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| Gordon Leslie Webb (1923-2008) | | | |
| Work & War | | | |
| During August 1937 I left Alvaston and Boulton Church of England School, aged 14 and went to work at Leys Malleable Castings, Colombo Street Foundry, Derby. | | | |
| Ewart Chainbelt Ltd. were next door to Leys, and made and fitted water-cooled covers that lowered on to the top of chimneys when an air raid warning sounded; this was to stop bombers seeing the glow from the furnace chimneys. | | | |
| In 1940, during an air raid, a bomb fell on the foundries each side of the power station at Leys. A few yards closer and Leys and Ewarts would have been closed down. | | | |
| I had a work mate called Ronnie Rowlands and he would borrow a horse and dray from somewhere to do light carting. We went once with the horse and cart down Harvey Road, Alvaston, Derby, from the Blue Peter Public House to the Mitre Hotel and there was no traffic all the way, not even a bicycle or pram. He and a Ruby Priestley were the one’s who were killed at Park Gates, at the junction of Ascot Drive and London Road, Derby, on their bikes going home from Ewarts 2-10pm shift on Wednesday 15th January 1941. I would probably have been with him but my shift was changed to 6-2pm. A German plane had dropped a butterfly bomb and killed both of them. A butterfly bomb was the size of a cocoa tin with a 4” spiked fuse underneath and wings on the top. The wings spun round slowly allowing the bomb to hit the ground sometime after the plane had gone. It made a crater about 4ft across and 3” deep. This type of bomb was anti-personnel and not for causing extensive damage. Ronald Roland was 18 and lived at 1146 London Road. Ruby Manifold Priestley was also 18 and the daughter of Arthur Earnest and Doris Elizabeth Priestly of 2 Wildsmith Street, Alvaston. | | | |
| I once worked two shifts from 7:30am to 7:30pm and 7:30pm to 7:30am. When I was on nights I used to go and meet the girl I was walking out with coming to Leys, where she worked from 8:00am. I would see her into work for 8:00am and then ride home on my bike down Osmaston Road, passing Nightingale Road, between 8:00am and 8:10am. The building at the corner of Nightingale Road and Osmaston Road was called the Rialto Ballroom and had a large clock sticking out on brackets. We set our time by this going to and from work either peddling faster or slowing down. On Monday 27th July 1942 it was a rain soaked night, the red alert raid warning light kept coming on about every hour and it meant shutting down the machines and going to the air raid shelter. Some of the warnings only lasted ten minutes, so it meant coming back into the workshop and starting the machines, setting them up and then trying to earn some money, bearing in mind we were on piece work. When 7:30am came I was so tired I decided to go home, passing the clock at about 7:35am to 7:40am. At about the same time a low flying German Dornier bomber flew across Nottinghamshire heading west. It passed over Weston-on-Trent and turned northwest to follow the railway line over Chellaston and on toward Derby. It was caught in a barrage balloon cable, which was cut through by the toughened steel edge of the plane’s wing but not before it had caused damage to the plane and disrupted the bombers targeting. At about 8:05am to 8:10am it dropped its load of four bombs on Rolls-Royce factory, Derby. Only one hit the factory, with the rest landing on nearby streets, the occupants of which accounted for the majority of the 23 killed, some near the clock. It was the only direct hit on Rolls Royce throughout the war, even though it was a significant target. | | | |
| Most of my mates had signed up for the forces. My best friend, Jack Froggatt had joined the Navy. I decided to go along to the Assembly Rooms at the east end of Derby Market Place to join up. I filled in the papers and was asked how long it would take me to do a test piece. This would involve bending a piece of metal into a kind of horseshoe shape, drilling a hole through it and making a keyway using hacksaws, files and a micrometer. I said it would take me about 8 hours, this impressed them as most tradesmen had said it would take them about a week. As I queued up for a medical a smart naval man called my name, he asked me if I worked at Ewarts and said I was wanted back at work. He took my papers and sent me away. When I returned to work the manager was waiting for me and he was furious, he asked me why I wanted to sign up when he was desperately trying to find skilled men. | | | |
| My foreman was Joe Wright, my father’s cousin, he was probably the main instigator in ensuring I did not join up. If I did anything wrong he would tell my father, he told Joe that if I was such a problem then he should sack me, but Joe would not do this, as I was such a good worker. | | | |
| One day the manager came to me and told me to get a bag of tools on my bike and report to the chief engineer at Celanese, Spondon. When I got there I was put with the Millwrights and asked to check over an elevator, which they built to feed coal to the boiler house. I checked the casing, chain, buckets, bearings, shafts and motors; everything was spot on and I could not understand why I had been sent for when their fitters were such good tradesmen. I went to the chief engineer for the key to start the plant but he told me I could not have it until Saturday morning, it was Tuesday afternoon then. The Millwrights took me around the different plants until Saturday when I was allowed to switch on and run the elevator. Monday morning when I returned to Ewarts I found out that Government officials had been there looking for me to work in the shipyards and had been told all the platers etc., were out on site and not available. Firms used to work in with one another to keep labour. | | | |
