Leslie Mitchell, president of BLH&MS

"It was but yesterday…"
(abridged from *Chronicle* volume II Mar-05 page 7)

Leslie Mitchell
President of BLH&MS (Oct 2012)

It was late summer 1929, with the country still in the throes of a national depression when I arrived on the scene and added to it. I have since been told that the occasion of my arrival coincided with the moment that the midwife, who was attending my mother, chose to suffer a mental breakdown which resulted in her being certified and committed into care; I would like to think that this wasn't due to me!

I was the youngest of a family of nine with four brothers and four sisters and still have fond memories of my earliest years with the family in a three-bedroom, terraced house in Redhill, Surrey. In 1935, my parents and I and four of my siblings moved to Berkhamsted. My father had been working in the Foundling Hospital in Redhill but their decision to move to Berkhamsted meant that we would move as well. Our arrival at our new home was a bit of an anti-climax after weeks of expectation. The house had no electricity, only gas (and this wasn't in every room) and it was to be bed by candle light for many years to come – what a difference from the home I had just left.

The first few days in Berkhamsted were spent exploring and discovering things such as the buses being green instead of red and that the dustcarts were pulled by horses. In fact many of the delivery services relied on horses and it was strange to see so many working in the streets. The railway used horses for delivering goods, as did a baker, grocers, greengrocers, a chimney sweep, timber merchants and milk floats. Milk was delivered from a churn, not from bottles, and we had to take a jug, which was filled by a measured ladle. Horses of course also provided another useful purpose and it was not unusual to see small children equipped with a bucket and shovel roaming the streets to obtain what was useful for their fathers' gardens; an occupation I managed to avoid. The canal was another source of amazement as I had never seen anything like it before and I used to wait for ages to watch the barges pass through the locks. Of special interest were the huge horse-

drawn timber barges that seemed as if they would never fit the lock but of course always did after much manoeuvring.

I started school in Berkhamsted in September 1935 at the Victoria Church of England School for Boys in Prince Edward Street, along with my brothers Eric and Bert; my sister Eve went to the Victoria School for Girls next door. The school was built in mock Tudor style with a small bell tower in the centre and large gabled windows. It was divided into six classrooms and two cloakrooms. Three classes were designated as juniors and three as seniors, each having its own entrance into the building by way of a cloakroom. The headmaster, Mr Popple, had a study built onto the seniors' end of the school and there was a playground all round the school. The toilets (a separate block at the back) were very primitive by today's standards, consisting of what amounted to an open drain, which was only flushed occasionally – a place to avoid if possible. The cubicle doors opened outwards into the passageway and there was many a time when some unfortunate who was about to leave, made a hurried and unexpected retreat (sometimes with dire consequences) when someone, usually in hot pursuit of another, hurtled into the opening door.

I had been permitted to start at Victoria at the age of six (I should have gone to the infant school in Chapel Street run by a Miss Kohler until I was seven) because it was thought that as a complete stranger to the town and not knowing anyone, it was better that I should be nearer my brothers who could keep an eye on me and see that I got to school and back safely. My first teacher was Miss Mawditt (Sally) who lived in Potten End and arrived each morning on her bicycle. She was quite a disciplinarian and woe betide you if you ever incurred her displeasure for the most likely outcome would be a sever rapping of the knuckles with a ruler, usually with the accompaniment of a loud grinding of teeth; not a pleasant experience! I was to stay with Miss Mawditt's class for nearly two years, as one changed classes more by age than ability.

It was during 1936 that the town was struck by an epidemic of diphtheria affecting many school children. These were taken to an isolation hospital near to Aldbury in a small canvas-covered ambulance. The family who lived next door to us, the Drapers, had several of their ten children taken away, the youngest, Doris who was my age, died of the illness and Mum and Dad were quite concerned in case any of us caught it. In retrospect, I believe the reason that many of the boys at Victoria were spared the illness was due to the action of our headmaster, Mr Popple. He obtained Kerol pastilles, which were manufactured by Coopers in the town, and cut them into small pieces so that every child in every class had a piece to suck first thing in the morning before classes got under way, They weren't very pleasant to take, tasting like creosote, but it did have the effect of restraining the spread of the disease in the school; at least neither my brothers nor myself contracted the illness.

During the first few weeks at school I, like my brothers, had to contend with quite a bit of harassment from the other children. It usually took the form of being teased about the way we spoke. Berkhamsted people in those days had quite a distinctive Hertfordshire accent which of course we hadn't so were "different", and it was at times difficult to understand them. They in their turn couldn't understand us, disbelief on their part shown by saying "O-ah". Occasionally one was forced to assert oneself physically but time is a great pacifier and it wasn't long before friends were being made and we were either accepted or tolerated.

The school was divided into four competitive houses each with its own colour: The Bournes (red), The Torringtons (green), The Ravens (blue) and The Finches (yellow); I was in Torringtons. The house titles were derived from local historic dignitaries and benefactors.

