

Gladys Lamarr and her sister Gwen Herbert talk about life in the village in the past. In 1994 Gwen had given a talk to the Women's Institute on this subject, and had collected an assortment of material, which she refers to in the interview.

Interviewer – *First of all, can you say how long you have been in Bridge?*

(Gladys) Since February 1933.

And we are now in a house at the top of Union Road, but I believe you lived in Mill House. How old was Mill House, can you remember?

We were told it was built in 1730.

The Old Mill, of course, was just up here near to where you are now and in the old days, presumably the miller could look out of his window and see the mill?

That's right. That is why it is built looking up the road.

Could you please explain why, because your father obviously wasn't a miller, why did you family come to the Mill House?

We came because a man from Canterbury called Mr Burlestone, opened a coal business and he wanted to expand. So, he asked my father would you go to Bridge and build up a business of coal rounds in Bridge and Barham.

I see, and how wide was the round as it were?

He went from Petham and right the way through to Bekesbourne.

And obviously in a lorry?

Yes, several lorries, and the coal used to be delivered to Bridge Station and they used to unload the trucks, weigh the coal into 100 cwts and then deliver.

Interviewer – *Before you came to Bridge you lived in Canterbury, whereabouts?*

King Street.

You weren't there during the war with the bombing were you?

No, we were in Bridge.

I believe you had relatives who worked in the Union down the road. Who were they?

My dad's brother and his wife.

Did they actually live in the close?

Yes.

What did they actually do there?

Well, they were called porter and portress, and the aunt used to supervise the laundry. She had to do the ironing and everything and he did the booking in and booking out of the washing that was brought in, and dishing out meals and all things like that.

And you, I understand, were actually quite often in the close?

Yes, because they had two children and we got to play, and we got to know all the inmates very well. Some were young, some had got children and some were retarded obviously.

So you say there were young people there?

Yes, early 20s.

I think in those days single mothers used to be up there?

I think that's what they were.

In addition you had, what should we call them, tramps or vagrants coming through?

Yes they were brought in and opposite the Mill House there used to be a brick building and my uncle used to take the vagrants in, strip them, wash them and all that.

(Gladys) It was a strange place that, when I went in and saw the dummy all dressed up, I thought it was a dead person. They used to clean it.

(Gwen) Later that vagrant place became a Control Room in the war.

I will come to the war in a minute. When you were old enough you went to school in Bridge presumably, did you?

Yes, along Patricxbourne Road.

Can you remember things of your childhood there?

(Gwen) I remember mainly starting school at 4.00 because I had got two sisters at school and I got so annoyed I wanted ago, I got in early. And I remember things like the teacher; she used to live down here, saying who can tell me how many halfpennies in a shilling. I put my hand up. She took me by the hand and took me to the bigger group to tell them that I knew. We used to make paper chains at Christmas, I couldn't stick them, and I remember making slides down the playground with water and the teacher, Miss Bailey, fell over. (Gladys) She broke her wrist on that playground. And during the war, going into the shelters and, of course, I was the same age as the headmaster's children so I used to go into the headmaster's house very often.

Did they actually feed you at the school then?

Pupils could stay for lunch but we used to come home, but I always wanted to stay. I loved the smell of the tablecloths, the vinyl tablecloths. You had to take your own lunch, they didn't feed you.

Now I guess, outside school, you had a pretty free time did you?

Yes, we used to play ball on peoples brick walls. We used to go primrosing, and didn't really have to worry about anything and, of course, we used to be in the guides. That got us out and about.

Yes, a much freer time wasn't it? I suddenly remembered that the Nailbourne because I have just come up today, pass the Nailbourne and the Ford is closed to vehicles. Can you say anything about the river as it used to flow?

Yes, in our youth it always seemed to be flowing, but it used to flood every so often. We could walk to school down by it, but when it flooded we walked by the Ford and along the planks. It used to flood all into the High Street. When we came from the school, instead of walking up the road, we used to go across the river, holding a stick. I fell in once with my gas mask and it worried me because I thought we were going to get gassed, and I ran all the way home to the Control Room. I remember them picking it up and checking it.

