

John H Holt 1941-1948



John in 1947

War time recollections

I suppose that my first insight into Ripon Grammar School was when I sat for what I think was called the County Minor Scholarship exam. I know that my father who was the headmaster of the village school at Skelton-on-Ure was keen to get as many of his pupils as possible into the RGS; at which I think he was quite successful. I distinctly remember the essay that we were asked to write which said "Suppose you could change places with somebody, who would it be and why" or words to that effect. Anyway I was successful and the next stage was an interview with Mr Strachan in his study at the RGS. To a young boy of 11 he seemed to me quite a forbidding and stern man. However I survived the interview and started school there in September 1941.

We travelled to Ripon on the United bus from Skelton that left there at 8.30am. It came from Boroughbridge at which town and on the way through Langthorpe it picked up quite a lot of other boys going to the school. There were quite a number of us from Skelton and indeed included quite a lot of girls going to the High School; but that is another story as we got a little older!! The cost of the bus fare in those days was I think 4d return but school children had a bus pass that I have a feeling was provided free but by whom I'm not sure.

The bus stopped in the market square from where we had to walk to school and as you can imagine there was very little time to arrive in time for assembly in The Big School. It meant a very brisk walk and even then we could be late. If it was raining then we got very wet; but there was an alternative. If you stayed on the bus it used to go up Palace Road and through the Royal Engineers army camp and stopped outside the school about the same time as those who had walked.

Because of the shortage of petrol the buses quite often used to run on gas which was supplied to the engine from a container towed behind the bus. Also to accommodate more passengers the bus seating was changed so that the

seats were set parallel to the length of the bus. This way, although there was less seating accommodation there was more room in the centre that allowed people to stand; and so more people could be carried. At times the buses were very packed indeed!!

As petrol was rationed and only available to those who owned transport and used it for vital war work there were very few cars on the roads. Those that could not obtain a ration of petrol laid their cars up for the duration of the war and that is how my father's Morris 8 came to be standing on bricks in the garage with the wheels removed. They were kept in our spare bedroom and it was my job monthly to make sure that they were pumped up with a hand pump to the correct pressure in order to preserve them. Those vehicles that were allowed on the roads had to have their lights shielded by a circular metal frame with long slits in the centre and a cover above each slit that slanted the light downwards. This fitted into the vehicle light glass cover and only allowed the minimum of light to show so that it was not that apparent from above to any enemy planes. Also to try and ensure that they could be seen on the ground by passing traffic those vehicles with running boards had the edges painted white.

By September 1941 the Second World War was in its second year and we had already been issued with gas masks in case the Germans dropped gas bombs. In Skelton there were two detector boards that contained a green chemical and if there was gas about I think they changed colour depending on whether it was mustard gas or chlorine. We carried our gas masks to school in their cardboard boxes slung around our necks until the fear of gas became more remote; when they were left at home. Nevertheless in the winter when we arrived home at dusk that was the time when searchlights would be scanning the sky looking for enemy aircraft. The nearest we had to a fear of bombing was when a German bomber said to have lost his way dropped a single bomb on Dishforth aerodrome. We had not long been home and we were quickly ushered under our stairs that was deemed to be the safest place in the house. I think the nearest city to be bombed was York and although it is about 18

miles away from Skelton we could hear the noise in the distance. When there was an air raid expected the air raid wardens in Skelton would parade along the street blowing whistles. When it was deemed the danger had passed they would parade the street again ringing hand-bells to sound the "All Clear". In Ripon and larger towns there would be sirens that would sound with a warbling sound for a raid and a constant sound for an "All Clear". On a still night in Skelton we could hear the Ripon sirens.

