



Escape to Branston

by Peter Owen



60 years on, a wartime evacuee recalls
his life in a Lincolnshire village



Barbara & Tony Hunt.



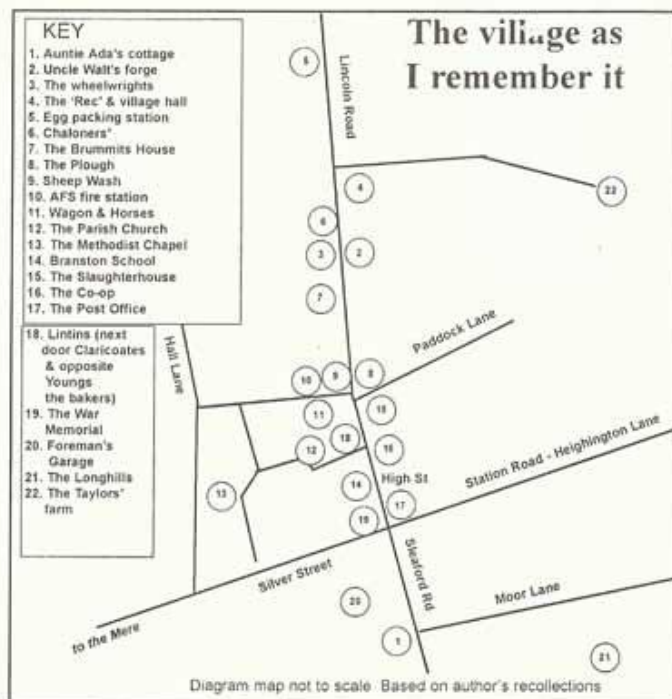
IT WAS 60 years ago that seven-year-old Peter Owen arrived at the Lincolnshire village of Branston. He and his mother were escaping the nightly raids that were bringing terror to the neighbourhood of his North London home and jeopardising children's education. It was a move that was to alter Peter's life and his perspectives. Growing up in the village over the following five years left an indelible impact on him.

Now, after 50 years in journalism, many of them as an editor in his adopted county of Essex, Peter still has a regular sub-editing role on a national Sunday newspaper. In this Millennium Year, a return to the village of his childhood rekindled memories of the early 1940s and talk of the names, the places and the experiences that left their mark.

"I want to say thank you to a village that welcomed me and my parents and caused me forever to regard Branston as the second home I left 55 years ago."

—PETER OWEN, AUTUMN 2000





I am indebted to Jan Kroon my Dutch friend whose childhood in Holland under the Nazi jackboot was so different from my war and who gave me the inspiration to write these recollections of a time long past . . .

. . . and to Aileen and Roy Creasey now happily in retirement in Branston who have helped to jog my fading memory, to fill in some gaps, to dust off some names, to prompt other memories and to accept the challenge when I have dared to suggest that some of my recall is different from theirs. My thanks also to Branston History Group and to Sheila Cant for their help

I apologise if the memories of 60 years ago have become blurred at the edges and some friends have been forgotten in my recollections.

The Escape

THE air raid siren sounded just as the wheels of the mighty Flying Scotsman locomotive began to grip on the gleaming rails. Those ribbons of metal mapped a silvery thread out of Kings Cross Station to the tunnel beyond . . . and, eventually, to the safety of a village called Branston.

It was a place, four miles south of the city of Lincoln, that was to be my home for the next five years and whose people and their ways were to influence me for the rest of my life.

'Wailing Winnie' our own family hate name for the London sirens that had punctuated our daily lives increasingly over the past months had, it seems sounded its own farewell. We, my mother and I, were escaping the nightly terror that the siren had prefaced.

Winnie's sound was to leave in the depths of my mind a trigger reaction that even today, 60 years on, causes my stomach to churn whenever its recorded wail streams from TV or radio.

It was, I can now reflect, almost symbolic that the siren heralding another daylight Battle of Britain raid on the City should sound as my parents embraced on No 10 platform at Kings Cross.

Dad had always been there, at home, every night. Even after that day, a month earlier when he arrived hours late after lying in a London gutter for safety while the Luftwaffe unleashed its biggest ever daylight raid. It was the only shelter he could find as the bombs rained down. More than 300 bombers had killed 400 Londoners on that day.

Now my father and I were parting. But for how long? For weeks? For years? Forever? Many of my friends had seen their fathers go to war, never to return.

I was far luckier than the groups of London's tearful and fearful youngsters who were forced into evacuation to be billeted in some alien place away from the love of their families and often with unwelcoming hosts. Ours was a 'family evacuation.'

In the unthinking manner of a seven-year-old I was just anxious to get away that morning, to meet Auntie Ada and Uncle Jack in the stone cottage of the Lincolnshire village I had been told about, where the siren rarely sounded, and then usually only in practice

"Goodbye Dad." I said, a little surprised that he had seemed to allow

engine smuts to get in his eyes and to make them water so profusely. Dad was, it seems, as anxious as the locomotive crew of the Flying Scotsman that we, a moving target, should get the devil out of London and drop passengers like us at Grantham for the local change train to Lincoln before pounding the metal road northwards.

My father was returning to the now silent house at Finchley where for the past months I had spent the night in relative safety asleep under an upturned settee. My parents had slept in the same downstairs room and had perfected a gymnastic leap from mattress to sitting position under the heavy oak dining table whenever one of the Luftwaffe's big'uns had screamed its way earthwards and seemingly at us.

If, as I thought, Jerry had made me target number one, then he missed. The nearest he got was a hundred yards away, as my friend Andrew Harkess and I noted, almost casually, as we walked to school next day, there was just a big muddy hole where a house and family had been the night before. The shelter of our settee and dining table would have proved of little defence to that kind of direct hit.

It would be just five years before I again sat on the settee. For me, the adventure of a lifetime awaited.

A new life begins

MRS Ada Gilbert was at Lincoln Station to greet us off the small local train, a poor relation of the 'Scot' now Flying northwards. The puffing locomotive pulling in to the county town had wheezed its way on an all-stations trip from Grantham. Mum and her sister Ada embraced and walked with our cases to the bus station.

It was a journey that Auntie Ada had made herself 20 years earlier, on the arm of her new husband.

Young Ada Barnett had been working in the ticket office of the London Underground when the handsome moustached young soldier came into her life. Jack Gilbert was recovering from being blown up in a German gas attack at Ypres. I say recovering. In fact he never did shake off the legacy of the gas that distorted his inner workings for the rest of his life and eventually caught up with him 40 years later.

Auntie Ada, a stranger in the even more rural life of Branston a genera-

tion earlier became accepted in her husband's village. Few people would have known that she began working life "in service". Hers was the Upstairs Downstairs life as depicted so accurately in the television series of that name.

She told me years later that in the Big House where she was an upstairs parlour maid there was a butler just like Mr Hudson and a cook that was the spitting image of the one on the TV series. She told me one of her roles, waiting behind the curtains of the drawing room each morning at eight o'clock until she heard the swish of her mistress's skirts and would step forward to be at her beck and call for the rest of the day.

But by the time we arrived to live with her she had become a member of the Parish Church ladies, singer in the choir, called to 'lay out' people who had gone to another world (it was years later that I discovered what laying out meant). She was loved by neighbours and was a devoted wife to Jack.

When we interrupted the calm pattern of Jack Gilbert's life, he had already completed one full career as a gamekeeper, mainly at the Longhills, the wooded mansion and grounds that was home to the aristocratic Abel Smith family.

Hitler had ended that career and Uncle Jack turned his skills from nurturing game birds and the gamekeeper's traditional battle against pests to be drafted into a role in the second of those 'wars to end wars'. He was now a carpenter at Waddington air base four miles away. I still have some of his carpentry tools he used to repair the huts used by bomber crews on the mighty Lancasters that flew from the base.

We caught the 2A bus, green, and a far cry from the new silent red trolleybuses just introduced near my old home. The route that afternoon took us past Sincil Street, over the bumps of the wide Durham Ox level crossing, onwards past Robeys' factory and up Canwick Hill.

That wide railway crossing which took its name from the nearby pub provided an unwelcome barrier to city life for long minutes throughout the day as the pre-Beeching rail lines throbbed with activity, much of it for the war effort. It was to be replaced by a grand wide bridge.

From Canwick Hill, if we had cared to look back, we would have had a grandstand view of that solid historic city overlooked by the ever-present towering magnificence of Lincoln Cathedral.

The trip on the alternative 2B bus would have taken 15 minutes longer

via Washingborough and Heighington. And so to Branston and the solid stone block of three cottages facing Moor Lane that was to be home for the next few months until a second move across the village that was to shape my life. In the distance were the woods of the now deserted grand Longhills house. In days to come Auntie and I would push an old pram along the rutted path to pick up kindling wood for her stove.

This was Branston, perched on a crossroads, four miles from Lincoln within sound of the mighty Big Tom bell and sight of the impressive cathedral that housed it.

For the first time for I don't how long, I went upstairs to bed, to sleep on a normal mattress instead of under dining room furniture. But this was nothing like the 'upstairs to bed' I had known at home where the bannister-railed staircase led from the hall of our modern three-bedroomed semi in a swish new estate.

The cottage stairway was entered through a latch cupboard door and like Wee Willy Winkie from my nursery rhyme book I carried a candle in a holder held out in front of me. No upstairs lights here.

The tiny bedroom my mother and I were to occupy sloped almost to the floor. There was just enough room for my bed. But what a bed!

I can almost feel today the enveloping warmth of the plumped up feathers within the loose mattress. It was bliss. Less than blissful were the bathroom arrangements. To a lad accustomed to 'usual offices' that funnelled water in and out of modern sinks and baths as appropriate, even when the raids were on, culture shock Number One arrived.

I had earlier in the afternoon made acquaintance with the cottage toilet, the wooden box with two holes and two lids situated in the coal shed at the bottom of the garden beyond the pig sties. Phwow!

I lifted the lid and vowed never to be one of those sort of chaps who takes his paper to the loo for a long read. Not that you could read. There was no light, other than the torch you had to remember to take with you at night on the last excursion of the day.

Imagine then the fears of this little lad plucked from suburbia where every night was a unwelcome kind of firework night, actually being asked to go outside to wee! I think it was a year or two before I ventured forth on my own without maternal company.

That first night after being accustomed to air-borne sounds that came with the volume of Wagner from his German fatherland, the silence of the

village was all-enveloping. No Wailing Winnie. No drone of German bombers.

The sky view of a packed milky way seen from my Aunt's garden on that autumn evening in 1940 was a sight I have not seen matched even 40 years later under under the clear night skies on holiday in the African bush. The sight stays with me still. So does the scene of the flickering candle in the bedroom picking out the pattern on the water jug and matching chamber pot. I suppose with an inventive mind you could almost call it an en suite room . . . but not quite.

Now then . . .

'NOW Peter,' called out the neighbour Mrs Stephenson on this my first morning in Lincolnshire. I blanched a whiter shade of pale. Whatever could I have done? She has seemed so pleasant when we had been introduced the previous evening.

'Now then' she repeated louder and, to me, more frighteningly. 'I don't know,' I replied hesitatingly. What I did know only too well was that when an adult bellowed out 'Now then', it was closely followed by 'what have you been up to, you little blighter.' or words to that effect. Mrs Stephenson who lived in the same block of 200-year-old cottages as my aunt and uncle was just as puzzled by my response. Strange little boy, she must have thought. Perhaps it was the bombing, poor love.

It was something far simpler — a matter of local custom. Several 'Now thens' later that day I realised that this was a greeting, a cheery Hello, sometimes abbreviated to a simple 'Now', but nonetheless threatening to an unaccustomed young ear. It was the first of many lessons in a village that may have been a mere 130 miles from home in distance, but was a world away in so many ways of custom and comment.

I quickly learned about 'Now then' and that 'yon field' didn't grow 'yons' or that 'yon road' wasn't paved with whatever it might be. I had to be a fast learner if I was to weather it out with the rest of the boys and girls I was to meet at Mr Williams' school in the village.

I started almost immediately at Branston C of E School, stone-solid, with a low rugged wall and opposite the Co-op stores.

Lessons, as I was to find out on that first morning, October 28th 1940,

were always preceded by a short service. The floor-to-ceiling green curtain that separated Mrs Freshney's class from Mrs Clark's was swept back and Headmaster Williams emerged to seat himself at the harmonium at the centre, an instrument totally unfamiliar to me.

Everybody looked so serious and I think I stifled a giggle as Mr Williams pedalled away like a demented duck at the treadles coaxing enough air to feed the tubes enough puff to play *Immortal Invisible, God Only Wise*. Strange how little cameo scenes like these etch themselves on a mind now 60 years older.

My lessons in life and in Lincolnshire pepped up a pace. I learned that one of the ladies at the back of the room was Mrs Williams who occasionally shared in the teaching and a more colourful lady looking after the infants, a Miss Edinbrow.

I was impressed by the boy who announced to me: "I'm going to mend the fire." Wow! Where I came from things like fire and stoves fires were usually mended by men in overalls. This proposed act of engineering skill by my newly-found classmate was something I should see.

Language Lesson Three. Within days I too would take my turn at 'mending the fire' . . . a term I quickly found meant picking up one of the large hods of coke, going to the circular stove in the centre of the room, flapping open the almost red hot trap at the top and pouring in enough fuel to keep the fire going. And not too much to send coke-dust up the nostrils of Mr Williams. Then off to refill the bucket from the coke mountain in the yard outside and persuade my seven-year-old frame to manhandle it inside again.

All this was a world away from the cosseted life I had known and which my grandchildren now enjoy. I imagine those daily wrestles we had with the fiery stove flap would today send today's Health and Safety inspector round the twist.

I settled happily into the lessons, but found relationships more difficult. Sometimes it would all end in tears. But that made matters worse.

"Are you roaring?" I was taunted. Roaring? Roaring? Only lions do that, unless, as I found out, you are a small boy crying his eyes out in Lincolnshire; then you are, quite frankly, roaring. Another one for the language lesson.

Classmates all wanted me to talk to them in 'your funny voice'. The

London accent was quite a laugh to them. Ironically the experience was to be repeated five years later when I returned home with my acquired Lincolnshire accent far broader than many locals because by that time I had mixed with the village's real sons of the soil and the men whose families farmed it.

I was given a seat at a desk alongside a girl who spoke in the same strange way as me. She had been sent from London to relatives, but was never happy and returned home shortly after.

On that first morning however, she was full of excitement. She had received a parcel from her mother and despite my protestations insisted on showing me the main item, a pair of white knickers with a little floral design (as I said earlier, you remember some things more than others). The only further embarrassment for me was that she wearing them at the time, clearly apparent as she mischievously raised her skirt beneath the desk to illustrate.

With my sheltered upbringing all this sort of thing was new. Life was certainly going to be different in Branston.

Wrong impression

TWO of my best friends from those early days were Michael and Raymond Waby who lived in one of the last houses out of the village before the road disappeared towards Metheringham. They taught me a lot and took me with them and others from nearby cottages along the footpath curiously called The Wong to the Sunday School at the Methodist Chapel. This stone building was to form an important part of my life over the next few years.

I remember in those early days of feeling my way, trying to impress my way into recognition. During a lesson on the evils of smoking I had piped up with a grown-up air "Oh I have smoked."

