

Memories from Marion Wenbourne 1917 – 2018

I was born on Christmas Day 1917 of a Kentish family. We lived in Burham, near Aylesford Priory, half way between Rochester and Maidstone. My father, Edward, was in the Royal Navy for twenty years, starting as a boiler man and rising to the rank of Chief Stoker responsible for the coal propulsion throughout WW1. He took part in major conflicts, at the Falklands, the Dardanelles and Jutland. In 1925 he needed to find work and he and my mother brought myself and my younger sister and brother to Chiswick. My older sister, Betty, had died of the Spanish Flu which followed immediately after the end of the War.

We lived at first in Oak Cottage along the Mall. We shared the cottage with another family and an elderly member of the Thornycrofts. There was no gas or electricity, the stove being heated by driftwood from the Thames collected by my sister, brother and me. Candles were used for light. Times were far from easy. I remember going to bed hungry quite often, and listening to mice as they ran about within the hollow walls. Being near the river the cottage was subject to flooding. During the big floods of the late 1920s I was carried upstairs to safety while asleep, much to my disappointment as I would have liked to see the rapidly rising water. Three maids who lived in a basement further along the Mall were drowned while they slept.

I attended St Nicholas Sunday School in the National School House, which was where the modern house now stands (Fisherman's Place).

My father found work at Brentford Baths in the boiler house, so after five years at Oak Cottage the family was housed by the Council in a flat opposite St Mary's Convent, where I lived until the last years of my life, which were spent back in Kent.

We children went to Hogarth School. I left at fifteen to attend a commercial arts course at the Polytechnic in Bath Road but couldn't take up a free scholarship because the family's needs meant I had to go to work. I started at a printer's in Brentford in the bindery, and then moved to Cherry Blossom Shoe Polish Factory, working from 8am to 6pm at the packaging site in Staveley Gardens. The Mason family who owned Cherry Blossom provided excellent out-of-hours facilities for their employees. The club was in Boston House with a great variety of lessons including cooking, sewing, First Aid and physical activities like League of Health, Rangers, and Guides, with whom my sister and I went camping.

When war broke out the packaging factory was given over to making petrol tanks for Wellington bombers. Because of my First Aid training, I was an assistant in the sick bay. I helped out in anti-gas manoeuvres and at night I went to the cellar in the Convent during air-raids. One particular event is imprinted on my mind when waxed barges on the river were set alight. The atmosphere was heavy with smoke and the possibility of an explosion was endangering both St Nicholas Church and the Convent. Other outstanding events were the V1 in Barrowgate Road and the very first V2 which fell in Staveley Road, the vibrations from which were felt in our home. One family who had sought refuge in their Anderson shelter were completely wiped out when bombed directly.

Did you know that there were once many more cherry trees in this area, hence the chosen name for the factory and its products ?

Later in my life I went on a mini pilgrimage with members of my family, including my nephew Colin Homewood, walking from the border of Kent to Canterbury Cathedral. We did it a bit at a time. I enjoyed it so much, and remember once sitting on a Plantagenet tomb by a derelict church to eat my sandwiches.

Marion Wenbourne died, aged 100 years, on 12 July 2018. She is buried in the churchyard of her childhood in Burham, Kent, where she lies within a few feet of her father and her sister Betty.