

A
Village
Remembers

As told to pupils of Gamlingay Village College
by senior citizens



£1

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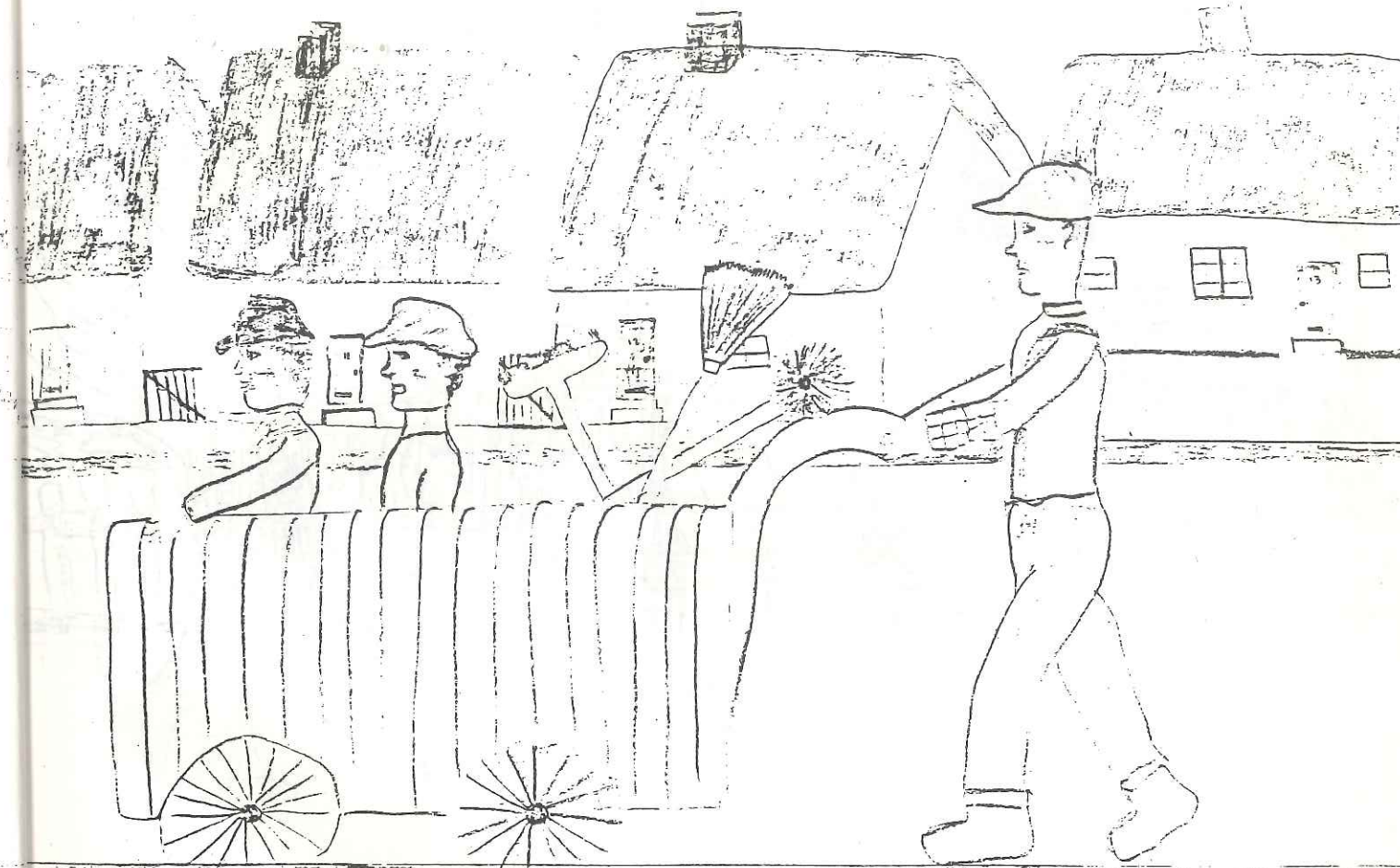
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During the Spring Term of 1990 a party of pupils from Gamlingay Village College set out armed with cassette players. Their mission was to find out what life was like during World War Two. They talked to villagers about their experiences and this booklet is the result of their endeavours.

INTRODUCTION

Take a walk in Gamlingay in 1938. Cattle are grazing in the field where the Village College now stands. Hens are scratching in the dry earth. A carrot washer is churning in the spring water at the bottom of the field.

On your way into the village you pass sheep grazing in the meadow where Charnocks Close now stands. On reaching Church Street, you see pony traps making milk deliveries from one of the Gamlingay farms and a hand cart delivering bread from one of the three village bakeries. The village roadsweeper is busy at work and is accompanied by two little boys who are enjoying a ride around the village in his cart. Dodging these few vehicles and jostling for space with them on the road, are children playing with hoops and whips and tops.



A Ride in the Dust Cart

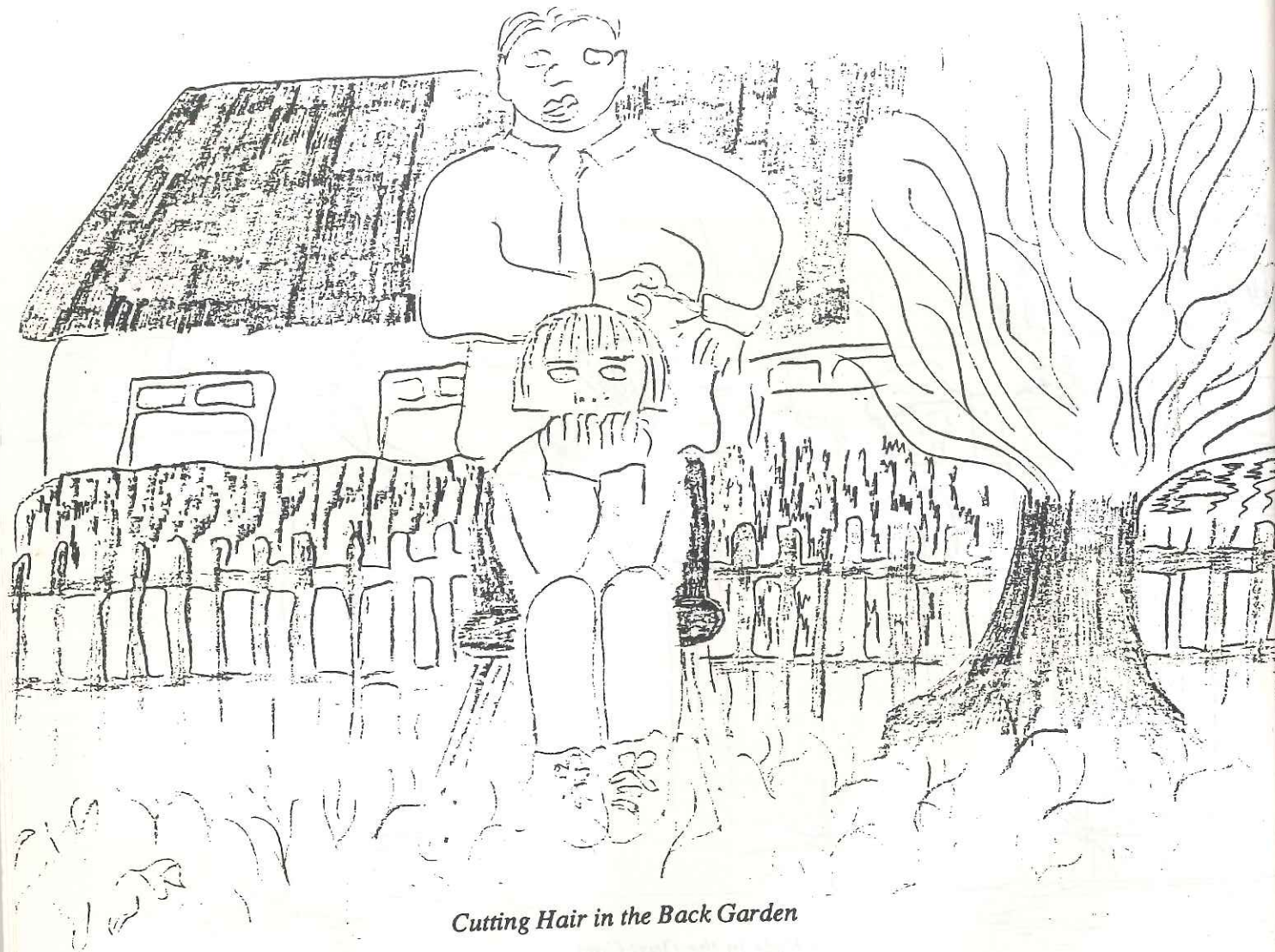
Looking towards the church you see Mr Housden's donkey grazing in the field opposite and the village blacksmith busy in his forge on the corner of Stocks Lane. As you walk further into the village you see bullocks prancing in their pens along Avenell's Walk, you pass sweet shops, the post office, newsagents, undertakers and some of the fourteen pubs. At the crossroads, where the bank now stands, you will see Pete Knibbs' farm surrounded by clucking hens, grazing cows and a kitchen garden.

Time for a haircut gentlemen? Then visit Fowler's newsagents for a 'short back and sides'. Or, for ladies, perhaps a visit to Miss Minny's (where Chapman's now stands) for a perm. A haircut for the children? Then a gentleman will bike from Potton and cut their hair in the garden, if the weather permits. He'll also tune your piano and insist on staying to lunch!

1924

What about entertainment and facilities in the village? For adults there is a variety of activities. There is a dance every Friday at the Conservative Club and one also in the Church Hall on a Wednesday. There is an Old Time Dance once a week at the Women's Institute Hut.

If you prefer to go further afield, then Bedford and Cambridge are within easy reach by train. There is a special train to Cambridge for the Midsummer Fayre and then later in the year, an annual trip to Hunstanton when families board the train laden with buckets and spades.



Cutting Hair in the Back Garden

Closer to home, the girls can be found round at Miss Orlebar's for Brownies and Guides and in the depths of winter the children will be skating on the frozen pond at Spittlepit.

Bicycles are popular in the village. The shop on Honey Hill supplies most of these.

If you wish to travel by bus, then Mr Bartle of Potton offers a good service. For ninepence return he will pick you up in Gamlingay, take you to the pictures in Biggleswade, take you home after the show (delivered directly to your doorstep) having stopped for fish and chips on the way back!

A picture of an idyllic Gamlingay where onions are stored in lofts, potatoes in disused chapels and rickyards abound?

Into this peaceful scene intrudes the sounds of buckets clanging heavily as water is collected from the village wells, and, at dead of night, 'Tweedie' steals into your garden bringing his barrow with him and leaves wheeling a large full bucket.

Along came 1939 and with it the Second World War. How was this to change the lives of the people of Gamlingay?



Bartle's Bus

THE GERMAN SOLDIER

In the spring of 1990, Karl Heinz Probst, a German Soldier who was made a prisoner of war in 1944 and who subsequently spent some time in Gamlingay (where he was known to the local people as Johnny) visited us at Gamlingay Village College.

He told us his story:

It is a long time ago, forty-one years and nine months since I left Woodbury Park to return to Germany.

Last Friday evening, I arrived at Sandy Railway Station. I came from King's Cross and I remembered the line well. When I left the train and looked around, I must say, I was amazed to see how Sandy had developed. The same I could say about Everton, Biggleswade and Gamlingay.

How did it happen that after such a long time I would return to a place where I had spent three years of my life as a prisoner of war? I lived only 400 metres from the Berlin Wall, which made it impossible to go to relatives or friends in West Germany or France or even England. When the wall came down, my friends in Gamlingay wrote to me and invited me to stay with them. There is one line in that letter that I shall always remember. It is, "We have never forgotten you".