| While I was at Ewart Chainbelt I went on site a number of times; a mechanised foundry at Bradford, a monorail conveyor at Harrison’s foundry at Lincoln, and a swing tray elevator through four floors at Hayes Mill Leigh, Lancashire.  In February 1944 I was working at a factory called Luxfer, this was the other side of Nottingham, it was classed as a shadow factory. It made jerry cans, incendiary bomb casings and anti-aircraft rocket casings. Also made there were Path Finder bombs; these consisted of a tube filled with incendiary bombs, an explosive bomb at one end and fins at the other end. The idea of these was for a plane to find the target and drop the bombs on the target. The bomb exploded and threw the incendiaries in an umbrella shape all around. The following bombers clocked on to the fires and dropped their explosive bombs on the target. Another fitter and I had to put up a conveyor over the girls working on the benches and the only time this could be done was during the night. We tried to get bus passes to go home each day but were unable for short terms. We decided to sleep in the beds in the de-contamination centre, with sandwiches from the canteen and tap water to drink. One night the managing director came to see how we were getting on and asked how we went about getting something to eat, we told him and he walked away. About 2:00am the tannoy came on and a voice said “will the two fitters in No. 2 Factory come to the canteen where their supper is poured out” when we got there the Luxfer managing director had gone around the canteen and found many leftovers, put them in a frying pan and made a fry-up. It was hot, plenty of it and very welcome, plus mugs of tea. When we finished the conveyor we were able to go back on days. We managed to get a bus-pass on the Barton Buses, so we could get home every night. | | | |
| War and Home | | | |
| On the evening before war broke out on the Sunday 3rd September 1939, I was sixteen and stood in the garden of № 16 Courtland Drive, Alvaston, Derby, in pouring rain, in my yellow cycle cape, watching 6 out of 8 barrage balloons brought down on fire by lightening. The steel wire tethers fell across the trolley bus wires and shorted out nearly all of Derby’s power. Shortly after this the sirens sounded but it was a false alarm. Next door at № 14 lived Mr. and Mrs. Baines and their two lads. Mr. Baines worked at the railway in the offices and he managed to obtain a load of railway sleepers to use for an air-raid shelter. My father and Mr. Baines, with a little help from me, dug a hole between the two gardens, about 8 feet by 8 feet by 8 feet, ensuring that equal area was allocated to both families by spanning the boundary. The railway sleepers were put in a box shape and interlocked in one another and designed to hold eight people. | | | |
| Courtlands Drive 1941 | | Courtland Drive Air Raid Shelter  ~  1940  ~  (Picture taken from №16) | |
| My mother decided to build brick walls to hold back the soil from falling in at the sides of the passage leading down to the entrance. So she turned the dustbin lid over and mixed the cement in it. She bricked up the sides wider at the top than the bottom to stop the earth sliding in. The entrance was exactly on the boundary of the two gardens, the door being made from a section of a skylight from a derelict cowshed that stood at the end of the footpath on Elvaston Lane that led from Field Lane. All the while we had the shelter, until the end of the war, we never had any water seep in, and it was always dry. At the end of the war we dug the sleepers out and cut them up for logs for the fire. | | | |
| Word went around that gasmasks had arrived at the Nunsfield House, Boulton Lane, Alvaston, and needed assembling. The mask consisted of a face piece, filter, large elastic band and a cardboard box to carry it in. The noise was terrific with people talking and fitting one another with gasmasks to get the right size and then boxing them up to take them home. | | | |
| Our relatives in Canada offered to take in my sister, Janet, who was only seven years old, for her safety throughout the war. Enquiries were made and papers filled in and a place was available on a sailing to Canada. However at the last moment my mother decided she would not send Janet and the family would remain together. On 17th September 1940 a German U-Boat attacked the evacuee ship SS City of Bernares, en route to Canada, killing 258 of the 401 on board, including 80 of the 100 children passengers. | | | |
| A.R.P. Air Raid Precautions Services | | | |
| When war started my father joined the A.R.P. in the First Aid section, and I joined as a messenger boy. Our ambulances were Alvaston Laundry vans converted to hold stretchers. | | | |
| IMG_4168.jpg | C:\Users\Ian\Pictures\Alvaston Pictures Sep\London Road Alvaston\20220131_110016915_iOS.jpg | | |
| I stayed in the A.R.P. until the Home Guard started in 1940. During the time I was in the A.R.P. Dunkirk evacuation took place and we had to go to Derby Railway station to stretcher off soldiers to hospital. Those above decided that we should learn how to use a rifle in case we had to take any off the soldiers so that we could avoid any accident. We went on a course at Alvaston camp, which was at the side of Alvaston Lake and then went to the rifle range where Ascot Drive is now. | | | |
| Home Guard | | | |
| Home Guard Portrait | | | |
| At the corner of Raynesway and London Road stood a blue police box where I signed up for the Home Guard on 9th August 1940, just three days after my seventeenth birthday. When I joined the Home Guard, which was known at the time as the Local Defence Volunteers, I became the only one who had fired a rifle since 1918. We had no uniform or weapons, only an armband, which read L.D.V., which we said, stood for “Look, Duck and Vanish”. None of us felt inclined, armed only with a cricket bat, to stand up to a fully trained German Paratrooper. The first uniform we were given was a pair of boots and overalls. The man on guard was issued with one rifle with five rounds of ammunition for use. | | | |
| The R.A.F. had two camps at Alvaston; one was at Curzon Lane for the Balloon Barrage and the other was at Meadow Lane for R.A.F. men based with the Royal Engineers.  They were with the Engineers for training on machines at the Railway Workshops. | | | Balloon |
