicine. He was not prepared to pay my fees for anything else, though I would have liked to read history, my favourite and best subject.

“I CALLED IN at the University in Edmund Street which had the Law and Arts facilities and was surprised to learn the Registrar expected me. I was sent up then and there to have an interview with Dean Smalley-Baker the head of the law facility [on the right in the photo]. It was naturally agreed that I would commence as a student in October.



“I FOUND ON MY FIRST DAY I that I was the only woman in my year, which had 13 men students. There was another woman reading law, but she was in the third year and was a solicitor’s daughter from Shrewsbury so had a great deal of legal background that I lacked. We wore black gowns to lectures, held in the old chemistry lecture room where there still seemed to be a faint whiff of gas from the piping that had supplied the Bunsen burners.

“I LEARNED AS I WENT ALONG that the legal studies were designed to suit would-be practising solicitors who were then taken the statutory year as required by the law society as a college. The lecturer for Torts and contracts was solicitor himself by the name of T Tilly. His gown lay in shreds at the back of him, as he had the habit of drawing it round while lecturing and pulling out of a long thread of the material. The lecturer on Property Law and Equity was named Hargreaves. He was a cynic from Cambridge, somewhat amused with having to tutor a woman. I had to endure many barbed comments and found questions usually addressed to me first at lectures. He was, though, an excellent and inspiring lecturer.

“THE DEAN HIMSELF WAS A CANADIAN and had been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford after service in the First World War. He lectured in Comparative Law (which he thought important, as it was a comparison of various legal systems both continental and worldwide) and also in English legal history). His lecture notes were typed out as transcripts for us, complete with the jokes he wanted to make. There was no one who could tutor us in Roman law, so that was omitted from the two-year course for a wartime degree. A lecturer seemingly as old as my grandfather gave the lectures in criminal law.

“APART FROM THE LECTURES, I also had to undertake physical training of some sort. Birmingham University was the first to introduce such a rule for students, and to fit into my studies, lectures being in the mornings three times a week. I chose folk dancing, held in the gymnasium at Edgbaston, and modern dancing in Edmund St. This was not ballroom dancing, which I learned at the University hops, but the type of dancing which Isadora Duncan had introduced. We danced in bare feet on the wooden boards and I developed enormous muscles in my legs from which they were never the same again.

“I ALSO HAD TO UNDERTAKE WAR WORK OF SOME SORT and chose to be a telephonist in an underground station nearby to Somerfield Park. I went on night duty once a week to man the telephones in the event of bombing raids over Birmingham. But by then the raids slackened off and it was a question of staying in the underground shelter all night and finding some amusements to pass away the long hours. I made friends there with girls from the neighbourhood, some of whom worked in the factories by day.”

On 13 February 1943 Dean Smalley-Baker wrote to Miss Gibbons saying *“The University has a request for names of those to be recommended for jobs in various ministries. The openings seem quite attractive. We have one girl already in the Ministry of Supply and she seems to enjoy the work and find it interesting. Most of the vacancies are in London. The salary is something in the neighbourhood of £200.”* Miss Gibbons must have demurred. In any case, on 2 August 1943 she turned 21, and was fit to be called up for war service.

She was off for the life of a sailor, as you’ll see overleaf.



"A welcome sight to weary sailors"

A PAGE GLEANED FROM BUNNY'S CERTIFICATE OF WRNS SERVICE 1943-6

"SHE IS AN EXCELLENT LEADING WREN IN EVERY WAY. A charming personality and a most reliable and intelligent member of this unit." That's how a Royal Navy Captain summed up Bunny on her Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) Employment Certificate as she handed in her lanyard on 5 February 1946. She'd begun on 15 September 1943, as a conscript – "for the duration" – four years after just that family cruise as experience.