Travelling to school by bus daily meant that we crossed the river Ure at Bridge Hewick and over a period of some weeks we saw something being constructed on the upriver side of the bridge. There was a concrete area made in the field on the left hand side of the river and a concrete ramp down into the river and another ramp out of the river on the other side. There was then a short concrete road to the main Ripon road on the Ripon side of the bridge and a concrete standing area on the other side of the road (the racecourse side). That concrete stand is still there, as are the ramps down

into the river. One morning as we passed over the bridge we saw that Sherman tanks had arrived and later some Churchills and Crusaders. We then saw them going down the ramps into the river and driving up and down the river practicing for the Normandy landing; although we didn't know the reason at that time. One morning as we crossed the bridge we could see that a Sherman upriver had fallen into a deep hole and the turret gun was pointing up into the air at a very steep angle. We hoped that the tank crew had got out of the tank in time before it filled with water.

The bus to Ripon came from Boroughbridge to Skelton and also often involved passing numerous army lorries and Bren gun carriers along the road and particularly along the Avenue down to the Newby Hall park gates. These in fact extended along the Mulwith Road and also into Newby park many times completely filling the park with vehicles and tents. We were told that the army was on manoeuvres although many years later it transpired that this was probably part of what was known as The Coates Mission. This mission was to provide for a number of houses, of which Newby Hall was one, to provide safety for the Royal Family should it become unsafe for them to stay in London because of the bombing. It became fairly common knowledge in the village that the Royal Family may well come to Newby but not that the army was there to familiarise themselves with the area for this reason. Newby Hall was surrounded by barbed wire and concrete pill boxes (machine gun posts). In

the very large fields along the river Ure which backs on to Newby Hall rows of wooden railway sleepers were erected vertically in long lines at frequent intervals to prevent aircraft from landing there.

Being near to Dishforth aerodrome meant that there was the constant drone of bomber aircraft and through the war years York aircraft were succeeded by Whitleys, Wellingtons, Halifaxes and Lancasters. Inevitably they returned from air raids having been shot up quite badly at times and there were numerous crashes around the area. One of these could be seen quite clearly from our bus in the morning where it had crashed into Moses Hill Plantation near to Givendale Grange on the way to Ripon. It was a Halifax crewed by Canadians and in fact crashed on take-off from Dishforth Sadly all were killed. Here perhaps I should mention what became known as the 1000 bomber raids on Germany that took place later during the war when bombers based in the UK leashed thousands of tons of bombs on German factories and railway marshalling yards in The Rhur etc.. At dusk we used to sit on the wall of our garden in Skelton and watch Lancasters and other bombers appear in a line of about 8 on the distant skyline. Almost before they had disappeared to the East overhead another line would appear; and so they came wave after wave. They certainly caused havoc on the places that were attacked and there has been a lot of controversy about the bombing of Dresden in particular where I have visited and seen the cathedral in the course of reconstruction. My personal feeling is that it brought the war to an earlier end than otherwise might have been the case and Bomber Command has only recently been recognised for its part in the war in which over 55,000 aircrew lost their lives; most of them young men in their 20s.

On one occasion there was a huge blazing fire that I could see from my bedroom window and it was obviously in the village. Everyone thought that an aircraft had crashed and indeed several fire engines came from Dishforth aerodrome thinking the same. As it was not an aeroplane they returned to Dishforth. It turned out it was an absolutely huge stack of wheat in a farm stackyard that was on fire and several other civilian fire engines turned up. They emptied a nearby static water tank that had been built specifically for putting out fires created by enemy incendiary bombs and then emptied a local pond. That not being enough they had to take their hoses all the way down to the river Ure about a mile away! The fire was eventually extinguished but not before it had destroyed the whole stack together with the threshing machine standing at the side to begin threshing the next day. The cause of the fire was at first thought to have been due to a 5th columnist in the locality starting it deliberately but in the end it was thought it was a carelessly thrown away cigarette end that had blown against the dry stack and fanned into flames by the wind that night. What a careless loss of food for the vital war effort.

School finished at 4pm and as the bus left from the market square at 4.30pm that meant another brisk walk, and sometimes a run, to catch the bus. If we missed it there was another that left a little later but that one went along the B6265 and along what we called the top road to Boroughbridge via Kirby Hill. We would get off it just past the Marton le Moor lane end and tramp along a footpath, cutting across the fields to Skelton. It was quite a long and sometimes muddy walk much to the chagrin of our parents.