Now you mention in your memoirs that children used to swim in the river even?

Yes, down there it is called the Sheep Dip, and it was deep to wash the sheep. But it wasn't very big, I didn't go in but they did. It used to grow watercress, which we used to pick. There used to be a bull in the field and I went up quite close to it. (Gladys) My mother was having fits when we went by and the bull didn't move. Just went on and it didn't turn. She thought any minute now that bull is going to turn and come for us. We ran to the stile quickly!

Now obviously your father took the coal round by lorry but I guess there were quite a few horses around were there?

(Gwen) Not in our time, but we used to get a horse and cart from a fellow in Canterbury, called Woodmans from Wincheap, and he used to sell soaps and washing powders on a Saturday afternoon. And we used to have a man on a bike selling ice cream and he was from Littlebourne and had a bike and sidecar. And Miss Stone used to live in Linton House and she used to walk round and knock on your door and say "it's Mary, get your jug, do you want 1 pint or 2 pints of milk".

Where did the milk come from?

She had a small dairy. (Gladys) The actual opening is still there if you look, opposite the church. It's quite wide and is the opening to the dairy..

The other man who delivered milk used to live at Brickfield, and he was called Mr Lawrence.

I think you most probably saw one or two public celebrations in your time in Bridge?

(Gwen) Yes my earliest one is 1935 when there used to be a fire station in Brewery Lane, and they took the fire tender out and our middle sister (she is dead now) rode on the fire engine. They did a big carnival, lots of people dressed up. It started off at Union Road and went up to Highland Court and we also used to have (I'm diverting) in the flax field, horticultural things with swings and Penfold's Fair. It was here for the week, and when the fair was here, the fair children had to come to Bridge School.

Going on from that, did you have any traveller children at all, gypsies?

Only with the fair, can't remember any others.

(Gladys) No, only the odd tramps. I remember the tramps coming through with their tins and they would knock on your door for some tea or something to eat and they marked your house with a cross – there was a cross outside your house to tell someone else coming along that that was the place to go. My mother made a mistake by doing that. Because living in the High Street, they used to walk through the High Street. (Gwen) And we used to get the people coming across with onions in bags.

The Onion Johnnies?

Well, Mum used to say to all of us the gypsies are about and we used to hide under the window. They used to come round and Dad would say "I don't know why you get worried with

them, don't buy anything" – ooh they make you. One day we went to Canterbury, came home and dad had got socks. We said, "where did you get them" and one of these travellers had called and he couldn't get rid of them. So we used to get those and the gypsies used to sell pegs. Going back to functions, there was a man called Mr Whigham who lived in the big house at the top, and he was very good to us children. He would provide a party for us with a magician but having said that, on Sunday in Church, he'd always sit in the choir although he wasn't in the choir.

Now, there was a mention I think, in the Jubilee celebrations, about a fireman. Can you tell the story?

Mr Deeson, he was a character. We had several characters in Bridge, but he was a character because he hadn't got a roof to his mouth so he talked liked that, so he was made fun of by all the children, but it never fazed him at all. And he would do stunts as a fireman. He knew what he was doing, coming out of burning cottages, so he was a sort of hero in our minds.

I think you said they built up a wooden hut with straw in?

Yes some straw and they set fire to it and we would say, there is a man in there.

Now the war. First of all, what about the soldiers? I think there were soldiers billeted round here?