"THE WRENS WHO CREWED THE NAVY'S SMALL CRAFT WERE AN ELITE GROUP in a highly prized job" writes Douglas Lynsday, author of the engaging Wren Jane series of books. He says that competition to become a boat crew Wren was fierce, and senior Wrens willingly took a drop to a lower rate to join them. The first training course was in Autumn 1941, and from the start the young women were a huge success, whether or not they had a background in boating. The long hours, out in the open air in all weathers, did not put them off. "They were a welcome sight to weary sailors, arriving in port after a hard slog at sea to be greeted by good looking girls bringing their boats alongside dressed as the seamen were in oilskins and sou'westers. The sense of camaraderie was strong both among the boat crew Wrens and with the matelots who had the hardships of a life on the water in common." Very largely, the Naval discipline system left them alone to get on with the job. They loved the job and the freedom to make their own way in serving the Navy. It was said of them that "there was never an ugly boat crew Wren. A life in the open air, doing a physically demanding job successfully, left them tanned, trim and together."

BUNNY'S FIRST POSTING WAS TO BASIC TRAINING AT CHATHAM. Through October she was a Boats Crew Trainee at Flagstaff Steps in Devonport Dockyard by Plymouth. Experienced enough, she was posted next door to HMS Drake, as one of the small boat taxi crews supporting the tank and infantry landing craft units preparing for D-Day (she's the driver in the photo). Then on to HMS Cicala in picturesque Dartmouth. This was the base for Motor



Torpedo and Gun Boat flotillas – including a Free French one with



De Gaulle's son. As well as fighting duties in the Channel, these units had daring roles slipping into beaches – bringing back airmen via the French Resistance, dropping off secret service agents and supplies.

IN THE FORTNIGHT BEFORE D-DAY, Bunny was locked down in Plymouth – and spoke of seeing the harbour packed with landing craft one evening and empty the next morning. She went back to Dartmouth for a while; but from November 1944 to her discharge in 1946 she served at HMS Foliot in Plymouth. That lasted until she was released Class A, Suitable for Re-entry, on 5 February 1946 as a Boat Driver, with a £12.10.0 plain clothes gratuity. She had Good Conduct Badges, Award of Chevrons, an Award of Wound Stripes and a Hurt Certificate (which may be when she broke her leg jumping from a Landing Ship Tanks on to her small boat). The "Cause of Discharge from the Service" was not entered; so, with the caution gained in her law studies, she did not offer her "Signature of Rating on Discharge".

As well as lifelong friendships and reunions, Bunny's service provided family legacies. First, holidays at Kingswear! Second, a portfolio of cheery songs – notably *Be Kind To Your Webfooted Friends*, sung when we scattered her ashes on Wains Hill at Clevedon, a favourite walk with magnificent vistas.

Overleaf is another move of house – back to post-Blitz Moseley!



“Now we can have a banana”

A PAGE ON BEING IN 1945 MOSELEY FOR VICTORY IN EUROPE DAY

THAT’S ME above ON MY FIRST DAY at Moseley CofE School in 1943. Not happy: outside toilets; we still had to have gas mask practice; far too many girls. Unaware, en route I used to pass No71 every day for six year. But we were back on familiar ground, off the highest point of School Road.

DAD’S JOB HAD CHANGED AGAIN and now centred on Birmingham. The bombing had mostly stopped, so we went back to Moseley. Our family home until 1958 was 68 Greenhill Road Tel South 0926! Like the house in Rugby, it was large and Victorian, with high ceilings and picture rails. There was a big dining room (on the right) and a lounge at the back with French windows onto the sunny garden with apple, plum and pear trees. The kitchen was on the left, cosy and roomy enough for a big range and the piano from Rugby. Beyond that was a scullery, and an outside toilet. The first floor had a bathroom and four bedrooms. A winding staircase went up to two rooms in the attic with the servants’ bell system – which became my indoor play space. From one room you could/can spot the spire on the church at Tanworth in Arden, about 8 miles away.