Everyone else seemed shocked. I had scored a hit. It wasn't true of course and the irony of it was that throughout my adult life I have been a non-smoker. But, if you'll pardon the expression, the smokescreen that my attention-seeking outburst caused on that day reached my mother and more importantly my Aunt. Things were said!

I realised that life with Auntie was not always going to be trouble-free. Long after the war in the closing years of her life we became very close, but back in the tensions of 1940, I was threatened with all kinds of everything if I ever again nipped the buds from chrysanthemums, if I drew finger patterns on her carefully brushed apple green table cover or made marks on the gleaming black stove that was the centre piece of her spotlessly-clean living room.

It was in the oven of the stove, heated by the continuously burning fire, that Auntie Ada produced excellent food, and introduced me to one of life's delicacies, Yorkshire pudding. This dish was not an afterthought to play second fiddle to a plate of beef as my southern friends would have it. This was the overture to a main course, to be played out in its own style, bathed in gravy, served as a fluffily crispy-edged offering filling half the plate.

Even now my southern friends find it hard to accept my strange habit of pushing the main course to one side, leaving enough worshipping room on the plate for the much revered Yorkshire pud. Some happily-acquired childhood habits never die.

For years I would claim that no one made 'Yorkshires' like Auntie Ada. But now, just for the sake of present domestic harmony I can proudly claim that if Delia Smith were to stage a competition, my Essex-born wife with her millennium-age fan oven could probably edge my 1940s aunt into second place.

Auntie Ada's hearth played host to huge cloth-covered bowls of dough being rising under gentle warmth before being baked into memorable crusty loaves. That stove was the provider, not only of heat and food, but was the only source of hot water and had to be topped up several times a day.

Running cold water on tap? Certainly. It was just that the family tap was a communal one shared by neighbours and situated alongside a hedge in the road outside.

The old pump fed by an ancient well outside the back door had been made redundant and the recent arrival of piped water to the street supply was one giant step for the likes of Ada Gilbert. But for this young suburban boy to whom water both hot and cold had come from the turn of a tap in the comfort of kitchen and bathroom, it was back to dark ages. There was nothing mod-con about shivering in the queue waiting to fill buckets at the silver-painted obelisk beyond the front hedge. And that tap!

In the mornings of that first winter with its knife-edged east wind scyth-

ing in from the Lincolnshire Wolds, it was as much as my tiny frozen fingers could do to turn the ridged knob that brought water gushing from the carved lion's mouth of a latterday dalek. But I didn't dare to let on to Auntie Ada. I didn't know it then, but seeds were being sown for our move to Lincoln Road on the other side of the village. That winter — one of the coldest of the century — brought a new enchanted world as snow drifted over the village. For days it blocked the road stretching beyond Silver Street and preventing school friends from cycling in from The Mere.

The great white blanket drifted high up the hedge that Uncle Jack clipped immaculately between the garden and Sleaford Road. Armed with small shovel and some ingenuity, I created the first, and only, igloo of my life. It was exciting, with two entrances and a middle 'living' area where I could hide as adult voices exchanged their frustration: "Wherever can he have gone?" No one shared my igloo. It was the first home of my own.

The hedge curled round the bottom of the garden beyond the fertile rhubarb and runner bean patch where Uncle Jack grew the most unbelievable crops. I learned much later, with mixed feelings, the reason for his success.

At 4.a.m. on a spring morning when curtains, windows, and presumably noses were still closed, Jack Gilbert ventured forth, prised open the coping stone outside the coal shed-cum-privy door and with a ladle and a great deal of fortitude painstakingly emptied the accumulated contents into the deep trench already dug in his beloved vegetable garden.

Years later I had occasion to reflect on Uncle Jack's prize veggies. Working as a reporter at Dagenham in East London I covered the marketing of a new council product. Dagfert. It's origin was the dried out beds of the old sewage works. Yes, I thought, that'll make 'em grow. And by goodness it did. Produce at Dagenham Town Show could have rivalled Uncle Jack's, and for the same good biological reason.

On the buses

IT was over the hedge from this more pungent memory of Branston life that I found a new adventure, two to be precise, but more of her later. Alongside a petrol station with its elderly pumps dishing out Power petrol, the wartime title for the formerly competing Shell, Esso and Cleveland suppliers, was a row of large wooden garages. Outside one of them, I found a man washing down a single decker bus. More than a bus, it was a coach with posh seats, the livery painted in cream and brown with the name Gelsthorpe on the back.

Johnnie Gelsthorpe had a number of coaches which he ran on a timetable from Branston to Lincoln, presumably in opposition to Lincolnshire Road Car Company. Ralph, the man with the hose and wash leather was one of the drivers.

It was not long before I joined him regularly, helping with bucket and broom and, in exchange on Saturday mornings, I would get a free passage on the 11 o'clock service through Heighington and Washington where Ralph lived. He allowed me to operate the lever let into the floor like an extra handbrake which permitted the driver to open and shut the passenger door without him having to leave his seat. I felt very important.

Even Mr Gelsthorpe who joined the bus at busy times to help with taking the fares tolerated my presence. But I doubt whether he, like anyone associated with modern road safety, would have held with those fun moments when Ralph, lurched the bus from side to side along Heighington Road as he tried to dislodge me, his only passenger on an otherwise empty bus on a deserted road from hanging on to a central bar and collapsing into a giggling heap on the floor.

Like the drivers, I came to know by name many of the regular passengers. No London bus driver could have comprehended that lovely village practice of picking up people from their own front gate, even the one next door to the previous stop. It was amazing that the bus kept to time. But it always did.

It was there in Lincoln at 12.30 on Saturday as the factory whistle sounded that hundreds of men swarmed like prison escapees from the factories.

By this time, my father had become one of those factory escapees. A lifetime of work as salesman, factory owner, shop proprietor and Mr Fix-it in

'the rag trade' had barely fitted him for the trauma of sudden change which was forced on so many men and women in one form or another.

Too old to be called up for the 1939-45 army, he tired of performing a fill-in daytime job at Finchley and, after dark, becoming a target in the Luftwaffe's game of night time Russian Roulette. He locked up the house and upped sticks to join us.

No job, no future . . . until the next day. At 9.30 he was shown into a manager's office at Robey's the mighty engineering plant on Canwick Road, Lincoln. By 10.30 he was seated at a lathe for the first time in his life.

This was J.G.Owen, the man known for his immaculate white starched collars and razor sharp creases in pin-striped suits crease breaking correctly onto gleaming black shoes. The same man who, for years, had sent his starched collars away each week to be even more starchily starched was wearing a boiler suit and getting his hands dirty and greasy at a machine!

I don't know whether he enjoyed it. He didn't say. But he would arrive home at 7.30 after a 12-hour day at a lathe helping to make army tanks and be as full and descriptive in his outpourings to my mother on the day's events as he had been such short years before discussing his negotiations and business deals in the fashion industry and running a large newsagent's business.

Later, in a city with proud peacetime engineering names like Ruston and Hornsby and Clayton Dewandre, he moved to Ruston Bucyrus. This was a name known the world over for building excavators, but was by now heavily engaged in the war effort. Among the projects, a front for one of the war's biggest hush hush jobs, preparing a substantial component for Mulberry Harbour that would form the mobile quay for the Normandy landings.

The only pause in my father's five years behind a lathe was when he was rushed to Lincoln General Hospital with a serious internal ailment. I recall those icy weeks when mother and I hurried down our Sunday lunch to catch the bus to Lincoln and then either a Corporation bus or embarking on a laborious walk up the steep Lindum Hill near the cathedral to reach the hospital.

Dad recovered, gave up for ever his 40-a-day smoking habit and died of cancer in 1961. I wonder whether he resented in any way, the friend-

ships I struck up with men of Branston who were to influence my life.

Isn't it sad that in the year 2000 a friendship between man and boy invites at least innuendo and at worst accusation? Happily my childhood and the adult company in which I was often happier than with those of my own age was unsullied in any way. Driver Ralph was the first of my adult friends, but by far the greater influence on my life before or since, apart from my own family, was a man I called 'Uncle Walt'. Every boy should have one.

Uncle Walt

VILLAGE blacksmith Walter Pearson carried on the family business in Lincoln Road, shoeing horses, making farm implements and being a general smithy long after his father died. Brother Ernie who lived next door had gone into hairdressing at a shop in Lincoln near the bridge over the River Witham. Charlie, tenant of one of Uncle Walt's cottages a few doors away, worked at Ruston and Hornsby's. They brought up families who were to become my friends.

But Walter who married late in life had lost his young bride after just three years. He was heartbroken. He became a virtual recluse in the brick built house alongside the forge and shoeing shed. He was rarely seen in the village, choosing to take back lane routes if he had to cycle anywhere. He was reluctant to deal with customers, rejected bus rides and always cycled into Lincoln to buy his ironmongery supplies and horse shoes from Shipleys in Broadgate.

When he chose to speak, it was almost in monosyllables through closed teeth. He scuffed his feet as he shuffled across the yard. This was hardly surprising. He tied his bootlaces only when he was going to venture beyond the brick wall that marked a reluctant entry to the world outside. Hardly the sort of fellow to befriend a rather timid small boy.

We were thrown together by circumstances. Walter and Jack Gilbert had been old friends. With my father's arrival, space in the tiny Gilbert cottage was at a premium and other men never seemed to find my father the easiest of company. I never will know the truth of who said what to whom, but we three found ourselves at what is now called Blacksmiths House

We had our own part of the house and, exclusively, our own family toilet. The owner's privy was across the yard. Ours was in a different direction. Down the path, beyond the horseradish plants past a fence and to a single-seated emporium with its escape pit positioned conveniently near to the vegetable beds.

For a boy who was now eight, the adventure was just beginning. For the premises of Uncle Walt, as I was to call him from Day One, was a dream.

To a fusty old adult, it was a ramshackle collection of cobwebbed ancient barns in need of repair, chicken sheds unused, partly-peeling outhouses barely needed and, of course, the forge and shoeing shed now looking decidedly the worse for wear.

Even today I sense I can smell that mixture of heated metal, burnt oil, scorched horses' hoofs and anthracite emanating from the business end of the premises. The sheds, together with a 'secret garden' overgrown beyond locked doors with a huge triffid-like hop plant were mine to explore in the days and months to come.

I took to Uncle Walt immediately, and so, I was told much later, it was reciprocated, although the first encounters were wary.

He was an intensely shy man and spoke to me only briefly on that first meeting. Dealing with small boys invading his lonely space was a new experience for him. But slowly he began to live again. He showed me how horses were shod and, as he manhandled some of the more fractious mighty shires and percherons, I learned how to swear.

He had seen men injured for life when an anxious horse lashed out and I sensed that the anger which manifested itself in colourful use of the Anglo-Saxon language did in fact cover a degree of fear. Just conjure up the picture: Anxious horse versus cautious blacksmith at a meeting of man and beast.

Firstly the old shoe would be wrenched off and hurled clattering onto a rust mountain in the corner. Then, with short sharpened knife Uncle Walt would pare away at the horse's spreading, split and redundant edges of hoof. A red hot horse shoe held in long tongs was pressed sizzling, pungently-smelling into the reshaped hoof held between Uncle Walt's legs. It was a daily trial of strength.

I learned to bucket the shiny anthracite from the huge heap in the yard to the forge and to pump the bellows that breathed fire and white heat on to

horse shoes, shaping them with care to fit the hoof of a particular animal. The same skill was applied to farm harrows and to weld plough shares. The working sound of a hammer making a 'tink-tink-tink' on the anvil before bending iron like putty in its white heat, remains a musical memory.

A mighty drill bored holes like knife through butter as I wound the giant wheel that turned the cogs that wound the bit — no high speed Black and Decker in those days. Everywhere there were tools scattered in boxes. Decades of dust, iron filings and flakes from molten metal, clogged the crevices of the uneven floor of the forge that once held half a dozen smiths and was now home to the last of a line.

Only the newspaper headlines and the drone of Lancaster bombers warming up four miles away brought any reminder of war. For me, selfishly, it was the time of my life.

I wanted to keep rabbits. No problem. Uncle Walt encouraged me, bought chicken wire, and made hutches for them. Then much later, when I suggested I might keep chickens, there was an 'open sesame' to one of the disused, cobwebbed outhouses.

But there was more to come. Freedom virtually to do as I pleased . . . and it pleased me to help out with gardening, with apple picking, with feeding the pigs. Uncle Walt taught me how to dig with fork or spade in straight lines behind taut string lines, to spread pig muck in every third row and to rake the newly-dug earth until it was flat like the bowling green at The Rec, Branston's recreation ground 300 yards away.

Other boys of my age might have regarded it as a chore. I loved every minute of it. I was free to dig and sow as I wanted, without my father — he could be a little dominating — at my elbow to tell me what to do. He was busy in Lincoln on his factory lathe working 12-hour days for five-and-a-half days a week.

The only time Uncle Walt got really angry with me was when I dropped the apples. His large garden with its gravel path leading down to a high brick wall at the end had gooseberry and blackcurrant bushes on either side. The goosegogs as we called them ripened to sweet juicy spheres, blushing red in their full finery.

There were apple trees of many varieties. Bramleys, russets, coxes orange — that one was my tree, given to me on my arrival at Uncle Walt's for the duration of the war.

When the picking season arrived, Uncle Walt would pull out the large

extension ladder from one of the barns and hoist it skywards. Then, handing me a bucket and a hook to hang it from the highest rung he would nod to me to begin the climb. His part of the deal was use his large and sinewy hands to grip the ladder at the bottom. When my mother caught sight of me high above the barn tops she would die a thousand deaths. But Uncle Walt was certainly too portly to pick the fruit and was, I suspect, not too happy with heights.

I would take my little frame aloft and reach for the apples often at arms length, and then, horror of horrors let one fall to a bruising end on the earth below. "That's it," Uncle Walt would call out. "Drop the buggers. You're supposed to pick them." That first summer we picked, or rather I picked bucketfuls of apples, carefully selecting those that would keep and wrapping them in old newspapers. With a care usually reserved for fine china, we would then pack them gently.

They went into the drawers of old furniture in the unused upstairs rooms in Uncle Walt's part of the house or we would lay them in parade lines on bare floorboards. No apple had to touch another for fear that the slightest sign of rot would spread to another.

In that way, the apples would last well into the winter. By this time however they were rubbery and pappy, not like the cosseted fruit of today where it can be bought as fresh as the day it was picked. But Uncle Walter tucked in happily on winter's evenings, paring the skin in front of the red-hot stove of the back kitchen. He used his old penknife which I am sure doubled for a horse shoe knife when his real one went missing.

A pig of a ride

PIGS kept in one of the outbuildings were a constant source of enjoyment to me. Their squealed greetings, their contented grunts as I scratched their heads brought me a rapport with them and a love for the animal that has not dwindled. I respected them not for their mucky ways, but, believe it or not, for their cleanliness. They are naturally rooting animals, but prefer to sleep on fresh straw and don't deserve their mucky reputation.

I was able to watch the arrival of the first of a new family of piglets and it opened my eyes still further to the magic of the countryside that no 'townie' could ever appreciate.

One of the full grown pigs, my special friend Fred, would allow me to ride on his back . . . provided, as I was to find out, he was given plenty of notice.

I decided to show off to a friend as we strolled home one fateful afternoon from Sunday School. There I was in my neat new grey suit that Mum had bought for me only days earlier, using precious clothing coupons from our ration books. I quietly eased my diminutive frame over the half door of the old stable in which the pigs were housed. Fred, the porker on whom I intended to become jockey was positioned beneath me. I slipped and dropped firmly on to his back.

