

Before Memories Fade... A Family Tale

Jeanne (born 1929) and Gerald (Born 1931) have written this tale of family life in the first half of the 20th Century for the interest of their children, grandchildren and, perhaps, even later generations. It is based upon their own memories and upon tales from their parents Arthur and Amelia. In particular, their mother was a great raconteur and, right up to her death just before her 101st birthday in 2001, entertained listeners with tales of her early life.

Arthur Sydney Everitt was born at 24 Weavers Row, Halstead, Essex on 1 June 1898. Halstead was a small country town with a population of about 5,000 in the picturesque Colne Valley of north Essex. It was 13 miles from Colchester, a day trip away by bus or a train of the Colne Valley Railway drawn by a high domed 'Puffing Billy' tank-engine. London was a distant city, certainly not the destination of daily commuters that it has become. He grew up in Halstead moving to a larger house, 25 Stanley Road, at the other side of the town until he left to join the Royal Engineers at the start of the Great War.

This Certificate is not available for purposes of Secondary Education.

CERTIFIED COPY of an ENTRY of BIRTH.
(Issued for the purposes of the Factory and Workshop Act, 1901.)

Registration District of <i>Halstead</i>		Sub-District of <i>Halstead</i>		in the County of <i>Essex</i>		No. <i>1</i>	
No. <i>337</i>	Sex <i>Male</i>	Christian Name <i>Arthur Sydney</i>	Surname <i>Everitt</i>	Age of Mother <i>22</i>	Age of Father <i>22</i>	Place of Birth of Mother <i>24 Weavers Row, Halstead, Essex</i>	Place of Birth of Father <i>24 Weavers Row, Halstead, Essex</i>
I hereby certify that the above is a true Copy of an Entry of Birth in my Register Book in my custody.				Witness my hand this <i>9th</i> day of <i>June</i> 1898			

X The mark of Elizabeth Everitt

He was the youngest son of Samuel Everitt (probably born in 1856) and Elizabeth (née Wicker born 1.12.1856). Uncertainty in dates would be common in the days when literacy was limited. Elementary education was only introduced by the Forster Education Act of 1870. The young couple signed the Register themselves when they were married in 1878 both giving their ages 22 years. The bride could just about do this but for the rest of her life had letters read to her. On Dad's Birth Certificate she witnessed it with a cross "X The mark of Elizabeth Everitt".

Grandfather was a master bricklayer and then a general labourer and carter. It is rumoured that he had an inheritance from a relative that he used to keep him away from any form of work for many years without his wife knowing. She worked for 54 years in the Courtaulds silk factory in the town retiring on pension at the age of 70. We never knew our grandfather as he was killed in an accident at work in 1925. He fell from the high sides of a cart when he was lifting up flour sacks at a mill. He died two days later from a fractured skull. His death certificate gave the age as 66 but he was more likely 69 years old. They did not retire early in those days.

When we knew her, Grandma Everitt was a little old lady with an ankle-length, black dress, apron and shawl. She would make the long day trips to visit us in London. From under her apron would come a special surprise, a small loaf of the local bread, a “Halstead Pad”. This was delicious when freshly baked and Dad’s especial favourite but not after a journey of several hours. She died from a stroke in January 1940. Although the youngest child, Dad went to Halstead, as expected, to sort out her affairs. She shares a grave with our grandfather in Halstead Cemetery and in 1965 our fathers ashes were scattered over it. Several years later four of her great, great grandchildren (Greg, Victoria, Catherine and Nathalie) returning from a trip to the Constable Country visited the cemetery and spent some time quietly trimming the grass and tidying the grave.

Dad was the youngest of probably a large family of whom only five (or perhaps six) survived to adulthood. His eldest sister Emily was over 20 years older, in fact older than our maternal grandmother... She had one daughter who died of meningitis at the age of three before Dad was born. On marrying she moved to Stratford in East London where she was the neighbour of the Ellingford family. She returned to Halstead after she was bombed out in 1940 and died there in 1966.

The eldest brother Ernest, known appropriately as Bullace (a bitter wild plum), never married and lived at home with his mother until her death in 1940. He was also a general labourer and carter. He was a well-known figure driving his cart about the town and gave some street credibility to the two evacuees Jeanne and Gerald

Aunt Min, the next in line, married Bill White, a skilled decorator and sign writer. She had no children but she did look after her nephew John White whilst his mother Edie went to work in the silk factory. Bill White and his brother Nelson would spend the evenings together, each with a separate jug of the local ale bought from a cottage across the road that surprisingly had a licence for off sales.

Closest in age to Dad was his brother Lewis. Marrying Ethel he lived all his life in Halstead working as a postman. His had one son, our big cousin Jack, who continued the lifetime connection with the General Post Office progressing from message boy to manager of the Colchester Office. During our holidays in Halstead we would see him hurtling around the town on his bike delivering telegrams. In the days before telephones were common, urgent messages would be sent by wire from a convenient local office and the printed slips at the far end pasted on to a Telegram Form and delivered by hand in a distinctive yellow envelope. As the charge depended upon the number of words and not the number of letters “telegramme-ese” such as “unnews goodnews” was commonly used to reduce the cost. . During the First World War the arrival of the yellow envelope would be dreaded “Regret, your son ...”

Dad went to the local Council School. We would hear years later how he regretted his failure to concentrate and to heed the words of his teacher Teddy Baker. He eagerly left school at the age of 12 and found a job in the local foundry that made “Tortoise” stoves. He was paid one farthing for each small casting (960 farthings =£1) and one halfpenny (480 halfpennies =£1) for a larger casting. These tall, cylindrical, coke-burners with a vertical stovepipe were commonly used for heating large workshops and buildings. There would be one in every school classroom giving some warmth to the pupils in the front row, a little more to the teacher and some to the crates of school milk stacked around them. Each child had a 1/3rd bottle of tepid milk provided before break each morning

The start of the World War I in August 1914 saw a great upsurge in patriotism and a rush to enrol. As Dad said later, he broke his mother’s heart when he rushed away to Colchester at the age of 16 to join up with all the local lads. The enrolment was swift



“How old are you, lad?”
“You’re a liar”
“Sign here!”

“Eighteen, Sergeant!”
“I am not”

And so he became for five years 33759 Dvr. A S Everitt R.E.



His 17th birthday was spent in France. His campaign medals are headed by the 1914-15 Star awarded for service in France during those years, but without the 1914 Rosette that was only gained by the regular soldiers of the “The Old Contemptibles” who went immediately to the front after the outbreak of war. Like most who returned from the war in France he said very little about it. We did know that he worked with horses delivering ammunition. He did say that it could be difficult finding the way on a pitch-black night and that it was very easy to slip off the duckboards into the deep mud. As he was not one to seek out trouble we naturally assumed that it was in the rear areas or on some quiet part of the front. A letter home did say that he was not allowed to say where he was except that it sounded like the name of his sister’s husband. Surprisingly no censor noted it or could think that he would have a brother-in-law named Albert. Many years later in 1985 when we visited the battlefields, it was a shock to realise that Albert was only two miles behind the centre of the British thrust on the Somme where there were 57,000 British casualties including 19,000 killed on the first day. This was not the place for the father that we knew.

He was demobilised in 1919. His letter of commendation was signed by his squadron commander, Captain John Glubb, who later became Glubb Pasha the head of the Jordanian Arab Legion and a well-known figure in Jordan until dismissed by King Hussein in 1956.

He joined the Metropolitan Police and, after a few years pounding the beat, got a coveted place in the mounted branch. He did not return to his home in Halstead but as a single officer, lived in Shepherdess Walk Section House near his station in City Road.

On leave from France he had stayed with his older sister Em at 19 Widdin Street, Stratford. Next-door at 17 Widdin Street lived the Ellingford family including his future wife Millie.

Amelia Elizabeth Ellingford was born on 30 May 1900 at 52 Blyth Road in Stratford, east London. She was the eldest daughter of Philip Ellingford (1875-1951) and Florence (née Mundy 1879-1954).

Grandfather Philip was the fifth of a family of eight. He was a carman for Carter Paterson’s driving a delivery wagon pulled by two large dray horses. Before the days of containers and aeroplanes all goods from abroad would come by sea, with the Royal Docks (Victoria, Prince Albert and King George V) being particularly important. The goods were unloaded by stevedores and then distributed by lorries, horse and cart or by rail. He was in his early sixties when we first knew him but always seemed much older. He suffered from very bad sight and would sit quietly in the corner reading a newspaper held a few inches from his nose.



Without a doubt the dominant one in the family was our grandmother, Flo. She also came from a large family being the sixth of twelve children. She was energetic and forthright, always impatient, very helpful and protective to her kids but it would be

stretching the truth to say that she was kind-hearted. On one occasion young Gerald used one of her favourite words to describe another boy along the road. He never did it again. "I'm not having that (expletive) language in this (expletive) house!"

The 500lb bomb landing in her kitchen of 17 Widdin Street on the afternoon of Saturday 7 September 1940 failed to explode on impact. It wouldn't have dared! A few hours later when all had been moved to safety it went up, completely destroying four houses. Next day we had to pass the end of the road on a trolleybus. The driver, our next-door neighbour, considerably asked Dad whether he should rush by quickly or not. He took it slowly and we clearly saw the devastation. It was strange seeing a pile of rubble with the familiar piano upright on top and an unbroken mirror still hanging on a wall.

Homeless, our grandparents moved to Halstead, a town that they knew from contact with Dad's family. Returning to London in 1942, when it seemed (mistakenly) that the air raids had finished they moved to nearby 9 Widdin Street with their youngest daughter, Louisa.

Nan lived there until her death in 1954. Before she went into hospital for the last time she insisted upon scrubbing and whitening the front doorstep before leaving. Gerald had recently been commissioned in the Royal Artillery and, much against his better judgement was persuaded by his mother to give her a treat by wearing his new uniform when he visited her in the hospice. She was in a very frail state with brittle bones but very pleased and proud to see him. She beckoned him over in what seemed like an embarrassing dying declaration. She pointed to a passing nurse and in a feeble voice she told him "that's the silly moo that broke my leg!" She died two days later, going the way she had lived.

