

Anne Webber's World War 2

The following extract is from Anne Webber's autobiography entitled 'My Life'.



Age 17

Marion and I, aged 14, went away on Friday 1st September, 1939. We had to assemble in the playground of Coborn school with the rest of the children being evacuated. My friends Doris and Ellen were with me. There were lots of tears as our parents left us there with a packed lunch and as many clothes and possessions as we could carry. From there we all walked to Bow Road station along with the teachers. The person leading us carried a small board with H45 written on it.

From Bow road we went to Paddington, Great Western Railway main line station, where we got on a steam train. We weren't told where our final destination would be. A rumour went round that it would be over 50 miles from London so we were trying to work out where that would be.

When we got to Taunton we got off the train and walked to the empty cattle market where we were given food parcels. After that our names were read out and we were allocated to local people who had said they had the room to take somebody. Marion and I went to a couple called Mr. and Mrs. Jacobs. I was pleased that Doris was billeted next door. They lived in a semi-detached house on the edge of town. They had one son who worked away, so we were able to have his bedroom with a double bed in it where Marion and I slept.

Mum went away with Jennifer, aged 2, and the twins, aged 4 months, on Saturday the 2nd but Marion and I didn't know where they were for some days.

On Sunday the 3rd the whole school went to church and, of course, during the service the Vicar stopped what he was saying to tell us that we were at war with Germany. I remember that most people were fairly optimistic saying that it would be over by Christmas.

Coborn school was very lucky because Bishop Fox's school in Taunton had just had a new school built, so we were able to have the use of their old building throughout the duration of the war.

Marion and I stayed there for about three weeks when we heard that mum was finding it difficult to manage the three little ones on her own and wanted Marion and me to go and live with them. We found out that she was living at Glebe farm in a small village of about 200 people called Stockton, on the back road from Salisbury to Warminster. In due course Marion and I did the journey to Stockton by car after saying goodbye to all my school friends really believing that the war would soon be over and we would all be back home in London again.

We soon settled down to country life in the farmhouse with the farmer and his daughter. There were 2 or 3 other families from London staying in Stockton as well. I had to find a grammar school to go to. I had a choice between Salisbury and Trowbridge. I chose Trowbridge as there was another girl in the village already there. I started going there 3 weeks before the end of the autumn term. Of course I had to learn to ride a bike first. Dad bought me a bike in London and brought it down to me by train.

It was a long day for me, as the train left Codford station 3 miles away at 8 o.c. and I didn't get home until about 4.40 p.m. I also had homework to do and I loved helping with the babies.

We soon settled down to village life and made friends. Mr. and Mrs. Lay who lived at No 8 Stockton invited us to their house every Thursday evening to listen to Tommy Handley in I.T.M.A. on their wireless as we didn't have one. I became friends with their daughter, Stella. We used to cycle over to Codford on Saturday evenings to go dancing. We had plenty of partners as there were army camps all around.

At the farm one morning I remember looking out of the farm bedroom window and seeing the "Dads' Army" of

Stockton, the L.D.V. (Local Defence Corps), as they were called, marching down the road with broomsticks over their right shoulders representing rifles. There weren't enough rifles to go round for some weeks.

The first winter of the war was awful. We had never experienced such deep snow before. When it had snowed in London it would turn a dirty colour and soon melt because of all the hot smoke coming from all the chimney pots, no central heating in those days, only coal fires! I didn't go to school for a week as I couldn't cycle to the station. The walls by the stairs at Glebe farm were so damp that ice sparkled on them.

The babies would often wake up about four o'clock in the morning. Mum would have a bottle of milk ready for Beryl. I would have to stand by her cot feeding her. I used to be freezing. Mum would take Hazel into bed to breast feed her in the warm.

We had our own bathroom in the farmhouse and the use of a large farm kitchen with a Kitchener stove and oven which cooked lovely cakes and pies. The farm belonged to Mr. Lush and his daughter Margaret. The washroom was large with a copper in which to boil the washing. It was lovely having a toilet indoors which was in a very large bathroom upstairs. Remember our toilet in London had been outside. Of course the large bath was pure luxury after just having a bath which had to be brought in once a week on Friday evenings and filled with water manually, when we lived in London...