The criterion for membership into these houses was the location of one's home in the town. Rivalry between houses was actively encouraged in every class engendering "esprit de corps" throughout the school.

The class which I enjoyed the most was that of Miss Hawkins (Polly) a large lady with a heart to match her size. A more dedicated teacher would be hard to find but at any sign of misbehaviour, there would be the threat of a visit to the headmaster's study and we all knew what that would mean. But it was a warning that few took seriously as invariably when the boy opened the door, she would shout "Right you, stay outside on the mat 'til I say you can come back in". It was a bit of a gamble really, to test her, because if Mr Popple did happen to pass by, he would inevitably ask why you were there. There was a strong likelihood that he would march you off to his study and then there was no chance of escaping punishment; at least you knew "she" hadn't sent you.

Miss Hawkins' favourite subject was nature study. Such was her enthusiasm for the subject that few could literally fail to catch the bug. During spring, she would organise field trips to local ponds and river, each of us armed with jam jars to gather specimens for the special pond-life tanks on the classroom nature table. We would collect such things as water boatmen, hydra, dragonfly and *Dytiscus* beetle larvae, not forgetting frog-spawn to provide the tadpoles to feed the larvae on. There was never a lack of volunteers to stay behind and feed the creatures, or in the morning to see if there were any survivors. Possibly this morbid interest helped the observation of the creatures' development, as every stage was carefully explained to the class. Stress was placed on the importance of understanding how nature worked and, if left alone, always maintained an even balance in all things, to quote "You will never find a large fish in a small pond". She was also keen on wild flowers and a special jar was kept on the table for a monthly challenge to see who could find the most different wild flowers and name them correctly; no duplicates were allowed. To say the least, I found that this was to be the start of a "growing" interest, which has persisted ever since.

Starting work at Clunbury Press

(abridged from *Chronicle* volume V Mar-08 page 14)

On August 9th 1943, nearly three weeks before my fourteenth birthday, I started work at Clunbury Press, the printing department of Cooper McDougall and Robertson Ltd., the local sheep-dip manufacturers and the largest employer of labour in the town. The name "Clunbury" was taken from the Shropshire village of that name which had strong associations with the Cooper family.

Some weeks earlier I had attended an interview with the manager, Mr S.H. Smith. He was a large man with his hair cut short back and sides and parted in the middle. He wore large black glasses, which he kept taking off and on while he was speaking, which was in a deep broad accent peculiar to the Midlands. He would pause frequently, and carefully stress some of his words as if to give me time to take in and grasp the importance of what he was saying. It was in this way that he spelt out just what would be expected of me once I joined the company. He reminded me, as if it was necessary, that there was a war on, and that with most of the men being away fighting for me and the country, I would be expected to do my bit too, and pull my weight in whatever task I might be given to do, regardless as to whether I might consider it to be my job to do or not; a very forceful man was Mr Smith. I had met and knew him to speak to for some time before the interview as he was the churchwarden at St Peters where I was altar boy but he was quite a different person I was now seeing to the one who smiled and spoke kindly to me on Sundays. Much later when I had seen and experienced some of his tantrums, I would liken him to that quotation from the good book from which he read on Sundays, "The devil goeth about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour."

My working days started at eight o'clock in the morning and finished at six o'clock at night with an hour off midday for lunch, five days a week. I was paid one week in arrears, which meant that it was a fortnight before I was able to take home my first pay packet, thirteen shillings and four pence, old money. That would be equivalent to sixty-seven pence today. Of this princely sum, ten shillings was given to my mother for my keep and clothes, the rest was mine to spend on incidentals and entertainment. But, I had to learn how to make it last the whole week as there was no question of being able to borrow if you ran short; if you had to borrow this week then you will be twice as short next week, I was told.
For the first few months I was put to work in the paper stores, along with two other lads who like myself were just starting work for the first time. They were "Bonzo" Burns and Eric Holland. We were under the supervision of Mr (Ted) Sills, a tall slightly built man who had a bad leg due to an injury in the First World War, causing him to walk with a limp. On the whole he was a kind and patient man, I suppose he had to be bearing in mind the green and naïve lads that he had the misfortune to try and train. The reason why new arrivals were first placed in the stores was so that we could learn where everything was to be found, from the location of departments (there were twelve) to where the material stock was kept.
We were kept busy all the time, and we had to be ready to take stock to any of the departments as soon as it was issued. It seemed as though there was always one machine or other waiting, and we were told a standing machine was not earning money. Other duties, which I had to do in the stores, included dusting and keeping the paper stock clean which sometimes meant having to crawl between the stacks and racking on hands and knees. At other times we would be sent on errands – I well remember one such errand when I had to deliver the parish magazine to distributors around the town using the company's bicycle with a basket on the front. As I came down Shrublands Avenue on my way back to work I applied the brakes to slow down when the brakes jumped out of their

brackets and went between the spokes of the front wheel with the result that I stopped somewhat sooner than expected.