(Gwen) Yes there were a lot of soldiers. We, well some of us anyway, got quite friendly with some because they liked the church and music, and our sister being an organist and we were attached to the church, they used to come to our house and practice and talk. So we got to know them and they were here and we had contact with them. They were here one minute and then gone across the water. I mention in there, they gave us lots of food which they had to return (I am sure it didn't all get returned. The police came to the school and said "if anyone has got food from the soldiers, they must return it" because there was meat and everything. We weren't allowed to keep it, rationing and all. And as I also mention in there, they entertained. They did plays and I remember thinking how can men do women's parts, but they did. Because our village hall was called the reading room and it had a stage, and we used to do a concert. We used to arrange it, my sister and I, every year to take the children in the village on outings. I was always sad when the stage went because it meant so much to us. (Gladys) Yes it is the thing that's missing isn't it. (Gladys) The Women's Institute used to do plays and we used to sing. That hall is quite big, they could push the kitchen back and still put a stage there.

One thing that surprised me is that you say that German shells actually reached this far. Where was that coming from?

(Gwen) That was coming from the channel, the stretch of water between France and Dover, and if they were in so far the shells could reach here. Once they had started you didn't know until you heard a whistle that it was coming, yes they reached us the shells.

You say there were anti aircraft guns at Renville?

The planes used to come in sometimes very low before the barrage balloons went up. At the top of the hill, on the right, they were so low that they machine gunned right across the lawn, and when they got to Canterbury, they machine gunned down the High Street. My mother and sister were in there and it went right across the pram.

(Gwen) They came one day and took all the iron railings from everywhere. We thought that was sad and then the convoy them through and we went down with apples and things and gave to the soldiers.

You were in the girl guides and actually worked for the war effort in the girl guides?

(Gwen) I worked at Canterbury hospital and worked at Dr Barnado's at Bishopsbourne.

And you used to collect all sorts of waste paper and rose hips. What were the rose hips for?

To be made into syrup for young children. (Gladys) We used to get points didn't we for how many we picked, so everyone was very busy around the hedgerows. (Gladys) I used to have to weigh them at Bridge School.

Actually, you mention pigswill here.

(Gwen) It used to be the butchers, what's the butcher's called down here – Wakehams. Well at the back of his shop used to be the place for the pig swill and three times at least we lost our potato peeler and they found it in the pig swill

You mention that Margaret was an organist.

She was only 14 when she was made organist at Bridge, and Patricxbourne and we had a kneeler made in her memory.

The blitz in Canterbury - was it actually at night or was it during the day?

It was at night. We all had to get up and get dressed. It is something we will never forget. Our aunt and uncle at the close had got to take all the children in that had become homeless and she sent a note to mum and said "I must have clothes", and I remember my best dress going and I remember my mum saying "well you have got a home, they haven't. They were filthy and had to clean them up.

You were in Canterbury, but you managed to get home?

(Gladys) Yes we had an unexploded bomb dropped. It was a good job it didn't go off, it was facing St Martin's this way, and the soldiers said, "You have got to go home, you can't stay here". (Gwen) And you had to have an escort to take you to the bus. The scouts did that. (Gladys) Then they wanted us back and they said you had to be out of the way, glass was everywhere. (Gwen) And our gran and granddad were under the stairs in Canterbury and our dad was a warden and he tried to get in to get them out. They did let him in in the end. There was a plane that shot down a German and he went right up in the air and did a victory roll up to the top and he couldn't pull out of it and exploded.

Evacuees. You also had children from elsewhere from Medway towns. Of course because they would be bombing the naval establishment there. So where did they stay?

(Gwen) They were brought to the village and I am not sure if they were teachers or what, came round with them (I can see them now) coming up Union Road and they called at each house, and according to the children who lived there and how many bedrooms you had, you had to take them in. We didn't get one because we hadn't got the room, but certainly lots of people in this road had the evacuees. We were very friendly with them. I can remember their names to this day.

When they went back home was there any contact with them?

They didn't go straight back home. They were taken from here when things hotted up here, and they were taken off further up the line, and we were left here. We were told to pack a bag ready to go, but we never went.

So there was a warning that you might have to evacuate?

Dad was a warden and he came home and said we had all got to pack.

Now you mention here, hop-pickers. There were hop fields towards Bishopsbourne?