I became friends with Norman Barnard who was a bit younger than me. He lived along the road at Glebe cottage. We used to stand in the front garden along with his cousin John chatting for ages in the cold. I was probably the first city girl they had really got to know. Our friendship was renewed again about 14 years ago when I wrote a letter to the "Warminster Journal". He saw my name in the paper and wrote to me. I have since been to stay with Norman and his wife, Joan, several times and they have stayed here with me too.

Dad was able to come down every three weeks to stay from Saturday until Sunday. The government paid either their whole fare or part of it to enable families to keep in touch. If he was away sick, he would stay with us and see our local doctor.

After living at the farm for about 8 months, we were moved into No 12 Stockton. This was good as we had a house all to ourselves. It was an Elizabethan cottage with 2 bedrooms upstairs and a living room with a Kitchener stove downstairs. There was no proper kitchen only somewhere to keep food, etc. The tap for water was outside and shared between 4 houses, 2 on the opposite side of the road. The bath, copper, etc were in a large shed at the end of the garden. There was a pump for the water. The toilet was outside next to the shed. There was no running water, only a very large bucket with a seat. After you used it you had to put some "Elsanol" fluid in. When full it had to be emptied into a large hole in the garden. Dad had the job of digging the holes when he came down to visit us.

Of course in the winter the tap in the street froze up and it was usually mum who had the job of going out with a kettle of hot water to defrost it. Using the pump in the shed was hard work too, but it was the only way we could get the water to fill the copper to heat enough water for mum to do the washing, and also to have a bath

Back home in London a landmine fell behind the houses opposite and damaged the top rooms of our house, so Mrs and Mrs Roeder and their son, Victor, had to find somewhere else to live.

Mum's paternal aunt and two cousins lived upstairs in a house in East Ham and early one morning a bomb fell and her aunt and one cousin were killed. Her cousin, Louise, who had gone down to make the tea, lost part of her leg.

The twins were going to be 2 years old on the 13th April, 1941, which was also Easter Sunday, so we decided to have them Christened in the village church in Stockton. They hadn't been christened before, because dad had wanted them to become Unitarians like Marion, Jennifer and me. We were still optimistically waiting for the war to end and to go back to London. I made them pale yellow dresses and knitted cardigans to match. They looked really sweet. The Font was decorated with yellow primroses round the edge. It was in the afternoon and only the family and my friend, Iris, were there. I was their Godmother. Hazel cried and my friend said that she was "crying the devil out of her" – whatever that meant.

We had our own garden at the cottage. There were two Victoria plum trees and also apple and pear trees too. I loved the plums. They really belonged to the farm but we were allowed to pick the fruit.

Mum planted potatoes, which she had never done before. In our garden in London we only grew flowers and rhubarb. Dad was the gardener. Of course, when the potatoes were ready for eating they had to be dug

up. This was in the spring of 1941, seven weeks before I was about to take my School Certificate or "Matric", as it was called. (short for Matriculation)

This heavy work caused mum to develop a hernia which nearly strangulated as the doctor kept her in bed at the cottage before he had her admitted to Salisbury hospital to have it operated on. Consequently I had to stay away from school to look after the children. Eventually another evacuee, Mrs. Newton, took the twins back to her house to look after them there. She had twin boys and used to wheel all 4 children in a very large twin pram from Sherrington to Stockton to come and see the family. Mum was in hospital for nearly 2 weeks.

Since I was helping with the family and away from school for 7 weeks, I couldn't do any revision for my exams. Anyway I went back to school and took all 6 subjects. I failed in 3 and had to retake all 6 at the end of the autumn term. In those days you weren't allowed just to take the ones you failed but had to take all of them again. Dad had to pay £2.50 as well, which was about one third of his weekly wage. I managed to get 4 credits and 2 passes.

We were really happy in the cottage but in the autumn of 1941 we were informed that the cowhand from Glebe farm was getting married and needed somewhere to live. Our Billeting Officer, Mrs. Sykes, managed to find accommodation for us in the servants' quarters in Bishopstrow House, about a mile and three quarters outside Warminster.

