

A child in Oxhey, in World War Two by Carol Ackhurst

Born in 1937, I slept through the beginning of the war, and when old enough to take stock of my world, assumed that this was normal life, and it would always be like that.

Whatever are we doing? The whole family is standing about doing nothing in the entrance hall of our house, and it is the middle of the night.

There is an air raid. We heard the air raid siren of our own village Oxhey, go off, a rather high pitched wavy warning. Also Bushey, and soon Watford too. The family scramble out of bed and Dad, whilst gathering me up, age about five or six, directs us down the stairs to the middle of the house to the hall. Dad has decided that it is probably the safest area of the house, as it has no windows, no danger of flying glass. We stood there listening to distant explosions Dad put me on the floor and I found myself eye to eye with his waist. He was wearing his brown city suit, which was designed to leave the bottom button on the waistcoat unbuttoned. I noticed that the bottom buttons did not even meet, so I took hold of one in each hand and tried to pull them together. I soon gave up. 'Humth' I said, 'too fat' and according to my father everyone shouted with laughter and felt a bit better!

But laughter got less and less. Nan explained the war to my sister Angela and me. There were goodies and baddies, the baddest baddy was Hitler, and the leading goody was Churchill, and he would definitely win, in the end. . . . Meanwhile the air raids carried on, always at night, bombs dropped on the golf course which surrounded our home, and incendiary bombs occasionally clanked down the roof. Nan and my sister and me now slept downstairs. The windows had been bricked over. When it got really noisy, my sister and I toddled across the hall and climbed into bed with Nan. One particularly busy night we could hear the bombs much nearer to us, each one preceded by the familiar horrible whistle, and the whole bed shaking with our combined trembling. 'This one is for us' said my sister, every time she heard the whistle begin. After a bit the All clear would ring out, on just one note.

In fact we were not right in the line of fire, which was undoubtedly London, so there were many not far from us who had a much worse time. One day Dad went out before breakfast and looked in the sky above London, We heard him observe that London had had another bad night. One summer night we were still in the garden at dusk when we heard a large number of aircraft approaching very low, right over our house. Dad looked up, and then at us in shock. We did not ask the question, I think we knew the answer. 'Get inside' he shouted. Back to the dark hall we went. I used to dream of aircraft fighting each other in the big tree at the bottom of our garden. I also used to hear our local air raid siren, which was Oxhey, in my sleep, then hear it for real when I woke up. I never did resolve that bizarre experience.

Dad decided to do his bit. He commuted to London every day, picking his way around rubble and bomb damage, but had time in light summer evenings and weekends. He dug up the lawn and planted vegetables. He tried to store all he could for the winter, and stored his large marrows in netting on the ceiling. One famously exploded all over him and the floor. He thought it was hilarious, but Mum was not so sure! None the less he was beginning to enjoy himself. He loved growing tomatoes and we all had to smell and eat them as soon as he'd picked them so that we got the newly picked smell.

Chickens arrived, for whom he made a run. There was a chief chicken who ran the show, and had to be first to the food, much of which was kitchen waste. This One day one of the chickens was broody, so Dad gave her some China (phoney) eggs, which she sat on happily, and a week or so later, he brought home some one day old chicks. My sister and I were allowed out with Dad after dark, with the chicks. The broody hen was a bit surprised to see us, but thrilled when she heard the little cheeps coming out of a cardboard box. My sister and I were totally enthralled. Dad let us take out the china eggs from under her and replace them with the chicks. It was such a warm furry cosy place. Our little hands were ideal. O happy hen! And happy me. It was a lovely magic experience for a little girl like me. Every day until they became independent, they wandered round the garden in a tight group, with mother scratching the earth and then standing back and called her babies to gather up the bugs she had unearthed. The chickens laid well, and the eggs

were stored in the bottom of the larder in Isinglass. The poultry department of our enterprise was going well.

We were beginning to enjoy our war! The bombs had stopped for the moment, Dad was a member of the A.R.P. (Air Raid Patrol) and he was an Air Raid Warden, which he enjoyed, and out of the friendships which forged at this time, came a GOOD. IDEA. One day Dad arrived home with a donkey. She was a gentle lazy patient addition to our family. My sister and I were thrilled, but discovered she was not a very good ride. She had one speed, which was 'slow'. I never saw her trot.

Dad set about building a cart for her to pull and with Jenny and her cart and two pigs, he created the Oxhey Rural Pigclub. The swill from people's homes was collected in dustbins in Jenny's cart and boiled up and mixed with some meal and the pigs grew big and fat! Every now and then Sunday lunch in our village would be a generous pork joint. Swill is anything in the dustbin that is edible - just.

Polly then arrived, after my sister and I had nagged Dad for a pony that could go a bit faster than Jenny, perhaps one that could actually trot? Polly was a real goer and could trot at a good speed, and with her trap, particularly during times of shortage of Petrel became our main mode of transport. Petrel was often unavailable, or in very short supply.

Isn't this impressive? Due to my father's enterprise, we are nearly self-sufficient. Food supplements arrived from the government. Dried eggs made very good omelets. The cod liver oil was endured, a spoonful a day, the orange pleased Mum, and she poured it into her gin, (leaving some for us of course!). Ration books provided the basics. Other sources included the Saturday meat delivery and was a great treat to my sister and I. We would look out for the butcher every Saturday, who arrived on his meat delivery cart, with a beautiful heavy piebald horse in the shafts, and he knew the route and needed no direction. As the butcher, after delivering our meat, was going to the farm, which was the end of the lane and then return, we were always invited to climb on board. Off our lovely piebald trotted, his back and his harness gleaming in the sun. It was the big moment of the week. For fish, Watford had a wonderful fishmonger. It smelt Devine, all open. I decided there and then that when I grew up I would buy a fishmonger shop and eat prawns all day. Sugar was the only thing that ran out. We all took a lot in tea and coffee, so we bought glucose. Sometimes fruit would be scarce and on rare occasions it was rumoured that the greengrocer in Bushey had bananas. Granny's neighbor would knock on the door and shout 'BANANAS' and then rush to join the queue.

During the war so far, my Mum had worked for the Red Cross, and our house had been the head quarters for this work. Knitting groups met there to make scarves, gloves and balaclavas. She used Polly and her trap to get about. But now there was a new and pleasurable project, to welcome the Polish soldiers, who came in and out, and made a fuss of us kids. The drawing room was much more fun than I could ever remember, the door open all the time and access unquestioned. Always before, it had been our parents' tidy drawing room. We made friends with the soldiers and one day a polish soldier pulled his trouser leg up and showed me the hole in his leg where a bullet had passed straight through it! Life was getting more colourful by the minute. We used to walk or cycle down the road to see the soldiers at the Ack Ack station, but unfortunately never at night when it was for real. From home we used to watch the bright rays move across the sky in search of enemy aircraft and know that a friend made today could be gone tomorrow. Of course, my sister and I were longing for a German plan to land on the golf course, or crash and burst into flames, but no such luck!

At the end of it, we had a procession through the village, (very slowly) led by Jenny with her cart, with all the children following, with much shouting, singing and flag waving, probably speeches too, had I listened. I was just furious that my sister was chosen to lead Jenny, and I had to be with the children following with their flags.

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