

A Picture of the Age: 1849-1999

Written by Graham Citrine to celebrate the 150th anniversary of Christ Church

Chapter Four: 1924-1949

.We are now entering an age which will be within the experience of a great many of us - a time of our childhood and our youth, and therefore a time, perhaps, of real nostalgia, for these were our 'Good Old Days'. Again, my apologies if some fondly remembered event is only mentioned briefly or not at all.

The 1920's were a time of real optimism: people really believed that the Great War was a 'War to end all Wars'. The great powers seemed to have settled their age-old problems and differences. At Locarno in 1924 the western powers agreed to respect their frontiers (though, significantly, Germany did not accept her eastern frontiers). In 1927, the Kellogg-Briand Pact saw an agreement by all signatories never to use war as an instrument of policy. Germany was accepted into the League of Nations as an equal, and the League was seen as a real hope for a peaceful settlement of all quarrels - old enemies seemed to be making a valiant effort to understand other points of view. In the same vein, nearer at home, in 1929 the coming-of-age of the Boy Scout Movement was celebrated with a Jamboree in Arrowe Park, Birkenhead having seen the first Scout Troop in the world being formed at the YMCA in Grange Road. [(My Scout Master, John Dudleston, had been a Patrol Leader in that first troop!)] Boys from every country in the world came together and it was believed that if the nations' youth buried their differences then peace and understanding on an international scale was possible. Britain was spending less on armaments than at any time over the past 60 years.

It was a time for young people: the war had robbed the elders of all respect and authority - they had been the ones who had been the statesmen or generals who had led them to war, it had been the young who had died! Whereas the old might wish for a return to pre-war conditions, the young disagreed. The restrictions of the Victorian age were swept away: the 'bright young things', having survived the slaughter, were determined to enjoy life and they reacted against all the restrictions of the past. Ladies' dresses, which throughout history (no matter how outrageous the top half) had always been long enough to cover the ankles, now rose to above the knee, achieving a shortness not to be seen again until the 1960's. Stockings, which had been black or grey, were now daringly 'nude' or 'flesh-coloured'. Many young girls accepted the new fashion for the boyish look -figures were flattened, the waist disappeared, tight corsetting was a thing of the past. The Edwardian hair style of elaborate curls disappeared, to be replaced with the 'bob' - or even the 'Eton crop', when girls had their hair cut very short, plastered with Brilliantine to keep it flat to the head. Hats, from being huge creations of feathers and ribbons requiring careful adjustment before a mirror, were replaced by simple pull-on felt hats needing no adjustment. Make-up was now used, often in garish colours - plum reds, purples, even greens and blues - girls were determined to be noticed as being in revolt. Smoking too became a symbol of revolt, often using long holders so they had to be noticed. Young men too were in revolt: in place of the tight, figure-hugging suits, high starched collars, heavy pocket watch, etc. of the past, there came the soft cotton shirt with turned down collar, the sports jacket, and the new 'Oxford' bags - wide-legged trousers with each leg up to 48 inches in circumference, followed later by 'plus-fours', worn with brightly coloured stockings and a large soft cap, and wearing a wrist watch! The full evening dress of tails, white tie and starched shirt was replaced by the short dinner jacket with black tie and soft

shirt - the Prince of Wales being in the forefront of fashion made this acceptable. Both sexes enjoyed the new frenetic dances imported from the U.S.A. - the Foxtrot, Charleston, Black Bottom, Bunny Hug - all danced to the music of the American South, the negro-based music of jazz. Older people looked on horrified but helpless, they no longer had the authority to impose their standards.

Another effect of the war was that domestic servants were fewer in number. Young girls who had entered the factories during the war enjoyed the higher wages and greater freedom this afforded them; new industries in electronics, etc., offered opportunities for women rather than men. Indeed, what unemployment there was usually suffered by men rather than women. Middle class ladies increasingly found that they had to do their own housework, or perhaps have a cleaning lady in for two or three hours a week. This led to a demand to make housework easier, and in the 1920's we see the growing use of vacuum cleaners, washing machines, gas or electric fires replacing the difficult-to-light coal fires, convenience foods (ready-made cake mixtures, etc.). Domestic service, of course, did not end completely, and I can remember walking along Shrewsbury Road in the 1930's and seeing the housemaids busily cleaning the huge houses along that road - when war came in 1939, most of these wealthy families left Birkenhead and did not return, the houses were turned into flats with a shifting population, and Christ Church lost a large proportion of its older congregation.

In general, the 1920's were a time of relative prosperity as the world recovered from the War and changed from a war-time to a peace-time economy. The techniques of mass-production used in the war now produced the cars, radios, household goods demanded by the people, and at a lower price. There was some unemployment in the old 'heavy' industries - shipbuilding, iron and steel, and there was also a surplus of coal as Europe tried to export its coal into Britain. To offset this threat, the coal owners believed that huge amounts of cheap British coal would guard their market. They proposed therefore to force miners to work longer hours for less pay and this led to the major industrial problem of the decade - the General Strike.

Neither the Government nor the Trades Union Congress wanted this to happen - both sides tried to negotiate. All attempts failed before the intransigent attitudes of both sides. The Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, said he had never met anybody so obstinate and so stupid as the miners' leaders - until he met the coal owners! To any offer to the miners, their president, a dour Yorkshireman, Herbert Smith, said simply "Nowt doin'": their secretary, A.J. Cook said, "Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day." The miners and the owners both wanted total victory, not a settlement; the miners expected the rest of the British workforce to support them. In May 1926, with huge stocks of coal in hand and the coming of summer, the miners were locked out. Reluctantly the TUC brought out the Railway workers in support - and soon all workers affiliated to the Trade Union movement. To some, this was a direct challenge by six million workers to a democratically elected government. Winston Churchill wanted to send in the Army (his solution to any problem was to fight - which made him a great war leader but a disaster in peacetime). Baldwin, a much wiser man who had a great deal of sympathy for the miners, refused, giving Churchill the task of editing the "British Gazette", the Government newspaper of the strike. The strikers were restricted because their printers were on strike and therefore they had no papers to put their point of view. Most workers gave only reluctant support; they could see that if the strike were prolonged then their own employers might be forced into closure, leading to widespread unemployment. Also, the strike had little impact at first - miners should not strike in summer to win their case (they were to make the same error in 1984!): a great deal of supplies, both of food and of fuel, were now able to be sent by road - there were plenty of volunteers willing to drive lorries, trains and buses - there was almost a holiday atmosphere. Talk of revolution on the Russian scale quickly disappeared when it

