

Memories of WW2 - Marie Gilham

From a Portsmouth schoolgirl

I was born in December 1930 so not quite eight when the war was started. I was the eldest child of Tom and Dorothy Gilham followed by Tom in 1934 and Kathleen in 1936. My father was a greengrocer with shops in Portsmouth. The one which operated during the war was in London Road, North End - the others were all damaged.

We were comfortably off and lived in a large four bedroom detached house on Havant Road in Cosham.

My father had been in the Navy in the First World War, and was already 40 when the second started. He also sold food so was not called up this time. My parents did not want us to be evacuated so in the summer of 1940, after air raids were intensifying on Portsmouth, we moved to a four roomed bungalow in North Boarhunt in the north side of Portsdown Hill, between Southwick and Wickham. My maternal grandmother also came with us so my mother was able to work in the shop.

There were four bungalows at the top of the lane leading southward from a pub on the main road called the Boars Head. Although they were not old "Pandora", as ours was called, had no electricity or running water. It was possible to install electricity but for water we had a well in the garden, and of course there was no bathroom, just a Privy in the garden, I do not remember much about my schooling from 1939 to 1940 but I went in 1937 to a private school in Drayton, followed by Tom in 1938. We had an Anderson air raid shelter in the garden but once we got to North Boarhunt the soil wasn't suitable so we had a Morrison, a bit like a billiard table in Pandora. We did not go to school for a year but when Kathleen was five in 1941 we all three went to Southwick primary school.

I was fortunate to pass the entrance exam to the then private Purbrook Park County high school (which became part of the state grammar school system after the 1944 Education Act) in the summer of 1942 when I was not yet 11, and was very happy there, obtaining my School Certificate in 1947 and the Higher School Certificate in 1949, just before these exams were changed.

For the first years we were often in the air raid shelters or under our desks and of course at home we spent many nights in the Morrison shelter as we could hear the air raids on Portsmouth.

We had a large garden and grew all manner of fruit and vegetables and kept chickens and rabbits. Roast chicken was the Christmas treat.

We went back to Cosham in 1944 before the end of the war, joining in with dancing in the street after VE Day and the street party after VJ day. We were very lucky as no family members were killed. I remained at Purbrook, not wishing to transfer to a Portsmouth school. I am thankful that I was a child - children were told very little those days and did not really appreciate at the time the awful dangers we were all under.