Mum (Amelia Ellingford) was the eldest of eight children and she outlived them all. Large families were common in the 19th Century. Our maternal grandparents came from families of eight and twelve children. Dad came from a family of probably ten or more. A decade or so later families were still large but many more survived. Mum born in 1900 was the oldest of eight all of whom survived to between 61 and 100 years. Then in the next generation the nuclear family with 2.2 children became the norm. There were eight children in the Ellingford family but only 13 grandchildren and 30 great grandchildren

Mum's eldest brother Philip (1901-71) was followed by Gladys (1904-96), Sidney Walter (Uncle Wal 1906-68), Ivy (1908-69), Louisa (1912-86), Arthur (Uncle Wid 1914 -86) and Stan (1916-91). As her younger siblings died off one by one she was sad but accepted it philosophically. "He was a good lad, a pity, but that's life".



They all grew up in the small terraced house in Widdin Street. An entry passage led to a parlour, a small kitchen, a living room with a 'staircase in a cupboard' to the two bedrooms upstairs and an outside toilet. Many years later she remarked to her grandson Laurence that it was very similar to his house in St Albans. He and his new wife Liz had already decided that they would have to get

somewhere larger before they could start a family. Puzzled, he asked. "How did a family with eight children live in a house this size?" "A little crowded; we four girls shared a bed (head, feet, head, feet). The two toddlers were in the next bedroom with Mum & Dad, Phil and Wal were downstairs in the front room and Joe Honey slept on the sofa". "Joe Honey? Who's Joe Honey?" "Oh, he was the lodger!"

All the children went to St John's School at the bottom of the road. Mum left in 1914 and got a job making wooden boxes for munitions. They were relieved that they were only making the boxes when they heard the explosion as the works in Silvertown blew up.

Many years later she would speak in graphic details of bygone times. We had a suspicion that some of the facts were embellished but then found that they were invariably substantiated by other sources. They were given the afternoon off work on 11 November 1918 when the Great War was at last over. The news was only discovered from a notice displayed at the Town Hall. Before the days of television or even wireless, news travelled slowly. There were no pundits to predict and analyse.

Early Married Life (1921 – 1929)



The Bride and Groom drove in a horse-drawn, open coach to their wedding at St John's Church, Stratford on Saturday 30 July 1921. Weddings were commonly held on a Sunday as, at that time, Saturday was a working day or at least a half-day. But Dad, on a shift roster, was able to have Saturdays off.

The young couple moved to a two-roomed apartment in 70 Myddelton Square, Finsbury. This was a large four-storied Georgian townhouse that had seen grander days. The area has now gone very up-market again. But in the early twenties one house would accommodate four families. Each rented two rooms and shared a common kitchen, toilet and garden.

All police officers, whether married or single, had to live within a mile of their stations so that they could be called out in an emergency. One such incident occurred on 28 April 1923. The Cup Final was being played in the new Wembley Stadium and as it was only partially completed thousands of extra spectators flooded into the stadium and swarmed over the pitch. Mounted policemen were fully occupied clearing the pitch so extra police had to be summoned from those off-duty at home to get the King out. In the days before telephones were commonplace, a duty officer from the station had to go round on foot summoning those available. Dad joined the posse and after a ten-mile ride to Wembley they formed an arrowhead of horses to part the vast crowd and escort the car back to Buckingham Palace before returning to the station to clean up and resume the rest-day. The papers next day were full of "the hero on the white horse" (Dad's colleague, PC George Scorey) who saved the Final by gently easing the crowds from the pitch. There is now a "White Horse Bridge" in the rebuilt Wembley Stadium. Dad's comment was more scathing. "Useless, what about the others on the dark horses?"

Mum's fabled memory of those times was well tested many years later. She was talking about her old sewing machine that Gerald and family were still using. He knowingly enquired of its age. "Oh, that must have been in 1925, your Aunt Min was staying with us and I had to borrow one from the woman upstairs. Your Dad said he would get me one of my own. He got one with a 20% discount for 15 guineas". Unknowingly the original invoice had just come to light. She did get the month wrong!

The Family of Four



In 1929 the family, including baby Jeanne who had been born in February, moved across the square to No 38 where Gerald was born in 1931. This had been occupied immediately before by friends from Halstead.

On Mum's 95th Birthday she was taken for a trip round London to all the old haunts. She was posing for a surreptitious photo with Gerald outside No 38 when the present owners looked out. Invited in for tea she amused them for several hours. Later she was able to provide them with even more information about the previous occupants, whose daughter had contacted them. As the present owner was interested in local history, he was pleased to have found a primary source of information.

Warren Buildings (1933 – 1936)

Dad was posted to City Road and then Old Street so in 1933 we moved to Warren Buildings in Ironmonger Row. These were tenements for married policemen. Each had two bedrooms, two large reception rooms, kitchen, balcony and its own front door, a great improvement on Myddelton Square. Entry was through a large enclosed yard at the back where all the kids played. As we were strictly forbidden to go out alone through the gates we gazed longingly across Ironmonger Row to "Toffee Park", the green churchyard of St Luke's.



Every Saturday we would go to Stratford to see our Nan.

But first we had to walk to Harts Butchers in Smithfield Market to get the weekend joint, the best part of two miles. We then walked to Moorgate to get a tram to Aldgate, another tram to Stratford Church and then a further half-mile walk to Widdin Street.

By the mid thirties the eldest children Uncle Phil, Aunt Glad and Uncle Wal had married and had moved away but the house was still crowded and exciting with much coming and going. It started at the front door that was always propped open. At least it always seemed so but then perhaps we never went there in the middle of winter.

The big joy was finding Cousin Alan who lived there with his mother (Aunt Ivy). She continued to work at Unilevers as she had managed to conceal that she had a family. Women in many large "respectable" firms were forced to retire on marriage. Her intended Billie Underwood was always popping in until they married and set up home in Leyton in 1936. As part of the usual service to visitors Nan did his washing. He should have known better than leaving his newly laundered best shirt out to air. He watched in disbelief as a fireball of energy rushed in, tore it in half and left clutching a new white duster.

Uncle Stan, Uncle Wid and Aunt Lou still lived at home so the house was always full. At the end of the day we had the same long journey back again but it was well worth it.

There was always a break at Bow Church on the tram journey between Stratford and Aldgate. Overhead wires for trams were not permitted in inner London. At Bow the overhead pole would be stowed and a shoe lowered to pick up power from a third rail below the road surface.

Aunt Lou came in for her midday meal each day as she worked nearby for De la Rue, the Bank of England printers. She was a very smart young lady in her twenties but very strict. It was amazing how she mellowed in later years.

When out shopping we would often see our Dad on patrol. He always looked very smart a fact borne out by photographs still in the family's possession. The harness and kit were immaculate. One tip he passed on is still used. Finish off metalwork with a brush cleaned on a piece of natural chalk. The chalk still in use was collected from the Isle of Wight in 1939.

Each police officer had his own book of regulations setting out the relevant law, his legal powers and the action required of him in various situations. This had to be kept up-to-date and we would sit and watch as Dad did a "cut and paste" job with actual scissors and true paste and little snippets of paper all over the floor.

In 1934 he had a serious accident at the junction of Goswell Road and Old Street whilst out on patrol. Police horses are trained to be placid and obedient but this one shied on a wet surface, reared up and came crashing down on him. He suffered a broken femur that would not knit and he was confined in St Thomas's Hospital for 15 weeks until a silver plate was inserted in his leg to join the bone. We stayed at Stratford for a large part of this time leaving Mum free to visit him. After leaving hospital it was a long time before he recovered spending many hours walking round and round the room first on crutches and then with walking sticks. Not being completely fit for riding there was a fear for some time that he might have to leave the Police. But in each station there is one PC who does general duties including grooming the inspector's horse and does not go out on patrol himself. He filled one of these positions for the next 15 years, working office hours and seldom wearing uniform.

In 1934 Jeanne started at St Luke's School on the other side of Old Street. The following year Gerald followed his big sister to the same school. The School is now closed becoming a bookshop and then an oriental restaurant but the little statues of a Puritan Boy and a Puritan Girl over the entrances still remain. We were collected after school each day and taken to the sweet shop where we were allowed to choose what we liked for ½d. Despite much pressure to buy proper sweets we were allowed to waste our money on a surprise packet as intriguing as a modern day Xmas Cracker.



The highlight of each year was a fortnight's holiday by the sea; Folkestone in 1935, Skegness, Folkestone again and Sandown Isle of Wight for two years before the war came and stopped it all. Skegness in 1936 was particularly memorable even with what seemed a never-ending train journey. Back home the following morning Gerald was so upset and no one, not even he, knew why. Most likely someone had told him that we would be going again the following year and for the first time he was old enough to know how long a year was.

It was also in 1936 that Jeanne contracted pleurisy and had to spend six weeks in the Children's Hospital in Great Ormond Street. She then went to Skegness on holiday, but was not allowed to go in the sea and then went to Tadworth for six-week's convalescence. She remembers that during this time she was only visited three times. The hospital regulations did not permit more.

At home we had a wireless housed in a very large freestanding cabinet. It was powered by wet acid batteries and each week these had to be taken for charging. We had always had a wireless at home but still wondered how the sound got into the cabinet. This has never seemed a problem with later generations.

Sundays were always different. Not being allowed to play out Jeanne and Gerald had to put up with each other's company. Neither thought this the best day of the week. On Sunday afternoons we were often taken by tram down to the embankment for a long walk from Blackfriars to Westminster.

Strange as it may seem nowadays every house with children had a cane prominently displayed. When we visited other families we asked what type of cane they had. A distant cousin had the novelty of getting her chastisement with a carpet beater. And yet parents, ours certainly, were inherently kind and loving. They just followed the expectation of the time and were concerned that "sparing the rod would spoil the child".