was learnt that strikers were helping to unload food supplies for the poor in the North East, while on the Saturday of the strike football matches between strikers and police took place - Plymouth Argyle offered the use of its ground and people came in free of charge; on the Sunday, all took their traditional day off. A face-saving compromise was arranged between Owners and TUC leaders, the miners refused to accept and continued on strike for a further six months, until hunger and poverty forced them to return. The General Strike itself was over after nine days. The Strike brought in men such as Ernest Bevin and Walter Citrine, who urged working with employers, conciliation rather than confrontation. As a result, even during the worst of the 1930's depression British workers who kept their jobs did not see cuts in pay as happened elsewhere in Europe and the USA. Employers too preferred to compromise rather than risk closure. By 1929 wages were stable, but the cost of living had fallen by more than 15 points: the British working man was buying the radios, even the cheap cars now coming onto the market, and throughout the Thirties prices generally were lower than before 1914.

At the end of 1929, however, the Great Depression began. Its causes are complicated, but put very simply, Europe, since the War, had relied on American loans. America refused to accept goods as payments for these loans, demanding instead repayment in gold. The result was that though Europe seemed to have full employment, countries were not becoming richer - any surplus wealth was sent to the USA. In 1929, America saw her stock market collapse; people were buying stock, seeing it rise in value, selling to make a profit, then buying more stock, assuming it would always continue to rise. In October 1929, prices of shares plummeted, people who had taken out loans could not repay, banks became bankrupt, loans to Europe ceased, so that by 1930 massive unemployment developed in Germany, Italy, France, and, to a lesser degree, Britain. On Merseyside, the 1930's slump is remembered because there was a fall in demand for shipping - on the Mersey, Clyde, Tyne, wherever ships were built, there were huge numbers of unemployed. Often the only people working in a home were the women, who might have poorly paid work in department stores, or as cleaning ladies. Men, from being the wage-earner and home provider, became dependent on the wife or daughter for weekly 'spends' or pocket money - a most humiliating situation. In the Midlands and the South, where the new industries in car manufacture and electronics were growing, there was almost full employment. Fortunately, Neville Chamberlain had closed the workhouses, so that 'dole' money and Public Assistance was paid, albeit in very small amounts and then only after the dreaded humiliation of the Means Test. This was the age of the Jarrow March and other hunger marches, until finally the Government realised that help had to be given.

The opportunity came with the new outburst of nationalism in Europe: the Depression had led to the dictatorships in Italy, and later in Germany, claiming their superiority over others by 'victories' in every sphere. This was shown in the new transatlantic liners being built. Up to 1929 the Blue Riband for the fastest Atlantic crossing had been held by the venerable Cunarder 'Mauretania', built before the Great War. Now, the Italian 'Rex' took the title, only to lose it shortly after to the German 'Bremen'. The French replied with the 'Normandie', possibly the most luxurious liner ever to sail the Atlantic. Britain seemed out of the race. Here was the government's chance: the huge '534' building on the Clyde was given government aid for its completion. There is an interesting story regarding its name, which I am assured is true: Cunard had always used names ending in '...ia' for their ships - hence 'Lusitania', 'Scythia', etc, and they decided to call this ship 'Victoria'. They approached the King and asked if they could name their ship after 'the most gracious and beloved Queen of this country'. The King, George V, replied that he was delighted and that his wife would feel flattered at the honour, so it became the 'Queen Mary', which on its first voyage took the record and held it until the end of the 1960's when the record became irrelevant as air liners took over the Atlantic crossing. In Birkenhead, a government grant led to the building

and completion of the huge battlecruiser 'Renown' a sister to 'Repulse', beautiful ships, but lacking the armour to fight against a major battleship. This was followed by an order for the largest liner built in an English shipyard, the 'Mauretania, the first purpose-built aircraft carrier, the 'Ark Royal'. and later the great battleship, 'Prince of Wales'. I was privileged to see all of these ships launched. To all intents, these orders meant that the slump in Birkenhead was over.

To live in the 1930's, if one had work, was a good time to live. Prices were in general much lower than in 1914, while wages had certainly risen. A new house in the London suburbs with three bedrooms, gardens, garage, etc, would cost £550, or £5 deposit and payments of 12/6d a week (I will no longer translate into decimal coinage - that is an exercise for those interested). An oak bedroom suite would cost £15/15/- or 9/- a month. Cigarettes were 6d for ten, beer 4d a pint. Clothing was cheap - 'Weaver to Wearer' and the '50/- Tailor' had shops in Grange Road supplying good cheap clothing to the people. For a 'best' suit, one went to Burton's, where a tailor-made suit with two pairs of trousers and waistcoat might cost as much as £6/10/-. Ladies' clothing was equally cheap - coats for winter at 39/11d, shoes 5/6d, silk stockings 1/6d (rather expensive and therefore a tragedy if they 'laddered' - for everyday wear, lisle stockings at 6d or 9d a pair were preferred). A week's holiday in a boarding house in North Wales, full board for a family of four, was £4. Even the longest bus journey seldom cost more than 3d, and most people travelled by bus. There were cars and they were cheap - Austin and Morris both selling cars for the family at £100. Larger saloon cars built by Vauxhall, Riley, Wolsey and others might cost as much as £235 - but they were for the rich. In the whole country there were only about 2 million motor vehicles, and more than 80% of these were in the affluent South.

