

## David Pickford

Narrative, as below, and recorded reading his own story on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2013 by Richard Pickford.

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### DAVID PICKFORD – BORN 1932

As told in MAY 2013

I am the youngest of a family of five boys and two girls. We were all born in ‘The Bell’ in Great Easton.

My first memory of the war was sitting on the triangle of grass outside the Great Easton Village Hall because a bus had brought the evacuee children to the Hall and anybody who had a spare room came to get the children. I was looking forward to some boys to play with and then Mrs Buster Brown had two boys Harry and Lenny Bridges who were about my age who became good friends. I played with them every day after school except Mondays when Mrs Brown did her washing, and while the “copper” was hot they had to have their weekly bath. The Gibsons at ‘Battailes’ had the two Atkinson brothers. Bob Farrow at ‘The Green Man’, Mill End Green, had Ronald and Donald Sleeth and – as he had riding ponies – the two boys helped looking after the ponies, and at school they ran around hitting their backsides with a stick as if they were ‘geeing’ a horse up. Mrs Tyler had their sister Daisy. Nearly everybody had a child, but I can’t remember the names of the others. School was alternated between the school building and the Village Hall. The village children had either mornings at school and afternoons in the Village Hall, or vice versa the following week. After a few weeks a lot of the evacuees returned to London, so by using the staff room we could all get in to the school again.

Air raid shelters were built on the right hand side of the school with escape tunnels on the ends. We had to practise crawling out in the dark as there were no lights in the air raid shelters. There were also blast walls in front of the school doors.

One morning Bonnie Harrison turned up at the school having been bombed out in London. He sat next to me and we have been mates ever since.

To start with we spent our spare time collecting scrap iron which was piled on the village green, and paper that was stored in a garage at Snow Hill for the war effort. In the summer we killed white butterflies with twiggy sticks as a form of pest control and collected rose hips for rose hip syrup; I think as a supplement for Vitamin C because there were no oranges.

“French Letters” (condoms) were everywhere. One thing I remember is a boy called “Rofey” (I think his real name was Edward Townsend) who put one on a tap in the senior’s cloak room at Easton School. He filled it with water and it was about 4 foot long across the floor. Us boys all stood round, and it burst just as Mrs Langman (the Headmistress) came in. The floor was flooded. And I think Rofey got the stick.

At lunch times I would leave the school at 12 o'clock to have my lunch at home. One day I started down the school path, got by the big oak tree on the right hand side and heard a bang above. Pieces of aluminium fell from the sky. Two Hurricanes had collided. One came down at Neville's Farm, and the other behind the cottages with the pump at the front on Easton Hill.

The Home Guard was formed with Captain Steele (who was at the relief of Mafeking in the Boer War) in charge. People started making hurdles in Brewer's Mead, which I think were going to be put out to hinder gliders if they landed. The river was dug out, and a big willow tree by the side of the ford was cut down. A tank trap was dug between the river and Croys Grange; concrete bollards were built on the Cox Hill side of the ford, with fixings of steel cables. There was a man-hole with a small tunnel going under the road. I think the idea was to enable the road to be blown up if necessary. The pill boxes were built.

Black Out was imposed and Frank Saitch was the air raid warden. His son was killed at the beginning of the war, as a Wellington bomber pilot, and was mentioned in a book called "Bomber Command Continues". He would go round the village on his bike blowing a whistle when the siren went, and round the village again ringing a bell for the "all clear". I think Polly Rolf did the same at Duton Hill.

My father took me to see where the bombs had dropped at Debden, and a Dutch Barn that was hit at Pledgdon Hall. Mrs Capel of Essex House woke us one night calling, "Fred Pickford can you come because there is a bomb on the house". My father got us all up and we had to go down the garden and lie down behind a bank while he went to see what the trouble was. The bombs we were all frightened of were the land mines that came down by parachute, and I think he must have thought it was an unexploded land mine. As it turned out it was an unexploded incendiary that had gone through the roof. So he put it in a bucket of sand, took it outside in the garden, and we all went back to bed.