The job I enjoyed doing most was the delivering of parcels of chequebooks to the Post Office in Lower Kings Road. Frank Birtchnell, who worked in the mailing department, would load up a large four-wheeled trolley with parcels destined for shipment to overseas branches of Barclays Bank, which had to be taken to the London docks by the Postal services. It needed at least two of us boys to drag this heavy and cumbersome trolley up Manor Street, which is quite steep, to the High Street where the road was more of less level and easier to pull along to the traffic lights. Going down Lower Kings Road to the Post Office wasn't quite so easy. If we had a lot of parcels, it would be as much as we could do to stop it running away with us, especially when we had to make the turn into the Post Office yard. However the struggle involved in getting there was mostly forgotten once we started our return journey, for instead of returning the way we had come, we would make a detour via the station and Castle Street. On arriving at the canal bridge one of us would stand on top of the trolley holding the handle, whilst the other ran and got the trolley moving when he too would jump on and down the hill we would go; the one steering trying to miss the potholes and manhole covers, if he could, and both, though enjoying the experience, secretly praying that nothing would come out of either Keys or Matthews yards, which might have caused not a little inconvenience.

To us this was great fun and more exciting than being shut in at work, and so it was until the day we were racing full tilt down the hill when who should appear from Chapel Street on his way to the station, but Mr Smith, the manager; not having any brakes there was no way we could stop or prevent ourselves from being seen. The next day there was trouble with a capital "T". We were hauled up before the manager and told in no uncertain terms of the danger of riding on trolleys and that we were never to return by that route again, along with the threat that we would be sent home if we disobeyed. Being sent home was a punishment favoured by Mr Smith for misbehaviour or bad workmanship and there was a man in the letterpress department who had been sent home more than once.

When I first started work it was with the intention of becoming a Printers Engineer, but this idea was soon to fade as the engineer to whom I was to be apprenticed was still a serving officer in the Royal Navy, and I began to have doubts about having to wait until the war was over before starting my career, so I began to think of alternatives.

After I had spent sufficient time in the stores, where I had learnt to count and handle paper correctly, I was transferred to the Binding department. The foreman of the Bindery was Walter Jackson, certainly not the most endearing of people, being a bigot and an egoist, amongst other things. I believe he was the most disliked person, at that time, in the entire printing works; and, for the most of the next sixteen years, the bane of my life.

Nevertheless he was a craftsman and he did teach me quite a lot, some about my craft and some about people. He was a born sceptic and tried his best to make me the same, but his efforts to do so backfired as I ended up doubting him. Among the things that I did learn from him was to look for possible problems before starting any job so that it would be less likely for mistakes to be made later; I was also told never to accept things at face value, and that I should not accept criticism about my work except from someone who could do better.

During the war-years raw materials were scarce and the salvage of paper was essential. It was separated from the general rubbish collected from local households by council workmen and once or twice a week an accumulation of books, magazines, cardboard and other salvageable material like cloth rags was delivered to Clunbury and baled up along

with the printing waste ready for re-pulping. These deliveries provided rich pickings for Mr Jackson who had the ability to spot anything which could be put to an alternative use. I remember on one occasion he retrieved an old leather bag which had got mixed up in the paper waste, stripped it down and made his grand-daughter a pair of shoes out of it.

I had not been very long in the bindery before I found myself being impressed by the skills and dexterity displayed by the senior apprentices, especially in their ability in making things, not all work projects, and decided that I would like to be able to do the same. So, instead of becoming an engineer, I sought to become a bookbinder. I suppose I should write at this juncture about the conditions under which we worked at that time – they did change but it took many years for that to happen.

Clunbury Press was mainly situated on the top and middle floors of buildings in Manor Street and between Ravens Lane. The works entrance was in the front yard of Ravens Lane, where a door opened into a space barely large enough to contain the Bundy clock which recorded the time every employee entered or left the building, or at least this was its purpose. Everybody had a Bundy number which was treated almost as an identity number, having to be entered on daily work sheets as well as for clocking in and out when entering or leaving work. You were allowed three minutes grace for being late, after which you were stopped a quarter of an hour's wage.

The ground floor beneath Clunbury was mainly used for many years for the production of Coopers Sheep Dip, the main ingredients of which were arsenic and sulphur. These materials were ground together by large millstones and were attended by men with heavy aprons who had tufts of cotton wool sticking out of their ears and wearing gauze and cotton wool masks over their mouths and noses. It was said that men who worked in the dip didn't make old bones. One of the grinding mills was placed close to the bottom of the lift shaft used by Clunbury, and though there was some kind of protective shutter over the bottom of the lift gates, which was lowered when they were grinding, it did not prevent some of the dust being pulled along the shaft each time the lift was used. Although it was possible to avoid passing though the mill areas, most of the time it was not convenient and you would run through as quickly as you could with your handkerchief over your mouth; not that it made much difference because whether one passed through the mills or not, when you got home and washed, your face flannel would more often than not become slippery and turn a greenish colour and smell from the dust picked up during the day's work. Similarly if you went to the pictures, you would know instantly, even in the dark, if someone who worked at Coopers were present because the warmth within the cinema would bring out the smell of dip, which clung to people's hair.