The side roads in Birkenhead seldom if ever saw a motor car, unless the doctor came to call. As a result, the streets were the children's playground, and I am sure this will bring back fond memories. Games and pastimes seldom seen now filled our playtime hours:- bowling a hoop through deserted side-streets, learning to roller skate in total safety, skipping (two mums would have a washing-line stretched across the street, they would turn the rope and six or more children would skip in it together - the skill, which I never achieved, was to run in as the rope was turning and get into the rhythm of skipping immediately), marbles ('alleys' in Birkenhead) played along the gutter; and playing two (or ever three) balls against the wall - chiefly for girls, who could master this skill much better than boys. With these were a whole series of rhymes and songs to be used whilst one was skipping or playing ball. I was tempted to include some here, but space does not allow it; but I do feel that these should be written down before they become forgotten - a series for a future magazine perhaps! Street cricket with its own very strict rules - one hand off the wall when catching was out; over a wall was '6 and out' - the batsman having the task of retrieving the ball. Knocking and asking if one knew the householder, more daringly climbing the wall if one was unsure of reception; any unpleasant person would be punished by the ritual of 'ringing the bell and running away'. A corner house was the traditional meeting place where games would be planned, sides picked (again, more rhymes for choosing who would be 'it'). There were 'seasons' for games or activities - how they started nobody knew, but start they did - a time for top-and-whip, for hopscotch, marbles, bowling of hoops -all were cheap, all required considerable amounts of energy.

There was reading - the library was free - and there were the comics. For young children, 'Tiger Tim's Weekly', Enid Blyton's 'Sunny Stories', the famous 1d comics of the previous century - 'Chips', 'Comic Cuts', 'Funny Wonder', but now joined by the 2d comics 'Film Fun', 'Radio Fun', and a whole series of D.C. Thompson comics - 'Hotspur', 'Rover', 'Skipper', 'Adventure', 'Wizard'. Looking again at my copies I marvel at the amount of reading matter - at least 26 pages of close print, three columns to the page, with the most wonderful stories - 'Buffalo Bill's Schooldays', 'The Traitor of the Team', etc. For girls there

was 'Peg's Paper', 'The Girl's Crystal', again 5 or 6 stories, very few pictures. In 1937 came 'The Dandy' and in 1938 'The Beano' -both still in print, but not as they were. Each had at least six small-print stories, plus the cartoon characters who have entered our culture - 'Keyhole Kate', 'Desperate Dan', 'Hungry Horace', 'Lord Snooty'. Nobody was rich enough to buy all these comics; instead, all of one's gang bought one of them, read it, then began the system of 'swaps' - by the time all comics had been circulated the next editions were on the market. American comics could also be bought at the Birkenhead Market and I was fortunate in having an aunt in America who regularly sent me the garish comic books - 'Batman', 'Superman', 'Captain Marvel' - these gave me an awesome status in the swapping trade!

Newspapers as always had their circulation wars; in the 1930's there were about a dozen daily papers and on Sunday, 10 papers. Apart from the 'Daily Mirror and the 'Daily Sketch', all the papers were broad sheets; on Sunday, the 'Sunday Pictorial' was the only tabloid, the rest were broad sheets. In addition, there were magazines - 'Everybody's Weekly', 'John Bull', 'Picture Post', 'Illustrated'. In order to sell, they all had offers at different times - my bookshelf has the complete works of Dickens, My Father-in-law has the Waverley Novels of Sir Walter Scott; I also have the 'News Chronicle' music book of 'Old Tyme Variety Songs', and the 'Daily Express' edition of 'Songs that won the War' - and I know all of them for it was my father's practice every Sunday afternoon to have my sister and I on his knee and together we would sing through the books while Mum made the tea. I'm sure also that many older readers will remember 'Lobby Lud' - the character created I seem to remember by the 'News Chronicle' - he would visit a different seaside resort each day, his silhouette would be in the paper, and if recognised, one would have to have a copy of the newspaper in one's hand and approach him and say 'You are Lobby Lud and I claim my £10' (it might have been more or less, I can't remember exactly). I know that we were holidaying in North Wales when it was reported that he would be in Llandudno; accordingly, the whole family went to Llandudno for the day, armed with the Chronicle - needless to say we saw nobody we could swear to be Lobby Lud, though I am sure many innocent and bemused holidaymakers were accosted.

Radio was a major home entertainment, licence fee, 10/- (50p) - the BBC, under the genius of John Reid, a dour Scots Presbyterian - became the most respected radio corporation in the world, chiefly because Reid ignored any government attempt to control his empire. Unlike radio anywhere in Europe, the BBC could be guaranteed to speak the truth, no matter how unpopular this might make it with the politicians. It also had dignity - when George V was dying in January 1936, Reid's beautifully phrased "The King's life is drawing peacefully to its close" was a sentence of sheer poetry. (Compare it with the 19th century Poet Laureate A. Austin's offering on the illness of the Prince of Wales: "Across the wire the electric message came, He is no better, he is much the same." and one can appreciate the contribution to our heritage of John Reid. He disdained to give people what they might want (this was the problem in the USA where commercial radio catered only for what was popular), instead, he gave them what he thought they should have. A study of BBC programmes shows a mix of light variety (early broadcasts were from the Argyle Theatre, Birkenhead), symphony concerts, serious talks such as 'The Brains Trust', regular news bulletins at set hours: suitable programmes for a Sunday were cello quartets, symphony concerts, at least two church services and for light relief, and I am sure many will remember this, Palm Court Hotel with Albert Sandler playing the violin - but this was after 8 p.m. so that there was no excuse to miss Evening Service. On every weekday, there was Children's Hour from 5 o'clock with its 'uncles and aunties'. I still have my Uncle Mac's Children's Hour Annual with stories about Larry the Lamb and articles by 'Nomad' concerning the English countryside. We looked forward eagerly to 'Monday Night at Eight' which included 'Inspector Hornby Investigates' - the clue to solving the mystery was given

at the end; one preened oneself if the solution had been worked out beforehand.

Outside entertainment was provided by the cinema: the movies had been replaced by the 'talkies' in 1927 and film stars became the new aristocracy. To go to the cinema was sheer escapism - for 6d one was admitted to a sort of palace, uniformed servants opened the door for you, another servant showed you to your seat, in the interval yet another servant brought a tray of sweets or ices for you to choose, and for two and a half hours you could sit back in a plush velvet seat and be entertained. Films were usually escapist - light comedies, musicals with a rags-to-riches story, pleasant foot-tapping songs, and one could be sure that good always triumphed, nobody ever profited from crime, the 'baddies' were obviously bad, the 'goodies' obviously good. In cowboy films the hero never shot a man in the back, never hit below the belt or kicked, and always gave his opponent the chance to draw first. To us today, they might appear naive or unreal, but they were simple morality tales for most young people and they did give us a standard to measure ourselves by, and therefore should be admired. For children, there were the Saturday afternoon matinees - usually a broad comedy, a cowboy film and always a serial - Flash Gordon was a favourite and after the show it was the custom to fasten one's blue gaberdine 'mac at the throat as a sort of cloak and swagger along the street as Buster Crabbe had done in the role of Flash Gordon. The cowboys were our heroes - Buck Jones and his horse, 'Silver,' Tom Mix and his horse, 'Tony', the handsome and much admired Ken Maynard - but we had less admiration for Gene Autrey because he would insist on singing to the detriment of the action we demanded. Autrey died in 1998, the last of the 1930's cowboys. At one time, there were 17 cinemas in Birkenhead, each often showing two different films every week, and all playing to packed houses, particularly at weekends

