

“THE KINDNESS OF AYNHO VILLAGE” - THE STORY OF A LONDON EVACUEE IN WW2

My Mother and I got off of a bus in the village late one afternoon in early November in 1940. Having left burning London early that morning after our Anderson air raid shelter was made unusable with us in it by a too close for comfort bomb, being surrounded by bomb damage and sleeping under tables, all normal life was impossible. Schools were closed, and the relentless bombing continued which I remember being affected by. I was nine years old at the time. No doubt this prompted my Father to arrange for Mother and I to get away for a while. His brother happened to be a market trader and worked at Banbury market every Thursday, so he must have suggested that we should go to Aynho as he had customers in the Village. With no arrangements made for accommodation, my mother asked the other people getting off the bus if they knew where we could stay. One couple, Mr. And Mrs. Miller took us in for the night in their cottage up on the hill. The next day they had arranged for us to stay in the cottage opposite with Mr. And Mrs. Stayton. That next night not long after we had got into bed we heard the dreaded sound of German bombers. Mother said the bxxxxxs have followed us here. The vibration of the aircraft engines caused bits of plaster to fall on the beds. The following night they came over again and we had been told that they were bombing Coventry, so we went outside and being up on the hill we could see a red glow in the sky from the fires.

The following day we were told that the Landlady of the Great Western Arms had rooms that we could use. So we made our way down to the station and were made very welcome by Mrs. Mildred Howe the Landlady, and wonderful Mary who was the “Jill of all trades”: barperson, cellar person, cook, etc. Her Father was Mr. Hawkins who ran what was then the coal wharf. Mary was a great friend to us; to me she was like a big sister. The first night in the Pub the bombers came over again. The following night as we lay in our beds listening to them going over, we heard the familiar sound of a bomb falling, to which we both took cover under our beds waiting for the explosion. We had already been made aware of all the activity in the railway goods yard seeing all the army lorries coming and going. We found out the reason for all this activity was that railway trucks loaded with jerry cans full of petrol were being transferred and stored in the grounds of Aynho Park House. There was no explosion so we assumed that it was a time bomb. Mother got Mrs Howe out of bed and we waited anxiously for a big bang, as nothing happened we returned to our beds.

The next morning Mary told us that her Dad had been on the canal bridge listening to the planes going over and heard the bomb falling. He estimated that it had fallen in the fields further down the canal; he informed the police who were not able to locate it. Soon after arriving at the station, I met the two children who lived in one of the cottages. Ceenie and Sheila lived with their Mum and Dad, Ceenie was my age and Sheila was a year or two younger, their Dad worked for Mr. Belcher at Nell Bridge Farm. In the afternoon after the bomb falling the girls and I were half way up the station steps when the bomb exploded. Fortunately it was too far away to do any damage. We soon settled in at the station and I got to learn all the train times from the girls. Being two stations, the up line was known as Aynho Park Station which I think ran from Aylesbury to Banbury with two carriage push pull trains operating the service. The bottom line was the busiest running trains from Oxford to Banbury. There was lots of activity going on nearly every day with commuters and the army lorries continuously transporting the jerry cans of petrol to and from the store that was in the grounds of Aynho Park House. The Royal Army Service Corp provided the transport and the Pioneer Corp (later to become the Royal Pioneer Corps) provided the Labour. All this activity was overseen by the traffic officers whose office was next door to our living room in the Pub.

After a couple of days I joined the girls on the way to the village school. A small ‘Bedford’ coach would stop at the top of the station steps to pick us up, and I met the teacher Miss Govier. This was my introduction to village life. It was good to have a regular routine of schooling, as during the blitz it was a hit and miss affair as to whether schools would be open or not. As we were so far away from the village the girls and I would take our lunches with us and eat them in the classroom or sit in the playground if the weather was good enough. There were three farms in the village as I remember, the Abernethy’s, Oakey’s, and Joe Watts, also Mr. Belcher at Nell Bridge Farm. It was a wonderful experience for me with the other children. We had to help farmers at busy times doing various tasks like crawling along the furrows picking up and putting potatoes into baskets. Another task was chopping up mangle wurzels. My greatest thrill was helping Mr. Watts harvesting on fields outside the village. It was a thrill working on the threshing machine, which was driven by a steam engine and all the activity going on around. Men pushing the stooks on to the top of the machine with pitch forks to men on top who were cutting them and feeding into to the thresher. At the end of the day Mr. Watts sat me on top of one of a pair of cart horses and said “take ‘em home boy” and left me in charge of these two great animals who actually took me all the way back to the village and straight into the yard (which in those days

