

Memories of Childhood and the War Years - Mrs Ethel Robinson

Transcript of 1988 interview recording by Daniel Robinson (b 1978) with help from his father.

Introduction

Mrs Robinson was born on 3rd September 1902 at Hoo St Mary, a village on the north of the Medway Estuary in Kent. Her father was a farm worker at that time, and frequently walked to Gillingham to work, a distance of about 14 miles, walking home again at night after a 12-hour day in the fields. The family moved across the river to Gillingham when she was about 5 years old.

At the outbreak of war in 1914 she went to live at Mountfield, near Robertsbridge in East Sussex, with friends of her mother. This was to relieve pressure on the family accommodation. She attended the small school there at John's Cross until 1916, when she left to return to her mother. When she was 15 she went to work in London as a housemaid. After the 1st War (1914-18) she married Charlie Else, an ex-sergeant of the Royal Garrison Artillery. She had a daughter Jean in 1924 and a son Douglas in 1927. Charlie wanted a new life in Canada but she did not want to go, so they parted and never met again.

At the time of the 2nd World War Mrs Robinson became a full-time Civil Defence/Air Raid Precautions worker. Later in the war she married her second husband, an ex-sergeant-major of the Royal Engineers, who was the Group ARP Warden for her area. Daniel's father Vic was her third and last child, born in 1944.

Transcript of Interview with Mrs Robinson

(rearranged to put the reminiscences in time order).

Explanatory comments from Daniel's father are in italics

Early Childhood

My first memories in Hoo were of being out in the cherry orchards. I first went to school there when I was 4, then we came to Gillingham, and I had to wait until I was 5 years old to go to school there. I went to the Richmond Road schools (*as did Daniel's father from age 5 until he was 7*). We always had an orchard to play in, fruit orchard. Father often used to walk from Hoo to Gillingham to work. If he was working at Hoo I used to go to work with him in the orchard in the mornings until I was old enough to go to school. I remember getting up in the barrow and lying asleep.

The sweets were very cheap them days; you got 4 ounces for a penny of any sort of sweet. We didn't get any regular pocket-money. Father being the bailiff at the cherry orchards in Hoo, we had plenty of fruit. Mother used to make us some treacle toffees. I didn't go into the hop-fields, because Mother never went hopping. It was all hop-fields there then.

Before I was born, Mother was airing some clothes on the bars in front of the open stove. She had 3 children alive then, and was expecting another in 2 months. The youngest was asleep next to the stove in her crib. Someone opened the front door and the draught blew the clothes onto the stove.

They caught alight and then set fire to the crib. The baby, Winifred, was very badly burnt and died in Canterbury Hospital. Mother said that her fingers dropped off one by one. When the new baby was born she was christened Bertha Olive Winifred. Mother wanted to call her just Olive Winifred but Father wasn't having it. In those days you didn't worry too much when you registered births - not like now when you have to do it within days. My oldest sister was Marie. I think she was born at Snakesbury (*near Goudhurst, in Kent*). Then they moved to Sheerness, where May and then Sidney were born. Then came Winifred, then Bertha, then Floss (Florence) and then me, the youngest. There was another after me, named Alice (Mother's name). She only lived a few hours, but long enough to need a coffin. If they were stillborn or miscarried then the doctor used to take them away wrapped in a bit of newspaper. I remember him saying "Good old News of the World!". Births were usually attended by midwives rather than doctors. You used to pay extra to have the doctor. I think you got 35 shillings as maternity allowance then, and we used to give that straight to the midwives, but doctors charged guineas to come. I remember wondering "Does the Queen get this?"

Life at Home in Gillingham up to 1914

My brother (*Sidney*) was in his 20s then. My father gave him 2 piglets. He bred them and the piglets used to follow us about the fields and the orchards. A bout of Swine fever came along and wiped them all out, so he lost that money. I remember the pigs all lying out - they turned purple with the fever. Unbeknown to Father we went up to the pig-pens in the orchard because we liked walking through the disinfectant. The orchard had 2 outways, down by the house and up to the top of the hill. He couldn't keep animals for so long (*= for a time*) - 'Isolation' was it? and then they started up again and bred the pigs. I used to go up there on Saturday mornings sometimes and wash their tails and their mouths and whiskers. I did their tails up in a bit of rag to make them curly. Sometimes they managed to get over the fence and came straight the way down to the kitchen - it was a long orchard - they knew when we put the buckets out to stir the food up. They'd be squealing and shouting for their breakfast.

When war broke out in 1914 my brother was married, but enlisted into the Navy. The Commander had him as his 'help' so that he (*Sidney*) could carry on with his market garden that he had worked up, and do the Commander's garden (*as well*). Then he went down with Spotted Fever. We used to go up to the Simotic Ward in the Naval Hospital in Gillingham (*now the Medway Maritime Hospital*) and see him. We all had to put on white gowns and disinfectant masks. His wife (*Mabel*) carried on with his part of the orchard that Father had let him have until he got better and came out (*of the Navy*).

That war wasn't like the second war. My brother was registered as a potato dealer (*he later became one of the biggest hop and fruit farmers in Kent, S.P. Howland and Sons, with farms at Teynham and Paddock Wood, and later at Thanington, Canterbury, and a market garden at Christmas Street Gillingham*). Shopkeepers could only deal through him - they couldn't go and get their potatoes anywhere *but through a dealer*. Of course, they were rationed. I came to Sussex in 1916 when Percy my brother's second son (who still runs the market garden in Gillingham) was born. Then Father came out of the Dockyard (*he spent a lot of the war as a member of surface teams for naval divers in the North Sea*) and Mother took a shop (greengrocer's and general shop) and sold all her own grown stuff. It was all fresh, so we did well. We used to go down to the glasshouses and order the tomatoes. Mr Featherby was a JP and owned these glasshouses all round us. The shop did well.

