

## **Dorothy King**

**It's Joan Hill speaking to Dorothy King. Dorothy is in her 98<sup>th</sup> year now. She's a resident in Bridge and she's going to tell us first about her childhood, growing up not here in Bridge, but somewhere else. Dorothy, so where was it you grew up?**

I was born in 1920 in Worcestershire about seven and a half miles from Birmingham where my mother lived. At that time, it was classified as Worcestershire but very shortly was taken in as the city of Birmingham. At that time it was really quite rural because we were well out of the city. There was a lovely green field opposite to us. It was small hamlet, maybe on a par with Patricxbourne.

**So, Dorothy, where was it you went to school?**

Where we lived there was no school, there was a church which was a chapel of rest for the...at Kings Norton. The church was used for weekdays as a school for kindergarten children. Two classes for the very small ones from 5 upwards and for the slightly older ones. During the week they let down a big telescopic screen to enclose the altar so that the altar was completely closed off during the week. We had two classes run by two lady teachers. There's not a lot I can say about what we learned but very often we were taken out into the country because it was on the doorstep so we were always going out to see the farmer or things like that.

**Try and describe your classroom. Did you have slates and chalk or anything like that?**

Oh, no we were a bit beyond that.

**So, you would sit at a desk?**

Yes, not a desk, a little table. We didn't have slates. The teachers had a blackboard. I remember writing on sort of thick brown paper with the chalk but by and large we were given a piece of paper and a pencil and we were taught to write by having a five-line stave like a music stave and we had to form the letters so that they took up a couple of lines of this stave and we were taught how the curve should go and how the tails should go.

**I remember that too and it made you have beautifully rounded letters and perfect sizing.**

Yes, copperplate writing.

**So, moving on Dorothy when you became a teenager, what happened then?**

Oh, when I was a teenager I went to the Girls' Grammar School at Kings Norton. I had been going to what was known then as a Council School which was mixed classes and from there we were weeded out and some were recommended to take the 11+ exam and some were not. The ones that passed it went to a Grammar School and the others went to what was known as a Commercial School in the city. Boys particularly, they learned woodwork and all sorts of manual skills whereas the girls went to an academic school and under a Headmistress who was a classics fanatic. She was very small, very old fashioned, very authoritative. Everyone was terrified of her. You didn't come in contact too much with the Headmistress.

**When you did come in to contact with her, did she give you any guidance as to what you would do when you left school? Did she ask if you had any ideas?**

I think she might have done eventually but never in my time. What you saw of her was in Assembly in the morning. She always took Assembly. She was up on the platform, we always had a Collect and a hymn. Not a sermon as such but a little address about current events etc. We had to stand there virtually at attention, no movement, no noise of any kind.

**Now I believe your chosen path after school was going in to the WAAFs, so tell a bit about how that came about.**

Oh, that was a long time later because when I left school I went to work at what was called the Selly Oak Colleges (I've got a whole leaflet about it) as a clerical worker to do shorthand and typing. But I was very, very unhappy there; I hated it partly because the head shorthand typist was so horrible to me. She was supposed to teach me

shorthand which I had never had any word of at all. I taught myself to type. I was so miserable there that one day I went in to Birmingham to the Youth Employment Bureau and got myself a job and this was in the city for a large engineering firm, where instead of being on my own there were masses of people and I was very happy and it was very nice there and this went on until war broke out and then I was told that I was in a reserved occupation because the firm had branches in America and Canada and they were eventually involved in Lend-Lease\* which was about trying to get America in to our side in the war. When war broke out I volunteered for the Red Cross and I did part time nursing round all the hospitals in Birmingham. I used to work all day in the office and then from 6 in the evening until 10 or half past I would go around the different hospitals nursing.

### **That must have been a hard day for you.**

Oh, I didn't have any sleep, but we were young. I went on doing that and I decided that well, again, because I was young and everybody else was joining up and going in to the services, one lunchtime in the office a girl and I decided we'd go down to a recruiting office and see what was what and find out about things. We went down there and I announced I would like to join the WRENS. Purely snobbish because it was the Senior Service. They said "Oh, we've only got vacancies for what they would call in the Army, batwomen, to look after the officers or cooks. Well I didn't fancy either. So they said there were loads of service vacancies for the WAAF and they were very desperate for signals personnel. They said because I could type I could go in to signals; so much for choice! I had to wait to hear from them and it was some months before I heard any more. There was no warning or anything it was just a railway warrant to somewhere. So, I went to Gloucester and first of all I did square bashing there for about three weeks which was awful. I was in a hut with about thirty-six other women and the ablutions where you had a wash or went to the loo was about a four-minute walk across the barrack square. At the end of November freezing cold, no hot water. Half the girls that had been recruited never washed and it didn't make it much better when I heard that Sarah Churchill, Winston Churchill's daughter was also doing square bashing there and she must have had a proper toilet but she was actually on the square doing marching. She had upset the whole family by marrying a music hall comic named Vic Oliver.

