

‘V’ FOR VICTORY – AND VICTORIA

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“Here is the news and this is Alvar Liddell reading it” was a regular sound in the war down Victoria Cottages, Howden-le-Wear, as were the voices of Wilfred Pickles and Valentine Dyall.

But best of all was Dick Barton, Special Agent. We listened to Dick Barton’s adventures every Saturday morning. It was wartime, and the radio, as well as giving us the news, provided us with an escape from the hardships of war. Although saying that, I don’t think we children noticed the hardships. We played together after school – blockey, rounders, hop scotch (we called it ‘itchy dabbers’), knocky nine doors and hot rice – and sometimes we went to the Saturday afternoon matinee at one of the three picture houses at Crook. We usually walked there and back.

At seven, touching eight, years old, the war seemed far away and to be happening to other people. Perhaps if my dad had been in the forces it might have been different, but he, and my uncles and most men in our street, worked down the pit at Roddymoor colliery. Like soldiers, sailors and airmen, pitmen too were needed then. They helped keep the home fires burning.

I remember rationing and powdered egg (yuk!). Bacon, bread and butter were rationed as well. We had rabbit pies to help eke out the meat shortage. PC George wasn’t too pleased and he warned my dad about poaching, but dad still went rabbiting – he had a family to feed, and hungry pitmen needed full bellies when they were digging for victory. Sweets too were a luxury, and when Miss Holmes, who had her little shop in the front room of her house at No. 25, got her supplies in, we used to rush up for our meagre monthly ration. Because sugar was rationed, we stopped taking it in our tea and mam used it for baking. We had a few hens in a shed at the top of the garden, so we had eggs as well, and the odd chicken made a tasty meal, but there weren’t many fat people knocking about during the war.

A Doggarts’ Club soon got rid of our clothing coupons. We got a new dress, shoes, socks and sometimes a coat for the Sunday School Anniversary in June. Otherwise it was a time of ‘make do and mend.’ I can’t remember my man getting many new clothes and she always seemed to wear a pinny.

We carried gas masks to school and there was a huge map of Europe on the wall where the teachers pinned little flags to tell us how the war was progressing.

The A.R.P. man, Mr Winter, used to parade up and down the sixty houses in our street to check if there were any chinks of light showing through the blackout curtains. I’m not sure if he was official or self-appointed. And Walter Griffiths, who was in the Home Guard, did so too. Mr Gittens and Mr Cruddace were the only two men in our street who built air raid shelters. I suppose most of our parents thought that we were safe and only towns on the coast, like Jarrow, Sunderland and Hartlepool would be bombed. Aeroplanes weren’t supposed to come as far inland as Crook or Bishop Auckland.

But they were wrong! One hot summer day five of us, who were inseparable during our childhood, went down to the river in the field by the railway near Oddy's farm (now known as Low Barns Nature Reserve). We took jam sandwiches and a bottle of water for our bait – except Bobby, that is: they were posh and kept a goat tied up outside their fronts, so he had goat's milk. We had an old tin bath that was out boat, and the River Wear was our Amazon, and we were film stars and explorers. Owen was paddling his canoe and the rest of us were plodging when the air raid siren disrupted our peace. Owen dived into the water and the trilby he always wore – don't ask me why, but I think it was something to do with Humphrey Bogart – floated off down the river and we all rushed to collect our belongings and run to hide in the dark, dank railway tunnel under the line at the disused railway station near Wear Valley Junction.

Later we learned how lucky we had been that day. A young farm labourer had been killed by aircraft fire in a field about two miles from where we had been hiding, and passengers on a bus at Woodside, Witton Park, had to take shelter in a nearby public house as the bus also came under fire.

I was nearly thirteen when the war ended. We had a victory party in the Assembly Rooms beside the Green Tree Hotel and a bonfire in Bradwell's field down Victoria, but amidst all the joy and celebrations there was a sadness too.

During war my cousin, Pte George Horsman, who lived in High Street, Howden-le-Wear and served with the D.L.I., was killed when the ship he was travelling in to come home on leave from Egypt was torpedoed in the Mediterranean.

And there was pride too for his brother, Cpl Jack Horsman, also serving with the D. L.I., who had escaped from German captivity and received the Military Medal for bravery.

Yes, we celebrated victory at the end of 'the war to end all wars' . . . but did it?