Most of the farm cottages were only wooden. Our farm house in Gillingham was a fairly big house for them times. Our front windows looked out right across the Dockyard and over to Sheerness. Next to our house were 3 little wooden cottages, but they had very long gardens - and front gardens. They used to cultivate the gardens. We could see our house from the school playground. Each of us had to do some weeding when we came out of school before we could go out and play.

The shops were lots of little private house windows. They used to make boiled sweets and sell them. Shops down near the Causeway in Gillingham used to boil shrimps and cockles and clams and sell them. There were very big marshes raised above the mud down off the Strand at Gillingham. During the war they were blown up because they were getting dangerous. We used to walk out when the tide was out (over our knees in mud) to get on them to pick this purple heather, but they're all done away with now.

To cook, we had a range with one oven and an open fire at the top - we didn't have a gas stove in them days. We had to fix a thing on the front of the bars to boil our kettles in front of the fire, and cook on top of it. We also had oil stove to cook some things on. During the (1st) war there wasn't much to cook. My father had plenty of vegetables, of course.

There were queues and queues of people at the shops, queuing up for hours to get anything that came in. They'd tell one another if they knew of anything, and all flock up from Gillingham to Chatham to get in a queue to get a bit extra.

In the 2nd war there was better rationing. We had ration books (I've still got mine) and we all got something decent. We had coupons in the books for meat and a very little bit of butter each week. When we'd eaten it we had to go back for margarine - and that was rationed as well. Meat was very scarce, except when you bred your own rabbits and chickens, and could kill them, but then the chicken feed and the rabbits' bran were rationed as well. *The chickens and rabbits were fed on bran mash – potatoes mixed with bran and all the scraps, boiled up on big saucepans – it made the house smell rather*

Having an orchard we could get things like fruit easily. We had our chickens and rabbits. Sid (my brother) showed a lot in Chatham. He bred high-class rabbits, the big ones, Old English and Flemish Giants. So we didn't do so bad, but many people only had meat once a week as the ration was so small. The wives used to save the meat for the men, and the children had to have eggs - but they were rationed...

To feed the rabbits and chickens we didn't put soap or liquid in the washing-up water. We washed all the grease and that (*etc.*) off the plates into the water and then tipped it into a bucket with the bran and meal. So there was nothing wasted. We used to feed them chat potatoes (*spoiled ones with black marks, etc., in them*). Us children used to eat them as well. They were very cheap, and wouldn't sell in the shops. We had to wash them clean and boil them in clean water in a big iron pot, in case it boiled over onto Mother's stove. When Father had dug the potatoes up we had to sort the chats out and put the seed potatoes into crates to sprout for the next planting time.

The stoves stood on white (*cement*) bases. If we rubbed them with hearthstone, they came up snow white. We cleaned the range with black powder that Mother bought, mixed up with water fairly thick in a jam-jar. It was put on with a paintbrush. It was then polished with a bit of velvet or a soft

brush. They used to come up beautiful. We used to keep the steel part clean! There was a lot of brass on them, which we cleaned with Brasso. Even the door-handles and the finger-plates were cleaned every day.

Teacher's Pet - Schooldays in Gillingham

In my schooldays in Gillingham, we moved from Richmond Road when Father took the orchard. Our house, River View, was only 2 cottages away from the church school. It was big to us kids, as we had only lived in farm cottages up till then. The teacher, Miss Rogers, always got me to fetch her dinner from her lodgings up near the level crossing, probably because I always had a clean pinafore on. Before that the caretaker had been fetching it for her. She was a great fat lump, over 50 or so. She looked very old to us kids and we always called her 'Granny '. I called her that to her face once without thinking - oh, dear, I nearly fell through the floor! I don't think she twigged on to it.

To get her dinner I had to go up Church Hill and along Gillingham Road to her lodgings. It was a 4-storey house. Mrs Stone was the housemaid there, and there was a cook-housekeeper. I always wanted to see what Miss Rogers' room was like. I used to have to stand in front of the door on the mat, and one day I couldn't resist it and tip-toed over because the door was ajar and had a peep in it. There was a piano in there, and a nice carpet. I nipped back quick, and wasn't found out. Jean's (*Jean was Mrs Robinson's daughter by her first marriage*) Auntie Daisy and the housemaid at Miss Rogers' lodgings were old school friends. It was blooming cold sometimes waiting on that front door mat for the dinner. It was tied up like a Dockyard man's dinner. I didn't dare splash the gravy (I think one of the previous dinner-fetchers had dropped it once, and she thought that I looked safe). It was a plate with a basin turned over the top and tied round with a cloth. She never had a pudding she was too fat anyway!

When rationing was on people who couldn't afford their rations used to sell them to us, who could pay for them for our kids. You weren't supposed to do that - they called it the Black Market.

In Sussex during the First War

My mother had to take in a sergeant and his wife (*i.e., they were billeted on her*) and when the war was over (*it couldn't have been – this was 1914. He may have been posted abroad and his wife went back home*) and the wife went back to Sussex she took me with her. I stayed there and finished my schooling. It was only a little village school (*at John's Cross*). We used to lay in bed and listen to the gunfire rolling from Hastings direction. They were booming all night. They were the guns being fired in France. There were a few single planes used to come over.

The school at Mountfield was tiny. It is much enlarged now. We had to take our dinners to school, and tramps used to come in and steal them out of our coats. There were a lot of tramps them days, you don't see them now. We had to walk from Mountfield into Battle to get a train into Hastings – there were no buses then. There were only the charabancs that men used to have for their club outings. They were like open-air coaches. Children used to run round them saying "Throw out your rusty coppers". They used to throw out all their coppers for the children to pick up. I didn't do it because I was frightened and didn't know what it was, but those children were used to it. They used to get quite a lot of money that way.

Return Home to Gillingham

I came back to Gillingham when I was 14 (1916) then went to work in London as a 3rd housemaid. My sister was cook there. Then my brother came out of the Navy on convalescence and got fit again. He took over the orchards. One was in the school lane and 2 more were a street away, in Christmas Street. The cemetery at Gillingham Church was up on top of these orchards and we could use the cemetery as a short cut for Father getting to work and us getting home.