Sport, as always, provided entertainment. In 1926 England won the Ashes, with Jack Hobbs, possibly the finest batsman ever, scoring a century. In the 1930's the appearance of Don Bradman, 'a run machine', won them back for Australia. England regained the Ashes in the notorious 'body-line' tour, when Larwood was told to bowl 'bouncers' at the Australians, who could not deal with them. Such was the anger, Australia threatened to leave the Empire. Ordered to halt the onslaught, Larwood still defeated the Australians and the Ashes were won. At the Oval in 1938 came Hutton's magnificent 364 in an England total of 903 for 7 to defeat Australia by an innings and 579 runs - I doubt if we shall ever see the like again. Ironically, ten years later Hutton was again England's highest scorer at the Oval when he scored 30 in an England total of 52! This was Bradman's last match and he was cheered all the way to the wicket only to be bowled for 0 - it was said that he could not see the ball for tears.

In the thirties, Jules Rimet organised the World Cup in Association Football - England disdained to enter, preferring to wait until the competition was over, then playing the winners (and defeating them).

1934 was a great year for English tennis - England won both the Ladies' and the Men's Championships at Wimbledon when Fred Perry and Dorothy Round both won. Perry was to win again in 1935 and 1936. It appears unlikely that England will ever produce such players again!

The 1920's and 1930's were also the age when aeroplanes began to make the headlines with intrepid flyers undertaking hazardous trips to far-flung parts of the world - to South Africa, India and Australia. Britain won the Schneider Trophy outright in 1930 when a plane designed by R.J. Mitchell won the trophy for seaplanes for the third time - Mitchell used the experience he gained to design the Spitfire in the 1930's. I'm sure many will remember how we used to run outside if we heard an aeroplane flying overhead, and this led to the practice of 'sky-writing' - a small bi-plane would write a slogan across the sky, usually a well-known article being advertised, it was most effective for hundreds would watch trying

to guess the product as it was written, and we would stand afterwards waiting to see how long it took before it disappeared; sky-writing, I'm afraid, is now almost a lost art. But the one who won the public's attention was a heroine – Amy Johnson – who in 1928 had learned to fly tiny De Havilland 'Moths', paying £2 an hour for her first lessons, she also learned to become an air-mechanic, maintaining the planes she flew. Her longest flight after obtaining her licence in 1929 was from London to her home town of Hull, but she had her dreams. In 1930, she bought a second-hand single-engined Gipsy Moth which she christened 'Jason', she taught herself map-reading and basic meteorology. On Monday, 5th May 1930, she took off from Croydon Aerodrome early on the morning, arriving in Vienna in time for tea, and to huge acclaim; the next day she headed for Constantinople, sustained by a packet of sandwiches and a thermos of tea. Crossing the middle eastern desert, she ran into a sand storm and had to put down in the desert until the danger passed, she then flew on to Baghdad and from there to Karachi, beating the previous record for the flight to India by two days. She now flew to Calcutta, to Singapore, to Java, where she had to make an emergency landing on a sugar estate, and where bamboo made holes in the fabric of the plane's wings, to be patched up with sticking plaster from her First Aid kit. Two days later, she was in Australia, to the plaudits of the whole world, particularly from the British. She returned to Britain a heroine, and to a cheque for £10,000. We have to remember that in those days, few air fields existed, and even fewer had qualified mechanics – Amy Johnson had to do all her own repairs. Also, of course, there were none of the modern navigational aids – no radio, no satellite links – flyers literally 'flew by the seat of their pants'. Throughout the 1930's, she continued to make solo flights to Cape Town and back again, she married another flyer, Jim Mollinson, though the marriage did not last. When war came she ferried planes for the RAF and in January 1941, was lost over the Thames Estuary, an ironic end for a woman who had flown over the uncharted, shark-infested waters of the Coral Sea to die flying over possibly the best charted waters of the British Isles and well within the sight of land, a fitting end to a genuine heroine: her plane, 'Jason', can still be seen in the Kensington Science Museum.

In 1936 the Olympic Games were held in Berlin and for the first time Nationalist politics intruded. Until then, the Games had been, in De Coubertin's words, "for the glory of sport". Now, on Adolf Hitler's orders, they were for the glory of Germany. Superbly organised, they were spoilt for Hitler when an American Negro, Jesse Owen, won four Gold medals, overshadowing all the achievements of the German athletes who led the medals table. Hitler was to be equally furious when the German Heavyweight champion, Max Schmelling, was knocked out in the first round by the American Negro, Joe Louis. The 'Master Race' theory was shown to be nonsense.

Other stories in the news in the 30's were the crash of the huge airship 'R 101', which burst into flames on its maiden flight, killing most on board and ending for ever Britain's interest in airships. They had been seen as the easiest way of transporting large numbers of passengers quickly over long distances and indeed Germany persevered with the huge 'Hindenberg' until that too was destroyed by fire in 1938. In 1936, the Crystal Palace was destroyed by fire (I can never understand how a building of iron and glass could burn), removing one of the great 19th century marvels.

In that same year, 1936, Britain was rocked by problems with the Royal Family. In January, George V, who had celebrated his Silver Jubilee the year before with great rejoicing, street parties, etc., died. He was a much loved Monarch, the first to make the now traditional Christmas radio broadcast. He was succeeded by the very popular Edward, Prince of Wales, who became Edward VIII. Edward was the most travelled prince in history, loved throughout the Empire. However, unknown to the people, he had formed a liaison with an

American divorcee, Mrs Wallis Simpson. The friendship was known throughout the world, but the British Press remained silent. Therefore the shock to the people was immense when, at the beginning of December, it finally reached the papers after the Bishop of Bradford, in a sermon, criticised the King's conduct. Edward believed that his popularity with the people would see him through, but his Prime Minister, Baldwin, knew that though the people might accept a mistress hiding behind the euphemism of 'friend', they would never accept a Queen Wallis, nor would the Empire. Edward had a choice - give up Mrs Simpson or give up the Throne! It is remarkable how quickly children react to these situations -the news broke on December 4th and within two or three days there was a street rhyme:

"Who's this coming down the street?
Mrs Simpson, sweaty feet,
She's been married twice before,
Now she's knocking at Edward's door."