was at the rear of the Cartwright Arms) to the water trough. In that yard was a cart axle with the wheels on which we used to ride on with the yard being on a slope. We used to spend a lot of time on the Butts watching the soldiers playing football or on hot summers days lying under the big trees on the hillock. The girls friend, Sybil Humphris was a regular companion, we also used to visit Ted Humphris through a wicket gate in the estate wall that led to the greenhouses that were built against the kitchen garden wall. He used to be pleased to show us his wonderful orchids, many of which he had cross-breed himself. It was at one of these visits that he told us that he had been given the running of the garden and showed us around it.

Another visit we used to pay was to Anita and Milson Westbury who lived in the gate house at the cross roads, although we were not allowed to go in too far as it was guarded by the Army. I think that their Dad was the gamekeeper as was his Father before him. In the end house at the station lived Mrs. Meadows, and beyond her house was called the 'Brick Yard' on which she kept chickens, free range of course. She used to get us to look for eggs, and she always gave us some as our reward. Mrs Meadows's son lived in Birmingham and he used to visit her some weekends with his wife and daughter Muriel, on a motorbike and sidecar. Muriel was older than us and therefore we used to look forward to her visits to tell us all her latest news.

Living in the Great Western Arms was very interesting. Although the soldiers working in the sidings were not allowed in, on hot days some would come round the back and drink water from the pump in the yard. Saturday nights would be busy and we used to listen out for the regular singsong. A favourite song would be about the nightingale that sang in the "Valley Below". Sunday lunch times was also busy- Mr. Belcher from Nell Bridge Farm would sometimes arrive on horse back to join the regulars, he would secure the horse to the railings around the Pub and we used to make a fuss of it. Mrs Howe owned a cow, which she kept in the field on the village side of the top line bridge, and it became my job to go and fetch her in for milking. This was fine until the time that instead of turning down into the station area; she trotted off over the canal bridge towards Clifton. I ran down to get my bike and caught her up and headed her back, I was told afterwards that she had got the 'Gadd' and was looking for the bull down the road. The girl's Dad used to milk her and of course, when I tried she kicked the bucket over.

We used to go to Sunday school and the teacher was a Miss Wright. She was a very dedicated person. I think the Vicar was Mr. Banham.

My Cousin, who used to work with her father in his shop and on the stall in Banbury market, came to live in the village to do war work in a factory in Banbury that they used to call 'The Ally'. During her stay she met and married the 'Girls' Uncle Reg who was in the air force at the time. I was a pageboy on that occasion. During the summer of 1941 we started hearing a strange sounding aircraft high in the sky over the village, and according to the stories that began circulating it was a secret aircraft on test at Upper Heyford. This was confirmed much latter to be a fighter plane fitted with a Frank Whittle engine.

We had another encounter with a German bomber. My Dad had come to see us, he was a London bus driver and also in the Home Guard. On this occasion we had gone into Banbury on a bus, we were on the top deck and were actually in the town centre when this bomber, at roof top height, flew right over the top of us. We got down on the floor for safety; it was so low we could see the crew in the cockpit. We then heard loud explosions and later found out that they had hit the gas works killing some of the workers.

We soon became accustomed to village life. My Mother got a part time job helping a Mrs. Patterson who lived at No. 1, at the start of the Cartwright Arms terrace. This was good for me as I could join her for lunch on school days. The village shop was in the square, run by Mrs. Eaton and her son John. The post office was the house on the left, half way up the path to the school, with steps up to the door.

Apart from the Army at the petrol store and the activity at Upper Heyford airfield we were not much affected by the war at this time, although my Mother had a bad experience walking up to the village on one occasion. She became aware of an aircraft, which she could see was a bomber coming up from the airfield in the distance and as she was watching it just fell to the ground out of her sight creating a huge explosion. This experience upset her very much.

At the beginning of the summer holidays in 1942 I said farewell to Miss Govier, as I was then eleven years old, and prepared for the next term at Kings Sutton School. The same bus took us there; Ceenie and I were the same age so we could still travel together. It was not long after starting at the new school that we had a letter

from my Father telling us that our Anderson air raid shelter had been re-erected and that we could now return home. I was very sad to leave the friends I had made and all the kind people who were our friends at the Apricot Village.

Arnold (Bill) Pyatt.