

BOLTON REMEMBERS THE WAR

Transcript of interview with Edith Thorpe (ET) • National Fire Service

Interviewed by Ken Beevers (K) 11.08.2005

K: Well, first of all can I begin by asking you your name?

ET: My name is Edith Thorpe.

K: And when were you born Edith?

ET: 1919.

K: And where were you born?

ET: In Mowbray Street.

K: Mowbray Street. Where was that?

ET: It's alongside the Methodist Church at Ivy Road.

K: Is it still there?

ET: Yes, yes. Number 5.

K: Number 5 Mowbray Street. And what did your parents do?

ET: I don't remember my Father at all. There was just my Mother, and aunts, uncles, grandma.

K: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

ET: No, there was just me - spoiled.

K: (laughs) What with all those aunts and uncles.

ET: It was lovely - a nice, nice relationship, you know. And I was brought up at the Methodist Church because our front door was across from their side door, so from being about three I went to that Church. I went to Church Road School, and there were no houses here then. There was a cinder track in Empress Street and an older girl used to take me to school, because it was lonely. All these houses were down, you know. And I went there until I was eleven, passed a scholarship and went to County Grammar, but also at that time my Mother got married got married again and he had a daughter and then they started with another family.

Well, I went to work in a newsagents to begin with and then I went into office work and finished up at Whitehead's, the big shop on Deansgate and from there that's when the War broke out and I was capable on the switchboard at Whitehead's so they asked for volunteers at the Fire Station. So I went part-time to begin with, that was in 1939, as War broke out. And then they wanted full time workers, so I volunteered again and I was one of the first - well I was the first - firewoman in the Bolton fire brigade, the of course the Auxiliary Fire Service took over, so I was kept on as telephonist. We did shifts, it was seven 'till two, two 'till ten and ten 'till seven the next day, and it was very exciting work because we had to call the fire engines out every time we got a fire call, but we also did ambulances at that time, so that was most exciting when they went out on ambulances. Then, of course, we got rid of those and we went on different shifts again and we had the blitz in Manchester. We were there all day and night, we couldn't leave the switchboards. Then there was the blitz on Liverpool and one of our men got killed there... and it was an exciting job really. Then, of course, there was the bombs in Crook Street that we heard all about, and I married one of the firemen and, of course, we were on different shifts, so I went on to permanent days, office job up at Burnthwaite, Chorley New Road, and I was on different office work. First of all it was in the Building Department and seconded to the Works Department, which was very good. And then I went into Finance, and did lots of different jobs in there, and we used to go out paying wages to all the different towns round about.

K: Which towns did that include?

ET: Oh, it was Wigan, Bury, Farnworth. I think that was it.

K: This is still Wartime, and it was Auxiliary Fire Service?

ET: Yes, I went into the National Fire Service after that, and our headquarters was up there and then the front started, and the soldiers were going abroad, lots of the firemen were sent down south and they were near where the invasion was in Cornwall, and they had to live there. My husband was down there nine months and they were on duty like, near the bases of the Air Force and the Army because they had lots of bombs and fires so they had to have a Fire Brigade down there.

During that time, on our off duty, we used to go to the pictures and things like that, and I was in the Odeon when that bomb came down. Oh it was terribly frightening. First of all the manager

came on the platform of the Odeon and said 'we've got a Yellow Warning' and then it became a Red Warning and he said 'Just stand where you are' and we all stood up, and stood there and you could hear the bomb coming down. I've never been as frightened in my life, just went schoooooo! And it hit next door. And that was where all spirits of liquor were stored in a big warehouse, so it was a big fire. (laughs) So, I was with a friend, we were going on duty at ten o'clock at the Fire Station, so we went out and went there immediately. That was most exciting.

K: I think one person was killed, was that right?

ET: I think they were, yeah, yeah.

K: And the bomb also hit the shelter didn't it, on the market?

ET: Yes, yeah, and we were in between, you know. You could just hear the swoosh. I admire other people who were in Blitz's and that, you know, because that was bad enough just once. And then after that I was up at Burnthwaite.

K: Was Burnthwaite the offices then?