On Friday 11th December, having signed away the throne the day before, the new Prince Edward, Duke of Windsor, broadcast to the nation and to the Empire stating that he found it "impossible to carry out the heavy burden of responsibility . . . without the help and support of the woman I love." His successor would be his brother George, Duke of York, who became George VI. Many saw the Abdication as the beginning of the end of the monarchy; instead, it probably saved it, for the new shy king and his delightful wife were possibly the most beloved royals ever to occupy the throne.

The Abdication seemed to have another effect - Edward had been the leader of the 'Bright Young Things'. In 1936, he showed that he was a middle-aged man who could not accept responsibility - he had, in effect, 'run away'. The young generation saw the danger into which they were heading, they needed to face facts, accept responsibility, for the international scene was becoming alarming.

Throughout the 1930's there were growing signs of future problems: the dictators of Germany and Italy were becoming increasingly active, and in Britain Sir Oswald Moseley's British Union of Fascists was making itself noticed - though never to the degree where one was ever elected to Parliament. Britain and France, leaders of the Free World, tried to ignore the dangers, their peoples did not want war, which they saw as being more terrible than the previous slaughter. In 1935 Hitler's Germany began to re-arm after leaving the League of Nations; in 1936 Germany invaded the Rhineland; in 1938 Austria was forced into union with Germany. In all these matters Britain and France did nothing. The new policy was 'Appeasement' - avoid war no matter what the price. In 1936, the Spanish Civil War seemed to herald what might happen to us should we become involved the bombing of Guernica seemed to underline the possible dangers if our own cities were heavily bombed from the air. I well remember Christmas 1937 when a large number of Spanish children came here to escape, temporarily, the horrors of civil war in their own country. They came to accept and to enjoy whatever their friendly hosts provided - unfortunately they had never experienced the full horror of an English children's party. Quickly they realised, as they politely ate the sandwiches provided, that English children saw these not as food but as ammunition to throw at all and sundry; jellies in those small paper cases we used to have were an especially effective weapon and perfect missiles as they splattered most satisfactorily into faces and hair. Add to this one of my uncles who had never grown up and who took great delight in sticking jam tarts on any unprotected nose and one can understand why, after the meal, all were covered with crumbs, jelly, jam cake etc. and looking somewhat shell-shocked. But of course, there was worse to come - organised games! Whatever game was played, it always degenerated into complete mayhem: one I remember was 'Oranges and Lemons' where, as we all know, when 'caught' one chose to be an 'orange' or a 'lemon'. It ended with most of the Spanish children on one side, and

the English on the other, but with a significant difference – the English knew what to do, the Spaniards didn't!. The two lines began the traditional tug-of-war, except of course that the English knew exactly when to release the hold and stop pulling - immediately, all of the Spanish children were left sprawling on the floor where once again they were attacked with any missiles available. I am quite certain that they were glad to return to the relative peace and normality of their civil war. Equally, I often wonder if any of these - they will be in the late 60's or 70's now - remember that party – possibly it will help them to understand the excesses of the English holidaymaker in Spain today. In September 1938 Hitler turned his attention to Czechoslovakia, demanding the province of Sudetenland. France had an alliance to defend the Czechs if attacked, Britain was France's ally. At Munich, in September 1938, Britain and France agreed to give Germany what she asked on condition that she would make no further demands. The policy of 'Appeasement' was in full flow – but politicians too often fail to realise that appeasement can only work from a position of strength – show the potential trouble-maker that you are the master, then agree to concessions, stressing to the other side that these are concessions which can be withheld if there is any dispute. When agreeing to concessions from a position of weakness, there is always the probability that the aggressor will continue to demand more. Chamberlain came home to a hero's welcome - he has since been condemned, but we have to remember that both Labour and Conservatives had refused to arm Britain in the 1930's and in 1938 Britain was in no condition to fight a major European war. Also, Chamberlain was doing what the people manifestly wanted - he gave them peace. He also gained an extra year for Britain to re-arm, and Britain did at last modernise her forces. Unemployment in the ship yards fell away as Admiralty orders were received - I'm sure that many will remember the tragedy of the 'Thetis' in June 1939 when a Laird's built submarine was lost in Liverpool Bay because of a careless oversight with the painting, which had blocked a tiny inspection hole. More than 40 Laird's workers were lost with the crew. I can remember the lights burning late in a neighbour's house that first Saturday in June as a wife and daughter waited for news of a father and son both aboard the submarine, and the awful announcement on the radio - "The Admiralty regrets . . ."

In March 1939 Hitler had broken the Munich Agreement and most realised that war was now probably certain. Cigarette cards advised how to make a room gas proof, how to dig a trench against aerial attack, taught basic first aid. We speak glibly about Britain 'muddling through', but in 1939 plans were made to issue everybody with gas masks, to evacuate all schoolchildren to places of safety, to construct suitable shelters for those who wanted them - all of these were successfully put into operation as soon as war came. The great fears were of attack from the air - 'the bomber will always get through' was accepted belief, and Germany had a huge bomber fleet. Gas was the other great fear. It had been used devastatingly in the Great War in the trenches; how much worse it would be in Britain's over-crowded cities! In the event, neither side used gas as a weapon - but the fear was there! Gas was a very real fear and it says much to the credit of the government that there were sufficient gas masks for all the population; I well remember an auntie with a young baby who had been issued with a baby respirator – a large rubber contrivance into which the baby had to be inserted and fastened in, then air was filtered in via a hand-bellows. Understandably, the struggling child was unwilling to be put into a smelly, hot container and she fought violently: my poor auntie was in tears as she contemplated the prospect of trying to put the baby into its respirator, ensuring it was airtight by restricting the violently kicking limbs which kept forcing open the fastenings, putting on her own mask and pumping filtered air to keep the baby alive – and all of this during a terrifying gas-attack. Fortunately, the danger never manifested itself – gas was never used !

