

New Forest Remembers WWII Project

Oral History Team: Transcription Document

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File name	JVB	007	0001M0.WAV	Interview date: 16.08.13
<p>00:00:00</p> <p><i>Could you just tell me your name first of all?</i></p> <p>Joanne Bowman.</p> <p><i>And when and where were you born?</i></p> <p>I was born in Skegness.</p> <p><i>When was that?</i></p> <p>In '27.</p> <p><i>Thank you.</i></p>				

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VAT Reg No. 871 9343 00

CHAIRMAN OLIVER CROSTHWAITE-EYRE CHIEF EXECUTIVE ALISON BARNES

00:00:00

Would you like to tell me first of all about your experiences in Coventry and why you moved to Lyndhurst?

Well we were bombed out in Coventry and then my father was transferred to London, the Ministry of something or other, and so we moved to London and we were bombed out there. And that was so awful and I was in a dreadful state because I'd heard a delayed action in an air raid shelter near my ear. And we used to go to bed every night in the shelter and so they sent me to Lyndhurst, to Foxlease, to the Girl Guides there, to learn gardening there. The bliss of being there, no bombs, I couldn't tell you. I often dream about it now, those wretched bombs.

Did you go on your own without your parents?

I went on my own.

How old were you then?

Well, I don't know. I think I was fifteen or sixteen, something like that. So it was just so wonderful there. I joined the Guides and we lived in bungalow in the grounds opposite the gardener's house, which was called "The Link". And we had a Miss Cook looking after us, three girls, and we had to be in at nine o'clock at night (laughs). It was a wonderful experience, absolutely wonderful, peaceful and ...

Who were the other people living in the bungalow with you?

There were two other, three other girls. Beryl from Jersey, because she was caught up in the war, and Josephine, and Miss Cook was in charge of us and Miss Biess we hated her, and Joyce Carwell.

What was going on in the house at this time? Were there other Girl Guides?

Oh they were all working, they were all the same as me. You were only allowed to be there for a year, because we had to learn and we had to go to the RHS (Royal Horticultural Society) and do our exams. After that we had to leave and I was heartbroken.

Were all the girls in the big house in the same scheme as well, or was it just the four of you?

Yes, just, the four of us in "The Link". It's still there now, it was the last time I went there.

Who was living in the main house?

Oh, the gardener and his wife, she cooked for us and fed us well, very well. And the head gardener Mr Crays. He was wonderful, he was very kind and taught us a lot.

What do you remember about doing the gardening?

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Oh I remember learning, I enjoyed it so much. No bombs, no aeroplanes, it was absolutely wonderful. (*Interviewer quietly – It must have been a big change for you*) Yes.

So there were no air raids?

Oh nothing like that, no, no. Not when I was there anyway. When the war...I think I left...I can't remember when I left there, when the ended or just before, well anyway, there were no, no the war had almost ended..

Has it been good therapy for you?

Yes.

Do you remember anything about the big house at Foxlease?

Oh Miss Newman, she ran it, she was the Guider in charge. She was very strict, but very nice, very human, and we used to go there for cocoa in the morning. And cookie, the cook there, we used to call her cookie, and she used to call us the wretched garden girls. Very happy days, very happy days.

Were there Girl Guides visiting during the war?

No.

So it was just..

Just the Guiders, and we had wonderful campfires there, in the evening, you know, it was just so wonderful. Campfires and something else (pauses for about six seconds).

00:05:05

Did you sing songs at the campfire?

Oh yes. (*Do you remember?*) Oh yes I do.

Which ones do you remember?

(Half singing, half talking) Campfire's burning, campfire's burning, draw nearer, draw nearer, in the gloaming, in the gloaming, let us sing and be merry (laughs).

So that was just the four girls?

Oh no, all the guys, the guys came in from the village. We had...there were girls staying in the big house, but who they were I really can't remember. I think a lot of them came from abroad, I don't know. Perhaps they'd been chucked out, or bombed out like me, refugees.

It must have been nice, a big group of girls.

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It was, it was absolutely wonderful. They were very strict with us too. I mean, we used to go to the village, but we had to be in a nine o'clock sharp, and you wouldn't dare not be in at nine o'clock.

Did you have to wear a Guide's uniform?

