

BOLTON REMEMBERS THE WAR.

Transcript of interview with Edith Williams née Hart (EW) • ATS / Pay Corps

Interviewed by Ken Beevers (K) 26.07.2005

K: If we just start with your name.

EW: Edith Hart, I was. I'm now Edith Williams.

K: And when were you born?

EW: 1923.

K: In?

EW: Bolton.

K: Whereabouts?

EW: In Markland Hill Lane.

K: What did your parents do?

EW: My Father was a lamp-lighter, and my Mother worked in a bleach works. She was a farmer's daughter.

K: And where was her parents' farm?

EW: Her parents' farm was up on the moors, Smithills Moors yes.

K: And where did you go to school?

EW: Church Road and then Whitecroft Road.

K: And did you have any brothers or sisters?

EW: Yes, I had two sisters and three brothers.

K: Big family.

EW: Yes, and my Father died when I was nine years old. I had a younger sister and a younger brother and two older brothers and a sister.

K: So, when you left school, what did you do?

EW: I was a machinist.

K: Whereabouts was that?

EW: At Chesro - at Tootal, Broadhurst and Lee's. We made dresses.

K: Where was that?

EW: Up at Daubhill.

K: Oh, down Adelaide Street?

EW: Yes, that's right, yes.

K: Oh, yes, they used to have a school there didn't they?

EW: That's right, we went to school two half days a week, until we were eighteen.

K: At the Continuation School?

EW: At the Continuation School. We were very well looked after, with dentist and doctors and... Yes, we were very lucky, actually... and sport and cookery.

K: Yeah, when you were there, that would be, I'm trying to work it out...19...

EW: '37, when I was fourteen I left school.

K: Was the headmaster still Mr Jenkins?

EW: That's right.

K: Is that where you were when War was declared?

EW: Yes, when War was declared I was still there, and then they needed people to go into the weaving shed, because they were doing clothing for the War effort, I suppose. So in 1941, I went into the weaving shed, which I hated! (laughs) And I stayed there until I went into the ATS, in June 1942.

K: Do you remember the announcement of War being declared?

EW: We, yes, I was in Church.

K: It was Sunday wasn't it?

EW: Yes, it was Sunday morning and the minister came and... well, someone came in and said that War had been declared and he announced it in Church.

K: Which Church was that?

EW: Delph Hill Methodist.

K: So during the service a man came in and..?

EW: Yes, yes.

K: And what was the general feeling?

EW: Well, actually, we cried because one of our gang, the boys, was already in the militia and we knew that he would have to go straightaway, and, you know, we knew what was going to happen. They were all going to have to go eventually, which they did. Although we had one or two conscientious objectors, who... well they went into non-combat services. They all did something, but we had two or three at our Church who were conscientious objectors.

K: And how did people feel about them?

EW: Well. I don't know really, because, they didn't object to going helping. I mean one of the boys actually went to Russia, with... he wasn't actually in the Medical Corps, but that was the sort of thing he was doing. I remember him particularly.

K: So you followed the call to work in the weaving shed, so to speak, and I know there were notices, weren't there, in the paper saying 'Cotton Needs You' and so on?

EW: Yes, that's right, yeah.

K: You hated it because?

EW: The noise, the noise, and I know it might sound a bit snobbish, but the girls who worked at Chesro were more, refined, should I say, than the girls who worked in the mill (laughs) and I didn't really fit in!

K: What was Chesro, sorry?

EW: Well that was where we worked, we made dresses and they were called 'Chesro Dresses' and you could always tell somebody who worked there, because, everything had to be perfect. It was attached to Tootal Broadhurst Lee's, but the dresses went to South Africa and it was quite something if you had a Chesro dress.

K: So it was noisy?

EW: Yes.

K: Were they long hours as well?

EW: Well, we worked shifts. You know, it was six 'til twelve and twelve 'til six - no, eight hours it would be, three eight hour shifts, we worked.

K: And what were you particularly making?

EW: Well material, that's all I can... for Army uniforms.

K: So how did you get out of it, so to speak? Out of the weaving shed?

EW: Well, that was when I was due to be called up, and there must have been a notice in the paper, I think, that they wanted girls to go into the ATS to go into the Pay Corps, so that was, I volunteered to do that. To go into the Pay Corps at Radcliffe.

K: So when did you start?

EW: June, 1942.

K: June 1942. Can I just ask you, when you were at the mill, before we get into that, were there any air raids during that time?