In August 1939 Hitler made an agreement with his arch-enemy, Communist Russia: Poland was helpless between them. On 1st September Poland was invaded and Britain

sent an ultimatum, which ran out at 11 a.m. on the 3rd September. I'm sure many will remember that sad voice of Neville Chamberlain as he announced at 11.15 a.m. ". . . no such undertaking has been received and consequently this country is at war with Germany."

On that weekend at the beginning of September, more than one and a half million children, many with their mothers, were evacuated: again, the organisation was incredible – inevitably, there were moments of confusion, but in general these 'evacuees' were moved hundreds of miles from the industrial towns to places of safety and accommodation found for them: and all of this in a matter of a few days. Again, for the most part, the new homes found provided kindness and shelter, though again there were stories of cruelty and insensitivity – these are the stories which are heard, the millions of those who found welcome and kindness do not make good stories in the popular press. Evacuation was not compulsory – it was left to the parents to decide. My parents had decided that my sister and I should go to a place of safety and on the evening of September 2, knowing that we were going away the next day, we were somewhat subdued. My closest school friend and his parents came over to wish us well, and in talking with my parents they said how they intended to keep their son at home – whereupon the lad had a satisfied smirk on his face, until they added, " if we're going to die, we'll all die together", whereupon the smile vanished and a look of real dismay replaced it – he was not too keen on dying with or without parents.

The first months of the war became known as the 'phoney war' because of the lack of fighting – indeed, I would suggest that there was more fighting between the English and the Welsh children in the village where I was evacuated than there was on the Western Front. I remember a report in the newspaper that the Minister for Air, Sir Kingsley Wood, forbade the bombing of German forests with incendiary bombs as this might damage private property !

We all took the war very seriously: I remember in the town where we were evacuated that there would be a practice Air Raid alert at midday – at the appointed time, most of the people were gathered outside the Market Hall where the Air Raid siren was installed. We were told that when the alarm sounded, we were to return to our homes and take shelter under the table, none of the houses in this part of Wales having shelters. The chairman of the Parish Council, accompanied by the local policemen marched up to the Hall to press the alarm. Then came that undulating wailing with which we were all to become so familiar later in the war; we duly clapped this evidence of efficiency then returned home to our shelter – and this I find now as completely bizarre – my sister and I, with our landlady proceeded, in all seriousness, to sit under the table to eat our lunch, seeing nothing ridiculous in our situation.

The war gave new opportunities to those who revelled in officiousness – the Air Raid warden in 'Dad's Army' was a fair picture of many at this time. Again, in our small Welsh town, there was one warden only and to him the black-out was a heaven –sent chance to underline his power . he would be seen prowling the streets after dark, peering closely at the windows. Any sign of a glimmer of light, probably totally invisible beyond three feet, and only visible if one crouched down to spot it under the thick curtains which most people had, and he would hammer on the door and demand that a member of the household come out to view the offence, with threats of official action if such an occurrence happened again. As the light could not even be seen from the edge of the pavement, the chances of its being seen by a German plane flying at several thousand feet were remote, nevertheless we had to comply – it was his moment of glory.

To attempt to give the history of the war would be impossible: suffice to say that both Britain and France tried to re-run the Great War, whereas Germany used new tactics.

France had built the Maginot Line, a magnificent system of trenches and heavy guns. "Like a battleship on land", said one British general, "and just as useless". They refused to believe that nobody wins a war by sitting still and waiting for the enemy to attack. In 1940 the Germans simply went round and over it, the British were forced to retreat at Dunkirk, and France was forced to accept an armistice. Apart from a wonderful victory over the Italians, Britain suffered a series of defeats until August 1942. By then it was truly a World War - involving Russia, the USA, Japan, as well as the European powers. Britain was near defeat on the Nile, on the borders of India, and at sea where the German U-Boats were sinking up to 600,000 tons of shipping each month - Britain was close to starvation. So often we would hear the high-pitched sirens of destroyers or corvettes announcing that another convoy had come into the Mersey and if we went down to the river we would often see the merchant ships damaged by gun-fire, or even by torpedoes, but still afloat. Yet we survived, indeed were healthier on our rations than before - 4oz of butter, 4oz margarine, 1/- worth of meat (a small piece of expensive meat, or more of the cheaper cuts), 1 egg a fortnight, 2oz tea, 12oz sugar. Bread and vegetables were unrationed throughout the war and many other goods (sweets, tinned fruits, tinned meats, etc.) were on 'points' - if you bought a tin of 'Spam' you would be unable to buy a tin of pineapple. Children and expectant mothers were given more milk, eggs and orange juice containing cod liver oil. Clothing was also rationed and was 'utility', i.e. it followed strictly standard patterns to save cloth, buttons, everything. Fish was not rationed, but was in short supply, and many will remember the custom of 'queuing' - a very British way of ensuring a sort of fairness - one of the great crimes was to 'jump the queue'. Nobody starved and certainly the eating of less meat and more vegetables meant a healthier population generally.

Air raids brought their own impact - many houses had their own air-raid shelter, either an 'Anderson' (a metal shelter sunk into the ground), a 'Morrison' (a metal shelter inside the house which could serve as a table), or a brick shelter in the street. Others went to the underground stations - Hamilton Square had its regular nightly visitors. We learned to live, even enjoy, the camaraderie of the shelters, and we had the practice - for Merseyside, after London, was the most important port in Britain and was therefore, after London, the most heavily bombed. Christ Church School was destroyed in March 1941, and sustained bombing continued until it culminated in the great 'May Blitz'. When the school was bombed, for a time we had nowhere to go, but in the April we moved into the church hall, always known then as the 'schoolroom' attending school on Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings only: we had no books, no blackboards, no chalk, literally nothing - we sat in circles around the teacher who had to contrive oral lessons with several classes all in the same room together; it was then that I began to admire teachers for their kindness and adaptability. At that time I was living in Tranmere, our house having been one of the casualties in April, and I remember standing in Mersey Park looking across at Liverpool, seeing the whole length of the Liverpool Docks blazing from end to end, with similar infernos on the Birkenhead and Wallasey side. I suppose that everybody has his or her personal memory of the 'blitz' but there are a few I can certainly remember - an Aunt, of somewhat corpulent size, used to return to her home in Rock ferry at the height of the air raid. My father asked her if she felt nervous with the bombs falling. "Oh no", she replied, "I shelter under the trees in the park". Because of her size, she refused to use her Andersen shelter in the garden, claiming she could not get through the door. Indeed, many of us preferred to take our chances in the warmth and safety of the house rather than the discomfort of a cold, damp shelter - the story spread that if you could hear the bomb coming down, then it would not hit you - it was the bomb which you could not hear which was the danger! I can remember Christmas 1940, sitting beside the fire reading a comic, with an air raid in progress outside. Mum and dad were listening to the wireless, Granddad was smoking his pipe. Suddenly there was the sound of breaking glass, the bricks fell down the chimney, we heard slates falling from the roof to crash outside, soot swept into