I left Mountfield to come back to my mother, who was living with my sister then. They had been working in Harrow and Tonbridge schools. Father was up in the North Sea salvaging. I was there with Mother until I was 15. My brother was married by then, and he used to rent the orchard in Hillyfields (*in Gillingham*) which was the brickfields - and our orchard there backed onto them. In time we bought both that and the Christmas Street orchards. There was a public pathway through there.

As my brother improved the business Father worked for him. They used to go out and buy the orchards (*i.e., the crops*) in fruit and put their own women in to pick them. We used to get up in the early morning to go mushrooming in those fields. Those orchards were on the Top (London) Road, so we had quite a way to walk before we got there. Sometimes we had a lift in the horse van if it was going up there. Then my brother bought another fruit shop in Richmond Road, Gillingham opposite a big laundry. There was a big waste bank between that and the houses. There used to be a lot of rats on there. Further over this waste ground was the Dockyard railway (*a single branch line from Gillingham Station, which connected with a network of lines within the dockyard itself*). The trains used to go through full of sailors and the Army going to get on the boats to ship out to wherever they were going abroad.

Life 'In Service' as a Maid in London

When I went to London I started off as a 'between-maid' (*'Tweeny'*) in a house at 3 Bina Gardens where my sister was cook. There was also a housemaid and a parlour maid in that house, but no kitchenmaid. As a between-maid I worked in the kitchen with my sister in the morning. I had to get up early and clean the kitchen out and scrub it all, although she used to do most of it for me as I was only 14. About 10.30 - 11.00 I had to go upstairs with the housemaid and help her. I used to generally do the maids' room - there were 3 beds in one room, then my sister's room, and another spare room on that landing. Whenever the air-raid sirens went we all trooped downstairs and stood with our backs to the middle wall with next door. Before the sirens came in, policemen used to go round with rattles or blowing whistles. I used to get up at 5.45 or 6.00am, do the kitchen stove out (unless my sister did it for me) and scrub the floor - while she scrubbed the tables. Then we had to prepare the vegetables, then I went upstairs with the housemaid, making beds, etc. I stayed with the housemaid until lunchtime, then at 2.30 I had to put on a black frock and fancy apron. After that I had to go back to the kitchen and help prepare the evening meals, do the washing up and that sort of thing.

I left there when my sister went back to Gillingham to run my brother's shop. I didn't like doing all the kitchen work so I got a 3rd housemaid's job in a bigger house. The first house, in Bina Gardens (*near Earls Court*), belonged to a Canon Lucas and his wife. They had no children, and the house was quite small compared to the next one, which was at 6, Collingham Gardens. In that job all the work was by the clock. If you had nice ones over you it was all right. The war had taken away all the

young footmen, which left the butler-, whom we called 'Father', to do what he could himself. As I was the youngest one there I had to go and help him in his parlour. There was all this lovely Venetian glass in the cupboards. I wasn't allowed to touch that. I used to look at it, though. It was a big house, and I went to it when they (*staff*) were scarce. There was Cook, kitchenmaid/scullerymaid (they had to do away with a scullerymaid and make do), 3 housemaids, (I was the 3rd one to start with), and the butler, who didn't have any assistance because of the war. Originally there was an under-butler, footmen, and the boot-man - we called him 'Boots' - who used to come in once a week to do some of the jobs.

If there was a dinner, they had waiters come in, as Marie wouldn't do it. Marie started work at Harrow School, with the Lucases, and they thought a lot of her, even though she did have a sharp tongue. Marie wouldn't stand any nonsense, and the old girl used to click her false teeth 19 to the dozen when Marie wouldn't do what she wanted, and wouldn't try to make something out of nothing. "Can't do it Madam!" she'd say. Mrs Lucas was Australian, and quite wealthy. She was fat and flabby-faced - ooh, she was ugly! Her husband was a jovial-looking old canon. They never had any children. She married him when he was a curate. He was the vicar of the local parish.

In Collingham Gardens there was a tray-lift (*'dumb-waiter'*) to take the food from the kitchens up to the dining-room, but in Bina Gardens we had to carry it all up the stairs. Marie wouldn't answer to the name Mary when Mrs Lucas called her that. When she said "Didn't you hear me calling you?" Marie would say "I heard you calling someone called Mary, Madam. My name is Marie," (*pronounced 'Marry'*). "Good old Marie", I used to say. I always knew when Mrs Lucas was coming as I could hear her false teeth clacking. They always did when Marie upset her.

The family was German, and the sons were doing voluntary work for our government to keep them from being interned. She (*the lady of the house*) used to give parties for the wounded soldiers every so often. They used to be lovely parties, and they sent them off with a nice little parcel of tobacco, cigarettes, etc. She did that to keep her sons from being interned. The head housemaid and 2nd housemaid used to have to attend the parties. I wouldn't go in as I couldn't stand waiting at table - it was not what I went there to do. I said that I would sooner pack up and go home.

The family name was Fleishmann, (it was on all the table-linen), but when I went to work for them they changed their name to Ashcroft. The husband was a Russian Jew, a big man with a big bushy moustache (from pictures in the house). One of the sons was named Oskar. The other one was married. I never had much to do with him. He had 2 kids - little devils, they were. They had a blooming great bedroom and we had to get it all ready for them. I never saw much of the family. If I was down on my knees scrubbing the cloakroom (*toilet*) and one of the sons wanted to go in, I would have to get out of it. He wouldn't go to one of the upstairs cloakrooms although there were 2 or 3 on the way down. They were all right and never interfered with us. She (*the lady*) didn't like me though, because I wouldn't toady under.

