

BOLTON REMEMBERS THE WAR

Transcript of interview with John Makin (JM) • Telegraph Boy

Interviewed by Ken Beevers (K) 03.08.2005

K: If I could just begin, John, by asking you your name?

JM: John Makin.

K: And where were you born John?

JM: Bolton, Lancashire.

K: Whereabouts exactly?

JM: Keswick Street, which is Blackburn Road, down a street, Ulleswater Street.

K: But you were born in the Haslam Maternity Home?

JM: Oh yes, specifically born in the Haslam Maternity Home on Chorley New Road.

K: When were you born?

JM: 1925.

K: And what did you parents do?

JM: My Father, after serving in the First World War, in Gallipoli and then in Flanders, was demobilised in 1919 and went back to his pre-War employment in Marsh Fold Mills on Chorley Old Road. Then, at some time early in the 1920s he went to work at a mill... Lincoln Mills, which were owned by a gentleman named Robert Entwistle, and they manufactured cotton goods, quilts, bedspreads, under the trade name of AXA - A, X, A.

K: You were telling me earlier that your Father went to the Front by bus.

JM: My Father was a very meticulous diary enthusiast and I've got these five diaries for the time he was away in the War and a copy of what he wrote has gone to the Imperial War Museum North. But reading parts of it, there are funny parts of it and some very unfunny parts, but, it surprised me to read that he'd been on leave to Bolton from France - so that was after 1916, and he went back from leave... He got the ferry across to Calais, he caught a French public bus, which took - he may have had to change somewhere - but it took him to within two or three miles of the front line at Ypres, in Belgium. And it seems that for anyone to be riding on a public bus to go to a place where such carnage was going on in Flanders... beyond belief really!

K: Where did you go to school?

JM: I went to Chalfont Street, from five years old. I didn't pass, the...what is now called the 'Eleven Plus', there were two kinds of school to go to, either the Central School on Folds Road, or to the Municipal in Great Moor Street. I didn't pass for either and carried on at Chalfont Street, until... this was getting up for 1938, and preparations were being made in case of War, and schools were being converted into Air Raid Precaution First Aid Posts and Chalfont Street was one that was closed and we were moved to Brownlow Fold. And then Brownlow Fold was closed to be a First Aid Post and then we were then split up and sent to places which really were not meant to be schools. I went, with a group to St Paul's Church, the old Church Hall, in Halliwell Road, where we were all in one big hall. We didn't really do any lessons and just seem to pass our time on until it was time to leave school at the age of 14 and that was the end of my formal schooling!

K: So, when did you start work, and what did you do?

JM: Well, my Great Aunt was Chief Supervisor at Bolton Telephone Exchange and she had been leaning on my Grandmother for me to go and work in the Post Office, and the Post Office, as it was then, was the biggest department in the Civil Service, and the only way into the Civil Service for a child who hadn't had a Secondary education was to join the Civil Service through the Post Office - girls as internal messengers, boys as external messengers or the correct title was 'Boy Messenger' commonly known as a Telegraph Boy.

K: What date would that have been, then, when you joined?

JM: End of 1939, beginning of 1940.

K: So you were still just at school when War was declared?

JM: Yes, yes.

K: Do you remember that particular day?

JM: I do, because some time ago, I had sent to me a photograph of a group of men going on an outing somewhere and I think the heading on the photograph was 'What happened to Jimmy Clean Clogs?' He was a man on that photograph. At the time that War was declared he used to go round the streets with these extremely well polished clogs and he used to get the odd copper from the ladies who he did clog dances for. And I remember that on Sunday 3rd September, Jimmy Clean Clogs was doing a dance in Ulleswater Street and someone came out and said that Mr Chamberlain had declared War and we were then at War. And that's how I remember Jimmy Clean Clogs and the declaration of War.

K: You were watching were you?

JM: Yes, kids used to gather round him while he did his... he used to enjoy doing it, I'm sure, as we were all somewhat in awe of him doing this dancing in the street.

K: Where did he live?

JM: I think it was somewhere over Halliwell way.

K: So you were at school for a bit until War... did they have an Air Raid Shelter at that school?

JM: Oh yes, in the school yard. It's just been filled in.

K: Has it?

JM: Yes, about twelve months ago. The school's been demolished and where the school building stood it's now the playing field of a new school that's been build nearby and that grassed area is now where the old school yard was and the Air Raid Shelter was in the boys school yard. And we used to go in there, early on in the War, when the sirens sounded expecting bombs to start falling but fortunately that didn't happen.

K: Was it one of those that you went downstairs in the playground - it was in the middle of the playground?

JM: That's right, yes.

K: And did they have a sort of lid?

JM: No, it was below ground, so they must have put a re-enforced concrete roof on it.

K: And you just went and through the door...