Oh, yes, but not when we worked. We had a dress, a dress. I wish I could find the photographs, but I can't. Yes and we were given kit...I can't remember.

And what did you wear when you were gardening? Were you given clothes for that?

Oh yes I meant when I was gardening. We were given, like a uniform to wear when we gardened.

Had you been a Girl Guide before you went to Lyndhurst?

Yes, yes, in Coventry (so you were familiar with the campfire songs?). Yes.

So you worked in the garden at Foxlease?

Yes, with vegetables, of course it was all vegetables for the war, Dig for Victory.

Do you remember what vegetables you were growing?

Oh everything we could possibly grow, carrots, potatoes, everything.

And were those vegetables sent off?

Oh yes, yes. They were...I don't know where they went, I can't remember.

So you were doing your bit for the war effort.

Oh yes we were really, yes.

It must have been sad, did you miss your parents?

No. No, I was just so happy, to get away from bombing. That was so traumatic, it was absolutely awful. I used to go to school and every day somebody else would be killed, every one less in the class. So you know, where's so and so, she was bombed last night. I mean nobody knows, you've got to go through that, oh, horrible, horrible.

So you were able to escape all that and to learn?

Oh yes, gardening, it was wonderful.

Have you got any other memories of Foxlease itself at all, or your time there?

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Oh yes, we used to, in the evening, because we were very strictly under control, we were allowed to go to a tennis club in the village to a dance. And this was all local boys, they were too young to be called up. And we used to go to the bench, we used to get our bikes and go and cycle to the bench. It's still there now with the tree and the thing round it. The Americans of course were there, and they used to feel sorry for us and give us chocolate and chewing gum (laughs).

At the dances at the tennis club, that was all local boys, you didn't have any of the troops going to that?

Oh we must have done, we must have done. I remember the dances were good.

What do you remember about those?

Oh it was just, to be free, just to go out and be normal, it was just so wonderful.

What sort of music did you have there?

Oh I can't remember, no, I don't remember.

Did you have clothes to wear for that because it was difficult to get clothes?

Oh we were very sparse (?), we didn't have many clothes. They were all rationed and you couldn't get them anyway. And money was short of course. I don't know if we were paid, my mother used to send me ten shillings every so often.

00:10:11

Did you cycle in to the dances?

Oh yes, we cycled in, we cycled everywhere, several of us together, girls.

Any other memories on your list?

(Pauses for 10 seconds) Oh yes, we had a swimming pool there, in the grounds, and you wouldn't believe it, I can't believe it now, I used to break the ice and go in and swim. Yes, wonderful. Yes, I was tough then, I couldn't do it now.

Was there a roof over the swimming pool, or was it in the open air?

Oh it was open air. It was just a, you know, just a...whether it's still there or not I don't know.

It was until recently, but they have put a roof over it now.

Have they?

You were more hardy.

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Yes we were, ice! We didn't care.

So you could go in that every day?

Well not every day, I can't remember, but we used to go quite often for a swim. It was only a walk just four minutes by the gardens, in the grounds.

Anything else on your list?

(Pauses for 20 seconds) Oh I forged my age. I forged my age, whether it was to go there at sixteen or not I don't know that. I was so upset because I lost all my, I was so upset because by forging my age they wouldn't let me have my chocolate child allowance. So I lost my chocolate allowance (laughs).

So they found out that you forged your age?

Oh yes. They knew as soon as I did. As soon as I forged my age I was over the age you could have this chocolate, you could only have this chocolate under a certain age.

It must have stuck in your memory all this time.

Yes it was.

Why did you want to be sixteen?

I can't remember whether I had to be sixteen to go there, or perhaps it was when I left and I had to go somewhere else, because they made us leave, as I say, after a year, because we were, you know, qualified. We all took our exams and I got my certificate.

Where did you do the exams?

Southampton. In the RHS, the Royal Horticultural Society.

That must have been a bit daunting, taking it there?

I can't remember.

You got your certificate.

Yes.

Did you use the gardening skills afterwards?

Oh yes, I've always gardened. I've always done the gardening, and I hurt my back, but I always did the garden, always. Dennis is now doing it, you know, because we moved, yet again.

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So when you left Foxlease, did you go back home to your parents in London?