Yes, up the top and at the Hunts, and at the top of the hill at Renville's. They used to come up from Dover and on a Saturday night they used to come and pinch our fruit. It was a terrible time.

Could I ask Gwen, when you left Bridge School, what did you do then?

When I left Bridge school, I passed the exam to go the Canterbury Technical College to learn commerce and shorthand and typing and commercial subjects. So I travelled there every day obviously.

And you then met your husband?

No, I got a job and I ended up working at the East Kent Road Car Company at Harbledown. Then I went into local government at Whitstable at the Urban District Council, which later of course became Canterbury. Then I moved with the local government to the Midlands and I worked for several different departments working my way up to as far as I could go in local government. I was in local government for 30 years.

Now, famous people. Lady Baden Powell, I think you mentioned her?

I met her, yes, but that was in their gardens when they came to Canterbury and I had to go and give a demonstration, with others, putting up tents and goodness knows what. Yes, I met the Baden Powells.

And there was also the wife of King Hussain?

Yes, well of course she wasn't then, she was a young girl. She lived in the Red Lion and her father and mother went to work as a batman for King Hussein in Jordan and that's how Toni (that's her name) met him. He liked her because she was so ordinary. Toni's son is now the present King of Jordan. Of course, King Hussein married again.

Now, the church. You were heavily involved in the Church weren't you? Now something about the vicars?

Yes, our main vicar during the war was Reverend Gregory. You will see, if you look in the back, his last letter he wrote. They lived in Rose Bank, not where the vicarage is now, the one that sides onto the main road and we spent hours there. As children, they really took us to heart and we spent hours with them. Mrs Gregory was Canadian, and the Canadians used to send parcels of food over and we used to distribute them to children, I have got pictures of all these things. Yes, we were involved in the church all through the war. We were Sunday school teachers. We were entertainers, just heavily involved.

I know what I want to mention, totally away from the church. The cost of living, because I think you say somewhere here about the cost of living?

Yes, it's in the back. That gives the cost of living in the country really, so you are saying what it is the cost of living, which is difficult for us. I know three pence was a lot of money. That is one of the Government papers.

Oh, I see this is what you could do. Yes, here we are, I will read it out. For 1 pound 2 shillings and 11 pence you could get a lot. I won't read it all, but certainly you could get 5 white loaves, a neck of beef, a sheep's head, one and half pounds of rabbit, two pounds of jam, three quarters of a pound of tea, four ounces of sultanas and the list goes on, all for that amount of money and that was in 1933.

And that, of course, wasn't in the war because you couldn't get that food.

Now going right to when you started work. I think you mention here that you bought your first car?

(Gwen) £65. And I bought it off a man who worked for the Ministry of Transport. He used to do learner drivers tests in Canterbury and he had a property built at the back of Old Mill House, and he lived there. And on the second trip out it broke down, the half shaft went and my mother said "you shouldn't have bought it off of him, he knew it was no good" and in Brewery Lane there used to be a garage owned by Henry Ford, and he was very good to me. He used to mend the car and I could call on him anytime, it was good. And across the road, next to Skippers, was Mr Woodward, who used to do batteries and things. That was handy. But he was always so tanked up from The Plough he used to be asleep.

There was a Mr Williams, who used to live in Patricbourne Road, and he has talked about the man who used to stoke the gas furnace to make the gas, and he used to go down to the pub and the gas level would go down and then he would return and shovel like mad and the gas pressure would go up?

We knew the Williams's very, very well and Mr Williams was Clerk to the Council and I used to be friends with Dennis his son. They used to be heavily involved in the church and therefore we were quite involved with them really.

That's interesting, because we met up with Bob Williams about two years ago.

Yes, he was a bit older than me, I knew his brother more - Dennis. He was an electrician and he was a good artist. I have still got his drawings in my autograph book of naughty boys hung up with pegs.

Gwen and Gladys thank you very much for contributing to this.