The head housemaid was in charge of me - she had 2 under her before the war, but there was only me at that time. She didn't normally go in the dining-room, and was nothing to do with the butler. Before (*the war*) she would have come under a housekeeper. The 2nd housemaid used to go in the dining room, but when I got to be 2nd I wouldn't go in there. In the servants' hall we all used to go in there together for breakfast. At lunch, we all had our meat course together in the hall, but then the

men (what were left) and the head housemaid used to have their pudding in the next room, so they could sit and talk amongst themselves.

On my day off I used to go up around Kensington High Street, in the shops, and all around Harrod's and Whiteley's (a big store then, on a corner in Kensington). I used to go visiting my sister Floss, who was a between-maid like me in a house in Gloucester Road, near Whiteley's. They had motor-buses then, but not many because they were short of petrol in the war. There was the Tube (Underground) of course. They used to use them as air-raid shelters in the 1st war as well (*as the second war*), but I couldn't go down one in a raid. I was always nervous in the Tube. It was only partly underground round there. It was an afternoon out to go round Harrod's or Whiteley's and see all the animals they had for sale. On my 'day' off during the week I was free from 2.30, but had to be in by 9.00pm. The older maids could stay out till 10.00. I had every other Sunday afternoon off as well.

At Bina Gardens, if we went to church we had time off on Sunday afternoon as well. Food was rationed, but it was amazing what Canon Lucas' wife used to get from the jewellers she knew - legs of lamb and pork - they used to be able to get it. She used to visit the poor in Shoreditch and made us dry the tea-leaves when they were finished in the pot so that she could take them to give away. My sister Marie told me that it was silly, as they used to get better tea than she did undercover, and threw her tealeaves away. "There you are my dear" she used to say, then they'd make a cup of tea with it, and she'd stand there and say "Well, drink it, my dear".

I had to up at 5.30 and was on duty until I went to bed at 10.00. I got £20 per year. I only remember Marie getting £36 per year as cook. We used to send some of it to Mother. A pair of stockings was sixpence three farthings (*nearly 3p*), a pair of shoes was 4/11d (*nearly 25p*), although you could get them cheaper. When I was 15 I bought my first winter coat (that wasn't home-made by Mother) for £3, I think. It was nigger-brown with a belt and a nice collar that came right up - it was nice. It was about knee-length, although our print dresses for work were down to our ankles. Marie wore a mauve dress and white apron, and I wore pale blue ('butcher's print') with white aprons. Mother used to make them. In Collingham Gardens we were supplied with working print frocks and aprons. Nuts were delivered to the shops then in sacks made of stuff like fine hessian, and we made them into covers to put over our white aprons when scrubbing the floors and steps. I had to have my own black frock, but the white collars, cuffs, caps with black velvet, aprons with bibs and lace, and a big sash with a bow to tie behind us were supplied. We cleaned the steps with soda and water and soap. The tiles had to be polished after they were washed and dried, but not under the mats. We had hearthstone to clean the cement with. I didn't use a lot of soda, as I didn't want my hands cracking - it didn't half chap your hands if you were scrubbing the steps with it (poor Mother's fingers used to crack right down to the bone). The head housemaid used to put a lot of washing soda in the water, and after she had gone I used to hook half of it out! I was cunning. The housemaid at Bina Gardens learned (*taught*) me that. We used to buy rose-water for our hands, or Mello, a goldy-coloured ointment.

At Christmas-time we had the same work to do, but Christmas Day was like Sunday-work - we didn't strip the beds like on other days. If you had 6 or 8 beds to strip and re-make before breakfast you knew it, as they were all big beds - no single beds in the bedrooms, only in the servants' rooms. We only had a party amongst ourselves in the servants' hall, but we always got good food at Collingham Gardens - the old German girl got turkeys and that (*etc.*) under the counter. At Bina Gardens, the

food was fairly good - we had a bit of the family's turkey as we cooked it. Marie used to cut the oysters up to make them go further in the soup. Mrs Clark, the housemaid-cum-parlourmaid sometimes ate one. I used to sit up on the top of the stairs and say "Oi, Marie, Clark's pinching an oyster!" - poor old Clark. She was housemaid in the mornings, parlourmaid in the evenings.

The Family

My father was good at visiting public houses. He said that he got his business that way. He did get orders there. He also worked in the Dockyard for a while, holding the lifelines for divers in the North Sea. When the war finished he came home and set about farming again, this time without any restrictions. They bought the Gas House orchard and the Christmas tree orchards. My father was foreman for my brother. He never made any headway himself, but taught my brother all that he knew.

Father used to value orchards for people who wanted to sell the fruit whilst it was still on the trees and also pruned roses for people like bank managers. He was quite busy at that. Father didn't pick apples at harvest time; he only set the ladders (*putting the ladders up in the trees and seeing that they were safe*). The trees were very high then and the ladders started very wide at the bottom and went up to almost nothing at the top. The women would only have my father to set their ladders true. He always went up to the top himself to see that they were safe. Of course us kids used to go up the ladders and were then afraid to come down, so we had to wait for Father to come home to come up the ladders to fetch us down. He still worked in the Dockyard between the wars (*he died before the outbreak of the 2nd war*).

Before the first world war Father was a head waiter in Sheerness. He then ran a shop for the Sheerness Co-op in Sheerness High Street for several years. They came back to Gillingham again. My father's brothers were all orchard-owners around Faversham and Canterbury.

My mother's brother was a pensioner of the Marines. The Government gave him a house in Watling Street with a ladder dividing his wall from the Government ground. He used to inspect all the deep chambers in Fort Darland where munitions were kept. They were lit with electric lights. He had to wear carpet slippers in there (*to avoid explosions*).

When my brother was in the Navy during the 1st war he went down with Spotted Fever and was taken away to the Naval Hospital. We couldn't get any news about him so we stood and waited outside the hospital gates. My brother-in-law (my sister May's husband, Ted, a petty officer sick bay attendant in the Navy) was in the nursing ward, and each body that came by he was expecting to be Sid. He (*Sid*) left his wife and little baby behind and if there was a raid the baby used to run up to the top of our orchard and lay under the trees. He (*Sid*) recovered, but about 7 people died of it in the hospital that same week. You had to be very careful, and the babies were put into white gowns and hats. My brother was an invalid after that, and couldn't do much physical work, but his brain was all right, thank goodness, and he did well in his fruit business - they didn't know what he was worth when he died.