EW: Actually, the only air raid I can really remember in Bolton, was in 1941, September, and I can only really remember that one because my sister had had a baby and she'd come to stay with us. And we had to get under the stairs and under the table! (laughs) That was the only time that we were in the house. I remember when they bombed the bottom of Deane, when some people were killed, because I was in the Lido with my boyfriend, and, I can't remember the comedians who were on. We heard all this... oh the air raid, the aeroplanes and everything and nobody went out of the theatre, we just sat there and watched the end of it. And then, when we were walking home, we could tell that some bombs had dropped in town. And then the only other time I can remember an air raid was when they bombed Manchester on a Sunday and we were in

Church that Sunday night, and when we came out, it just looked as though Bolton was on fire, and it wasn't it was Manchester. And we'd no idea... We were in Church that night and we'd no idea so many bombs were being dropped.

K: This was again at Delph Methodist church?

EW: Yes.

K: Whereabouts is that?

EW: It's just up the road here, up Chorley Old Road.

K: So then you volunteered for the ATS and opted to go to Radcliffe?

EW: That's right, yes.

K: So, did you have a uniform?

EW: ATS uniform? Oh, yes, would you like to see me?

K: Yes (laughs) oh, that's very nice (laughs) that's a really nice photograph. Whereabouts is that taken?

EW: Edinburgh Station I think, that was. Working at home, I didn't... when we had leave, we could have a pass to go to where ever we wanted and that particular time, my friend and I went to Edinburgh on leave.

K: She looks a bit like you, your friend, actually.

EW: She's the one who's just gone living down near Dorset, I'm gong to miss her.

K: Oh. Well, anyway, they're lovely photographs, those. But every day you went to work in your uniform?

EW: Yes, along with hundreds of others, we got the train at Bolton station. When we got off, at Bury, it was - Black Lane Mill. Where did we go to? We went to Ainsworth Road and it was just a sea of khaki, because, they were coming off the trains, coming up from Manchester as well, because they were billeted at Whitefield, Radcliffe... all the stations from Bury to Manchester. The electric train ran then, and they used to come up there in droves (laughs) and civilians as well. There were civilians who worked there.

K: And were the supervisors, were they Sergeants and..?

EW: Captains (laughs) Captain Roberts, my Captain was, in the part that I worked at, and he was very nice indeed. Very nice. I became a Sergeant. It was all right.

K: So the mill had been converted, had it? To a..?

EW: Well, it still had the wooden floors, all they'd done really was bring tables, and chairs and things in it and take the machinery away. Yes, it must have been closed actually.

K: So, how many people worked there?

EW: Oh, I couldn't tell you. Hundreds.

K: Hundreds... a big concern?

EW: Oh definitely, yes.

K: And, as you said, they were from all over the place.

EW: Yes, yes. A lot of them were boys who had been... wounded perhaps, at Dunkirk in other units, and weren't fit to go back fighting, so they were transferred into the Pay Corps.

K: So, obviously, you had no previous experience of pay and..?

EW: Oh, I'd no experience at all of... Because it was like office work. I was pretty good at arithmetic and that was why I got on to this particular unit, this particular BCP, because, there was a bit more adding up and that sort of thing, with the boys being paid. So it was quite something, actually, to be in the unit I was in. And also, we had to write lots of letters to the boys and their wives, and, you know, if something had gone wrong. We used to laugh sometimes, because you'd get somebody who'd just got married, and kind of about three days later, their wife had a baby (laughs) and that used to amuse us when we...

K: Yes, Wartime...

EW: Yes, they'd probably been on leave nine months earlier (laughs) and...

K: Obviously they needed their pay, so, it's a satisfying job?

EW: Oh, yes, yes. We felt that, and we still do feel that we did a good job, and yet people say to you, you know 'Well, where did you work?', 'Where did you go? Were you on the ack-ack?' We'd say

'No, we were in the Pay Corps and we were stationed at home.' 'Oh, is that what you did?' - you know! (laughs) As if we really hadn't done a 'proper' job. But we did, because they needed us in that respect.

K: Well, if they'd not got their pay, you now, everything would grind to a halt.

EW: It would, yes.

K: The morale would be pretty low, for a start.

EW: That's right - to keep it going.

K: And it's still the same today.

EW: Yes, of course it is. (laughs)

K: Radcliffe, I suppose would be a bit nearer to Manchester isn't it? Did they suffer much in air raids or..?

EW: Oh, they did in Manchester.

K: Yes, in Manchester, but in Radcliffe?

EW: No, no. I remember one girl coming into work, one morning and she couldn't sound her Rs and she came in and she said 'Why is Wadcliffe Woad woped off, has there been a waid?' (laughs) Isn't it funny how you remember things? .

K: Yes, small things isn't it?