| During the winter of 1940, in a heavy snowstorm, a knock came around midnight on our front door in Courtlands Drive, Alvaston. When my father opened it, it was my uncle Sergeant Dave Pickard of the R.A.F. aged about 40, he fell into the hallway with his full marching kit. The R.A.F. squad had landed at Midland Road railway station and had been told to make their way to H.Q. at Ashfield House, which I believe was on Osmaston Road. My Uncle had said he would see them in the morning as he was going to make his was to his sister’s house. He reported next morning and was granted a Billet at our house during the winter months. When spring came the R.A.F. was put under canvas in bell tents just inside the gate at Meadow Lane with the R.E’s. At weekends I would go on my bicycle to the camp and ask at the Guard House to speak to Sergeant Dave Pickard, who would go back and obtain a pass for a few hours to go to his sisters, this went on until he was posted overseas. I cannot remember how long the R.A.F. was at this camp. | | | |
| Home Guard | | | |
| 14 Battalion C. Company Home Guard, Alvaston, Derby  *(Gordon Webb second from the left, middle row)* | | | |
| We used the caretaker’s old house at Alvaston and Boulton School, Elvaston Lane, for our Headquarters. We would march to St. Michael and All Angels, Alvaston Parish Church, to take position on the tower for one hour before dawn and one hour before sunset. | | | |
| IMG_0613.jpg  (Alvaston Church. photo taken in 2021) | | | |
| I loved to see the sunrise and hear the farmer from the farm behind the church calling his cows up for milking. One could see the mist actually roll in across the fields in the early morning and see the frost drop. I had to leave my rifle inside the door at the bottom of the tower because it was a religious building. I was instructed to ring a bell if I saw any paratroopers, unfortunately or fortunately I never had the opportunity to pull the ropes. I was also advised not to take my boots off as feet swell up during the night and it would be difficult to put them back on. I, of course took no notice of these old soldiers tales until the next morning when I had to go out on cycle patrol to Shardlow and had to pedal the bike in my stocking feet. The pedals were made of steel and were called ‘rat-traps’. | | | |
| Having to work 12 hours a day 7:30am to 7:30pm, it was difficult to report for duty on time. I would cycle back to Alvaston after work where my father waited for me by the roadside and passed me a haversack as I cycled past. This contained my supper for when I was on duty up the church tower. To save time I would go to work in my uniform on parade days. | | | |
| Later weapons arrived from America, some of which had been taken off gangsters. I had a Thompson sub-machine gun, which had a round magazine holding 50 rounds of 0.45 cartridges. For a short time Canadian Ross rifles were given out, followed by American Springfields. As we progressed we were taken to various rifle ranges, one was at Farnah Green near Belper called ‘Firestone’ and another at Trent Station on the way to Nottingham. The one at Trent had 16 targets and was about two thousand yards long. We also went to bombing ranges at Muggington and Chellaston Quarry Brick Works, where we fired various weapons and threw №36 hand grenades. | | | |
| One Saturday night / Sunday morning we were sent to guard the Old Cavendish Bridge at Shardlow (it has gone now having been washed away in the 1947 floods). I was in a weapon pit with a Lewis machine gun and was standing in about 4” of freezing water - why do they find these jobs in the middle of winter? An officer came up to me and told me to go to the nearby pub and have a rum in his name, while he looked after the gun. I had a double rum being as I wasn’t paying and then went back to the weapon pit. A short time later another officer turned up and said the same thing, off I went again for a double rum, I couldn’t believe my luck when later a third officer said the same thing to me. When I returned the third time I had a job to see the gun never mind the sights on it. The Germans didn’t come that night so all was well. | | | |
| Alvaston was bombed by a two-engined German plane. It flew down Alvaston Street and dropped two high explosive bombs in a field on the riverside of the street. One exploded then the other went off at lunchtime the next day. It also dropped an oil bomb and a canister of incendiaries. The oil bomb exploded but did not catch fire and the incendiary bombs burnt themselves out in the gravel pit fields. I do not think it intended to hit houses because as it flew past the church at a few hundred feet high it had its guns pointing vertically and had one of its engines misfiring. I never heard it crash because I was busy trying to get down off the tower roof, through the small hatch and down through the bells, together with three other guards, one of which could only just squeeze through the small hatch. | | | |
| One night I overheard the officers saying they could do with a DON.R. (Dispatch Rider). I said that I had a motorbike, thinking that I could pull a cushy job at H.Q. riding around the countryside. They told me to bring it down at the weekend so they could look at it and organise a ‘G’ Licence. Panic stations had arrived! I had four days to find a motorbike that was working, bearing in mind that nobody had been able to buy petrol for pleasure since 1939 and this was 1942. I was asking around at work when a fellow in the tool room said he had a 1931 B.S.A 350cc side-valve machine he would sell me for £12, I had just this amount in my post office savings. He kept the bike in running order and we managed to get a pint of petrol to get to H.Q. I had never been on a motorbike before so I had to push the bike from Deadmans Lane to Coutlands Drive. Sunday morning came and I started off with one foot in the gutter and first gear on the bike. Company H.Q. was at two houses opposite the Old Welcome Hotel, Brighton Road, Alvaston. By the time I reached H.Q. I had managed to get into top gear, which was top of three gears set in a gate on the side of the petrol tank. The officers examined the bike and passed it for the job; then gave me a licence and some petrol coupons. I tool the coupons to Walkers bike shop, which was at the corner of Raynesway and Shardlow Road (before they opened a garage further back). I forgot to mention that this adventure was in the middle of winter and we had a heavy fall of snow and of course there was no salting of roads. Army lorries and tanks could manage quite well. | | | |