No, no, I wanted the country. I couldn't bear living in London, I hated London. I went to another place...I can't remember. I've got pictures of that somewhere.

Away from the New Forest?

Yes, not far away, but I got the job.

Do you have any other memories of the New Forest when you were there?

Oh yes, going for walks. Mr and Mrs Crays were so good to us. The Head Gardener used to take us for walks and explain trees and things and the badgers and the birds and the bees, it was absolutely wonderful.

Were you affected by the war in any way, you were able to go where you wanted were you?

What, during the war?

While you were at Foxlease.

No we didn't want to go anywhere, better to stay safe.

00:15:00

Did you see many of the troops? You mentioned the Americans at Bolton's Bench. Did you see many troops around?

Yes the Americans, a lot of Americans. They were always with us young girls. They must have been much older than us and we must have looked very young, because they always treated us, you know, "Hi kid, you're just like my kid sister". They were just so nice, so friendly and nobody ever tried anything on, you know, when you think about today (laughs). You know, we were just so innocent, which was lovely.

Well it was a nice change for you from the city life wasn't it?

Yes.

Do you remember much about Lyndhurst at that time? Did you used to go into Lyndhurst?

Yes we used to go into Lyndhurst quite a bit, on our bikes, because it was quite a way down Clay Hill and along. We got friendly with some of the local girls there.

So were you working in the garden most of the day each day?

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Oh yes, oh yes. We went over to Mrs Crays' and had breakfast and then we'd get to work, and then we'd have lunch there, with as I say cook (laughs), I can see her now! Wretched garden girls, get out of my...(unclear). (Laughs)

Had they dug up some of the grounds for growing the vegetables, do you know, or was just the normal vegetable garden?

Well I think it was the vegetable...we did a lot of digging, yes we did, cultivated a lot of ground. It's hard work! I grew muscles I never knew I had (laughs). And of course we had no nails, no hands. And all the other girls we saw. We had working...

Working hands. You got some fresh air.

A lot of fresh air. And we didn't care in those days, we weren't fashion conscious, nothing like today.

Do you remember much about Lyndhurst and what was in the town at that time?

We used to go to the cinema there, I forget what it was called. We used to go there to the cinema once a week. I've been concentrating on Lyndhurst, on Foxlease and not on Lyndhurst.

Well that was where you lived.

Yes, and we used to go to dances at the Grand Hotel, we were invited to the Grand Hotel. It's on the corner, well it was. Whether it still is or not I don't know. Then we had Miss Cook with us. We were under supervision.

So you were chaperoned?

Yes.

So there were dances at the tennis club and the Grand Hotel?

No, at the tennis club yes but not often at the Grand. Only if it was a special occasion.

Do you remember any particular dances there?

I just remember jitterbug. I used to jitterbug a lot (laughs).

Did you have a live band at that?

I can't remember, I honestly can't remember.

So had you been introduced to the jitterbug before you went there, or was that all a new experience for you?

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Oh, a new experience gosh yes. As I say I was only, gosh my father would have died rather than let me go to one (unclear) (laughs). (*Interviewer: spreading your wings*) He was very strict.

Did you get troops at the dances at the Grand Hotel?

Oh yes.

It must have been exciting.

It's amazing when you think today how well they treated us. Nobody, not one person not one man, not ever, ever, tried to be, to take advantage, incredible. You see the little tarts of today with their..(laughs)

00:19:37

What else was in Lymington at that time? Presumably there was a cinema and a Grand Hotel.

There was a cinema. I think we used to go to a café there and have a cocoa.

Do you remember any of the films that were on at the cinema?

No, I could if I thought for long enough, but no.

Do you remember, do you have any memories at all of D-Day? Were you aware of that?

Yes I was, gosh yes.

What do you remember about that?

I remember being in London, celebrating. I must have left Lyndhurst by then because I think I lived, yes. Gosh yes I remember celebrating. Everybody was shouting and it was wonderful. No more bombs (laughs). (She appears to be referring to VE Day and not D Day)

You said that you saw the American troops at Lyndhurst. Were you aware of any black troops? Black Americans?

I don't remember seeing any black ones no. Oh yes I do! Yes there were a few yes.

That must have been unusual to you.