AND UNDERNEATH WAS A CELLAR. Again it was a place to shelter. But it was also a cool storage place. One time, my father acquired about six dozen eggs which we carefully placed down there. He then managed to get a hundredweight of logs, which got slung down the coal chute and on to...



WE ENJOYED MANY WARTIME VISITORS. As the job now meant a car (with restricted routes, mind) he often gave servicepeople a lift, and brought them back for a cuppa – with Americans we got gum in exchange. And Bunny brought fellow students from the university – Czechs, Poles, one from Spain who’d fought with the Republicans. Up the road was a nurses’ hostel, and they’d drop by too.

THAT’S WHERE WE WERE ON VE DAY 8TH MAY 1945. That meant a huge bonfire on the spare ground where School and Ashfield Roads met, later a place for prefabs. We had parties in the street and school and went to see the Illuminated Tram come along Alcester Road. My parents woke Paul and me up in the middle of the night to say the war was over. We gave the reply that – apparently – was common to many children: Good, now we can have a banana. It took a long time - long after VJ Day that August. Joe Moran has this note in his Defining Moments series in the FT Magazine for 1 August 2009.



“It was the first winter after the end of the second world war, and the children of Britain were about to receive a late Christmas present. A Fyffe ship, the Tilapa, arrived in Avonmouth from Kingston, Jamaica, loaded with a consignment of 10 million bananas. Hundreds of children, most of whom had never seen a banana before, were there to greet it. As the ship docked, a crew member threw a yellow banana on to the quayside, where it was caught by the 10-year-old daughter of a dock worker. It was the first banana to reach Britain since 1940. “Most of the bananas were green and unripe, and meant to be stored for a week before being distributed all over the West Country. They were earmarked for under-18-year-olds, as a special austerity-era treat, as children tended to be the most excited about bananas. A popular wartime song, by bandleader Harry Roy, had asked ‘When Can I Have a Banana Again?’, and the arrival of the Tilapa was a symbol – unfortunately, a premature one – of the end of shortages and the return of good times. Many children had to be shown how to eat a banana: like an ice-cream cone, rather than corn on the cob.”

Overleaf, Hugh looks at us in 1949 - and beyond.



How we were years on from No71

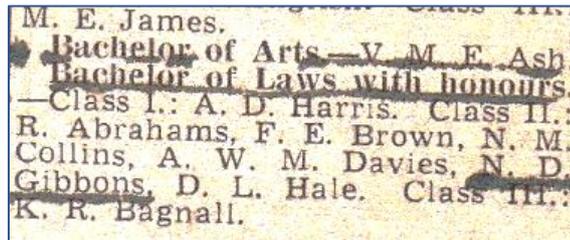
A PAGE ON THE EARLY POST-WAR FAMILY

THIS IS US IN THE SUMMER OF 1946 – once again enjoying a holiday on the beach at Clevedon. That’s me bottom right, with an unknown blond photobomber in the middle. To Paul I now had two nicknames: ‘Ginger’ and (because of my spindly physique) ‘Belsen’.



BY 1949, Dad was fully back with ICI Metals, based in Birmingham office in Newbold Street until his retirement in 1958. Mum looks especially relived after the physical turmoil and emotional tugs of the war – though she had to fight agoraphobia a few years later. When it came to retirement, they at last bought a house rather than renting. It was in Clevedon – for the walks, swimming, social life, paddle-steamer ferry, vistas. Dad studied for the Bar and got as far as Part 1 at the Middle Temple, staying in a posh hotel...

BY 1949, BUNNY WAS IN COURT IN LONDON. She’d got her degree at Birmingham and qualified as a barrister at the Middle Temple. She then went into the chambers of the redoubtable Robert Megarry. (His series of *Miscellany at Law* are a cheery read, and not just for lawyers. NB My favourite paragraph is the last in Misc. III, Chapter 6 “Short of Water”.) This took her on to a senior role in the legal department at Lloyds Bank and then as an editor at the law publishers Butterworths. She retired in 1982 – to live with my mother in Clevedon! There she was a great swimmer, traveller, reader, stalwart of the archaeological society, and writer-up of family history and correspondence.