Anyway, trying to condense all this, I was there for about three weeks. I have never been so cold in my life, bitterly cold, and then I was told I was going to be posted to Morecombe. So, another railway warrant and I went to Morecombe. You have to remember that this is at the end of November, beginning of December. At Morecombe we had to do more square marching, up and down the front and we had to do PT on the pier in our blouses and navy-blue knickers and the whole of the people that were left in Morecombe used to come and gape at us. We were up on the bars on these tiers doing all these things. We did loads and loads of marching up and down.

We were billeted in one of the bed and breakfast places at one end of the town with a widow. She hated us all, she didn't want us. There were four of us, strangers, in there and she didn't really want us at all. She fed us on beans and cheese puddings. We had so many beans, so stodgy it was terrible. We never saw any fruit, we never saw anything like that. So that was pretty miserable. In between they would push you in to the medical unit and inject you with all these things. Yellow fever was the worst. You couldn't move your arm or let anyone brush against you or you'd pass out. They were painful. They'd keep telling us to swing our arms but you couldn't even lift your arms.

After that, I was there about another three weeks or so and I was told I was going to be posted to Cranwell to the Signals School. Once we got there the first thing we were told was they were so short of recruits and they wanted us at once. The course was being cut from six weeks to three weeks. We had to march to school at about quarter to 6 in the morning having rushed to the cookhouse and had a piece of bread and margarine and cup of tea. I marched to school in the pouring rain and really dark. You had to go and sit at the typewriter with a case over it and touch-type. I've done that in woollen gloves it was so cold.

*\*The Lend-Lease policy was a programme by which the United States supplied Britain and other allied nations with food, oil and material between 1941 and 1945.*

### **Let's move on from what you did there.**

So, I did my three weeks there and we were sent home for Christmas. I think I was there for a week and then I got another railway warrant to this place that I'd never heard of and just the railway warrant. I got on at the station in Birmingham and was told I didn't have to change. I went on this train. It was dark and no lights, just a tiny little blue light in the ceiling. Absolutely packed with people. I sat there in the carriage and all the other side – it was a slam-door obviously – two rows and all you could see on the other side were cigarettes! Then you had to rely on hearing a porter yell out a name. No sign boards or anything that you could check on. I asked one of the soldiers what he'd said and he thought so, so I got out at this little "one horse" place. You got out on to the line. There was nobody about, it was dark, I don't know what time it was. There was one other girl and she came from Liverpool and she had been exactly the same, not knowing where she was coming to. We walked out of the station and the snow was up to here. Absolutely covered with snow. There were two little boys with sledges. They said, "Are you going up to Redfield?"

That was where we were supposed to be billeted. They said, "It's alright miss, we'll take you." We put our kitbags on the sledges. I remember, I gave them sixpence. It was a good mile and a half and we were billeted in what had been a big gentleman's manor house and when we got there they gave us a cup of tea. There was no food, it must have been half past nine. We were told where we had to sleep. We had to sleep in the stables. They'd converted them as much as possible and put double bunks in all the stalls. The straw was still on the floor. I was in the bottom bunk and I was petrified because at night you could hear the rats scraping in the straw. I think for weeks I slept with the blanket over my head because I was so near the floor.

### **What happened in the morning when it was daylight?**

We were told to go to the cookhouse and have some breakfast. They said we were all working shifts and there'd be an A, B, C and D shift. I got in to B shift, I don't know why. I remember the first time I went on duty we went into another great big, lovely house and for that particular shift it was all men and me. I remember I did a lot of teleprinting messages and things. Then I'd been there, perhaps about a week when all the men vanished. They'd all been sent to the Middle East to open a signals centre in Ben Gazi or El Alamein. They scraped around to see if they'd got enough WAAF to make four watches and we were virtually responsible for the whole of the signalling, messaging system.

At that time, I'd still didn't know anything about Bletchley, I'd never heard of it, but of course I got to know where it was. We were in a little village and it was seven or eight miles away. We were told we'd be getting coded messages and they must be accurate. They used to come in in blocks of letters and figures. Very boring really because we never knew what was in them. We had to book them in, put them on message sheets and give them to the officer. Or if there was any that was in coded language we had to book them in and send them on to Bletchley. We didn't know much about Bletchley at all except it was all signals and very secret.

### **How long were you there for?**

Virtually the whole time. Oxfordshire, Buckinghamshire, the centre of England were all Bomber training stations where the pilots were trained for Bomber Command. None of them were fighters it was all bombing. We were in the middle of a big hub.

### **Was this for the whole of the war?**

Yes, from about 1941 onwards. I didn't know much about Bletchley until later on, it was all very hush-hush. I don't think even the people who worked there knew.

