



A War-time Childhood

The following account is extracted from Col Tim May's autobiographical writings.

Early life and the outbreak of war

I was born at on the 22nd of October 1930 in Beaconsfield. Some weeks later I was baptised Timothy Lewis May at the Wesley Memorial Church in New Inn Hall Street, Oxford.

I was told that my father marked the occasion of my birth by letting off rockets at Slade Farm, Hedgerley, between Beaconsfield and Slough in Buckinghamshire, where he and my mother then lived and farmed. I was their first child, born nearly three years after their marriage in 1927. In 1936 the family moved to a small house in North Warnborough near Odiham in Hampshire and in 1938 settled in Coombe Bissett.

Coombe Bissett village itself was pretty as I remember it and remains so allowing for the further `prettification` and gentrification that has occurred. It is a chalk village standing on a chalk stream, but was/is spoilt by being on the main road from Salisbury to Blandford. The `B` road past Angeldown runs on along the Ebble valley to chalk valley villages with names like Stratford-Tony, Broadchalk, Bowerchalk, Fyfield-Bavant, Ebbesbourne Wake and Berwick St John before reaching Shaftesbury.

Mr Lampard was a man of about sixty and lived in the timber and slate bungalow about a hundred yards from us down the road towards the village. Mr Lampard ran the few acres round his house as a smallholding and had a horse and, I think, a tractor. We used to meet and chat and walk round his `patch` quite often. I don't think he had any children of his own. Rather wonderfully, he seemed to talk to me as if I were an adult and certainly didn't seem to object to my company. One day, it must have been the summer of 1940, we were walking together along the far side of the hedge about a hundred yards up the slope behind our house when we became conscious of a twin-engined aircraft flying towards us from behind in an easterly direction. We were also conscious, I swear, of a spattering noise in the hedge. As the aircraft passed overhead, I realised, knowing as nine-year old schoolboys then did, that it was a German Heinkel 111 flying at no more than 500 feet! Were we being machine-gunned? We thought so at the time. The Heinkel was shortly followed by a pursuing Spitfire and we were told that the Heinkel crashed shortly after, somewhere on the far side of Salisbury.

My education when at Coombe Bissett was at a small school of which the only name I ever knew was `The Pre-Prep School`. The school comprised about ten boys aged from about seven to ten, taught by a rather rakish and happy lady, plump and in her thirties, called Anne Swanton. My parents always referred to her privately as "Annie Fannie" although we, of course, called her Miss Swanton. I do not think of her teaching regime as onerous but now believe it must have been quite imaginative for its time. During the two years or so that I was there, I must have learned a certain amount of maths, geography, English and even a little French. An elderly, motherly and bespectacled lady came in to teach us handicraft. I particularly remember a current affairs class. This was the time of the Munich crisis and Annie Fannie got us to act out the roles of Hitler, Chamberlain, Daladier and Mussolini taking it in

turns to represent the various characters and using our imaginations to supply the words. This now seems impossibly ambitious for eight year olds, but I think we mostly enjoyed it.

Our formal education was mostly in the mornings. After lunch we tended to engage in more random activity. This meant the whole school piling into the back of Miss Swantons` car and going to some suitable site where we frankly ran wild for an hour or so. Favourite places were Miss Swantons` fathers` farm at South Newton near Wilton or, best of all, Old Sarum where we could play at storming the ditches and battlements—excellent exercise!

A most interesting aspect of Miss Swanton was her boy-friend Colonel Behr, a frequent visitor to the school. He was an archetypal `Colonel`, plump, vinous, moustachioed and in his fifties. He and Annie Fannie gave the place a wonderfully `raffish` feel which was not lost on my parents.

This was the time leading up to the Second World War, and on the 3rd of September, just before my ninth birthday, it all came to head. Everyone was anticipating the worst and many were listening to the wireless at 11am to hear the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, speak to the nation. I remember well the fateful words, so often re-broadcast,-----“No such undertaking has been received, and so this country is at war with Germany”. I went outside and climbed on a stack of Breeze-blocks on a building site on the far side of the Yarker`s house to think about what had happened.

Up to that point I had been rather `gung-ho` about the prospect of a war with Germany believing we could easily beat them. With the actual announcement came the realisation that war is a serious business in which I and my family could be killed or maimed. It was no longer something to be taken lightly, and I found myself very anxious. My feelings were emphasised when, within about twenty minutes the air-raid sirens sounded and I really thought the German bombers were coming to get us straight away. I was very relieved when the `all-clear` sounded shortly afterwards!

As it happened the first six months of the war were peaceful for us. There was quite a lull for the services too until the Germans moved first into Denmark and Norway and soon after that into the Low Countries and France. France, of course, collapsed and much of our army escaped home via Dunkirk. The Germans might well have seemed unstoppable and the performance of our services had seemed disappointing, to say the least, to a nine year old boy. Looking back, however, I don't think I ever seriously doubted that ultimately we would win. Probably I simply couldn't contemplate the alternative.

