

Sedgley in the 1930s and 1940s

At an All Saints' coffee morning in 2011, a group of Sedgley residents including Bob and Connie Webb, Neville Foster and Margaret Woodhall got together to talk about their memories of the village before, during and immediately after the Second World War.



World War II 'Ack-Ack' battery

As a boy, Neville Foster recalls going round collecting pieces of shrapnel that had fallen on the Sedgley and Gornal area, which were mostly the spent cases of anti-aircraft shells. The 'ack-ack' batteries were at Eve Lane in Upper Gornal and at Penn Common.

Neville recalls the Penn Common battery wasn't very active – it wasn't manned continually. By contrast, when the Eve Lane battery opened up it shook the neighbourhood. He often passes the place they were located when he travels to Dudley on the bus, although it's all built over now. He says: "My mother was stone deaf, but when the Eve Lane battery opened up, it would shake the house - and even she heard it!"



Turls Hill House, 'The Belgian Yard'

During the early part of the war Neville lived in Turls Street at the bottom of Turls Hill Road. He remembers Turls Hill House which was referred to locally as “The Belgians” or “The Belgian Yard”. Belgian refugees who had come over to England in the Great War were housed there. During the 1930s when work was scarce, Neville’s father worked there as a gardener. Neville’s brother had a job as an errand boy for a grocers’ shop in High Holborn Sedgley and Neville used to go round with him at times when he delivered to the ‘Belgian Yard’. For some reason it was regarded as a rather scary place.

A story and photo on the ‘Flickr’ internet site adds to the mystery. Previously the house had been occupied by the Whitehouse family who were steel masters in Coseley. One of the family who lived in Turls Hill House apparently went bankrupt, building a wall around his estate and according to local rumour, shot himself in the nearby quarry.

Neville explains why the mystery may have developed around the place: “When several nationals gather together in one place (and there were about 40-50 of them) it can become rather ‘ghettoised’ - it may have been difficult for the locals to get to know them.”

Lights Out

Neville recalls that the war didn’t change his life too much. “I was a child of 12 in 1940. Before the war there was street lighting and we used to play street games and be in the house by 8pm. When the war came along we were faced with a blackout, but it didn’t seem to curb our activities much!



Cinematograph projector

“At Christmas in 1939 I remember my brother buying me a cinematograph projector that used to show the old-style 35mm films. My father had a garden shed and I had my pals round. We managed to get odd strips of old films to show and it became our own private cinema!”

“By 1939 I had joined the scout group and got into various outdoor activities and from 1940 onwards I went to Dormston School. We were allocated a position in the shelters and in the practice drills we would make our way to these positions. The teacher would have a roll call to make sure you were there.



Children in an air raid shelter in World War II

“While the air raid shelters at Queen Victoria school were all brick-built surface shelters, at the Dormston School they were located under the playground in a zig-zag pattern. You went down a ramp to get to them. The Boys’ and Girls’ schools were separate at that time. In the Senior Boys’ school there were six classes with an average of 35 boys to each class, so there were around 200 boys. The Girls’ School was in the area nearer School Street.

“The shelters were huge. They were filled in after the war and new buildings put on top, but I would still remember where they were if I went by there. They were in the zone between the Dormston School buildings and the Queen Victoria School buildings in line with the back of the Red Lion.

“Later in the war we moved to Upper Gornal and each of the houses there had proper brick-built shelters in the gardens. They were arched and very substantial, much better than the Anderson shelters. Even so I refused to go in. My parents used ours when we had an air raid warning but it was very cold and damp and I said: ‘Well, if a bomb’s going to drop, it’ll cop me in bed’. My parents seemed to be OK with that!” (Ed- I’m sure they weren’t!)



German bombing raids

Neville said that German bombers frequently flew over Gornal and Sedgley on their way to Manchester and Liverpool: "They were guided by radio beams projected from Cherbourg.

"Two beams were projected and where they crossed it used to set off a clock in the bombers to warn them they were approaching the target. A third beam above the target would cause the release of the bombs. The technology was developed as a landing device for civil aircraft by a Dutchman named Lorenz, but the Germans developed it into a navigation aid."

At the coffee morning Neville Foster met up with Bob Webb, an old acquaintance who lived round the corner in Quarry Road in Upper Gornal during the war, and Margaret Woodhall, one of the All Saints' Friday flower ladies. Neville showed the group a photo taken from the top of Eggintons the chemist, before the Clifton Cinema was built.