I don't know what students use now but we carried our books etc in a satchel again slung across our shoulders and this could be quite heavy at times when trying to get to school on time. Latterly in the 6th Form I used a small attaché case.

Food during the war, (and indeed for some years after the war) was rationed of course and in the early days my parents made sandwiches for our lunch and we sat in The Big School to eat them. Later on a hot lunch was provided and it was taken in a hut near to the carpentry hut that was behind where the present reception area is sited. Later still we were provided with lunch that was taken with the boarders and we had to queue along the corridor before making our way into the dining room. In those days corporal punishment was the order of the day and whilst queuing there I was pushed by another boy and fell right in front of Miss Bayley the maths mistress who claimed I was fighting and as a result got the cane from Mr Freeth, the French master! You didn't argue in those days.

Speaking of rationing, food rationing was very strict although in some cases there were some "under the counter" purchases as they were called. In the countryside we didn't suffer as much as those in the towns as we could keep hens and most families at least in our village kept a pig in their back yard. This was encouraged by the government as a means of supplying people with fresh meat. Pig Clubs came into existence to obtain bulk feed for the pigs. Also when a pig was slaughtered it was impossible to preserve the offal for future use so it was cut up; made into parcels and distributed around the village to others who kept pigs. When their pig was slaughtered the

compliment was returned. Many families had 2 hams and 2 sides of bacon hanging in their larders with much of the other smaller joints preserved in brine.

Sweets were rationed too but we used to make our own by mixing a tin of condensed milk with powdered milk and rolling the mixture into small balls. They were very sweet but good. Also often if we had time just before our bus left for home we would dash into a greengrocer's shop and buy dried bananas. These were horrible looking brown things but they did taste of banana. The other thing that was available from the pharmacist was glucose tablets that also took the place of sweets. The third of a pint of milk that we enjoyed at junior school was still available at RGS and as prefects we used to be in charge of handing out the bottles from the step at the base of the clock tower at the morning break. Any full bottles that were left were quickly consumed by the prefects in charge and at that time it was full cream milk so we all thought it tasted extremely good.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill made some very inspirational speeches but at the outbreak of war and during the first year or so food was becoming more scarce as ships bringing food to us from abroad were being sunk by U-boats. (German submarines) Even bread became rationed and we were exhorted to try and produce our own food. Dig for Victory was the slogan and people worked very hard on their gardens and allotments.

Ration books held coupons that had to be surrendered for a set amount of food and as the supply of clothing material became more difficult to obtain the books also held coupons the surrender of which had to be made to buy clothing. In Ripon Jacksons the clothing shop in Westgate was a designated shop for the supply of the RGS uniform and the supply was of course limited by the availability of clothing coupons. My mother used to knit my jerseys and pullovers that had the RGS colours along the bottom hem.

As the war progressed it was evident that raw material was becoming in short supply for the production of tanks and other weaponry including aircraft. We were exhorted to collect as much as we could of any iron, steel and aluminium. As a local boy scout in the Skelton troop we were sent round to knock on the doors of everyone in the village to collect these metals. Everyone was extremely patriotic to the extent that they were donating aluminium teapots and other domestic items to be broken up for the war effort. It was also vital that the government acquired funds for war expenditure and my father and someone else in the village vied with each other on a friendly basis to see who could sell the most National Savings stamps and National Savings Certificates. The same exhortation applied to the collection of paper and the Scout room where we met regularly had a heap of paper for collection to help with the war effort.

Turning to sport I was never much good at cricket much to the disappointment of my father. However I did enjoy rugby and after playing for the Colts I graduated to the First XV as a regular player. We enjoyed many good games winning a lot and losing some; I hope with good grace. Leeds Grammar School was always a hard match whilst Ashville at Harrogate was considered

an easy win! One school we did enjoy going to was Ampleforth College as after the match we were entertained to a good meal We were taken to the away matches in a coach and it was traditional on the return that we used to sing popular songs of the day. The last one as we arrived back in Ripon however was always the same; called "I'll be your sweetheart, if you will be mine" That always went down very well. How memories come flooding back!!