How did I get to be in Gamlingay on 8th August 1945? As an eighteen year old boy I had to join the German army. After a short training, I was transferred to Normandy. Those were the days when the commanding officers of the German army expected the opening up of the second front. D-Day was expected but nobody knew where the landing would take place. At this time I was stationed near Calais and I remember on clear days I could see the white cliffs of Dover. On the 6th June, D-Day started and on 16th June, the German army launched their attack on London.

On 27th August 1944 I was wounded, and some days later I was taken prisoner.

I had started learning English in 1938 and was familiar with many aspects of life in England. I'd read about London. Buckingham Palace, Trafalgar Square, Eton College, Harrow were familiar names to me.

When I was wounded, I was able to express myself in English. I will never forget the words of the doctor, he said, "You are lucky, boy, everything will be O.K." I was then transferred to Liverpool and from there to South Wales. On the 8th August 1945 I was transferred to Gamlingay. We arrived shortly after midnight at Gamlingay Station and were then taken by lorries to Woodbury Camp.

On 9th August I got up very early. An English Commanding Officer came along. I greeted him, "Good morning, Sir". He asked if I spoke English. When I replied that I did, he said, "Then you are my interpreter."

This event altered my life. I now had a privileged position. My job was to accompany the Commanding Officer when he visited the farms and to translate for him.

In 1945 many British men were in the army and so there was a demand for landworkers. Thus the prisoners of war were set to work on the land.

I was able to meet many people in Gamlingay and the surrounding area. I met many people who showed sympathy and they became my friends. It was with regret that in 1948 I left Gamlingay to return to Germany.

IN THE SAME BOAT

During the war I lived at Egham in Surrey. We didn't have many of the larger bombs dropped on us, but we had loads of the ones that set light to everything; the incendiary bombs. It was horrifying at times.

I remember the time when London was set alight - the sky was alight although we were about seventeen miles from London.

The doodlebugs came later. They used to follow in lanes so you knew when you were more or less safe. You just watched them go "putting" along silently, until they cut out. You could see them in the distance and when the engine cut out you knew they were going to drop and that was it. There were rumours going around about a pilotless aircraft. Nobody would believe them but of course it was true.

When the V2s came along they made a tremendous blast. I remember going out into my garden during a raid on London and I felt the earth shaking under me.

Of course, we all had to blackout our windows. To begin with this was dreadful. No-one had any blackout material; people just didn't have dark curtains. To start off with we used to have to put black paper all over the windows permanently. It was really dreary, it made things seem miserable. This went on for some time and then gradually blackout material started being available in the shops. This was much better. I've still got some of this green material lying around, even now. Since the war ended I haven't shut my bedroom curtains for the sheer joy of not having to black the windows out.

During the war you somehow lived from day to day and you lived quite ordinary lives. You just got on with your chores and your shopping. You met your friends - it was quite a friendly time - and everybody helped everyone else. There were shops where you could exchange children's clothing and there were restaurants - National Restaurants I think they were called - where you could get a cheap meal.

There was very little fruit available. If you had a child and there were any bananas about, you were given one banana for each child. We all grew our own vegetables - they opened up fields for this.

During the war the Americans sent us food. I remember passing a shop loaded up with the stuff called 'Spam'. When I read the list of ingredients on the cans I was horrified, all those chemical names! It was good stuff though, but the best stuff of all was the sausagemeat sent by the Americans. It was absolutely fabulous. It was real minced pork and when it was cooked there used to be a thick layer of lard across the top. Of course fat being rationed, this lard was an absolute bonus. We used to make beautiful pies using the lard for making the pastry and the sausagemeat for the filling.

We had some lovely dinners! Tinned salmon was very cheap and we usually made pies with this. We also made a delicious vegetable pie, using all sorts of vegetables and mixing them in an Oxo gravy. I still make this pie today! I remember going to a friend's house. She had baked a sponge and the filling was a banana filling. It turned out it was parsnip mixed with banana flavouring. It tasted all right though!

I've been rather pleased that I started my cooking during the war, because it always made me use my imagination. Even now, I rarely follow a recipe absolutely to the letter!

At the beginning of the war I was asked to look after two evacuees. Their father was a Russian Jew and I think their life in London had been rather different to the life with me in Surrey. They appeared never to have had a cooked meal like an apple pie or a baked potato. I think all they lived on were things you could bring home in a basin from the corner shop like jellied eels.

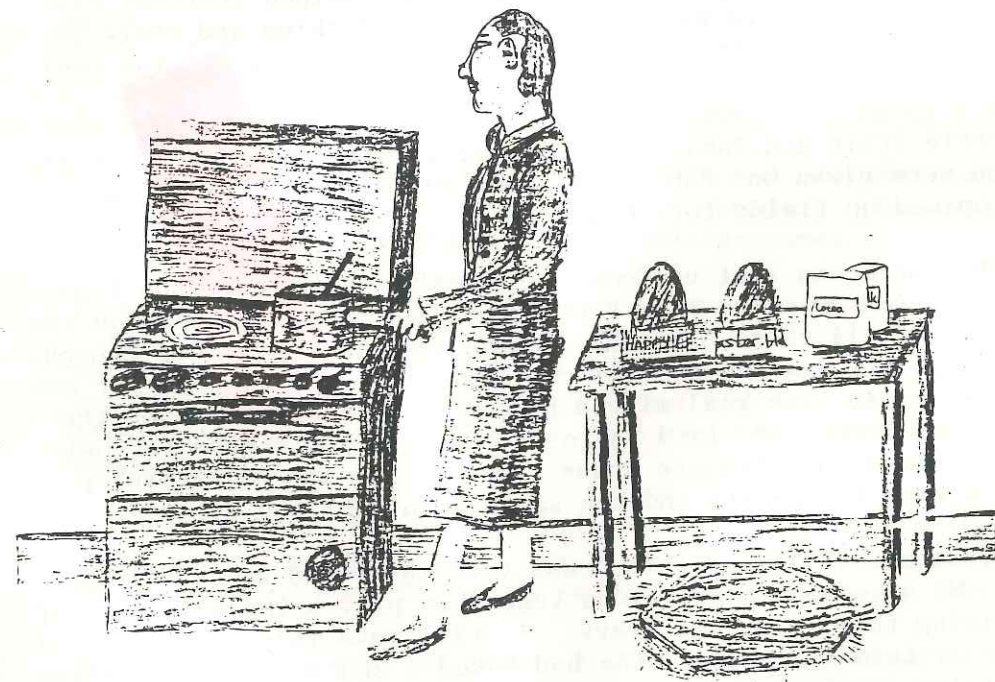
Unfortunately, both the children had head lice. There was always a rush at the chemist's. Everyone was rushing to get special soaps and shampoos. Anyway, we finally got the girl cleared. Her mother suggested that it was a waste of time cleaning the children's heads, because as soon as they went back to school again, they'd be in the same condition!

The father (who hardly spoke English) used to rent a car and pile as many people, relations, brothers, sisters and their boyfriends, as many as they could get in there, and then he used to come and deposit himself in our household for the Sunday. So it was a question of feeding him and the five thousand at the same time!

After several weeks of coming down to see us, London was becoming quiet and they came and collected the children and took them back. I didn't see them again.

A little while after the Jewish children left, I was asked to billet three little Catholic girls, Patricia, Maureen and Sheila. They stayed with me until my own son was born.

I remember making Easter Eggs for them. In my rations I got a tin of baby milk, a tin of cocoa and a tin of condensed milk. I mixed this all together and then rolled them into balls. They were lovely!



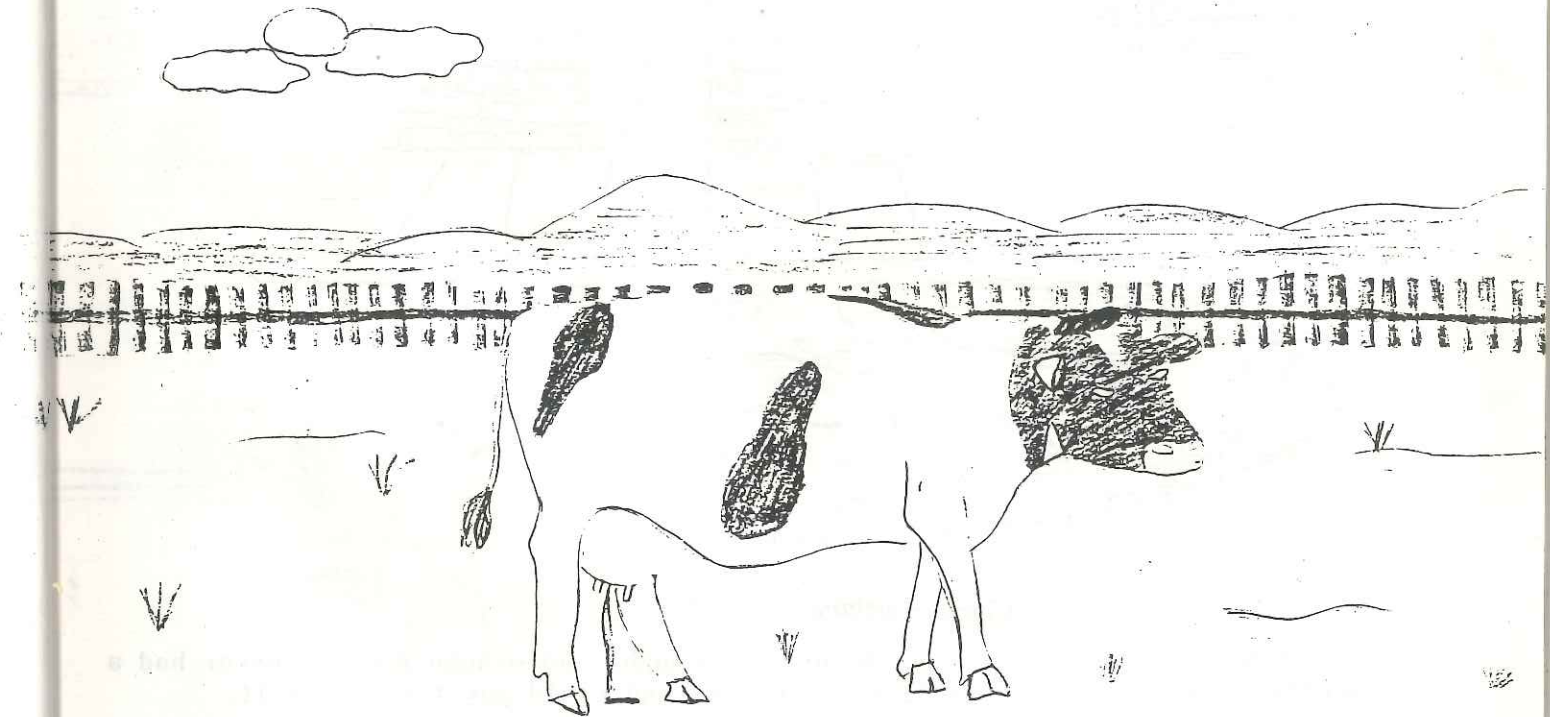
Making Easter Eggs

In winter we all borrowed skates and went skating on the frozen ponds. In summer we roamed the meadows around Runnymede. One day, as we were walking towards the river, one of the sisters noticed a cow 'spending a penny'. "Auntie, Auntie," she said, "is that milk?"

I remember Maureen, who was then aged six, particularly well. Whenever she walked forwards she was always looking behind her. One day she walked into a lamp-post and had an awful cut above her eyebrow. I took her to the doctor and he stitched it. He told us it was just as well we came and had it stitched as she would have had a scar. When we got home Maureen said, "I wish he hadn't stitched it because when I'm a saint I could have been known as 'Saint Maureen with the Scar'."

It was a difficult time. It was especially difficult for the evacuees who had to get used to strange families and for the families themselves, who were often not used to small children who could, at times, be tearaways.

