



A COTA VICTORIA  
SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

# THIS IS ROBERT'S STORY

— MEMORIES



## PART 1 THE PEACEFUL YEARS

My Chambers Combined Dictionary Thesaurus defines the word Reminisce thus... “verb intrans. To think,talk or write about things remembered from the past”. So I suppose I am doing all these things. (And who said men can’t multi-task?)

Memory is a nebulous thing and can be coloured by time, distance and no doubt the age of the reminiscer. (Is there such a word?) So if any of my recollections are not as accurate as they could be. I apologise, but who would know anyhow?

My name is Robert Tunnicliffe and I was born in Coventry, England on December 3rd 1929 and a lot of my childhood memories are of the peaceful ten years prior to the outbreak of WW2.

My father came from Bedworth, which is about eight miles from Coventry, which in those days was considered a little village by us townies. He married my mother and moved into her home where she lived with her retired father. I suppose it was the thing for the newlyweds to move into the family home and continue to look after my grandfather. I have wondered how they met as they lived in different towns but it didn’t occur to me to ask and so I’ll never know.

My father, Ted, was what we describe as a working class man and he worked at Courtaulds, a manufacturer of fabrics and nylon. My mother Florence (Flo) ceased work very soon after they were married to look after the household and I suspect to start a family as I was born about a year after they married.

I think my earliest memories are when I was about 4 years old, as I remember being in hospital for a hernia repair before starting school. The school I attended was Spon Street Elementary and was within easy walking distance of home, although in those days almost everything was within walking distance of home. Very few people had cars and walking seemed the natural order of things. My Dad had a motorbike and sidecar and we used to travel to Western Super Mare and camp for a week every year by the seaside. I can’t remember ever going anywhere else or the motorbike being used for anything else.

Looking back I don’t see how the logistics could possibly work as by this time I had a sister Delia about 18 months younger than me. Dad drove the motorbike, Mum rode pillion, two youngsters in the sidecar so where did the tent and all the camping gear go?

Back to my first day at school... at morning recess the older and wiser seven year olds said “hope you enjoyed your first day at school you can go home now” so, having no reason to doubt I went home.

On another occasion I was instructed to assist the milk monitor and was told that one of the perks was that you get to drink as much milk as you like. Well I did, which led to a shortage of milk for other students and a ruler across the hands for Bob.

Next door to us was a very old lady called Miss Rogers, she always wore a black dress which I think was taffeta, high necked and to the floor. She always wore a cameo brooch on a black inch wide tape round her neck and her white hair always piled high. In her garden she had an elderberry tree which although not tended or fed produced copious amounts of elderberries.

With the elderberries she produced gallons of elderberry wine. Now the elderberry wine from Miss Rogers must have had some magical qualities unknown to modern science because whatever ailed us was treated as follows--- Sore Throat- take a glass of Miss Rogers’ elderberry wine,--Constipation -take a glass of Miss Rogers’ elderberry wine-- Headache—Backache-- Diarrhea— Well I’m sure you get the idea.

Speaking of things medical, I recall in the days before Medibank or BUPA the local family doctor would run his own version of health insurance. The practice was run by “Old Dr. Kenderdine” and his two sons. You would sign onto his practice and his agent would come round each week and collect the 2 or 3 pennies then when you visited the Doctor there was nothing to pay. I believe today’s system is more about company profits.



Me and my maternal grandfather

I am sure that a child's brain is programmed to remember the happy times and relegate all others to a compartment which is never opened, so my memory of the 1930s is a period of eternal summer, of cricket and football in the street where the only traffic to look out for was the milkman or baker's horse, and so continued until September 1939.

During these idyllic years (he says tongue in cheek) I was very close to my maternal grandfather, his name was Charles John Ludford and he was born in 1870. He had

been a watchmaker as were so many in Coventry at that time. He was not a tall man but was very fit and he had a love of country walks.

In those days prior to the urban sprawl about 15 minutes out of town he would take you out into the country so, Grampy John would pack lunch and bundle young Bob into his pram and set off.

I estimate he walked anything up to about 10 kilometers, stopped for a long leisurely lunch and walked back.



Morrison shelter

## PART 2 THE WAR YEARS

The outbreak of war in 1939 was a nonevent, nothing changed for the civilian population and all around was a feeling of invulnerability and confidence. This period became known as the Phoney War.

British troops were sent to France and the general feeling was that our boys would trounce them and be back in a couple of months but this was just the calm before the storm and the enemy thought otherwise.

There are many excellent published accounts of the Second World War and it is not the intent of this account to add to them but rather to continue to write the way I saw it as a 10 year old boy.

One of my first memories of what war means was the day we were all issued with gas masks. They were issued in square cardboard boxes and that was so uncool. Very like the kids of today who have to have the latest cases and covers for their ipads and phones we had leather (or in my case vinyl) boxes with a shoulder strap. We had to take them everywhere.