Family Life and Business Between the Wars

We girls got married when the (*1st*) war ended. I tried to ride a bike then. I never did learn properly, though I used to practise in the side-street beside the shop. Once Father came home and found that

he had lost his wallet. There were quite a lot of notes in it as he had been collecting his money from the wholesale sales. He had also been cutting cabbages. I still had to get on the bike against a wall, but I managed to ride the bike back to Beechings Crossings, to the field where he had been (*in Twydall, between Rainham and Gillingham*). I had a couple of miles to go along the Lower Road, past Bleak House and down a steep hill (but I didn't fall off, and so I was allowed to go out on the bike after that). You could see where they had been cutting the lines of cabbages, and I found his wallet inside a cabbage. (The outer leaves and the stalk were left in the ground when cabbages were cut.)

Sid learnt all that he knew from Father, and as he didn't drink he did well. Father was a good manager but a bad workman and liked to go trotting off to the pubs. I remember once he came in drunk into the kitchen and tormented us by trying to tip the zinc bath of water over. It was on a stool so that we could do the washing in it by the copper. I was holding it down by the handle on the other side of it. Sid came in, got him by the scruff of the neck and rubbed a new bar of Sunlight soap all over his mouth and neck. Bertha had just bought it - it was in 2 halves, with 'SUN LIGHT' written across them. Sid said "perhaps that'll clean your mouth out a bit". We used to follow Father to see if he went to work in the Dockyard or off to a pub. He used to drink when the moon was full. Mother used to say "Oh, dear, look at that moon - he'll be off again!".

My brother sold part of his Christmas Street (*Gillingham*) farm and bought a large fruit and hop farm at Teynham. He also bought a large farm in Paddock Wood (*south of Tonbridge*). He had a bailiff in there who was Eamonn, the cousin of Leslie Ames, the Kent and England cricketer. The house there was called Ploggs Hall. There were large hopfields there, and Whitbreads was next us. Londoners used to come down at hop-picking time, which then lasted from 6 to 8 weeks. My brother had quite nice huts built for them. The Government inspected them to see that they were modernised. The families came on special trains to all the hop-farms. They were a jolly lot of people - they used to get drunk a lot, but were never aggressive. They were good workers too.

A vicar and his wife used to come down to the farm for their holiday and pick hops, as their wages weren't big in the church. The hop-pickers sat on upside-down baskets and picked them into big baskets, until the bins came in. A man used to go round on stilts to cut the hops down. They brought them to us at the bins. A family used to all pick around one bin, and all the children had to help. Nice streams with pure water used to run round the fields and we used to drink from them. There was a mug hung on a stick for us to use. On Going-Home day the farm always gave a party, with sweets for the children.

My father, who worked for my brother, used to go out with the pony. Then my brother bought Topsy, an old war-horse, a charger (*cavalry horse*). She was a lovely big horse. Father used to load up with her, and go round the shops with their wholesale orders. The man (a six-footer) who used the pony and little cart used to go round with the small orders. Topsy was very nervous, and if she saw a piece of paper flick in the road she would up with her front feet, nearly tip the cart over and was gone like the wind. Father had always to keep somebody with him to hold the reins and steady her while he was in selling the things. She could stand up on her hind legs and swing the cart of goods right round - she was strong. She had beautiful white whiskers.

My brother had 2 shops in Gillingham then, fresh fruit and vegetables. They were considered to be quite high-class. One was down near the Dockyard and the other was in the High Street.

My father never drank spirits or wine, but liked his ale too much. The publicans used to put him in the back of the van, turn the horse round and say "Take him home". The horse came back with nobody driving it. My mother and elder sisters used to get Father out of the van and upstairs, get the horse out of the van and stabled and put the cart away.

My father bought an Airedale bitch from Gillingham Police Station for my sister, who ran one of the shops. She was called 'Peggy Whiskers Lass' and used to sleep under the counter. She had puppies and Father gave us all one. His was called 'Paddy'. She used to lay down the bottom of the orchard guarding the van which was loaded with the orders ready to go out in the morning. Nobody dared go near it. She wouldn't move unless he told her to. He used to get home for tea and say "Coo, I've left that damned dog down the field". He had to go out there and get her as she wouldn't leave it. When Father died she pined so - she wouldn't leave him, and after he was buried we took her out with us. She used to go into all the places that he had been, sniffing around trying to find him. We didn't realise until then how many pubs he used! She got so thin that the vet had to put her down.

I had my Airedale, Bruce, and my sister had two, Peggy II and Peggy Whiskers Lass. Once I was standing in the High Street opposite Woolworths with my sister's pram whilst she was in Woolworths. The dogs' leads were tied to the pram handle. Two sailors leaned over the pram to look in the shop window. The dogs caught hold of their baggy trouser legs and wouldn't let go. I knew they wouldn't bite them unless they tried to get away, so I had to get the shop manager to call out for my sister so that she could come out and make them let go.

The 'Medway Queen' was a paddle steamer built around the time of the 1st war, or after. It used to go from Sun Pier, Chatham to Sheerness and Margate on excursions. We used to go on moonlight trips on it, around the Nore Lightship. So many people got on it the deck was nearly down on the sea, especially when they all crowded over to one side to see the lightship. It all stopped when the (2nd) war broke out (*by about 1990 it was derelict and Daniel and his father passed it in a dinghy lying in the Medway alongside the Gun Wharf, near Sun Pier awaiting possible restoration. It was so rusty that you could see right through it*). It was very nice and clean inside then, with seats and a bar. I think the 'City of Rochester' was another old paddle steamer, before the 'Medway Queen'. We used to go down to the Causeway in Gillingham to watch them go by.