EW: Yes, I remember a Welsh girl and she was stationed in Bolton, and we used to say 'has anybody seen Jane Carydd Wynn Jones. Has she turned up, has she got her ticket?'(in Welsh accent) (laughs).

K: So you were still at home, and do you remember much about rationing and food shortages?

EW: Well, actually, we were very lucky. I mean, we were rationed, but my eldest brother had a butcher's shop, and I had another brother who worked at the Co-op grocers and my brother-in-law had a farm! So we were very lucky. If anything came in, we did get our share of it. We didn't do anything we shouldn't of done, but they made sure that Mum was well looked after. I got married when Jack came home from Italy in 1946. We were both de-mobbed about the same time in 1946. We did our wedding reception ourselves, but, we weren't short of anything to do it with. (laughs)

K: When did you meet him?

EW: When I was fifteen.

K: Oh, (laughs) so right through the War?

EW: (laughs) Right through the War, we got engaged when, well he went up in 1941 and we got engaged in 1942, when he came home on leave. He was in the Signals, the Royal Corps of Signals, so he kind of followed the Army through North Africa and all the way up Italy.

K: So you didn't see him much?

EW: No, I didn't, he went abroad on the 11th November, in 1942, and came home in 1946. He came home once in that time...

K: So you had to get to know each other again... sort of thing?

EW: Well, more or less... We got married anyway... so... (laughs) Well, we'd been together for so long, and we knew... I hadn't met anybody else. I don't suppose he had much chance actually, but... We had a good time at Radcliffe, with...

K: It looks as if it was very well organized.

EW: I loved drama, but I was still going to Church and we did plays and things at Church, so I didn't really join in anything much there, except sports. I did go to some sports meetings and run in the relay team. But there was everything for them to do, if they wanted to do it.

K: What hours did you work there?

EW: From eight 'til five or six o'clock.

K: And did everybody finish at that time, or were there shifts?

EW: No, there weren't shifts. You just worked during the day. And we had to do parades as well. We did a bit of foot slogging, nothing very hard, we went on Church parade. We lined Bury Road, when the King and Queen came through.

K: Did you have to do fire-watching?

EW: Oh yes, and work on the switchboard at weekends, because we only worked Monday to Saturday, but sometimes you had to go on at the weekend, if it was your turn to go and stop the fires from coming, if they ever came, but they didn't.

K: Some people seem to say the did the fire-watching and nothing ever happened.

EW: No, it didn't.

K: It was like, like a battalion wasn't it?

EW: Yes, it was a battalion.

K: The 44th?

EW: That's right.

K: And there were other Pay Corps, about the country? Many..?

EW: Yes, there would be a Pay Corps for every regiment.

K: Which regiment were you...?

EW: The Royal Engineers.

K: The Royal Engineers, and no-one else?

EW: No.

K: But, I suppose because it was well, quite labour intensive, clerical, you needed a lot of people?

EW: Yeah, yeah, I don't think they did it for anybody else. I know we only did it for the Royal Engineers. (laughs)

K: How did they actually pay people? By wire... or by? .

EW: Well we just kept their accounts, I suppose. If anybody had done something to have their pay docked, we got word about it and it went off their account. We didn't actually pay them, we just kept their accounts.

K: You typed?

EW: Well we didn't. We wrote... I couldn't type. It was handwritten letters.

K: And filed, did you?

EW: Yes.

K: Was there a lot of filing?

EW: Yes, there was a lot of filing.

K: What was the atmosphere in Bolton like, during the War? No different?

EW: I don't think so. Everybody got on with it. You still went to the pictures, as much as to say to them, you know, you're not going to get me down. (laughs) I think everybody felt that way.

K: Did you go to the Palais?

EW: We went dancing yes. We went to the pictures and we used to go to the NAAFI in Manchester, there wasn't one in Bolton. And there was a services club in Manchester that we used to go to as well, quite a lot.

K: Did you wear your uniform a lot?

EW: We had to wear our uniform. No we always wore our uniform. We really hadn't any civvies to wear.

K: Did you make do and mend?

EW: Rather! (laughs) When my brother got married, just as I'd joined the ATS, and I wore my uniform. I always regret that I had to wear my uniform when I look at the wedding photograph (laughs) but I wore it actually because my husband was being groomsman and he had his uniform on - well he wasn't my husband then, he was my boyfriend -because he hadn't a suit to wear, so we both wore our uniforms.

K: What was the blackout like?

EW: Oh, that was awful. I remember my future father-in-law, whenever I went to visit them - which I did every weekend, I always went for tea at weekend - and he used to walk home with me to make sure I got home safely.