the room; my father grabbed me with one hand, my sister with the other, and my mother with another (I still don't know how he managed it) and threw us all under the table, my granddad continued to smoke his pipe, confining himself to saying "Scissors" – the most extreme oath he would ever allow himself. "That's our house gone ", said dad – he went to investigate and found instead that it was a house across the street. There lived a young mother with her baby and mother, while her husband was away in the forces. They had been sheltering in a street shelter when the baby began to cry for a feed; too embarrassed to feed the child before strangers the three had gone back into the house where all were killed, my father helped to bring the baby's body out. He then insisted that in future, no matter what the discomfort, we should all go to the shelter when there was a raid in progress. We would sit there during the very heavy bombing of 1941, and every so often, granddad would say, "There goes our house", whereupon he would glance out of the door and say, "the back wall is still standing". Once he went in for some tea when the raid seemed to be slackening off, and when we came in he was sitting in his chair with his tea, with the remains of the hearth rug smouldering at his feet – he had come in to find the house ablaze, had put out the fire and made his tea – he had his priorities right.! It was about this time that he gave up the drinking of beer – not because he became teetotal but because of the price. Always, on Friday, when he drew his pension, he and his friend would go to the Argyle pub and buy each other a pint. Asking for two pints, he put down 1/-; "Another 2d please Tom, " said the barmaid, "It's 7d (3p) a pint now". "7d a pint for beer", said granddad, "then that's the last pint I'll ever buy ". He was true to his word, he never entered a public house again.

A story concerning the Queen Mother may be inserted here: as Queen, she was living at Windsor during the worst of the blitz. A cousin in the Coldstream Guards (a traitor, for both my father and I had been Grenadiers) was on sentry duty when her Majesty came up to him and asked about his family – he replied that he came from Merseyside where his mother and sister still lived. A few weeks later, Merseyside suffered its May Blitz and when the Queen next saw him, she came to him to ask if his family were safe – she had remembered an ordinary soldier and his family several weeks after she had first spoken to him. From that time onward, he was devoted to her and remains so to this day.

We were finally forced to leave our house in April 1941, when there was no roof, no windows, and a large hole in the wall – fortunately we had our relatives to give us accommodation, others were not so lucky. Our furniture had to be put in storage and unfortunately almost all of our more precious belongings were stolen – mother at this time was more concerned with our safety and the fact that dad had collapsed and was shortly to die – material possessions seemed to be of little importance.

Morale generally was very high during the war, I cannot remember any feeling that we might lose; a cousin who worked on the railways was a member of the Home Guard in 1941, before he was drafted into the army proper. He was detailed to guard the railway line near the Hooton signal box armed with a .303 rifle and 5 rounds of ammunition; when his guard duty ended, he would solemnly hand over the rifle to the next man on duty, with the clip of bullets intact. They knew how to load the rifle – the only one the platoon owned, but they had never fired it – the 5 bullets were the sum total of their defence and could only be fired on the direct orders of an officer.

Radio was a great morale booster – 'Bandwagon' at the beginning of the war was the first regular comedy show on BBC radio; it was followed by a series of shows, all of which had their own popular catch-phrases – Jack Warner in 'Garrison Theatre' with his 'mind my bike', and talking of his 'little gel'; 'Happidrome' broadcast every Sunday evening with 'Mr. Lovejoy, Ramsbottom and Enoch' - their phrase was 'Let me tell you...' The most famous, of course, was ITMA with the Liverpool comedian, Tommy Handley. Every character had his or her catchphrase – 'can I do you now sir ?' 'I don't mind if I do', 'After you Claude, no

after you Cecil', and as they were introduced and the phrase was spoken, so the audience erupted into applause and laughter. There was never any bad language or innuendo, no smutty jokes: the most outrageous comedian, Max Miller won his laughs by not voicing the punch line, he allowed the audience to supply that while he viewed them with puzzled innocence, or a knowing grin and raised eyebrows. The 9 p.m. news was listened to by all, and the BBC won a reputation for truthfulness which was respected the world over. The government also played its part by not hiding any disasters from the people. In May 1941 I can remember the radio programme being interrupted by an announcement that "the Admiralty regrets the loss of 'HMS Hood' " – the 'Mighty Hood' was seen as the embodiment of British sea power – we did not realise its basic weaknesses as a war ship – but this truthfulness and honesty in reporting bad news meant that when there was good news to be reported, we knew it to be true. In Germany, on the other hand, where unpleasant truths were often hidden, and the war seemed to be a constant stream of victories, when the defeats began they were kept from the people who were therefore all the more shocked when the truth began to appear – they were not prepared for it, whereas in Britain we became so accustomed to defeat in the early years of the war, we could accept any setback and simply carry on.

In 1942 the Americans began to arrive and Arrowse Park became a huge U.S. transit camp. To many these might have borne out the saying, "Overpaid, over-sexed, and over here", but to children they were the most friendly and generous of allies. A new phrase entered our language - "Any gum, chum?" and invariably the sticks of gum would be produced. I tried the question on a G.I. and he, having no gum, offered me a chew of his chewing tobacco. Needless to say, it was not an experience I repeated - chewing tobacco is an acquired taste!

Once America was our ally victory was certain, for once America sets its mind to a task it is unbeatable - they still have the initiative and self-confidence that Britain had in the 19th century, but which we seem now to have largely lost. I can remember the excitement at school when we saw a huge fleet of more than 100 'Liberator' bombers flying over. There was no way that Germany could match this output. Christmas 1944 saw the beginning of the end of the blackout when restricted lighting was allowed in the streets and shops. At the same time, church bells were once again allowed to ring out, it being felt that the danger of invasion was past - my mother was in tears as she heard them that Christmas morning.