Albert Road, Leyton (1936 –38)

In autumn 1936 we moved to 58 Albert Rd, Leyton. Dad had been posted to Limehouse but the general rule on living within one mile of the stables had been relaxed. The ground-floor flat No 60 and our flat No 58 shared an entry porch but each had a separate front door. Ours led directly to a long flight of stairs to the upper floor. A flight of steps at the rear led down to a shared garden.

Gerald went to Newport Road School, a mixed infant's school a few hundred yards away but Jeanne had a longer walk to Norlington Road Junior Girls. All the roads in Leyton seemed long and dreary. Each afternoon in the summer we had a picnic in the High Road Leyton Sports Ground. This had been and was again one of the venues of Essex County Cricket but at that time was the sports ground of No 3 District, Metropolitan Police. We took thermos flasks and sandwiches, invariably "Velveeta" and tomato. Variety did not matter. It was continuity that seemed important. Later in the evening Dad would arrive, quite often to play bowls. It was not only the wide open space that was the attraction but all the hidden places under the wooden stands.

On May 12 1937, King George VI and Queen Elizabeth were crowned in Westminster Abbey. On the day that the old King had died in the previous year, we sat around Mum as she told us all that it meant, showing us pictures in the Daily Express of the old king top left and the new king top right. Memories came flooding back many years later when this front page was featured in a TV documentary.

Souvenirs abounded. Some for Edward VIII had to be discarded as though he had become King in January 1936, he abdicated in December of the same year and all the preparations had to be altered for his brother. Aunt Glad had for many years a large musical jug of Edward VIII, too good to throw away. Gerald received from school a picture book to commemorate the occasion whilst Jeanne being much more mature had an official programme of the service in Westminster Abbey. A coronation spoon was for many years kept pristine in its presentation box but now with the passage of time has found its rightful place complementing a silver sugar scuttle.

The celebrations started with a large crowd of kids being taken to the local cinema for a documentary featuring the new king and queen and then an exciting adventure film with swooping planes and Chinese pirates. Gerald was particularly thrilled as it was effectively his first time at the "pictures". His previous visit had all been a blur, as his need for glasses had not been detected.

In the autumn of 1937 the children were thought old enough to have a week at Halstead without their parents. Jeanne stayed with her grandmother who had now moved to a small cottage at 23 Trinity Road. Gerald stayed with Aunt Min at 31 Tidings Hill. The holiday was so enjoyable that we were allowed to go again the following year. In early 1939 all arrangements were made but then it was cancelled at the last moment when there was an outbreak of Infantile Paralysis in Halstead. By September we were at war. We would travel by Eastern National coach from Stratford through Chelmsford, and Braintree to the terminus at Halstead. There was no public transport further north so Sudbury and Suffolk were a foreign land. Returning to school after one trip Gerald was able to tell his classmates that he had

counted 48 windmills. Whether this was accurate counting or not, there would nowadays be great difficulty in finding one.

Sometimes Dad would take us to his police station to see the horses. Before the annual sports day at Imber Court the stables would be decked with bunting through which the horses had to walk. At intervals there would be a loud burst on a rattle, or even a simulated gunshot. The horses were unconcerned but might perhaps lazily turn their heads.

Compton Avenue, East Ham November 1938

At the end of 1938 we moved to 64 Compton Avenue East Ham. This for the first time was a self contained house. It was a terraced house with a tiny front garden enclosed by iron gates and fencing until they were removed during the war to help build a few tanks. With three bedrooms in the house, both Jeanne & Gerald had their own room rather than one having to sleep on a put-u-up in the lounge.

Strange as it may seem now, East Ham was considered one-up on the adjoining Plaistow and West Ham: the streets had trees. These were spaced conveniently apart for cricket and a particular skill was required to get a leg break off the camber of the roads. Of course this was only possible because there were no cars parked along the kerb sides

Junior Schools.

Jeanne transferred to Brampton Road Junior Girls, about a twenty minute walk. It was now Gerald's turn to progress to the juniors. The nearby Central Park Road School had infants on the ground floor and Junior Boys on the top floor. This had a fine view towards Woolwich and the Docks three miles away. Information from the shipping press would be used to chart the daily progress of selected ships. Then they would arrive on schedule, towering over the surrounding houses.



Discipline in this all-boys school would now be considered brutal. The form teacher carried a thick cane and administered a firm tap across the back of the knuckles for any misdemeanour. Not to get the "stick" at least once a day would mark one out as a wimp. But on one memorable occasion the Head Master came into the classroom and called out a boy for some unspecified offence. He got six full strokes from a thin whippy cane with a full follow through. He returned to his seat, nursing his hands, stifling any tears. The victim was a seven year old.

The Road to War

At the start of 1939 war clouds loomed. Barrage balloons appeared in the sky. These were large hydrogen-filled balloons tethered with steel cables that were hazards to low flying aircraft.

We were all issued with gas masks. Being over 7 years old, we had the full grown-up versions. The straps were individually adjusted and then the mask checked for leaks by holding a card over the inlet filter. There was an air-raid drill each day. On the sound of a simulated siren (wailing up and down) we filed into the corridor strongly reinforced with thick timbers. We sat attentively until a rattle told us to don our gas masks, a bell indicated that the gas attack had passed and on the all clear (a steady-pitched siren blast) we filed quietly back into the classroom.

Later in the year at 11 am on 4 September we sat around the wireless and heard Mr Chamberlain "...I must tell you now, that we have received no such an assurance and consequently we are at war with Germany". Then the siren sounded We moved quietly but apprehensively to our Anderson shelter, exactly as we had been drilled, sat down with our gas mask cases open, thumbs in the straps and chins out ...and then nothing. The rattle never came. It had been a false alarm. Poison gas was never used during an air raid in the war.

Anderson air raid shelters were provided and installed free. They were made from strong curved corrugated steel and sunk about three foot into the ground. The excavated soil was then used to cover the roof and to form a blast wall to protect the entrance. There was room for two bunk beds each side. Fortunately we had dry soil and so the shelter could be sunk a generous depth. Very soon the tops of shelters were shored up to become vegetable gardens. Nan's shelter in Widdin Street was a masterpiece. Aunt Lou's husband combined two together and equipped it with easy chairs and fireplace. It was used once only.

Street surface shelters were built with thick brick walls and reinforced concrete roofs. The basements of many shops were also used as public shelters and during a very heavy raid buses would stop and send the passengers to safety. Later when we travelled by tube we notice the bunk beds lining the platforms. Aunt Glad had another type of domestic shelter; a Morrison shelter, a steel table with strong mesh sides, inside her house.

Once war was declared, everyone became friendly and helpful and the typical aloofness vanished. Final touches were made to black out curtains. There was a mistaken belief that the Country was better prepared for this war than in 1914. A neighbour became distraught as her son was posted away when the Territorial Army was mobilised.

The fear of air raids was real. Plans were well advanced to evacuate the schools to unknown destinations. It was decided that we would not be evacuated with our schools but if there were no schools in London we could not stay. Education was important. Dad always regretted that his education had been restricted. There was a time when his career in the Police could have been put in jeopardy. Both parents were wonderfully supportive. At no time was there the burden of expectation. There was genuine but quiet pride when we did well and quiet consolation when we didn't. We heard from Mum of one of her cousins, Wally Easter, who had gained a State Scholarship to Cambridge when such awards were rare. This reassured us that we did not have to blaze an unknown trail. We might stay in London and get killed but we were not going to miss our education.

Tredegar, Monmouthshire September to December 1939

We were invited by a near neighbour to go with her to Tredegar in Monmouthshire. So Mum set out with her two kids on what turned out to be a nine-hour journey. Our National Identity numbers issued

shortly afterwards (viz. XOVO/112/6 to /8) showed that there were eight in the house at the time of registration. These identities were retained until just recently as NHS numbers.

Life in Tredegar was completely different. Welsh education was of a very high standard. At first it was hard-going keeping up with the arithmetic. Singing lessons were, of course, uninhibited. Geography was related to the local countryside and the position of the coal seams relative to the slopes of the hills and valleys. On sports afternoon, deciding to kick up meant just that and not just a nominal direction. The local Tredegar mine was in full production. We would sit high up on the slag heaps and watch coal being poured into the ovens and red-hot coke pushed out and doused amid clouds of steam.

This was the period of the phoney war. Little happened on land but we were aware of losses at sea. HMS Courageous, an aircraft carrier, was torpedoed in the Bristol Channel. A few months previously we had taken a speedboat trip around it when it was anchored off the Isle of Wight. There were losses at sea from mines though how these were related to the mines down the valley was unclear. As it was announced that the schools would shortly be opening again it was decided that we would return to East Ham.

Back to London January 1940

For a few months we only went to school for 1½ hours each day, as the teachers taught on three shifts. Compared with Tredegar, schooling was easy. But we did not miss much as each morning Dad would set us work to do in our own time. Later in the year, school was extended to half time and then later to full time. Then the Blitz started and we were back again to no schooling.

We were told in school of the miracle of Dunkirk. Dad had tried to show us on a newspaper map the positions of the Germans advancing up the French coast from Abbeville but the relative large-scale map had no connection with the map of France and England in our atlas. Gerald was more concerned about where he would get some front wheels for the cart that he and his friends were building. During the summer we followed the reports of the Battle of Britain in the newspapers with the totals of aircraft shot down appearing like cricket scores. We saw occasional trails from aircraft but the main action of the Battle of Britain at that time was over Kent and the south coast.

The first large scale raid on London came on the afternoon of 7 September with much attention centred on the nearby docks... At first this was frightening. During a lull we went out into the street to collect souvenirs, jagged pieces of shrapnel from anti-aircraft shells. The pall of smoke to the south from the burning docks slowly extended until it covered the sky immediately overhead. We returned to the shelter as evening approached and settled down to sleep. We wore our one-piece siren suits with their long leggings, zip and hood. Mum's and Jeanne's were a discreet navy blue but Gerald's was made of a distinctive orange and light blue striped material. It came into its own later for going through brambles and thorn bushes.

