

Memories of War Time in the village of Eastergate West Sussex

My name is Roger Bennett, I am 78 years old and I live in Spain. I was born in the Village of Eastergate West Sussex in the year 1935 and lived in the area until 1978 when we moved to Devon from where in 2004 we moved to Spain to live our final years in the Sun. I was born and lived in Church lane Eastergate in a house built by my father who was the local builder. My dad was also a drummer who played with the then famous Blackmans concert party, where also my mother was a singer. Blackmans toured West Sussex during the war years playing at village halls etc. and generally helping to keep up moral amongst the public. My mother was a very extrovert person, a good organizer and former teacher at the old Eastergate school in School Lane under the then headmistress Miss Stark. In those days mum had a very good friend named Rita Luff and between them they organized Old Folks Christmas parties, held at the village hall, whist drives, fetes and every Friday night at our house mum invited all the neighbours to card parties with food and drink. Mum and her friend also started old time dancing lessons at Eastergate Village hall every Tuesday evening, with a grand dance once a month, these ran throughout the war and were packed with villagers and a great moral booster. Dad being the local builder built in our garden along with friends a big underground air raid shelter, and when the siren went off the neighbour's would arrive and sit out the raids which because of the closeness of Tangmere Airfield was quite often.

War broke out in 1939 when I was 4 years old but you grew up very quickly in the village with home life being disrupted somewhat. Where we lived in Church lane was close to the junction with Barnham Road and Hall Cottages as they were then known. In the cottages lived many of the boys I grew up with, boys from the ages of 6 years up to 16, many friendships were formed amongst all of us as dads were away in the war and we all had to pull together to help our family's. We made trucks with pram wheels and raced them down the Barnham Road luckily there was not much traffic about except military trucks. I remember as an eight year old in 1943 playing in the road when a German bomber was shot down, the pilot bailed out and landed in Level Mare Lane and the plane crashed in the old gravel pit in Eastergate Lane. Several of us got our trucks and as we knew a short cut to where the plane crashed arrived before the police, the plane had broken up and had scattered pieces all around, some of us took a lot of souvenirs, I took a smashed up machine gun and some bullets others took incendiary bombs, needless to say when we got home the police were called and took them away. As an eight year old with no Television to watch in those days, I knew the name of every plane that was flying, German and well as our own. In 1941 at the age of six I can remember looking out of my

bedroom window and seeing dozens of spitfires in a dramatic dog fight with German bombers who were attacking Tangmere Airfield which as it turned out was the biggest raid on Tangmere during the war, indoors we used to listen on our wireless to the pilots talking to each other whilst engaging the enemy. Towards the end of the war Lancaster Bombers were deployed at Tangmere and I can still hear the drone of their engines as each night they took off on their missions over Germany. My Father because he was a trained carpenter was called to work in the Dockyard in Portsmouth. He worked at the famous Vosper Thornycroft shipbuilding yard building the fastest motor torpedo boat of its day or MTBs as they were known. The Germans continually bombed Portsmouth and tried to take out the docks, and many a night dad did not come home because the trains were not running, sometimes it was days before we knew he was ok and coming home. Mum and dad were married in Eastergate church and are also buried there as well, along with my grandparents. Eastergate during the war years and just after had a Church Choir with 14 Choristers and 8 men singing Base, Baritone and Tenor. We had choir practise two nights a week with services on a Sunday Morning and Evening. Our Choir master was the formidable Ray Kingsmill who at that time was M/D of Barnham Nurseries. As choirboys we had to take turns on a Sunday to pump the bellows which worked the Church organ, there was a line on the back of the organ which a lead weight on a string was not allowed to fall below, if it did the organ would run out of air and an irate organ player would whisper more air please or words to that effect. In 1944 the BBC came to St George's and we were one of the first Choirs to be broadcast on Radio, from that broadcast three of the Choirboys one of them being myself were selected to sing in Westminster Abbey with the Westminster School of Music a great honour in those days, at that time Eastergate Choir was with Ray Kingsmill at the helm one of the best village choirs in the South of England.

One event that happened in Church lane in 1942 that stays with me vividly is when the Germans dropped a Land Mine at the back of Robinsons Nursery that fronted Church Lane. I was 7 years old at the time and remember the blast brought all our ceilings down, broke all the glass and did untold damage, just down the road from us it all but demolished a couple of Bungalows. The bomb crater was huge and to this day I could still go back the exact spot in Church lane where it fell. The Reverend Nash was the Vicar at the Church, in the forties, and the local Police Constable for Barnham and Eastergate was a PC Bates who lived in a police house on the corner of Elm Grove and the Barnham Road. PC Bates was a very firm PC but fair, and if he caught you scrumping apples he would march you to your parents' house and see you were properly dealt with. The local bus service was privately run by a Mister Will Walling * who was the local garage owner of the Irene Garage, located by the then named pub the Labour in Vain. His local bus was called the silver queen which ran

from Eastergate to Bognor. The service was taken over later by the Southdown Bus Co. These then are were a few of the so many memories of life in the Village of Eastergate in West Sussex during the war years of WW2

Roger Bennett

*Cecil Walling, not his brother Will who had the saddlery shop in Barnham Road, was proprietor of the Silver Queen bus service until December 1944 when he sold out to Southdown and took on the Irene Garage – for more information see the section on the Walling family.

Roger Bennett was the son of Stanley Bennett, a local builder, and Hilda Bennett, the youngest daughter of Rubin Ruff who sold fruit and vegetables for many years at the Barn, Church Lane. Hilda taught at Eastergate School for 15 years until she married Stanley in 1926. With her friend Rita Luff she organised many village events before, during and after the war, including concerts by Blackman's Concert Party and a VE Day street party for the children. See street party photo which shows Roger Bennett at the front.

Sandra Lowton