Startled, this bundle of muscle and squeal took off like a steer at a rodeo and flung me high, and straight into the muckiest, most evil-smelling heap in the whole sty.

My friend doubled up with laughter while I fled for the house in tears, smelling like a sewage works, my new grey suit effectively dyed another, less appealing colour with an identity no self-respecting tailor would claim.

My parents were angry, but mother, seeing my distress and embarrassment let me off with the caution: "Don't you dare to ride a pig ever again." I needed no second bidding. My days as a porker's jockey were over. The suit? Mum cleaned it as best she could, but it never really lost its indelibly-acquired aroma.

The rest of the clothes went into the copper for washing. Washday. Now that was an experience that I and certainly my mother had not been prepared for. Both at Auntie Ada's and at Uncle Walt's and, presumably most of the other old cottages in Branston, the wash house was as important a part of the property as the toilet and certainly better built and equipped.

Like a theatrical production there was a regime to be followed. On Mondays, it was always Mondays, the man of the house rose early to light the boiler fire and fill the copper. This was set in stone and brickwork, a huge rounded receptacle beneath which coals burned fiercely and smoke billowed from a separate chimney. By the time the woman of the house was ready to start on her part of the production, the water was boiling.

Out came the dolly and the washboard, new to me, but at Auntie Ada's I had learned the hard way. Young children were expected to join in the ceremonial of traditional washday customs, and I was to be no exception.

I was shown how to turn the all-wooden dolly, a kind of stool with four

legs and long handle and bar at the top making a tee. It had to be turned vigorously, first one way and then the other among the soapy clothes decanted into a tub. You had to put muscle into the movements so that the legs acted like the paddles of a latterday washing machine. To me it started as a new game, only to become a bore and another source of trouble as I turned the dolly like a boy possessed . . . and slurped water all over the slippery-tiled floor. Well, boys will be boys!

Then I switched roles helping to turned the handle of an ancient mangle to squeeze every last drop of water and suds before the rinsing process.

But after Mondays, the boiler had a different role, at least where the family kept pigs. 'Seconds', those potatoes not fit for retail sale because they were gnarled, chopped or slightly black were bought by the sackful as 'pig tait's'. The wash house copper was brought to the boil and buckets of spuds were cooked skins'n'all to be kept on one side for the next few days. They were then used to eke out the scoops of pig meal and scraps that fattened the grunterns.

Helping with pig-keeping inevitably introduced me to the other side of the coin. Pigs, particularly in wartime were kept for one reason only, as meat providers. Their days were numbered until they were either loaded unceremoniously kicking and squealing into a farm cart or taken 'walkies' down the road to the slaughterhouse.

Their cacophony of protest could be heard by half the village as the reluctant victim with a rope through his nose ring was dragged to the executioner. I still think today that this ring of destiny was a particularly cruel deceit by man.

Uncle Walt fashioned sharp-ended four-inch horse shoe nails into rings in his forge and sold them for coppers to local pig owners. The ring would be inserted by special pliers through the tenderest part of the nostril to form a ring in a little piglet's nose, a device that 'slept' for most of the next year, to be activated on that final walk to the slaughterer's scaffold. Even then a demented sow would shun the pain and choose the hard way by being shoved unceremoniously from the rear by a couple of perspiring men. Others, 15 stones of innocence, would stroll placidly down the street to meet the man with the knife and join their playmates at the great sty in the sky.

At the other end of the village, Auntie Ada would always go out for the day at slaughter time. It was inevitable that after many months of feeding

the two porkers in Uncle Jack's sty she would become attached to them and could not bear to witness their final journey. She knew it would happen, year in year out, but could never get used to the parting.

I inherited her ability to divorce my thoughts of Grunter and Porky and Squealer from the slabs of meat and bags of slippery offal delivered back home later in the day. I have even managed to shut from my memory my thoughts of Fred's fate. Perhaps it was quits for spoiling my Sunday suit?

Pigs came back as pork from the slaughterhouse at the bottom of High Street hill where I never actually saw the dreadful deed performed, but heard the crescendo of squeals and then the shot and . . . silence. I watched later as two slaughterhouse men, their aprons bloodied, hosed down the concrete floor until all the reddish hue had vanished from the water.

Back home at Uncle Walt's, pig night brought a hive of activity as the late and unlamented family squealer was delivered back again, pink and freshly washed, in two large sides, four legs, a bag full of innards and a head, its eyes now respectfully closed.

Family and neighbours would join in, knowing their labours would result in a plate of offal or some sausages or chitlings in payment.

They would be positioned in a barn brightly lit by flickering oil lamps around a huge shallow trough filled with salt. I shared in the work of carving huge blocks of salt and pounding it down into granules. The sides of bacon were then immersed in the salt which was smoothed into every pore to preserve it for the months to come. Exposed bones were treated to salt petre rubbed firmly into the sockets. Bits of meat would be ground down and put through a borrowed machine on to which was fed one end of the fully flushed former intestines of the victim and twisted into sausages.

This was no scene for the faint-hearted. Hammer films of the 1960s could have been raised on this spectacle. The sausages together with 'fry' and chitlings would be shared between helpers and anyone else who was owed a favour. Just how this squared with tight meat rationing I know not, but I believe owners were allowed to keep their own pigs, or at least a proportion of them.

The wives would turn their hand to make pork pies, the like of which I had not eaten before or since, although I kid myself that no one in the Essex wasteland can make pies like Curtis's sold at their Lincoln shop beyond the Stonebow.

Most old houses in the village had 'dairies', an extra room in the coolest

part of the house leading from the kitchen in which those things which are housed in modern fridges were kept for as long as possible.

Huge hooks were screwed into the ceiling of these dairies and kitchens to hang the hams and sides of bacon above head height for the winter.

It was from these that the shortcomings of the system of preserving meat with salt could be witnessed. The salt was supposed to protect the meat from becoming a nursery for any passing fly anxious to spread its eggs asunder.

It didn't work. Horrified, my mother would find grubs wriggling on the floor where they had dropped from their cosy birthplace above. When one dropped on to her hair one day it was the last straw. She protested and Uncle Walt moved the side of bacon, and its inhabitants, to another part of the house. From that time on, she refused all offers to share in a slice of fatty bacon, preferring to keep to the two rashers a week that came with the ration book.

Uncle Walt continued, however, to cut himself liberal slices of bacon and fry them in home-produced lard over the fire in his own kitchen. Come to think of it, Uncle Walt never went short of much. Rationing seemed to pass him by.

As the old blacksmith in the village, he was always open to persuasion to do a rush job for a local farmer whose implements sheared off at the most inopportune time.

Later produce wrapped in plain brown paper would exchange hands as the farmer went on his way rejoicing. At supper time, Uncle Walt would produce a great mound of freshly made butter from his own cupboard when we, in our part of the house were scraping from the two ounces a week we were allowed on the ration. Mum liked Uncle Walt, but could never come to terms with the dual standards of wartime eating.

It would annoy her when he would come in with four eggs in his hand and ask: "Would you cook those for my tea?" I think we had about three a week on our allocation. His had come from a grateful farmer. Nothing was ever said and I don't believe that Uncle Walt ever appreciated the hurt he caused.

Mother's view on eggs was to change later with the arrival into my life of some pretty young chicks . . . more of that later.

On your bike!

A NEW arrival changed my life in the village and the ability to enjoy it and share in some fantastic experiences. I was given a bike. I don't remember where it came from, but I have a feeling that Uncle Walt had a hand in it. He certainly took a hand after its arrival.

This was the man who would never normally be seen out in the village and who most people thought had given up life to be an elderly hermit. Now he could be seen running, yes running, balancing the bike with his hand on the back of the saddle as I struggled to reach the spinning pedals and stop myself falling off at the same time. Day after day a perspiring Uncle Walt persisted in what must have seemed a hopeless cause pushing his portly frame and this little urchin with no sense of balance around the village.

Then came the day we went further, beyond the Sheep Wash, along Rectory Lane and up Hall Lane, a long straight road with no traffic, but with a steady incline. Suddenly, I realised I could no longer feel Uncle Walt's steadying hand on the saddle. It was not surprising. I wobbled as I turned my head. He was standing fifty yards back, hands on knees puffing like a grampus and smiling all over his face. I had gone on alone.

It was the dawn of so much. It meant, for starters, a visit to Dye House Farm at the end of Paddock Lane, run for their mother by Jack Taylor and his brother Dick. Jack was a regular visitor to the blacksmith's. Now we were going to see him on his own ground. We bumped down the rubble-strewn track past the recreation ground on a lane that led to the farm.

Our arrival was signalled by a gaggle of geese, finding greenery by the permanent little spring that bubbled half way down the lane. I learned then of the value of geese as guards. They could sight intruders half a mile away and let everyone else know. I also learned just how big a foe they could be. Uncle Walt warned me to stay away from their wings. "One flap and they could break your arm," he cautioned. I never gave them a chance to prove it.

The farmyard was an adventure all of its own. A herd of cows passed noisily by on their way to be milked, scattering in their wake, the chickens and chattering bantams that roamed freely. There were tractors and farm vehicles the like of which I had never seen before. Even the working carts were skilfully painted in bright colours in a unique style with ornate

scrolls and whirls. This I knew to be from the deft fingers of another Pearson --- the wheelwright Herbert Pearson whose workshop was opposite Uncle Walt's forge. The positioning of the two ancient industries was hardly surprising; the two old crafts went hand in hand.

Wheelright Pearson would mould the wood and create or repair the wheels. He would then wheel it across Lincoln Road to the forge opposite and Blacksmith Pearson would heat the huge iron hoops that were the "tyres" for the wheels to expand them over the wood. Then, with a whoosh of steam he would immerse the newly banded wheels in a huge trough of water positioned outside. As the metal contracted it squeezed the wooden wheels that extra fraction of an inch to form a vice-tight fit.

The wheelwright would then display his other ancient craft, as a sign-writer. His fine brushes turned plain wood into artist's canvas for ornate designs that would give each cart a character of its own. Increasingly, of course, farmers had their own names painted on the carts.

Only one thing halted work at the wheelwright's. Death. Other people's. Immediately someone died in the village, Wheelright Pearson would stop work on farm carts and reach for the long flat sheets of oak that were stacked in one corner of the workshop. His role doubled with that of coffin maker to the village.

He put as much loving care into the creation of the last rest for fellow-villagers as he did in looking after the needs of the living. I watched fascinated as he shaped the sides of the coffins by neatly sawing a series of cuts halfway through the planks of oak at "shoulder height". Then, applying pressure and water gradually over the next precious day he would shape the coffin for this final fitting. To suit the requirements of the customer's relatives he would add the polished fittings and a carved plate if appropriate.

It was, however, the carts, the other side of the wheelwright's business that caught my eye as Uncle Walt and I cycled that day into the farm yard. It was the first day of wonderment that was to enrich my years as a growing lad.

In the background I could hear the clatter of milk churns. Hard at work was Ernie Taylor. This was not Ernie the fastest milkman in the west immortalised years later by Benny Hill but the man I recognised as the cheery chappie who had delivered milk to my aunt's cottage ever since my arrival in the village.

I watched fascinated as he brought the cows in from nearby pastures and gradually milked them by hand and carried the buckets of creamy white liquid away to his little dairy.

Here, in a brick-built room not big enough to swing the proverbial cat, the milk for the village (well that part of the village that didn't get its supplies from Lincoln Co-op) was prepared.

I saw it trickle from a container above the cooler, a pail load at a time rippling over the stainless steel ridges that contained a continuous flow of cold water, rather like a heating radiator in reverse. Then it went into churns, some for local delivery, some to be picked up later that day by a truck that would take it to a central marketing point.

Until my arrival in Branstons, milk to me was something that came in bottles. Here, in village life, it arrived in small churns carried by the milkman as he went from house to house. In those lovely far off days when everyone left their back door unlocked, he would breeze in uninvited with a cheerful word and ladle one pint or two from his spotless containers into the jugs or basins that awaited him on the kitchen table at each cottage.

In Ernie's dairy everything was spotless, with a lovely faint smell of bleach that kept at bay the microbes. Modern day health and safety executives would get a touch of the vapours if they walked into such a place. But while there may have been muck, mud and cow dung outside, here in the dairy all was pristine clean.

Tight squeeze from an old cow

IT was not many weeks before I was sharing in the exciting life of the dairy. I would be the one to bring in the cows for their afternoon milking. It was only if I was early that I would have to walk three fields away to round them up. This, I learned the hard way, had to be done gently. Ernie caught me once chasing them in and he gave me a dressing down. So did Jack Taylor, same surname coincidentally, but unrelated.

To agitate cattle in this way, Ernie warned, would curdle their milk. I wasn't sure if he was right, but in future, it was a stroll for me and my new-found four-legged friends rather than a canter back to the cow sheds.

Usually, however, the cows relied on their own body clocks that told them it was milking time. If we were a little late, they would be the ones

to tell us. They mooed impatiently and clustered around the gate. Once through the gate they would make a beeline for the milking sheds and would queue up in regulation order. They all had a pecking order. Primrose knew that she could never go in front of Blossom. If she tried, her friends rather than the dairyman put her in her place.

In summer they strolled in from the fields. In winter when they were crowded into a huge barn next to the milking parlour on daily-fresh straw that grew higher, in more ways than one, with each passing week. When spring came this served as a ready-made manure mountain to be stored in an aromatic pile rotting gently in an unused corner of a field in readiness for putting oomph into crop-growing the following year.

At first I was allowed only to watch and see that the cattle kept in order. That didn't last. Soon I was filling the troughs with a metal scoopful of food that each cow would munch on happily, ensuring that one end of the animal was taking it in while in its production area at the business end below its voluminous structure, it was dispensing the result of all that grass, chaff and feed.

Then came the day I was handed a small three-legged stool and shown how to crouch down almost beneath the towering belly of a great brown beast.

Carefully I was shown how to grasp firmly in each hand one of the available udders and, how by squeezing at the right place I could ensure that warm liquid would squirt with a resonance of sound into the shiny empty bucket I tried to hold between my knees. Ernie could milk a cow in eight minutes. It would take me nearly half an hour. But then it could be all in vain.

I learned two other lessons in life that I would remember always: Never place a full bucket of milk within kicking distance of a startled cow and never, but NEVER station one behind a cow that has a cough and diarrhoea at the same time. The effect is instant and catastrophic. Need I say more?

The most delightful times would be helping to feed young calves from buckets and allowing them also to suck from your fingers. My townie friends of today might greet that practice with a sense of 'ugh' . . . they haven't lived.

It was in the cowshed at Taylor's farm that I had some of the happiest times of my innocent young life and I will forever be indebted to the

men who made me so welcome. It was in the same cowshed that I had the first of two scares that were to illustrate the hazards of farm life.

The first came as I tried to persuade a cow to leave the stall backwards. She had different ideas and decided to show that this lady *was* for turning.

She made a near impossible U-turn in the narrow stall just at the point where diminutive little me was standing. I felt every breath being forced out as the increasing weight forced my rib cage towards my backbone. Ernie found me moments later lying on the floor, looking blue and gasping for breath. To this day I don't know how close a call it was but I suspect that the flexibility of childhood bones played a part.