ET: Yes, yeah, there was switchboards up there, and also there were switchboards at Clarebank on Chorley New Road. And while I was on the switchboard at Bolton, if the siren went during the night, I lived up Montserrat then, and we had to turn out to Lowndes Street sub-station, so as whatever time day or night we had to walk down to the station and report... (laughs) It was most exciting but a bit frightening. But really, it amazes me that in the blackout you felt safe, you know, not like it is today, you couldn't do that today could you? Turn out in the night, but then everybody looked after everybody else. Near the end of the War, Burnthwaite closed down and we were split up into different areas and I went over to Stockport to take stock of clothing at a warehouse, Fire Brigade clothing, of course. And I worked there for a short time, then I landed at a big garage on Manchester Road called Borough Garage. I don't think it's there now and finished out my clerical work there. And then I left the brigade in 1951. It was full time during the War.

K: So where you on duty when any of these air raids took place?

ET: Yes.

K: Were you? Like Crook Street, you were on duty that evening?

ET: Yes, yes, on the switchboard. Well it didn't affect us, but we had to take the calls and direct the men to go out, you know? And if we worked all night they used to get refreshments in for us, and sit at the switchboard eating them, you know. Yes, it was exciting really. But, we were lucky compared with other places, you know.

K: So there would be a lot of activity that evening then wouldn't there?

ET: Oh yes.

K: How many fire engines were there? Did they split them up?

ET: No they were all in the big station.

K: Marsden Road?

ET: Yes, we could call on Bury, we could call on Farnworth and Wigan, you know. They all supported each other, if they were short. We didn't get much activity in Bolton, really.

K: No, no, not as far as War...

ET: But they supported the other towns.

K: Yes. So they regularly went to...

ET: Oh, Liverpool was one of the busiest, you know, and Bootle.

K: So the engine from Bolton would go there?

ET: Yes, and the men yes, and that's what I said, one of the men got killed.

K: Do you remember what his name was?

ET: Yes, Isherwood - can't think of his first name...

K: What year, do you know what year that was?

ET: When the blitz on Liverpool was on? It would be about 1941, I should think, roughly, yes.

K: And Manchester as well, obviously, they went there as well did they?

ET: Oh yes. They were on call.

K: So the fire brigade, obviously would be called out whenever there was an air raid, also they would be on alert all the time?

ET: Red Warning, it was called. It was an exciting time.

K: Yes, well you were doing a very important job and you were in the midst of it weren't you?

ET: Yes, we were, yeah.

K: You weren't just bystanders. Did you have a uniform?

ET: Oh yes. The uniform was navy blue jackets and trousers and skirts. Mostly the drivers - we had drivers on the cars and that, the girls wore trousers, but we mainly used skirts. We had a flat cap and a Glengarry and a white blouse and a tie, and of course, our badge in the hat, and it was very smart.

K: So this is a photograph of the first firewoman in Bolton?

ET: Yes, yes. We didn't have uniforms at the beginning, till they had to get a lot more girls to go on the shifts. And then in our spare time, when we had a few days off, we had a keep fit team, and we used to keep fit by having squad drill when we were at Burnthwaite, up near High Rid Reservoir.

K: I know it, yes.

ET: That would keep us fit. We went there every morning, we were on duty, whether it was raining or snowing and we did our squad drill to keep us fit - and that's another, a smaller view of our keep fit team.

K: So by 1943, there's seventeen in this photograph.

ET: Yes, well there would be more than that. That would be just one shift, you know. Yes.

K: They did various work, like you did, clerical work?

ET: Yes, we'd drivers, we had wages clerks, we had Nissen huts to do the work in, but I was in the house - I was lucky, but the Nissen huts were good.

K: Were any of them fire, actually firewomen, like the men, or..?

ET: No, not at that time.

K: They didn't do that in those days.

ET: No, no that came later, yes. My husband was in the Fire Brigade and I met him in the Fire Service, it was a regular - there he is. (laughs)

K: (describing photo) Outside the Town Hall, marching on parade.

ET: Yes, he saved a sheep down a quarry, so he got presented with a...

K: Oh, what year was that?

ET: It must have been about 1940

K: Oh, during the War? What was his first name?

ET: Harry.

K: Harry Thorpe?

ET: Yes.

K: Saved a sheep in a quarry.

ET: Yes 'Humane' is the title of his medal, but unfortunately he died in 1951.

K: Oh, I'm sorry.

ET: But he was an officer in the War. That picture is where he was stationed down south.

K: Oh, do you know the name of it?

ET: Port Elliot. I think it was an Earl's home.

K: It is in Cornwall?

ET: Near Plymouth, yes.

K: That rings a bell.

ET: Yes, because I went down to see him.

K: So, this is during the War?