### **So, we'll move quickly on after that, though it was really interesting to hear you talk about. Where did it take you after that?**

I was there until they were running it down after D Day and sending them elsewhere. They didn't want us anymore and we were posted to RAF stations. I got sent to West Drayton near London. There were several men and a sprinkling of WAAFs. There was no signals section.

**So eventually when the war came to an end where did you go?**

West Drayton. I landed up in the General Registry which was like the clerical part.

**Then your life moved on.**

I got married.

**How did you meet your husband?**

He was at High Wycombe, Bomber Command. He'd been working under ground. He said they all went a bit barmy working under ground. There were all sorts of posh people there.

**Quite a difficult time to be getting married wasn't it?**

Yes, we wanted to go to the Scilly Isles for our honeymoon but it was 1944 and they were all preparing for D Day. The whole of the south coast was barbed wire and you couldn't go down south so we went to the Lake District.

**Perhaps we'd better move on to what brought you to Bridge.**

I came out of the WAAF. My husband was a printer and he was lucky enough to be offered his old job back. That was in Hastings on the Hastings and St Leonards Observer. Of course, I was demobbed way before him. They let the married women go first but the men had to wait until their number came up. It must have been eighteen months practically and during that time I went home to mother. I got a job in the head GPO in Birmingham. Eventually, when he was back in his old job we had nowhere to live. He kept trying to get me to live there and no money. Eventually I went there and lived with my in-laws.

**So, we're doing this for the Bridge History Society so perhaps we can move to when you came here to live.**

**When was it you came to Bridge?**

I came to Bridge in 1987 having been retired for about eighteen months or so. I stayed in Worcestershire and we lived in the Vale of Evesham. Then my husband became ill and couldn't go on working. He had to retire on sickness grounds. That same year my mother died. My mother was still in the same house, seven and a half miles from Birmingham. We moved from Hastings so that I could get near to my mother to see what we were going to do about her living on her own. She was crippled with arthritis. So we left Hastings and looked for a bungalow. I was then working for the DHSS and I asked if I could have a transfer to Worcester. That went through OK, so we had to find somewhere to live there. I was virtually on the spot for my mother. I worked for the DHSS in Worcester. My husband was like a house husband. He used to fetch his paper in the morning and worked a lot in his greenhouse because he was a gardener, while I went out to work every day.

**But what brought you here?**

Well, everybody died.

**So, you had no ties with the family.**

She died at the end of June 1980. In December that year my husband died. That meant I'd got one elderly aunty left on her own and I had to get her in to a nursing home. Roger my son was down here. He was with Customs and Excise at Dover. He kept asking me to move. I was driving two hundred miles down here and neither of us wanted to keep doing that. I got a bungalow in the Vale of Evesham, I said I wouldn't come this way until that last aunty died. So I had another two and a half/ three years up there and then she died on Christmas Eve.

Then the bungalow was too big on my own so I decided to come here. We tried lots of villages around here.

**Dorothy, we're really pleased that you decided to come to Bridge. You're in you're 98<sup>th</sup> year and you're looking so well and a lovely smile on your face and with lots of personal memories. Have you been happy living in Bridge?**

Yes, I settled down immediately. I made friends and joined everything there was here.

**Would that have been the Women's Institute and the Church?**

Yes, and I used to drive for the Fish Scheme. I was in the choir and then I took over playing the organ and went for about fifteen years to all the nursing hymns to play for their hymns.

**So, did you play only at Bridge church or other churches as well?**

I've played at Patricxbourne and Lower Hardres but mainly I played in Bridge at the request of Raymond. (Raymond Gilbert). One Sunday he said,

"I'm sorry, we won't have any music today."

Afterwards he asked if I'd play for a service. I said I wasn't an organist, just a pianist. But I did it and played until Jean Barber came to live here.

**So, really you were self-taught, that's incredible. So, when you weren't required quite so much for the organ you sang in the choir.**

Yes, I sang in the choir when I joined with Betty Walker and Bettina in 1987. At that time, I think it was Martin at first (Martin Miles), who sent his resignation because he'd become a House Master. Then I think we had Peter Giles but he gave it up. But Jean took over and she was much more qualified than I was. I played at Evensong one evening and Petr Giles was in the congregation. I was nervous and I asked him what he thought. He said it was alright but I should give a bit more time between verses.

**Well, there have been many years for you here in Bridge. When we had a flower festival in the church, we had many visitors and you celebrated your ninetieth birthday and lots of friends came and talked to you.**

I remember the one before that in 1990.

**Yes, I think we've had two, if not three flower festivals. We always say we're not going to do another one but somehow we do.**

They are lovely but they take a lot of work. I helped with one in Worcester Cathedral. They did all the bishop's gowns with flowers.

**You've recalled lots of memories Dorothy and thank you very much for recording it for us.**