K: Where was that from?

EW: Only from here. From Brighton Avenue.

K: From Brighton Avenue.

EW: But he used to walk to Markland Hill Lane with me, with a torch, yes.

K: Because, obviously coming home from work in the winter, you would be..?

EW: Well, you got used to that. It wasn't too bad coming home from work. But if you'd been out at night, to, you know, dancing or whatever, because the trams were still on Chorley New Road, but we had buses on Chorley Old Road, and they stopped earlier than the trams. So if you went anywhere you had to come home on the tram, and walk all the way up Greenmount Lane, in the dark. And many a time, I walked up Greenmount Lane in the middle of the road, hoping you met nobody.

K: Yeah, you wouldn't like to hear footsteps, would you?

EW: No.

K: But you got used to it - but it was not pleasant.

EW: No, no it wasn't pleasant.

K: You obviously had food from the farm, and the butchers, but did you grow anything?

EW: No, because we hadn't a garden, so we didn't. But my brother-in-law on the farm, had to grow wheat and potatoes and things, which he didn't before the War, but they had to do it. They had to turn some of their meadows into fields for growing potatoes, and vegetables and things.

K: What was your least favourite Wartime food?

EW: No, the worst thing that I remember is having carnation milk in tea, in the NAAFI, and I hated that! (laughs)

K: What was your uniform like, what colour?

EW: Khaki. (Shows photos)

K: Some nice buttons and... did you have a cap?

EW: I've got a Glengarry on that one. We could wear those when we were off duty. They were lovely.

K: Oh yeah. They look nice... yeah.

EW: This is me and my sister.

K: Oh that's lovely.

EW: That was a lovely photograph, it was taken at what was Whitehead's in town and it was in their window, off and on all through the War. (laughs) They kept putting it back in the window, because it was such a nice photograph.

K: Oh, it is isn't it, yes. That's your sister with her Land Army hat on and... did you like your uniform really, or not?

EW: Well, it was all right.

K: The same as everyone else...

EW: Except for the tie, when it was hot.

K: First of all, you were ordinary rank, and then you said you were a Sergeant?

EW: Yes, I finished up as Sergeant.

K: So, were you then supervising other people?

EW: Yes, I think there was probably about twenty on our table that you were over. You did the same work as they did really, but...

K: Were there Corporals as well?

EW: Yes, yeah. Well you started off as a Lance Corporal, with one stripe and then you got two stripes, you had to pass exams, and then I finished up with three stripes. So your pay went up, but don't ask me how much! (laughs).

K: Is there any other, is there any incidents during your time at the Pay Corps, you'd like to..?

EW: There was one time, when I went to a sports meeting and I think it was in York somewhere, and we landed in Manchester at midnight. We were waiting for the milk train in the morning to get back to Bolton. And I went into the NAAFI on the station, there. It's very strange how you meet

people, and we were having a drink and the girl who was behind the counter came over to me, and she said 'You *are* Edith, aren't you?' and I said 'Yes, I am' and she said 'Well, I'm your cousin' and we hadn't seen each other for about five years, we were the same age, but she lived in Manchester and we lived in Bolton. That was strange.

There was another thing that went through my head then, oh, I know what it was. This was how well they looked after you actually, because I had a bicycle and I fell off it in Bolton and made a bit of a mess of my face, and my Mother rang them up and said that I'd fallen off my bike and I'd hurt my face. So they said 'Can she come into the office and see the M.O.?' she said 'No, she's not fit'. So they sent the ambulance for me. I really had made a mess of my face, and when my Captain saw me, he just looked at me and said 'Good God Edith, what have you done?' (laughs) and they wanted to put me to hospital, and I said 'No, my Mother will look after me.' So they let me stay at home. But they really did take care of you. It was like a family really, in your own particular unit. It was really very good.

K: ...in other sections of the War and the Army and so on you had bond, didn't you with the...

EW: That's right, with the people that you worked with, yes.

K: You were all, obviously striving for the War effort, weren't you, in your own way?

EW: Mm.

K: What do you remember of when War ended, VE Day?

EW: You know, my friend and I have talked about that, and, we think we must have gone to Manchester. But, we really can't remember.

K: Did you have a day off?

EW: No, no, no. I really can't remember what we did.

K: I suppose men still had to be paid. You didn't do anything in the street where you lived either?

EW: No, we actually had a party when all the boys from roundabout came home, all the neighbours, we went to the Conservative Club and had, I don't know, probably, a potato pie supper.

K: That was when people came home?

EW: When people came home. And we did the same at Church, you know, when the boys had come home, because it was 1946 before we all got de-mobbed.