My other brush with near disaster was easier to put into perspective. Tom Clarke, one of the tenants of the cottages owned by Uncle Walt was a lorry driver who worked, I believe, for Foreman Bros, the Branston-based transport fleet that travelled nationwide. In late autumn and early winter he spent each working day carting lorry loads of sugar beet from the huge piles at the roadside on almost every village farm to the factory at Bardney.

The lorries were loaded by hand (no fork-lift trucks in those days) and then disgorged as the lorry, its sideboards unfastened, was tilted above the swirling water of huge concrete pits.

Tom was a decent chap and my calls of "Any chance of a ride" usually bore fruit. But one day, we didn't get there.

We had just passed Branston Fen and were level with a farmyard shortly before Bardney Causeway (or Corsey' as Uncle Walt called it), the straight road that led across the flat fen to Bardney.

Suddenly Tom reach down beneath the dashboard. What happened next was a cross between a blur and a slow motion film.

"Look out," he yelled in desperation, although it could have been "Get out". In any case, lorry and I were soon to part. It veered from the road and headed for a ditch before coming to an abrupt end pointing downwards. My journey had not ended, however.

This was pre-seat belt days. The lorry stopped. I sailed on. It was not the most modern of vehicles and as my head touched the windscreen, to my everlasting good fortune the glass obligingly continued onwards with me, snapping itself free of its worn mountings. It floated further down the

ditch. Meanwhile, in something approaching the flight scene from Peter Pan, I sailed gracefully into thick undergrowth. Suddenly all was darkness.

Like an impossible scene from Michael Crawford's *Some Mothers Do Have 'Em* of 30 years later, the final act of this cameo was for the cab roof which had also been torn asunder to float down and completely cover me where I lay shutting out all daylight.

Much later when he was able to get over the shock of it, Driver Tom recalled that amid the horror of what was happening, he found it bizarre to the point of hilarity to see me disappearing, as if on wings, from the cab we had both shared only seconds earlier.

Frankly Tom thought he had seen the last of me. Meanwhile, after a pause to wonder if this was all a horrible dream, I said the only thing that came to mind as appropriate at times like this: "Help".

This arrived in the form of the family from the nearby farm who took me in and tended to me until the Branston district nurse who happened to pass a few minutes later looked in to repair my 'dreadful injuries'. They were rather painful. Nettle stings. All the way up my bare arms and legs. That's all. Everyone agreed that I was lucky to be alive. A six-inch square gate post had sat solidly in my path as I Peter Panned past it at around 30 miles an hour. Neither it, nor I felt a thing.

Driver Tom was not so lucky. He had been unable to come in answer to my "Help". The weight of tons of sugar beet thrust forward on to the back of the aging lorry cab had trapped him breathless between seat and steering wheel. It needed a burly farm labourer to prise him out. He was off from work for a while.

Sadly, it was the end of my trips to Bardney. Perhaps it was something that my father said to Tom in a long and rather private conversation that evening.

I never did find the cause of the accident apart from a suggestion that the steering failed.

Most safety advisors and insurance companies together with upholders of political correctness would perhaps wince at my journey that day.

They would, of course, be still further alarmed on another occasion by the sight of nine year old me, the sole custodian of two giant shire horses sitting high up as the might of horse flesh carried me along Lincoln Road.

Convoys of army lorries and red cross trucks taking the war injured to

the American hospital, set up in a mansion in nearby Nocton, sped past. The horses released from their duty of pulling carts knew every plodding footfall of their way home from one part of Taylors' farm near the egg packing station to Dye House.

However I credited myself with steering them across the busy main road, following its line for 600 yards, turning down past The Rec and home to base. To imagine that I was "driving" was an illusion that I liked to enjoy. I did not even countenance the thought that they would have got home on their own quite well enough. But they, it seems did not want to dent a boy's ego and responded to gentle tugs on the reins and 'Whoa's in time-honoured fashion

I enjoyed still further being able to drive a tractor as a 10-year-old on the farm of another of Uncle Walt's friends, Mr Sharpe. Today a farmer allowing that to happen would find himself locked up and the key thrown away. To me, it was part of the exciting childhood that I was being privileged to enjoy.

Mr Sharpe who farmed beyond the Nelstrops farm nearer to Canwick, had a Lincolnshire Wolds accent you could cut with the proverbial knife. "Yon's a bi'black o'er faithers tails" he would announce in place of the weather forecasters who had been banned for the duration of the war. And we would cycle off for home having interpreted that this phrase was, in Oxford English, a warning to beware of the portent of an ominously dark cloud formation in the direction of the potato fields owned by Mr Sharpe's dear old Dad.

Ticket to ride

BY the time I was nine Uncle Walt and I were riding everywhere. We cycled to Canwick and then whizzed down the hill to Lincoln, hoping not to end up prematurely in the city graveyard at the bottom. We always walked back up the hill, by the way.

I can remember my mother coming to grief on her old-style bike with suspect brakes as we cycled down hill past Heighington Station on one occasion. I rounded the sharp corner at the end and turned to my head to see if Mum was far behind. She had disappeared . . . bike'n'all into a

hedge. There were a few scratches, but she was none the worse for her experiences, except that I don't recall her using the bike too much after that.

Uncle Walt and I would cycle to the Brayford, the industrial waterside area where the River Witham widened into what is now a marina. I would look across to Ruston Bucyrus where Dad was at work. Then off to Shipleys where Uncle Walt ordered his supplies of metal, horse shoes and nails.

It would all arrive later that day thanks to a man called Frank Millns. He was the village carrier, a role unknown in suburban London, but a vital cog in countryside life before the advent of the family car or personal van.

Frank, in his green high-sided vehicle would go the rounds of suppliers in Lincoln picking up goods to be transported back to the villages. The likes of Uncle Walt and I could then pedal on our way back up Canwick Hill unencumbered by parcels. Well, not quite. We would make it nearly half way and would walk the last 100 yards to the top, although I did pedal it once all the way.

We would cycle to Bracebridge Heath for fish and chips, a rarity once the regular mobile fish and chip man was called up for war service. Once, when the war at sea stopped fish supplies from getting through, we had to make do with slices of potato in batter instead, and pretend it was fish. I found it really quite tasty.

We cycled too to the village of Harmston where the blacksmith had an oxy-acetylene kit. Uncle Walt hid beneath the folds of his coat a piece of work that old blacksmith skills could not handle. On the way back, we spotted a moment of history: the lowering, piece by piece of the ornate statue of George III that had stood proudly for many years on top of Dunston Pillar.

I don't know why it was removed; perhaps to be less of a threat to aircraft arriving at RAF Digby or because it was a sign post for low flying Luftwaffe pilots. A moment of history said Uncle, but who cared? No one it seems. Although the pillar is still there, the statue has never been put back and is, I believe, to be found on a less lofty perch in the grounds of Lincoln Castle.

Birth of a Granny

IN these early days of the new millennium newspapers are packed with stories of the evils that lurk round every street corner for the lone child befriended by adults. Yet now with the benefit of hindsight coupled with an all-too-revealing career in newspaper journalism, I cannot recall any influence that even hinted at other than genuine friendship and regard.

I speak of being 'a lone child' but I was never a lonely one. I was what my parents called 'old fashioned'. From mixing so much with my elders I used the sort of adult phrases that strangers regarded as quaintly amusing. Perhaps it was because of that I acquired the nickname 'Granny' from my friends. I would have liked to have remained as plain Peter, but the name stuck and throughout my years in Branston I was always known by my friends as Granny Owen.

To me now, that conjures up a picture of a prissy little know-all, but I don't think I was. May be I was odd, but I don't recall that I was ever the odd man out. I had friends in abundance.

Their names, if not their faces come flooding back. There was Ken, one of the friendly Brummit boys who lived in stone cottage nearly opposite Uncle Walt's house.

There was Dave 'Ginger' Billings who lived near the church, there was 'Trot' Frith who lived a good two miles away in farm cottages towards Bracebridge Heath (Why 'Trot'? Did he get the name from the way he seemed to run everywhere?).

There was Peter Speed whose mother I recall ran the sweet shop on Sleaford Road and his near neighbour Gerald Forman whose family owned the large lorry fleet housed on the opposite of the road. The Woodcock brothers whose father drove a bus. They lived in Station Road as I recall. There were also the Footit sisters, Hilary and Gillian I think. They lived within a stone's throw of my home unless I am mistaken.

There was Frank (I think it was Frank) with whom I sang at the Chapel and with whom I had a friendly rivalry in being selected to sing solos at anniversary services. His mother, who played the organ was less than friendly on her son's behalf and seemed to resent the fact that as a boy soprano I had been favoured when God handed out the vocal chords and was usually picked first.

I was told that I had a pure boy soprano voice and years later I learned of a story that had been kept from me for fear of it going to my head. Uncle Jack and Auntie Ada had walked past the chapel in the cool of a summer Sunday evening and heard the unaccompanied strains of a young voice through the open door of the chapel.

"That's good," said Jack Gilbert. "I know," replied his wife. "That's our Peter." And tears coursed down her cheeks. How do I know? She told me, word for word, 30 years later. She reckoned by that time, there was no risk of it going to my head. I don't know. I can't exactly be accused of modesty mentioning it now. Praise is welcome at any age.

I digress. Other friends . . . The Challenor brothers lived a little way up the road at the garage where I used to have to take the radio accumulator battery each week to be charged. Only in that way, through the crackly old wireless set with its valves like shiny aubergines, could we continue to hear ITMA, Bandwagon and, with father looking stern, the voice of Winston Churchill offering blood, sweat and tears, whatever that meant to me.

The Challoners had a younger sister Gaynor who as I remember always wanted to join in the boys' games.

Chris Hallam my particular chum lived in one of Uncle Walt's cottages with his mum Zena. His father was away fighting for King and Country and I marvelled at the stories told by my mother of how Zena, a rather beautiful young Russian woman, had been smuggled out of her homeland 24 years earlier at the age of two.

She was of noble birth and the only way she could escape the fate that had befallen the Russian royal family at the hands of the revolutionaries was to be bundled into a potato sack and hidden beneath real spuds on a slow and tortuous farm cart journey to freedom. I was always sorry that after the war I lost touch with Chris.

Then there were girls

COMEDIANS talk of 'behind the bike sheds'. My earliest revelations came behind the bus garages at the bottom of Auntie's garden and under a spreading walnut tree that each autumn disgorged barrow loads of nuts.

It was here that a small group of girls with a leader who stayed with the

Herberts at the petrol station decided to show all to an audience of three rather curious young lads.

Obviously cut out for stardom in some future Playboy centrefold, the leader (her name escapes me and chivalry prevents me from trying to recall it) made me realise that we were not all built in quite the same way and that it was not just a matter of skirts and trousers. It was all very innocent and to this day I recall the relief at not having to reciprocate in life's big revelations, at least at that stage.

Nor was I more than an interested onlooker two years later. Our gang had dug dens near a hedge at The Rec and mounded earth over a corrugated iron roof to provide an exciting hideaway.

The older ones decided to consecrate the occasion with a bonding experience with a couple of girls of their own age. Perhaps it was all for the good that this was not to be an example of audience participation. I escaped with a passing reluctance, but with my morals and all else intact. I am sure I returned to London more aware of life's possibilities than the townies of my own age. Life has a pace of its own in the country, and that pace as I found out was not always slow.

Innocent too was my worship for the girl of my pre-pubescent dreams. Sadly it was a case of unrequited love. Fellow pupil at Branston C of E, Pauline Brown with the delightful nickname of Binky was the target of my affections. She knew it, but teased me and so did her friend . . . Olive Skelton, as I recall, who would embarrass me unmercifully over this adoration of Binky.

The high spot of this one-way romance was in the summer of 1944 when organised games in a field off Hall Lane followed the day after the Chapel anniversary as a kind of thank you for our participation.

Among the assembled gathering of Sunday School teachers we played The Farmer's in his Den as we circled hand in hand and chanted a folk song that ended *'open the ring and let one in and kiss her when you get her in.'*

At that point I made a bee line for Binky and my joy was unconfined. I learned in later years that she married and moved to the West Country.

My other big friendship with the opposite sex was a business partnership. Pat Pearson (no relation of Uncle Walt) lived with her father known to villagers as 'Ginger' in one of those houses up steps facing The Plough. She delivered Lincolnshire Echoes each blacked-out night along Lincoln

Road, and for more than a year I shared the round. Ironical really that 30 years on I would participate in editing another Evening Echo, this time in Essex. But in my delivery days it was never more than a marketing arrangement with Pat, although we did get to hold hands, 'to keep warm' of course. The winter wind from the Wolds blew mighty chilly between the exposed houses on our Lincoln Road round.

Things varied slightly on just the one night as we delivered Echoes to the darkened homes. A crippled Lancaster bomber limping back to RAF Waddington, didn't quite make it. It crashed with an almighty explosion in a ball of flames between the two villages.

It really was scary. A little in shock and perhaps for mutual comfort, Pat and I — she was a couple of years older than me — flung our arms round each other and hugged.

It was even at that moment when I should have been concentrating on being afraid I found the body pressing tightly to me was more rounded than I had realised existing beneath the black gaberdine mac that Pat always wore. I said nothing to her. After all, by that time I was a still-shy 11 year old and the thoughts accompanying that hug had to go on ice for a few years.

My education on that front, if you'll pardon the phrase was enhanced a little at the Theatre Royal in Lincoln. Uncle Walt's niece Beryl who lived next door with her mother Nell and father Ernie took me with her to see a show entitled Jane of the Daily Mirror. Well, really! It was based loosely, and I do mean loosely, on the cartoon character already making a name for herself with her scantily-clad exploits in the tabloid daily paper.

I don't know whether Beryl who was a couple of years older than me wanted the companionship or whether she wanted to see the expression on my face. She was not disappointed. I can't remember the rest of the acts on the variety show, but I do have a very distinct picture of the interlude between each of these acts when the curtains parted to reveal Jane, the newspaper's cartoon character-come-to-life as she appeared wearing nothing but a smile, either carrying a harp or seated on a settee.

In those days, ladies wearing those sort of non-clothes were not allowed to move in public. So this was what they called art. I probably determined then to become an art critic. Funnily enough after the past 50 years as a journalist that is one of the few jobs I have not done. So Jane, Beryl and the Theatre Royal hold a unique place in my memory.

Beryl and her playmate cousin, Charlie Pearson's daughter Nancy proved to be good friends to me and would tease me with the precocious style of conversation, just to see me blush.

Beyond that teasing, life for me in Branston was an age of innocence. It was fun. The games I learned to play were the seasonal ones. Conkers of course as we strove to keep our conker, and pride intact and give it the title of a 'Kinger', or something like that.

There was whip and top as well. My, how we would whip those tops down the narrow footpath opposite the cemetery, just skirting people coming out of Youngs bakery and Lintins the butchers, but still managing to keep the top spinning with a well-aimed thwack from the long leather strip laced to the whip handle.

Marbles had their season. We would roll them along the gutter down the hill on the way home to Lincoln Road, trying to make contact with our opponents' shiny glass marbles and capture them.

When the snow came we all shared in making the playground slide the longest and glassiest as we polished the ice.

Now as a governor of a large comprehensive school in Essex I often reflect on that hazardous playground slide in Branston where Mr Williams and his team turned a blind eye and were even known to join in. To create an icy slide in these days earns almost immediate suspension. Dangerous. Foolhardy. No consideration for other people.