Later in the war, the company would produce quantities of what was called AL63, a very fine white powder that was used for delousing inmates of the concentration camps in Germany; the active ingredient in the product was DDT, now a banned substance. It was also much sought after by amateur gardeners who used it on their green crops to kill caterpillars and other pests; I sometimes wonder nowadays how many gardeners fell victim to the DDT as well as the caterpillars.

In Clunbury there was no hot water system at that time. If hot water was wanted, you had to fill a bowl or bucket with cold water and place it under a steam jet until you got the temperature you wanted and had to be very careful not to get scalded or burnt on the steam pipe in the process. Heating in the factory then was by steam pipes running round the lower part of the walls, though this was changed later and the pipes suspended from the ceiling. Steam had a secondary use as with frequent leaks occurring in the system it helped with the humidity problems with the paper stock. I can remember seeing paper

hung up for it to acquire the humidity of the room before it passed through the printing process.

Sometimes when working late, which could mean up to nine at night, it was possible to hear the mice scampering along the steam pipes, they used it like a racetrack. Mice were everywhere, which was quite surprising considering the amount of arsenic about the place. Of a morning they would surprise you by jumping out of bench drawers when they were opened, and evidence of their presence would be all over the place. I remember old Jim Parks standing in the passageway with a handful of babies, still blind, patiently drowning them in a fire bucket, one by one.
In the austere years of the war being able to sit down at work was a luxury, chairs were few and far between and only the senior women and machine operators were allowed proper chairs. The rest of the women had to use wooden dip boxes turned on end, and then only at the discretion of the foreman; boys and men stood.

Mid morning and afternoon there was a tea break, one of the girls would go and collect the cups and mugs of tea for the whole department. Dip boxes would be laid down and everyone would disappear out of sight for ten minutes below the benches to eat their lunches, etc. I remember on one occasion when us boys had been pasting diaries into cases, one of the boys, slightly more disagreeable than the rest, had left his lunch of three cream buns beside his seat whilst he went and collected his tea from the tray. One of the older apprentices, for a joke, whipped the cream out of one of the buns and substituted it with a dollop of paste. We all sat back and waited his return to enjoy the joke when he found out. Imagine our surprise when he did return, when he sat down, picked up the tampered bun and ate it with no noticeable reaction at all. We all looked at each other and roared, but he had no idea what we were laughing at – and no-one dared tell him either.

For much of the time during the war period, the department was engaged in the production of large stout brown paper envelopes for use by Lloyds Bank branches all over England. The production of these was all by hand, from the application of gum to the flaps, to making them up by gluing the seams. This was mostly women's work, though if there was little else for us boys to do, or women were absent, we had to take part too. Every operation had a specific hourly production rate, set by the foreman and if boys had been put on the job, they had to work harder and produce more to prove, according to him, that we were better than the women! A daily record sheet had to be completed each day and the foreman would check your entry of output against the record book being kept by the charge-hand, and woe-betide if they didn't match. The usual task for the boys in the production of the envelopes was the preparation of the gum and glue used by the women. The gum would be supplied in metal drums weighing about half a cwt (half a hundredweight is 56 pounds) and they could be filled solid with the gum. It was a boy's job to make this mass sufficiently viscous (with bare hands and water) to flow through the apparatus used by the women. It had to be prepared absolutely free from lumps, which might block the apparatus, because then the women would shout at you because they were being slowed down and couldn't meet their output figures, and then they would complain to the foreman, and it was trouble yet again.

Mixing the cold glue was easier it being more viscous in the first place, but it was kept in a large barrel, something of the size of the old wooden beer barrels. Remembering that at fifteen I was not very tall, I had to have someone with me when I had to replenish the supply. The person with me would stand beside the barrel with a drum ready to receive the glue, whilst I had to make a run and jump almost head first into the barrel. Draped over the edge, I would plunge my hands deep into the mass of cold treacle-like substance and, by rotating my hands make a large ball of glue around them. I then had to lift the

mass clear of the barrel and lean to one side to allow the glue to slide off my hands and arms into the waiting drum.

It could be quite a painful business for, once in position hanging over the edge and I had got started, I had to continue because the glue on my hands would have prevented me from getting back up if I came off. The time wasted while I washed my hands to start again, and being only allowed so long to fetch the glue, I had to stay put ladling away with my hands all the time with the sharp edge of the barrel cutting into my middle until it was thought sufficient had been collected. It wasn't too easy getting down afterwards either, trying to straighten up after being bent double for so long was bad enough but the glue on my hands made getting hold of something to help nigh impossible; it was then a rush to get to the sink before the glue started dripping off me onto the floor. In all it was a very primitive method but one that did sometimes have amusing moments; like the time when the barrel was almost empty and I did literally go in head first and got stuck. I was trapped with my hands in the glue and could not get myself up and out. I had to wait suspended upside down until one of the men came to pull me free. My foreman was not best amused though there were plenty who seemed to be – I was in trouble again, this time for not only wasting my time but someone else's too.