In the summer of 1940, after Dunkirk, we began to experience the war at first hand. Night after night we heard the German bombers with their characteristic throbbing drone flying overhead to places like Coventry and Birmingham. At home we could see the fires lighting up the sky over Bristol, Southampton and the Midlands towns and cities. On one or two occasions German bombers emptied their bomb-racks (there were no obvious targets) near to us and I found a German aluminium bomb-stick just behind the house. In the late summer Hitler tried, as a necessary prelude to invasion, to destroy the Royal Air Force in what became the Battle of Britain. Although most of the action was to the east of us over Sussex and Kent, we did see a number of dog-fights which were very thrilling. There was also my machine-gunning incident with Mr Lampard. As you know, the RAF won that battle and Hitler, who apparently feared our navy, decided not to get involved in seaborne operations without air superiority and invaded Russia instead.

Another effect of the war was the arrival, during the winter of 1939, of the evacuees. In order to avoid being killed or injured in air-raids, children, living in towns likely to be targets for the German air force and under the age of about ten, were ordered by the Government to be evacuated, on their own, to what were considered to be safer areas in the country. When these children, with their belongings in bags and labelled like parcels, reached their designated "safe" town or village, they were arbitrarily `billeted` on local households who were required by law to accept and look after them. In Coombe Bissett the billeting was achieved by asking householders to go to the village hall, when all the children arrived there, and taking those allocated to them back to their houses. In this process there may have been some element of choice as to the actual children selected, but, in practice, not much. We were allocated a pair from Portsmouth, a boy of about eight and his sister, about six. The boy rejoiced in the name of George Bernard Shaw. This was a bit surprising as I think his family had only limited cultural aspirations. This was not a happy time. Although I think we all had some real sympathy for the children, they had not been brought up in the "nice" middle class way to which we aspired and they talked with an incomprehensible `Pompey` accent. Apart from obviously missing their mother, they did not (and who can blame them?) like any thing about their situation, and we soon fell out. Their mother was able to come and see them once or twice, but travel for individuals was very difficult because of the war.

While I don't remember any protests about the arrival of the evacuees, it became obvious that the stress caused to both sets of families and the children was unsustainable and the Shaws, along with most of the other evacuees, returned to their own homes where many of them were, in a few months, duly bombed by the Luftwaffe.

Whatever the course of the war, my life, and those of the family were profoundly affected.

My father desired to serve the nation despite being a member of that really very fortunate group who were just too young for the First War and just too old for the Second. Finally after serving as a Special Constable and as member of the Observer Corps, he was offered a commission in the Claims Commission being then aged thirty-nine. This was strictly non-combatant: he followed the army dealing with claims made by civilians for damage caused by the services to civilian property. His knowledge of farming and land was obviously an asset in this role. I can't remember where his first posting was but it certainly was not near Coombe Bissett. However, for this and several other reasons it was decided that the rest of the family (at that stage Peggy, Judith and myself) would go and live at 49 Sandfield Road, Headington, Oxford.

Early Teens during the war in Oxford

The house in Sandfield Road was owned by my grandfather, Tom Lewis. It was a typical 1930s detached, five bedroomed suburban villa. It had half-timbered gables at the front and was finished in pebble-dash. There was a long, narrow garden at the rear big enough to include a greenhouse and a tennis court. The house is still there, in 2008, but looks very neglected and run-down. The garden backed onto an open field across which was the Osler Pavilion TB clinic where patients lay outdoors in their beds for the fresh air. Many years later, I would go and see my uncle Roy there when he was dying of lung cancer.

The House had been lived in by the Weakley family, Peggy's older sister Molly and her husband Ted and three children, Jillian, Margaret and David. Ted was a South African of English extraction and had been a successful tobacco salesman in Britain. He was now in the RAF and arranged for his wife and children to spend the war in South Africa for safety. The empty house was to accommodate in addition to us, Peggy's younger sister Barbara and her

two children Avril and Joanna (Jodie). Ironically Barbara and her brood came to Sandfield Road because it was thought safer than Solihull, near Coventry where her husband Herbert (Michael) had a successful manufacturing business engaged in vital war-work. As it happened, the move was a good one for the Whites, as despite the proximity, at Cowley, of the Morris and Pressed Steel factories, busily engaged in the production of war material, Oxford was never bombed during the whole war.

It was thus that I found myself the only male in a household of six---even the dog, Quest, an English Setter, was female although the cat was, I fancy, a neutered ginger male!

Looking back, I think it must have been about this time that I began to see myself as an individual. Instead of being merely rather shy, I think I began to acquire the self-consciousness of emerging adolescence. I now ask myself, `was this tendency aggravated by the impact of all the things that were happening to me?` i.e. father going, the war and the move to Oxford?

