

Memories of growing up in Saltford and serving on the Home Guard

by

Ivor Stabbins
(1926 – 2012)



Ivor Stabbins (19) and his future wife Margaret Waller (17).
Photographed in 1945, the year Ivor took up National Service in the RAF.

This fascinating and often humorous account of life in Saltford in the 1930s and 40s was written by Ivor Stabbins and comprises two accounts that he gave. The original documents were kindly donated by his widow, Margaret Stabbins, to Saltford Environment Group's "History of Saltford" project on 12th December 2017.

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MEMORIES.

I was born at 69 Albert Road, Keynsham in July 1926, and moved to Longreach Cottage (now changed to 329 Bath Road) at Saltford when I was 2 years old.

My childhood was very enjoyable. Dad ran a Smallholding for a Miss Wills, who was one of the "poor relations" of the Wills Tobacco family. She lived in a large house which was named Longreach House. (Now called Long Reach Hotel), She had one servant, Minnie Rogers, who cooked and generally looked after her. Mum used to go there one day per week to do the cleaning. Our house was in the same 6 acre grounds, so there was plenty of room for games etc. when we were not at school.

Going back to Dad, -when he came back home after serving in the Somerset Light Infantry for most of the 1914-18 War, which was spent in Mesopotamia (Iraq) and India he decided to start his own Market Garden. He bought the land and a horse, plough etc. Unfortunately The first two years were disastrous because of the adverse weather conditions, and he had to sell up and look for work. This was how he came to work for Miss Wills. For 2 years he lived in Keynsham, and cycled over to Saltford each day to attend to the animals and garden. As can be imagined, this was not a satisfactory state, so it was agreed that a house would be built (Longreach Cottage) for him to rent. This meant that he had a "tied cottage" and that he would find it difficult to leave the job he was in.

The job consisted of tilling about 1½ acres of ground for growing potatoes, cabbages sprouts, root vegetables and any other things that could be sold to make money. In addition there were flower gardens and lawns to be tended. They kept two cows which required milking twice a day, plus sows and piglets, and approximately 400 chicken. Each morning Dad would go into the dairy in the big house and separate the day's milk, to obtain cream. The skimmed milk would then be used for the animal feeds. Some of the cream was made into butter, and the surplus sold, together with eggs and vegetables etc. Some of the chicken were killed and sold dressed for the table. Dad used to drive Miss Wills car to deliver produce to customers around Keynsham every Friday evening. At Christmas time the number of chicken sold was considerable, which involved Dad working late in the evenings to prepare these. He received no extra wages for the hours he worked. On many occasions he would be up all night if one of the cows was calving or the sows having their litters. It was all part of the job and he still had to carry on as usual next day.

Each Saturday evening Dad would have to make up the Accounts book, showing what had been sold during the previous week, and on Monday mornings would be called into Miss Wills to show her these and give her the cash.

Miss Wills was a Justice of the Peace, and attended Keynsham Magistrates Court each week. This is where Dad put on his other hat and became chauffeur if she did not want to drive herself. The car always had to be cleaned, and guess who did that?

Mum was always very placid and caring. She worked hard at home doing washing for a couple of people, and going out cleaning for two mornings a week, besides working for Miss Wills. When I was at Keynsham School I remember that on a Monday, when we got home Mum would be just clearing up after a day's washing. At that time we had a boiler with a coal fire under it, so the ashes

had to be cleaned out from that in addition to all the other tidying up. Our usual tea on wash days would be cold joint of meat with bubble & squeak, as there had been no time to prepare anything more elaborate. Still that went down well and I can never remember being hungry. Where we lived we often had a visit from a Tramp, asking if Mum could make some tea for him in his Billy can. They were never refused and always went away with a nice piece of cake or a cheese sandwich. I think these Tramps had a code which they left for one another outside the gate of a person who would not turn them away empty handed. Although Dad could not get away from the work, Mum always took Eileen and I for a weeks holiday, usually accompanied by Auntie Olive. Quite often it was to Weston-Super-Mare, where we would have "Rooms and Attendance". This was bedrooms and a room downstairs where we would have breakfast and our evening meal. We would supply our own food and the landlady did the cooking and cleaned up. One particular place where we were, Eileen and I used to dread this landlady coming in to clear the breakfast things and staying chatting to Mum when we were anxious to get down to the sands. We went to Southsea or Bourneouth at other times and Ron Ford went with us

On Sundays we went to the Baptist Sunday School in Keynsham.