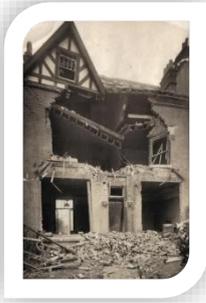


BY 1949 PAUL WAS YEARS GONE FROM “KINGSWOOD” in School Road to Kingswood School in Bath. That’s him wearing a school blazer in the back garden of 68 Greenhill Road – with neighbours houses in the background. Previously we’d both attended Moseley CofE Elementary, but he was switched to Stanley House School. Kingswood gave him great scope for his sporting skills. He was an active member of Moseley Rugby Football Club when he came back from National Service (that’s him in the same at ease style in Benghazi). His job took him and family away from Birmingham in the late ‘50s – and a long career with Texaco before retirement at Tynemouth; and a stalwart of Rotary, The Prince’s Trust, and Newcastle Falcons and Percy Park rugby clubs!



AND IN 1949 I WAS captain of cricket at St Mary’s Primary, now moved up the road. Our kit was one ball, two bats, four pads and a set of wickets; and we were bussed to our matches at Uffculme Park. Teachers Mr Morris and Mr Baines were easygoing with us after their own years of war. From there I went to Moseley Grammar and on to King Edwards School in Edgbaston – which took me to Trinity College Dublin. In summer of 1958, with my parents I left Brum for Somerset. The rest’s a different Gibbons family history, living at a No75.





Explaining the bombs on Moseley

A PAGE ON WHETHER CREEP-BACK DID FOR US IN 1940

Why did houses in Moseley and Kings Heath get a hammering in the Birmingham Blitz? After all, they were residential areas several miles south of the main industrial heart of Birmingham – albeit underneath the flight path for bombers coming up from Northern France.

Leaving aside my father's attractive theory that it was in personal response to his views on Ribbentrop, I've come across three suggestions, and my own belief.

1. Bunny's was they were after the gun on the train in Moseley - unlikely, because it was too specific a target.

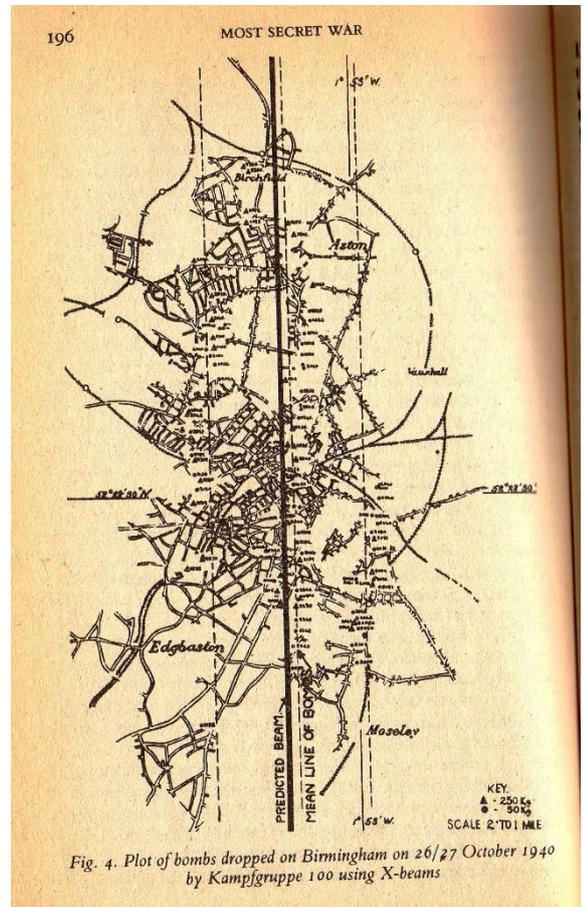
2. A teacher at King Edwards School said that the German bomb aimers mistook the railway cutting at Moseley for one near Longbridge, by the big Austin factories. But the Luftwaffe bombers were using a system of radio beams to help precise navigation.