| My first trip out was to take dispatches out to Chellaston Home Guard H.Q. at the Rose & Crown Inn and then on to Weston-on-Trent army camp, which was opposite the Ukrainian Centre. Coming back I had to make my own way down Snelsmore Lane to finish at Elvaston Lane old school. Coming down Snelsmore Lane, which was like an ice rink, I spent most of the time dragging my bike out of the ditch. | | | |
| Another time when I was a dispatch rider I was told to help the cook while I waited for dispatches. He had a fire going in the schoolyard at Elvaston Lane with a metal tray on it, which was about six feet long by three feet wide. On this he had placed eggs, bacon, sausage, bread and tomatoes. When the officers came and told us all the men had been fed the cook and I sat at each end and finished off all that was left (burp!). | | | |
| While serving with the 14 Battalion C. Company Home Guard at the National School, Elvaston Lane, we were ordered to give a demonstration in the use of certain weapons to the local Special Constabulary. The weapon picked on this particular evening was the Spigot Mortar. We assembled this in the field next to the school but the legs were not spiked down with it being a dummy run. I was sent to fetch a bomb from the Quartermaster’s Store. What we didn’t know was that although the warhead contained sand, the firing charge was live and full strength. I returned to the weapon site, lay down and placed the bomb on the Spigot, giving it a spin to make sure it was free to run, withdrew my hands clear and called “Mortar Ready”. The №1 on the mortar then showed the police officers how the safety catch worked and the firing trigger. There was an almighty bang and the front legs lifted from the ground and away went the bomb heading for Lindon Drive. A few seconds later came a crash of breaking tiles and the №1 gunner and I quickly lost interest and started dismantling the weapon while the police proceeded to the noise of the crash and to estimate the damage. | | | |
| At weekends we went on manoeuvres to test the army defences and other Home Guard positions. One of these was Elvaston Castle, at the north west end of the lake. The Army had a camp there with a number of anti-aircraft 3.7-inch guns, we had to try and put these out of action. We borrowed a Trent Bus and unlocked the rear door and then tied it with string so that a good kick would swing the door open allowing us to bail out fast. We drove down to the camp and pulled up across the gateway with one of their weapon pits at each end of the bus, I kicked open the rear door, dropped out and threw a hand-grenade into each pit. These pits were classes as wiped out by the umpires. By the way, the hand-grenades were made of china clay with a sort of firework inside, which blew the clay into dust but harmless to people. I carried on running through the gateway to make my way towards the ammunition sheds. The rest of the team made their way to the guns and put them out of action. We were not allowed to go into the gun pits but put a cross in white chalk on the sand bags next to the opening to the pits. In two hours it was classed that we had destroyed the camp, blown up the guns and the ammunition dump. Of course the Army was not very happy with this decision. | | | |

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| *A copy of the Standing Order that chillingly shows how serious the duty was*  *for the Home Guard Volunteer* | | |
| |  | | --- | | “…………..  Special Orders To:-  No. – Section   1. This position will be held, and the Section will re-main here until relieved. 2. The enemy cannot be allowed to interfere with this programme. 3. If the Section cannot remain here alive, it will remain here dead, but in any case, it will remain here. 4. Should any man, through shell shock or any other cause, attempt to surrender, he will remain here dead. 5. Should all guns be blown out, the Section will use Mill’s Bombs, and other novelties. 6. Finally, the position as stated will be held.   ……………………..” | | | |
| One exercise was to practice setting up a roadblock and disabling enemy tanks. They decided on an ambush on the main road from the south up to Derby from Shardlow. They selected the road at the end on the old Snelsmore Lane, which lead from Chellaston. Across the Shardlow Road from Snelsmore Lane end was the Elvaston Castle estate, with wooded parkland. The younger Home Guard were told to take cover under army blankets beside a large fallen tree in the field next to Snelsmore Lane. The older, more experienced First World War veterans took up position on the other side of Shardlow Road on the Elvaston Estate side. | | |
| I had heard from my uncle George how the British Expeditionary Force had needed to slow down the enemy tanks whilst they retreated to Dunkirk, every hour gained meant more lives would be saved. The Belgium’s and French had opened sluice gates that had been used to drain the land around Dunkirk. The land had turned back into bog land, too soft for tanks, so they were forced to stay on the elevated roads and lanes whilst the infantry followed behind, protected by the armour. The B.E.F. raided local farms and took large porcelain dinner plates and laid them upside-down on the road with some soil sprinkled over part of the plate. As the tanks approached they could see the half hidden disk and took no chances in case they were land mines. The tanks were forced to stop and call up the infantry who carefully lifted the plate with a bayonet and checked what was underneath. The subterfuge was repeated every few miles and occasionally real mines were hidden under some plates.  They also strung wire across the road from tree to tree and hung army blankets over them. As the tanks approached the screen ahead obscured their view and they could take no chances as to what lay ahead, so again the tanks had to stop and the infantry brought forward to check what lay ahead. Most of the time there was nothing but as the tanks could take no chances this delay was precious to the British.  Armed with this knowledge the Alvaston Home Guard set up its own roadblock. The young Home Guard were instructed that once the tanks stopped they were to break cover, run to the tanks and place crowbars in the tracks, if the tank moved then the tracks would break and the tank was disabled. As we lay in wait for the exercise to begin in dawned on me that once we had broken cover and milled around the tank, the following tank would spray the forward position with machine gun fire, knowing that this would not harm the tank, but would be devastating to any solder in the vicinity trying to push a crowbar into its tracks. Also even if this was successful the only way of retreat for us was to leg it over the open fields toward Chellaston in open view of the following infantry and tanks. That is why the wily veterans had chosen their position on the wooded side of the road, making it easy for them to retreat into the woods and melt away across the estate. | | |