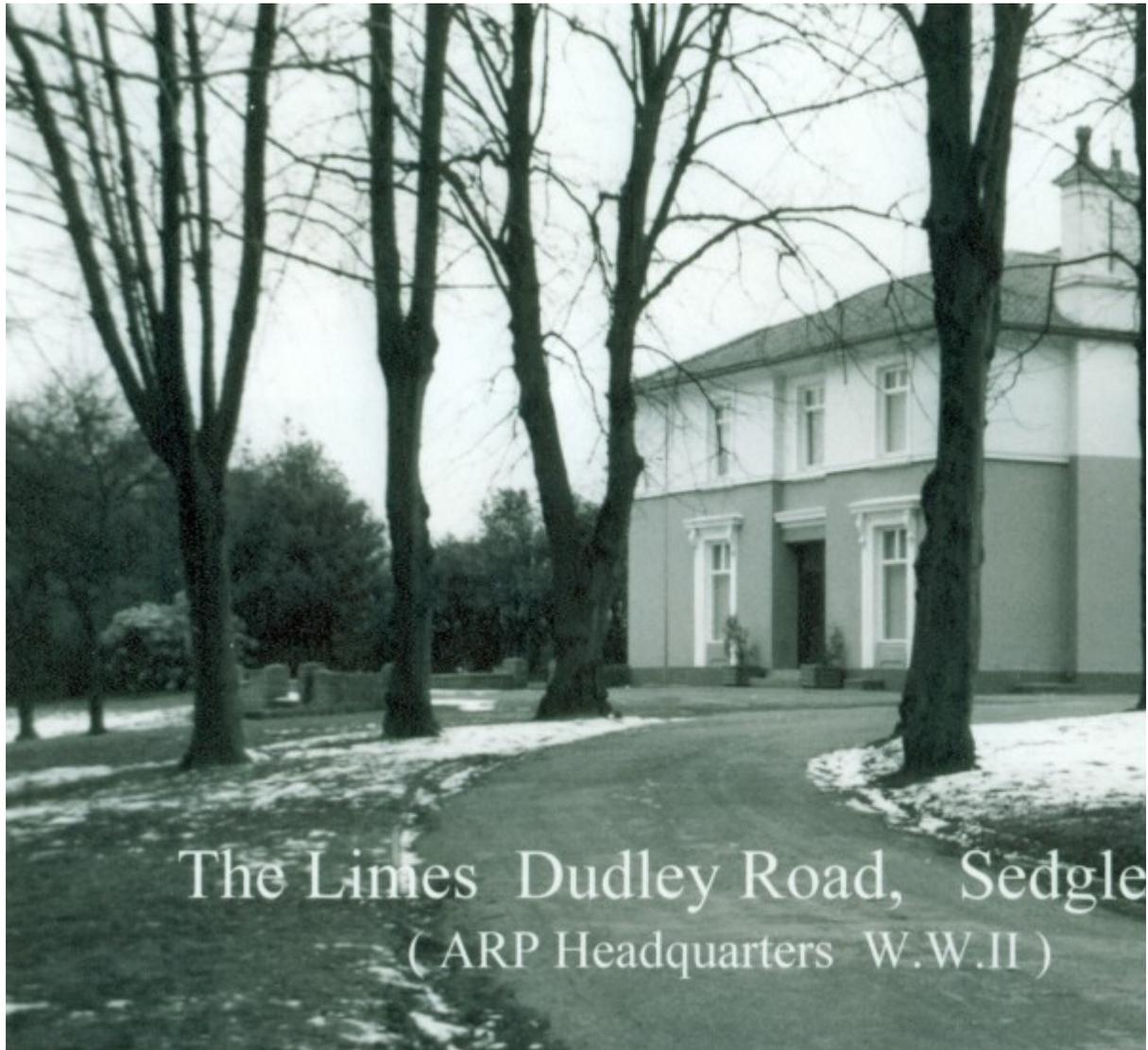
Bull Ring

Bob identified Carmichael Fox the butcher's premises, Colonel Hilton's house, and the grand house known as Sedgley Manor, owned by Dr Chand and used by him as a surgery. Bob says the local legend is that Dr Chand won the house 'on the turn of a card'.

Margaret's grandfather apparently made coffins on premises that later made way for the Clifton cinema, and her mother used to make the shrouds and the pillows for them. Once they had made them, they were often invited to the wake!

The group then recalled the opening of the Clifton Cinema in 1937. The opening films were a short Laurel and Hardy film and a British comedy called Convict 99, starring Will Hay.

Margaret was taken to see Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm, starring Shirley Temple.



The Limes

The group then looked at Neville's picture of The Limes, a grand house on the corner of Catholic Lane and Dudley Road in Sedgley, originally built for Eliza Tinsley and her husband, Black Country nail makers from the 1840s onwards.

The Fire Service and Air Raid Patrol (ARP) were based at The Limes during the war.

(Note June 2016- The Limes has now been refurbished and converted into 8 flats, with 2 detached houses, one either side.)



Queen Victoria School

There was a discussion among the group about Arthur Howes, a teacher at Queen Victoria School during the war. Margaret said: “He was a wonderful teacher - there ought to be a statue to him! I can remember him coming up from the Gorge Road at dinner time with all the children, just like the Pied Piper! We all felt safe with him”

“I used to go down Clifton Street, Hurst Hill to see my grandmother and hold Mr Howes’ arm as I walked down the road. He taught us grammar - and it’s never left me.”

Handwriting

Neville Foster added: “Mr Howes taught us how to write, but when we went to Dormston they changed the method completely. So my handwriting today is a mixture of what Arthur Howes taught us and what Mr Jones taught us at Dormston – a bit of a spider’s web! I also remember Mr Howes used to appoint a bell monitor who rang the school bell.”