When I was 5, I started at Keynsham Infants School in Temple Street. Eileen, my sister and I walked to Keynsham each morning and we had a penny each for the return journey, which was the bus fare to Saltford. In fact we usually walked home to save the penny. Eileen was at Bath Hill School, and finished later than the Infants School, so I would normally wait for her to come out and then walk home with her. On one occasion I remember walking on my own. A motorist stopped his car to ask me if I was lost. Obviously I knew where I was going and carried on.

After we moved from Keynsham when I was two, Dad's mother and father moved from their house in Temple Street, Keynsham and took over the tenancy of 69 Albert Road. Uncle Arthur, Dad's youngest brother lived with Granny and Grandpa as he was still single. He worked for a herbalist in Bristol. Grandpa worked on a local farm. Granny was a little lady, quite well educated; and as children we had great times when we visited her. She always played games with us, sometimes with cards, or Blind Man's Bluff. Her memory was very good and she loved poetry. The house only had paraffin oil lamps for lighting. I remember being there when Mr. Skuse, the man from the Hardware Shop called with his horse and cart. From this he supplied the oil and any hardware, brushes, buckets and soap etc. The soap that was used for washing clothes was a hard "Puriton" type supplied in a long bar. One thing that stands out in my mind, was seeing this Mr. Skuse cutting a piece of this soap using a jagged edge of a tin to achieve this.

I just about remember Granny being ill in bed, and then she died on the 17th April 1933. I was almost 7 years old at that time, and remember seeing her in her coffin in her front room. For a while Grandpa and Uncle Arthur lived there in that house. In 1935, Ron Ford's mother and father and of course Ron were living in St. George's Road, Keynsham. Ron's mother was Dad's youngest sister Edie, who was married to Frank. Uncle Arthur decided to buy a house in St. Keyna Road, and had agreed to share it with Edie, Frank and Ron. Grandpa went too.

On quite a few occasions I would spend the weekends with Ron.

Just before the War started in 1939, Ron's Mum and Dad bought a house in Sherwood Road, and Arthur married Lily.

When I was 7 years old I left Keynsham and started at Redcliffe Endowed Boys School in Bristol. There were 650 pupils. Gerald Holgate was the Headmaster and he was said to know every one. After about a year he retired and Ralph Fryer took his place.

Originally I used to catch the bus to Keynsham Church (fare 1d each way), then meet Ron Ford at Keynsham Railway Station. We then caught the 8.11am train to Bristol Temple Meads. The return fare was 2½d. We then walked from the station to Redcliffe School.

My brother David was born in June 1936, at the B.M.H. in Bristol. The day after, Dad took me to a Flower Show at Brislington House, which was in the grounds of the Private Mental Nursing Home owned by Doctor Fox who was a friend of Miss Wills. We went because Dad had entered some of her garden produce on her behalf. I remember leaving there in the evening in the car. There was a violent thunderstorm in progress and the windscreen wiper (only one) was not working. Not a great remembrance of having a brother. Still that is about all I can associate with that time.

When I was about 12, I had a bicycle, which I was given as a present instead of going on holiday with Mum, Eileen and Dave and saving my bus and train fares towards the cost, by cycling to school each day. The cost of the Raleigh bicycle was £5.10 shillings.

My friend Donald Hedges lived in the Grove Garage which was owned by his father. It was situated on the Bath Road just above Pixash Lane. Now it's enlarged and much more modern. We often tinkered with engines and built things. We once bought a motor bike between us for 10 shillings (50p), and repaired it. As we were too young to ride it on the road we used to keep it at 329.

As fuel was rationed we scrounged old dirty petrol that was used at the Garage for cleaning engines, and filtered it through a chamois leather. It was a bit of a long process, but it meant we could get perhaps a pint of petrol which lasted us for quite a while, riding round the fields. On another occasion we decided to buy an old motor bike from someone in Wilmington, which is near Stanton Prior. I think we paid 5 shillings for it. As it was a large bike, we found it rather heavy to push, so though we had ridden our bicycles to collect the motor bike intending that we would take it in turns to either wheel the two bikes or push the motor bike, we decided to leave our bicycles at Wilmington. Even so, we found it slow going and as this was a Friday evening Dad had gone to Keynsham to deliver the vegetables etc., so I was told to lock up the chicken houses. This had to be done every evening just as it was getting dusk, as foxes would prowl around when it was dark to kill any chicken. Anyhow as we were still pushing this motor bike, I realised how late it was, so we dumped it in a field at Burnett and ran home as quick as possible, hoping that nothing had happened to the chicken and that Dad had not got home to discover they had not been locked up. As I arrived near the cowshed, I heard a clanking sound coming from there and panicked as I thought dad was in there giving the cows a bucket of water. Instead of going the main way to the place where the chicken houses were, I went a long way round across a field so he wouldn't see me. Fortunately all was well and I was able to lock up the houses before going into our house. What a

relief to find that dad had still not returned from Keynsham. I am sure I never told him about it. The next day we collected the motor bike from Burnett, dumped it at 329, and then walked back to Wilmington to collect our bikes. Never did get the engine going on this motor bike, but we cut it up using the front part to make a 3 wheel trolley. We had some fun with that.