It was a hard time but everyone was in the same boat. Everyone was rationed in the same way, there was no thinking that someone else was better off than you. I don't think I ever felt deprived of anything at all. There was a shortage of things, but people made use of the stuff that they did have and I think in the long run, it was better for you. I don't think hardships are bad for you, they put you on your mettle.



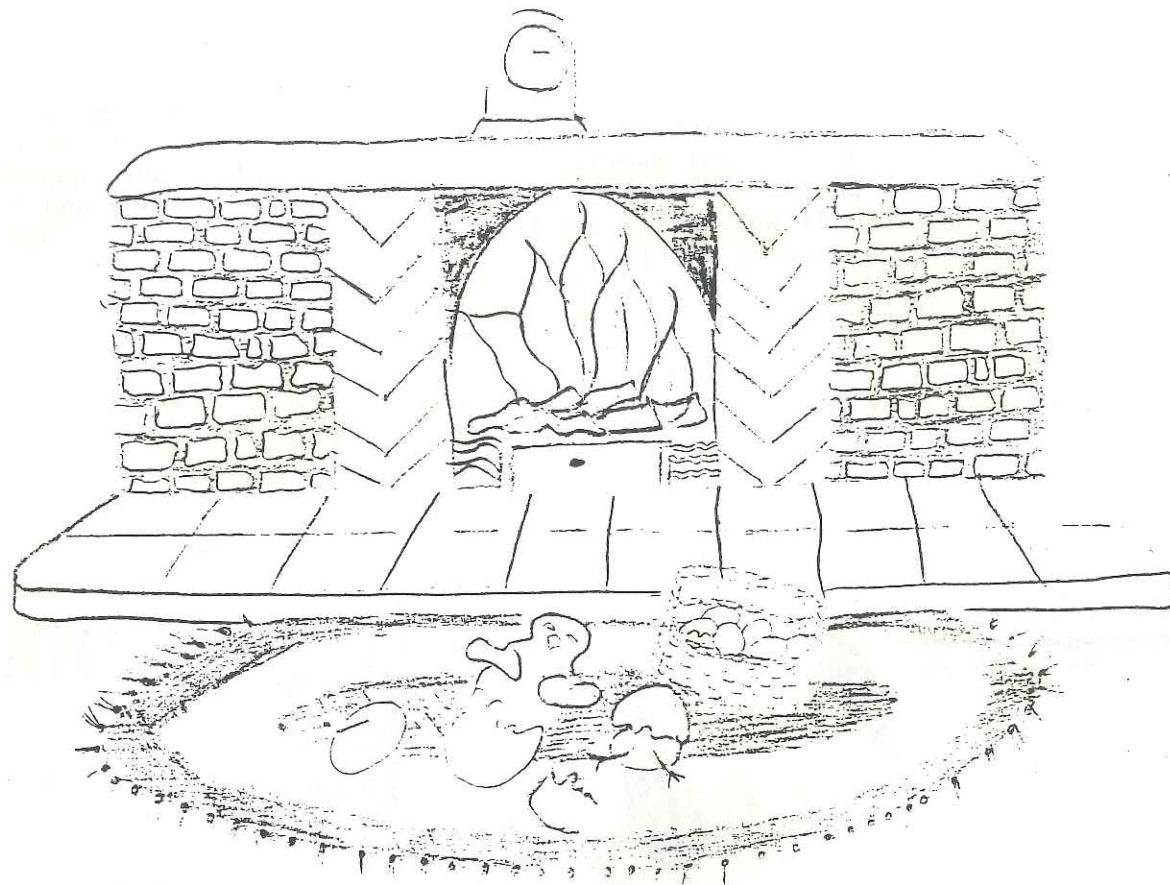
"Auntie, is that milk?"

LADS DON'T CHANGE

I was twelve and in my last year at Gamlingay School when war broke out.

Life was hard in those far off days. I had to fetch milk for my mother before school began. Three miles I had to walk! At lunchtime I had to run home - we lived on the Potton Road in Gamlingay then - and then run all the way to Potton where my dad worked, deliver his dinner and run back ready for afternoon school at 2.00pm. We must have been fit in those days!

We kept pigs and chickens. We used to put the eggs by the fire and watch the tiny chickens hatch, one by one. We had a good sized garden and grew lots of vegetables - potatoes, cabbages, sprouts, parsnips and carrots. I remember the taste of raw carrot, freshly dug.



Chicks Hatching by the Fire

We didn't have money for luxuries though. No orange pop! I never had a bottle of ginger beer until I went to work and could pay for it myself.

I started working when I was twelve years old. I worked from seven in the morning until six in the evening. And all for a shilling a week! Three of us there were, two men and me, milked forty cows we did between us, all by hand! There were no machines then mind. I remember what it felt like to have frozen fingers at 7 o'clock on a dark morning in midwinter. Aye and they'd stay frozen all day too!

Yes, life in Gamlingay carried on much the same during the war. There were three or four good football teams in the village, we went for bicycle rides, had running races at Whitsun and played marbles. Used to pay marbles all the way to school we did and back again. Turning our heels round and round in the soft tarmac on hot summer days - we must have made nigh on fifty holes up Mill Street.

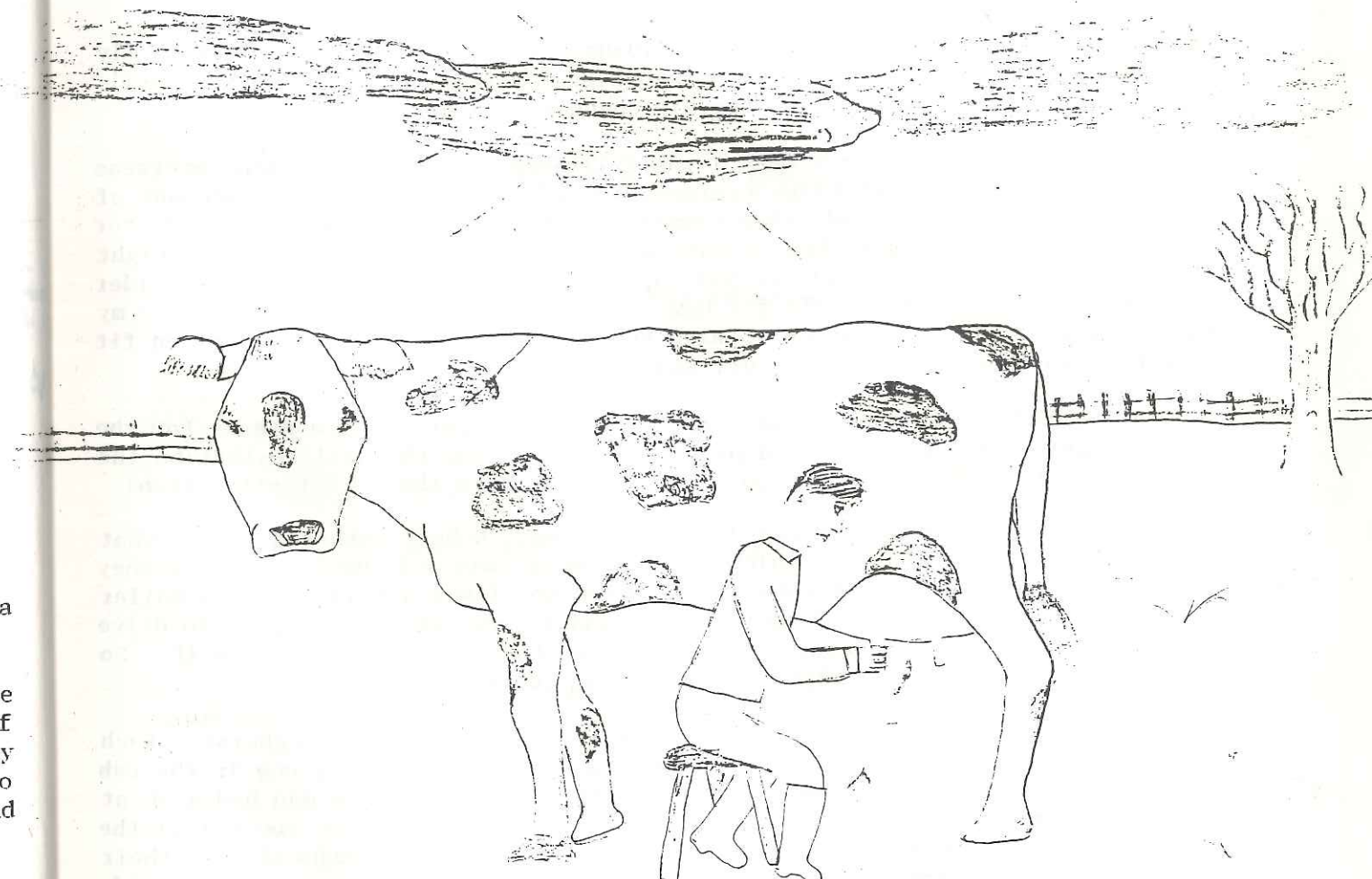
Mind you, boys don't alter much. We were just as wicked in those days. As I said, I used to live along Potton Road, not far from the railway line. One day a couple of lads climbed over the fence and went down to the railway line. They got hold of one of the sleepers - six foot wide it was and mighty heavy! Anyway, they dragged this sleeper right onto the railway line. In broad daylight this was! It was fortunate that a signalman going home for his lunch happened to see it or there would have been an almighty smash!

Yes, lads don't change! I remember the lamplighter, he used to come round at 10 o'clock every night to put out the street lights. Well, these two lads threw stones up at one of these lamps and broke it. There was a rumpus about that!

We had the Home Guard in Gamlingay. They had proper uniforms and all that. Used to wake us up at two o'clock in the morning on their manoeuvres.

I remember one day a bloke arrived home. He hadn't realized that there was a blackout, put all the lights on in the place, he did. Well, some German planes came over and blew the side of the house off!

Sadly, some of the men left the village never to return and some, who were prisoners of war and returned later, found it difficult to adjust to their life in Gamlingay again.



Milking Cows at 7 o'clock in the Morning

GETTING THROUGH

When I was a young man, I don't suppose I ever thought I'd move far from Gransden. I was working on the land, twelve hours a day, six days a week, for 3/6.

We sometimes had to work on Sundays too, because cattle and horses need looking after. But Sundays had never really been a day of rest - even when I was a lad it was two services and Sunday School for us children and a walk round the allotments with my mother as a treat! That's not as bad as it sounds, we got home-made sweets to keep us quiet in church.

When I was a young married man I lived in a little cottage in a row of four. There was a living room with cooking facilities in the corner and two bedrooms upstairs. Our little girl shared with us and the boy had his own room. We had no kitchen or bathroom and the toilet was down the garden - but that's too nasty to talk about! There was no gas or electricity and we had to cook in the oven beside the coal fire. At least that was better than at my mother's house; she had to cook everything on a pot hanging over the fire-place on a chain.

My wife's aunty lived next-door-but-one and she kept an eye on the children for us, if we went to a Whist Drive. Mostly we made our own fun, and there was Football and Cricket. I came from a big cricketing family; I remember one season when I was bowling at one end and my Dad was at the other.

