

# The experiences of mothers during World War II

But when you think of the women who were living not knowing if the house was going to be bombed, whether the husbands were going to come back from the war, feeding the children on rations, having to look for a job once the children went to school. It was a very, very hard time for women, those. And it was six long years...

Hard work, yeah, definitely. As I say, women who had children under school age because we didn't start school until we were five were allowed to stay at home to look after their children. But once they went to school, they were encouraged then to find some sort of job because obviously there was a manpower shortage. And I know my mother went to work in the in the canteen at Ford's Motor Works, which is in Davyhulme, where, I mean, it's not there now, but that's where it was near the sewage works. And she worked there part-time so they could fit in, you know, with school picking up and taking and picking you up and that sort of thing, you know. So those are the things you remember. There were a few bombs dropped fairly close because the Ford Motor Works who were producing Spitfire engines, I think, was a target, as was the sewage works, which was next door to it. And so the houses near where I lived with a few broken windows and roofs damage, that sort of thing. And we had did have shelters to go into which apparently they used during the Manchester Blitz, which was 1940. But I can remember going in a couple of times as a very young child into the shelters, but that's it really.

## **~June**

I don't know. Somehow we came through it. We had to queue for everything in the shops to get your rations. Everything was rationed. As I grew up, my father died. Again, cancer got him. How my mother coped, I do not know. She always took us away for holidays. We just got on with it. We just had to cope as best you could.

## **~Louie**

I was five when war broke out. Five, six, seven-ish - eight, possibly at that time. And yes because we were singing about Hitler hanging on the wall.

- Can you remember the song?

Well, it's to the tune of - there'll be 9 green bottles hanging on the wall. If you were very good at it, you could go through the whole German rigmarole of Hitler. Who was the other one? Goebbels. But I wasn't so good at that. I just used to open and shut my mouth. People took the time out, if you like, to make the most of it.

- I think the adults tried their very best to let the children have a normal life.

## **~ Val and June**

My mother's family was based in Durham, County Durham, and my mother was one of 12 children. Grandma was a really strong character, lovely lady, married beneath her some might say, but loved my grandfather to bits. She managed to bring up most of those 12 children. Only one died of diphtheria until the war years. Of those, seven were girls.

And during the war years, my mother spent most of her time up there with her family. And she worked even though at that time she'd already had my brother, who was born in 1941, and a tiny girl that lasted six weeks the year following. So, she went up to stay with her parents because it was safer and it meant that my brother didn't have to go away from home.

Mum at that point, and her sisters all worked in a munitions factory, a metal factory in Newton, Aycliffe, making bombs and hand grenades. Funnily enough, one of my uncle's picked up one of my Auntie Emma's hand grenades because each one was marked on the bottom with the initials of the young lady that filled it.

### **~Lesley**

My memories of living there were grey, misty days, mainly fog, in fact, bright yellow, slick pavements, cobbled streets, having the bonfire in the middle of the street because nobody had a car. Using tiny things like rip wraps and Catherine Wheels and eating treacle toffee when we could get the treacle to make it with and baking potatoes. Lovely way of life in some respects, not in others.

But it was great. I mean, we had only the one fire which was in the range in the kitchen. No central heating. We woke up in the mornings and your windows were covered in swirls of ice. And I was lucky my mother made her own rugs so we could put our feet down on those instead of the polished boards or the linoleum, whichever it was.

Hot water was hard to come by. You needed the fire for that. We had very little waste. Everything went on the fire to be burned. Even tins went on the fire to be burned. I shared a bed with my brother for a couple of years and my father's grey coat was laid over the top of us because we couldn't get blankets again. They were on coupons, and you couldn't get them.

So, in 1954, when it eventually started to go, we got a few things. We managed to get bananas and a few oranges and stuff like that, but it was a tough time for the whole nation. The strange thing that raised it was the coronation of the Queen. That was amazing.

Here we had a beautiful young woman aged twenty-five, going on to the throne all the bad years and people still living in very dire circumstance, back end of a war is never clever, but it was dull, it was drab. Things had to make do, you had to make do, because you couldn't get them, and everything was virtually pre-war that could be salvaged anyway.

So, her coronation was a huge thing for us children, beautiful young woman in a sparkling gown, you know, and to go to the pictures, which was just around the corner because we

didn't have telly, we only had the radio, and to see in colour, the processions and coaches and all the rest of it. And everybody joined in on that, more so then than now.

### ~ Lesley

My brother Harry went to the Merchant Navy and on his first trip, my mother got a letter to say he was reported missing believed a prisoner of war. And somebody actually saw a picture in Manchester Evening News of men in a place called Brest – was it Germany? I don't know where that was - and they thought somebody looked like Harry on that photograph.

And then we got a card off Harry to say I'm a prisoner of war in Stalag Luft 1 and he was torpedoed with the Scharnhorst. His boat was Silver Fur. Only one man died in the ship with Harry and the Germans had let them have a service on board their ship for him. Yeah, so that was good wasn't it.

- So, what ended up happening to Harry?