ET: Yes.

K: Is that the... At the bottom that picture?

ET: That would be him on duty down there.

K: In Cornwall?

ET: Yes.

K: Obviously it was Plymouth they were bombing so he would have been...

ET: Yes.

K: That would have been very dangerous wouldn't it?

ET: Oh, it was.

K: Plymouth was absolutely devastated.

ET: A lot of the fire brigade went down anyway, but the story's not about my husband. Anyway that was at the College, but I've only that picture of me. (laughs)

K: You've only that one picture? Well it's a very nice picture and it's in colour!

ET: It is, yeah. I left the fire brigade to have my first baby in 1945.

K: So, just go back a little bit now, the day War broke out, do you remember that?

ET: Yes, I was at home, listening to the radio and everything went quiet, you know, said must listen this, yeah. It was a Sunday.

K: Yes, it was yes. But you just remember sitting a home. You would be twenty then wouldn't you so...

ET: Yes and I said 'so that means I'll have to go full-time, you know', because I was only part-time through training in 1939.

K: Where did you train?

ET: At the Fire Station. I worked at Whiteheads and I would go round that way and have a few hours training. Quite a few of us did that.

K: Did you tell me what the shift was?

ET: I know it was two 'til ten in the afternoon, so the other would be ten 'til seven because they made us stop on that extra hour. Roll call was at eight. The night was the longest shift. The morning one was pretty short. Was it eight 'til two and then two 'til ten. Yeah. That was awkward getting used to the food, eating meals.

K: What when you were on shift work?

ET: Yeah.

K: Was there anything you remember particularly about food during the War, was there anything you liked or disliked?

ET: Well... Rice pudding! (laughs) That was a favourite supper dish. No, we'd pretty good food really. The men themselves did the cooking at first, and then when we got so much staff, we had to have ladies who came in specially, as cooks, you know, and... No we did very well, don't think we were anything short, you know. The men were good cooks too. (laughs)

K: I think you mentioned going to the pictures too, was that something you did often?

ET: No, no it wasn't it was rather odd that... When we were up at Burnthwaite - I don't know whether I should tell you this but - they used to organize outings, but we also had to do shifts on fire-watch at different places, and we had to come from Burnthwaite, this particular night, and there were three of us on duty at the Fire Station. Now they had organized a party, from Burnthwaite to go and watch a particular film, I think it was Warsaw Concerto and we were longing to see it, so when we got to the Fire Station, my two friends, who were on duty with me, said 'Oh, let's go - Fire Station's all right - we'll go and watch it'. So we did. Well, it was booked up, all the seats were taken because it was a good film we had to book. But we managed to get in a box. I think it was at the Theatre Royal and they had boxes. So the three of us booked into a box. Well it was all dark inside the theatre when we went in, and it was only when the lights went up, that we saw all the crowd from Burnthwaite sat in a row, there, and we were hiding so they wouldn't see us! (laughs) I've never forgotten that (laughs) because we shouldn't have been there, you know. My husband, he went mad, he was a disciplinarian, you know, he said 'You've no right to go!' (laughs) Anyway, that's one naughty thing we did. (laughs) Whether you put that in, I don't know! (laughs)

K: So, do you remember what the film was when the Odeon was bombed or..?

ET: Oh, no I don't, I think my mind went blank that night.

K: What about the blackout, because it would be quiet dark where Burnthwaite is, wasn't it?

ET: Yes, absolutely.

K: No landmarks or anything was there? Where were you living then did you say, Montserrat?

ET: No. I'd moved to my husband's in Musgrave Road.

K: Musgrave Road?

ET: Yes, that's off Chorley New Road, you know. So I could get the bus up to Burnthwaite, and then walk up, along from Chorley New to Chorley Old Road, you know. You could get to Burnthwaite both ways.

K: Do you remember it as being particularly hazardous the blackout?

ET: No, I don't really, no, no. I don't think I ever went out without someone being with me, you know. You couldn't wander on your own. But, you weren't frightened like people are today, because people were kind. No it wasn't frightening.

K: Did you ever grow any vegetables of your own?

ET: I think we did at home, yes, we had an air raid shelter in the back garden and we grew vegetables just at one side. But they also grew vegetables up at Burnthwaite, they had a gardener, you know. That was done.

K: Quite big grounds, I suppose, they grew vegetables for 'Dig for Victory.'