The next exciting thing was the air raid shelter. The Government decided to supply the civilian population with air raid shelters. The ones I remember were the Anderson shelter which was a corrugated shelter mostly buried in the ground and the Morrison shelter which can only be described as a steel dining table.

My Father opted for the Morrison shelter and it was duly installed in the kitchen come dining area which fortunately had a stone floor or otherwise it would have finished up in the cellar. The shelter was used as a dining table suitably disguised under a large table cloth and when the air raid sirens alerted us to an air raid we were supposed to get under it and be protected from bombs and falling debris.

We heard of the defeat in France and the evacuation from Dunkirk but as we lived in the middle of England and many miles from the beaches we didn't really comprehend the enormity of what was happening. It may well have been appreciated by the adults but as I said before I am remembering how it was to me at aged 11.

My father, now being in his thirties, was just too old for conscription and in any case was employed in an essential industry so he became an Air Raid Warden. Air Raid Wardens were responsible, among other things, for checking that the Blackout was effective. All windows had to have Blackout curtains or some means of ensuring that no light could be seen, as lights could guide bomber pilots to targets.

They would direct anyone caught outdoor to the nearest Air Raid Shelter. They would also report bomb damage so that emergency services could be directed to where they were needed. Air Raid Wardens were civilians and in my opinion very brave men as most of their duties were carried out outside, in the streets, while air raids were in progress, sometimes relentlessly for hours without letup.

My father was issued with a variety of equipment but one that stands out in my mind was the stirrup pump and water bucket. The hand pump, which looked like something you would use to blow up bike tyres, was a two man job, it was placed in the water bucket and one man would pump away while the other would direct the hose. I thought this was a puny way to attack burning buildings until I learned that prior to releasing bombs the enemy would drop incendiaries to light the way and the stirrup pump method was an effective way to douse spot fires.



The stirrup pump

During lulls in the bombing the ladies would brew up cups of tea or cocoa and us kids would take them out to the workers. We thought it was a great lark and had no sense of danger.

Early in 1940 German bombers began dropping bombs on Coventry but this was not like the concentrated Blitz that followed. One evening in November 1940, wave after wave of German bombers dropped their bombs and this continued until the following morning. All I can remember of it is the almost non-stop loud bang. When we were able to go outside the next day all I can recall is the piles of bricks where houses used to be.

Bomb blasts are unpredictable and fickle. For instance they can destroy a house to the North and spare a house to the South. A landmine destroyed about six houses in our street but did relatively little damage to our house. The house next door was totally destroyed. It had another type of air raid shelter which was a solid brick building in the back yard. The shelter had a concrete slab for a roof. The house and shelter were gone and the concrete slab was upside down in our garden. I believe it was so big and heavy it took hours to break up and take away.

The house I lived in was not badly damaged, just broken windows and the like but the out buildings which were of solid brick construction and contained the wash house, toilet and coal storage were completely destroyed meaning the place was uninhabitable.

So what to do? By this time there was another Tunncliffe, my younger brother Trevor, who was 1 year old. My Mother and Father decided to take us to the aforementioned Bedworth which was a small enough town to have escaped the ministrations of the Luftwaffe and had relatives whose houses still stood. My little brother was put into a pram with a few belongings and as there was no transport we headed off to walk the 8 miles.

Needless to say we were billeted out among various aunts until the house could be repaired. My father continued to work and spent a lot of time at the bombed house. I can't remember any detail but believe the emergency services were magnificent, they sent in a whole gang of bricklayers and plumbers and in a few weeks it was back to new. There was so much damage to housing and a lack of accommodation that anything that could be repaired was pounced on.

In the meantime I had been enrolled in the local school so it was decided not to interrupt my education. The family returned to Coventry and I was left boarded with Auntie Nellie. I can't be sure how long we were separated as a family but I think it was not until the following year that we were reunited.

I recall another bombing incident which I am not sure if I should present as tragedy or irony but here goes. A new cinema was built in Coventry and was named "The Rex" and was to present the wonderful new film "Gone With The Wind." Next morning the cinema was gone!. I don't think there is anything I can add to that.



My paternal grandparents Elizabeth and Frederick

After the bombing raids of 1940 the rest of the war was a little blase to a to a young lad who was all of 12 years old.

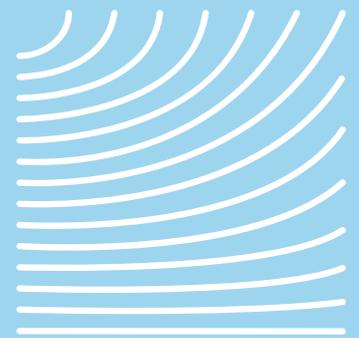
In those days two career paths were open to lads like me; one was further education via high school or an apprenticeship, there was no doubt which course I was destined for. First

my parents could not really afford to send me to Grammar School and second because of the men and women away at war vacancies were plentiful and apprenticeships widely available. So in 1944 I left school and joined the workforce as an Electrical Engineering apprentice and that is the end of the tale of my boyhood.



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