Life as an Air Raid Warden in the 2nd War

I was in the ARP voluntarily, 2 years before the war, so I could choose what I wanted to do. My two children (*Jean and Douglas*) were eventually evacuated. I went into the Warden Service as I didn't like being shut up in houses when the firing was going on. We had some condemned cottages next door to Gillingham Post Office, which were fitted up. The gas-masks were stored underneath them and we had 2 bedrooms of our cottage as an office. Downstairs was awaiting room for people being fitted with masks.

I had to go round to all the sick people to fit their masks. We had no masks in the 1st war. In the 2nd war most people had a mask with a canister on the facepiece. We had Service respirators with the canister on the end of a hose carried in the satchel. Babies had a sort of cradle which you put them in and pumped the air in through the filter with bellows at the side. I had to take classes of women then to show them how to use them. Fathers used to come as well, to learn how to use it for their babies. They cost a number of guineas each! (One guinea was 21 old shillings or £1.05 today).

In 1938 when war was expected, everything was hush-hush. There were places you couldn't go in, because you never knew who was who. You had to register sort of...there were one or two spies picked up in Gillingham, on the Great Lines and the Darland Banks.

I remember the first German plane coming up along the Medway. I used to stand up on the hill and watch them when our planes had hit them. They used to go along all alight, then drop into the Medway before they got to the Dockyard. It was the Dockyard that they were aiming for. It got hit in several places. There were a lot of streets and houses bombed by them emptying their bombs when they were turned back from reaching London by the Spitfires. They didn't care where they dropped them. The Medway Towns got a lot of bomb damage, compared with most other places.

When the second war broke out the Dockyard was where they kept trying to bomb. The bombs often landed a long way off and one landed on the railway. We lived in a terrace of houses near the railway and the shrapnel hit my long housebath (*which used to hang on the dividing wall outside the back door*) and that was riddled with holes when we next came to have a bath. They were also called 'bungalow baths'.

Each of us Wardens had our own territory - a number of streets. We had to report to our post when the sirens went, then went out on our beat. We always went out in pairs, a full-timer and a part-timer. My partner was an ex-Commander in the Navy. We used to all round the streets and the back-alleys to see that people were all right and in their shelters. Some people wouldn't go in the shelters - they didn't have to, it was up to them. We used to persuade most of them to go down. Most of them (*the shelters*) weren't very nice, but some people had done their shelters out like little bedrooms. We had benches in them, 2 pairs, one over the other, like stretchers. It used to get very hot inside, and the condensation ran down the inside of the corrugated iron. They were dug out of the ground in gardens. We had to dry out the bottom mattress every night. We learnt to put some newspaper or waterproof under them. We also saw that the people in the big shelters were all right.

When houses were bombed, the Rescue people came out, and the St John's Ambulance and the Red Cross stood by in bad cases. I remember laying over a bomb-hole where people were buried. I could hear them, and spoke to them under the rubble, keeping them quiet until the Rescue men dug them out. That was down near the Dockyard, at the end of Richmond Road. We had to write reports on all the incidents.

I didn't like telephones and I didn't like being indoors during raids, although the shrapnel from the Dockyard anti-aircraft guns could come down anywhere. If I was on telephone duty in the Post, and no air raid warning had been given, the ARPO (*Air Raid Precautions Officer - a local government official in charge of the Wardens*) would ask for volunteers to take over my seat at the telephone from among the voluntary (*part-time*) wardens.

If there was a severe air raid in our zone the volunteer farmers used to come with their lorries to do the rescue work, but they always took along a woman or two to help with the injured. We had our bandages, etc., and they picked us up and went off to the damage. We had to wait on the edge of the craters for the people to be got out. We used to lay down and listen for buried people, and on one occasion I had a cold and was coughing. After one raid, my daughter got home from the opticians where she was working, and her aunt (my sister) asked her if she knew where her Mum

was. She said "I don't know where she is now, but I heard her coughing halfway up James Street where a bomb had been dropped" so they knew I was all right! We got those people out eventually - some of them didn't survive it. The Red Cross or ARP ambulances used to take casualties to the hospital or to the Emergency Centres.

The big school at Richmond Road was a 'double-decker' (*two-storied*), with the boys going in one side and up to the top. The girls' entrance was on another side to separate them. When the children were evacuated the Rescue men I was attached to used the Infants' School (*as a base*). There was a big rota on the wall for night telephone duty. We did one week on nights and the other on days.

In severe raids people got blown to pieces, and it was the swarms of flies that took us to the bits in gardens and on roofs. We used to watch what the dogs were doing as well, for the same reason. We used a fork on the end of a long stick to pick the pieces up and put them in bags. It was marvellous how the mortuary men used to put the right pieces together for the post-mortems and inquests.

When it was quiet, with no warnings going, we had to turn out and help the First Aid - St John's Ambulance or Red Cross. People often came round to the post for help if their daughters were having babies. We had to go and do what we could. I remember one young Belgian woman who lived in a bed-sitter above a shoe-mender's shop in Canterbury Street. The old man who ran the shop came over to our post to fetch someone as she was in labour. They all looked at me, so I said "All right, I'll go". The building was very old and we couldn't stand upright in the bedrooms. Her husband was a sailor and was away, but she was very methodical and had everything ready. The ambulance men came for her - their heads reached the bedroom ceiling before they had got to the top of the stairs. I helped to get her ready to go to hospital, but she was too far gone and couldn't wait, so we had this little baby boy in the ambulance on the way to the hospital afterwards. Everything went off all right. I then went back to tell her husband, who was coming home but wasn't in time.

On another occasion when it was all quiet (*in the post*), some people came to the post from some very old cottages off Green Street. They couldn't get the toilet door open since the last air raid, as an old man had apparently had a heart attack or died of shock in there during the raid. They were the old wooden bench seat toilets, and when you pushed the door in, it caught his feet and wouldn't move. I was thin at the time, and I stood on their shoulders, opened the little tiny window at the side of the toilet and lifted him up by the collar of his shirt - it was made of that very strong material. I inched him up while they pushed the door until we could get his feet round the crack of the door. It wasn't a very nice job.