As the war neared its end, the civilised world was profoundly horrified by the pictures which began to emerge of the German concentration camps – I'm sure many who saw these images on the news reels at the cinema will remember how the whole audience became silent, punctuated now and again by gasps of sheer horror. I feel that it was not the Germans who were being condemned though many did imply that only in Germany (i.e. 'the baddies') could such cruelty exist, rather it was mankind generally – these acts had been committed by men and women who, according to many reports, were normal, kindly people once they were off duty: they were simply 'obeying orders'. John Donne had said in the 17th century, 'No man is an island' – what had happened in Germany could happen anywhere – and this in a country which had produced Beethoven, Brahms, Goethe, Schiller – a country which had been a Christian country for more than a thousand years ; Belsen, Ravensbruck, Auschwitz , Dachau were blots on humanity not only on Germany – never again could Europeans hold themselves up as the models of civilisation. It did reinforce the belief that the 2nd World War was a 'just' war - we were fighting against a very real evil in Naziism – but what had happened in Germany could happen anywhere, and this must give us food for thought and also that extra vigilance that we never surrender our hard-won liberties of freedom of speech and thought to demagogues, no

matter how plausible their speeches may be – always must we be ready to question, to argue, to criticize.

In May 1945 the European war was over. In June, to the astonishment of many, Churchill's government was defeated and Labour swept to power with a massive majority. In August two atomic bombs on Japan meant the end of the Pacific War - after nearly six years, the world was at peace. Britain alone had fought from the first day to the last - and she was exhausted and virtually bankrupt.

The years 1945 to 1949 are usually called the 'Years of Austerity' . Labour had a huge programme of social reform, including the introduction of the National Health Service and the need to rebuild after the bombing. There were still world problems which demand our forces' intervention, for it quickly became obvious that whilst the USA was eager to withdraw from Europe and was rapidly demobilising its forces, the Soviet Union was expanding into Eastern Europe. Britain stopped them taking over Greece, but in 1948 Churchill warned the world that an 'Iron Curtain' had fallen across Europe and the 'Cold War' began. Our Empire, too, was disintegrating - noting Britain's financial weakness, African colonies and our Far Eastern Empire, led by India, were demanding freedom from British rule. The greatest Empire in history was breaking up - India and Pakistan leading the way.

Life after the War was, to many, harder than the War itself - the people felt they had earned an easier life, but rationing continued for another eight years - the government would buy nothing which was not absolutely essential. Even bread was rationed after the War, something which had never been considered during it. 1947 saw the hardest winter for years, not helped by a dock strike which forced the Labour government to send in the army. Newsreels showed the Guards marching into the docks, but this was only for the cameras: the Pioneer Corps had been unloading hours before we arrived , but we looked good on camera! Britain and Europe were saved by the generosity of the USA - Marshall Aid poured millions of dollars into Europe to rebuild the shattered economies so that the countries would have the strength to face the Communist regime of Russia. Britain did have some advantages - after America she was the world's greatest car producer and was the world leader in the production of motor bikes. She had a television industry, transmitting having begun in 1936 and restarted after the War - indeed, after America Britain was the only producer of radios, and we exported television sets to the USA. One can speculate where we have gone wrong to lose that ascendancy, but space here does not allow it.

In sport, though Britain could hold her own at golf (Henry Cotton became the Open Champion for the third time) she was out of her depth in athletics (only 4 silver medals at the 1948 London Olympics), tennis, where the Americans carried all before them, and even football was showing weaknesses, only able to draw against Moscow Dynamo even though the English team had Mathews, Mortensen, Finney and Lawton in its forward line and the great Frank Swift in goal. We had high hopes in cricket when the 'Middlesex twins', Compton and Edrich, both scored more than 3,000 runs in 1947, but the 1948 Australian team, with Bradman and bowlers Lindwall and Miller, went the whole tour unbeaten, soundly defeating England in four Test matches, with one drawn. The heavyweight champion was a Yorkshire man, Bruce Woodcock and we had high hopes that he could challenge for the world championship – until he met the Americans ! He was destroyed by a giant of a man, Joe Baksi, who himself was swiftly despatched by the great Joe Louis, the 'Brown Bomber'. Years later, I met Woodcock in Doncaster where he ran a public house, his battered face told its own story of the difference between a brave 'no-hoper' and the superbly fit Americans.

In one area, however, there was revolt against austerity - in 1947 Christian Dior brought in

the 'New Look' - longer feminine dresses, 'wasp' waists, rounded shoulders rather than the square military look of the war years. As one fashion writer noted, "the swish of petticoats was heard again". The New Look and the immensely popular wedding of Princess Elizabeth in 1947 and the birth of her son in 1948 seemed to herald the possibility that life was going to improve, that there was a cheerful future to look forward to.

In one custom where the war made a profound difference which I had not fully realised until recently - when my sister and I went to church in the 1930's and 1940's, it was a firm rule that all ladies wore both hat and gloves, all boys and gentlemen wore their 'best' suits; I keep to that tradition still, though I have no objection to other modes of dress; it is the ladies who have changed - in church recently, there was nobody wearing either hat or gloves ! Only for weddings do ladies now seem to wear a hat for church, and after the ceremony it is put away until found by the grandchildren to be used for 'dressing up'. Such was the price paid for clothes' rationing when the rules were relaxed. Once a change has taken place, very seldom is there a return to former ways.

In 1949 Christ Church was 100 years old. It had seen the change of Britain from the richest and most powerful country to being a debtor nation. Two World Wars had robbed Britain of her wealth and power, but she still had her pride. Her great empire might be disintegrating, India and Pakistan had won independence in 1948, but unlike the empires of other countries, there was no hatred of Britain's rule, indeed most colonies which won their freedom continued to accept the monarch as their head of state, and all wanted to be members of the new Commonwealth.

Britain was still a leading member of the United Nations and had respect throughout the world, so that at the end of our fourth period we can say that there was a real hope that perhaps things would improve in the 1950's, we would earn the rewards of our past endeavours. There was an air of optimism as we approached the half century mark of the 20th Century.