JM: Yes, went down a sloping passage into an L-shaped underground passage, as it were. There was entrance/exit at each end of the L-shape.

K: And what was down there, just seats?

JM: Just seats, alongside the walls, yes.

K: And so did you have drill sometimes, practising going down or not?

JM: No, no, whenever the sirens went, the Air Raid Wardens came along blowing their whistles, telling everyone to make their way to the Shelter. Which we did, we were very obedient people! (laughs)

K: And did you have a gas mask?

JM: Oh yes, the little cardboard box with the civilian mask in it, yes.

K: You took that to school every day?

JM: No, at the time that I was at school, War had not been declared, so no, we never took gas masks to school.

K: So, you joined the GPO.

JM: As a Boy Messenger, that's the Civil Service rank, Boy Messenger, and you did that for two years. At the end of that two years, you had to take the Civil Service Examination. If you were successful then you could carry on, if you were not - you were out. If you were successful you then had the option of joining the Postal Service or the Engineering Department of the Post Office, at that time, of course, both departments were as one in the Post Office.

K: What was you job like then in Wartime Bolton, as a Messenger?

JM: Delivering telegrams... sometimes it was obviously a telegram the message of which would upset people and I think there had been occasions where lads had taken telegrams to mothers, ladies, wives - with bad news - and it became evident that the telegraph boy should know what the content of the message was so that he could be aware that the person receiving the message might be upset. So, after Dunkirk, we began to be told that the message contained bad news, specifically - it was a death. On some occasions we was advised to see if there was

anyone available next door and just say would they please wait until you'd delivered the message and then the lady next door could give assistance... was it needed. Thinking back on it, it seems as it might have been a little unwise to do that, but that's how I remember it. They were difficult times. When we rode into a street, everyone started coming to their doors to see which door we were going to, of course, they would be wondering what the message was. There was a great deal of telegrams then, each time we went out. I suppose on a working day I travelled six miles per hour - that was the official speed at which we were supposed to ride our bicycles. And we would go out, I would think, with about ten telegrams on each journey out and we would do about six journeys per working day, so, I suppose we would deliver between fifty and sixty telegrams. Of course, there were telegrams which were pleasant to deliver - greetings telegrams, taking telegrams to a wedding at the Pack Horse Hotel, and the best man would receive those and he had a silver threepenny piece or a sixpence specifically in his pocket to give to the telegraph boys who were taking telegrams of congratulations.

K: So you liked working on Saturdays?

JM: Oh yes, yes, Saturday was a normal working day, yes.

K: Do you remember any particular moment when you took a telegram of bad news?

JM: There was one where... I didn't know it was bad news and I had pushed the telegram under her door and seemingly, it had gone under some lino so that it was missed for a couple of days and I was hauled in and what had I done with this telegram. Really we weren't supposed to leave telegrams like that. We were supposed to take them back and it was always policy for us to ask to see if there was a reply and sometimes a telegram would be 'Reply Paid' - the sender had paid for a reply. So when it was Reply Paid we *had* to deliver it in person to the person it was addressed to and wait for that reply. Very interesting, going to the Grand Theatre and the Theatre Royal and seeing famous band leaders and George Formby on his motorbike in black leathers with Beryl, also in black leathers.

K: Did you take him a telegraph?

JM: Oh yes, yes, yes, all these people who received these telegrams, they were either sent to the theatre where they were performing or down into Dorset Street, down in the Haulgh, where they had a lot of theatrical digs, down there, and presumably it was bookings for the future at other theatres.

K: But Wartime must have made a lot more telegrams, so you were very busy.

JM: Of course there was the blackout at night and riding the bike which had to have dimmed...

K: Is it like, was there like a...

JM: ... a cover on it, so that it just shone down on the... Well, your eyes became accustomed to the darkness and you could see.

And I remember the very first air raid... There wasn't a messenger at Farnworth office and we used to take it in turns to cover Farnworth. Going out from Bolton in the morning, to the Farnworth office and staying out there all day and then back to Bolton at night after our eight and half hours. And on my very first air raid I was on the way back into Bolton and I think I must have been delayed, because it was roundabout six o'clock. It was dark and I was passing John Shaw's the fireplace merchant at Moses Gate when the siren went. Our instructions were: in the event of an air raid, make your way to the nearest shelter and stay there until the 'all clear'. And we had a service gas mask and a steel helmet with GPO on the helmet and we were instructed, again in an air raid, take your normal cap off and put the helmet on and make your way to the shelter. And I did this, it was on a little island just at the junction of Albert Road and I think it's called Market Street, at Moses Gate and spent my time there until the all clear went and then I made my way into Bolton. That was my first air raid. It wasn't an air raid really, it was just the sirens went.

K: So you had to ride your bike with your gas mask and your tin hat?

JM: Oh yes, yes.

K: Do you remember any other air raids?