As I approached my sixteenth birthday, I was told that I was to attend the London School of Printing for half a day a week to further my trade education. This news brought a mixture of feelings, on one hand I looked forward to meeting and mixing with others of my own age whose trade experiences would be different from my own, whilst on the other hand London did seem a long way away to someone who had not travelled far before without adult company. As it happened I had no choice in the matter, I was told that I was going and that was that. A shilling a week was deducted from my wages towards expenses; Mr Smith said that no-one ever fully appreciated anything that was done for them unless they themselves had contributed something towards it. The first time I went, my foreman, Mr Jackson, told me that none of his apprentices had ever achieved less than first class certificates each year, I was to be no exception; however as he had entered me in a class a year ahead of my age, he said he was prepared to accept a second-class certificate, albeit for my first term only.

I travelled up to Euston by train in the company of two or three apprentices from other departments. Harry Gibson and Peter Duncombe are two that I remember. We had each been given the money for our fares, enough to pay for the train return ticket, leaving five pence to pay to get across to Waterloo and back. This caused us to walk from the station to St Pancras church to get the No. 68 bus. We could have caught it outside the station but it would have cost more and we had little enough money of our own to spare. We got off the bus on Waterloo Bridge and walked to the school along Stamford Street. We were invariably late, either because the train was late or because we had to wait for the bus. The teachers remember my first visit to the school. I was already feeling quite apprehensive about what to expect, and when we eventually did arrive, late, seeing the large doors shut and studded with iron bolts, I could not help thinking that over the top should be inscribed "Abandon hope all ye who enter in".

However, the next two years, which I spent attending part-time studies here were to be among the most enjoyable of my life. Not only did I enjoy the company of friendly classmates, the teachers themselves too became friends, everybody giving encouragement to anyone facing difficulties or problems with their own work. The half-day spent at school became the highlight of the week, with as much knowledge, theoretical and practical, about the trade being crammed into those few hours as possible. The sad part about it though was that, despite all my efforts, little of what was being taught there was I permitted to put into practice back at my daily work place. There the foreman held the

strong conviction that he knew more, and was better than the teachers and I was not allowed to handle anything but simple work, everything else was his chosen prerogative.

The time at school began with a theory lesson lasting about an hour, after which homework sheets were handed out and the previous week's work returned marked with the teacher's comments. The marked sheets were passed to the manager (Mr Smith) on my return in order that he could see if I was making progress; he usually "rubber-stamped" them with his initials, though sometimes he might add some comment of his own before returning them to me via the foreman, who might also make some remarks about them – usually sarcastic ones!

We next had a period spent either on English, science or book design, lasting about half an hour and then after a ten-minute tea break, we returned to the bindery workshop for practical work. Here was where our theory lessons were put into practice. We were encouraged to take books of our own choosing and re-bind them in whatever style of binding we were currently being taught. In this way we gained practical experience and were able to keep for ourselves specimens of the different styles we had learnt and personalized with our own individual designs. One of the teachers used to tell us that to become truly competent we must be able to "cook" a book, that is should we make a slip or mistake in one of the processes we should be able to retrieve the situation in a manner that the uninitiated wouldn't know any difference.

Once lessons were over, we had about an hour and a half before we caught the train back to Berkhamsted. If we missed it for whatever reason, the time clerk would dock our wages; even when we did catch it he would often ring the station to check what time the train actually arrived to see if we had loitered on our way back, and was not averse to suggesting to our foreman that we could have been quicker getting back. He had a lovely disposition and we loved him dearly!!

The time between leaving the school and catching the train became quite precious to the group of apprentices I travelled with, none of us ever had much pocket money and we could ill afford trips to London on our own at any other time, so each week we used to plot and scheme different places to visit, ever mindful that we mustn't miss the train. In this way we succeeded in visiting most of the famous landmarks of the capital, albeit for only a few minutes.

Time passed, the war finished and men returned back to work. It was strange for a time because previous to their return, apprentices carried out most of the work and now they had to partly give way to the men who returned to their old jobs and partly had to assist them and refresh their memories after being absent from the trade for several years.

Towards the end of 1947, I received an invitation from the King offering me alternative employment: it was an offer I couldn't very well refuse. So it was that on 20th November, the day the King's daughter was getting married, I entered into his service in the army, a service which was to last for two years, but that is another story which I hope to write about another time.

Wartime Recollections

(appeared in *Chronicle* volume VI Mar-09 page 13)

On Sunday September 4th 1938 at a little after 11 o'clock in the morning, the Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announced to the country and the world that the United Kingdom was now at war with Germany. I was just 10 years old and my first reaction was one of great excitement, whether this was due to the uncertainty of the future or not I am not sure. That afternoon I, together with my brother, went and stood in the High Street, outside the Star Supply Store (there were lots of people already there) to listen to a demonstration of the warning for an impending air raid (the plaintive wailing of which was to become all too familiar later) sounded on the Water Works siren, to indicate an 'Alert', with a sustained blast to signal the 'All Clear'.