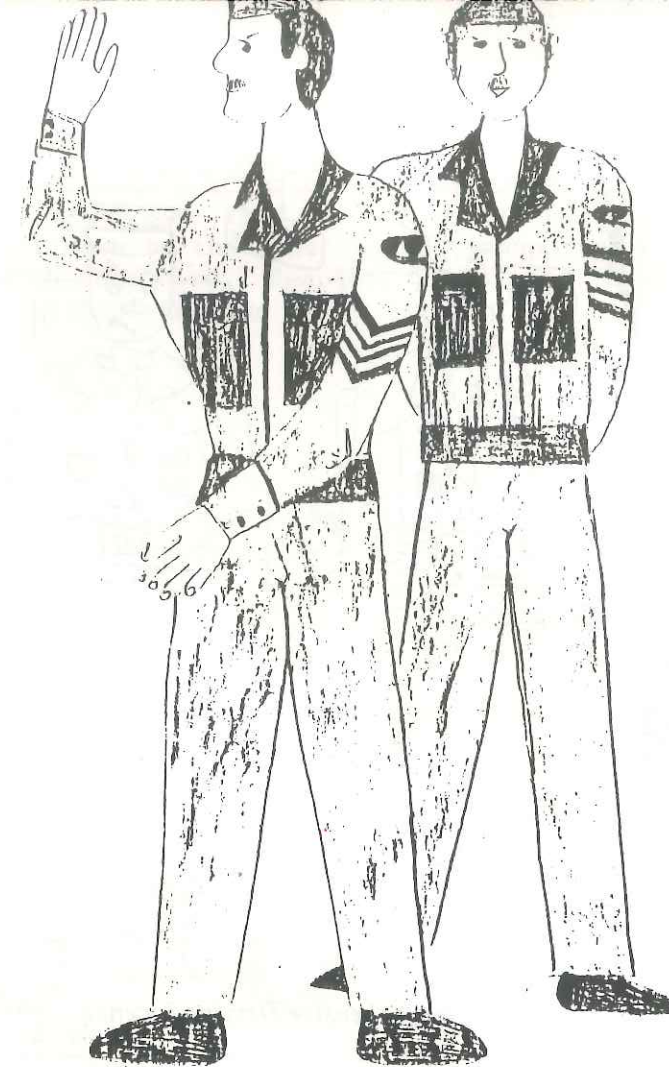
Things were changing a bit in the 1930s. For instance, I wasn't actually working on a farm in 1939, I was working for Bedfordshire County Council. But it was the war that brought the big changes.

I served as a lorry driver when I was called up. I didn't get sent overseas because you had to be A1 to go overseas and I was B2. That was on account of hammer toes. We called them hammer toes but I don't know what the doctor would call them. We got them because when we were children, there were eight of us in the family and we had to wear "hand-me-downs", so when my older brother's shoes got too small for him, they were handed down to me because my father wasn't in a position to keep buying new ones. They didn't often fit properly, so they made my toes curl under.

I was called up in 1941. I was sent to Blackpool for three months. For the first four weeks we did training, footdrill and things like that on the promenade. Half the town came out to watch - we were the latest attraction!

Then we had two months training driving lorries. Nobody bothered to ask what I'd done before the war, which as it happens, was driving lorries, so they sent me on this course. Before I was called up, I was driving a steam roller for Bedfordshire County Council and I had a Comprehensive Licence to drive anything on the road. No matter what went on the road, I could drive it. So the Army sent me up to Blackpool on a driving course!

They had quite a lot of instructors there; mine was Henry Longhurst. Each instructor used to take four to six men in a lorry at a time, one in the cab with him and the rest bumping about in the back. Each man had a go at driving then Henry Longhurst called for the next one. You could feel the tension as the four or five men in the back waited anxiously for their driving lesson. Each time he called, I nudged the chap next to me and said, "Go on mate, you go next."



Drilling at Blackpool

Of course, with my Comprehensive Licence, I could already drive, but I never told him anything at all. I decided to see how long it took him to find out. After I'd nudged everyone into having a go, there was only me left.

"Private Medlock!" the voice echoed round the lorry. "Medlock!" the voice repeated.

"Coming, Sir," said I.

Now it was my turn to climb into the cab with the instructor. I'll always remember him as he sat on the driving seat.

"I'll just show you the gears," he said, "and take you a little way and change from one gear to another." I'd got my Comprehensive Licence in my pocket, but I never told him anything. We drove along Blackpool seafront and then up on the top street. Finally, the truck came to a stand-still.

"I hope you've been taking in everything I have said and demonstrated in this lesson," said my instructor. "Now Medlock, are you confident to have a go?"

"I think so, Sir."



The Comprehensive Driving Licence

He pulled over and we swapped seats; I started off on my test. I went into first gear, second gear, third gear, top gear. I suppose we must have gone a mile to a mile and a half down the road when he said, "Pull to the side of the road!" I could tell by the tone of his voice and the look on his face that he was none too pleased. I pulled in as instructed.

"Have you ever driven before?"

With a smug look on my face, I reached across to my left-hand pocket. I pulled out my wallet, took out a little card and showed it to the instructor. The card said,

COMPREHENSIVE DRIVING LICENCE

and in smaller letters underneath:

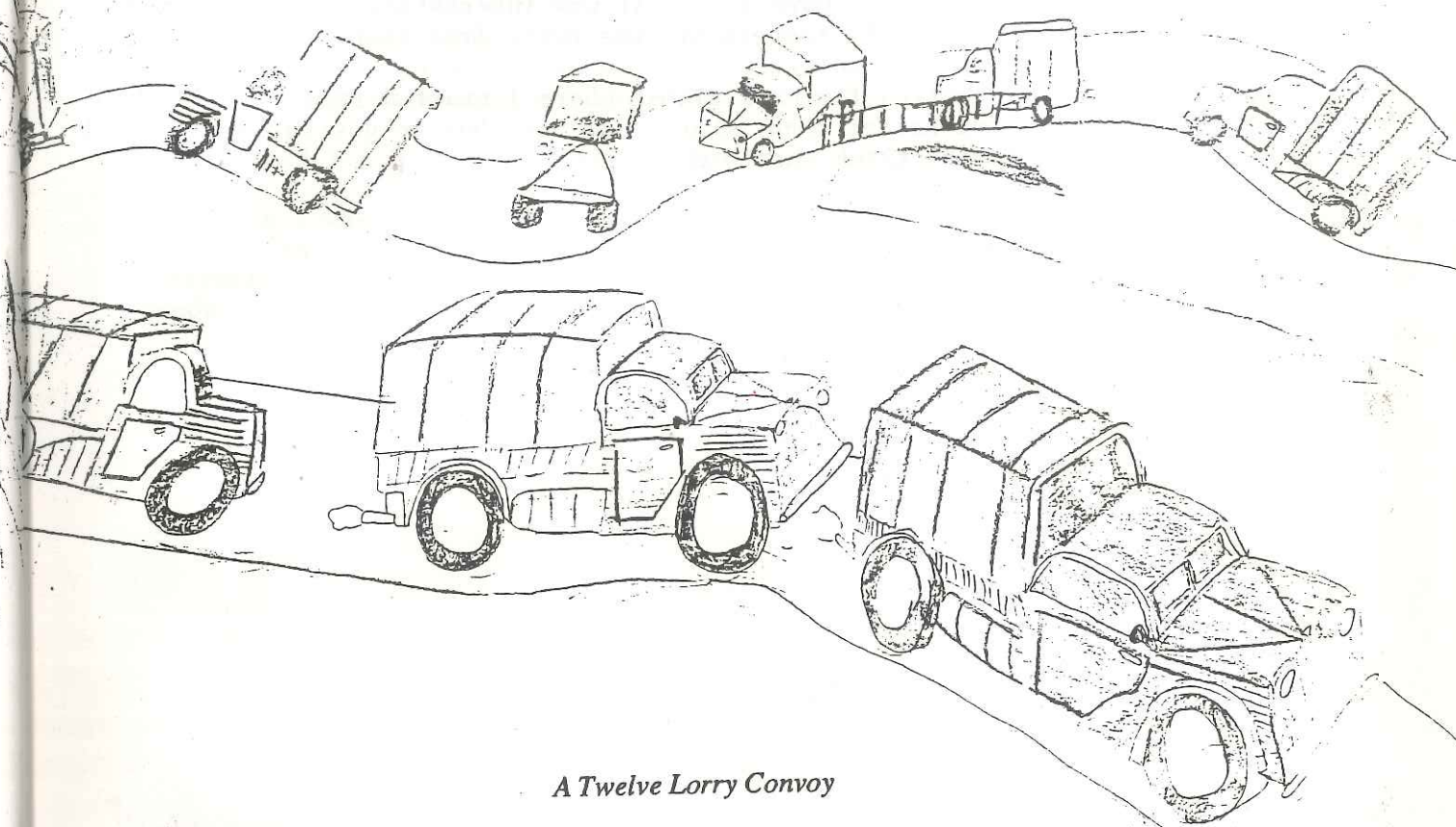
The holder of this card is permitted
to drive any vehicle on the road.

I didn't say a word; I hadn't told him anything. He was furious.

"Get in the back!" he yelled, "I don't ever want to see you again!"

And that was my first experience of being called up in the Army.

They were short of drivers, so once he got over his temper, I got my own lorry. We never knew where we were going from one day to the next - we were part of what they call a Mobile Unit. That's a unit that can move from place to place with its own equipment and men - chefs and all. Some of the units in the Royal Artillery hadn't got their own transport and they called on us when they had to be moved. We also carried ammunition from different dumps for them. We took it down to the coast to be transported over to France and we did the same with tractors, Beaufort guns and heavy artillery. I travelled from the north of England to as far south as you can get on convoy work.



A Twelve Lorry Convoy

We didn't know where we were going from one day to the next. We'd get to a new place and as soon as we got there, they'd say, "Sorry mate, you've got to move on." When we were on convoy duty they packed up sandwiches for us, so we missed our hot meals. The army food was usually good, but sometimes you got to a place where you could do the chef's job better yourself.

Even on the darkest nights when the Jerries were bombing us, we had to keep going. As a unit we were very lucky, only one of my friends ever got killed. We saw more English than German bombs because we had to carry them to their destination on our lorries. We didn't have to handle the bombs ourselves because the Sappers (they were the men who used to dig trenches, but now they seem to do all sorts) loaded and unloaded them for us. We just had to deliver them.

If we moved anything in daylight it was all right but after it got dark that was another matter. Because of the blackout, we weren't allowed to use headlights. There would probably be about twelve lorries in a convoy and the sergeant in charge was in the first one. He had the map and headlights of a sort. I say "of a sort" because he had to cover his headlights with a shield with little slits in so that not much light showed through. We didn't have headlights at all - all we had to go on were little red lights on the back of the lorry in front. We daren't so much as blink or the man in front would turn a corner and you'd missed him. And if you went wrong, everyone else behind would go wrong too. I shall never forget those little red lights.

Things changed a lot during the war and I didn't go back to Great Gransden. After the war I moved around a lot and worked in hotels. I worked my way up to become head-waiter and head wine-waiter; I didn't get as far as manager but I did very well. The only reason I came out was the money. We had to rely on the tips people gave you. We shouldn't have been able to live without them. Even at the Norfolk Hotel in Bournemouth - that was one of the biggest, it stands just off the square as you come up the hill - they only offered me 25/- a week. It was a meagre kind of living.

I had twenty-seven years in Bournemouth then I went to the cellophane factory in Bridgewater, in the processing department. I'd never done the job in my life but I was willing to have a go. It was interesting work, despite the fact that it was so hot; the temperature was never less than 90°F.

And now I'm in my eighties I'm back almost where I started from. When I look back, I think it was harder then, than it is now, but we got through, we had to. At any rate, I did, thank the Lord!