We children woke in the morning, surprised to find that there had been another heavy raid. The burning docks made a clear target for the bombers. A HE bomb had destroyed a house in the next road and Dad and our next door neighbour had been out tackling incendiary bombs. An incendiary bomb had a magnesium casing that burned fiercely with a brilliant white flame. It was about 18 inches long and weighed a few pounds. One had landed in our neighbour's bedroom but had been tackled quickly and smothered with a sandbag. The lessons taught in the ARP classes during the preceding months now bore fruit.

Halstead Essex September 1940

Receiving an invitation from Aunt Min we decided to go and stay with her in Halstead. Jeanne enrolled at the local Council School and found that she was being taught by the same Teddy Baker who has

taught Dad in what seemed the far distant past. Gerald went to Holy Trinity School. This was a rather strict and not very friendly school so he was quite relieved when a few months later we moved to the other end of town and he changed schools.

Life with Aunt Min and John White was great fun but quite a strain for her having two extra energetic kids around the small house. As our Nan, who was living at the other end of the town, had found us some convenient lodgings near to her it was arranged for us to move. Unfortunately the timing went wrong. Dad was coming to visit for the weekend and there was no time to tell him that we had moved. Mum and Aunt Lou went to meet the coach but this was delayed and he arrived by train to find his family was not with his sister. He never spoke to her again.

The Fenn & Colne Road December 1940 – September 1943

For almost three years, until September 1943, we stayed in a variety of lodgings on the Snowden Fenn Estate. These municipal houses had been built in 1938 on the northeast edge of the town. They were constructed in rows of four with a passageway between the central two houses. Consequently all houses had rear access and were invariably entered by the kitchen door at the rear. The ground floor comprised a main room, kitchen and bathroom that had a large brick-built copper for heating water for the bath and laundry. Upstairs each had one large, one medium and one small bedroom. There were occasional air raid warnings and a few jettisoned bombs, probably as bombers flew overhead on the way to the Midlands, but this was sufficient for some people to sleep downstairs or to create reinforced shelters under the stairs.

The houses with long rear gardens were sited in a large curving row with attractive views over the open countryside. The adjacent meadows were readily accessible and provided excellent areas for play. Rent for a three-bed roomed house was 5/- per week. The national average wage was then about £4 per week but probably considerably less for a family with a father in the Services. Most of the local children with whom we went to school would today be considered as belonging to one-parent families. The fathers went to North Africa with the Essex Regiment in 1940. All became PoWs when Tobruk was captured on 21 June 1942 and did not return until 1945.

Life was varied and active. There was never a shortage of anyone to play with. We were perhaps looked upon as being somewhat strange, rather ignorant of things that mattered such as how to climb trees, snare rabbits or skin a mole. When the last field of the season was being harvested there was a particularly large crowd waiting for the final rush of rabbits trapped by the binder as it cut their refuge smaller and smaller. All the guns were on one side and all the boys with catapults were on the other. They couldn't believe their eyes when young Everitt, catching sight of a rabbit chased it into the standing corn. All the local words for mentally defective, such as cranky, were hurled at him.

We stayed first with a family with three boys, two of approximately our ages. Life was rather tense and when there was an opportunity to move we gladly accepted it.

Life at the next house was hectic but enjoyable. There was also another family, (mother and two children) billeted there and two foster boys from Dr Barnado's. The landlady's husband was stationed at Colchester at the HQ of the Essex Regiment. As he was slightly older than other soldiers and medically C3 he was unlikely to be posted anywhere else. He came home for some weekends. We all fitted in without using the small third bedroom. That was kept for storage. Each billeted family had a room for three. The landlady slept downstairs and the foster boys had a bed under the stairs "where they would be safe". It was crowded but there was never a dull moment.

She treated the two foster children cruelly even according to the harsh standards of the times but the visiting District Nurse on her regular rounds noticed nothing. She did however eventually decide that we were overcrowded and that this was not good for her charges.

We did know a family nearby who were prepared to have us so we volunteered to move. It seemed at first sight a good move. It was only a small family with a daughter the same age as Jeanne. But life was oppressive. There was relief once a month when they walked the three miles across the fields to Colne Engaine to visit an aunt for the day. To be left alone was bliss. This monthly trip was the furthest that the daughter had ever travelled in her life. But she in no way felt deprived. Rather she pitied us for being rootless.

In the spring of 1942 we were invited to take over a furnished house where the family were themselves away. We were so keen to leave that we took temporary lodgings for two weeks with what would now be classified as a dysfunctional household. But the change was like ascending to heaven. The father of the house was in North Africa, the eldest son was visiting His Majesty for some offence that was not revealed and his younger brother paid similar intermittent shorter visits. The lady of the house was looking forward to the coming season when the Yanks were arriving at Gosfield. For company we had the two younger children. We were sorry to leave after a couple of weeks for what we thought was our permanent abode.

But we only had this house for four months when we were told that the family would after all be returning and so we were on the move again.

Our final move, where we stayed for the last 15 months at Halstead was with Ted Tracey an old widower in his mid eighties. He was still very active and grew all the vegetables for the household either in the garden or on an allotment at the other end of the town. As the war progressed, food became scarcer with more and more items being rationed so that having home-grown vegetables was a godsend. This was an ideal arrangement. He produced the food and Mum cooked it properly. There was frequent banter

“Lovely raspberries, Millie dear!” produced the response “You never say anything about the pastry!”

It was perhaps unfortunate that we did not discover him earlier, but then we would have missed much upheaval and many experiences. We were at last well settled and our places in society well established. The girls all knew their best friends and the boys all knew the ranking order for fighting, mainly based upon bluff. Regular confrontations started with the ritual words “I’ll posh yer beak, boy!” But a boy with glasses and curly hair knew he couldn’t aspire too high. Hockey and rounders matches were memorable occasions when everyone, oldest to youngest, joined in. The big boys selected the players in turn. It was great to belong. At the end of the evening, the younger ones went off home tired out and the big boys and girls went off to do what big boys and girls do.

We were accepted but always recognised as being different with funny ideas and habits. That we came from the largest city in the world that was at that time the centre of the world’s attention meant nothing. Curiously it was noticed that we celebrated birthdays and Christmas with presents and cards. It seemed that no-one ever received any post whereas Mum got a letter from Dad most days delivered by her postman brother-in-law, Lew. He was uncomplimentary about his brother as he claimed he had to walk one mile to deliver a single letter just for him.

The Mounted Branch of the Metropolitan police was retained throughout the War but as the principal duty of crowd control was hardly needed the horses and men were moved to the country. For the first few months Dad had been at Theobalds Park in Hertfordshire but had returned to London before the Blitz started. We heard that on a few occasions he had been involved in getting horses from burning buildings when the London Docks were ablaze. Later his station moved to Ascot but only after we had settled at Halstead. His station was based at Greenyard Stables on the racecourse. In peacetime this accommodated the jockeys during the



race meetings. A novel use for horse and riders was found after some German flyers had to bail out over Windsor Great Park. Every morning thereafter a dawn patrol scoured the park. We stayed for a few days at Ascot from time to time and Dad visited us every few weeks. Transport was unreliable. Sometimes he could get a direct coach to Halstead or take the train changing at Colchester or Marks Tey but often he had to “hop the buses” changing at Romford, Chelmsford and Braintree.

The Ellingford Clan

Our Grandparents with Aunt Lou had moved to Halstead when their house in Widdin Street had been bombed. Cousin Alan lived with them while his mother continued at work in London. Aunt Glad and baby Brian had found lodgings in a house in Hedingham Road to the west of the town at the start of the War. We would meet after school at a club run for evacuees at the High Street Congregational Church. This probably also gave our hosts a break from our continual presence.

Often on a Sunday afternoon we would all gather for a country walk. Sometimes with the others uncles and aunts visiting their parents it became a large gathering. A favourite walk was round the “Cangle Farm”. This was about four to five miles mainly along the country lanes. On one rare weekend when all eight children were present there was an opportunity for family photographs; Granddad with the boys and Nan with the girls.



Holidays-at-Home and Savings Weeks

Wartime was not the time to go on holiday. The coast was out of bounds to visitors and transport for non-essential purposes was discouraged. “Holiday at Home” weeks were organised with concerts, sports events, fetes and a parade of the uniformed organisations. There were many of these. Most people seemed to find a reason for wearing a uniform. Even babies had their prams decorated with red, white and blue bunting. The army stationed in the Drill Hall provided a few troops and the Home Guard took pride of place. The bugle band of the Boys Brigade led the way

Similar shows were organised for the savings week “Warships Week” was followed by “Wings for Victory” and “Salute the Soldier” when every town and village had a savings target with its thermometer showing progress. Halstead had a target of £5000, the cost of a Spitfire. We all believed that we were buying an actual Spitfire with wings and guns. It would have been too dispiriting to think that we were only helping to depress consumer demand to keep the war economy on an even keel.

Halstead Council School and St Andrews Junior School

After the move to the north of the town, Jeanne continued at the Council School in Factory Lane in the centre of the town. She started work at Easter 1943 in the check office of the local Co-op for a wage of 15/6d a week rising later in the year to 19/11d. Co-operative societies flourished because they paid a “dividend” to all their customers based upon the total amount spent. With Retail Price Maintenance, all shops were obliged to charge the same price but by paying a “divi” on purchases Co-op’s gained an advantage. But totalling the amounts on the “checks” issued by the Co-op with each purchase was not a trivial job.

Gerald transferred to St Andrew’s Junior School. This was a church school housed in a Victorian Building with four interconnecting rooms and no corridors. Standard 1 and Standard 4 were lined up in the two separate playground (boys and girls), and filed quietly into their rooms before Standard 2 and

Standard 3 could enter. Then the reverse process got them out at playtime. The kindly head, George Fairs, had his own tall desk at the side of one of the large classrooms at which he stood to do his work.

Once a week we had a visit from a canon from the local church who gave us a long and boring talk about the scriptures and other canonical books. Nine-year olds really appreciated the significance of the “Apostles Creed”, phrase by phrase, including the derivation of the title from the Latin word “Credo”. A little catholic girl had to sit in her seat through all of this perusing her red catechism.