We hated it at first and were all in awe of Mr. and Mrs Temple, the local Squire and his wife. They were in their late seventies. I expected they really disliked having a family of six living in their house too. The house had 42 rooms. They had no servants. Most of the rooms were unused and had dust cloths over all the furniture. There were two very large kitchens and we had one of them and also the servants' parlour downstairs. We also had a very large bedroom in the attic which was divided into three. with a bed in each section.

We were still optimistic that the war would be over soon and we would be going home to London. by Christmas 1941. Of course that feeling changed when Pearl Harbour was bombed by the Japanese and the Americans entered the war in December.

It was much easier for me to get to school at Trowbridge from Warminster than Stockton and, if I missed the train, I only had to wait about half-an-hour for the next one. I was also home much earlier too.

The house had no electricity, only oil lamps. The water was heated by a boiler in our kitchen, which was always lovely and warm. It was also good to have hot and cold running water and an inside toilet and bathroom. We soon got used to using the oil lamps, and, of course, candles. Dad sent our three-piece suite, sewing machine, and some other things down from London which we put in the parlour. The sewing machine went in the kitchen which had a very large table in it. Cooking was done on two oil stoves, on one of which was a metal oven. There was a taste of paraffin at first, but we soon got used to it. Surprisingly, cakes and pies, etc. turned out beautifully. This was also in spite of cooking with dried milk and eggs and rationing of sugar, etc

In the evening, just before we put the blackout curtains up, we would sit and look out of the window on to the field and watch a vixen and four cubs come out and play like puppies. Then the badger would go on his evening stroll down to the river. There was a red squirrel who would sit on the windowsill. If Mr. Temple left his dining-room window open he would find it sitting on the table enjoying a peach, etc

The mice were something else! I didn't know a lot about their breeding habits as we had a cat in London. One evening sitting by the fire, I saw a little face with bright eyes peering at me from a small hole in the hearth. I said to mum something like "Oh look at that, isn't it sweet?" and gave it some crumbs to eat. A few weeks later mum took a loaf of bread out for breakfast and curled up in a hole in the middle was a mouse fast asleep. My mother went one way and the mouse and bread the other.

About this time we noticed an awful smell in the corner of the kitchen. We traced this to a battery radio which dad had made and put in a home-made wooden box. In the side was a round hole. On taking the top off, there was a dead mouse in a nest made from a woollen sock it had dragged through the hole. It had been electrocuted. Beryl, the younger twin was the only one brave enough to remove it.

Mr Temple had an unwritten no-smoking ban in the house. This was hard on my mother as she smoked quite a bit. One day he came in to talk to her, so she hid the cigarette behind her back, not realising the smoke was rising over her head. (To be continued in the October Magna).

Anne Webber's World War 2

Continued from September Magna

The boiler to heat the water for the whole house was in the corner of our kitchen and Mr Temple or the gardener would come in to stoke it up. One day mum decided it was too cold in the bathroom to have a bath, so she decided to have a strip wash in front of the fire in the kitchen. As she removed her clothes, she heard footsteps and just managed to hide under the long kitchen table where she stayed until Mr T. had left. I wonder if he knew she was there?

My step-grandfather and grandmother were bombed out in the summer of 1941 during the Battle of Britain and went to live in the vicarage of St Bennett's church, Mile End Rd. One day my grandfather was knocked over by the blast from a bomb. Not long afterwards he developed lung cancer and died, so gran came to live with us at Bishopstrow House. Unfortunately she had to have her dog, Prince, destroyed as Mr Temple wouldn't have any animals in the house. She was only with us for a short time when she also became ill with cancer of the pancreas. This might have been due to losing her house, her husband and beloved dog all in the space of a few months. She died in Warminster hospital in early summer 1942. She was buried in St. John's churchyard, Boreham road, Warminster. She was 72.

I had always gone to church, first of all Stockton church and then Bishopstrow so I decided to be Confirmed. After going to the Rectory in Bishopstrow for lessons with my friends, we were Confirmed by the Bishop of Salisbury in Christ Church, Warminster.