For a time we slept downstairs under a big table, but that didn't last long and we all went back to our beds again.

One night a bomb dropped between the river and 'Battailes'. In the same stick a bomb hit an oak tree in the corner of the field opposite Hill Farm, and an oil bomb dropped in the same field. There was also a stick of bombs dropped over Broomhills about the same time. To the best of my knowledge, there are still two unexploded bombs in Dew Wood.

When London was fire bombed you could see the glow in the sky from the village. Chelmsford was also bombed on a Thursday night so there was no cattle market on the Friday. Buster Brown, who drove the cattle float, had to bring not only the cattle and pigs back, but also the chickens and rabbits that he took for the people in the village. Nearly everybody kept either a pig (which I think we were allowed to keep half of) or chickens, rabbits or goats. Posters were put up for 'Dig for Victory' and warning us not to touch personnel bombs because some of them looked like toys.

Len Ledgeton was unfit for military service so he was sent to London repairing bomb damage. He told my father about some building materials being sold, so my father went to London and took me with him. I remember the underground station having bunk beds down the side, and when we got out into the street a crane with a big steel ball was knocking down the walls of burned out buildings. Lorries were carting the rubble to clear the street and dumping it in a park. It was a huge heap of rubble with lorries driving up it and tipping the rubble at the top. My father left me with a policeman while he went into one of the buildings that was not very safe. The policeman had to go, and left me alone – I was not very happy!

First my brothers Tony and Bert went away to the Merchant Navy, because my father thought they would be better off there than in the trenches as it was in the First World War. As nearly all my father's workmen had been called up, or those unfit for military service had been directed to war work, he rented Bush Farm, Gallows Green, next to Hyde Farm that my brother Jack was farming as a dairy farm. I remember going into the meadow behind Blamsters Hall where there were between twenty and thirty heavy horses. They were Brewer's Dray horses that had been brought out of London because of the Blitz. My father, with other farmers, bought some for working the land. Ours was a huge shire horse called Kitty. She did a lot of work such as carting corn, and horse-hoeing sugar beet. Nearly everything except ploughing, for which we used a Fordson tractor – which we used when we could get it started!

Kitty had a foal and therefore she was in milk when we were using her for hoeing sugar beet one day. I was leading her up the rows when the hoe broke. Tony sent me down to the farm to get a bolt. When I got back with the bolt he had a bottle of milk and he said he'd been down to Jack's who had a dairy farm and got it from him. I drank some and it tasted sweet so I told Tony. He said, "Yes, Jack put some honey in it". I found out later that he had milked Kitty and that is what I had to drink!

When the horse was shod I was put on its back to take it up to John Rolf the blacksmiths. He would shoe it then put me back on its back to take it home.

Tony was home because he had been taken very ill with peritonitis in Buenos Aires. He was in hospital for some time before catching another merchant ship home. He was now C3 (unfit for service) so he stayed at home and worked the farm. I thought this was great because I had someone sleeping in the bedroom again – it had gone from a bedroom sleeping five boys to just me which had got very lonely.

Things got a lot better when Tony got home because he poached pheasants that he shot with a catapult at night. He made his own lead balls about half an inch in diameter that he used in the catapult and they made no sound. He always went out when it was a very strong wind and it was raining because that was when the pheasants sat lower in the trees. He also shot young rooks when they first came out of the nest and sat on a branch before flying. My mother would skin them and use the legs and breasts to make rook pie.

The first Americans that came were the Engineers to Easton Lodge to clear the parkland and build an air field. There were explosions all day long as they cut down the trees and then blasted out the roots. To start with they couldn't understand why we didn't take any notice when the siren went, but they soon discovered most of the time there was nothing to worry about.

I went with my father to see them laying the concrete runways and infrastructure. They worked in shifts, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and I think it took about thirteen months from start to finish.

The first airfield that opened was Saling. The first American aircraft that went in there were B17 Flying Fortresses. After a very short time they changed to Marauders B26's, the same as Little Easton and Stansted. We learned to know which airfield they were from by the yellow markings on the tails.