3. However, in the book *Most Secret War*, Professor RV Jones revealed that false signals of these beams were being sent out by the British to mislead the bomber crews. So a third possibility is that the bomber dropped a stick of bombs where the signals indicated but got us instead of the British Small Arms factory. The picture on the right (from the book) shows the location of bombs dropped on 26/27 October, with many falling short of the (presumably) targeted factories. FYI Jones noted that the curvature of the earth north from Cherbourg is not a true sphere but slightly flattened – making the difference of several hundred yards.)

4. My own belief is that it's a combination of the false signals and what was quite common during night raids using visual aiming equipment. The crew said "Near enough", dropped the bombs, and got the hell out of it. This was called Creepback, and understandable. Harassed by searchlights and anti-aircraft guns, and having difficulty making out the target or markers because of smoke or fires, crews might flinch a little - and a even a few seconds early action in the air could mean a big difference on the ground 3 miles below.

Not only the Luftwaffe was susceptible. Wikipedia says: "The RAF could find no effective counter to the problem of Creepback, and eventually incorporated it into their mission planning. The initial aiming point for a bombing raid would be set on the far side of the target as the bomber stream approached, allowing the bombing pattern to 'creep back' across the target, which was usually an industrial or residential district of a city..."

Your authoritative (and people-filled) account of those times for Birmingham is *Brum Undaunted* by the redoubtable historian of the city Carl Chinn ISBN 978-1-85858-278-8



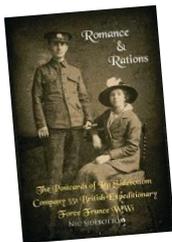
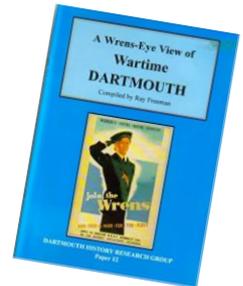
Ad-endum

A PAGE ON FURTHER READING

But first, another coincidence. The story of us and the bomb in the night was part of the many talks I gave on the Air Transport Auxiliary during WW2. Maidenhead U3A and the Mothers' Union at St John's Church in Crowthorne provided surprises after the presentation. Up came someone a couple of years older than me who said they'd been living along School Road, remembered our house, and had been at the church school. Who was that? I didn't note the name – and they don't appear in the 1939 National Register as, being alive, their record is flagged as private till 2039. If you know who, sing out.



FOR MORE WORDS ON THE WRNS, the Association of Wrens and Women of the Royal Naval Services is a formal first port of call <https://wrens.org.uk/history/>. But a good go-to place is the series of books about Wren Jane Beacon by former mariner DJ Lyndsay – whose website is www.wrenjaneb.co.uk. More specific to their service at Dartmouth is the book "A Wrens-Eye View of Wartime Dartmouth" compiled by Ray Freeman. Published by the Dartmouth History Research Group in association with Dartmouth Museum 1994. (ISBN 1 899011 01 3). You can catch part of it by an officer in the BBC History site www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/stories/76/a4440476.shtml



MORE FAMILY MEMORABILIA! We're not the only bit of the family with a bagful of material. Nephew Nick Sidebottom found 200 postcards that his grandfather, my uncle Leo, sent from the trenches of France to his newly-wed wife Annie. He published them as Romance & Rations, which is available as hardback, paperback and Amazon Kindle. Albeit subject to censorship, the postcards are an unusual glimpse into life then, starting with a busy week from his diary when he gets engaged, enlists, married and leaves for war.

