

RAY GIGG PRE-WORLD WAR 2
Interview 26th March 2011

Ray Gigg, the only son of Bertie and Ethel Gigg, was born at what is now called “ School Cottage” on the 23rd of February, 1929. Shortly after his birth, the family moved to a newly built council house now known as number 6, The Malthouse. It was from here that he started school, at 5 years old.

SCHOOL

Ray's first memory of school is not a happy one. He didn't want to go, and because he was so upset, he cried all the way there. He does remember what the uniform was: blue and gold blazers, and caps and grey shorts for the boys; dark blue gym slips and white blouses for the girls. Ray has kept his badge and tie to this day: a tangible memory.

He remembers his teachers clearly. Miss White, a strict teacher of about 40, lived in the village store (the now-closed Post Office) on the corner of Ashbury Hill and High Street, and made an effort to pacify the crying Ray. The first thing to learn was the alphabet, and the teacher, dressed like the girls in navy and white, would stand at the front of the class chanting: “ a for apple.. b for bat...” while pointing to a colourful display. Ray was quick to learn to read because he wanted to read all the stories available , like Billy Bunter, and the comics of the time, Beano, Dandy, Wizard, Hotspur etc.

Mr. Rousell, teacher of the middle class, wasn't there long but embarrassed Ray and some of the boys by seating them between the girls. Miss Winifred Mildenhall, about 30, taught Ray for longer and he remembers her sing-song voice saying “ you must get this right” as she patted them on the bottom. She married Oliver Collet, and it so happened that Oliver and Winifred Collet lived directly opposite Ray and Eunice's first house, 9 Sandy Lane, Shrivenham, which they moved into in 1955, 3 years after their marriage. This was their home for 29 years before they returned to live in The Old Forge in Ashbury.

In the late 1930's, Ray moved into the class of Mr. A.W.Culley, a very musical headmaster, who was keen that the pupils should play percussion instruments like drums, cymbals, tambourines, triangles, and make instruments like recorders from bamboo canes. He played records like Mendelssohn's Fingal's Cave on a wind-up gramophone in a cabinet, conducting the group who all crashed happily away. Efforts in other subjects were rewarded annually, and Ray used to regularly win book prizes, one of which, The Big Book For Boys, he still has.

Ray has a good visual memory of where things were in the classroom and in the school. In the senior class he can still see in his mind's eye, the piano at the big window, the open fire, the big painting of the boyhood of Raleigh by John Everett Millais, and the Civil War helmet on top of the cupboard. The whole building was heated by 2 big round tortoise stoves and an open stove with a huge fireguard, and at break time all the children would huddle round the stoves to get warm. In the senior classroom, screens separated off the different age classes: 5-8 at the stage end, 9-12 in the middle, 12-14 in the top, and a clearway ran through the front of the classroom to the doors in the screens. Each class teacher sat near the class stove, and the Head had his own study (now the ladies'toilets).

LUNCHTIME

In the early 1940's, all children were given school milk. For the children of Ashbury, it came in a large zinc-plated copper churn, with a little dip on the side, measuring one-third of a pint. Each child dipped in and poured the measure into their cup. Mid-morning breacktime saw a rush to be the first at the milk, to get the prized creamy top-of-the-milk. If you didn't live near the school, you stayed at lunch-time, but Ray went home for his dinner. He, like most children then, walked there and back by himself, not having to face the dangers of modern-day traffic.

GAMES AT PLAYTIME

A highlight of the playground was whipping tops, which would fly all over the place. There were two different sorts: sausage tops, that didn't get off the ground much, and T-shaped tops which would go

four or five feet in the air and come down still spinning. The whips could be made of cord or leather thong which gave more traction or spin, but most children had locally-made whipping tops or steel hoops, fashioned from 3/8th inch diameter steel rod, into a two feet tall hoop. The boys liked to bowl them along, controlling them with a long hook held in the hand, or running free, but they were definitely dangerous : Ray was once caught on the nose by a top whipped up by a big lad from Knighton.