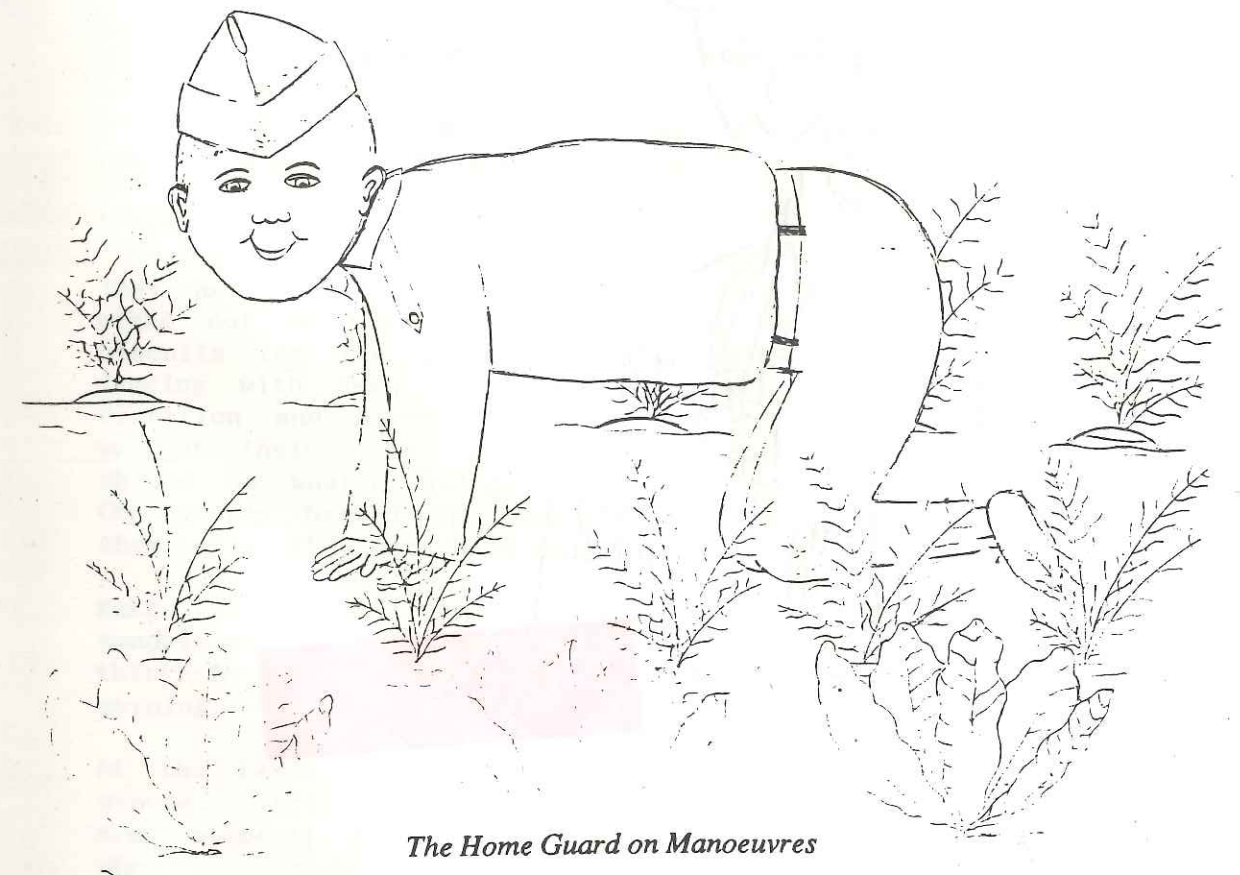
JUST MANOEUVRES AGAIN

It was a normal sort of day, cold, wet and miserable. We'd just come back from watching a few pictures at school. Somebody used to get a projector and hire a different film each week. Anyway, Dad was already in bed because when you were working on the land you had to be up at the crack of dawn. So we went in quietly and were just having a nice cup of cocoa in the kitchen, when we heard this funny noise outside.

Mum said not to worry, it was probably an old moggy. Somehow, I didn't think so, so I got an old torch and turned the hall light off. I opened the door and flashed the torch around the garden. That was no moggy! It was Jack Brown from two doors down. And he wasn't alone neither! There were about nineteen others, crawling on all fours around our vegetable patch. They had demolished our carrots, crushed our cucumbers and ruined our spuds. It was the Home Guard on manoeuvres again!

Jack seemed to be taking it all really seriously by the look on his face.

At first I was really angry. But I couldn't help seeing the funny side of it in the end. When he saw us watching him, he stood up and turned as red as a beetroot. We killed ourselves laughing. He said he was sorry about the spuds, so we invited him in for a cup of tea.



The Home Guard on Manoeuvres

THE IDEAS MAN

It was a Monday morning and we were buttering sandwiches - two hundred we had to do, with two knives and a slab of butter as hard as rock. Arthur softened the butter under the grill and Bill and I spread it on the bread.

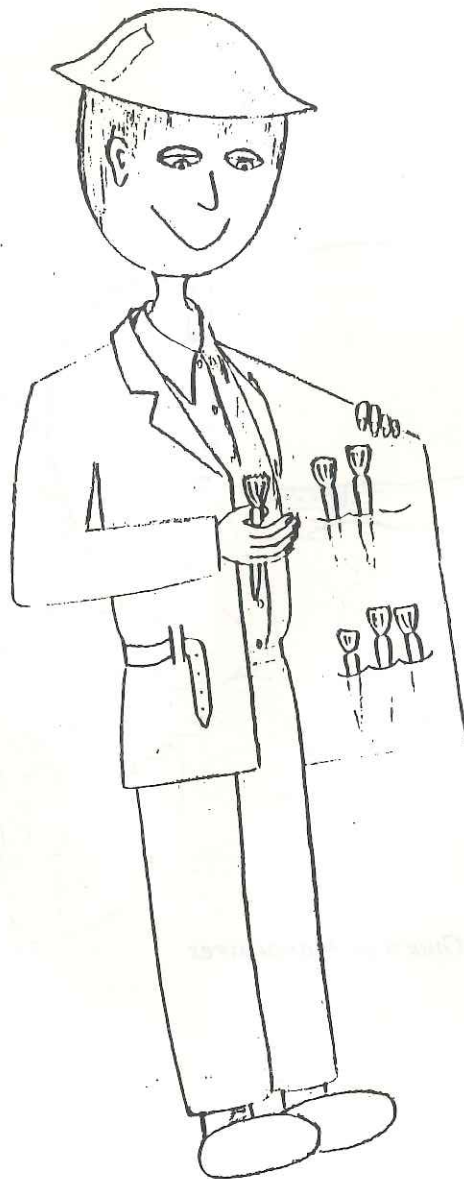
"Hard work, ent it Bill?"

"Yes, I'll say; take us all day, Fred."

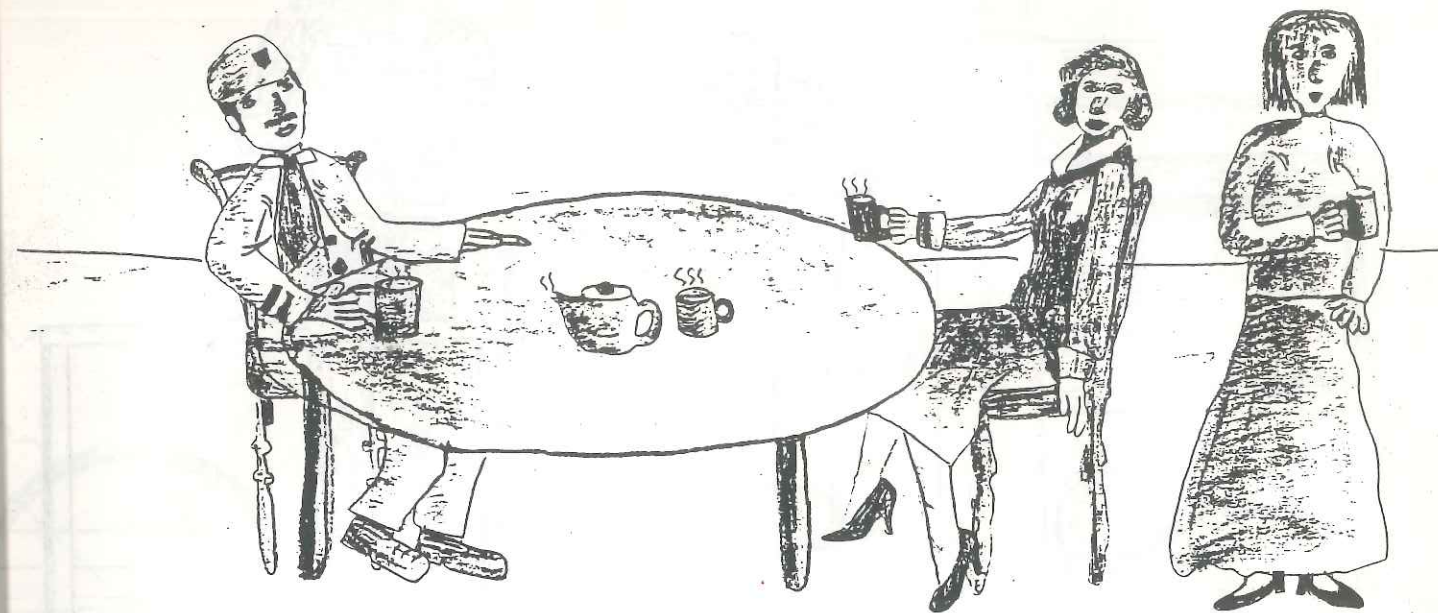
"It's as interesting as watching paint dry," said Arthur.

That gave us a good idea. Bill thought of it first; he was always getting good ideas. He said, if we melted the butter until it was runny, and got two paint brushes, we could paint it on the bread. The problem was, where to find two paint brushes.

"There are some in the paint store," said Arthur, "but that's always guarded."



Paintbrushes for the butter



Don't be too generous with the tea

"Anyway, we're going out with the girls tonight," Bill answered, "we can't go around pinching paint brushes."

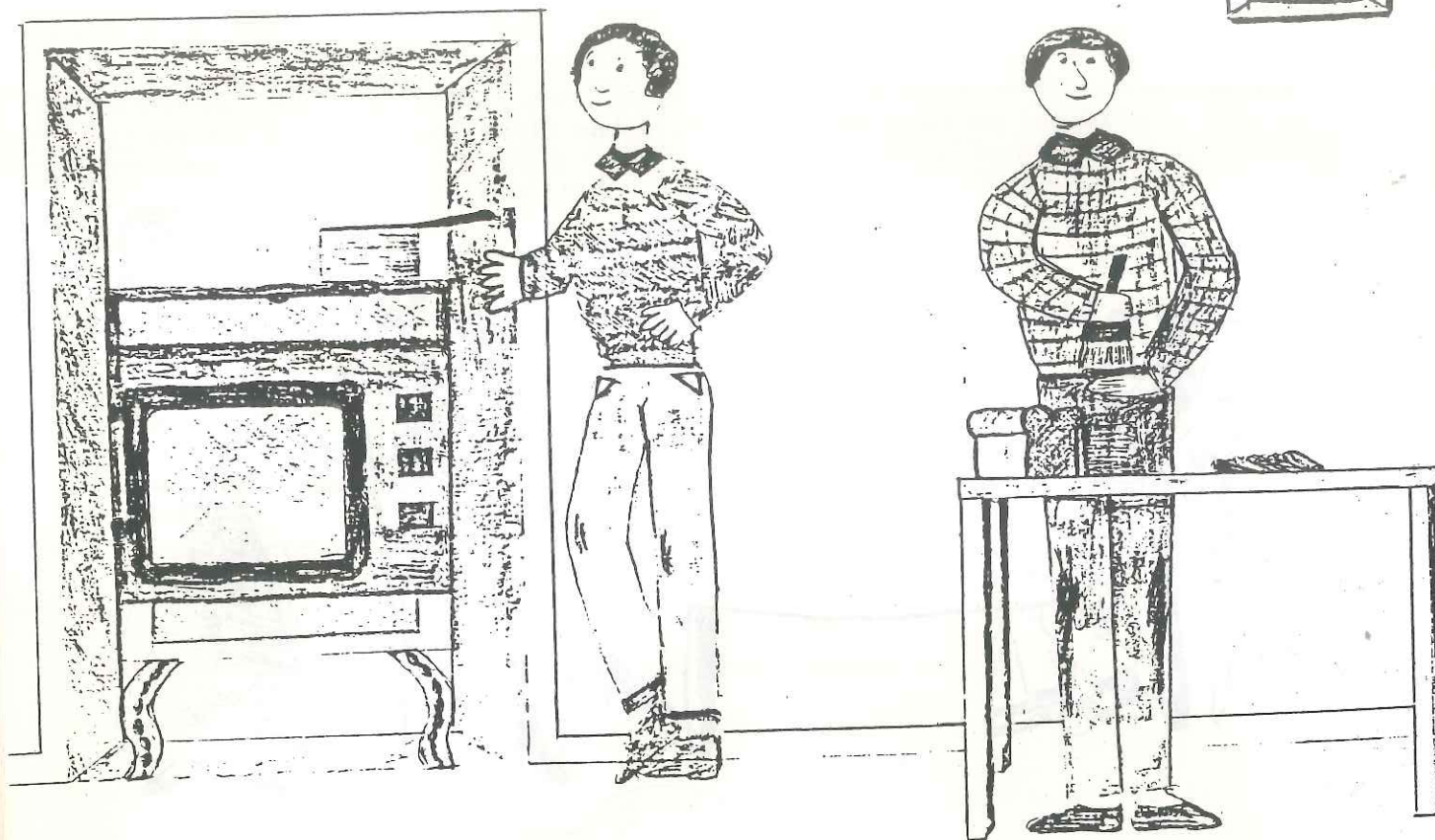
I didn't see why we couldn't do both.

