

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?



Oil painting of Bishopstrow House

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 women's 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).

Many thanks Anne for sharing your memories with us. Anne's autobiography, to date, ends with a poem written by Amy her granddaughter:

I think I shall end this with the poem Amy wrote me on my birthday

Eighty two, good for you

Teaching me to the extreme.

Interesting things you do

We work great as a team

Great fun you being my Nan

Oh no, the poem is over, for luck
look at this four leaf clover

Holidays abroad as far as the Pacific.

Thousands think you are terrific.

You are really nice to me