Fiddlesticks! Forget the rationing, forget the war, I was lucky to be a kid in Branston in those days before political correctness and parent power and guidelines and sue-the-teachers-at-the-drop-of-a-hat had been invented.

While my friends of schooldays back in North London and the rather special Essex girl who I was yet to meet were suffering the first onslaught of doodlebugs and rockets, I was leading a charmed life.

I was growing up in a village virtually untouched by scenes of war for which I will always have an affection. It is for that reason that now I have time to reflect and to delve into some vivid memories and some a little more hazy for this record of a little lad who took to the country life and found that it was impressed forever into the recesses of his mind.



The neat suburban house with all mod cons (plus the bombs!) we had behind in London



Mother and Auntie Ada at the window of the tiny bedroom of the old Sleaford Road cottage.



Uncle Walter Pearson's house still there in Lincoln Road. The forge pictured overleaf has long gone

The homes and family who figured in my young life



Before the war: Uncle Jack Gilbert with Auntie Ada, my grandmother and my mother in the early '30s



Lesson time

CANING OFFENCE: Conifers are now in the old playground hiding the familiar outlines of what was the village school with its low wall, a trap for any youngster with a poor aim when innocent pedestrians walked by, as I found out to my cost

UNCLE WALT'S FORGE: This picture taken early in the 1900s and kindly sent to me by Branston History Group shows the building as I remember it in the 1940s. I would close the shutters at midday on Saturday signifying the end of the working week and open them again on Monday and ...



... across the road, the wheelwright's run by another branch of the Pearson family. As both pictures illustrate, there was a full work force. By the 2nd world war, they had both become one-man concerns.



Happy Days

Taylor's farm where I spent some of the most rewarding times of my young life



The Methodist Chapel ... memories of song and Sunday School



NEIGHBOURS: Beryl Pearson and her parents Nell and Ernie lived in the house on the left. Her cousin Nancy lived with her family second right and Chris Hallam 3rd rt. Lorry Driver Tom Clarke occupied the house to the left of the telegraph pole

Investment that has lasted a lifetime



The certificate bought 60 years ago on the day I first attended Branston School. I still have it... the tangible symbol of an investment for life that my experiences at Branston had brought me

THE PARISH CHURCH (right): Scene of thanksgiving and my acute embarrassment as the Last Post was played



Postmistress in the war years at this familiar landmark, Aggie Applewhite remained a family friend for years. It was at this corner that we arrived by bus in the autumn of 1940 to an air of calm after nights of bombing back home. It looks hardly any different in today's picture (left) than it did 60 years ago

Yes, there really was a war on

FOR our mums in the early 1940s life must have been a time of anguish. Now in my late 60s, blessed with a whole covey of grandchildren I can reflect on the plight of civilians in those parts of the world, including Europe, where man's inhumanity to man still continue.

The tears of parents we see on our television sets today is often in grief and anguish for what has already happened and fear of what might lie ahead for their desperately vulnerable children. Yet also into today's newsreels, amid the tears there are scenes of their children happily playing football with an old tin can in the muddy compounds of a refugee camp. Children are either more resilient that parents give them credit for or, happily, are bereft of the ability to imagine the unthinkable.

There was probably a slight parallel in the 1940s for our parents anguished by the uncertainties and dangers for their offspring as bombs fell. But, perhaps because I am looking now through the rosy-coloured spectacles of hindsight, it all passed us by, as perhaps was right.

For me and others like me, life was a luxury. True, I took note of the papers and when we went to the cinema in Lincoln, I was always fascinated by the war scenes on the newsreels. To this day I remember the one that jolted me more than most.

The Ritz was showing a Pathe reel of the Arnhem landings and the bloody conflict, the weary mud-spattered wounded being carried from the front. I could not shut it from my mind and have had cause in recent years to recall that Lincoln film on my visits to my daughter-in-law's home near Arnhem. Her parents, children at the time of course, had suffered at first hand from a Nazi invasion that I had witnessed only on a Lincoln cinema screen.

None of that misery for us. While our parents may have agonised over whether German soldiers may one day march through the village, the only sight we had of enemy troops were the Italian prisoners set to work in the Branston fields. We were told not to talk to them. I found it all rather strange.

As children we were brought up with a picture of foreign armies as agents of the devil incarnate who were out to kill us all. So how was it that

this rather pathetic looking group of men in their grey uniforms and strange soft caps leaning on the gatepost opposite Auntie Ada's house appeared to be just like any other young fellows of the same age?

They smiled, but of course as true patriots we did not smile back. It must have been particularly sad for the young Italians brought into a war for which they had no great zest, miles from home, treated with contempt. I did hear one story of a lass from the village who was a little less contemptuous than others of the presence the enforced visitors from the land of pasta and pizza and was prepared to demonstrate it. But tongues were silenced.

The same tongues were, however, kept busy by the arrival on the scene of allied servicemen — and not just of our own nationality. There was an obvious influx of airmen from the various bases that made up the huge bomber and fighter shield that was the county of Lincolnshire. The most dramatic was the arrival of the Americans in their neatly-pleated high quality uniforms that rather put the rough serge of British khaki and Air Force blue into the shade. We saw them in the official parades through the village to conjure up support for the war effort like "Put your money in National Savings and help to buy a Spitfire".

Many of the 'Yanks' as everyone called them, were from Nocton village to which the Americans ferried their war-wounded, back to the pastoral calm of the hospital they established at Nocton Hall. On their way in they travelled by ambulance, but we took advantage of their generosity when they were well enough to journey to Lincoln for the evening.

They would pile into the back of army lorries, only to be assailed en route by groups of young monsters. We yelled 'Got any gum chum?' Often they would fling out packets of chewing gum as their trucks sped past and then would laugh as we made an undignified scramble to forage for the packets in the gutter.

Some older girls in the village were luckier. They were proud possessors of the new nylon stockings being manufactured in the USA, but that was no doubt recognition for making our allies particularly welcome in our land.

The uniformed visitors could sometimes be seen at dances in the Village Hall beyond the bowling green in the recreation ground. I and my friends would cluster on fine evenings on the wooden steps and peer in through the open doors at the dancing to a local band.

Many British servicemen were billeted in the village, some of them with my Aunt after we had created the space by moving out to Lincoln Road. Soldier Harry would arrive at the Gilbert's on his army motorbike which he parked near the pig sties.

The petrol in his tank like all other military vehicles was dyed pink or blue. In this way military police could detect if it had been siphoned off to find its black-market way into private fuel tanks. Harry didn't succumb to the temptation, but I can remember other visiting soldiers draining some of the precious liquid in exchange for hospitality. Punishment both for servicemen and civilians was severe.

We played host on many occasions to an ATS girl called Peggy whose home was in Croydon. My father, a proud Londoner, got on with her like a house on fire and it was sad that after the war we lost touch with her.

My aunt was more fortunate in maintaining what was to be lifetime friendships. Two WAAFs (members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force) were billeted with her. Auntie's best pronunciation of their service was 'Wofffs'. One of them, Norah, regarded her as a second mother. In fact, she called her Mum and visited and kept in touch for long years. It was a friendship that ended only with the death of Auntie Ada in 1982.

Nearly 40 years on, Auntie's part in their war was shared in remembrance by the former WAAF and the widow of soldier Harry when they both sent flowers to her funeral at the cemetery at the bottom of Canwick Hill. Only a handful of us attended. It closed an important chapter in my life.

The end of the war solved one mystery. The ATS and WAAF girls were sworn to secrecy and would never speak of their role in the huts behind the gaunt stone buildings in Blankney where they worked. It was only in 1945 that word filtered out. Day in day out, night in night out, it was said, they were watching air movements hundreds of miles away in Germany through the magic eye of the newly introduced RADAR. The existence of the aeries and huts was concealed by the magnificently tall trees surrounding the sealed-off and sentried area where they worked. Another version suggested that theirs was a more specialist cipher role and that the radar was elsewhere on RAF bases. I prefer the Blankney version however, it sounds more romantic.

The London blitz had made more of an impact on me than I had appreciated. It was months after my arrival at Branston village school that I

heard again for the first time the siren, a sound which I thought I had blotted from my memory.

There was almost an air of excitement among my classmates when they heard it. Other people's war was coming to Branston! But what of me? The boy who knew it all; had slept through nights of bombing without turning a hair; had always gone out the following morning to scour the streets for shrapnel and finding it by the tinful.

In those days of The London Blitz, my friends and I would compare our latest 'souvenirs': the largest, the most jagged, the pieces made the most colourful by the heat at moment of detonation. Best of all were the fragments with codes etched on them in both British, from the guns, and German from the fragments hurled over long distances as the bombs exploded.

All that was in my London past. Here suddenly in the assured safety of Branston, the siren brought it all back with one stark sound. In the village school that day, to my shame I became a shivering, sobbing little ball curled up beneath my desk. I wept uncontrollably.

Some teachers and, I suspect, most of my friends put it down to sheer cowardice. Strangely I think it was the rather tough head teacher who sat with me until I calmed down seemed to understand. Perhaps the others were right and that after all I was a wimp. I would like to think however that in the recesses of the mind of this little boy, memories of that nightly onslaught back in the summer and early autumn of 1940 were triggered by the alien Wailing Winnie. The safe haven that was the village of Branston was, after all, just as vulnerable to attack as the rest of Britain.

We were to see the war in the air once more from the school playground. The sight had been so commonplace back home. A scene of aerial combat painted on the sky by the vapour trails of those magnificent Spitfires and Hurricanes as they homed in on the Junkers and Heinkels of the Luftwaffe in a cannon-fire fight to the death. It came just once to the wide blue yonder over Lincolnshire. "Look," cried my schoolmates. "What is it?"

Pulling myself to my full height, which wasn't very high, I told them. "It's a dog fight," I said with an authoritative air. They collapsed with laughter, trying to visualise a couple of terriers having a scrap in the sky. Try as I might to explain that this was the terminology for aerial combat, one boy was determined to ridicule me. I punched him in the stomach and he collapsed, wheezing on the ground.

Whether I had forgotten, or whether in my temper it had not mattered,

but the truth dawned. He was an asthmatic, and everyone knew it. Mrs Clarke wheeled me before the Head. The sympathy, I suppose on reflection, was quite rightly all one way. I just felt a deep hurt that no one understood what we had seen in London day after day. The boy concerned Derek Woodcock and his brothers Ted and Tony remained friends with me and I valued that. That day I learned a lesson in humility and respect for one's fellows.

A group of visitors to the village learned a lesson in hospitality from the locals. The only organised group of evacuees to arrive there was a group of young mothers and their children from Leeds which had taken quite a pasting as the Luftwaffe turned its attention to northern cities. They had come fewer miles than we had to escape the bombs, but they seemed far less amenable to change. They came, it was said from the rougher end of the city and would gather to sit on the wall of Branston's war memorial to chat among themselves and turn their backs on the villagers.

We would find them there on a Sunday night as we waited for the 6.30 post bus. That was the Lincolnshire Road Car scheduled service that picked up Royal Mail as well as passengers. Almost no one climbed aboard the bus but many would drop an envelope to their relatives in the sealed box that was carried in the front of the bus. The ladies of Leeds did not stay long. They soon went back to their Yorkshire homes and the village returned to as much normality as wartime would allow.

They came limping back

If we needed a reminder of the war, then it was never far distant. With Waddington air base four miles away — there was a glut of air bases in a county so conveniently flat to the west and south of the Wolds — the air was filled with the sound of Lancaster bombers being prepared and taking off and landing throughout the day. In later years the Americans' Flying Fortresses joined them in proliferation in the Lincolnshire skies.

Fighters from Digby, Boothby Graffoe, Metheringham and bombers from other stations like Fiskerton and Scampton wheeled in the sky, weighted with the bomb load they were to unleash hundreds of miles to the east. From the summer of 1943, dusk brought the incessant roar of the mighty engines as Lancasters took off, their bomb holds packed with high explosive. Squadron after squadron flew over, rendezvousing over

Lincoln Cathedral before heading out over the North Sea. Years later during the Falklands War, the BBC's Brian Hanrahan was to make famous his phrase "We counted them out and we counted them in." At Branston and other villages near the flight path of Bomber Command's armada people had been doing that a World War ago.

Whole squadrons flew out, and then the silence of the grave fell over the village . . . often until around 3am when we were awoken by the increasing drone of returning Lancasters. Seven . . . eight . . . nine from a whole squadron. A bad night, and then stragglers limping in, their fuselages pock-marked by bombardment from Nazi defences.

Often the stragglers did not make it. One flew low over Branston, on fire and with no hope of making it. There was a huge explosion as it plummeted into a field of kale on the edge of a dyke half a mile on the Lincoln side of Heighington Lane.

The blast swept through the village. My mother who had watched the crippled aircraft from the end of Uncle Walt's garden was flung off her feet by the force of the explosion. "I felt I had been hit in the stomach by a lorry," she said.

Everything in the aircraft was destroyed including the crew. There was not much to see as we peeped beyond the RAF personnel guarding the wreckage the next day. But within days some pretty gruesome stories were circulating in the village. I only hope they were not true.

Considering the number of aircraft that passed over the village in various forms of mechanical fitness, it was a wonder Branston escaped so lightly. The nearest it came to disaster in my recollection was on a Sunday evening when a Lancaster bomber crashed in the field just beyond the Stephensons' garden hedge. Fortunately there was no major explosion or the old stone cottages and the newer semi-detached houses of Sleaford Road would have been demolished. Perhaps the last act of the pilot was to steer his aircraft away from the cottages.

As it was, the plane burst into flames immediately. My family and I were on a Sunday evening walk coming back near The Rec in Lincoln Road on the other side of the village when a huge pall of oily black smoke billowed into the air. Seeing the direction, my mother's immediate thought was for her sister and she fled through the village towards the scene.

I had grabbed my bike and was level with the Sheep Wash opposite the Wagon and Horses when Bill Dixon, bus driver and part-time fireman,

arrived on his bike to open the garage that housed the fire tender and the car that pulled it. This arm of the National Fire Service, formerly the Auxiliary Fire Service was the village's part time brigade.

This time the ancient car refused to start. Bill cranked the engine with me yelling at him "Come on the NFS, come on the NFS" as if it was some huge game. I wonder he didn't wallop me. Eventually the car's engine coughed into life.

His team had yet to arrive, but Bill coaxed the unwilling vehicle and its tender loaded with water up the steep hill of the High Street. It was snail's pace and if it was such a day of tragedy, it could almost have been like a scene from one of those Will Hay films running at that time in Lincoln. Eventually, Bill arrived, to his credit ahead of the Lincoln crews and the Waddington firefighters. But it was obviously too late to save the stricken aircraft and those in the crew who had failed to escape.

My father was among those who held back a distraught American airman trying desperately to get back into the flames — we could feel the searing heat from the next garden.

"But those are my buddies in there," he yelled, tears coarsing down his smoke-blackened face. And he sobbed as he realised that they had flown together as a crew for the last time.

'Put that light out!'

BRANSTON set 'Lincoln' ablaze one night. This was a pretend Lincoln transferred into bare fields on the edge of the village. Huge oil drums and flammable heaps had been carefully placed on land without crops, a good mile from any prying eyes. I only saw them when I went to get Jack Taylor's cows in from one of the further fields. This was the dummy Lincoln.