At morning assembly, the range of hymns was restricted. The Epiphany hymn “As with Gladness men of Old” was sung every Friday with the same teacher playing it. It was never clear whether it was her only piece or whether it was too difficult teaching the kids another hymn.

Discipline was firm but not harsh. Most of the teachers were experienced and commanded respect. We all sat in our seats, facing the front and not talking to our classmates. There was an intriguing frieze going round the Standard 4 classroom (the top class) showing all the dates, events and monarchs century by century. But there was no way of finding out anything about any century other than the adjacent one. Wandering over to see another year was just not allowed.

The schools were sufficiently close that we came home for midday dinners. What is now the trunk road from Harwich to the Midlands was the football pitch on the way to and from school. Having to stop for a passing car was almost unknown. All football was played with a small tennis ball in the road. A large football on a field was a rarity except for organised games at the big school.

Rationing

Throughout the war and after, rationing and the shortage of some foods was the concern of all. In January 1940 the first three items, sugar, butter and bacon, were officially rationed. Other items followed. When meat rationing was introduced the weekly allocation was based upon its cost and not its weight so that the cheap cuts went further. At one stage it was restricted to 11d per person per week with offal and sausages extra if they were available.



Rations books contained coupons for each item for each week. At first these were carefully removed when a purchase was made but as each person had to be registered with a retailer, coupons were never a second currency. Very soon shopkeepers removed pages of coupons and substituted their own more convenient record cards.

Not all goods in short supply were rationed. A limited delivery would be shared among as many as possible and not to the lucky early arrivals even though this meant long queues and more trouble for a shopkeeper. To have done anything else would have been unthinkable. An arrival of a delivery of a luxury such as tomatoes or oranges would immediately cause a queue. The general attitude was “if you see a queue, join it!”

Bread was not rationed until after the War. But the National Loaf was very rough, brown, full of chaff and not very appetizing.

Jam was a luxury and rationed to one lb per person per month, equivalent to 1/8in per day, sufficient for one slice of bread spread very thinly. One month, in a fit of frustration, Mum gave Jeanne and Gerald a pot each and told them to make it last the full month. Jeanne’s had all gone within a few days. Gerald put a scale on the side of his pot. Each day’s ration was spread thinly and the excess scraped off, especially when watched by his sister. For the last few days of the month he relented and shared the accumulated excess with her.

Later, a range of goods controlled by “points”, such as tin food and dried eggs, could be bought from any shop where they were available whether registered there or not. Coupons cut directly from ration books controlled these. A similar system of “personal points” was used for sweet rationing. This continued until way after the end of the War finally being abandoned in 1953. It was removed for a short time in 1950 but there was such an increased demand that it was hurriedly re-imposed.

The campaign to “Dig for Victory” was in full swing. Almost all the back gardens were given over to vegetables and some had chicken runs or rabbit hutches. One of the local boys would sit on his back fence picking off the birds with his catapult. He was a hot shot and everything that he hit, from sparrows to rooks, went into the pot. There were opportunities to earn a few pence helping in the fields but this was mainly weeding by hand and unattractive work. Horses had been replaced by tractors for ploughing and drawing the reaper/binders but were sometimes still used for carting the stooked sheaves to the yard or for general carting. One boy had the much envied job of driving a horse and cart for a nearby smallholder but he worked hard for his 2/6d per week. Stacking the sheaves from the binder into stooks of six or eight was not suitable work for the younger lads but a routine job in later year at harvest camps. A few days later the sheaves would be taken away and made into a stack where they would remain for a few months until the itinerant threshing machine arrived. Nowadays with suitable varieties of corn and modern machinery all the processes can be carried out in a single operation by a combine-harvester.

At Halstead, milk was delivered directly from the farm by horse and cart and measured from a large churn into a jug. In summer it had to be immediately scalded to prevent it going off. Keeping food fresh was always a problem. Flies, wasps and even crickets abounded, as there were no refrigerators or aerosol sprays. Fly papers, if obtainable, were ineffective and trying to catch wasps with water in an empty jam pot was interesting but quite useless.

Ice cream was not included in the sweet ration and was not officially rationed. At Halstead, a special treat would come with the ice cream man every third Sunday – one wafer per person. On a day trip to Walton on Naze at the end of the War it was suddenly announced that unlimited ice cream was on sale. A packet of six individual blocks were going for 1/6d. We each hurriedly consumed a packet of six. Some went back for a second packet but no-one could face a third pack. The longing for ice cream was over. The principal of marginal utility was well illustrated “The more you have of something, the less you want more of it!”

Mashed parsnips with banana essence helped down with evaporated milk would be another Sunday treat. Trying to recreate it in 1995, as part of the 50th anniversary of the end of the war, was not possible. Parsnips and bananas were plentiful but banana essence was non-existent

Clothes rationing with “clothing units” came in 1941 at the same as the “Utility” regulations and the CC41 symbol. (Clothing Control 1941). Later these restrictions were extended to furniture and occasionally some items of furniture can still be found with this symbol imprinted underneath. Turn-ups on men’s trousers were banned, double breasted suits were discouraged and the more flamboyant trimmings on ladies clothes went out of fashion.

Boys wore short trousers until at the age of about twelve when they permanently discarded them, donned their first baggy long trousers and underwent a few days of ribaldry. A similar embarrassing ritual of transition from school cap to trilby or cloth cap was also observed. Newsreel films of football matches of the time show everyone in the crowd with a hat or cap. Gerald was relieved to find that when his time came the fashion had changed. He discarded his school cap in the third form and, except when in uniform, went bareheaded for 30 years.

The Yanks are Coming

Early one morning in December 1941 we heard on the wireless that the Japanese had bombed the American fleet at Pearl Harbor. For the first half of 1942 the news was universally bad with the fall of Tobruk in June affecting all the local families. Times were getting hard but then slowly things perked up. Construction of local airfields was in full swing. The Yanks were coming. There was an airfield being built at Earls Colne, three miles to the SE, another even closer at Gosfield to the west and Weathersfield within a few miles of that. All the older lads rushed to get jobs. It seems that most of the work was sheer hard labouring with concrete being mixed and poured manually. Then towards the end of the year the advanced parties of American airmen arrived and the airfields became fully operational with the start of the American daylight bombing offensive in 1943. Some of the local girls were sporting silk stockings in place of the leg dye and pencilled seams.

In early November the church bells rang out to celebrate the victory at El Alamein. Previously that had been the signal for an impending invasion. Perhaps there was some scepticism at first. Had not we seen it all before with great advances and withdrawals up and down the North African coast? "Where do we go from here, now that we've got Bardia?" But when the Americans and British First Army landed in Morocco and Algeria and swept swiftly along to Tunisia all seemed well.

Earls Colne Grammar School

In the spring of 1942 it was time for Gerald to take the General Admission Examination known as "the Scholarship" or later "the eleven plus". This was the means of selection to determine who would go to the Grammar Schools. Most of the schools had been created after the reorganisation of education in 1902 (Balfour Act) and had achieved high academic standards. But there was only capacity for about 10% to 20% of the population depending upon the area of the country. In consequence the selection had to be made at a point where there were many pupils of similar abilities. The results of a probably imperfect examination taken on one day meant the difference between five or even more years of secondary education and at the most three years before starting work shortly after the 14th birthday. In general the competition for places was fierce.

Jeanne had taken the examination in 1940 and had not been selected. If she had passed she would have to have gone by herself to Swindon where the Grammar School had been evacuated in 1939. Not surprisingly she was not disappointed.

There was a myth that selection mistakes could be corrected by later transfer. The few who found later success after missing two years must have been outstanding. Nevertheless, the system was probably the only one feasible at that stage in the development of the economy.

In the rural environment of Halstead the situation was somewhat different. The selection was supposed to be based upon ability but it is difficult to see where it differed from selection by parental status. None of the kids from the Fenn Estate entered. It was not expected and their mothers could give no assurance that they would stay until 16. Fees were subsidised and Dad had to pay only £9 a year but there were still other expenses. School uniform was obligatory and Gerald was issued on the first day with items ranging from cap and tie to football shirt and gym kit.

One boy from the estate had passed for the Grammar School but had left after three years. There was good wages to be earned building the many local airfields. But when a daughter of a local shopkeeper failed to pass she was pitifully questioned as to why she had failed. The parents of one of Gerald's friend from the estate were persuaded to let their son enter. They were unusual. He was a long distance driver but in her spare time his mother was teaching herself French. The son passed and he and Gerald used to travel together each day on the four-mile bus journey to the Grammar School at Earls Colne. He

was doing well. But when they met again several years later he revealed that he had left at 14. Peer pressure and the lure of good money were too great.

Earls Colne Grammar School had been founded in 1520. It had all the trappings but little of the substance of a traditional Grammar School. There were only 130 boys with only two in the 6th Form. Latin was not on the Curriculum but the Head Boy was coached to say grace in Latin before schools dinners. As the year progressed this became more and more garbled. When Gerald learnt Latin at his next school he pondered for a long time upon the meaning of “peysum ristum” that had been intoned every day. Then he realised - “per Jesum Christum”!

School Dinners at 7d per diem set the tone. All the “Grammar Bugs” were lined up in the playground before filing in to take their places at long tables under the gaze of the founders’ portraits. On one occasion, Gerald arrived late to find he was shunted to a table for 10 in the window. He was mercilessly teased by the fourth formers in charge but did notice that food was more generous (one pudding for 10 was better than two for 30), so he arranged to sit there for the next few days. He was soon accepted as a regular and others who dared to take his place repulsed. When it was the day for that table to do the washing-up his expertise gained from Mum’s coaching was acclaimed. Food was clearly organic and free from artificial chemicals as witnessed by the leather-jackets in the potatoes that had to be carefully detected and removed.