ET: Yes, definitely, and then they had a lawn at the front of the house, where, every lunchtime, we used to play at rounders in the summer, but I mean we think we kept fit! (laughs)

K: Yes, well, it's always been important in the fire service, fitness, hasn't it?

ET: Yes.

K: Yes, so it applied to all ranks, yes?

ET: Yes, we learnt first aid and we were healthier, I think. We'd Woolton pie...

K: You had that did you ..? You made that?

ET: Yes, we'd Woolton pie, put carrots in instead of meat. Yeah.

K: Was it nice?

ET: It was very good, yeah. You got used to it. Dried egg, of course... made cakes with dried egg. And if you got a tin of Carnation milk, you could let it down and you could bake actually.

K: What was Christmas and birthdays like? Were they just frugal?

ET: (laughs) I always remember my wedding cake... (laughs)

K: Oh yes, you were married during the War, weren't you?

ET: (laughs) Yes, it was a cake, and I thought it was a real one. It had a cardboard top, it looked like icing, but it was cardboard that they'd just fixed over it and painted it white! (laughs)

K: So there wasn't much to it... Cardboard?

ET: No...Cardboard top.

K: It looked good on the photos?

ET: It looked very good, yes.

K: Where did you get married?

ET: St Peter's. It's my Church, up the road here.

K: Did you have a honeymoon?

ET: Yes, we did, we went to Keswick, my favourite spot, yes. We did lots of walking, yes.

K: Oh, well you were fit weren't you?

ET: Oh, we were, yeah. I still am for my age. I can't grumble!

K: So you had to get all your ration things together for a reception did you? Where did you have that?

ET: We had it at the Empress.

K: The Empress, what was that?

ET: We got it through some friends of ours who knew the managers and it was only about twenty six of us went. We just had the small room, but it was held at the Empress, yeah.

K: Where was that?

ET: How can I describe it? Where Marks and Spencer's is on the left hand side, and upstairs.

K: So right in the centre of town?

ET: Yeah.

K: So what about the end of the War - VE Day, do you remember that?

ET: Oh, I couldn't do much I was expecting Christine.

K: Oh, I see, yes.

ET: So I didn't celebrate really, only quietly at home with my husband, yes.

K: Do you think Bolton changed quite a lot, because of War? Did it then go back to normal?

ET: I don't think there was much difference. No I don't.

K: I mean, presumably, there were other fires, nothing to do with the War during that time?

ET: Yeah.

K: Were mill fires prevalent, or..?

ET: No, they didn't have a lot of mill fires, no. I think the sprinklers helped a lot you know. I can't remember any really big fires.

K: So, the most significant thing really, was the air raid in Crook Street, wasn't it?

ET: Yes, and the blackout, the blackout curtains were terrible.

K: It must have made it difficult for the fire engines to go quickly.

ET: Yeah, it was... they did very well... I don't think people appreciate them.

K: There's a picture of a fire engine in that booklet, there's a Farnworth one and it had a name, it was called Edith.

ET: Oh.

K: Did the Bolton fire engines have names?

ET: I don't think so, no. They used to call them names. (laughs) Oh well it could have been after me, my husband served at Farnworth. They moved them about, you know. They weren't always...

K: Did he know, well, although Mr Entwisle was... he left ...he was killed in the War. But the Entwisles were Chief Officers.

ET: That's right, yeah, and the Bentleys. They lived in Captain's Clough, Reg Bentley and Harold Bentley, Cyril Bentley. Is that it? (looks at picture)

K: Yes, it was called Edith.

ET: Oh yeah, oh.

K: That engine was at Kearsley.

ET: Oh, do you know that favours my husband there.

K: Does it really? Mm it does a bit doesn't it?

ET: Treacher was the name of the officer at Farnworth.

K: Oh, was it?

ET: Yeah, because Harry served with him for a time and then he went with Mr Heap at Bury.

K: You obviously enjoyed your time in the fire service.

ET: I did.

K: And you only left, when you were having a family.

ET: When I was expecting, yes.

K: But you never went back?

ET: No. Well, I did mention it when my husband died, but I'd nobody to mind the children, I had two yeah, so Chief Officer said no it wouldn't be fair on the children, so I only started to work again when they were at school, you know.

K: Ok, so shall we leave it at that?

ET: Yes, I think so.

K: Thank you very much.

ET: It's a pleasure.

K: It's been very good.

ET: I hope so.

K: **No, it's been nice - you've got all your facts in and it tells the story.**

ENDS