They had the local dances at the Conservative Club. It was always a good night out but it didn't do to be too generous, buying cups of tea and biscuits for the girls. It was nearly time for the last waltz. I was dancing with Jean and Arthur had got Joyce. Bill saw Sally looking in his direction and moved out smartish! Arthur and I walked our girls home and as we got inside the camp, Bill was waiting for us. He pulled us over and showed us what he had got under his jacket. Two new paint brushes. He knew the guards brewed up cocoa at eleven o'clock and he had slipped in behind them whilst they were bending over the stove.

Next morning we tried the 'Bill Brown patented method' of buttering sandwiches. With paint brushes, we finished two hundred sandwiches in thirty-four minutes. We played cricket in the sunshine for the rest of the morning.

At the beginning of the war, we thought that Hitler would invade us at any minute. Will you believe it, they gave us bikes to escape on. They were army property but we used them to go down into the village to the dances and when we couldn't afford that, we bought a pint at the pub and made it last all evening.

On this night, we were sitting with a pint in front of us and no money in our pockets. Bill had another of his good ideas. He disappeared without saying anything, but he was back in half an hour with three pound notes in his hand. We had a really good night out, it was only when we got outside we realised what he had done. With two bikes between three of us, I wobbled home with Bill on my cross-bar.

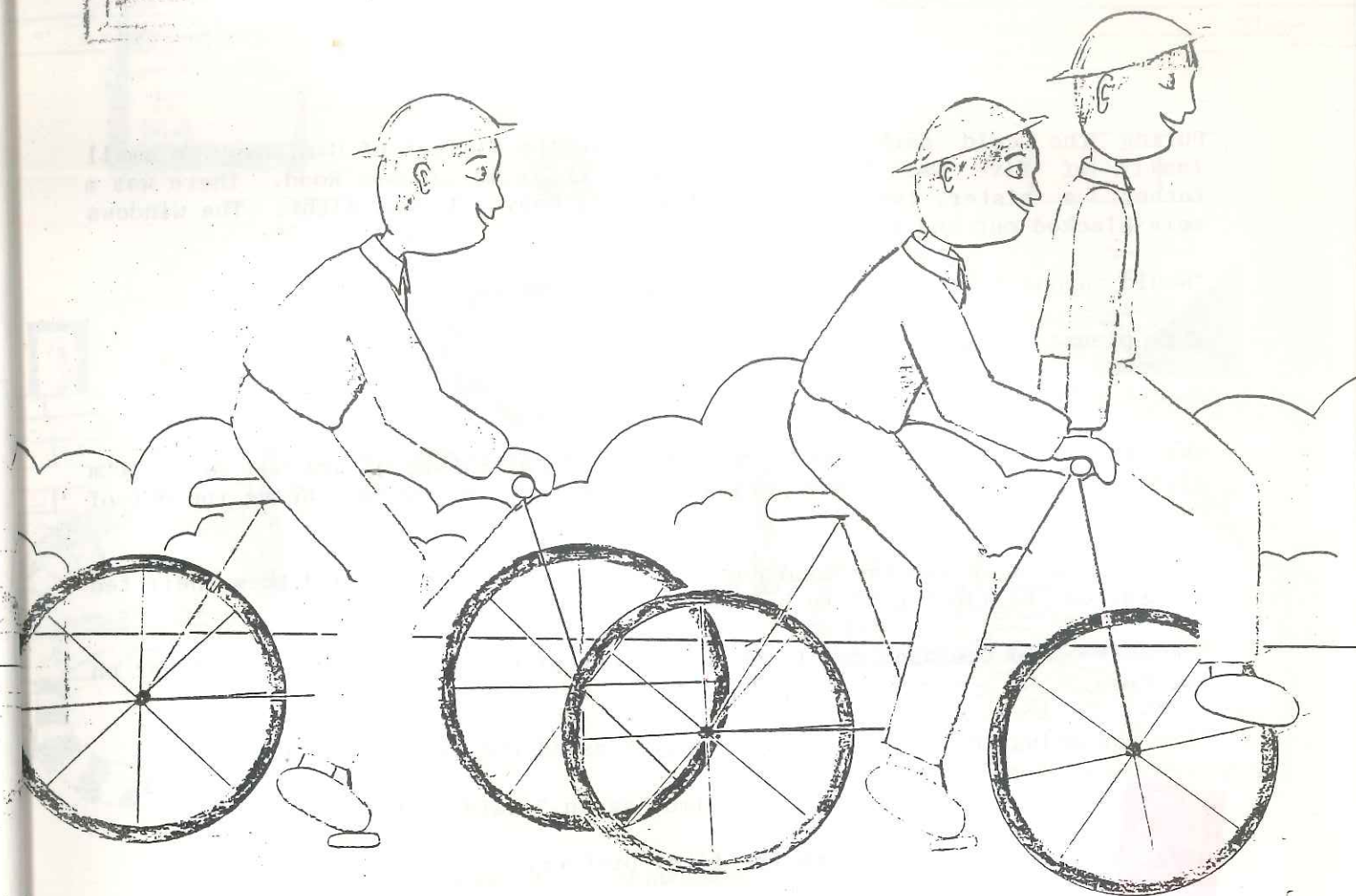


Painting butter on the bread

Next morning, Sergeant called a special parade, number one uniform and bikes.

"Brown, where's your bike?" yelled the Sergeant.

"Sorry Sir, I've sold it Sir," said Bill, looking him straight in the eye. The Sergeant shook with rage; he couldn't do anything about the bike, but Bill got ninety-six days in the 'glass house'. Bill's not always the one with great ideas.



Bikes for sale - only £3

During the cold dark years of the war in the village of Gamlingay, a small family of five were living in a council house in Cinques Road. There was a father, a sister, two brothers and a small baby. It was night. The windows were blacked out and the kettle was singing.

"Would anyone like a cup of tea?" asked the sister.

"Yes please," said the two brothers.

"Dad?" asked the sister.

"No thanks luv," said dad. Sister poured three cups of tea and said, "I'm afraid you'll have to have golden syrup in your tea again. We've run out of sugar."

"As long as it's sweet," said one of the brothers. She handed them their tea and sat on the floor next to her baby.

"Momma!" said the baby and laughed. Sister picked up the baby and put her on her knee.

"Are you going to the dance on Saturday?" asked the second brother.

"Yes, ... I'm going to dance with Simon again," said sister.

"I think you fan...", started the first brother.

"Listen," cut in dad. Everybody listened. They could hear an engine.

"DOODLEBUG!" shouted dad. Everyone dived for cover. Sister crawled under the heavy wooden table with baby, who started crying. Dad crouched behind the sofa, and the two brothers sat under the stairs.

"Shh," said sister, trying to comfort the baby.

"Waahhh!!!!" screamed the baby. The doodlebug got nearer and nearer until it passed over the village. A few minutes later they heard the engine stop and the doodlebug fell. Everyone froze in their hiding places. Suddenly the whole building shook. Pictures fell off the walls, ornaments crashed to the floor, chairs tumbled over and baby stopped crying. The cups toppled over spewing hot tea everywhere. Then everything went quiet. Dad got up, "You can come out now," he said. The two brothers and sister emerged from their hiding places, trembling with fear.

"I wonder where it landed," said one brother.

"I don't know, son," said dad. "I really don't know."

Next day their neighbours told them it had landed the other side of Bedford, and they never forgot the night of the doodlebug.



Sheltering Under the Table

DOODLEBUG

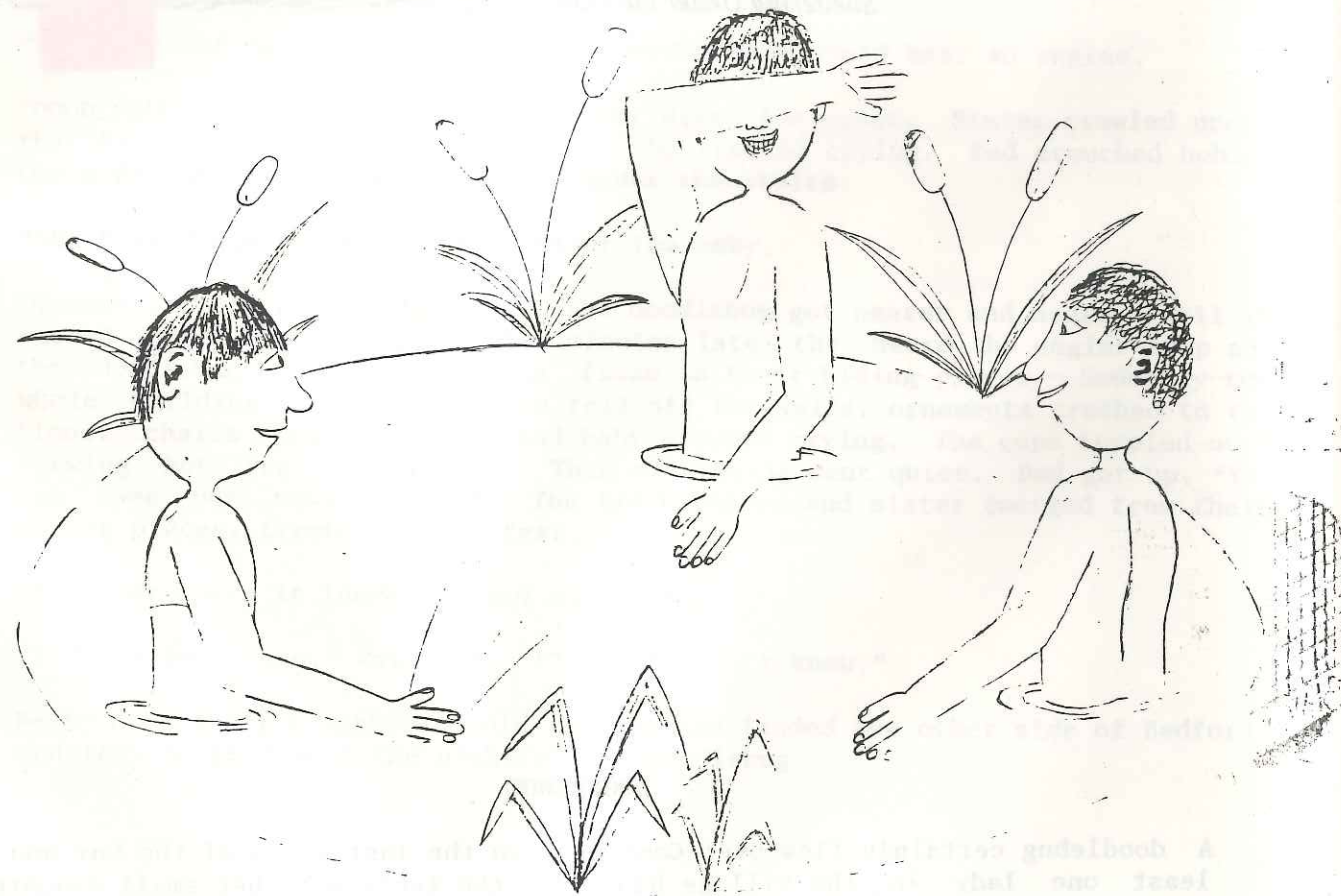
A doodlebug certainly flew over Gamlingay in the last years of the war and at least one lady in the village hid under the table with her small daughter. The rest, the writer has imagined.