The academic standard was not generally high. Geography was an exception and the combination of gardening and science unusual. There was just enough time to observe the effects of experimenting with different fertilizers on carrots. Loading a wheelbarrow was an exercise in mechanics, but the gardening afternoon soon degenerated into gathering rose hips and harvesting potatoes for the war effort. The effect of shortages showed in craft lessons. All the boys had smart new aprons, but woodwork was abandoned in favour of making paper models because of the lack of wood.

Return to London September 1943

In September 1943 time had come for us to return to London. Air raids seemed to have passed, the schools were functioning normally and the war was going well for the allies. American and British armies had just invaded Italy and it seemed that the Second Front in France would come at last in 1944. Jeanne had finished school and was at work and Gerald had just completed the first year at Earls Colne. It was judged better for him to change schools then rather than in 1944, 1945 or even 1946.

Jeanne found a similar job with the London Co-operative Society before moving to the Commonwealth Bank of Australia in Old Jewry and later next to Australia House in the Strand. She stayed there until she got married in 1951.

East Ham Grammar School for Boys

Gerald transferred to the 2nd year of East Ham Grammar School for Boys. The contrast with Earls Colne Grammar School was dramatic particularly when a new head teacher, Dr J L Whiteley, arrived in 1943. Unlike the rural community of north Essex, the competition for places at the school was intense. The snobbery of social class became the snobbery of academic class. All that mattered was ability and achievement. A parent’s occupation was irrelevant. This was not only the attitude of the staff but of all the pupils. One boy, who had 2/6d a week pocket money, whilst the rest of the class had only bus fare and dinner money, did not flaunt it. As one senior teacher put it “With eight distinctions at General School’s and four distinctions in Highers no-one will care what your parents did, whether you were school` captain or what school you went to!”

The school building, compared with the rural campus of Earls Colne, was disappointing. It was just an ornamental adjunct to the Town Hall. The name of the school was not even shown. Rather “East Ham

Technical College”, the evening occupiers, had its name engraved in the stonework. Rooms in the semi basement had little daylight with the corridors narrowed by support timbers providing air raid protection. The central hall was not large enough for the whole school to assemble. The outside decoration was ornamental, the staircases grand and the rooms dingy. Sports were held at a selection of municipal grounds a mile away.

More Air Raids

The lull in the bombing was short lived. There was not the full scale assault of the 1940 Blitz but the intermittent raids of the mini-blitz during January and February of 1944 were a nuisance. Travelling by bus, the driver might pull up and invite the passengers to take shelter. Usually it seemed more convenient to get out and walk keeping ears and eyes alert for trouble. The black out could be more of a problem, particularly on a foggy night. As there was no control on smoky fires, impenetrable “smog” could descend. Street lights were shrouded and sometimes the only way to keep on track was to walk with one foot in the gutter, counting the roads.

At home, life on a winter’s evening was very much confined to one room. The kitchen range made it very warm and the black out reached the required high standard without a chink of light showing. But all the other rooms, including the bedrooms, were freezing cold. Normally Gerald had no trouble doing his homework with the wireless playing and bustle around. But very occasionally, noticeably with a French essay, he would find it difficult to concentrate so he would dress himself in his outdoor clothes and huddle round a shrouded table light in the front room. Many years later, the grandchildren asked whether we had been read to in bed; not in a bitterly cold, unlit bedroom.

Shortly after D-Day in June 1944 the first of the doodle-bugs (V1 pilotless flying bombs) arrived. We watched and cheered as late one night we saw what seemed to be an intruder hit and brought down by tracer shells. Later we learnt that this was what they were designed to do; run out of fuel, dive to earth and explode. About 8000 were launched but as they flew on a steady course, at 350–400mph, they were good targets for the anti-aircraft guns lined along the coast. The latest fighters were also fast enough to catch them. Nevertheless almost 2,500, each with 750kg of HE, reached London.

For a few weeks school lessons were interrupted with every warning of an approaching V1. But then it was decided that the frequent and disruptive warnings would have to be ignored. Gerald can remember watching from the Art Studio on the top floor of his school as one streaked low across the sky. He accepted a bet from a classmate who said it would hit a gasometer. It missed, he claimed a toffee as his winnings and they carried on painting. Nevertheless it was decided to cancel the annual exams. This was a blessing in disguise. With the change of schools, Gerald was struggling to keep up, noticeably in science and mathematics. He had arrived at the start of the 2nd year not having done any algebra. The teacher loaned him his own book with answers and explanations and asked him to do his best. By the time the third form exams occurred he was on his way.

The next attack came from V2 rockets. Just over 1000 reached London between September ‘44 and March ‘45. It would not be true to say that they disrupted daily life. There was nothing that could be done. There was no defence or avoiding action that could be taken. The first sign was the explosion of $\frac{3}{4}$ tons of HE dropping from 50 miles up followed by the roar of the approaching missile in reverse sequence. The physics teacher, who was rather deaf, was enthusiastically explaining why this phenomenon occurred with a missile travelling four times the speed of sound, when one landed a few streets away just off the High Street. As the windows rattled he turned from the board angrily and asked “What boy did that?”

The attack from V1’s and V2’s finally ceased with the capture of the launching site in March 1945. Work on repairing the many war-damaged house had already begun in the autumn of 1944. Except in areas, such as parts of the City of London, where fires were started there were not large areas of

destruction. A typical 500lb bomb would make a deep crater and take out 4 or 5 terraced houses but most of the blast went upwards. Later parachute mines detonated at roof top height caused wider destruction - 15 to 20 houses on each side of two or three adjacent streets. The extent of the damage can still be detected at East Ham and elsewhere by looking for post war houses in the midst of the Victorian terraces. A V1 gliding in at a shallow angle could cause widespread damage whilst the damage from a V2 with the same payload, plunging vertically, was more confined. But every house near us received some form of blast damage so that teams of workers slowly moved from house to house for almost a year making repairs. Gerald extended his practical carpentry, with permission, by borrowing their tools and using off-cuts and scrap wood. There was plenty of this. Almost every house had its roof replaced. Walls were made safe. Our rear wall had a one-inch gap through which we could talk to the neighbours. It was judged that it did not have to be rebuilt but rather pulled back into place and re-pointed.

Post War Austerity

With great relief the end of the War came. The blackout had been eased a few months before. But it was not the end of shortages and restrictions. With the unexpected end of the war against Japan, Lend Lease, that had provided not only munitions but also food, ceased abruptly. The winter of 45-46 was bitterly cold and there was a severe shortage of fuel. The Nations gold reserves had all been spent. Rationing of bread, that had not been necessary during the War, had to be introduced.

The general election called for 5 July 1945 aroused great interest as there had not been one since November 1935. The wartime parliament had extended its life year by year beyond the statutory limit of five years. The Coalition Government of all parties formed in 1940 disbanded and traditional electioneering began. Most unusually, the ballot boxes were not opened for three weeks after polling to allow time for votes of the services overseas to be collected. Pollsters were not as advanced as they later became so that it was a surprise to many when the Labour Party under Clement Atlee gained a landslide victory over the Conservatives, fighting under title of the National Party and led by the wartime leader Winston Churchill. A similar result in a Mock Election held previously at school was not thought surprising in a strongly Labour constituency and was not thought a pointer to the election proper. But in this mock election the Labour candidate was closely pressed by the Liberals, a gratifying result for the Head of History who had imparted his belief that the most happy and prosperous time of mankind since the Antonines of Ancient Rome was achieved by the 1906 Liberal Government of Campbell-Bannerman.

The end of the War also saw the return of League Football. To local annoyance, League Division One was reconstituted as it was in 1939. This seemed most unfair to teams such as Manchester City, Birmingham City and the local West Ham United who had been doing well in Leagues South and North. Football had continued during the War but the team sheets (single sheet for 1d) usually showed several A.N.Others and unfamiliar guest players. Most of the professional footballers were in the services so that the team sheets showed rank, initials and surname but no forenames. Not to be outdone, the West Ham captain was always shown as PC Bicknell – he was a special constable. A flying bomb that had landed near the SW corner flag had surprisingly little effect. There was no roofing left but the adjacent goal post and stands seemed undamaged. The damage however became significant with the return of the FA Cup competition in January 1946. After the gates were closed, crowds swarmed over the damaged walls and overflowed on to the verges of the pitch and up into the rafters. It was exhilarating, particularly as the visiting Arsenal lost 6 – 0. For this season only there were home and away matches for each leg. Arriving home the sobering news was heard on the wireless. In a similar ground invasion at Bolton 23 people had been killed.

General and Higher Schools Certificates

Traditionally, the examination for the “General Schools Certificate” with exemption from “Matriculation” was taken in the fifth form. Two years in the Sixth Form were then required before the “Higher Schools Certificate”. Following a successful trial in the previous year, Gerald and most of his classmates in Form IVa, were entered for the GSC in 1946. They were then able to start the VIth form a year early. Higher Schools Certificate followed after two years in 1948 and he did well enough to be awarded a State Scholarship. He had started on a third year in the Sixth Form planning to enter for Open Scholarships when he met an old boy of the School who had just achieved a First in mathematics at King’s College London. It appeared that going to University at 17 years of age was unusual but not unknown. A ‘phone call to the Sub-Dean was followed by an interview the next day and an offer to start the following week. The State Scholarship paid for the fees and a subsistence allowance of £100pa. This was big money. When it was raised first to £110 and then £180 all the carefully budgeted plans were sent awry. With a friend he even put down a 10/- deposit on a £9 car before realising how impractical it was. Neither could drive nor knew anyone who could. So it was back to the trusty bike.

The family bike, or at least parts of it, had been handed down from Uncle Wid, Uncle Stan and Cousin Alan. Uncle Dood sprayed the frame and a few bearings and components had been bought with odd cash each week. To save money Vaseline from the medicine chest was used as grease. It covered many miles before being handed on to Cousin Geoff with the purchase of a 150cc BSA Bantam motor cycle in 1955.