JM: No. Maybe, maybe we became accustomed to them. I remember that one because it was the very first one and I was expecting planes to come over and start dropping bombs, but fortunately that didn't happen.

K: Well, you probably weren't working or near to the other air raids were you?

JM: No, they were mainly Manchester way.

K: What was the food like? Can you remember anything about the food?

JM: The food was very good. Opposite the entrance to the library, where it is now on Howell Croft South... On the corner there, opposite the entrance to the library, there was a public building there, I think that building had been the library originally, and that became the British Restaurant, anyone could go in there and get a meal. And I think it was ninepence for soup, main course, maybe it was ninepence for children, soup, main course and a sweet, and of course, this helped out at home with the rations.

From being a telegraph boy I passed my Civil Service exam and opted to go onto the engineering department, initially as, what we would call a Y2YC - 'Youth's Two Year Course'. And we had to finish that course before the War department got hold of us for the Forces. And being an external worker, at the time, I think around 1942, 43, we were entitled to an additional 2 ounces of cheese, to, presumably, to make us more suitable to work outside! I know I had to, to get this extra ration ticket, for the cheese, we had to get a form certified by our employer to say that we were employed externally for so many hours per week, I think it was... I know I got the extra cheese ration, whether I ate it or not I'm not sure about that.

K: (laughs) That's very interesting. You perhaps shared your ration with the family did you?

JM: Oh yes, well my grandmother would get those rations. I don't think I ate cheese so much!
(laughs)

K: What about any other food?

JM: When I finished my time on the Youth's Two Year Course, I became a maintenance engineer and you could sometimes get into the canteens at various works that you visited, as part and parcel of your normal working day. I know I went in most works canteens, Dobson and Barlow's at Bradley Fold and De Havilland. De Havilland was an extremely good one, where they made propellers and that. Being able to use these works canteens must have helped out at home. As a teenager, we didn't think a lot about how the women must have struggled to make the food rations last out.

K: What about dried egg and things like that? Do you remember any of those?

JM: Oh yes, whether I ate it or not I'm not sure.

K: Were you able to grow any vegetables at home?

JM: No.

K: You didn't have a garden or anything?

JM: No, I had a friend whose father had Kenyon's potato merchants on the wholesale market but I don't think there was any great shortage of potatoes. Except when harvest might have been difficult, at times.

K: So you started on this Y2YC course... So you were training really and working?

JM: Yes, it was an exceptionally good training programme, you covered every aspect of the telephone engineer's job - working down man-holes.

I remember one time, during the blackout, there was a whacking great wagon, came up St Georges Road, I could hear the engine roaring, turned into Chorley New Road and I was standing with a red flag in the dark, watching for something coming and I waved the red flag and getting ready, and this whacking great wagon stopped, and I looked in the cab and I couldn't see anyone in there at all, and I went round to the passenger side, and looked in there. It was an American Army truck and the driver and his passenger were black men and that's why we couldn't see anyone. In his drawl he said 'What's wrong boy?' and we explained to them would they mind waiting while we got our equipment out of the way so they could carry on!

We used to get spurts of work when they suddenly decided there would be a telephone in most Air Raid shelters, or facilities for telephone. That, obviously would cause work for us, put a telegraph pole up the side of these shelters and getting the telephone in there, or a socket that a telephone could be plugged into if need be.

K: Do you remember where those were, the Air Raid..?

JM: Where the Shelters were..?

K: Yeah. Extra telephones were needed in lots of places were they?

JM: It was just in case someone decided a particular Shelter warranted having a telephone. The telephones weren't left in there. Someone, possibly an Air Raid Warden would have this telephone that he could take to a Shelter somewhere. And the same with... they had Warden's Posts, where the Wardens used to meet up, again, unless it was a permanently manned post, they had telephones they could take in there and plug in.

K: Shall we talk about the Home Guard? So, for the rest of the War you were carrying on in your training course and becoming a fully fledged engineer.

JM: Yes.

K: But during that time you were in the Home Guard weren't you.

JM: Yes, before the Home Guard, we were compulsorily put on fire-watching duties and certainly at 15 maybe at 14 we did probably one night per two weeks. It would depend on the number of people available for the fire-watching duties, but, everyone, so far as I know, and people even living near the Post Office... I know one of the Abbott brothers, the Abbott family lived in King Street and they were the people who had the black pea stalls when the fairground was on. And Mrs Abbott had a shop on White Lion Brow. I know that her brother, John, he did fire-watching at the Post Office, because he lived in King Street and I suppose he was protecting his own property as well as the Post office one. But six people each night, and it was two hours on, two hours off, in pairs and we would go up on the roof watching for incendiaries with the... (laughs) with the (laughs) you can't help but laugh, but the buckets of water and a stirrup pump (laughs) and... The funny thing was that we had these stirrup pumps but we were advised not to squirt water on the incendiary bomb otherwise it would make the phosphorous even more dangerous, so... We never had to do it. It were to put fires out after the incendiaries had caused the fire but we weren't to tackle the incendiaries (laughs), because that would cause more trouble!