| On another manoeuvre we went to test the railways Home Guard, we had to attack the station in Midland Road and blow up the engines and signal boxes. This time we had an army lorry with a canvas top. We started off from Alvaston and Boulton School H.Q. down London Road towards Derby until we arrived at Deadmans Lane corner. At this time there was a high wall about ten feet high along London Road and Deadmans Lane. We climbed onto the wall, over the other side were railway sleepers piled up and wagon parts. We ran through the goods yard until we came to where the engines were parked. Plastic explosive was put on the engine boilers etc., (not real charges of course!) and then we made our way to the main line where passenger trains ran. We spotted one train standing at the signals waiting to go into the station, so we climbed aboard, then when it moved into the station we stepped out onto the platform and attacked them from the rear. They told us that wasn’t playing the game fair, but would the real enemy play fair? | | |
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| THE HOME GUARD The Home Guard is the unpaid, part-time, couponless, sockless, shortless and breathless army.  Its members are supposed to put bullets in the bull of a miniature target (which they can’t see) at 25 yards distance; to be ferocious bayonet fighters (this entails making extraordinary faces, grunting and grinding the teeth) to be also all-in wrestlers and long distance runners.  They are supposed to know the weight, killing power, mechanism and working parts of the rifle, several machine guns, countless grenades and a number of strange sub-artillery weapons; to say nothing of the truncheons, toggle-ropes, shotguns and pike. When they become proficient in any particular weapon, it is immediately declared obsolete and a new one substituted. The idea of this is to prevent them digging for victory, going to the pictures, or nursing the baby in their spare time (if any).  They are supposed to be able to change themselves into nigger minstrels, or Tube medicine men with vine leaves in the hair in a very few minutes. To make this sound easy it is called camouflage.  They must know all about decontamination, extermination, detonation, consolidation, elimination to say nothing of salvation.  They have to recognise and describe aeroplanes and tanks of all nations at sight and know how to deal with these. They must also support the ‘Regulars’, which sometimes happens after closing time.  INCIDENTALLY they are supposed to earn their own living if time permits. | | |
| On the 31st December 1944 my service in the Home Guard came to an end. | | |
| img902.jpg | **Defence Medal**  King’s Commendation for brave conduct. Civil.  IMG_4170.JPG | IMG_4171.JPG |
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| Joyce Fowkes (1922-2009) | | | |
| At the age of 19 she was called up to go into either the army, work in hospital or on the busses, she was pleased to be leaving her office work. Her mother said the army was too dangerous and she also did not want her having to empty all those bed pans in the hospital, so the busses it was. She was pleased it was the Trent busses and the country roads around Derby and Nottingham as opposed to the Corporation busses and their urban town routes. | | | |
| Joyce 1942 | | | So, in 1941, aged 19, Joyce went on to become a bus conductress on the Trent buses.  The uniform had to be fetched from the Trent offices on Uttoxeter Road, Derby. There were only men’s sizes available; the trousers were far too big, the heavy coat nearly came down to the floor; this was topped off with a large peaked cap, a leather moneybag and heavy metal ticket machine. One morning, as the bus pulled out of the depot, Joyce suddenly realised she was on the wrong bus. Training had taught her to jump off in the direction the bus was travelling, but she was new and jumped off facing backwards. She fell over and felt the bus wheel brush her leg. This could have resulted in a very nasty accident. |
| Her bus depot was on Albert Street with the entrance in front of the Derby Market Hall. | | | |
| *Albert Street c.1930*  *Bus Station on the left.*  *Derby Daily Telegraph works and offices, centre right.* | | Albert Street Depot | |
| *Derby Bus Depot* | | *Derby Bus Garage, Albert Street c.1940.*  *Seen here with two corporation motorbuses.* | |
| The busses were cold especially having been in the depot all night. There was no heating, the rear platform was open and the leather seats were freezing, so she did little sitting down and was constantly up and down the stairs on the moving bus. | | | |
|  | A photo from Derby’s Bus Station, during the war, showing a smartly-dressed driver, conductress and passengers waiting to board the route 2 to Belper.  The bus is a COG5, with a Weymann 54-seat body, new in 1939 and lasting in the Trent fleet until 1957 – (Jane Goddard. Derby Telegraph) | | |
| Some London double-deckers and open toppers were brought up from London. Joyce had to go on a bus, which had been converted to gas. This was achieved by towing a trailer with a small coal burner on it. Although this powered the bus it could not go very fast, also it could not ascend the steep hills in Breadsall. Whilst Joyce was still trying to get used to the journey from Derby to Nottingham, travellers would ask to be reminded when they were nearing their stop, but Joyce did not always know where these places were. On top of this the driver would shout ‘stoke up’ and Joyce would have to jump off and shovel more coal into the boiler on the trailer. | | | |
| One night on her way back, from Nottingham, the police stopped the bus. There was an air raid going on over Derby so they had to wait on the car park of the Blue Ball public house, Risley until it was all over. It was cold and dark sitting on the bus in the black out. | | | |