No such dangers for the girls, with their games of hopscotch and Farmer's in His Den. The headmaster was very keen on Physical Training and would demonstrate the use of the equipment that his pupils could use at playtime.

LESSONS

The class teacher taught all the subjects to his pupils. Ray's best subjects were writing and maths, and he loved Geography but hated History. He remembers that the evacuee headmaster for his last two years, was Mr. Duckham.

In 1943, Ray's schooldays came to an end, an upsetting time for him as he wanted to stay on and learn more, but the school, with only Ray and Jim Price in Standard 6, had no more to offer.

After leaving school, he worked delivering milk for Tom Halliday for a couple of months, and then started at William Bunce and Son, the local engineering works, training as a fitter and turner, under the foreman, George Fisher, as his dad told him he needed a trade. It wasn't really his choice though, as he wanted to be an electrician, but with training so expensive in town, there was no opportunity for this dream. At the age of 18, on May 22nd, 1947, he was called up for National Service, and served in the REME as a craftsman centre lathe turner, until July 1949. On his release he returned to work at Bunce's from where he was laid off along with Fred New and Henry Ody in December 1949, due to shortage of work.

SHOPS

Irene and Edith White kept the Village Stores at the crossroads, and sold sweets and groceries. Irene, also a teacher, was keen to tell everyone that she knew the famous children's author, Enid Blyton.

Mrs. Rose Simpson's shop opposite the Rose and Crown, sold sweets and drinks, especially Leasing drinks with a little ball top on. If you wanted, you could have Corona drinks with clip-tops, delivered to your home.

Miss Letitia Stroud, known as Tish, lived in the house by the Memorial Square, and also sold sugar and a few sweets, but her prices were higher, so her trade was less than brisk.

Mr. and Mrs. Southwell lived in what is now called The Cottage, opposite the village school, now the village hall. They ran a Post Office and grocery store, providing competition for the Village Stores. Ray didn't relish going in there, maybe because Mr. Southwell had put a row of spikes along the windowsill, so that lads couldn't sit there whilst waiting to go into school.

Mr. Critchley ran a drapery store in a big, dark shop, selling overalls and workwear, etc, where Sheilings is now.

MOBILE SHOPS

Johnny Ball lived at Bishopstone, and delivered his goods from a 3 ton flatbed lorry, which carried a huge container of paraffin. He had bright fruit, all in boxes with their origins emblazoned on the side, and a container of ice-cream (vanilla, of course), a treat for children who would run out with a tea-cup to be filled, and a few pennies to pay. Johnny knew that Friday was payday, so arrived every Saturday for trading. Ray remembers him fondly as a tradesman ready to help with putting goods "on tick" if there was no ready money. For instance, when newly-weds Ray and Eunice needed chairs, Johnny supplied them with Christie Tiler chairs, at £12 each, and allowed Ray to pay over 6 months. The Keogh brothers ran a hardware store in Swindon, and brought their goods out most months in a canvas-covered open-sided lorry, displaying saucepans and other items.

Mr. Webb came with bread from Bishopstone several times a week.

Mr. Baulch the Swindon butcher came once a week.

Mr. Fish from Faringdon arrived offering clothes.

Morses, a Swindon drapers and haberdashers, came monthly and offered a club payment method for their goods.

Mr. Thorn from Lambourn came fortnightly, charging up accumulators for radio. Ray remembers their late 1930's battery-powered radio, comprised of a tuba horn-shaped speaker which sat on the wide mantelpiece. The radio receiver was powered with 3 power sources: (a) 120 volt high tension battery, about 12" by 9" in size, made of 80 1.5 volt batteries (today's AA size), (b) a 9 volt grid bias battery, and (c) a 3 volt wet accumulator which Mr. Thorn from Lambourn collected and replaced with a recharged duplicate once a fortnight, charging 6d for the recharge. When Ray was about 13, because radios were so expensive, he could use the 120 volt battery that had ceased to power the radio, to reconnect the 1.5 batteries in a different order, i.e. in parallel, to power his 3 volt bedside lamp. Things changed when the village was connected to mains electricity in 1946.