Margaret says: “Mr Howes was incredible, with him you couldn’t wait to go to school – although surprisingly he never qualified as a teacher. When he read a story to the class he would pick one of the pupils out and you’d sit beside him while he was telling the story. It was quite an honour! He used to give me a sixpence for saying a poem in prayers.”



Bob Webb recalls: "The Hornby people had just brought out a model of the Princess Elizabeth locomotive - he put it on the desk. There were two: a green one and a maroon one. Later Rovex, who were making model railways before Hornby, brought out a model that was black. We thought it was great - he really knew how to capture our interest!"

Margaret remembers that Mr Howes had a limited range of attire. "He had two suits: a grey pinstripe and a black one. His moustache was ginger from smoking! He used to live next door to the pub, The Bull's Head.

Connie adds: "I'm sure he passed out on the pavement once. I wasn't very old at the time. I don't think he lasted much longer. He wouldn't have been working were it not for the war – he'd retired. I remember his mother was widowed and he said he'd studied by candlelight . His son taught at the Dormston School - he was called Eric Howes. He was a biology teacher."

Neville says: "Mr McCleod was the headteacher at Queen Vic. He didn't teach, apart from taking the scholarship class for mental arithmetic. His grandson Robert occasionally comes to All Saints Church."



Marion Richardson

Margaret remembers how her handwriting changed when she went to senior school. "Mine had to change because I went to Dudley Girls' High School. There was an art mistress, Marion Richardson, who had been at the school in the 1920s who invented the style of handwriting that was taught in school, so we all had to change and do these 'writing patterns' she had developed. You can go and see them in the pen museum in the Jewellery Quarter (in Birmingham): my aunt 'Fil' who is 98 was taught by this lady – she was really famous." (Note: from 1912 to 1923, Marion Richardson was the art mistress at Dudley Girls' High School. In 1935 she published *Writing and Writing Patterns*, a set of hinged cards and booklets for teaching handwriting.)

Air Raids

The group reminisced about air raids while they were at Queen Victoria School. Margaret says: "They used to ring the bell if the siren was going, and if you could get home in 2-3 minutes then you could go home. I lived in Gate Street and we used to do practice runs up the gulley."

Connie asks: "Do you remember Cooper's at the end of Bilston Street? Down there was a cellar. Sometimes we used to creep along the wall and go down there and we slept on padded car seats. But mostly we used the Anderson shelter out in the garden and our neighbours used to come through the fence to use it."

Margaret remembers an ARP post that was in Mill Bank. "My dad was in the ARP, and my aunt who has just died at 102 used to fire watch at The Limes - my dad even had an allotment in there!"

Bob says that there was also a 'decontamination shelter' in Mill Bank. (Decontamination centres would have been used in the event of an enemy attack using chemical weapons. On arrival, victims would have been doused with water to remove the bulk of any contamination and their clothing would have been removed for disposal by incineration.)

Were they afraid?

Neville says the only time he can ever remember being worried during the war was on the day it was announced that the Germany had invaded France in May 1940. "I knew that France was only 21 miles away and it's only 21 miles to Bridgnorth - they were that close. But generally I don't remember kids being worried at all."

Magaret says: "With hindsight I remember how worried our parents must have been that we were going to be invaded - and about the general situation. I recall there used to be a night guard on the Dormston School who was a member of the Local Defence Volunteers. They had to guard the school and get rid of the incendiary bombs if there were any."



Making ball bearings for Spitfires at Fischer Bearings

Connie recalls working in Wolverhampton when husband Bob went off to war in 1944. "While Bob was fighting I was busy making ball bearings at Fischer Bearings, Upper Villiers Street in Wolverhampton (formerly part of Sunbeam Cars), including making bearings for the Spitfire aircraft. The whole complex was known as Sunbeamland."

Margaret says her uncle used to work in the Sunbeam offices before the war. "He used to get sample of materials for the car seats and my gas mask was made out of one of those. Mine was white and my brother's was red! You just had to get a better case than the cardboard one they came in. In a way as a child, the whole war was an adventure."



Bomber Command



Statue to Sir Arthur 'Bomber' Harris

Bob spent nine years in Bomber Command, starting in 1944. He joined the RAF at 17 years and 2 months and while he was there they switched from Lancaster to Lincoln bombers. Towards the end of the war, the main activity was bombing Berlin. He says: "We were branded butchers, but the Germans had no scruples about bombing our cities. In the end, our efforts in winning the war were vindicated when the Queen Mother unveiled a statue to Sir Arthur Bomber Harris, our commanding officer." (The statue, which is located outside St Clement Danes Church, the central RAF church on the Strand in London, was unveiled in 1992.)

All Saints' coffee mornings are held on Fridays from 10.30am to 12 noon. Whether you're a church member or a shopper en route from Penny Farthing Arcade to the Post Office, we offer you an opportunity to stop, relax and chat. Yes, we are a church - but no one will try to convert you!

From time to time, informal reminiscence sessions are held with the aim of capturing valuable eye-witness accounts of the village's history.