K: Were you de-mobbed in 1946?

EW: In 1946, yes, in August 1946.

K: And when did Jack come home?

EW: He came home at the same time, actually. And so we decided we would get married and we were married in the October.

K: And what did you do after you'd been de-mobbed?

EW: I went back to Chesro as a machinist. And I worked as a machinist. Not all the time there, because, I wanted to work part-time when we bought our house and they wouldn't let me, so I went somewhere else that I could work part-time. But I had a baby in 1949, and I didn't work again then, until, 1968 I think, when someone asked me if I'd like to work part-time in a greengrocer's shop, so I did do.

K: And what did Jack do, did..?

EW: Jack, worked for the Fine Spinners, and he went back to the Fine Spinners when he came home. And worked with them until he was made redundant when he was sixty, and he died when he was sixty-one. So we had twelve months. And my Mother lived with us. She was blind, she was ninety-four when she died, on Christmas Day 1980, and then, my daughter, the only one left at home, was married in July 1981 and Jack died in April 1982. So in eighteen months, from having four in the house, I was on my own.

K: Is there anything else about the War?

EW: No, I can't really think of anything.

K: Well, that's very nice. (both laugh) Just looking at this booklet, did they send this to you afterwards?

EW: No, I bought that when we were there, but, I mean, if you have any use for it at all you can have it.

K: Are you sure?

EW: I am, because the children won't want it, and, you know, if it's a record of anything that...

K: Well, I know it's Radcliffe, but obviously people from Bolton... and... it was a sort of area thing wasn't it? The photographs are great - the rambling, swimming, cycling, yeah.

EW: Well, there was just every club that you could think of. I say, with living at home and still going to Church and being very active at Church, I did more things there because, we still had young people and I used to run the youth club at church and, you know, I just kept that going. I was also Arkela for the Cubs. I had a Cub Pack.

K: Did you take part in War savings? You know War Weapons Week and things like that?

EW: I can't remember.

K: Or salvage, did you take books and...

EW: Oh I know they did salvage in Bolton, because, they took all the railings from the... where we lived in Markland Hill Lane, we lived at a corner house, and they took all, you know, the gate and all the railings that were on the top of the wall.

K: And I don't think they actually used them, did they?

EW: Did they not? (laughs) So you hear...

K: It was a kind of... It was because Churchill thought that a sort of complacency had set in and he wanted to galvanize people...

EW: Yes, to doing something.

K: Yes, and I don't know what happened to them, I think they weren't really used. Perhaps they would have been if things had got worse.

EW: Yes.

K: Because you could take your teapots, couldn't you? And your saucepans.

EW: Oh yes, yes that's right.

K: Were you ever aware of any evacuees?

EW: Oh, we had a lot of evacuees from Guernsey and Jersey, yes from the Channel Islands. Well from Church we furnished a house on Chorley Old Road for them. And there was one little boy who came who came into my Cub Pack actually and the first words he said to me were 'I lost my cap over the boat' and they'd rowed.

K: They'd rowed?

EW: Yes, they'd rowed. He'd come in a rowing boat of some sort, from Jersey. He was a lovely little boy. One of the girls who was... came to Church and still writes to one of the ladies at Church, yes.

K: So, it's quite interesting really, to know that there are still...

EW: I've got a photograph of him somewhere with my Cub Pack.

K: So, how long was he with you..?

EW: They must have come over, in 1940, mustn't they?

K: Yes, they must have done.

EW: And they were with us until the end of the War. He was called Graham Gilbert.

K: And where was he billeted?

EW: There was a house on Chorley Old Road, that Delph had furnished.

K: Oh yes, you had furnished - the family had their own... You'd furnished the house for them?

EW: Yes, yeah.

K: He was with his mother?

EW: Yes, yes and sisters, I suppose. It's just him that I can remember.

K: Yes, it's interesting that they came from the Channel Islands, and they did come from London as well.

EW: Before I went in the ATS, I remember going to what was Gaskell Street School, when they were bringing evacuees from London - mothers and babies.

K: This was at the beginning of the War?

EW: Yes, at the beginning of the War, and they brought them all to Gaskell Street School before they went out to families, I suppose.

K: Oh for kind of... billeting.

EW: Billeting, yes. Mainly boys who were billeted in Bolton, and some girls, because they were billeted on private houses here.

K: People are surprised by this, because they expect it to be just countryside where evacuees went, but I suppose it was considered relatively safe, Bolton and it's nice that you remember an evacuee. (both laugh) OK, shall we stop the tape, unless you think of anything else.

EW: I can't think of anything else, I've rambled on! (laughs)

ENDS