COUNTRYSIDE

Living in the countryside seemed to be a delight for children like Ray, spending time amongst flowers, butterflies and birds. There were flowers in abundance, so everyone picked them to collect or display different kinds, such as bee orchids, or to take bunches of them home to their mothers. Sometimes the flowers were pressed, labelled with a paper tag on each stem, put between the leaves of a large book, and weighted down.

Mrs. Duckam, the headteacher's wife, who came from East Ham with the evacuees, had lived a town life. She was also a teacher and organised a competition to encourage the older children to collect and tag the flowers, making a huge emphasis on the importance of the country. She appreciated the value of country life, surprisingly, perhaps, for someone from a town. A book prize was awarded to the two pupils who collected and named the most flowers, and Ray remembers coming second to a girl by only 2 flowers. Each of them had collected over 120 species.

From 1937, for a few years, the Butterfly Man came for a week in the summer, and by helping him, Ray added to his knowledge of natural history. He learned how to recognise fritillary and many other butterflies, how the killing bottle worked, and how to mount the specimens.

And then there were the birds: skylarks, peewits, yellow hammers, finches, wagtails. Bird-nesting was a favourite pastime, and when Ray's father wasn't working he could take his young son to the hedgerows, lifting him up to take just one egg from each nest for his collection. The eggs were pierced at each end with a large pin and then blown out into a dish. The small delicately-shelled eggs sometimes crumpled in your fingers, which, if it was a rare egg, was quite upsetting. The yolks were afterwards fried along with moorhen and mallard eggs, which were plentiful at the time.

Ray remembers an older cousin Bill Starkey who worked as a butler for the Thomas family at Compton House in the late 1930's. He lived with his wife Edith and their daughter Barbara, a few years younger than him. Ray and his parents often walked from Ashbury to visit them along the footpath between Kingston Winslow and Compton. Knowing Ray's keen interest in collecting birds' eggs, his admiration of some very colourful ducks kept at Compton House, and his desire to have one their eggs, Edith promised to try and get him an egg. On the next visit, Ray was presented with a Chinese duck's egg. It was beautiful: mottled pale pink, blue and yellow, about the size of a mallard's egg, and Ray was overjoyed. No-one else had anything like this in their collection, and he was so proud of it that he could hardly put it down without picking it up to admire it again. He was eager to go home and blow it out for his collection, but oh, was soon to learn a hard lesson. As he picked the egg up again, turning it over lovingly in his hand, the inevitable happened: it slipped through his fingers and smashed on the floor. He was inconsolable. His dream was shattered.

Eventually, he became aware of his mother and Edith and what they were saying. Not to be upset? Not a real Chinese duck's egg? Only a bantam's egg that Edith had painted? A trick? Just a bit of

fun? His head reeled as he tried to take it in. He didn't want to believe it but slowly, gradually, it did sink in, and as he disconsolately picked up the pieces and looked at them, he realised what lesson in life had been learnt. Pride indeed, always precedes a fall.

FARMS AND FARMERS

Ray has clear memories of the surrounding farms. Red-faced Mr. Frierson had a dairy and arable farm at Odstone. Mr. Tucker had a cattle and arable farm at Kingston. The Spences, a long-established farming family at Manor Farm, provided Ray with his first earned money: ten shillings for picking up potatoes and putting them into sacks, a task he shared with Italian prisoners of war. And when Ray left school in 1944, aged 14, he worked for Tommy Halliday for three months, on the dairy farm where he loaded and delivered bottles with cardboard inserts in the top.