THE CUCKOO DOCTOR

I'd just left school when the war started. These days you set off to work in new clothes, but I wore what my brother had thrown off. There wasn't much of a fashion anyway, until the end of the war. I got my first job at Papworth Industries, repairing Mosquito aeroplane wings. I got 14/- a week; it wasn't a bad job but the one thing I didn't like was waiting for the bus in the morning. They had a bus that picked us up at the cross because a lot of us from Gamlingay worked at Papworth Industries. If it was cold, we always seemed to be an hour late because they could never get the bus started.

Things weren't too bad at home at the beginning of the war. We lived in a three-bedroomed house with two living rooms, a barber's shop and a large garden. The food rationing didn't affect us very much. I never had a fancy breakfast. I never used to have cereal; we didn't have cornflakes nor things like that. Mostly I had bread and milk. And if it was not bread and milk, it was bread and butter with salt and pepper and hot water. Having a big garden helped. We kept chickens and pigs. We used to kill a pig and not have our bacon ration. We had rabbits too. I used to hate to come in and see a big brown pot on the table, knowing there was a rabbit inside it. I ate no end of rabbits in the war, but I didn't like doing it.

There wasn't much to do in the village in the evenings when we got home from work, but in the summer we used to go down to Miss Underwood's pond or the Brick Yard. We used to grab a piece of soap and a towel and have a swim and a wash at the same time. The village boys lived down the brick Yard, all summer.



Washing in Miss Underwood's Pond

If you lived in Gamlingay, it was all right for anybody not in the army but we did used to think about them and we raised a lot of money for them. In the evenings all the pubs used to have darts and dominoes competitions and sales. If anybody had got a spare ½lb of tea, they used to take it to whichever pub had a sale on that night. The money they raised went to buying food parcels to send to the local boys who were in the army.

Gamlingay wasn't really ready for the war in 1939. In fact, we didn't even have a proper air-raid siren. I can remember on the first day of war at about 12 O'clock, old Mr Empson, Bill Empson's father, who lived on the "Cross" put up a post with an old-fashioned klaxon horn on top. The A.R.P. didn't have a proper base either; it was at Maypole House and Mrs Sills was the first Warden. She took her corgi dog everywhere with her, even when she was on duty. He was a terror. The first time the siren went off, she marched up the street in her steel helmet and gas mask shouting, "Take cover! Take cover!" That was our first warning, but nobody took a bit of notice of her. The siren used to go off quite often, but we only ever had one bomb drop here and that was up the Heath Road, to the left. It dropped in the "Plantings", next to a cottage.

When the war started, I wasn't old enough to join up - I wasn't even old enough for the L.V.D. That was the Local Volunteer Defence Force; they called it that, before it became the Home Guard. However, I was allowed to be what they called a "runner", a sort of messenger. Each of us younger boys was sent to a patrol and every night, when the war started, they used to send out a detachment to each local road.



The Cuckoo Car

One night, we were posted out towards Cambridge, on a hill near Gransden. It was our job to stop everybody and search their papers and ask where they were going. This night, Dr Gastine came along. We all knew it was the local doctor because on the bottom of his car, he had a "cuckoo" device. When he came past, he used to pull a little string in his car and this gadget went, "Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" and we all let him go by without stopping him. So he came flying by. As usual, he never stopped, he pulled the cuckoo-string and we just said, "Oh, it's Dr. Gastine." But there was one chap up there who was new, he didn't know what "Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" meant and before we could stop him, he put a bullet up his rifle and fired over my shoulder at the Doctor's car. As it happened, he missed, which was lucky for the people Gamlingay - and for Dr. Gastine.

I got called up in '43 and joined the real army. When I got back, Gamlingay seemed the same as ever. The war didn't seem to have touched it. But there were changes on the way.

THE VITAL EVIDENCE

When the air raid sirens went, the wife and her mother used to go in the cupboard under the stairs, I used to lie on the bed, I thought, "If I've got to die, I might as well die comfortable. I kept some mementoes of the war, like my ration books and some of the other books with stamps and coupons.

I drove a lorry during the war and we had to have coupons for petrol. You had to go to the War Transport Office and tell them where you were going and they'd work out your distance and give you enough coupons according to what they thought you needed, so if a bomb dropped in the road and you had to make a detour, you were five or ten miles further out than you expected to be and you ended up short of petrol.

Driving was part of my job, carting vegetables or carrying corn to the mill and bringing cattle feed back. I was working on a farm and that's how I became exempt from the army, but I had to join the Home Guard and "do me bit". We had to go up to Buff Wood. We had a little square hut on the corner of the wood, so we had to go up there. Two of us used to go from six in the evening till twelve and two used to come on from twelve to six in the morning. We had to see that nobody was flashing a light to direct the aircraft to Bassingbourn and Morden Aerodromes. It was mighty cold and lonely up there in that hut.

Sometimes when there was an air raid we used to go up to Hatley Park with the soldiers. When we were finished we could go in the canteen and spend up to 2/- on sweets and chocolates. My wife used to work in the canteen and she used to do the same, and that's how our two boys got a few more sweets than some others in the village.

We had the odd bomb near Hatley, but the Doodlebugs were worse. The engines kept cutting out then starting up again. One came up over the high trees. It stopped, we ducked and it ended up in an oak tree at Old Warden. Another came down in a potato field and cleared about an acre of potatoes. I went up there next morning and there were potatoes lying all over the road. It saved me having to pick them!

There were some nasty plane crashes, one ran out of fuel and crashed in Hayley Wood. We went up there the next morning. There were bodies and all that in the trees where it had exploded and bits of clothing scattered on the ground and in the hedges. It was difficult to imagine they were people - it's the sort of thing you hardly think about, until afterwards, when you've dealt with it.

The worse thing I remember happening was when I was on my own. I wasn't even on Home Guard duty at the time.

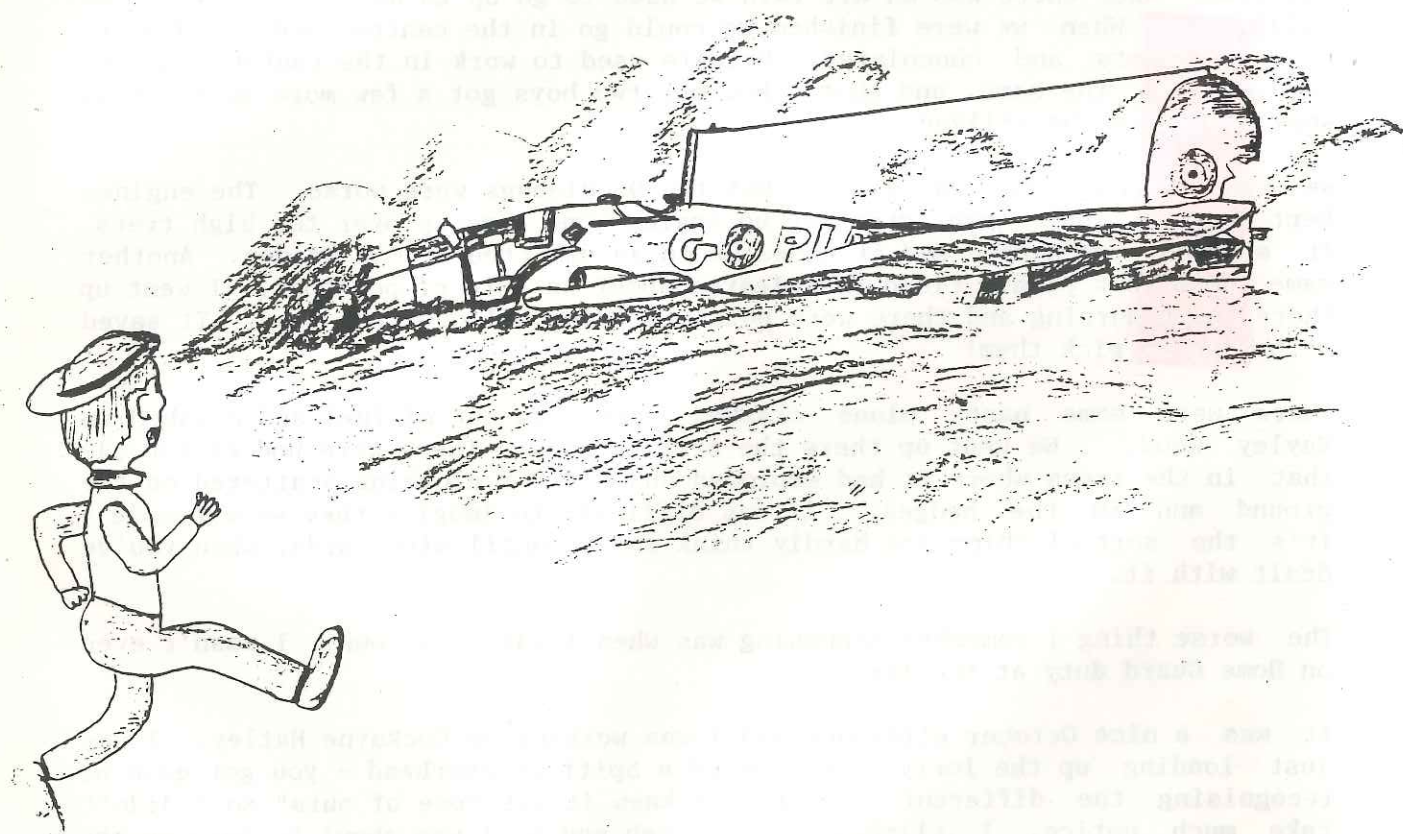
It was a nice October afternoon and I was working up Cockayne Hatley. I was just loading up the lorry when I heard a Spitfire overhead - you got good at recognising the different engines. I knew it was "one of ours" so I didn't take much notice, I climbed into the cab and as I was about to turn on the ignition, I heard the engine cut out, then there was a great thud. I knew what had happened, I jumped down from the cab and started to run to the next field. I could see the tail section of the Spitfire, the nose and one wing had plunged right into the ditch and become completely embedded. I didn't hold out much hope for the pilot, I thought he was a "gonner". He'd either been buried alive or the shock of the impact would have killed him.

And then I saw it, about a yard from the plane - a human hand, cut off at the wrist. It was a young hand, no rings, just a watch round the wrist. Perhaps it was a twenty-first birthday present. It had stopped at exactly 3 o'clock.

I don't know what I intended to do with the watch, but I knew I couldn't leave it there. I suppose I felt I was salvaging part of the young man, and I thought his family might want it, so I wrapped it in my handkerchief and went to report the incident.

The RAF came to make enquiries later and I handed the watch over. They said "Thank you, now we know exactly what time the crash happened." They took it away for evidence.

We had it quite hectic round here during the war, and the sad thing is, most of the crashes and the casualties were ours.



A Crashed Plane

The Time the Plane Crashed



POTATOES, SOAP AND BROOCHES

I was already married when the war began. I'd got Sylvie as a baby, she was a year old and then I had a little evacuee girl, Barbara. She was six when I had her and she stayed to the end of the war. She cried then, she didn't want to go home, she wanted to live with me. Families and friends stuck together in the war. You knew you were all in it together, you all shared what you'd got. You didn't get a lot but you shared it all out.