As it turned out we were to stay at Sandfield Road, my first experience of urban living, until I was at least sixteen in 1947. The road was populated by a good mixture of the burgher class of Oxford, from both business and the University. At number 47 were the Wests; Oliver West was the proprietor of the jewellers Leslie, Davey and West who still trade in High Street, Oxford. At number 45 were the Geddes`s; Charles Geddes was the proprietor of Geddes`s furniture store in George Street, now several bars and restaurants. The son, Michael, was my age and we became friends; he was at New College School

Number 51 was home to the Church family. The father ran a major plumbing business, subsequently taken over by the son Ron, about eighteen when we arrived, and, I think, still going now. Further down the hill on our side were the Jewsons with two rather offensive teenage sons. Their fathers` business, at the time was in taxis. Subsequently the Jewson boys became very successful Motor-Traders and Developers. I think the business still exists but I have never discovered if it had/has anything to do with the `national` firm of builders merchants. Opposite lived the Rose family. The father was a quiet man who ran a dispensing chemists and the mother had a raucous voice which I, and others who heard it I should think, can remember to this day, and which she used to summon her children "**Di-aaannn-aa**". Up the hill opposite were the Morris`s, he a very `soit` handsome businessman with a son Trevor, a bit younger than me but a friend, and, a little further along, the Lee`s.

Arthur W Lee was a builder. He had two cars, exceptional for 1940, of which the Registered Numbers were AWL 1 and AWL2. AWL 1 was many years later the number of a car owned by Robert Roberts, grannie`s father! AW Lee also had two sons, Ivor about my age and Alan a bit younger. The boys were different in just about every way. Ivor was broad, lumbering and maladroit, while Alan was slim, pretty, smarmy and instinctively disliked by all of us. Alan was also rather `thick, `but Ivor was absolutely brilliant academically. He won an open scholarship to Magdalen College and got a first in Greats only to die in a road accident at the age of about twenty-three.

Other interesting people in Sandfield Road were Mr Meister who taught part-time at the Dragon School, Dr John Havard, `our` family doctor and one of the "Inklings" with Tolkein, CS Lewis et al, and the Arrowsmith and Stoneham families of which more latter. Oh, and I almost forgot the Shuttleworth boys who both became, after their father, significant figures in British business later.

My life in Sandfield Road, where I was to stay until well after the end of WW2, was, I must suppose, a fairly normal one for a middle class boy of my age. In the earlier years I played with

the friends mentioned above in each others homes and gardens. We also ranged to one or two nearby neglected building sites and to a wonderful area across Staunton Road to the west, known as `The Dell`. This was an area of about three or four acres of scrub-land, dotted with thickets of dense bushes, and ideal for war-games and `Cowboys-and-Indians`. It is now built-over. One incident that sticks in my mind is that of the bonfire we started on a building site behind the Morris`s House. This was in a “camp” consisting of a hole in the ground that we had excavated. A passing policeman on a bicycle made us put the fire out and gave us a severe telling-off for doing something obviously unauthorised and dangerous in the dry conditions there. I very much doubt that our stupidity would be so sensibly handled today!

When I changed schools in September 1944, aged thirteen, my friends tended to change, and I began to spend time with John Sharpe, the son of a dentist with a practise on the London Road and his friend Reg whose surname escapes me.

The foregoing suggests, not without some truth, that being the only male in a house of females did not much suit my inclinations. It certainly is true that I sought entertainment and companionship outside the household. Of course, I did relate to my sister and cousins to some extent, chiefly as regards music and play acting which I enjoyed, even with them! I also enjoyed playing with the extensive Hornby train-set which my cousin, David Wheakley had left behind when he went to South Africa.

As I have implied, the house was well filled but we did have, in addition, numbers of house guests from time to time. These included my maternal grandparents, Tom and Margaret Lewis. They stayed for quite long periods. As his contribution to the war effort, Tom, always known in the family as Father Lewis, ran the tobacconists shop F Cooke & Co in High Street Oxford, half way between Longwall and Queens Lane. He also played the organ for New College Chapel, although he was, of course, a Methodist. My grandmother, always `Mother Lewis`, was memorable at this time for her multi-skilled personal talents. She would sit before the gas-fire of an evening, listening attentively to the wireless, while, at the same time, knitting furiously and conducting an animated conversation, despite deafness, with whoever happened to be about. She also had the irritating habit of flexing her ankles causing her shoes to “click” loudly at the same time!

My uncle (by marriage) Ted Weakley was another “house guest”; it was, after all, his house we were in. He had flown for the Royal Flying Corps in WW1 and served in an Administrative Branch of the RAF in WW2, his family having been evacuated, as I said, to South Africa for the duration. I didn’t much like him. He played the heavy father with me which I didn’t think I deserved as I, rather smugly, thought I was an obedient boy.