| When Derby was attacked by air, primarily for its railway industries, the sirens would sound and the family would have to go down into the Anderson Shelter at the bottom of the garden.  If a late shift followed an early shift it meant she could only have a couple of hours sleep. The late shift finished at midnight with a ride home on the paddy-bus and the early shift starting at 3:00am. Sometimes she would not wait for the paddy-bus and walked all the way home to Harvey Road in the middle of the night - 3 miles. Supper was left in the warming oven set in the black-leaded range next to the coal fire; it was a plate of beans on two slices of toast. By the time Joyce arrived home the beans had nicely soaked into the toast, this was consumed with a freshly made mug of hot cocoa.  Joyce had no girl friend apart from Elsie and no boyfriend so Sundays were spent at home with her mum and dad and no entertainment, so when other conductresses said they did not want to work the Sunday shift Joyce would volunteer. She much preferred to be riding the platform than being stuck at home. However this meant a long working week.  Joyce had to be up early and would set the alarm for 3:00am to get the shift workers to Celanese by 6:00am. One morning she was up soon after the alarm only to find her mother had set it wrong for 2:00am. It was not worth returning to bed so she had to sit and wait an extra hour before going to work.  On one occasion the early shift followed the late shift, which meant Joyce only had a couple of hours sleep, this was not enough and she fainted and slid down the chair under the table onto the floor.  Her mother would always be up first to make her breakfast of a bacon sandwich and mug of tea. Her mother had lovely long hair down to her waist, which she normally had tied up in a bun, but in the early mornings she was down for breakfast in a full length night dress and her hair down. Even on the coldest mornings when there was snow on the ground she would stand at the door and watch Joyce go off to work, walking down Harvey Road to the Mitre Inn in the darkness of the blackout. She said she would wait at the door until she could not hear Joyce’s footsteps any more, then go back to bed.  On an early shift the passengers did not always have the right change, so Joyce saved her small change and put it in her bag. At the end of the shift she added up the ticket sales and handed in the bag of money. If she had forgotten to take out her float it was too late, but if the bag was less that the ticket sales then she was told to make it up.  Occasionally there would be cheese sandwiches for sale in the canteen so Joyce would buy these, eat the bread and save the cheese for her dads pack-up.  In summer the heavy dark uniform was changed for a kaki smock, but again they were designed for men only, but the conductresses soon stitched darts in the back to reduce the waist and make them look a little more feminine.  Charlie Smith was selling raffle tickets in the bus station, so Joyce bought a few. After her late shift she returned to the station to find she had won a duck, a live one! She did not know what to do with it but the man in the office had had enough with it all day and insisted she took it away. It was in an old shopping bag with a net over the top. When she arrived home the household was asleep so she put ‘Charlie’ the duck in the coalhouse until morning. In the morning her dad was shocked to find it and wanted to know what she intended doing with it. By the way, during the night it had laid an egg in its confined space. Although her dad was a tough character he did not relish the thought of wringing its neck, but this he had to do. That night they sat down to a meal of roast duck but none of them could eat it. It was then that her dad realised he could have simply let it go on the canal at the end of their garden. He warned Joyce never to bring home a live duck again.  There was nowhere for the conductress to sit down, she had to stand on the platform under the stair. However she could sit if it was a ‘dead’ journey. This was when the bus had to go out to another starting place, like Burton-on-Trent, to collect workmen and bring them back to Derby. With not having to pick up passengers on the way out Joyce could take the opportunity to have a sit down.  Early shift sometimes meant a trip out to Hilton Army Camp to collect the soldiers and bring them into Derby. The bus had sat in the cold depot all night, so it was very cold sitting on the leather seats, and no doors at the back. The driver was reasonably warm in his cab because it was next to the engine. One way of combating the cold was to buy thermal cotton wool from the Chemist. This was in large rolls and pieces could be cut off and wrapped across the chest. Also conductress wore boots to keep their feet warm and these could be lined with the cotton wool.  On Saturday nights the soldiers had to be collected from their base at Hilton, west of Derby, these were big black Americans who had been in camp all week. However, Joyce found no better behaved men than these. After a night out on the town they had to be collected and returned to the camp. Most were so drunk and tired that they slept lying on the seats all the way back. Joyce sat at the front of the bus behind the driver’s window. He occasionally tapped on the window and winked to draw Joyce’s attention, at this point he would accelerate over the approaching hump back bridge. This caused the soldiers to roll off with such a bump onto the floor. Because of the state they were in they just groaned and climbed back onto the seat and went back to sleep.  Some drivers were courteous and drove like chauffeurs, others would drive fast and throw the bus around. One journey called for the conductress to drop off the bundle of morning papers at a newsagent in Sandiacre. One dark morning on such a route she had one of the inconsiderate drivers on board, he told Joyce that he would not stop at the newsagents so she would just have to throw them off. They were heavy and it was dark as the moving bus passed by, she hurtled the bundle off and carried on with her journey. The next week a notice on the board at the bus station called for conductress Fowkes to report to Mr. Bainsby, the manager. His office had a blue carpet and large fireplace. He explained that when the newspapers were thrown they had hit a passer-by on the pavement, and that she was to be more careful in the future. This did not bother Joyce, as she knew she had done no wrong and it was all because the inconsiderate driver would not slow down.  