Athletics

Gerald had always been keen on sports but not much good. To his own and everyone’s surprise he beat the School Captain at high jumping and got himself a place in the school’s athletics team. He was persuaded by one of the boys in a lower year, Derek Johnson, to join the local athletics club. At that time Derek was one of a pair of sprinters who outstripped all opposition and invariably breasted the tape together. One faded into oblivion whereas DJNJ a few years later missed by a few inches a Gold Medal in the 800m at the Melbourne Olympics. But then he unfortunately contracted TB and had to retire from athletics. At the time there was still no specific cure for tuberculosis other than rest and fresh air for a many months in a sanatorium.

The athletics club was part of a general sports club. It had its own, rather loose cinder track and good facilities (such as tennis wall, football shooting box) mostly built by the members. A Sunday morning would consist of athletics training, followed by building work for an hour, a game of football on the all-weather pitch and a two mile cycle ride home. On one morning a word of advice was almost philosophical. “Get over there mate. If you can shovel left-handed you’ll never be out of a job!” Taking this as general advice Gerald drifted towards the events that others didn’t do particularly those requiring technique (high jump, hurdles, and hammer). This was helped when he won bequests in three successive years to attend residential coaching courses at Loughborough.

Jeanne & Don

On 24 March 1951, Jeanne married Donald Hilborne at the Unitarian Church at Stratford. Aunt Glad & Uncle Bill had long been members and Mum & Dad had recently become regular attendees. At the wedding, the unheard of happened. The photographer messed up the photographs and had to return the following day to do his best to retrieve the situation. Jeanne and Don lived at 64 Compton Avenue for four years occupying a sitting room downstairs and the back bedroom upstairs. At that time Don was working as a toolmaker at Briggs Motor Bodies. Jeanne left the Australian Bank but continued at work, first back at the Co-op and then at the United Dominion Trust. Their television set, a novelty at the time, was much appreciated by all the family and we soon became fans of most of the programmes

including the five-minute interludes of a boat drifting down a country river or a potter's wheel turning; truly watching paint dry.. Present day adverts are perhaps an improvement.

Photography

Don became a very keen photographer and Gerald was not slow in following him around snapping up the cast-offs. The bathroom upstairs with suitable black-out became the photo lab. Nowadays the electrical regulations require the electrical bonding of all large metal objects and certainly no electrical fittings in bathrooms. The bathroom at Compton Avenue had cold but no running hot water. Two buckets of hot water, or three for the energetic, from the copper in the kitchen was the preliminary to a wallow. Electric power for lighting and photography came from a two-way adaptor in the light socket in the adjacent bedroom and a wire trailed across the room to a socket high on the wall in the bathroom. Then by a series of connectors and wires, power was supplied for orange lighting, enlarger, dish-heaters and glazer. The completed prints were left to wash in the bath. When colour photography required nine temperature-controlled dishes the end had come but meanwhile good business had been done. Gerald used his position as a competitor at some of the larger athletics meetings to get photos of some of the top athletes of the day. But he soon found that there was far more profit in making two dozen prints of one group photo of the winning team.

Kings College London

Life at university was a complete change. There were 20 students in the first year of the B Sc Hons Maths course. These were a mixture of State Scholars and County Major Scholars straight from school and more mature ex-service people who had been awarded generous grants as part of a special FE Training Scheme. One girl funded privately was completely out of her depth.

But after the carefully structured teaching of a typical school, all seemed out of their depths. A lecture consisted of copying notes from a blackboard. With luck some of these were successfully interpreted and partially understood several weeks or months later. As mathematics was not a laboratory-based subject there were only about ten lectures a week. Even this was as much as one could stand, but it did give plenty of time for other student activities. Being in the centre of the city life probably compensated for the non-residential nature of the college. After obtaining an unexpectedly good result in finals there was a brief flirtation with the idea of doing a post-graduate course in mathematics but enough was enough. Up to this point all had been a rush with Gerald completing his final examination before his twentieth birthday. Not necessarily a good thing but probably inevitable. A teacher training year was quite a rest and somewhat academically an anticlimax but there was much time for athletics and other interests.

National Service

From time to time the suggestion is made that the youth of the Nation could benefit from a couple of years of army discipline. National Service was certainly memorable but whether the individual experience was overall beneficial is doubtful and the cost was horrendous. There is nothing that could



destroy the efficiency of the present day army as quickly as dumping upon it tens of thousands of unwilling recruits. The benefits of discipline, comradeship, personal pride and structured competence were probably matched by attributes of callousness, insensitivity and toleration of injustice.

Gerald's experiences in the Royal Artillery were all in Britain but nevertheless varied. He took the early train from Paddington to Oswestry to give himself time to

settle in. What a mistake! He just served six hours longer. Two weeks with a random selection of all types was followed by a far more depressing eight weeks with those considered as officer material. Having failed to convince the War Office Selection Board that he had a Field Marshall's baton in his knapsack he completed the first year learning and then instructing in surveying at Larkhill in the middle of Salisbury Plain. This was practical instruction at its best. The underlying theory was never revealed but undoubtedly everyone could have surveyed in a bearing picket under enemy fire.

Having been selected at the second attempt, a posting to Mons Officer Cadet School at Aldershot followed. This came just in time to avoid a week at Porton Down for what had been promoted as help with curing the common cold. Only later did it emerge that nerve gases were the subject of the experiments. Six weeks of infantry training were followed by four weeks of Light AA and six weeks of Heavy AA. This all took place against the background of drill, rifle exercises and repeated rehearsals for passing out parades under the beady eyes RSM Britain and CSM Coleman of the Coldstream Guards. Having successfully deployed a Troop of six HAA guns in thick fog, not been sent to the Guard Room for "idle" kit and indicated that he would be acceptable in the Mess, Gerald was commissioned on 9 January 1954. Army life was then much easier, still frustrating but at times almost rewarding. As demob-day was in the middle of one of the Regiment's firing camps in Norfolk, he was left in command of the base camp as the Regiment moved off. Shortly afterwards, he handed over to the next in command and went home. A few years in the Territorial Army, first compulsory, and then voluntary and social, followed.

Early Computing

In 1954 young mathematicians looking for a job took their pick from the two dozen aircraft companies paying similar salaries between £11/10/- a week and £600 a year. This all seemed so dreary so Gerald decided to take a risk and opted for an intriguing offer from a company marketing a new unspecified type of machine for accountancy. Whatever happened to the British aircraft industry? Whatever happened to computers?

The Kids Leave Home



Dad retired from the Metropolitan Police in 1949 and got a job in the Tax Office in Romford Road. P.A.Y.E. had been introduced in 1944 to cater for more people paying Income Tax, The process was very paper dependent. Every piece of paper received at the office had to be sorted and matched with the relevant file which after processing had to be laboriously filed away again in its proper position. After a few years he obtained an established post as a Clerical Officer.

In 1955, Jeanne & Don moved to a new house in Rise Park Romford and then in 1957 to Luton. Gerald and Marjorie were married in the same year. For a few months they rented a one room flat in Queens Road, Leytonstone before moving to Lancashire and then in 1962 to Hertfordshire.

Mum and Dad stayed at East Ham paying frequent visits to the kids at Luton, Formby and Brickendon. Trouble with his heart forced Dad to retire in 1962. He had been a smoker all his life, rolling his own cigarettes, but when heart trouble was diagnosed he gave it up immediately. But his bad heart limited the action that could be taken when he developed cancer of the bladder.

He died at home in August 1965 cared for by Mum to the end. It was very sad. He was a kind man, much missed and we all knew how much he would have enjoyed seeing his grandchildren in their formative years.

Mum lived on for another 36 years without her beloved Arthur but in the centre of her growing family. In 1983 she moved to Luton to live with Jeanne & Don and then in 1996 to a nearby care home. At her 100th Birthday, she was asked whether she would like to see her great-grandchildren grow up and themselves marry. “No” she said, “I’ve seen it all. It’s time to go”.



Appendix - Life in the Forties

Money

In the main story we have used the old “sterling” system to indicate prices. This system of £.s.d was not changed until 15 February 1971 when the £ was retained but shillings and pence were abandoned for “new pence”. Before that, £1 was divided into 20 shillings each of 12 pence. This made arithmetic very difficult. A typical problem set at school would be “How much would three yards and two foot of cloth cost at $1/11\frac{3}{4}d$ per yard?

The small value copper coins were very large. The old coins would be over six times as heavy as new coins of the same value. There were notes for 10/- (ten shillings) and for £1. Very occasionally we would also see a £5 note. These were flimsy and white, about the size of a piece of A5 paper, and were invariably carried folded several times.



A policeman earning £5 per week was thought comfortable. Rent of a house for 15/- (fifteen shillings) would be normal. A “Milky Way” bar cost 1d whilst the higher quality “Mars Bar” cost 2d. But one of these would be considered a treat to be sliced and shared among the whole family. Not surprisingly obesity was not a problem. Each week we took our milk money to school, $5 \times \frac{1}{2}d = 2\frac{1}{2}d$, unless we were tempted by the sweet shop and surreptitiously bought a bar of chocolate instead. School dinners were 5d per day but the cake shop provided a similar temptation.



“Plastic” and cash machines had not been invented. Bank accounts and cheques were used for business but few had them for their private finances. Spare cash would be put in the Post Office as up to £3 could be drawn out on demand. Each week Mum divided up her housekeeping and placed it in a set of old tobacco tins. Shopping for small items on credit was unusual but hire-purchase was available for larger items but not to policemen. There were the apocryphal tales of people being paid on a Friday, getting the Sunday suit out of pawn and then returning it on Monday to get money for the week. There were mail order catalogue clubs. The members each paid weekly contributions and then drew lots with the winners getting the goods first and paying later. In consequence the supplier did not provide credit. There was a general feeling that banks only lent money to businesses and the very rich but good honest working folk paid their way.

Shopping

Most shops were small shops. The tobacconist sold only cigarettes and tobacco; the sweet shop sold sweets though the cycle shop might also sell records (78 rpm) and sheet music. In the suburbs there were a few department stores such as Bearmans at Leytonstone,

Roberts at Stratford and the Co-op at East Ham. But the West End was the place for the large stores.