One job I did at the week-ends was to take a water cart around the orchard and fields to water the chicken and the cows. This held about 25 gallons and took quite a time to fill from an outside tap situated in the yard. I used to get fed up waiting for this to happen so sometimes went away to do something else. Suddenly I would be brought back to earth when dad noticed water pouring down the yard as the tank overflowed. I then decided to make a float switch which I fitted above the tank. When the correct level was reached a Klaxon sounded, so I went to turn off the tap. Another problem which dad had, was that rats were taking the eggs which were in baskets in the shed. I decided to rig up a metal tray with a smaller tin which had a broken egg in it but insulated from it. Then with the use of a transformer to boost the voltage, I connected one wire to the large tray and the other to the small tin containing the egg. My theory was that when the rat came it would have to stand on the large tray and then put its tongue into the egg. Although I never saw the results, after it was disconnected we never had any more eggs taken, so I guess it did the trick.

Uncle Roland was living in Hong Kong as a Buyer for a large store, Lane Crawford & Co., He married Hetty in the spring of 1939. They decided to travel to China, United States and finally arrived in England, on their honeymoon. They were staying with us during August and September 1939. On September 1st., as it appeared likely that the War was imminent, lots of children were being evacuated from London to the West Country. The Billeting Authorities were asking for volunteers with cars to help collect the children from the arrival points and take them to the houses where they were to stay. Roland went to Keynsham Railway Station and I went with him. There were about 40 or 50 children, all with little bags with their clothes, and each with a gas mask. All had luggage labels tied to their clothing. They arrived at about 5 o'clock. It was a sorry sight.

Although the War had not started, a Blackout was in force from September 1st; the War starting on Sunday 3rd September. Roland helped make frames covered with thick black paper, which we fitted up to our windows every night. Hetty and Roland had to wait for another few weeks before they could get a ship back to Hong Kong.

My sister Carolyn was born in a Nursing Home in Keynsham in February 1940. Mum went there because it was too dangerous to go into Bristol at that time. The Nursing Home closed after the War finished and was bought by our Doctor's practice.

Nothing much seemed to be happening to us at home regarding the war, but our troops were in France. In April 1940 Norway was invaded, and by May the Germans were pushing our soldiers back towards the French coast. On the 24th of May, Winston Churchill became Prime Minister. As he could see the serious situation that was likely to occur he set up the arrangement to help this country in the event of an invasion. This was the forming of the L.D.V. (Local Defence Volunteers). Many people called it "Look Duck & Vanish". Dad joined almost at once. They had no official weapons, but a few had shot guns, and some only long handles from gardening tools.

On May 27th the evacuation of Dunkirk began. Churchill made his famous speech about fighting them (the Germans) on the beaches, in the streets etc. now we stood alone.

June 20th was our first Air Raid Warning, but we heard no enemy aircraft.

June 24th at about ten minutes to midnight we heard the air raid syren sounding. We all came downstairs and Minnie Rogers (the maid from Miss Wills house) came up to our place as she was alone at that time. Mum made us a cup of tea, and then we heard the German planes, and explosions as they dropped their bombs in Brislington. A few houses in the hill opposite what is now H.T.V. studios were hit and in Glenarm Crescent behind Brislington Hill. There were some casualties. It seemed very near to us, although it was 4 miles away. The All Clear sounded about an hour later.

I had left Redcliffe School on the 26th July 1940, and had written to J.S.Fry to try to obtain an apprenticeship in Electrical work. Subsequently I was asked to go there to sit an Entry Selection Examination. There were about 8 or 10 lads trying for the two vacancies, one in Engineering and the other Electrical. Most were 15 or 16 years old, but of course I was only 14. About a week later having heard nothing I decided to take a job with a Sheet Metal company (T.S.Hall) in Bristol. Although it was a labouring job to start with, I hoped it would eventually lead to an apprenticeship. Having agreed to start work on the following Monday, I received a letter from J.S.Fry asking me to go there for an interview on the following Tuesday. However not knowing the outcome, I started at T.S.Hall on the Monday, did not take my employment card with me. Dad came into the Company during the day to explain the situation to them and told them I would need the Tuesday off. On the Tuesday I went to J.S.Fry, and after the interview I was told I had the job. I never returned to T.S.Hall.