Of course we were rationed for food. I can remember eating lots of corned beef and we got four loaves a week and about two ounces of butter per person and two ounces of tea. There was variety in your food, but not much of it. We used to fill up with things like treacle pudding. You see, living in the country, we were better off because we'd got vegetables. In the towns they hadn't got them, had they?

We were rationed for clothes as well; you got books of tickets, "utility" they called them. We didn't get many clothes and they weren't really smart. You couldn't buy clothes through mail order like you can now; we just had to make do.

The war never made a lot of difference, really, living in a village. It wasn't like living in London, where the bombs and all that was. We didn't like it when we heard the planes going over. You used to hear them at night. You could stand outside and see them all over London. When I lived up the Cinques Road, I used to stand on my doorstep and see all the firing over London. The sky was all lit up with the cannons as they used to call them. You could see the sparks and all the searchlights, swinging across the sky. There was one bomb dropped near Gamlingay, up the Plantation near Woodbury Park, and nearby a 'plane crashed into a cottage and a gentleman was killed outright.

There were all sorts of things going on at Woodbury. They had lots of troops up there and then of course, they had the Prisoner of War camp. In the village, we got on as best we could. We all had gasmasks; we didn't like them, we didn't use them, but we had to carry them round! We got used to the black-out and the ARP Wardens coming round with their tin hats. When the sirens went, they used to shout, "Get indoors! Get indoors! Get them lights out!" They summonsed you if you showed a light. We didn't have a shelter where I lived, the nearest one was up the Cinques, by the Green Man, but it wouldn't have been a lot of good if there had been a bomb; it was only a dug-out hole.

The war was a sort of background to my life. My interests were in my home and family. If I'd been in my teens or not married it might have been different. Some of the young girls - it's an awful thing to say - but I think they really enjoyed the war.

Take Joyce, for instance; she lived two doors down from us. She must have been about seventeen when the war started. She was in service then at a house in Bedford. Her mother said it was a good place, hard work, but the people treated her fair. If she'd stayed, she could have worked her way up to Lady's Maid. Well, as soon as the war started and her dad and older brother were called up, Joyce gave in her notice and came home. They say she burned her cap and apron and said she wasn't taking orders any more; she'd go "independent"! I think she told the lady she worked for that her own mother needed her to help with the house and the little ones, but I didn't see her giving much help there. Her mother would be at the dolly-tub, mangling and pegging out clothes at all hours, but there was no sign of Joyce. She was busy with her war effort!

She went to Red Cross classes, to learn how to treat wounded soldiers, but they never came, thank goodness; she helped with all the paper work when the evacuees came; she served tea and coffee at the Servicemen's Club and she sang with a band somewhere, though I don't think she ever performed at the local dances in the Conservative Club, opposite to where Empson's Garage is. She even volunteered to be an ARP Warden. We did have a woman warden, so that's not why they turned her down. I think she was a bit too young, and a bit flighty, perhaps.

I got to know her first when we were potato picking. My mother looked after Sylvie and Barbara was at school, so a group of us walked up past the Cinques to one of the fields. One of the men would plough the field and we'd follow behind, picking up the potatoes. We'd wear sort of sacking aprons tied round our waist, like a pouch. As soon as we'd picked up as many potatoes as we could carry, we emptied them into the sacks the foreman had given out. We all had our own sacks, see, and at the end of the day, the Farm Manager came round, weighed the potatoes and paid us accordingly. It was back-breaking work and not very kind to your hands, but it was good fun when the weather was fine and I enjoyed the company.

Well, on the first morning, we were just turning into the field when who should come up but Joyce, riding a really old-fashioned bike. It was a great, heavy sit-up-and-beg thing with a basket on front that was falling to bits. She said she'd found it at the back of her dad's shed. You'd be surprised what people found to get about on during the war. Some of the better-off people who'd had cars before the war, and couldn't drive them because of the petrol rationing, got out their horse-drawn carriages and ponies and traps. But Joyce and I weren't in the pony and trap class, so it was a pair of boots for me and her dad's old bike for her.

She hopped off the man's bike as nimbly as you like, because she was wearing trousers! That raised a few eyebrows. I'm told girls in Bedford, working on the buses and in the factories wore them, but you didn't often see young women in Gamlingay wearing trousers. I have to say Joyce looked nice - she was slim and she'd got on a cotton shirt with big full sleeves rolled up to her elbows. It might have been her brother's cricket shirt, they had a team in Gamlingay before the war. She'd got freckles and fair hair which she'd tucked into a scarf twisted round her head like a turban. That was a style they had during the war. You tied the scarf with a knot at the top, then tucked the ends in. You pushed your hair out of sight under the scarf, then pulled a few wisps out of place, to make you look a bit more feminine, I suppose! But you could have tied Joyce's in bandages and dressed her in a sack, she'd still have looked pretty.

We were quite surprised to see her in the potato field, she was a good bit younger than the rest of us.

"So what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" my friend Edna called.

"Anything for a bit of excitement and the chance of looking at a handsome, romantic man."

She rolled her eyes in fun. We didn't know what she was talking about. The foreman was a respectable married man of fifty and the tractor driver was sixty, if he was a day.

Then we saw them - a detachment of Italian prisoners from Woodbury Park. You could tell them by the yellow diamond on the back of their khaki clothes. There they were, not fifty yards away from us in the charge of an armed guard. I didn't like that gun. They were near enough for us to hear what the guard said.

"Right, there will be no fraternising. You stay fifty yards away from the women. If you don't, you know what will happen."

One of the Italians translated and the prisoners nodded. We got similar instructions.

"'Ere, you girls, I don't want you looking at those Italians, you 'ear me?"

"Yes, sir."

But that didn't stop Joyce. She flicked back a strand of hair and smiled at the prisoners. One stopped and smiled back. The guard saw him and pushed him with the butt of his gun. He stumbled and joined the line - the Italians picking at one side of the field and us at the other.

It became a sort of game; each day, Joyce would decide whose attention she would attract. When the guard's back was turned, she'd wave or grin and as often as not, she'd get a smile or a wave in return. We'd ask her every morning, "Who's the target for today?"

One day, she said, "The fair haired one, the one who doesn't smile or talk to the others. He only looks about eighteen. I bet he's lonely and missing his family."

She did smile at him and not in a "flirty" way, just kindly.

We found there was a serious side to Joyce. She was writing to two young servicemen who'd got no families, to keep them in touch with "home". Just friendly letters, letting them know how we were managing in war-time. She'd got their addresses from the Red Cross. And she was helping an elderly neighbour with his animals. His only son had been called up and I don't think he could have managed without Joyce. There were several small-holdings in Gamlingay then.

We picked alongside the Italians till the end of the season, moving from field to field. After a bit, it seemed quite normal to have twenty "enemies" working on the same patch. We even got used to the man with the gun.

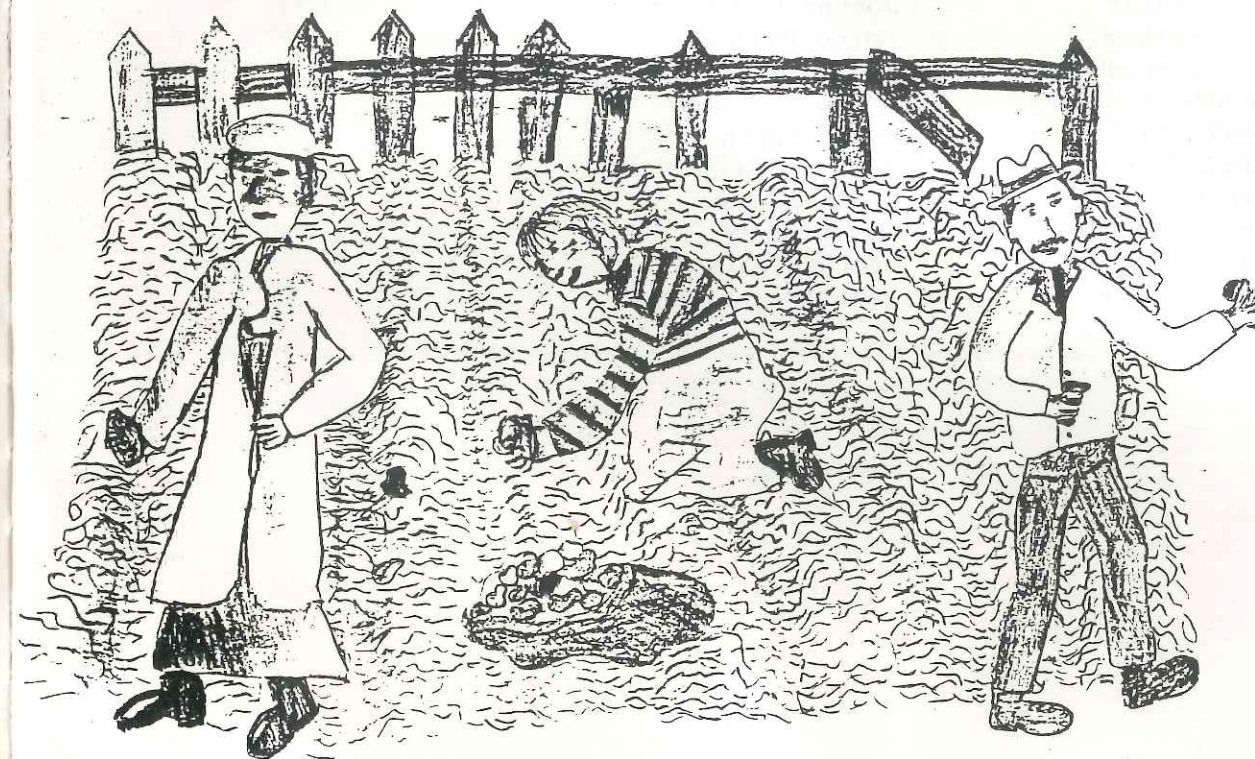
It's funny the way they guarded them so carefully during the day-time because they were much more relaxed in the evenings. The Italians were allowed to come into the village on their own and there didn't seem to be many restrictions at all. I was pulling Sylvie's curtains one night when I saw Joyce talking to the young, shy one she'd noticed in the potato field. They were showing each other their hands. I knew straightway what they were doing, we all did it, to show what a mess potato picking had made of our skin and nails. The Italian seemed to be asking for something. Joyce went into the house, came out again, looked round and put something into his hands. It was a bar of soap! Of course, we were rationed for soap and we had to use it carefully, but it turned out that it was even more scarce at Woodbury Park. It soon became a common sight to see the Italians around the village and they always asked for soap. They kept coming long after we'd stopped potato picking. Most of us tried to give them a little bit, even if we couldn't afford a whole bar.

One evening, Joyce's young, not-so-shy Italian came with a present.

"For you and your mother, to say thank you," he said, in very careful English. Joyce showed it me the next day; it was a beautifully made little basket. They invited him in that evening and her mother and younger brothers and sisters all liked him. The basket was put on the mantle piece.

The next present was for Joyce alone. It was a little brooch made from tin and bits of wire in the shape of a heart. It was really carefully done, you could see he'd taken a lot of trouble with it. Almost everyone who showed them any kindness got a little home-made present, they must have spent all their free time making baskets and brooches! Most people put the brooches aside, with the baskets, but Joyce wore hers all the time.

We imagined all kinds of romance for Joyce and her Italian and they really seemed fond of each other, but nothing came of it. Eventually he got sent home, 're-patriated' they called it, and Joyce married a friend of her brother's when they were demobbed. She moved away and I lost touch with her. I shouldn't think the basket lasted, but I hope she kept the brooch. It would bring back all sorts of memories for her.



Italian POWs Potato Picking

POTATOES, BASKETS AND BROOCHES

Joyce, the heroine of this story did not exist. She is entirely fictitious. The story-teller is partly real, partly invented, but we have based this story on accounts given to us of events which really happened in Gamlingay in the 1940s. We are grateful to the ladies who set our imaginations working.

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1924