When the Maidstone & District bus depot in Nelson Road was bombed I volunteered to go out then. You could see what had happened - they had all run to the shelter, but then put their heads round the entrance to see the raid. A bomb came straight down and they were all killed. That was another dirty job, getting them out. We had to help the Rescue men get all the bits and pieces together and send them round to the mortuary. They got them back together, although the burnt ones were like cinders and broke as you touched them. We could only identify them by the things in their pockets that relatives recognised - watches or anything that wasn't burnt completely. We did our best.

There were some very old terraced houses near the RE (*Royal Engineers*) barracks in Brompton (*between Gillingham and Chatham*) that were blown to pieces. You could smell the bugs as soon as

you went there; it was so riddled with them. We had to get the people out of those still standing, but the old ones wouldn't come for us. We had to get the police in. They certainly wouldn't go to the shelters! There was a little baby there - its mother was holding it but it was dead. I took that from her- and got her into the ambulance, and then they took the baby with them. You don't realise what it all means, now.

My husband was the ARP officer at the wardens' post, but he retired, so I didn't want to stop there, and transferred to the St John's Ambulance in Richmond Road School, as an ambulance attendant. The Red Cross had the other half of the school. We were called out on private emergency jobs, when there were no raids on for the hospitals and maternity homes. The air raids brought a lot (*of premature labours*) on! On quiet mornings we always had the ambulances out in the school playgrounds and polished them inside and out, engines and all. They had never been cleaned so much in their lives. Everything was all sparkling! We needed something to break the monotony after an exciting night of raids.

In night raids, everyone had to turn out, whether they were on days or nights. If the incident was a long way off, we often had to walk there, but any lorry driver would stop and give us a lift - they had been told to do so. We got to know a lot of them, but many of them already knew me from when we were fruit farmers. When the soldiers and sailors were joining their ships, they used to travel on the dockyard railway. The singing and shouting was amazing, even at night. We used to live in a terraced house then (*the early part of the war*), which backed on to the (*dockyard*) railway.

During the period of heavy raids on London, I had my post on top of a cinema (*in Green Street. opposite the General Post Office in Gillingham*). I sounded the warning from there, by turning the handle on the siren. As we looked across to Sheerness the sky was black where the Germans had got their fleet that far, when all of a sudden our Spitfires appeared from our way, where they were stationed, and there was a proper fight over where the Thames met the Medway. We saw a lot of them come down in flames, and our men (the RAF) won. I think it was the morning after that raid, we were in our post and this man walked in. I didn't recognise his (*uniform*) - his coat was all dirty. He asked in English where the nearest police station was. He wanted to give himself up; he was a German who managed to get out of his plane, so he was taken off to the police station. When I came off duty I went with the Head Warden to look at some of the damage, so that we could learn by that. We went into the orchard where there was (*wreckage*) and I said "Look, there are legs up there". The plane(s) had blown to pieces and there were legs up in the trees, still with their jackboots on (*long flying boots, in this case*). The Rescue men came and got them down. There were a lot killed then. That was off Watling Street (*on the East side of Gillingham, towards Ralnham*). We picked up a lot of bits of their planes. My boy still has some of them (for example, a circular slide rule and the start of a machine-gun belt). We laid them up and when they weren't collected (*at the end of the 2nd war*) we had them ourselves.

We never knew when we were going to find holes in our ceilings from the shrapnel dropped by our own guns. Many years afterwards when I had the roof of our house in Trinity Road (*no. 36*) re-tiled we found lots of pieces of shrapnel up there, where it had pierced the slates. When shrapnel hit the tin bath at the back of 101 Richmond Road (*where Mrs Robinson lived at the beginning of the 2nd war*), it knocked the rabbit's hutch over. It was up on boxes off the ground, and was covered up with

old mackintoshes to keep him warm and dry - my son's (*Douglas's*) pet. He was still squeaking for his food when he heard me coming by. The coats saved him!

I remember a landmine dropping through the bedroom window of a house in Gillingham. This thing was stuck out of the window and half on the bed. I believe it killed somebody in there, but I'm not sure now. It didn't go off, so I suppose there was a fault in it. The Navy or Army used to come and dismantle them, and they allowed some of us wardens off-duty to come and watch. That would have wiped out half of Gillingham if it had gone off (*exaggeration - she was joking!*). At least, part of the High Street! (*True*). The landmines were very big. They came down on parachutes and settled their noses in the ground. They made tremendous craters when they went off. The RE Bomb Disposal used to come and take the essential part out. We had to stay well away behind walls for that, but then we could go and see it. They (the bomb disposal men) used to be dripping with sweat by the time they had done it. They were shaped more like torpedoes than normal bombs. I was given part of one of the parachutes and made some things out of it - it was beautiful nylon, with silk cords. I remember when one came down its parachute spread over the Lines (*a large common between Gillingham and Chatham, once used as a military camp ground and exercise area*). Its nose was sat in the cellar grating of a house (*in Marlborough Road, along the east side of the Lines*). Again, it didn't go off. The Bomb Disposal people came and worked hard on it and got the exploding part (*detonator*) out of it, and then they lifted it out.

After the 2nd War

Between the 2 wars most houses had gas, not electricity. In Gillingham the Council was the electricity company, and we also had the Fixed Price Lighting Company, until a long time after the 2nd War. They bought electricity from the Council and people paid them weekly according to how many light sockets or plugs they had, not how much they used. I think we paid 1/5d or 1/10d per week (*7p or 9p*). We used to turn our electric irons upside down on a stand of some sort and fry our breakfast on it! It was very cheap. We didn't pay for bulbs, we just took the old ones back, and we could always have a new iron if we wanted one. Their fittings (and voltages) were different to the Council's. The fuse-box and transformer for the whole street was down in our cellar, so they gave us a free light fitting (*in the cellar*) for that.