Well, when he was a child, he fell off a wall and he got osteomyelitis in his arm which is a terrible he had all these bones... and they operated on him in Germany on that arm while he was a prisoner, and he came home before the other prisoners.

- So, they just released him?

They let him come home and missed the man who later became his father-in-law, which he was on the ship with him. And his son was a galley boy he was only young lad, said - call to 36 Moss Lane and tell my wife I'm all right. And he met Connie and married her. He met his daughter Connie and married her.

### ~ Isabelle

Right. Well, my father was killed in the war when I was 14 months old. And my brother was nearly four. So that coloured completely affected our lives, really. And so, mum brought us up on her own. But her mother, my grandmother, spent a lot of time with us because when Mum went to work, Grandma, who actually lived in London used to come down, happily come down and stay with us rather than stay with grandad in London.

She is Irish, you know, that side of the family - mum's Irish. So we also had sort of relatives coming and going, people appearing and staying with us and that kind of thing I think was very sort of Irish thing going on, you know, and I don't think mum could say no to people, you know, who sort of turned up but generally, well Mum worked until I was 16, she worked as a school secretary so that she would have the holidays off with us.

And one of my memories was really looking forward to the weekends because Grandma or Nanna, as we called her, would go back to London for the weekend and so that would be

Mum, my brother and me, and that's what I loved. I loved yeah, because there was a lot of conflict between my mother and grandmother....

Grandma, she was a drama queen, quite honestly. And she used to take me out with her, and she'd like, at the Chemist, she was always in the Chemist, well, that's my memory. We, you know, she'd sit down on a chair, and she'd start telling everybody in the Chemist that I was a war orphan.

My father was killed in war. I hated that. Absolutely. That's one thing that I remember hating being described as a war orphan, because my mum's still alive! And then when I got a bit older, my brother and I and my mum knew somebody from, you know, the organisation that do the poppies and that, British Legion, asked if my brother and I would lay the wreath at Southend Memorial, you know, on the, on the 11th of November and she said yes. So, we had to wear our guide and scout uniforms. And it said, there was a programme and it said two war orphans. And I was so cross. Did that for two years running.

But I think Mum had such difficulty. She never thought...well she said to me that day that I got married and she said I never even thought about looking for somebody else. Um, I think he was, you know, the love of her life.

**~Gerry**

The road that we were on led to the main road to Avonmouth, which was the port for Bristol.

So I think that is why we were often in the firing line for bombs and attacks. Those live in my mind very much. And the day that the war started, I was in the garden aged ten, picking beans for dinner and my father called out to me to come in and listen to the radio announcement about the war starting which was a great surprise to us all.

And then I think one of the main things was we all had to get all gas masks fitted. I was a bit worried about that because I didn't like the idea of something over my nose and mouth, but we all had to have them and those gas masks went everywhere with us. Mine frequently got left behind on the bus and my poor father had to spend his Saturday afternoons going down to the bus station to retrieve it.

I wasn't popular. On the road on which we lived, we had at the top of the road a large barrage balloon and a gun emplacement protected by sandbags and manned by some soldiers and some ATS girls. I think that was obviously to protect us. Opposite my house was an Army camp, a despatch camp, and I can remember the bugle being sounded in the mornings and the evenings and I think perhaps when we heard air raids that they were really aiming for the camp, but sometimes it was too close for comfort.

On one particular night we had an incendiary bomb raid and my father had told me to stay in the Anderson shelter no matter what happened. Well, it was a moonlight night. I stayed down there. Our neighbours weren't there at that time because I don't remember really why they

were not there. But I was in the shelter on my own and we had a string of incendiary bombs come down.

They make a screeching sound as they come, getting nearer and nearer to you as they fall one after the other and one came down and hit the corner of our Anderson shelter with a tremendous bang. And I looked out of the door and saw it flaring on the ground. And then I looked up the garden and saw my father dealing with one at the side of the house, putting sand on it from a bucket that was always kept by the side of the house.

And then to my horror and amazement, I saw that one had gone through the roof of our house. So that took a bit of a decision. Did I run up the garden and tell my father? Did I stay where I was? I decided in the end that I had to run up the garden and tell my father, which I did.

### **~Joy**

And they were married a long time before I came along because the war intervened. They were married in '36 and my dad went to war in 1939 and he ended up in a prisoner of war camp in 1941. And he didn't come home till 1943 and I was born in 1944. But my mum, she was actually quite amazing because there was the bombing in Manchester, I think it was the Christmas of 1941, and they were bombed out.

They lived in Chorlton and they were bombed out and they went to live with her eldest sister in Old Trafford. How they managed that, I do not know, because it's not that big a house. But she and my grandmother both went because my grandfather was also dead.

### **~Carol**

My brother got wounded in Dunkirk. Then I lost another one of my brothers. Yeah. Life expectancy in them days for children...you know, diphtheria, whooping cough, stuff like that. You know, we didn't have penicillin, antibiotics or anything. We used to have old wives tales, you know, vinegar and raspberry vinegar for a cough and stuff like that. It wasn't doctors and all that they've got today.

### **~Joyce**