Some preparations had already taken place, gas masks had been issued and an air-raid shelter had been built into Victoria Girls School garden. The Victoria Boys School garden was left intact for growing vegetables, though they did make an attempt to disguise the ugly scar made by the air-raid shelter by planting flowers over it, but they didn't do very well because of the sub-soil which had been thrown up. Close to the entrance of the shelter was erected what appeared to be a bird table with a painted surface, we were subsequently told that the coating was 'Litmus' and would change colour should there be a gas attack. The warning signal of a gas attack would be by means of a rattle and given by A.R.P. wardens in the street, and a bell would be sounded when all was clear.
A 'Black Out' imposed since September 1st meant that all street lighting was turned off, with traffic lights and car headlights modified with masks which only showed light through slits, and which theoretically could not be seen by aircraft overhead. This made going about at night a risky business, as there was the distinct probability of one walking into a lamppost, telegraph pole or anything else on the pavement. There was one advantage though, probably not fully appreciated by all, was that one could see the stars more clearly, and make out some of the constellations we had been told about at school.
Going to school now had a strange feeling about it; it was so quiet, with none of the factories in the town using their steam whistles (which they used to sound close to work time, to hurry their work forces up so no production time was lost), and the church clock not striking either; these had been useful as a guide for getting to school on time.
In the days that followed, we schoolchildren were inundated with behaviour instructions, "You must carry your gas mask with you every time you go out", "You must obey your teachers' instructions if there is an air raid, immediately", "Do not pick up strange objects you may come across, it might be dangerous, but do tell someone about it" and of course "Do not speak to strangers, or give them directions". The latter was considered important as only a stranger would not know his way round the area. Posters, which illustrated these directives, were displayed in the classrooms.

We were also told that very soon the town was to receive a number of evacuees from some of the London schools; and asked that we should befriend them; and, as some would have never been in the countryside before, teach them the country code; like closing gates, to prevent cattle straying, and not to walk through fields of growing crops. At the time it seemed quite incomprehensible that there might be children who did not know that milk came from cows, and eggs came from chickens; but this was later proved to be a correct assumption as it was reported that a number of the evacuees stopped eating eggs!
Because of the number of children arriving in the town, it was obvious that there would be insufficient classroom space for them all to fit into. The problem was overcome, on a short term basis, by pressing into service various halls in the town; the Victoria schools used the Town Hall and the High Street Methodist Church hall (near Kitsbury Road), with classrooms in the school building being vacated and exchanged alternately each week, with one of the halls, one week mornings, the next week afternoons. This lasted until

more appropriate accommodation was found; I believe a temporary school was built at Pixies Hill for them, which was nearer to Hemel Hempstead.

Berkhamsted also received other evacuees from the streets of London, who were to reside in the castle grounds for the duration of the war. It could be said that some of them reviewed their visitors in stony silence; they were in fact some of London's famous street statuary, and included among them was Rodin's Burghers of Calais.

It was not long before Berkhamsted received its first military contingent, men of the Royal Artillery, 64th Medium Regiment, to give them their full title. They were stationed in three large huts on ground between Beech Drive and Three Close Lane and situated near the footpath which ran from Chesham Road to Woodlands Avenue. Their large guns, which we were told were howitzers, were arranged lower down the hill, roughly where Falcon Ridge is today. They did not stay long and were replaced by members of the Dorsetshire Regiment. This regiment's Corps sign, which was painted onto their vehicles, was a drum. My teacher at the time must have thought that, Dorset being close to Devon, that this must represent 'Drake's Drum' so the class was set to learn Sir Henry Newbolt's poem by heart, a painful memory.

Drake he was a Devon man, an' ruled the Devon seas,
(Capten, art tha' sleepin' there below?)
Roving' tho' his death fell, he went wi' heart at ease,
A' dreamin' arl the time o' Plymouth Hoe.
"Take my drum to England, hang et by the shore,
Strike et when your powder's runnin' low;
If the Dons sight Devon, I'll quit the port o' Heaven,
An' drum them up the Channel as we drumm'd them long ago."

Drake's Drum by Sir Henry Newbolt

Troops were now being billeted in several places throughout the town, Queen's Hall, in Cheham Road, the Pilkington Manor House in the High Street and the House on the corner of Cross Oak Road and Shrublands Road being among them , the house next to the 'Homestead' (site of Peter John's) in the High Street, was occupied later in the war by American forces.

By January 1940 petrol had become rationed, and all brand names had disappeared, it was all now called 'Pool' petrol, and was only allocated to those who were adjudged had the most need. Commercial vehicles were allocated petrol with red dye, which if found in a private car was a serious matter. Incidentally, the cost of petrol at the outbreak of the war was between 1/- and 1/2d per gallon old money, about 2p per litre today.