At the end of the 2nd War we wanted a dog. My husband came home one day and took me up to Gillingham police station, where we got Rex. He was a young Great Dane who had never been claimed, and would have been put to sleep. He was a lovely dog, and would guard Daniel's father when he was a baby, walking along with his nose in the pram. He could lay his muzzle on the table and get your joint of meat without stretching. The kids used to ride on his back like a pony. Too many used to get on at once, so I made them pack it up. He loved to go on route marches with the soldiers from the barracks. He would hear them start off and go and meet them. He would be gone all day, go back to the barracks with them, and come home with a big bone in his mouth! He always came home safe – he was a happy dog. My husband was working then in the RE Records Office (*then at Brompton, between Gillingham and Chatham. It moved to Brighton later*).

My eldest son Douglas was born in 1927, and (*after evacuation to Neath*) went into the Merchant Navy during the 2nd war. They took them younger than the (*Royal*) Navy. He went to a Merchant Navy school first, and was then assigned to a ship. He was abroad when he was 16 (*in 1943*). He

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100 101 102 103 104 105 106 107 108 109 110 111 112 113 114 115 116 117 118 119 120 121 122 123 124 125 126 127 128 129 130 131 132 133 134 135 136 137 138 139 140 141 142 143 144 145 146 147 148 149 150 151 152 153 154 155 156 157 158 159 160 161 162 163 164 165 166 167 168 169 170 171 172 173 174 175 176 177 178 179 180 181 182 183 184 185 186 187 188 189 190 191 192 193 194 195 196 197 198 199 200 201 202 203 204 205 206 207 208 209 210 211 212 213 214 215 216 217 218 219 220 221 222 223 224 225 226 227 228 229 230 231 232 233 234 235 236 237 238 239 240 241 242 243 244 245 246 247 248 249 250 251 252 253 254 255 256 257 258 259 260 261 262 263 264 265 266 267 268 269 270 271 272 273 274 275 276 277 278 279 280 281 282 283 284 285 286 287 288 289 290 291 292 293 294 295 296 297 298 299 300 301 302 303 304 305 306 307 308 309 310 311 312 313 314 315 316 317 318 319 320 321 322 323 324 325 326 327 328 329 330 331 332 333 334 335 336 337 338 339 340 341 342 343 344 345 346 347 348 349 350 351 352 353 354 355 356 357 358 359 360 361 362 363 364 365 366 367 368 369 370 371 372 373 374 375 376 377 378 379 380 381 382 383 384 385 386 387 388 389 390 391 392 393 394 395 396 397 398 399 400 401 402 403 404 405 406 407 408 409 410 411 412 413 414 415 416 417 418 419 420 421 422 423 424 425 426 427 428 429 430 431 432 433 434 435 436 437 438 439 440 441 442 443 444 445 446 447 448 449 450 451 452 453 454 455 456 457 458 459 460 461 462 463 464 465 466 467 468 469 470 471 472 473 474 475 476 477 478 479 480 481 482 483 484 485 486 487 488 489 490 491 492 493 494 495 496 497 498 499 500 501 502 503 504 505 506 507 508 509 510 511 512 513 514 515 516 517 518 519 520 521 522 523 524 525 526 527 528 529 530 531 532 533 534 535 536 537 538 539 540 541 542 543 544 545 546 547 548 549 550 551 552 553 554 555 556 557 558 559 560 561 562 563 564 565 566 567 568 569 570 571 572 573 574 575 576 577 578 579 580 581 582 583 584 585 586 587 588 589 590 591 592 593 594 595 596 597 598 599 600 601 602 603 604 605 606 607 608 609 610 611 612 613 614 615 616 617 618 619 620 621 622 623 624 625 626 627 628 629 630 631 632 633 634 635 636 637 638 639 640 641 642 643 644 645 646 647 648 649 650 651 652 653 654 655 656 657 658 659 660 661 662 663 664 665 666 667 668 669 670 671 672 673 674 675 676 677 678 679 680 681 682 683 684 685 686 687 688 689 690 691 692 693 694 695 696 697 698 699 700 701 702 703 704 705 706 707 708 709 710 711 712 713 714 715 716 717 718 719 720 721 722 723 724 725 726 727 728 729 730 731 732 733 734 735 736 737 738 739 740 741 742 743 744 745 746 747 748 749 750 751 752 753 754 755 756 757 758 759 760 761 762 763 764 765 766 767 768 769 770 771 772 773 774 775 776 777 778 779 780 781 782 783 784 785 786 787 788 789 790 791 792 793 794 795 796 797 798 799 800 801 802 803 804 805 806 807 808 809 810 811 812 813 814 815 816 817 818 819 820 821 822 823 824 825 826 827 828 829 830 831 832 833 834 835 836 837 838 839 840 841 842 843 844 845 846 847 848 849 850 851 852 853 854 855 856 857 858 859 860 861 862 863 864 865 866 867 868 869 870 871 872 873 874 875 876 877 878 879 880 881 882 883 884 885 886 887 888 889 890 891 892 893 894 895 896 897 898 899 900 901 902 903 904 905 906 907 908 909 910 911 912 913 914 915 916 917 918 919 920 921 922 923 924 925 926 927 928 929 930 931 932 933 934 935 936 937 938 939 940 941 942 943 944 945 946 947 948 949 950 951 952 953 954 955 956 957 958 959 960 961 962 963 964 965 966 967 968 969 970 971 972 973 974 975 976 977 978 979 980 981 982 983 984 985 986 987 988 989 990 991 992 993 994 995 996 997 998 999 1000 1001 1002 1003 1004 1005 1006 1007 1008 1009 1010 1011 1012 1013 1014 1015 1016 1017 1018 1019 1020 1021 1022 1023 1024 1025 1026 1027 1028 1029 1030 1031 1032 1033 1034 1035 1036 1037 1038 1039 1040 1