On October 21st 1940 I started my 5 years Apprenticeship. Because I was too young to attend the Merchant Venturers Technical College I went to Temple Technical College in Bristol for one day per week until I was 16. In this College there were only 3 other pupils in our class, so I had very good tuition in maths which I badly needed. When I started at the Merchant Venturers it was 1 day per week and should have also been 3 evenings too. Due to the Night bombing I went every Sunday instead of the three evenings.

Between leaving school and starting my apprenticeship I was home, so I helped Dad by doing odd jobs.

On August 24th 1940 while an air raid was on, a 500lb⁰¹² bomb was dropped on a house in High Street in Keynsham. The firemen were based a few doors away and were able to rescue an old lady who was the only occupant. The house was completely gutted.

On September 25th 1940, the sirens sounded at about 11.40am. 58 Heinkel 111 bombers with an escort of 40 Messerschmidt Bf 110 attacked the Bristol Aircraft Works at Filton. They were flying at 15000 feet. There appeared to be no opposition from our planes until after the damage was done, and 160 people were killed. Six air raid shelters had received direct hits. About 900 private houses in the area were damaged. Twelve Hurricanes of 238 squadron then arrived from St. Eval in Cornwall and chased them, damaging many of the German aircraft.

Friday September 27th was a lovely sunny day with no clouds. The warning sirens sounded at 11.30am and I saw 10 German bombers with an escort of 89 fighters which were weaving

above and below the bombers. They were so low that I could see the Swastikas on the fuselages. Unknown to us at that time, 17 Hurricanes of 504 squadron had been sent to Filton from Hendon the previous day. The attack was planned for Parnell Aircraft Co. at Yate. Looking up it was absolutely thrilling to see the way the R.A.F. planes dived down out of the sun and within a couple of minutes all the formation was broken up and some of the German planes were destroyed, then ^{they} chased the others to the South Coast. This was the last daylight raid of any size in this area.

On Sunday 24th November 1940, Mum and Dad and I went to the evening service at the Norman Road Chapel. About 6.20pm the warning siren sounded and there was a lot of gunfire, and all round the hills towards Kelston there were a great number of incendiary bombs lighting up the sky. The Minister said it was up to us if we wanted to go home then or wait until the service ended. I remember we stayed, but when we came out to walk home there were German aircraft flying over, and the sky over Bristol was very red. The raid finished about 10.50pm. During the evening about 20 High Explosive bombs fell around the Keynsham area, one near Grange Road, Saltford, besides the incendiaries. In Bristol most of the main Shopping Centre was destroyed. When the raid was over we didn't hear the All Clear siren, as we had lost our electricity supply. J.S. Fry had a steam driven hooter which they normally used to give the start and stop signal to their factory, so that was used to give the All Clear. It was 3 or 4 days before the electric ^{ity} was on again.

(As a matter of interest, Mum had taken us into Bristol on the Saturday 23rd, and we had done our shopping in Castle Street. As usual the road was crowded. All that area was completely destroyed. What a good job the raid was on a Sunday.)

There were further night raids. One on December 2/3rd 1940, During that raid lots of incendiaries fell around the area mainly in the fields south of Bath Road, but one hit "Avon Villa" which was Saltford's Post Office at the time. A High Explosive landed on Saltford Hill near the Railway Station, another at "Glen Cottage", while five, plus one that did not explode, fell across Saltford Golf Course. A 3 inch gas main was set on fire at the Glen. In 1941 the raids continued. January 3rd/4th there was a heavy one, which went from 6.30pm to 12.40am and again from 1.40am to 5.50am. There were 149 people killed and 133 seriously injured.

Some 2500 houses were hit. Temple Meads station and the General Hospital were among the casualties. It had been a bitterly cold night, and the firemen reported that the spray from their hoses froze on the uniforms and helmets, and the pools of water on the ground became huge sheets of ice, making it difficult for them to keep on their feet. During that raid, 4 HEs fell on Keynsham and 3 HEs in Saltford.

The following night we had a 12 hour raid which was mainly centered on Avonmouth. January 16th 1941 another raid which lasted from 7.30pm until 5.50am.

On August 2nd 1941, about 3 days after I was 15 years old, I joined the Home Guard. You were supposed to be a minimum of 17, so I just put my age on. We used to do training at Keynsham Drill Hall once during the week, and then every Sunday morning for exercises which included rifle shooting, throwing hand grenades etc.

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No doubt most of you have watched "Dad's Army" on the television, and wondered how much of it was based on fact.