After taking my School Certificate, I stayed in the sixth form for a year and also learnt shorthand and typing. I would liked to have stayed on for another year until I was eighteen and a half and then gone on to college but dad couldn't afford to keep seven of us on his wages any longer. This was summer 1942

The term after I left Trowbridge school Marion started going there, since she was 6 years younger than me.

I got a job at Trowbridge County Hall for the War Agriculture Committee. Although I had educational qualifications and could type, they made me do filing which I hated, and paid me the paltry wage of £1 per week. Since I had to pay 25p fare, this was a dead loss.

As I had a sewing machine, they asked me if I could make some "pixie hoods" from some kind of woven straw fabric for the Land Army girls. These had a collar to stop the chaff going down their necks when they were threshing the corn. I think I made about 6 dozen of them. This earned me a few pounds extra.

I only stayed at County Hall for 6 weeks when I heard there was a job going at the Urban District Council offices in Warminster. This was much better, as I had no travelling by train only a short cycle ride from Bishopstrow to Warminster. They paid me £1 25p per week and I had no fare to pay either. The offices were in a building opposite Weymouth street. I really loved working there, as I ran the office for the Sanitary Inspector and Medical Officer of Health. We also ran the Civil Defence.

Every day at 12 o'clock I had to go over to the Town Hall to test the ph. of the water in the tap to make sure the right amount of chlorine was being added at the waterworks in Crockerton.

I'd had a swollen gland in my neck for ages but it had got larger and my mother noticed it and made me go to the doctor. I had it tested and they found out that it was tubercular, quite likely caught from drinking infected milk. Evidently the bacteria go through the tonsils. The Sanitary Inspector used to visit the farms in the urban district to test for T.B. but only did each farm once a year. I found out that the farm from where we got our milk for the office had a tubercular cow. I had to have the gland drained.

That was the bad news. The good news was that I couldn't be called up for the Forces. My mother was pleased about that. Sometimes I received food parcels from America with some gorgeous tinned sausage meat and Spam. I was also allowed more rations than the rest of the family. I only found out a few years ago that for over 50 years the three younger members of the family were under the impression that my mother spoilt me and was giving me some of their food! I can still hear my mother saying "Don't touch that, that's Anne's". They wouldn't have understood that I was ill. I also had to take cod liver oil and malt which I liked, and consequently put on quite a bit of weight.

My mother managed to get a job with Dent's glove factory making childrens' mittens. She was able to work from home. This involved stitching four layers of fabric together on the sewing machine. She was paid so

much a dozen

After working for a year at the Council Offices I was given an increase in wages of the equivalent of 25p. I was now earning £1 75p. per week. To put this more into perspective I remember that my father was only earning about £7 per week during the war and he was a mechanical fitter at the power station and he'd been there for about 37 years.

By the time I'd paid 25p billeting money, 25p for food, I didn't have a lot left over for entertainment and clothes etc. Fortunately I had been making my own clothes since I was about 15, also coats and dresses for the three younger children. I also unpicked a couple of my mother's old coats and made them up on the other side. Once they had been cleaned they looked nearly as good as new.

My friend, Sylvia Sims and I used to go dancing at the Town Hall once or twice a week. There was no shortage of partners since Warminster was a military town. Fortunately Sylvia's cousin's cousin, Michael, played the trumpet in the dance band and we managed to get in for nothing.

Of course this meant trying to find something different to wear. This was almost impossible with a shortage of clothing coupons and money. I made a black crepe skirt by cutting up two of my gran's loose coats. I combined them and made a gathered skirt. With several blouses I managed to look different every week.

I also made some dance sandals. The straps on top were made with black velvet and the soles of knitted string, which were then soaked in clear varnish to harden them (I read this idea in a womens' magazine)..Dad cut me some wedges from wood. The straps were fixed between cork inner soles and the string bottom sole

We also went to the "pictures" most weeks if we could afford it. The "Palace" in Warminster high street was quite old and cramped. The "Regal" down Weymouth street was modern and much better. Of course if we had a "date" it didn't really matter which cinema we went to.