But rabbiting was his most vivid memory of life on the farms. At harvest time, the tractor and cutter binder circled around a diminishing patch of uncut corn as the boys stood around, waiting for the rabbits to appear, chasing them with favourite rabbiting sticks held aloft, ready to thump them down on the unsuspecting creatures as they were outrun. If the farmer was Eber Read at Idstone, a boy could keep his rabbit. If it wasn't, all rabbits must be given up to be shared out.

ANIMALS

The farmers kept sheep and cows and chickens. The families in the council houses kept a dozen or more chickens and a precious pig, with pigsties in the gardens throughout the war years. And then there were Ray's thirty or so rabbits: a Flemish Giant, a Belgian hare, a Blue Rex, an Angora, all English and Dutch rabbits, and all a good source of pocket money. To get the best meat, a Flemish Giant should be crossed with a Belgian Hare, so off went the doe for a day to be mated at Miss Hall's. It was worth the sixpence fee, for these rabbits would sell for a shilling or two each, unlike wild ones which fetched a mere sixpence, and which would wreak havoc on unwired allotments. Most people kept an air rifle for getting rid of pests like sparrows and pigeons, that would otherwise devour the peas in the gardens.

Also in the gardens were as many as six beehives.

"A swarm of bees in May, is worth a load of hay.
A swarm of bees in June is worth a silver spoon
A swarm of bees in July? Not worth a butterfly."

Ray found it fun to bang a kettle with a key, watching the bees settle to the tinging sound. The bees would be put in a square box with crossed twigs halfway up inside, on which to build their honeycomb. In a severe winter, the swarm would be lost, but if not, at the end of summer, the honey was cut out of the box and the bees killed off with sulphur, (Henry Tilling's job) Honey was shared amongst bee-keepers, for it was seen as a war-time delicacy, and besides, you could always obtain extra sugar rations if you planned to use sugar water mix to help the bees survive the winter. He remembers cycling to Bourton when he was about 14, to see a Mr. Coats, who was quite an authority on bee-keeping, to collect a swarm of bees for his father. Mr. Coats had the swarm in a wicker basket called a skip, about 18" in diameter and 6" in depth. The swarm was trapped inside with a hessian cover, tied around the top of the skip. Ray balanced the humming skip on his handlebars and cycled very, very carefully back to Ashbury. Not something perhaps that would be tried today! Health and Safety Regulations have changed many aspects of life.

WATER SUPPLY

The field alongside Winslow Bank was the site of an unsuccessful attempt to drill for water, which lasted for several months in late 1939. Ray went every day to watch and when green sand was reached, he was given some to keep. In the past, that area had been wet enough, most spectacularly on a Whitsun weekend Scout camp, when a flash downpour not only washed away all the tents, but destroyed allotments, roaring under the road into the watercress beds at Rookless millpond.

There was clearly a need for an increased water supply, because of the numbers of evacuees and troops stationed in the area, in the early part of the war, and there was a successful drilling at Ashdown. Council houses had running water, but there were also cast-iron standpipes in the village,

one opposite the village hall, one opposite the Old Forge, one on the bank by Ashbury Hill Cottage, and one in Berrycroft, as well as those in Idstone and Kingstone Winslow.

Water was powered by a water ram, located alongside the stream in Watercross Lodge, which pumped water up to the reservoir opposite the entrance to the old vicarage on Ashbury Hill. The water that fed the ram came from where a spring used to emerge into a stone sink deep enough to dip water out of with a galvanised pail. The spring was located under what is now known as St. Mary's House, no.3 Chapel Lane. This was where you had to walk down to, if the ram failed. The watercross beds led towards Watercross Lodge. A path alongside the cress beds passed a recess under the road, opposite Pound Piece, which was a bit scary for children. It was apparently a tunnel to the mill; once you looked in you could see no light, but only a crumbling chalk block wall.

Water in the domestic house was not wasted. Bath night was only once a week on a Saturday night between 5 and 6 pm, in front of the warm kitchen range. The tin bath in Ray's family, about 1.25m long, 45cm deep and 50cm wide, was half-filled up from the coal-fired copper. The children bathed first, followed by mum and dad, all sharing a couple of towels. Quite an occasion.