A little history may help you decide. The war against Germany started in 1939. By May 1940 the Government decided that civilians should be asked to enrol to form a force that could help repel the Germans who were expected to invade the British Isles. Volunteers were asked to join at their local police station. My father joined up almost straight away. The recruits had no weapons issued, but some owned a shot gun, but the majority had nothing to use except a pitchfork.

Eventually an armband was issued with the letter L.D.V (Local Defence Volunteers). Many people said it stood for "Look, Duck and Vanish!" It was about 6 months before uniforms were received and the L.D.V. became the "Home Guard". About this time some rifles were sent to them from the U.S.A.

The recruiting age for joining was 17 years old, but as I wanted to take part in the training, a few days after my 15th birthday I told the enrolment officer that I was 17, and was accepted. So much for the history. The training consisted of rifle drill and firing at targets and other weapons which were now in use. We had lectures on one night per week at Keynsham Drill Hall. In addition, every Sunday morning we carried out field exercises at different places outdoors and manoeuvres, sometimes against another platoon as rivals. Our main night duty was to patrol an area at Burnett. Our unit consisted of a lieutenant, a second lieutenant, 2 sergeants, corporals and other ranks. Our leader was the lieutenant (which I think we will call "Mannering").

We did not have a butcher who would supply the transport when required, but our Mr Mannering had access to the Director of Keynsham Paper Mill for whom he worked. One of the workers was a lorry driver and also a member of our platoon. The transport consisted of a driver's cab and an open trailer which could carry a large number of men and supplies required for our platoon.

Not long after I enrolled, a few of us were training in how to use hand grenades, which I expect you know are thrown into crowds and explode after about 5 seconds after it leaves the hand of the thrower. I was not very keen on any sport at school (which included cricket). One of our sergeants took a few of us to an isolated field, bounded by a loose stone wall. After watching the other fellows throw their grenades it was my turn. The object was to stand about 10 yards in front of the wall and lob it over. To prepare it for exploding, you pulled out a pin as it left your hand. My grenade didn't get far enough over the wall. The sergeant with me yelled out to lie flat as possible and it was immediately followed by the metal pieces flying over our heads. It was lucky it was the sergeant with me. Mr Mannering would have said "stupid boy", which I was.

We also had to take our turn at Burnett for night duty. The site was virtually on the road which overlooks Saltford and leads to Corston. Behind us was an underground ammunitions dump which was part of the reason for our presence. Our patrols consisted of six men working in pairs for a 3-hour shift. When your 3 hours were up you returned to a wooden hut which held the off-duty men. There was always a sergeant or corporal in charge of communications. The hut had no electricity

or water, so paraffin was used for lighting and boiling water to make a cup of tea which was very welcome when you came in after 3 hours patrol. The lorry which took us to Burnett also carried two 5 gallon drums, one with water and the other with paraffin so we could manage through the night. I was on the nine till midnight shift with another colleague and as we finished we went into our hut. As soon as I went in it was nice to see the kettle boiling. We were handed our teas, my first comment was "it smells of paraffin!", then "it is paraffin!" The kettle was still boiling on the stove, so I took it off quickly realising that this was a dangerous vapour which could have burst into flames. Normally the hut had a paraffin smell, but this was too much. I never found who was responsible, but the drums were carefully labelled after this. We were very lucky that the whole hut was not ablaze.

For the last item I'll tell you another incident. As I said, Sunday mornings were normally used for outside activities. On this occasion it was to capture a rival platoon. The distance between us was probably about a mile, but in order to contact them, they knew we would have to cross the River Chew. This was very shallow in one area, so would be easy to wade across. Our rivals would be waiting for us on their side.

Lieut. Mannering was one step ahead, and decided that we should cross the river where it was quite deep, but only about 10 feet wide. With his forward planning he had a wooden bridge made, probably at Keynsham Paper Mills. It was approximately 14 feet long, but not very wide. Our transport brought it down and somehow it was dropped into position to span the water. When our platoon arrived, the temporary bridge was ready to cross. Lieut. Mannering led his men to the edge of the river and shouted out "Follow me men" and started to cross the bridge, until halfway across he fell into the river. He was helped out, shivering, as it was a very frosty morning. Later that morning, Mannering arrived back in his civilian clothes.

Well, that's it. I feel that the three examples I mentioned were not unusual, but our training was helped by all the officers and senior staff, making us into very competent soldiers who would have been able to defend this country while our own troops were fighting overseas.

Stick to watching "Dad's Army", it is a bit over the top and excellent entertainment. Just one more shot, our platoon was allocated a Browning Automatic rifle. I was put in charge of it instead of the normal rifle, which was far better than grenade throwing.