FOR MORE ON MOSELEY, just go to the excellent website of the Moseley Society moseley-society.org.uk. Their Local History Group has publications on both world wars. The story of the Piccioni families is set out in there, and also in more detail in 2012 newsletter at www.moseley-society.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/Moseley-History-News-October-2012.pdf





“The Kommandant wants to live in your house”

A LAST PAGE - ABOUT A VERY DIFFERENT 1939 FAMILY HISTORY FROM OURS

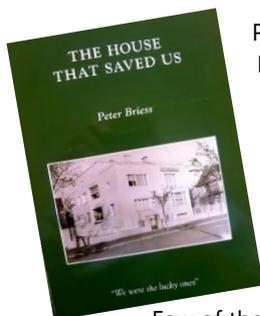
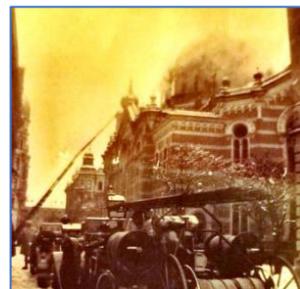
Reconstructing No71 has been about a house lost to bombing but a family inside survived. No68 Oxford Road showed a house and families inside lost, though some family outside survived. This last story is about No12, in which both a house and a family survived but many outside did not.

If you get to visit the charming town of Olomouc in south east of the Czech Republic, take a walk about 300 metres west of the Upper Square and its Holy Trinity Column. Stroll along the street called Na Vozovce. It’s very different from School Road – long, flat, straight, with essentially post-war houses, flats, offices. Only a few older houses remain. And you can see one looks different: No 12. Built in 1935, it’s in Bauhaus Art Deco style.



And No12 comes with a story that a friend drew to my attention. Joe’s daughter is married to the son of Peter Briess - who lived in No12 until May 1939. Just before the Gibbons were on our happy cruise in the Med, the Briess family was fleeing the house that Peter’s businessman father had built. They got to Britain and safety – albeit into the London Blitz. When like us they were celebrating VE Day in 1945, the 4th Ukrainian Front of the Soviet Army was still having to beat the German 1st Panzer Army so Olomouc could be free again.

Olomouc has a long and cultured history. Its university was founded in 1573, and it has a Cathedral, Gothic and Baroque churches, and cobblestone squares. Copernicus lived there, and Sigmund Freud was born nearby. For centuries in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia became an independent democratic state after WW1, with Czech as the national language. But by the Munich Agreement of September 1938, much of the country was ceded to Germany; and 15 March 1939 the German Army invaded the rest. In Olomouc, Nazis and sympathisers ransacked and set fire to the very fine synagogue built in 1899 by the 2500-strong community. Peter’s parents had married there.



Peter has set out the family story in his memoir *The House That Saved Us*. One day in May 1939, Nazis arrived at the door and said, “*The Kommandant wants to live in your house.*” Peter said his father had the sense not to argue. But he also had the presence of mind and courage to reply that the Kommandant could have the house on condition that he arrange exit visas for the family. It was a heartrending time, because it meant leaving behind not just the house and business but elderly parents and others in the family. But Peter, sister Hana, and parents Hans and Else were able to make their way via Prague to London, safety – and new and flourishing lives. A few others managed to escape too - to the USA, Australia and New Zealand.

Few of the family and others in the Olomouc Jewish community survived the following years of Holocaust and harshness. Peter said he lost grandparents, uncles, aunts, and 45 of the wider family. Outside No12 today are *solpersteine* – cobblestone-sized memorials to individual victims of Nazism by artist Gunter Demnig.



Peter and family have often returned to Olomouc. And in 2017, the only surviving person to have attended the Synagogue, Peter was in the party bringing back the town’s original Czech Torah. The Synagogue itself was never rebuilt. Today, its site is a car park from which the Jewish community of about 250 draws an income.

But Na Vozovce 12 is there wander by, and savour its past as a house that saved the lucky ones.

For more information on the return of the Torah, go this article in the Jewish Chronicle www.thejc.com/news/uk/scrolling-back-the-years-1.446666 and the personal account at <https://slipman.blog/2018/10/10/peter-briess-story/>