From time to time, my father came to stay sometimes accompanied by one or other of his fellow officers. His work at that time took him all over the country and he stayed with us when it was local. This I enjoyed because, if I was not at school, I was able to accompany my father, or his colleagues, as they went about their business in their private cars using Government petrol which was not available to `ordinary` people. We used to have grand lunches too, in hotels for which they had special food coupons.

Travel for Schoolboys (and girls) in the 1940s

It all seems difficult to imagine now. During the war, and for some time after, there was effectively no un-necessary travel for anyone unless it was on foot or bicycle. All fuel, especially petrol, diesel etc which had to be riskily imported, was wanted for war purposes. Only a very little was available for “essential” car users. Most people who owned cars, there

were far fewer then, of course, laid them up with wheels raised off the ground to preserve the tyres. Petrol was only obtainable with Government-issued coupons (plus money). To get coupons, users had to prove that their need was vital AND the controllers were very hard-nosed! Those who used the petrol they had been authorised to have for unauthorised purposes risked fierce prosecution and probable imprisonment if they were caught. Various members of our family and friends did get petrol. My father got a handsome ration to enable him to use his own car on Government business. My grandfather May got a pretty liberal ration of fuel for tractors, car and stationary engines to enable him to farm and add to the nations` food supplies. Cousin Bert Manley produced honey at an industrial level and he got not only petrol but also sugar to feed his bees. The sugar ration for most people was miniscule!

Another person who managed to get petrol was Mrs Arrowsmith who lived in Sandfield Road, had three sons at The Dragon and taught at St Faiths` a girls school nearby. By bombarding the authorities with letters and visits she persuaded them to allow her enough petrol to drive her car, a Standard 8, about the same size as a Fiat Punto, laden with as many as eight Dragons to and from the school every day! Moreover, to save money, we used to meet at the car, parked in Norham Gardens to eat together the packed lunches we had brought from home.

After a bit the petrol ration dried up and I had to go to school on the bus. The Oxford buses were then all run by a company owned by the Council called City of Oxford Motor Services. Those used in the City were all double-deckers in handsome red, cream and dark-brown livery. The services were immaculate, ran exactly to time, always seemed to have space on them and seem infinitely preferable to todays frenetic multi-company arrangements. The number 2 service ran from the end of Sandfield Road to Park Town in Banbury Road through the middle of Oxford and took about twelve minutes to do so. I think the fare was two (old!) pence. Magnificent!

I think I had learnt to ride a bicycle using friends` machines, so when my parents bought me a bike at the age of eleven I was able to ride it to school. I think it cost no more than two pounds. It was very much second hand and there were, anyway, no new bikes to buy. My bike was old-fashioned even by the standards of the day, very solidly built with rod-brakes and wide rimmed tyres, but I was proud of it. It was nick-named "tank" by my friends, because of its solid appearance, and it transformed my life with the gift of mobility. Not only could visit my friends round the whole city and suburbs, I could explore and did so. I don't think I had much training or advice but traffic and road safety didn't seem to be much of an issue then.

I had my own place in the cycle-rack at school and its number, `220`, was painted in white paint on the bike. When I first started to use the cycle to go to school I went, as instructed down the Pullens Lane footpath across Marston Road and through `Mesopotamia` and The Parks and Norham Gardens. This was a pain as you were forbidden to ride through Mesopotamia and The Parks and it was much more interesting to go through the City Centre.

Nowadays, travel is taken for granted by anyone over the age of about sixteen and everyone, of all ages, takes long distance travel as a matter of course. This was not the case in my youth. Until I left school at the age of eighteen plus, travel for me was only as far as my bike and local buses could take me. In , I think, 1946, when new bikes started to appear on the market, I sold "tank" and my `Meccano` set to finance the purchase of a shiny new bike with narrower wheels, white `composition` mudguards and cable brakes which had the name "Sun" painted on the frame. I think it cost £10.10s (£10:50p) which seemed to me, at the time to be a very large amount, and I was intensely proud of it even though it had no variable gears. As I got older, I rode `The Sun` further and further. Being interested in motor-racing, I rode to, for

instance, a speed hill-climb at Burghfield near Reading, about thirty miles and, in June 1947, I think, to the very first race at Silverstone, also about thirty miles, The International Trophy. The competitors included people like Guiseppi Farina and Alberto Ascari in 158 Alfas not to mention Bob Gerard and `Bira` in ERAs and `Phi-Phi` Etancelin and Louis Chiron in Lago Talbots. Who would think of going to Silverstone by bike today? My point is that travel in the mid-forties was difficult, only undertaken for a definite purpose and not for the faint-hearted!