There were, of course, no supermarkets and self-service was almost unknown. In Woolworth's (the 3d & 6d store) items could be selected from an island counters but then handed immediately to the assistant behind to complete the purchase.

Until the Heath Government of 1970 banned "Retail Price Maintenance", manufacturers could insist that their goods were all sold at the same price. In consequence other ways were found of getting a bargain. Dad somehow or other got a "Trade Card" for the Houndsditch Warehouse and at one time found a source of South African Port and Sherry in the London Docks. Bought by the crate the bottles were sold on to friends and relations. A bottle of fortified wine in the house was normal but table wine was rarely seen. In 1954, the standard meal in the restaurant car of British Rail could be enhanced by either a quarter bottle of claret or a quarter bottle of sauternes. .

Grocery shops, such as "Sainsbury" had separate counters and specialist staff for each type of goods. Bacon was sliced at the cold meat counter, whilst butter was made up with butter pats at another. Even sugar was weighed out into conical blue bags whilst the shopper waited. Chairs were provided for the elderly. Before fridges became available shopping every day was normal and running errands for a forgotten tin of pilchards (for Mum or a neighbour) was a chore. Bread (from a tall two-wheeled handcart) and milk (from a three-wheeled trolley) were delivered daily. Newspapers arrived early but the evening papers were sold at street corners with the cry of "starnewstandard". For a few weeks, Dad gave up the evening papers in protest when the price was raised to 1½d. During the war newsprint was so short that a daily paper would have only four, or occasionally six pages. We heard that in America they had 50 page papers and just couldn't understand what could fill them.

The "Man from the Pru" was a regular visitor. Industrial Branch Insurance required premiums, however small, to be collected every week so that the agent would know what was happening in the family. Howarth, the local agent, arrived with a cash payment the day after dad died. Mum was content to know that her own policies (sum assured £80) would provide enough to "bury her". Thirty-six years later Jeanne suggested to Mum's undertaker that he might like to do it for that price. By then Industrial Branch Insurance was no more but the policy had matured sufficiently that she was well covered.

Clothes

Men wore caps, trilbies or homburgs according to status. Boys wore school caps, some reluctantly, donning them symbolically as they entered the school grounds. But to a curly haired boy a cap was a godsend and he would have worn it in bed if he had been allowed. All boys wore short trousers until it was time to change to the first pair of baggy long trousers when the shorts were discarded for ever. Casual wear for men included a jacket, pullover and open-necked shirt even on a sweltering hot day.

Ladies also had their heads covered with hats or head scarves. With the shortage of material, clothes became plainer and skirts became shorter, until the arrival of the New Look in 1948. Stockings were scarce and some even resorted to leg dye and penciled seams. The Yanks arriving in 1942 brought the much sought after nylons. Girls working in the factories might wear trousers and breeches were part of the uniform for land girls but otherwise skirts were the norm. A wraparound pinafore would be quite normal in the home.

Transport

The main roads, except in central London, were busy but not congested. Buses and trams and later trolley buses were sufficiently frequent that time tables were not needed. Trams on their steel rails were noisy and uncomfortable. They were designed to run in both directions with a driver's control at each end. The slatted seats had backs that tilted either way. Just before the war, they were replaced by trolley buses with rubber tyres and more comfortable seats. The early ones had two seats up front next to the driver that were eagerly sought after. They were soon removed; clearly the driver had enough to do without being distracted by two gawping kids. Without a metal track as an electrical conductor they needed two overhead poles. As the path of a trolleybus was less constrained there was far more opportunity for a flashing electrical display when the conductor (human one) failed to switch the overhead points in time.

Earlier when living in Warren Buildings we would watch the lamplighter with his long pole turn on the gas lights in the streets, but in the suburbs the streets had electric lights, large sodium lights on the main roads and single bulbs in the side streets. But in the blackout even these were turned off.

There were still a few horse-drawn wagons, mainly for coal, beer and scrap metal. Keen gardeners would keep a bucket and shovel handy for the occasional horse and cart. Football in the side streets, with a small tennis ball, would occasionally be interrupted by the milkman or baker with hand-drawn carts. . Cars in the side roads were rare as few private people owned cars. Uncle Bill Girling had a Morris 6 that he managed somehow to get enough petrol to keep running throughout the War. On one memorable occasion Uncle Wal took all the kids for a ride in his open top sports car that he had just acquired. It was not until after the war that private motoring became more common.

Two of the young officers in Gerald's regiment had old bangers of about 1935 vintage into which everyone piled for an evening out. The more respectable field officers had new cars of which they were immensely proud, but a journey across Salisbury Plain on a bitterly cold winters evening still required the liberal use of a half potato to keep the windscreen free of ice. Don's first car in 1957 was unusual; it had a heater as standard.

As private cars were rare, so were private garages. Our neighbour at East Ham would arrive home from work and leave his car in the road whilst he had tea. Then he would take it off to the garage that he rented $\frac{3}{4}$ miles away and return half an hour later on foot. It is noticeable that even now in an inter-war town such as Welwyn Garden City there are few private garages. The larger houses have single garages and the rest have none.

Electricity

Most houses had electric lighting though Aunt Min and Grandma Everitt at Halstead had to rely upon gas or even oil-lamps. When we stayed with them we went up to bed in the dark or by candlelight.

There were few other electrical devices and these would invariably get their power from a two way fitting in the light socket. A selection of round-pin plugs (2 amp, 5 amp, 10 amp and even 15 amp) were available but even these would be fed by tattered cables trailing from the light fitting. Only in the fifties were ring circuits introduced with, what was considered at the time, yet another variant of plug. A home would have a wireless around which the family gathered. Our pride and joy was a large radiogram. On moving to East Ham, Dad checked with a colleague whether the supply was AC or DC. When the set burnt out, he found out that the type of supply could vary from street to street. Everything electrical was bought from the Electricity showroom where the bills were also paid unless there was a pre-payment slot meter. Installation of lighting included the provision of

small opal or “coolie hat” lampshades. These were only replaced slowly as separate shops selling light fittings entered the market. There were still one or two of the original shades in Compton Avenue when Mum moved out in 1983.

Unusually we had an electric toaster, with bare heating elements, and an electric bowl all driven with tatty wires from the light fittings. Vacuum cleaners were at first viewed with suspicion as it was believed they “sucked the guts out of a carpet” and could never compete with a good beating over the clothes line.

The arrival of the electric power drill in the early fifties came with the growth of DIY. One drill with a host of attachments had to do everything as it was too expensive to have more than the one electric motor.

Heating

Heating for most of the house was practically non-existent. Each room had a fireplace but those upstairs in the bedrooms were never used. A fire would be lit in the front room for Christmas but otherwise it was not used. The main heat came from the coal-burning range in the kitchen. This became so hot that it was dangerous to touch and the heat in the room was sweltering. It was occasionally also used for cooking and provided some heat to the bedroom above. Coal was delivered from a horse and cart into the adjacent store under the stairs. After each sack load the coalman was obliged to stack the empty sacks neatly on the pavement for checking.

The outside toilet had no lighting and no heating. There was a good need for a bedroom utensil.

Laundry

At first hot water was provided by a brick copper in the kitchen heated by a coal fire but later this was replaced by a gas-fired boiler. Some more modern houses had “back boilers” behind the fireplaces in the main rooms. But in Compton Avenue, hot water for the bathroom was carried upstairs in buckets; two for a bath and three for a wallow.

Most washing was done at home in a tin bath with a scrubbing board and hot water from the copper. Twin tub washing machines came later with the first fully automatic machines in the mid sixties. Flat irons heated on the range or the gas stove were happily replaced by electric irons when these became more readily available. There were laundries, including bag washes, but these only supplemented the weekly wash at home. For a few years, in the early fifties, weekly “collect & deliver” service for men’s loose collars became popular.

Telephones

A house fortunate enough to have a telephone might well display a sign “You may telephone from here”. When our neighbour retired from London Transport and set up as a street-corner newsagent he was allowed to have a telephone but only after a six-month delay. The general public had to rely upon public call boxes. There was automatic dialing in the London area with the Exchanges having interesting names showing the actual or pseudo geographical area, names of poets etc. But as the names were abbreviated to three letters and the letters coded as ten digits, capacity was soon exceeded and all digit numbers were introduced. Longer distance calls required the intervention of an operator and a delay of several minutes. Police out on the beat would be summoned, with the aid of the public, to a flashing blue light on a “Tardis” style Police Call Box where they were required to report regularly.

Entertainment

Cinemas were the focus of public entertainment. A programme with a new feature film supported by a “B” movies and a newsreel would be shown for a week before moving on to the next sector of London. With several chains of cinemas there was always a choice. Each evening three long queues would form for the 1/3d and 1/9d downstairs and the 2/3d in the circle. After the queues dispersed the ground would be covered with peanut shells. The groundnuts scheme in West Africa provided an ample supply whilst other confectionery was severely rationed.

Jeanne would be taken by her young brother on a Sunday afternoon when there would be a different programme for one day. Ever the gentleman he held out his hand surreptitiously for the admission ticket as they approached the queue.

Entry to the South Bank at the West Ham Football Ground was only 9d for boys. The narrow turnstiles with “No Change Given” displayed above led to the roofless bomb-damaged terraces. A team sheet for 1d completed the afternoon’s entertainment

Restaurants

Eating out was unusual. Fish & Chips were wrapped for takeaway in newspapers that could also provide a good read. Eel & Pie shops had high-backed wooden seats with live eels squirming on the ice slabs outside. A quick tap on the head with the handle of the knife followed by a rapid chopping sent them on the way to the pot for a quick stew up. But the shops also sold tasty meat pies and mashed potatoes covered with green parsley sauce in a basin. Apart from the occasional transport café there were few other eating places. Pubs sold drink not food.

Even the large hotels and the more prestigious restaurants in central London were restricted to charging 5/- for any meal.

*Jeanne Hilborne (née Everitt) and Gerald Everitt
September 2005*