The ladies of Belper and surrounding areas travelled into Derby to shop. On their way back home, the bus was filled with the aroma of freshly ground coffee beans, recently purchased from the Kardoma coffee shop in Derby.  Joyce was told to clean the ladies toilets on the station platform, this she refused to do because it was not her job as she was a conductress not a cleaner. She was told that if she refused she would have to report to the supervisor’s office and was also unfairly banned from using the platform toilets.  During the four years Joyce worked 12-hour shifts, 7 days a week and in all that time she had only one week off with the flu. The 12 hour shift was split-shifts, where they worked so many hours then went home, returned to work some more, then home again, three times a day, each time having to clock in. It was common practice to clock in others if they were late. One day Joyce arrived to clock in only to find the inspector barring her way to the clock. He said, “caught you”, Joyce quickly said that someone must have accidentally clocked her in by mistake. She never did that again.  The few bad experiences were more than compensated by the sheer pleasure of riding the open back platform on a sunny day through the beautiful countryside of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire - and being paid for it. | | | |
| Bernard Fowkes (1919-2008) | | | |
| Bernard was born on Saturday 29th November 1919 at Horsley Woodhouse, Derbyshire. He was the brother of Joyce Fowkes.  In 1927 the family moved to Derby. Bernard managed to find a part time summer job working on a farm down Sinfin. He was paid by the row and managed to earn two shillings and sixpence in one day. However, this had to be handed over to his mother, with not even a few pence returned for a treat. | | Bernard  18th August 1931  aged 11 | |
| Bernard joined up at the start of World War II aged 20 and left behind his girlfriend Millie Howitt. Millie lived in an end cottage opposite the lynch gate of St. Peters parish church, Chellaston, Derby. In November 1939 he received his embarkation leave and decided to propose marrying Millie now rather than wait until he returned from the war, not knowing how long it would last, or if indeed he would return. He phoned Millie and asked if she would make all the arrangements. This meant not only visiting the local vicar but also travelling to Melbourne for permission from the Dean. Bernard arrived home on the Friday and on Saturday 16th November he was in St. Peters to marry Mildred Emma Howitt. His best man did not turn up so his father had to do the duty. Millie was escorted across the road from her home on the arm of her father.  Bernard was sent to Berwick in Northumberland to embark. It was at night and the little boats had great difficulty in trying to get the soldiers onto the ships. The navy took charge and soon had them safely on board. It was a huge convoy with the Admiral at the front, and destroyers and corvettes all around. They zigzagged their way and after a few days someone remarked that if they turned around and went straight back they would be back where they started in just one day. They arrived in South Africa and a local priest went around taking down their names and addresses and promised to let their families know they were all safe.  They made their way round to Egypt and over to Tubruk. Tubruk was surrounded by Germans and had been knocked to bits. On Christmas Day they received a message for Churchill saying they could not be brought home as they were the best he had and were needed there. Their commanding officer said he knew it was Christmas Day but the fighting would not cease so he told them to try and take it steady for the day. Bernard was a driver and was in charge of a truck, which he named ‘Millie’ after his new wife left at home. He was ordered to take a tank track up to the front but would have to go alone over the desert with only a compass reference. However, just before he set off he was told a convoy was going the same way so he could join it. This was made up of troops recently arrived from England and set off in a straight line, but Bernard drove some distance to the side. The officer in command drove out to Bernard and asked if he had been trained on how to drive in convoy, Bernard said that he was well experience in driving in convoy and if an enemy plane came over a straight line column it would strafe most of them in one pass. The officer immediately went back to the column and ordered it to disperse and form a staggered column 200 yards wide.  At night they dug a trench and covered it with a tarpaulin as a bivouac. This would attract scorpions so they poured some petrol in the sandy bottom to deter them. Someone got this wrong and blew himself up. Food consisted of tined corn beef, that when opened during the hot days had melted and was poured out; if opened during the cold night it was frozen and had to be chipped out. Water was in short supply and certainly not available for washing or bathing, however petrol was in more plentiful supply. The tins of petrol were sealed and once used could not be reused to carry petrol but could be used to carry water. Tea was made on a makeshift billycan made from an empty petrol can, so it always tasted of petrol. Washing clothes was also done by cutting a 4 gallon square petrol can in half. The bottom half filled with sand and soaked with petrol, the top half upturned on top with water and clothes. Again someone got this wrong and nearly blew themselves up. | | | |
| From North Africa he travelled to Ceylon, it was thought that the Japanese would occupy India. Not much happened in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) so they stayed on this secure island and enjoyed the sunshine. As the war moved on Bernard was moved to the jungles of Burma. | | Bernard with motobike | |