The aim during any intense raid was to ignite the drums and persuade German crews that earlier Luftwaffe bomb-aimers had set fire to the real Lincoln, home to one of the heavily industrialised manufacturing centres of the British war machine. They would then, it was believed, switch to the blazing 'target area'.

My recollection was that it only happened on one night. I don't know whether it drew the fire power away from the city's precious factories, but

it certainly lit up the night sky. In the biggest raid on the city however, the 'dummy Lincoln' would have been useless.

Pathfinder Luftwaffe bombers dropped massive flares that drifted on parachutes oh-so-slowly illuminating every house, street and factory in an uncanny daylight. The cathedral was bathed in an eerie white light silhouetted against the black sky looking splendid and utterly vulnerable. But it was not to be the Nazi's target for tonight.

There were soldiers billeted in the village, but our 'defence force' was the Home Guard. As in every town and village, Branston had its contingent of volunteers ready to don the uniform and carry whatever weapons could be spared.

Together with my friends we would watch as a dozen men in khaki uniforms paraded up and down Paddock Lane, on Sunday mornings, conveniently close to the Plough Inn. A fine body of men whose stage counterparts were to be known in later years as Dad's Army.

Our other arm of protection were the wardens. They had played a vital role back in London with the onslaught of The Blitz and the constant raids, but in Branston their job seemed to be reduced to ensuring that everyone had their blackout curtains firmly fixed. Not even a candlelit glimmer was to be allowed and the quote of wartime radio comedian Rob Wilton with his 'Put that light out' jokes became a watchword.

In reality it was no joke. To breach the blackout regulations meant an immediate fine. One night my father saved us from the disgrace of finding our names in the Lincolnshire Echo when he sweet-talked the warden into forgetting a momentary slip. The warden's name: Mr Branston. He had, presumably had been drawn to live in the big house just off Silver Street because the village bore the family name.

There was little I did to fight back against Hitler, apart that is from learning to knit. The men in the village answered the call to Dig for Victory with flower gardens and allotments turned to growing vegetables, while the womenfolk fought the war with knitting needles. They created pullovers, sweaters and balaclava helmets for servicemen. And I joined in, just like any other Granny, you might say. Auntie Ada and Mum taught me my purls from my plains and while I never really mastered the more intricate (for me) skills of knitting socks, I did manage the balaclavas, although I never let on to Ken Brummit or Chris Hallam. They might not have understood.

I wonder if any of those balaclavas are still in service as disguises for modern day bank robbers to whom this type of headgear still seems to be uniform. In wartime they were essential wear in the watches of the night on land and sea. I even remember we schoolboys used to wear similar headgear in winter as the icy winds blew up from the Lincolnshire Fens. I suspect now they were made with 'left over' wool from the service blue issued to housewives officially to be returned as made up knitwear for the gallant airmen and sailors.

I was also let loose on the simpler work of knitting sleeves, but the elders proved they were also the betters by taking them over at the ribbing stage and sewing the bits together . . . plus, of course finding my dropped stitches. While most boys would not admit openly to "girls' work" I have a feeling that a few of them helped the war effort in this way.

The only other way we could help was financial. Most of our pocket money and odd coins went into buying savings stamps and eventually exchanging them for certificates. There were special efforts with posters extolling us to buy a spitfire or even a battleship. Our small contribution may have paid for a couple of rivets, but it gave us a sense of involvement.

Apart from stamps bought at school where there was a somewhat competitive air about the number you bought, most were purchased at a building next door to the village fire station near the Sheep Wash.

Just for nostalgia's sake, clinging on to a bit of my Branston past, I still have four of those certificates hidden away in a wardrobe drawer. The 15 shilling certificates clearly show the date stamp '*Branston Lincoln 28 OC 40*' — the day I started at Branston School — and bear the promise that they would be worth £1.0s.6p in ten years. That term was up in 1950, but I think the interest was frozen and, far from being a valuable collector's item, they are probably worth a fraction of their original cost in real terms.

It was just in the final days of the war that Branston had one its most dramatic visits from the Luftwaffe. A lone pilot in his well-armed fighter had eluded the defences and decided on a one-man last ditch foray on the Fuehrer's behalf. Sirens sounded as he swept in low over nearby villages after taking a pot shot at Lincoln and headed for Branston.

A very jittery me and an equally pale-faced Uncle Walt took the only real action open to us. We dived beneath the dining table as the sound of cannon fire got nearer. Through the open kitchen door we caught sight of the spurts of flame from the guns as the determined pilot pressed the cockpit

button and huge deadly cannon bullets streamed out. They hit a number of targets although remarkably everyone in range escaped.

Auntie Ada seated knitting in the living room of her cottage opposite Moor Lane heard tremendous bangs, then silence. And she carried on knitting. It was only the next day that it was discovered bullet holes had penetrated more than nine inches into the stone wall of the cottage, immediately in line with where my aunt was sitting. The marauding aircraft we learned later had been shot down by the RAF somewhere near Sleaford.

On the next Sunday our family thanked God for the builders of the previous century who had used that huge 15 inch stone work in cottage construction in the village. Those lovely old cottages fell to the demolition gangs in the 1960s preparing for a new garage and car showroom and my aunt was moved to a prefab off Station Road. It had its mod cons, a fridge instead of a 'dairy', hot water by tap instead of heating up the tap water carted in from the road... and no draughts! My aunt, widowed in 1961, found happiness and good-neighbourliness in that little home in her declining years. She was practical. She would not have swapped back to the 'atmosphere' of her old cottage for all the beet in Bardney.

By the time of the final fling by the marauding aircraft, it was clear that the war would soon be over. When that day came, we all put on our Sunday best and stepped out to the centre of the village.

I can recall only one occasion when my father went to the Parish Church. Although I went to the chapel Sunday School every week and dutifully marched two-by-two from school to the church on Empire Day every year, it took the end of the war to get Dad into a pew.

It was thanksgiving day. The church was crammed to overflowing. It was a moving service. My father was not the only man to have damp eyes on that day as uniformed trumpeters from Digby RAF base played the Last Post. The sound swelled in splendour of victory and commemoration over the packed congregation of a church built to hold only a fraction of the size. The fanfare echoed into the vaulted ceiling and over the choir... and I stifled uncontrollable laughter.

I have always recoiled in horror at the memory of the way I burst into uncontrollable giggles. Here in a church where we were told never to make a noise, these strident sounds seemed like an obscene intrusion and I felt acutely embarrassed. I have been moved to emotion many times in the years since by the music and symbolism of The Last Post, but I never

fail to recoil in acute embarrassment over the wretched little lad who couldn't control his giggles on the day when everyone else was saying Thank God for our salvation.

Something to chew over

It was sweets and not salvation that was in short supply for most of the war. I remember going to Mrs Speed's shop to see if there were any sweets off ration, only to come away with a packet of evil tasting Niblets.

I didn't have the nerve to go into the shop and come out without buying anything. We were allocated a banana and an orange on a couple of occasions as a treat from a hard-pressed government. I wonder now how the supplies got through and who it was who had argued that bananas were more important than basic food imports.

When there were no sweets we would go to Claricoates, the little shop just past the butchers and delve into a huge sack to buy licorice root. It was like chewing trees and we got splinters between the teeth, but we acquired a taste for it.

Yet for all that, at no time did I feel deprived. It is more than likely that as parents and grandparents we worry ourselves too much about the haves and have-nots of our offspring while the youngsters just get on with life and its limitations. In truth I had more treats and opportunities than most.

With a few foreign stamps in a book and a magazine that told me how to set up a stamp club, I went about it. One of Uncle Walt's brick built out-houses was ideal and he, of course, agreed to me using it for a once a week club. I sent the invitations out and about five of us gathered. We met just the once. Bags of enthusiasm but not a snowball in Hades chance of knowing what to do about it.

I had lots of ideas, if only they could have been reflected in my school work. I had enjoyed life at school although the academic work did not loom large in my recollections. There was the school garden we tended around the side of the classrooms and the woodwork classes. We had to go by bus to the next village of Potterhanworth on Mondays for these.

I made an awful fist of the work until the day later in school life I made The Firescreen. It was a simple job fashioned mainly in oak but it brought together all the newly acquired skills of technical drawing, mortice and tenon joints, dowels and rebating. The result was a screen with a star in

the middle in a wood that contrasted with the surrounds. I will never forget the day I took it home. I thought I might have had a 'well done' or 'that's nice'. Instead my mother burst into tears. I was puzzled. One comes to learn in life that tears are not always shed in sadness and this, apparently was one of those occasions.

Long after we returned to London and my parents later moved to Essex, the firescreen made in Potterhanworth in the 1940s adorned the summer-time fireplace until the later 1960s. After my parents died it inhabited my own loft until a few years ago.

At school in 1944 we were all looking forward with mixed emotions to the 11-plus examination and my friends and I were about level pegging in the mock papers we were set in preparation for the real thing. These were previous actual examination papers set by the local Kesteven Education Authority and Mrs Clarke steered us persuasively towards the fateful examination day.

Then came the blow. I was not to be allowed to take the 11-plus with my classmates. I was an outsider. While I had grown up for the previous four years using Kesteven Education Committee books, its methods and its examination systems, I was still listed as a Middlesex boy.

It was my first taste of bureaucracy and the bloody mindedness of adults. No matter what entreaties my father and, presumably, Mr Williams were to make, there was no reprieve. It was ruled that I had to take the Middlesex exam on the Middlesex date, the day after the Kesteven pupils took theirs. School was shut on their day to avoid distraction.

The following morning, as usual the ancient bell was rung in the playground and I was called out. I felt like a condemned prisoner going to the gallows with the eyes of a hundred or so others following me. The gallows in this case was Mr Williams' classroom. His class had been distributed elsewhere in the school on that day and I was the only one in that large room. The only privilege I had was to sit at the desk of my choice.

It was three of the most miserable hours of my life. Many of the routine questions on the three examination papers were similar to those I had been studying, but there the comparison ended.

Back home in Finchley youngsters had been following a far different syllabus and had the advantage of seeing the Middlesex style in the mock papers on which they had been working for months. But that was not my

biggest problem. For the last hour of the exam I wrestled with the increasingly agonising need to go to the little boys' room. I say room — no such luxury. The all-weather outside loos that ponged to high heaven were all we knew but to me on that day they beckoned like a haven of salvation. Only I could not reach it. Should I ask Mr Williams?

His beady eye was on me and I hadn't exactly endeared myself to him a week earlier when I burst open the barely bolted door of the privy at the Recreation Ground during a school sports lesson only to find him sitting there (but that's another story).

The exam paper became a blur. Put it down to guts, or lack of them. I was just too nervous to ask to leave the room and imagined it would be a crime to have asked to do so.

The result was a foregone conclusion. Results poured in from the Kesteven authorities giving grammar school places in Lincoln to almost all my friends. The envelope posted from Middlesex revealed what we had feared. I had earned the label for life as an 11-plus failure. My father appealed against the unfairness of it all, but to no avail. I can't remember that I was seriously bothered.

It was only in later years that the significance of it dawned. I realised then how many lives are mapped out for all time on that one day in an 11-year-old's life span.

Perhaps it taught me one of life's important lessons. The rest of my sojourn at Branston was spent marking time educationally. In later years, with the help of caring teachers I pulled on my own bootstraps and, looking back now on a happy career in journalism and newspaper editing both local and nationally, I have good reason to wipe out that one black day of school life.

There was in fact another down day at Branston School. It marked the time that the butcher's wife walked past the low stone wall of the playground at just the wrong moment.

We had been engaged in the harmless pursuit of chucking stones at each other. Boys will be boys and all that. The trouble was in the aim. Never the greatest in sport, it could have been me, but one of the missiles being hurled in not-so-friendly fire found a different target — Mrs Lintin's hat.

Like Queen Victoria, she was not amused. Nor was Mr Williams who presumably had no wish to fall out with one so powerful as a person

whose husband's role in wartime was to interpret for each of his regular customers the extent of the weekly meat ration.

The missile team found themselves duly lined up in the head's classroom. To my horror I realised we were to be caned, and I couldn't escape. "Whoosh" the weapon pivoted from the wrist of the angry head on to the reluctantly outstretched hands of those in the queue ahead of me. The waiting in itself was agony. It was my turn.

The head's studied glare at me ranged somewhere between pity and fury and there was a muttered comment along the lines of "You of all people!" whatever that meant.

The sting across the palm was something I will always remember. My hand felt numb. Not just then, but for the rest of the day. It was the first time I had been caned and I have to say, the last. One lesson well learned.

For the past 25 years I have been the governor of a comprehensive school and on a committee dealing with problems of pupil behaviour. I have smiled inwardly at exponents of political correctness as they speak

The evidence of the day I joined

32	21	10	40		Cross Joyce	28	9	35		HARSA
33	21	10	40		Creasey Ronald	28	9	35		HARSA
34	21	10	40		Cucksey Arthur	2	10	36		HARSA
35	28	10	40		Owen Peter	20	12	32		To N. Lench
36	28	10	40		Foreman John Michael	8	4	35		He. n. n. 4 1/2
37	28	10	40		Foreman Dennis Frank	22	3	34		He. n. n. 4 1/2
					Th. n. n. 4 1/2					He. n. n. 4 1/2

COME IN NUMBER 35: My thanks to Sheila Cant who provided me with this copy from the school role at Branston C of E in 1940

of the damage done to a young person's self-esteem and the futility of the cane as a sanction.

I go along to an extent with modern thinking and subscribe to a great deal of it. I do, however, listen with some scepticism to the argument that the use of the cane was always a physical assault by an adult on a child and an admission of failure. Perhaps it is a sign of my age, but my heart remains, in many cases in favour of the argument of short, sharp punishment. It worked with me. I never threw another stone in anger. There was no way I was going to again face the indignity of nursing a swollen hand and eyes that wanted to cry but would not be allowed the luxury. One stone was enough to halt this boy in his tracks.

Chickens home to roost

THERE'S nothing like living in a rural community to learn about the birds and the bees. Not the sort of lessons we learned among ourselves in the hideaways at The Rec but, for me it was more chickens and rabbits.

I became a farmer at the age of 10, or so I like to tell myself. I mentioned the rabbit hutches earlier. It was their inhabitants that brought me a great deal of pleasure, and some heartache.

Snowy was my favourite. This was a rather downmarket name for an upmarket white angora with his obligatory pink eyes and his ability to move his head from side to side like an owl at sunset. He stayed with me until the day we left to return to London when tears spilled over the deep pile of his pristine white coat of luxuriously length as I carried him down to a new home on the opposite side of Lincoln Road a few doors from the Brummits.

He had performed good and faithful service, in the way only he knew how. It was through him and his ability to uphold the reputation of rabbits everywhere that the population of my hutches grew in abundance. He took them all in his stride. Blue Beverens, Chinchillas, Dutch all became his consorts, and his sons proved equally fertile. You can see I was not too caring about keeping to refined pedigrees.

I loved the arrival of each new family, seeing some of them born and carefully ensuring that the respective mums had plenty of soft straw with which to mix the fur they tugged from their coats to provide a gentle nest.

It was always sad when an adventurous youngster no bigger than a man's finger crawled from the nest while my back was turned. Often they would tumble unseen to the floor or become trapped in the hinges of the hutch door in a premature death. All this was a telling part of the learning curve.

The happiest times of my rabbit-keeping was when the youngsters first gained their fur and the ability to hop, skip and jump. The playful antics of these delightful little moving toys entertained me for hours.