WATERCRESS BEDS

Ray remembered two watercress beds: one down by the Manor, at Lyde, and the other at Rookless, the wooded area going down towards the Mill. A contractor came from Childrey to plant the watercress which was then cut in April. The bundles were tied up round the middle with a fibrous creamy-white bag-tie, and the roots would then be chopped off. It was popular to go and see the watercress cut, and buy a bunch about 8" in diameter for sixpence to take home and have for tea. Ray remembers going in Spring to pick marsh marigolds, and walking down the path with his parents and the evacuees, spotting two grass snakes about a metre long, swimming about in a freshly-cut watercress bed near the main spring.

The children played there a lot, making a lovely den at one end of the watercress beds in the big elder trees, firing bows and arrows made from sticks, and fashioning pop guns from a section of elder branch about 6" long and 1" in diameter. The secret to these was to pull out the pith, then push wet and chewed newspaper into one end, with a paper pellet in the other end. You could ram this with a steel quarter inch diameter rod that had a wooden handle fitted at one end, against a pad on your tummy and there! Out popped the pellet.

Towards the end of the war, a problem arose with water contaminated with liverfluke going down into the watercress beds, but until then, Ray's father used to love the water, putting a bottle into the water that came straight out of the mouth of the spring. The same springs can be seen there bubbling up, even now.

DOCTORS

Dr. Macnamara, known as Dr. Mac, came from Shrevenham, and once came to Ray's home to give him an injection, an anxious moment for which Ray had to be calmed down. Afterwards, he was apparently useful as a threat: "I'll get Doctor Mac if you don't behave yourself". After him, it was Dr. Morrison from the Lambourn surgery. Nurse Philby was the local nurse who lived in the nurse's cottage by the Ashbury Evangelical Free Church. All cuts and grazes would be liberally treated with neat iodine which made you wince. Around the end of the 1940's she left the village and Nurse Mary Peck replaced her.

EVACUEES

Late in August 1939, evacuees from the East End of London arrived to be billeted in Ashbury. Ray remembers Cyril and Eric Gulland, Arthur and Arnold Liskey, and Bob Moore who were billeted with them at no.6. At times, at least four had to sleep in one bedroom, sharing a double bed, two up, two down. Amongst other evacuees in the village were Alfred Harris, Elsie Cottie, Philip Birkenhead, and Bill and Ralph Stevens, distributed between smaller families who had room, like Jim and Daisy Williams, the Miss Tuckers, Laura Jefferies, Mrs Simpson, and others. They were not billeted on others who had larger families with no spare accommodation. Lots of families would accommodate

parents of the evacuees who came to visit their children. There were evacuee teachers too: Mr and Mrs Duckham, Mr Fielding, and Mrs Geobels.

EXCITING TIMES FOR BOYS!

DUNKIRK TROOPS RETURNING

An exciting time was when the troops returned, housed in tents in the fields near Shrivvenham station. Ray and other eleven year olds were collecting war souvenirs, so they walked to Shrivvenham to see if they could get such treasures as cap badges, buttons or French foreign money for their collections, and Ray still has some of his finds.

MANOEUVRES

Barely a week went by without the presence of a lot of military vehicles, tanks, lorries, Bren gun carriers, with troops parked along the village verges. Because they had to practise their manoeuvres, they would often be seen driving all over the fields planted with crops. You could see a Vickers – Armstrong Wellington (a cigar-shaped bomber) and maybe an Armstrong Whitworth and Whitley bomber, towing a sleeve/windsock behind the aircraft, for gunners to fire at from another Wellington or until flying at a distance and parallel to the sleeve. When the sleeve came down, the local lads would rush to collect a piece of sleeve, as well as bits of parachutes used in practice activities. Sometimes spent cartridge cases could be heard coming down along the line of the plane's flight, which was normally over the downs, south of Ashbury.