Yes. It was all part of the war, you know, you took it all in your stride. Everything was different, everything changed, you know, American troops.

Were there lots of Army trucks moving around?

Oh yes, yes. They'd whistle and shout. Oh yes, if you were walking along, or on a bike, the troops, they'd always chuck out cigarettes and gum and chocolate for you. They were marvellous. You'd

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get down and pick them up. We were grateful for anything we could get (laughs).

Did the troops, the Americans, actually camp around Bolton's Bench?

Yes.

Did you see any of the campsites?

No, no.

You said there was no bombing fortunately. Did you see aeroplanes going overhead?

In Southampton yes. I remember when we went to Southampton, yes we did, but I think they must have stopped. The war must have been cooling down then.

So you went into Southampton to do the RHS exam (Yes), did you go in at other times?

Did we go in?

Did you go into Southampton at other times?

Not often, no we didn't want to, no.

You were enjoying the countryside.

Yes.

Presumably you didn't have any experience of the airfields in the New Forest?

Oh we did when we cycled past, we used to. No, just cycling past.

Beaulieu Airfield presumably?

That's right.

Do you remember anything about it at all?

I remember going to Beaulieu. No I don't remember.

No details of that at all?

No.

Were you aware of rationing?

Oh gosh yes!

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What do you remember about that?

Good Lord yes. Well Mrs Crays used to have her own dishes, with margarine and a portion of butter and sugar and she told us about our ration and, oh yes, they rationed us very much.

So you had to have your own dish of butter. Was that to last you for the week or...?

Oh yes, yes. I sometimes used to splash it all on and then starve for the rest of the week. Put the butter on thick and really enjoy it, and then go without and have the dry bread (laughs).

But obviously you were all right for fruit and vegetables?

Oh yes, yes, we were very healthy. We had wonderful vegetables, you can imagine, we grew our own.

What about meat? Do you remember having much meat?

We used to eat rabbit and rabbit and rabbit, until it came out of your ears. Mr Crays used to shoot them, so we had a lot of rabbit.

Do you remember how you had it?

Oh Mrs Crays was a very good cook, she used to cook it different ways, rabbit stews and rabbit any way. I always swore once the war was over I'd never eat another rabbit (laughs).

And presumably you didn't have much in the way of fruit during the war?

Oh they were rationed. You had your orange ration, oranges, and of course we grew our own apples. And bananas were, you know, absolutely very rare. I remember the oranges and the ration book.

I heard about bananas being scarce.

Yes, they were.

But you think you were still healthier?

Oh of course we were, gosh yes, yes. Apart from my ears when they bombed me!

And that didn't recover at all?

Well no they sent me to a hospital in Southampton and they made it worse. I mean the doctors weren't there you see, they were all called up. They did a lot of, more damage than they should have. I wear hearing aids now. Well there was a war on, that's what they'd say: there's a war on, what do you expect? (laughs) (*Interviewer: that's a shame that as a girl (inaudible)*) Yes.

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Do you remember of the girl guides who came in to Foxlease? Did they just come for a short time?

Yes.

For a weekend?

I honestly don't know. We were very much our own group in The Link. We used to socialise with them, at least we'd mix at dos and campfires and things like that.

Did you have your own bedroom at The Link, or were you all...

Oh yes, I had a bedroom I didn't have to share with my sister. That was wonderful My own bedroom for the first time in my life (laughs). We used to have a double bed and she wriggled and wriggled and wriggled (laughs).

Mind you if you were working in the garden all day I should think you were out like a light when you went to bed weren't you?

Oh yes we were absolutely knackered, yes, we were tired.

Did they get you up early in the morning?

I don't remember, not too bad I don't think, I don't remember.

Did you have to learn any theory for the gardening, or was it all practical working?

Oh it was all practical. Oh then we had to, yes we did learn for the exams. I don't remember doing...

And was there a gardener at Foxlease who used to teach you that?

Yes.

Well it's all very interesting. Shall I stop for a moment, give you a rest?

Ends: 00:27:35

Key Words:

Air Raids; Foxlease; Girl Guides; Gardening; Dig for Victory; Jitterbug; US Army; Beaulieu Airfield; Rationing; Clothes rationing; Food rationing

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