

Wartime Memories of Ian Archer

I was born on 9th April, 1940. My parents, Daisy and Fred had been married seventeen years when I arrived, their only child. My father worked at a factory in Portsmouth where he had been apprenticed as a young man. He and my mother were part-time caretakers for a solicitor, J.R.C. Miller of Portland Place (in recent years, renamed), Grove Road South, Southsea, a three-storey Georgian property where they occupied a basement flat, rent-free in return for their duties. Dad served in the Hampshire Regiment during the First World War and, because of his age, was not conscripted in the Second.

Portland Place (as was) is almost next door to St.Jude's Church and the crypt was used as an air-raid shelter during the early part of the war. I was told that, on one occasion after the 'all-clear' siren had sounded, my mother emerged with me in her arms and almost fainted with horror, seeing a number of heads rolling about in the road, before realising that they were from tailors' dummies blown out of the shattered windows from the shops in Palmerston Road!

After one air-raid when the windows of the flat were blown in, it was decided that, with a five-month old baby, it would be prudent to move away from Portsmouth to escape the bombing, or so my parents thought, so they re-located to Emsworth, where they rented an end of terrace cottage in The Gardens (renamed Bosmere Gardens in 1948 when the council estate was built). I have vivid wartime memories from the age of three (I can picture a third birthday card I received). The rush along to the air-raid shelter after the siren had sounded is fresh in my mind and the sound of that alarm in documentaries and films about the war still gives me the shivers. The tracer bullets were pretty and I was fascinated by the searchlights. From inside the shelter the boom of the ack-ack artillery was quite frightening. The engine sounds of the Luftwaffe aircraft were distinctive, a more 'throbbing' noise and I remember my father saying, 'They're Jerries'.

My mother used to go by bus into Portsmouth occasionally to shop. We were in a draper's shop in Southsea and I could just about see a cushion perched on a large wooden counter. Whilst we were there the siren sounded and customers and staff had to rush to the basement until the 'all-clear' sounded. I enjoyed, at the age of three, our visits to Portsmouth because I loved to see the several barrage balloons which were distributed round the skies of the city. On one occasion we managed to venture as far as Southsea seafront where I recall the great rolls of barbed wire on the beach. Back in Emsworth my mother was walking, with me in a pushchair towards Hollybank Woods where there was an army camp. A soldier with a rifle slung across his chest barred our way and turned us back -- a striking memory.

Ironically, since we had moved from Portsmouth to distance ourselves from the bombing (My father was still working in the city and I recall him leaving some evenings to do firewatching on the factory roof), we almost lost our lives when a bomb exploded literally feet away from our shelter, demolishing two houses in Harold Terrace. Fortunately, there were no casualties although our house suffered broken windows and a cracked gable end. I can still see the look of horror on my parents' faces at the moment of the explosion. I was very frightened. Strangely, this bomb is not shown on the map showing the locations of bombs dropped on Emsworth, held by the local museum. The space at the end of the terrace remained a bomb site until the early Seventies when a larger house was built where the two smaller cottages had been.

On 8th February, 1944 I was lying in bed, downstairs because it would have been easier to get me along to the shelter in the event of an air -raid (becoming rarer at that stage of the war) or a flying bomb, when I heard the sound of two aircraft flying around (I could actually discern the two separate engine sounds) when there was a very loud bang. This was another occasion when I was

terrified because, after the bang, the house shook as one of the aeroplanes skimmed the roof and this was followed by an explosion as the Mosquito, with its two-man crew crashed a few hundred yards away in what is now Brook Meadow. The other aircraft, a Wellington came down in the harbour with the loss of its five man crew, victims of a tragic accident. A booklet was published detailing the incident and there is a plaque to be seen on a bridge in Brook Meadow commemorating the pilot of the Mosquito, Arthur Woods, a film director in peacetime, and his Norwegian navigator.

My final (unless others come to mind later) memory is of my father holding me in his arms while standing in the doorway of the air-raid shelter, listening to an unusual sound approaching from the east. Shortly, a type of aircraft appeared low over Emsworth gasometer (not gasholder!). It was a flying bomb (V1, Doodlebug). In the bright moonlight it appeared to be silver although I now know that they were painted black. It passed harmlessly and crashed at Stockheath (now Leigh Park) I understand, exploding but causing no casualties.