The Americans were very good to us children, we could go into the cook house and they would give us a dinner even if they sometimes put the sweet in the same compartment on the tray as the main meal. I even had ice cream sometimes at the camp – something we never saw at home.

One day we went in for a meal and they said, "You kids are not having anything to eat until you do some work for us". So they put a bucket load of hard boiled eggs in front of us and told us to peel them. We were peeling them, one of the other boys was Bernard Chapman, and he was eating as many as he peeled (he must have been very constipated!).

The other thing we did was go through the dust bins because when someone was shot down they threw most of his personal stuff away. Most of us kids specialised in different things: sweets, badges, models, clothes and shoes. My personal speciality was shoes; my mother would sell them for me in the pub at 10 shillings a pair.

We learned to live with explosives. There were 50 calibre bullets everywhere. We learned that the black tips were armour piercing, and when the copper covering was taken off they made very good centre punches – I still have one. Blue tips were tracers, and if you scratched the piece of lead out behind the bullets, stuck it in the ground and put a match to it, it would go up like a flare. Red ones were explosives, which we didn't play around with!

The beer quota came into the pub on a Thursday. By Sunday it was normally sold out so the Americans would buy bottles. On a Saturday morning I had to go and pick up the empty bottles with my hand cart and take them back to the pubs. I got 3d a bottle for this.

The bomb dumps caught fire when the Marauders were at Easton Lodge. For several days there were explosions until they finally managed to put the fire out. When the bomber crews were confined to base, some of them always broke the curfew and when the MPs came they would hide in one of the private rooms in the pub, or my mother would put them down the cellar. The only time no-one came out was the night before D-Day. My father said something big must be happening, and sure enough when the planes came home the next morning they were all painted with black and white stripes.

The crashed planes were dumped on the left hand side of the road above the manor ponds and we would get aluminium and Perspex for making rings, brooches, models and all sorts. When the Americans left for France, they were limited to how much kit they could take so they had to dump a lot of their personal things, such as sheets and clothing. I collected a lot up, put it in sacks, then borrowed my brother Frank's pony and cart the next day to bring it home. Once again, my mother sold it all for me in the pub.

My sister Ruth drove a small pick up truck and she went round some of the Army camps picking up the swill (waste food) which she took to Mayslands Farm where it was cooked by steam being blown into tubs. This was then fed to the pigs. Every able-bodied man or woman had to do some form of work. If they had no job, they would be directed to some form of employment.

On the evening of D-Day just about everybody in the village went to Church. It was the first time I had ever seen Great Easton Church full. For V.E. Day we built bonfires on the village green with great celebrations, which were all repeated for V.J. Day.

When a pig was killed it had to be salted. This meant my mother broke up big blocks of salt that we had to rub into the pork, making sure we got it into the corners next to the bones. She then laid it in big earthenware pots, covering each layer with salt. If you had a cut on your finger this made it very sore. Eggs were also preserved in earthenware pots in the spring and summer using something called 'water glass', I think.

Farmers had to use a percentage of their land to grow sugar beet. The only seed drill they had put the seed in far too thick. This meant they had to be singled by hand. This was done by a man walking down the row cutting through the row about every six inches. The women and children then went behind pulling the remaining and just leaving the strongest plant so that it finished up with one sugar beet plant every six inches. The field was then horse-hoed between the rows to keep the weeds down.

At harvest time the beet lifter moved them enough so they could be pulled and knocked together to get as much dirt off as possible and thrown into heaps. Workers then came along and cut the tops off, and threw the best either straight onto a cart or back into heaps again. A lot of the work was done by Italian prisoners of war. About twenty would be dropped off at the farm in the morning with only one guard. They would work all day in the fields and be picked up again at night. If they could catch a rabbit or anything edible it would be skinned and put in the pot to eat. When the German POWs came they had two guards for every ten prisoners. Later on, some of the POWs lived on the farm. I used to feel sorry for the Italian prisoners of war, pulling beet on frosty mornings in what looked like very thin clothes, and with no cover apart from the trees and hedges when it rained or snowed.

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