But the family couldn't continue to grow and inevitably I ran out of friends to whom I could give them or, perhaps, sell them. They had to go to market. My only hours at the Lincoln livestock market ended as one of the saddest of my long days in Branston.

I rode into the City on my bike as my mother took the bus. I don't

remember how the rabbits got there. Perhaps Frank Millns the carrier took them. Mum and I met up in the auction rooms, somewhere near the Brayford I thought it was, a bustling place packed with cages containing rabbits and chickens.

I was fascinated by the sale and the atmosphere. The auctioneer's hammer fell on sale after sale. I didn't get as much money for my 'lot' as I had hoped, but it was good enough. I returned to the cage to watch my young bunnies, now plump adults, as the new owner came to collect them.

Another of the purchasers was ahead of him. He opened the next door cage, reached in . . . and wrang the neck of the first squealing animal he could grab. Then the next, and the next until the cage was empty and the heap of rabbits in their death throes lay in a box at his feet.

I was awestruck. I had imagined that all these nice men were about to give the rabbits a new home, to look after them. What a naive fool! If only someone had told me.

I fled from the building in tears. I didn't stop to see what happened to my own rabbits. They were no longer mine, I had deserted them and the shocking realisation came to me that they meant nothing other than meat to anyone else in those days of rationing.

My mother could do nothing to ease the pain, but said she would hang on and collect the sale money due to me. I wanted none of it. To me it was blood money. I had let my rabbits down.

More than half a century on, I can remember that lonely ride back to Branston as if it were yesterday. My face must have been in a mess. I could not get out of my head the scene I had witnessed. I had to get home and cuddle the remaining rabbits who were in no mood for this sloppy show of affection. There were presumably more interested in the extra space they were enjoying than in mourning for a group of their relatives.

I crept past the shoeing shed so that Uncle Walt would not see me and clambered upstairs to my bedroom. It was much later that my mother returned to find me fast asleep still sobbing intermittently, the house in darkness.

I wanted to believe her story that after I left, a totally different man had come along and gently put each of my rabbits, still living, into a comfortable carrying box and had taken them away. It's amazing how parents will jump through hoops to shield their tiny offspring from the truth. I never

returned to that auction room and never again sent any rabbits there.

But it was as Poultry Farmer Pete that I found the greatest reward, both in achievement and in hard cash. Audrey Taylor, who lived at her father Billy's poultry farm, used to be driven the two miles to Auntie Ada's house in the sidecar of the family motorbike and would take me to school in my early days at Branston.

The motorbike had an old fashioned sidecar into which two people could be packed using a shoe horn, an element of good luck and a lot of 'ouches'. Her father Billy would click his wooden leg, swing it over the seat and roar off down the road. Often I would go for a ride to the poultry farm they owned on the way to Bardney and help to collect buckets full of eggs.

It sowed the seeds, or should I say laid the embryo of a yearning I was to have in my early years. This enthusiasm was fostered at Dye House farmyard as chickens scurried around the yard and foraged for grain left lying around.

Yes, I assured mother, I could and would look after a clutch of chickens. I can't quite recall the order of things, but obviously the adults got together and Poultry Pete began his career at the age of nine. A box of day-old chicks was delivered and with a small oil heater were painstakingly kept warm in the little box run we had made.

I can see them now. Little balls of fluff that we brought into the house on that first evening. They chirped and squabbled as we corralled them on the living room floor in front of the fire. Cushions formed a fence and old newspapers a necessary carpet.

Uncle Walt and I had cycled over to Curtis the millers at Heighington with its dusty pungent smells of ground cereal and meal. The chicken feed we bought was then balanced on our handlebars as we rode home. We mixed spoonfuls of it with cod liver oil to give the chicks a good start, and my how they prospered!

Fluff gave way to feathers as gradually the chickens grew. Perhaps it was the heartbreak of what had happened to the rabbits that has made me conveniently forgetful over what became to those birds that became surplus to requirements. I have a vague recollection that I signalled their demise to Uncle Walt because I would return from school to find one less male bird in the run and one big juicy chicken dinner.

One of the male birds and five hens were to remain. They formed big

business for me. The cockerel grew into strutting, crowing magnificence. He would parade with pride among his harem claiming their favours in haphazard rotation and with a frequency that justified the glint of achievement in his eyes. With a mighty flapping of wings he would flutter to the fence post that divided the inner yard from the shoeing shop area and proclaim his territory loud and long. His harem worked hard for him . . . and for me.

My delight at finding the first egg knew no bounds. White and small, typical of a young pullet's first efforts, it was not in the nest boxes that had been carefully made for the hens. It was on a shelf in the coal shed, a good 15 yards from the chickens' main home. But they were, to use the modern term, free range. And Whitey, the unoriginally-named white leghorn hen who had grown from the motley selection of day-old bits of fluff, never laid her eggs anywhere else.

If she found herself trapped in the hen house because some thoughtless adult had locked in the free-rangers, she would let us know at the top of her voice that she was good and ready to give her all. On hearing her anguished call, Mum or I would charge round to the hen house and unbolt the heavy door.

A flash of white would then leg it past us at a rate of knots and leap on to the coal shed shelf, often just in time. Her cackles of triumph moments later would signal the arrival of another contribution to the Owen egg mountain, or should I say molehill.

Her foster sister, a plump and gentle lady with the rich rust and deep brown coat of a Rhode Island Red chose another hideaway for her daily delivery, always a rich brown egg. Each of the hens laid distinctive-coloured eggs. We knew from the contents of the nest boxes which of our chickens had done their work for the day.

The Red was my favourite. She would sit and cluck gently as I held her in my arms and whispered my exploits of the day into her ear. Life was not always a bed of roses in my Branston boyhood and I shared my upsets in my conversation with rabbits and hens. I was not always lonely, but at times I was a loner.

Snowy, the white angora rabbit was my greatest confidante. Pink-eyed and, like the rest of his breed, his head would sway from side to side as I told him of the day's trials and tribulations.

He was the sole custodian of my secrets and at that time I would let on to no one, man or boy, or even Mum that I talked to the animals. Sixty years later and with the song made famous by Rex Harrison ringing in my ears I am now prepared to confess all.

But I digress. I was talking of Poultry Pete. The egg production line started to roll. I could almost say I had cracked it, but that would bring a flippancy to a serious business. There was soon a greater output than our family could consume, even with Uncle Walt's considerable help.

Although this was rural England, not everyone had access to chickens and Branston villagers like the rest of Britain faced egg rationing. Recipes appeared using powdered eggs, a horrible orangy-yellow concoction in tins. When reconstituted it was, at best, passable.

I soon became popular with the neighbours and had some regular customers. Nell Pearson, Uncle Walt's sister-in-law, his brother Charlie, Mrs East who lived next to the forge and Walter Pickett a few doors away were among my regulars.

Walter, who worked on Jack Taylor's farm, taught me a lot about horses and ploughing and even let me hold the reins as the mighty shires tugged the gleaming plough across the dark Lincolnshire soil. I was delighted to be able to supply him with eggs, for a price of course.

Every sale went into the ruled ledger with its £.s.d columns my father insisted I bought. Every 14lb bag of meal and corn I bought from Curtis's, every single brown egg from my favourite hen, every white one from the tenant of the black coal shed and the offerings of their sisters was entered in the appropriate columns. I was learning book keeping at the coal face, or should it be chicken run. Years after, I would turn the pages of the book in nostalgia on what were some of the happiest days of my life. Somehow the book vanished in our present home.

I wonder on reflection whether my lucrative little business was all strictly legal. Perhaps my friends the Downeys whose father ran the official egg packing station in Lincoln Road or their father would have advised, but no one asked. After the war the Downeys turned the large old house opposite my Aunt's on the corner of Moor Lane into the successful Moor Lodge Hotel. But I digress . . .

One of the hens, not the best of layers, was determined to be a mother. I learned the real meaning of being broody as she sat for hours on end preparing to hatch her family from eggs that we would rob daily. The deci-

sion was taken to do something about old Broody. It was back to Billy Taylor's poultry farm for one of the most hazardous journeys of my life.

I cycled down Moor Lane, past the hedges that bulged in autumn with blackberries, past the back road to Potterhanworth where in spring tall grass hid a secret clump of the most prolific cowslips and under the railway bridge before climbing the short hill to the farm. Eggs that were almost certain to produce chicks were ready for me. I wrapped them in a small blanket and placed them oh-so-gently in a canvas bag (or 'bas' as the older villagers would call it) and set off for home.

It must be only a couple of miles, but it seemed like 20. I looped the bag around the handlebars and set off, free-wheeling down the first hill, but then puffing up the gentle rise of Moor Lane. The bag swayed as lorries passed and I prayed that I would not fall off or drop the precious load.

Eventually I arrived back at Lincoln road with my gilt-edged cargo and gently deposited them one by one beneath the gently-clucking Broody. And there she stayed on duty, her broad body and her expansive wings ensuring warmth until, you might say, the day of deliverance.

It was a wonderful experience as the eggs began to crack and the chicks emerged, pecking their way to freedom. For the second time we had a fluffy family. They grew into pullets and were reaching adulthood at about the time the war came to an end and we were packing up to leave. We sold them on to be fattened up for the table.

It was sad to see the old favourites go, but my main regrets were reserved for my last day in Branston and Snowy the rabbit.

Bright eyes that were snuffed out

NOT all my experiences of life with animals at Branston was cosy. How could it be, mixing with the sons of the soil and the life-style handed down over the centuries. I had learned the harsh realities from Day One at Branston.

"Never." Uncle Jack told me sternly on my first day in the village, "poke your fingers through the wire on that hutch, and keep well away at feeding time." That hutch was at the bottom of his garden.

I thought the worst of course; that I was unwelcome to share his pets. Not so. It was a matter of self-preservation. The hutch contained two yellowy-

white occupants with beady eyes, ferocious teeth and twitching noses. For most of the week the two ferrets were fed a-little meat but also bread and milk. From Thursday they were on starvation rations. By Saturday afternoon they were ravenous.

It was then, after Uncle Jack arrived home from his morning duties at Waddington, that they were transferred to a travelling box. With a deft touch born of years of experience he picked up each one by pinching finger and thumb behind their ears and dropped them carefully into the box.

Then he set off for the fields with a sharp small spade lashed to the crossbar of his bike with the double-barrelled gun he had painstakingly cleaned and polished like a family heirloom the previous night. Hours later, with boots muddied, he would return with the corpses of rabbits secured to his bike their back legs woven together around the crossbar of his bike.

I never went with Jack Gilbert on his rabbiting expeditions, but I did go with Uncle Walt and his friends over the fields to the Nelstrops' farm off Lincoln Road. There I saw nature in the raw. I watched fascinated as first the team of four or five searched the grassed area around a burrow that, judging from the currant-sized 'messages' outside, was clearly occupied. Then the men pulled nets from their bag and pinned them down with a draw string to cover the bolt holes they found, often as many as six at each burrow.

They carefully attached long cord leads to the collars of ferrets who were by this time ravenously hungry and sent them scurrying down the holes. Within minutes the terrified occupants were making their escape from the pursuing four-footed hunters along prepared safety routes to freedom . . . or so they thought. 'Safety' turned out to be the waiting nets.

In an instant the draw string attached to a peg driven into the ground pulled tightly through the hem of the net and trussed the rabbit into a squealing ball. Moments later one of the team pulled the animal from its net and with a deft flick across the knee pulled on the neck and the rabbit lay, dead meat among the rest of the burrow's inhabitants.

Some rabbits had a more painful and longer death as they fled into a dead end in the burrow and were a sitting target from the rapacious ferrets. All attempts by the team to tug on the cords and encourage them back to the surface failed and the digging began.

Long thin spades which seemed to be honed for the purpose were used to dig deep in search of the underground path taken by the rabbits and their

work for country folk and great fun for the youngsters. The only killing fields sport with which I had no qualms was the ratting and mousing that came on threshing day. The scene is etched on my memory like no other.

Farms such as the Taylors could not justify a threshing machine of their own and the days of the combine harvester were yet to arrive. The Taylors had to book their place in the diary with the man who owned threshing equipment and they took pot luck over when he could fit it in to a busy early autumn programme. Meanwhile they would store the gathered stooks in farmyard stacks.

We kids knew the night before that threshing day was upon us. With a hiss, a series of blasts on a whistle and the sound of heavy metal on the road, the whole paraphernalia of threshing rumbled past our house. At the wheel was the owner Freddie Lewis, a bad-tempered old varmint as I recall. He needed only the slightest excuse or to be shown the briefest offence to stop threshing and drive off from the yard leaving a bewildered and frustrated farmer with half his corn threshed and not knowing when the machine owner would have lost his own head of steam and return.

On a good day, however, it was all hands to the pump. The steam engine, its wheels wedged into position, was king. A huge continuous leather belt stretched to the adjoining threshing machine, its flails hidden within the huge box that made a cacophony of sound.

Aloft on the stacks of gathered corn, men with twin-tined pitchforks got into a rhythm of their own aiming the sheaves accurately to where two men awaited on the thresher, either side of the abyss into which the corn would fall. Razor-sharp knives in hand they cut the binder twine and sent the stalks and ears of corn sliding into the flailing arms of the machine. Others watched over the other end as the threshed corn poured out into waiting sacks while others carted the golden wheat or barley away.

All the men had something in common . . . the binder twine tied tightly around the lower legs of their trousers. For good reason. The diminishing stacks of corn were losing their four-footed inhabitants that had increased in number over the days and weeks awaiting the arrival of the threshers.

Squealing, darting, weaving, rats and mice fled like the Pied Piper's followers in disarray. They sought safety in any dark hole, pipe, or, ideally, the men's trouser legs. The tied trousers kept the invaders at bay.

Exodus of the rodents turned stackyard into killing field. Dogs, cats,

humans of all ages with sticks took on the duty. After all there was between a ha'penny and tuppence a time on offer for each rat's tail. Quite a bit of cash was logged on threshing days.

Harsh lesson in the fields

THE wonder of countryside life was never far away. Whether it was Uncle Walt showing me the best places to find mushrooms and how to compare them with poisonous toadstools, or how to spot a hare in a bare field, or to identify the jinking flight of a snipe as it weaved through the trees near the dyke adjoining Paddock Lane.

I would watch fascinated as the Irish labourers, brought over at sugar beet time, topped and tailed the crop with a perfected flick of the venomous-looking double-bladed hooked knife and with a practised rhythm. The men would toss them on to neat piles to be collected by farm cart and deposited in hillocks. These would then be covered with a thick layer of straw as insulation against frost damage until the time became right for them to be transported to Bardney sugar beet factory.

Then there was the potato-picking. This, together with planting at the other end of the season, was a ready source of income for all ages. I joined in only once. A truck took a load of us from the war memorial to fen land miles away and to the black-soiled fields waiting to give up the buried treasure of Arran Banner or whatever variety was being grown. It was a long day, eight o'clock to 4.30 and for a lad of 11 never that bodily strong, I was exhausted. Too puffed out to return either the next day or ever.

The farmer kindly called in to inquire after me and hand me my much-cherished wages. Neither my family or I realised that this exhaustion was an early warning of a heart condition that was to revisit me with a vengeance in later life.

