

Wartime Withington

A memoir by Florence Swinton

I recently came across the Civic Society's website and, having lived in Withington most of my childhood and indeed part of my married life, it recalled many happy memories for me.

In 1940, we were bombed out of our little terraced house in Morris Street. It was just before Christmas and my father had been called up and was due to leave. He had decorated the house for us, us being my mother, my sister Amelia who was 6 years old, and myself age 3 years old. Dad said we would be OK if we did not go in to the shelter that night as he did not think the raid would be too bad. Unfortunately a bomb was dropped on the back garden of the end house in Moorfield Street. The shelter was in the centre of Morris Street, and our house was directly opposite the said back garden. I believe we were reported missing and our names were posted on the wall. My aunt and cousin believed us to be dead and, of course, were deeply shocked and upset.

We shared a back entry with the row of shops on Cooper Street [now Copson Street] and Mrs Read who owned the grocer's shop had very kindly taken us in. Three months later my beautiful sister contracted diphtheria and unfortunately died.

Of course these are not personal memories as I was too young to remember. They are also not happy memories but knowing the terrible hardship and pain my parents went through made me so proud of them, both as they managed to keep going and their love for each other and for me never faltered. Eventually we moved to Queen Street where my aunt and family lived.

During the war my dear mother would take me to the Scala picture house to see the latest musical film. Her idol was Bing Crosby. I could not remember my father as he went to war when I was just 4 years old. My Mum told me that he looked like Bing Crosby. After the war we went to the railway station to meet my father as he came home on demob leave. "There's your Daddy", my Mum said. To be honest he looked nothing like Bing Crosby. He was much more handsome. His mother had been Irish and he had those sparkling eyes and black hair so many Irish folk seem to be blessed with. He never spoke about his experiences at war.

My father had worked in a grocer's shop in Ladybarn before the war. It was owned by a man named Paddy Lea (no guessing his nationality). He cycled there very early in the morning down Parsonage Road. One morning at the very start of the war a German fighter pilot decided to unload his remaining bombs along the road. My Dad jumped off his bike and crouched behind the wall of one of the many Victorian houses. I expect that was a knee-jerk reaction.

I went to St Paul's school with my cousin Dorothy, and remember buying liquorice sticks from the shop across the road. They were fine until you got to the middle and were then like sticks of wood. We used to go to the Rec, as we called it, on Ripplingham Road and take a bottle of lemonade and some sandwiches. My cousin and I joined the Band of Hope at the Methodist Church in the Village and on dark nights we would take a torch to see where we were going.

My mother decided she would take in an evacuee. She wanted a little girl. She said it would be company for me and, yes, it would but I also think she thought it would somehow ease her pain from losing my sister. She went to the Methodist church and came back with two children. A boy Johnny, and his sister Jeannie. She later told me that they were the only two children left and her heart went out to them when she saw them with their gas masks across their shoulders and clutching hold of each others hands.

I remember Parsonage Road and the Cowan sisters who owned the haberdashery in the village. I remember the shop. They had pulleys which the assistant used to put your money in pull the cord and send it up to the cashier, who was in a glass box on the next floor up.

Getting back to my cinema days! After the cinema, we would often go to Shaw's chip shop in Cooper Street (I think it is now Copson Street). Part of the shop floor was partitioned off and you could eat your fish and chips there, often with a plate of bread and butter. Sometimes we would go to the milk bar on Wilmslow Road. I would climb on to the very high stools and drink my milkshake through a straw. No wonder I was fat!

I remember after the war on V. E. night when the celebrations began. We had a street party which was wonderful. The landlady of the Victoria public house brought out crisps. The Village was closed to traffic and Radio Rentals relayed music for everyone to dance to - and dance they did! There was a great community spirit during those years of hardship.

My life in Withington holds many treasured memories. I was married at St. Paul's in 1959 and lived in Withington until 1978 when my Mum died. The memories then become a little too raw because I was so close to my loving parents.

Please excuse me for going on but, as you will gather, Withington is very close to my heart.