| Millie had three brothers and Bernard found out that David Howitt’s artillery unit was in his vicinity. He tracked the unit down and asked if Gunner David Howitt was with them, they said he was out on activities. He returned a few days later and asked again, having found him he introduced himself as his new brother-in-law. They went off to a café, a wooden shed, for an ‘egg bang Joey’, an egg sandwich, and a cup of tea. When Bernard was about to leave David said he would stay for another sandwich. The next day when Bernard returned to see David he was quizzed by an officer on how much the pair had drank the night before. Bernard insisted that they had only drank tea. David was seriously ill in a Field Hospital, a tent. Bernard was called back that evening and told by the doctor that he had cerebral meningitis and would not last the night. The doctor could not allow him to seen David in case he became infected and pass it on to his unit. The doctor said he would sit with David all night and would do all he could. The next morning Bernard returned and feared the worse only to be told that David had survived and was recovering, Bernard told him to take this opportunity to get a ticket home. Sometime late, in the jungles of Burma, Bernard came across a clearing and standing there was David. He asked why he had not taken his advice and gone home, David replied that he could not leave his mates whilst there was still a job to be done. He was still not well and eventually was sent home but died onboard ship.  Bernard was away for three Christmases and four years, Millie said she never knew where he was but Bernard always knew where she was.  When the war was over Bernard returned to England and awaited leave. They were given only a three week pass so they went to the sergeant and asked to see an officer as they had been away from home for four years and three weeks was not long enough. The sergeant said they would have to wait until 10 o’clock the following morning to see an officer. The next morning the officer was amazed that they were still there, he said all they needed to do was to go home and see the local officer in command who would then extend their leave on companionate grounds, so what where they waiting for and to get off home. Bernard went to the railway station and found out the times of the trains to Derby and determined he would be in Derby for 11:30 that evening. He went to a phone box and dialled the operator and asked to be put through to Chellaston Post Office. Once connected he explained to the post mistress who he was and would she mind going over the road to tell Millie he was on his way home, she was delighted to be the messenger. Bernard asked the operator how much the call cost and she said she would not charge.  Whilst his sister Joyce and her husband Gordon were watching a film, in the local cinema, a message was flashed up stating “Message for Mrs Webb in the Foyer”. She returned home to find Bernard was on his way home from war.  Bernard passed through Burton-on-Trent station and knew he was only half an hour from home, he gathered up his kit bag and was ready to jump out as soon as it stopped. He was the first out but stopped by a couple of Red Caps who insisted on checking his pass. Once passed them he made his way to the station entrance and the first ones he saw was his mother and father. Behind them was his sister Joyce and her new husband, who Bernard had never met. He looked for Millie who was standing right at the back, she was apprehensive since after four years she thought she would not recognise him, but she did. | | | |

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| Marriage of Gordon and Joyce |
| One a Wednesday night in February 1944 it was pouring with rain as I decided to go to the dance at the Alvaston Jubilee Hall, Boulton Lane, Derby (no television and radio was not to good). I paid a shilling at the door, went down to the cloak room to get rid of my overcoat and then sat in our corner to see if any of our gang would turn up. I looked around the hall and saw a girl sitting next to the doorkeeper. A voice inside of me said “she is the girl you have been looking fo”. When the dancing started I went across and asked her for a dance, while we were dancing I mentioned that I was working at Nottingham and travelling on a Bartons Bus, she told me she was a conductress on the Trent Bus to Nottingham. After dancing with Joyce she asked me if I wanted a drink, I did, so I fetched her coat and bag and took her across the road to the Blue Peter pub for a drink. This was the first time Joyce had been in a pub, she had only wanted a cup of tea from the back room at the dance hall. I thought she wanted to go to the pub, which had not impressed me as I had finished with my previous girlfriends because they had liked drinking too much. |
| After going out together we got engaged at Whitsun 1944, and set a date to be married on 16th December 1944. |
| Wedding Group  Julia May Webb, Percival Charles Webb, Janet Webb, Jack Froggatt, Gordon Webb,  Joyce Fowkes, Willis Fowkes, Edna Robinson, Annie Elizabeth Fowkes |

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| At Peace | | |
| Millie died peacefully during the night of 28/29th July 2007. A service was held at Markeaton Crematorium on Tuesday 7th August and her ashes were scattered in the graveyard of St. Peters Chellaston, where her father and brother are buried. | | |
| Bernard was a member of theMidlands Burma Star Association. | | |
| Bernard Burma Star  One of the last meetings of the **Midlands Burma Star Association**, held each year at the Derby Cathedral. This meeting was attended by Lady Hilton. Bernard is second from the left. | | |
| Bernard died on 29th October 2008,  aged 88 years Bernard | His funeral took place at Markeaton Crematorium on 6th November,  the order of service being:   |  | | --- | | Entry Music: ‘On the Road to Mandalay’  by The South Wales Burma Stare Choir  Sentences  Hymn ‘Just as I am, without one plea’  Prayer  Ministry of the Word  Selected verses form Psalm 23 & John 14  Hymn ‘Breathe on me, Breath of God’  Eulogy  Prayer of Thanksgiving  Reading by The Burma Star Association  The Last Post  Committal  Closing Prayer  Benediction  Exit music: ‘We’ll Meet Again’  By Vera Lynn | |
| C:\Users\Ian\Pictures\2000's\2008\Gordon and Joyce.jpg  Gordon and Joyce 2004 Diamond Wedding Anniversary | | |
| Gordon died on 29th July 2008 aged 85, Joyce died 26th March 2009, aged 87. | | |