Paper started to become an issue (it was needed in the production of munitions) and at school the use of exercise books had to be maximised, as replacements were difficult to obtain; and loose sheets were issued for work instead, with both sides having to be used. Pencils were now plain, not painted, and these too had to be used down to a small stub. Senior classes used ink, which I believe was watered down, because sometimes it was so faint that it was difficult to see.

Food was now fast becoming a problem; the country, unable to sustain itself, depended on food being imported. Ships bringing food were suffering heavily from enemy action, and in January 1940 it was found necessary to institute rationing, limiting to a basic amount what each person could have; some foods were to disappear completely until the war ended, like bananas and dried fruit. In August, land between the Court House and St Peter's Hall

was used to build a communal feeding centre for evacuees and other school children, which the County Educational Committee was to establish in St Peter's Hall. School dinners had arrived.

Bacon & Ham	4oz (100g)
Meat	to value of 1/2d (about 6p)
Sausages	Not rationed but difficult to obtain
Offal	Not rationed but sometimes part of meat ration
Butter	2oz (50g)
Margarine	4oz (100g)
Milk	2-3 pints; skimmed or dried @ 1 pkt per 4 weeks
Sugar	8oz (225g)
Tea	2oz (50g)
Eggs	1 fresh egg if available; dried eggs @ 1 pkt per 4 weeks
Cheese	2oz (50g), sometimes more
Cooking fat	2-4oz (50-100g)
Preserves	1lb (450g) every 2 months
Sweets	12oz (350g) each 4 weeks

Sample food ration allowances – per adult per week

1940 brought added worries to my family when two of my brothers were called up; the family now had three of its members serving, a brother, who had earlier joined the navy as a boy cadet, was not on full active service, later one of my sisters was also called up to serve in the W.A.A.Fs (a fourth brother was later to join them); small wonder that my mother became ever fearful whenever the postman called, and never ceased worrying about them until they all returned home, safely; I was never allowed to join any organisation which had a uniform, military or otherwise.

In May 1940 an appeal for volunteers to join what was called local Defence Volunteers (L.D.V.) men above (or below) conscription age to be trained to assist the military in an emergency, like an invasion. They did not have a uniform at the start, just an arm band with the letters LDV, this was later considered dangerous as if they were ever to participate in combat, they would be adjudged civilians and not subject to the protection of the Geneva Convention. They were later issued with battledress uniforms, and armed. In June, an extra filter was issued to fit on our gas masks, it was flat, like a tin lid, bright green in colour and fixed on to the gas mask with black adhesive tape. Later in the year air raid warnings became more frequent; in the Rex and Court Theatre illuminated signs were situated each side of the screen which lit up whenever the siren went. With the word 'ALERT' any of the auxiliary services present would then leave, 'ALL CLEAR' would be shown likewise when the danger had passed.

Berkhamsted sustained its first civilian casualty on Wednesday September 25th when an aerial parachute mine exploded in a field off Shootersway, opposite the lodge byDurrants Lane. A number of cattle were destroyed, the lodge was badly damaged and the occupant at the time sustained facial injuries with the loss of an eye.

September also saw London becoming the centre of massive and sustained raids, coming under a constant attack for several days, the sky at night above the city glowed crimson

from the fires that raged below, and could be seen quite clearly from Berkhamsted, as too could the sound of bombs falling.

At school we were encouraged to collect paper and scrap metal for salvage, and during school holidays we were asked for volunteers to help on the nearby farms, spring time it was for stone picking, and in the autumn potato picking. We also, at one time or another, collected rose hips, for extracting vitamin C, foxglove leaves for digitalis, old bones for gelatine (this wasn't popular as any delay in collection meant strong odours and maggots abounding). For a time the school staffed an empty shop in the High Street (Matchetts) to receive papers, magazines and books for salvage.

In 1941 the leader of the French Free forces, General De Gaulle moved into Rodinghead, a large house close to Ashridge; he was frequently seen on Sundays attending the catholic church in Park View Road with his family.

Each year the town held a War Weapons Week, encouraging people to buy National Savings Stamps. 1941 was 'warship week' with a target of over £215,000, a large poster was erected on the wall of the Civic Centre depicting a thermometer with the degrees indicating the amount saved towards its target. The outcome of this effort was that Berkhamsted was able to adopt, as its own, P44, otherwise known as H.M. Submarine United. Other years it was 'Salute the Soldier' and 'Wings for Victory'.

1941 also saw clothes rationing begin. A shortage of materials made obtaining new clothes difficult as most of the materials available were needed for uniforms etc. Everyone was issued with a clothing book containing various coloured coupons. The coupon system was sufficient for buying one complete set of clothing a year; the colours were to stop people from using them all at once, only one colour allowed at a time. This made life difficult with growing families, and so began an era of make do and mend.