After America entered the war, many "Yanks" as we called them were stationed over here. The British troops left Warminster Camp in 1943 and the Yanks moved in. They were lousy dancers but, of course, we still enjoyed ourselves. Life became quite interesting. I went out with several. My mum liked the one from Brooklyn the best, since he worked in the cookhouse and gave her a large bag of pork chops. I wasn't so keen and soon gave him up. I liked his friend the best. He was really tall, dark and handsome. He lived in Salisbury, North Carolina. (I contacted him by phone when I was in Orlando 53 years later. I think he was surprised, to say the least. I spoke to his wife as well)

Every so often there was a Ball at the Town Hall which was organised by the local gentry and we had to try and wear a long dress. I bought a bridesmaid dress from my friend and managed to alter it to fit me. I put different trimming on it. She only wanted 50p for it and I wore it several times. The only trouble was I had to cycle back home to Bishopstrow with the skirt hitched up on the handlebars. This was at two o'clock in the morning, Mum used to wait up for me sitting in an armchair in the kitchen. One night a mouse ran up her leg, so she never waited any more.

Once when dad came home from a walk into Warminster he had his pockets full of chocolate. An American lorry had shed some of its load as it turned the corner at the top of the hill and several people had a field day picking up as much as they could

Since I ran the Civil Defence at the office during the day, I decided to join, and became an ambulance attendant. We had to go on duty every six nights. This was in a converted garage in the high street. We used to play pontoon until the early hours

I also had the opportunity to learn to drive, so that I could become an ambulance driver. I got a provisional licence and managed to have three half hour lessons but it was October and it started to get dark early, so we didn't go out any more. We were promised more lessons in the spring but the war ended and we weren't needed any more..

I was on call one evening when I had a date with my American friend. Since he was leaving the next day, I wanted to keep it. This meant sitting squashed in a seat upstairs in the Palace Cinema with a gas mask, tin hat and greatcoat on my lap. Not very romantic! This was January 1945.

The war ended on the 8th May. That evening I went out with my friend, Sylvia, for a drink. I can still remember drinking 7 half pints,3 gins and a whiskey, I stayed at Sylvia's house that evening. Did I have a

hangover!!

We didn't leave Warminster until the middle of September. I had given my notice in to the Council Offices, so when they found a replacement for me, I managed to find a job in an Insurance Broker's in the corner of a farm. I was there for 6 weeks.

Dad's mother had recovered from her mental breakdown and moved into our house and looked after dad for the six years the war was on. During the height of the blitz they used to go to the Bank Underground Station every night and sleep on the platform. Bunk beds had been put up all the way along. Once when I came to London for a few days I tried sleeping in the one above dad. A train came along and stopped every three minutes until the early hours of the morning. They started again a few hours later. Luckily for me, Aunt Rose and Uncle Percy came along and rescued me and took me home to their house in Catford. One night a bomb landed in the booking hall and a lot of people were killed

I have forgotten to mention one frightening incident which took place one evening. It was in the summer and I think Jennifer was about 6 years old and the twins 4. They had all gone to bed up in the attic of Bishopstrow house, when mum and I thought we would just go for a walk to the end of the drive and back. As we got back near the door we heard the three children calling out "Anne" "Mum". When we looked up, the three of them were looking over the parapet. Mum said "I'll stand here and catch them if they fall and you go and get them in". I went into the house and ran the whole length of the hall and up over 40 stairs. I dragged each of them back through the window and gave them all a smack on their bottoms! They said they climbed out of the window every evening and went for a walk round the parapet..

Although it was such a dreadful time for the world, we were very sorry to leave our "second home" and return to London, as we had spent 6 happy years in Wiltshire. We all spoke with a soft accent and thought the London accent was awful. I expect Mr and Mrs Temple were glad to get their house back. They were well in their eighties by then

(The house has, of course, now been modified and is a top class hotel with two swimming pools. Jane and David took us there for a surprise lunch for our Ruby Wedding in 1991 and Jen and Beryl have also been round it recently).