Tiger Moths pilots would usually choose to practise over Winslow Bank, stalling the aircraft till it spiralled down, only pulling out at the last moment.

The gliders towed by Douglas Dakotas, were the larger Horsa, and the smaller Hotspur. These were released from the tow-rope high over the downs to fly back to the airfield or airstrips around 10 to 20 miles away.

Ray remembers two crashes: one between the top of Odstone track and White Horse Hill, and another on the B4000. This was a Bristol Blenheim fighter bomber and afterwards, the lads went down to see if they could pick up any bits for their wartime collections.

BOMBING RANGE

Something else wanted for wartime collections were the spent flares dropped at night over the hills opposite Ashdown House was the target area, and people were often kept awake at night by the explosions. Ray however, found it exciting to look out of his bedroom window, seeing the whole village and surrounding landscape illuminated, and watching the flares burn out slowly before they reached the ground.

SEARCHLIGHT BATTERY

Another excitement for the lads came with the searchlight installation in the field on the south side of Winslow Bank, beaming into the sky, picking up the enemy Junkers and Heinkel bomber aircraft. Such a contrast between all the blacked-out houses and the powerful light piercing the sky on a dark winter night. The searchlight detachment was housed in the huts, located on the left-hand side of the fork in the road to Kingstone by Winslow Bank.

RIFLE RANGE

Beyond that searchlight battery, at the foot of Winslow Bank, alongside the boundary fence before Odstone Farm, stood the rifle range, used by the Home Guard and searchlight detachment. The butts at the bottom of the hills opposite consisted of a big trench with the target along the top, and scores were denoted by the terms : bull, inner, magpie, outer. A black and white disc on a pole was used in

various ways to denote the scoring. Red flags up meant shooting was taking place, but when the flags went down, the lads would venture up to collect dead bullets. These could be melted down to make miniature cannon balls for spring-loaded toy cannons.

WARTIME ACCIDENTS

Ray does remember an accident with a rifle where someone was hurt. Another memory was of motorcyclist being struck by an aircraft landing as it crossed the B4000 at the top of Ashbury Hill to land on the landing strip which ran alongside the Ridgeway towards Idstone. The strip extended over the field a considerable distance in that direction. The lads would lie on the bank, watching fascinated as Hurricanes and Mustang fighters landed and took off. Nowadays, bits of the old metal interlocking landing strip can be seen in the Old Forge garden.

TROOPS STATIONED AT ASHDOWN

British forces were stationed at Ashdown, but then in 1942, came the novelty of Americans arriving. Black Americans! Gum! Nylons! Of course, the Americans were keen to ask local lads to introduce them to local girls.

CHURCHES

There were three active churches in Ashbury: St Mary's, the Mission Hall and the Methodist Church, which Ray remembers was less formal than St. Mary's, but not as informal as the Mission Hall which he attended. The congregation included Mary Warner, Walter New, John Seely with his skull cap, Bill Partridge and disabled Harry Partridge and others, who needed the warm spot by the stove. Vi Partridge played the organ and the speakers came in rotation from the Methodist circuit, unlike St Mary's or the Free Church, who had a resident minister or pastor.

One annual highlight was the camp meeting either in the field at Pound Pieces, or the back of the council houses at Idstone Road, or at the field where James Read now lives. Bunce's lorry or a hay wagon would provide the platform for speakers and the Methodist band from Minety marched from Kingston to Ashbury, with bandsmen being given tea in various homes. Thus, in a limited way, all three churches would be brought together once a year.

From time to time, the village would have activities in the old village hall, (now Church Lane House) such as whist drives and film showings. The hall would be lit by gas paraffin lamps, glowing white and bright, compared with the rather dim light of oil wicks at home.

Ray has of course many other memories of life in Ashbury before the war, but this selection might give a flavour of village life, and jog other people's memories too.

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