Item	Adult	Child
Lined coat or mackintosh (over 28")	14	11
Dress or gown or frock (woollen)	11	8
Dress or gown or frock (other material)	7	5
Blouse or shirt or cardigan	5	3
Petticoat or slip or camiknickers	4	3
Scarf, pair of gloves or mittens or muff	2	2
Pair of slippers, boots or shoes	5	3

Some sample ladies' clothing allowances from a total of 60 coupons per year

During the war social activities were limited, with most of the male population over 18 away and with most of those remaining, together with women and girls, engaged in long hours of shift work in war productions there was little time for leisure activities. Recreation usually took the form of dancing in local halls, often to music from gramophone records. There were occasions when music recitals were given, either in the Town Hall or Deans' Hall in Castle Street, with notable figures like pianists Dame Myra Hess and Benno Moiseiwitsch, soprano Isobel Bailey, and the Boyd Neil String Quartet. For the younger people the Court Theatre provided a Saturday morning film club; with serialised cowboy and mystery films.

In an attempt to relieve the tedium, especially in the summer months when workers had their holidays with nowhere to go (seaside resorts were now all no-go areas), the town instituted a 'Holiday at Home' scheme, whereby different activities were organised throughout the traditional holiday period (last week of July to the first week of August).Arranged by Stanley Radford, a member of the Cooper McDougall & Robertson staff, dances, fancy dress parades, football matches and competitions of all kinds were designed to amuse and prevent boredom.

In 1942 St Peter's church lost its fight to keep its railings, soap rationing began, and all signposts removed. It was also the time when the archbishops gave permission (because of wartime conditions) for women to enter churches with their heads uncovered.
In June that year Berkhamsted was introduced to a new form of transport, Gas powered buses. These strange vehicles had a gas producing boiler attached to the rear on a trailer and was powered by anthracite. They proved not to be all that efficient, as they often ran out of sufficient power to get them up Pendley Hill when approaching Tring. They were employed on the 301 route working from the Two Waters and Tring garages.

In August, Berkhamsted received members of the Black Watch regiment fresh from the Dieppe raid, they were billeted in Pilkington Manor House, whilst their wounded comrades went to the now established military hospital at Ashridge. In 1943, about early summer, I was standing on the steps at Victoria school when a single-engine fighter plane from Bovingdon made a sudden appearance above Tompkins meadow, weaving and spinning with pieces appearing to be falling from it. It swooped low over Chesham Road and went out of sight; then came a loud bang, followed by a plume of smoke. The plane had crashed into the railway embankment below the Sunnyside allotments; the cruelty of war had arrived on my doorstep.

I left school in July, and started work at the Clunbury Press on August 9th almost three weeks before my 14th birthday. Among the early tasks which I had to do each morning and evening was attending to the blackout screens. Paper was still in short supply, with much of what was available of poor quality, and tended to 'yellow' quickly after only a short period of time; the use of brown kraft paper was restricted to war use only, though some strong brown paper was permitted to be used by banks for making security envelopes. The problem of wrapping up finished products was overcome by utilising the wrapper which the paper came in, the lack of which sometimes caused late deliveries. 'There is a war on, you know' was the answer mostly given to disappointed customers.

1944 brought changes – army vehicles. 15cwt trucks, scout cars, and utility vans suddenly appeared in Berkhamsted New Road; sheltered under the trees, draped in camouflage netting they were protected from any airborne detection. They were all fuelled up, ready to go (so I have been told by someone who had evidently tried), and as they didn't have ignition keys, the engine could be easily started; to the annoyance of the sentry. They vanished just as they arrived, unseen and unheard. It might have had something to do with the Normandy invasion – who knows?

June also saw the arrival of Germany's latest weapons, the V1 flying bomb (the Doodlebug) and later the V2 Rocket. The V1 was powered by a small engine with a limited fuel supply, which when the fuel ran out crashed and exploded wherever it might be. The noise from the engine gave some indication that it was approaching, giving limited time to take cover; but with the V2 Rocket there was no warning, it came from out of the blue and exploded with deadly effect; there was no defence against it; both unguided missiles were launched as anti-morale weapons.

Later that year, on Sunday 17th September I had just left St Peter's Church, round about 11:45hrs when the sky was darkened by a large number of planes towing gliders flying low over the town; several members of the congregation who were leaving the church, re-entered to pray for the safety of the men in the planes. Later we found out that they were bound for Arnhem.

A sign that some things were getting a little better was when a branch of The British Restaurant opened in the Town Hall, providing meals at a modest price and no coupons required.

The end of the war finally came in 1945, first with the surrender of the German forces to Field Marshall Montgomery on May 8th followed by the surrender of Japanese forces on August 14th. Berkhamsted celebrated VE Day with dancing in the High Street until late. The war may have ended but the restrictions imposed during the war were to take a very long time before they were all removed.

During the war years, 86 high explosive bombs were dropped in the Berkhamsted civil defence area (there were 230 alerts sounded, the longest for 13 hours 25 mins on the night of December 11th-12th 1940 with the shortest being just 4 mins), and approximately 17 different Service Units stationed in the town, with five others encamped on the Common or at Ashridge.