In the last year of my time at Branston when I was one of the also-rans, the 11-plus failures, I was involved in one final act of harvesting. I was the only boy left in Mr Williams' senior class in that late September of 1944. All the others, sons of the soil were out by special permission on what today we would call work experience. But this was a back door method of papering over the cracks of shortages among the teams of farm workers who had gone off to war.

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My classmates were out there helping in the fields when Mr Williams designed a special project for us. Together on bikes we rode along Silver Street along Mere Road and turned down the road to Potterhanworth. We rested our bikes against the hedge, the Head produced some large bags and, risking attacks from wild rose and hawthorn hedges, we began to collect the hips and haws, the reddened fruit of the hedgerows.

There was good money paid for these fruits that were turned into jelly "all as part of the war effort". I don't remember any cash actually flowing into my pocket, but perhaps it went to a school fund.

What I do remember vividly however was the mystery cycle ride that Uncle Walt and I took one morning towards the end of the war. He refused to say where we were going. We bypassed villages on our circuitous route, ending up at Metheringham . . . along with several hundred other people, gathered together in the village centre. "What's going on?" I asked. "Never you mind," Uncle Walt replied. "Just wait and see." We waited. I was midway between curiosity and boredom when, after what seemed like hours later and was probably only minutes, The Happening took place.

Into the wide village centre trotted horses carrying riders in hunting pink led by the Master of the Hunt and following by a busy, excited pack of hounds.

The Blankney Hunt was back in business. Normality was returning to rural life and the locals soaked up the atmosphere of a life almost forgotten in the rigours of war.

For me, who had seen The Hunt only in pictures on biscuit tins and Christmas cards, it was magical. I savour the moment now, and the look on Uncle Walt's face as he reflected on the mystery exposed. As I said earlier, every youngster should have an Uncle Walt.

Musical finale

THE egg money had feathered my nest to an extent, , if you'll pardon the expression. But what to spend it on? It could have been odd items at the little shop a few doors away from the blacksmith's or at Speeds, or more likely at the post office run by the friendly Agnes Applewhite, Aggie as she was known to our family. She kept in touch with us long after the war and we exchanged Christmas cards with her.

At Ted Martin's on the diagonal corner to the cross-roads post office there was always a constant stream of people. My best recollection is that they had large dishes of cooked meat that was bought in small quantities, rather like the paté of today.

But most of my pocket money went on gramophone records. My most treasured possession in my years of Branston, apart from my bike of course, was the gramophone. It appeared on Christmas Day, probably on the eve of my 10th birthday. This coincided with my decision to relinquish the illusion that everything Father Christmas brought was made in Santaland and that the old fellow would have got in one Dickens of a mess having to find his way down Uncle Walt's chimney.

Far better that I should accept that the gramophone I woke up to on a memorable December 25th was a hand-me-down from the Gilberts and so too were the scratchy and somewhat overplayed records that came with it. There were a few new ones with pristine covers from Woodheads shop just off the market in Lincoln. But I loved playing the hits of the 1930s.

At 10 years and with none of the sophistication of today's youngsters, it was still all right to enjoy the music of the grown-ups. My parents and Uncle Walt who was obviously in on the scheme must have rued the day.

Over and over again they heard 'Thirties star Leslie Sarony singing Jollity Farm or some unknown artist trilling He Played His Ukelele As The Ship Went Down and there were different versions of the rousing Stein Song. My money was spent on George Formby records like A Lovely Blue Eyed Blondie. But before I get written off as a complete non-no, I have to say that a couple of Edward Elgar records sparked my interest in more serious music and tempered my buying selections in years to come.

Uncle Walt who used to sit in his back kitchen for a nightly chat with his brother Charlie and sometimes with Ernie would have his conversation,

My classmates were out there helping in the fields when Mr Williams designed a special project for us. Together on bikes we rode along Silver Street along Mere Road and turned down the road to Potterhanworth. We rested our bikes against the hedge, the Head produced some large bags and, risking attacks from wild rose and hawthorn hedges, we began to collect the hips and haws, the reddened fruit of the hedgerows.

There was good money paid for these fruits that were turned into jelly "all as part of the war effort". I don't remember any cash actually flowing into my pocket, but perhaps it went to a school fund.

What I do remember vividly however was the mystery cycle ride that Uncle Walt and I took one morning towards the end of the war. He refused to say where we were going. We bypassed villages on our circuitous route, ending up at Metherringham . . . along with several hundred other people, gathered together in the village centre. "What's going on?" I asked. "Never you mind," Uncle Walt replied. "Just wait and see." We waited. I was midway between curiosity and boredom when, after what seemed like hours later and was probably only minutes, The Happening took place.

Into the wide village centre trotted horses carrying riders in hunting pink led by the Master of the Hunt and following by a busy, excited pack of hounds.

The Blankney Hunt was back in business. Normality was returning to rural life and the locals soaked up the atmosphere of a life almost forgotten in the rigours of war.

For me, who had seen The Hunt only in pictures on biscuit tins and Christmas cards, it was magical. I savour the moment now, and the look on Uncle Walt's face as he reflected on the mystery exposed. As I said earlier, every youngster should have an Uncle Walt.

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and the long silences that were a part of it, invaded by my musical arrival. Out would come the portable gram, the winding handle would go in the side, a pristine new needle from the little blue box would be screwed in to replace the over-used previous one and it would be sound-off time for another outpouring of some golden oldie.

Uncle Walt said he enjoyed it. I wonder if he did. The gramophone went with me back to Finchley after the war and stayed a faithful friend during one of the most traumatic periods of my life.

This followed my return to 'home'. Home? True it was the house I had left and I quickly met up with friends I had left before the war. But home? That, they say, is where the heart is and my heart was 140 miles to the north.

I seem to have shut from my mind the trauma of preparing for my return. My parents were obviously anxious to get back to life down south. They had 'made do' in Branston, but never felt part of it. But for me, Branston was my life. I was deeply torn.

It was around June 18th when we had been due to return. I had been preparing to take part in the Chapel Anniversary service with a solo part in it and had told the organisers I could not appear. Then our departure was put back. I could not go back on my word, and I kept out of the way of my friends. Of course the one to spot me was the lady who had never thought I was right for the solo part. "I thought you had gone," she sniffed. "Why didn't you come to chapel yesterday?" I mumbled a reply, feeling horribly guilty and in a sort of no man's land.

The chickens had gone, the rabbits were going. I had made my pledges to Uncle Walt that I would write. He seemed curiously to have crept back into his shell.

"Come on Bo," he said. It was always 'Bo'. I don't know where he got the name from, but he never called me anything else. "Let's go for a ride." And we did. My bike was due to be packed up with our remaining goods and chattels for transport back to London, but I rescued it for what was to be a ride into childhood nostalgia even if at that time I didn't know the meaning of the word.

We rode off for one last time (I could not know it then, but we two friends, the middle-aged blacksmith and the evacuee would never ride together again). Past Taylors' farm, through the village of Canwick, view-

ing the splendour of the cathedral a couple of miles away, through the back lanes to Heighington, to Potterhanworth, always with the distant roar of bombers warming up at Waddington.

I noticed that sugar beet tops were growing fast. Ears of corn were starting to burst from their green sheathes. I would not be sharing in the harvest this year or ever again. We looked for hares, but the burgeoning vegetation hid them even from Uncle Walt's experienced eyes. Everything was changing including the role of those great defenders the Lancasters.

Perhaps, I reflect now, they were being flown off to the Far East where the war was still raging ahead of its ultimate nuclear conclusion. Those same aircraft were to play a role in the Berlin Airlift three years later as the war with Hitler was to be replaced by the insidious Cold War with Stalin.

All the time I was shutting from my mind thoughts of the return. I can't remember the final farewells to my friends, perhaps I shied away from them.

One of my daughters asked me recently: "What did you think at that time?" To be honest my memory of those days was a blank. Life was changing and nothing I could do could alter it.

Many of my recollections of life at Branston are as vivid today as they were 60 years ago and yet I cannot for the life of me recall the farewells to Auntie Ada, Uncle Jack and Uncle Walt. I must have shut those uncomfortable thoughts from my mind, although I remember that a few days before we left I told Uncle Walt I would write to him regularly. I was not to know at that time how important that pledge was to be to both of us.

My father had returned a few days before mother and I, and as we walked into our old house we found he had assembled a welcoming committee on the hall stand — all the old toys that five long years earlier I had left behind: Bluebelle, Woofy, Jacko the Monkey. I felt strangely uncomfortable.

Fine for a little lad of seven who had clung on to a doll for company five years earlier when the bombs were falling, but now I was approaching teenage, long trousers beckoned, and so, hopefully, were girls who would have left their own dolls behind. The toy menagerie went back into storage.

I was by now too old to attend the delightful little Frith Manor school I had left during an air raid five years earlier and was found a place at a Church of England school in Hendon, a long walk, a tube train journey

and a bus ride away. I was out of my depth among people who found the broad Lincolnshire accent I had acquired rather quaint and wanted to keep me talking so that they could poke fun at me. This was a mirror of reactions to my London-accented arrival at Branston five years earlier.

I invented ailments to stay away from school. My depression was so bad that one day when I was supposed to be going to another school at Hendon for woodwork lessons (just like those at Potterhanworth years earlier), I turned tail and slunk home. It was the first and only time in my school life that I played truant.

My parents were worried. They summoned help from Uncle Walt who made the first of what were to be a number of unprecedented visits away from the security of his Branston world and into the unknown of London suburban life.

I will never forget the day when this village blacksmith was persuaded by my parents to join us for a taste of London life, a visit to the capital's famous Sunday street market of Petticoat Lane. It was a mecca for bargain-hunters who jam-packed into the narrow walkways between the stalls with their raucous owners. Uncle Walt's face blanched white.

This villager who had measured up to the poem "*The smith a mighty man is he, with broad and sinewy hands*" had been accustomed all his life to the shoeing shed and wide open spaces of neighbouring farms. Now he found himself trapped in a seething mass of humanity. "Now bugger this," he said and fought to extricate himself. Never again did we venture to Petticoat Lane.

The joy of seeing him again on that first occasion only served to add to the heartache of this displaced 12-year-old. The weekly letters we wrote to each other didn't help. I wonder what his contemporaries would have thought if they had known that morose old Walter Pearson could be capable of writing such wonder letters.

This gruff, gnarled old countryman whose only regular writing experience extended to a weekly session sending invoices for services supplied to local farms and the like, would write two or three pages of the latest happenings. I wish I had kept those letters. I treasure the memory of those and of the man who in 1952 died quietly in his brother Ernie's house next door being looked after tenderly in his terminal illness by Nell Pearson.

My father and I witnessed this as we went to see him. Both Uncle Walt and I wept as we shook hands, his once muscled arms wasted. As we left the room I looked back at the gentle giant who had helped to make My War

a time of enjoyment, of opportunity, of a growing knowledge of the countryside when for others it was an era of anguish, desolation and tragedy.

Seven years before that sad parting of the 1950s, the autumn of 1945 reflected a post-war world where people were still revelling in euphoria after years of fear and uncertainty. I was this selfish little brat, his family intact and everything to live for. Yet all I wanted was to be back in Branston. My heart would leap when on occasion I would see at the London end of the A1 one of the familiar red-cabbed lorries that bore the inscription '*Forman Bros., Branston, Lincs*'.

I even rode eight miles north of my Finchley home to where the sprawl of London ended and the farmland of Hertfordshire began, just to see again rolling fields and open skies, to see growing crops, brown ploughed earth and circling rooks and . . . The ride merely served to fuel my 'homesickness' for somewhere that was not my home any more. In frustration my father picked up the phone and made an appointment.

We kept it on the Sunday morning of the first armistice day after the war had ended and five miserable months since my return. The doctor who 12 years earlier had helped to bring me into the world was waiting in his surgery for this out-of-hours visit.

"So why are you so unhappy?" he asked, inviting me to sit with him. "I want to go back to Branston," I said.

He looked at me long and hard.

"Of course you can, what is stopping you?" came his astonishing reply.

Before I had a chance to respond, he added quickly, "I am not saying now, this minute. But when your school days are over, of course you can go back. Nothing to stop you. It is what you want to do, and you can do it."

I have often reflected on that day. Until now Branston was barred to me, or so it seemed. This short softly-spoken message was simple psychology, but it worked. Oh how it worked! We shook hands, this old family doctor and this diminutive 12-year-old. I walked out. I think the sun was shining. It certainly seemed as though it was.

Dad and I walked slowly to nearby Woodside Park Station and stood looking at the Northern Line trains clattering off to descend into the central London tube. In the distance, church bells tolled in respect for the fallen. A day of reflection for most. For me it was a day of celebration.

The depression had vanished. I was going back to Branston. Not then, perhaps, but one day . . .

I never did of course, apart from visiting the village to visit my aunt and to see Uncle Walt for that one last time. The death of Auntie Ada in 1982 finally cut the ties. But not completely. They are too strong

Now, as my three score years and ten beckon, Branston, the life, the people, the childhood lessons in reality, remain as much a part of me now as they did when I stepped from the bus outside Aggie Applewhite's shop 60 years ago this autumn.

And so I came back

They say you should never look back; you should never return. Memories should be left to rest. All that got the better of me and my journalist's natural curiosity.

In the fading light of a Sunday afternoon in early Spring this year, I turned from the A1 and followed the familiar route to Branston. The post office and the war memorial are still there, as solid as ever. So is 'my' school, except that it isn't a school any more. The 'School House' is now private property with conifers in the former playground, bordered still with the same old stone wall, low enough that if your aim misfires you could be trouble.

The old blacksmith's forge in Lincoln Road went years ago, but Blacksmiths House is still there and although many of the old buildings were swallowed up when a new house was built next door, two of the outbuildings that form part of my story remain. So are the old wooden garages in Sleaford Road where a new world opened up, but believe it or not, the car showroom that was built on the site of my Aunt's old stone cottage has now been demolished . . . to make way for houses. They say life goes in circles.

The two garages which held the wartime firefighting pump and the car that tugged it remain facing the Sheep Wash, but the Plough public house is no more, flattened, together with adjoining houses and the little shop perched precariously on the bend, so that the blind corner to Lincoln Road could be smoothed out. The butchers and bakers are closed, so is the sweet shop next door and there is no sign of the old slaughterhouse. At the crossroads Ted Martin's shop has reverted to a house, so has Mrs Speed's on the other side of the road.

A huge housing estate now dominates the hillside where the Taylors once farmed, but their farm remains. It has changed hands and is now given over to horses. Sadly both the Taylors have died. And so, to my intense sadness have many old friends of roughly the same age as me. Ken Brummit, a victim of leukaemia, Peter Speed and Beryl and Sally Pearson (their maiden name). It is hard to absorb.

The old High Street Co-op is now a Human Resources Office — 2000 Techno-buzz comes to a Lincolnshire village. Today's school is a community college serving a wide radius of villages and with a public library to one side. The village has become much bigger, but at the risk of sounding nostalgic, I fear the heart has been displaced. But then I would say that, wouldn't I.

The people there remain warm and friendly, however. I'll be back.

PETER OWEN — Autumn 2000

BRANSTON REMEMBERED



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Peter Owen writes: I am delighted to give credit to this excellent publication due to be published as **Escape to Branston** was also being printed. I am sure it will add to my memories of the village. The picture above contained in the History Group publicity already does that. As I mention on Page 29, it was to the workshop alongside this building that I would take the wireler's accumulator batteries to be charged up so that our 'steam' radio would work



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