K: Did you get much action?

JM: No, no, no, no, never! We used to go up on the roof, there was a ledge round the front, foolishly we used to amuse ourselves by going round that exterior ledge, looking down on Deansgate. But we could see the glow, to the south, over Manchester and hear the bombs dropping and anti-aircraft shells exploding... And there must have been some anti-aircraft shells over Bolton, because I picked up a piece of shrapnel on Deansgate which I'm told did come from an anti-aircraft shell.

K: So, what about the Home Guard?

JM: Yes, well I'll try not to laugh, but... We were called up into the Home Guard, I think, at seventeen, and being employed in the GPO I had to join the GPO Home Guard. The GPO had it's own Home Guard because the intention was that, that battalion of Home Guard were there to defend the Telephone Exchange, and that's where I nearly start laughing, when I say defend the Telephone Exchange, because, it does cause one to smile when you think of what went on! There were a lot of... thousands of Americans at... that place near Warrington - Burtonwood, and they had nothing to do before D-Day and in order to find them something to do, they used to do exercises. Certainly on a Sunday - that's when we came in contact with them - attacking Bolton. And their objective, so we were told, was to capture the Telephone Exchange and capture the Town Hall. And once they got into the Post Office yard, we had an old postman there, he was about seventy with a revolver strapped round his waist... He was the only one that was armed. We had our rifles, but we never saw any bullets! Maybe they had some hidden away somewhere, but... We had a bayonet, 1914 style, the ones about 18 inches long... And the Americans used to come in on trucks, and I know for a fact that they disembarked at the bottom of Chorley New Road at the junction with St George's Road. Because, on one or two occasions my point of duty was to go and stand at the end of Vernon Street and St George's Road and watch for any trucks coming down, and as soon as I saw them, we had people that we could wave to, and get word back - mind you we were in the telephone service and we didn't use telephones! We either waved or shouted to get word back to our officers at the Post Office that the Americans had been sighted. Sometimes, the Americans would go down Chorley Street, and that would deceive us, and then they would go along the bottom by Brydson's Croft, following the River Croal, under the high level bridge and onto the back of the Post Office. I can't remember that the Telephone Exchange was ever captured. I know the Town Hall was captured because I actually saw American troops at the top of the Town Hall steps, and that said that the Town Hall had been captured. On one occasion, we'd finished, I was going home... going to catch the tram home and I was crossing the Town Hall Square when someone, foolishly - and I don't know which side had done it first, whether it was the Americans, or the Home Guard - had fixed their bayonets and that had caused some upset between one side or the other with some choice language being used about the you come near me with that, about what would happen and it all had to be smoothed out by an officer coming and telling them to keep their cool and (laughs) nothing was meant by it and shaking hands! (laughs).

K: What else did you get up to in the Home Guard?

JM: The parade night for the Home Guard was every Thursday night, and I went to Night School on the Thursday night at the Technical College. In order that you did not miss the parade anyone

who went to Night School, and I think there was about four or five of us, we had to attend parade on Sunday morning! And we were all the people that had missed the Thursday night and we were always the same people, and the same, whoever it was, Corporal or Sergeant of the Home Guard had to be there to see that we had something to do, and the only thing that they seemed to know about was the Mills grenade, because, down King Street we had a stock of Mills grenades - live ones - and the fuses, I actually saw them. And we had the same lecture for week after week after week and I even remember now that the Mills grenade has got 48 segments on the external cover of the grenade and it would split open into 48 lethal pieces of shrapnel were it to go off. And we actually were taken to a place called Rooley Moor, somewhere near Rochdale, and we were allowed the throw one grenade, as practice, and we went all the way to Rochdale to do that in Post Office trucks! (laughs)

K: Was it like 'Dad's Army' or is that an exaggeration?

JM: Well... it's so easy to make fun of it, but everyone was doing their best to be serious. Some of the officers did take themselves... I mean I went into the proper Army later and saw the difference (laughs) And I knew what the difference was between being in the Home Guard and being in the Army. They tried, and they tried to be serious and they were...our own people. The officer commanding the Post Office Home Guard, was the man who worked on the test desk, and I worked on the test desk when I'd finished my training and... Norman Shaw, he was a Captain and there was a Lieutenant Cummings and he was the one who looked after the telephones at the Town Hall, the automatic exchange in the Town Hall and the police telephone pillars, the blue pillars, the Ericsson pillars which have all been recovered now. Fred Cummings, he was the maintenance man at the Town Hall and looked after all those, the police telephones. Jimmy Levy was another Lieutenant, he was well-known in the town. And we had a place at the old Telephone Exchange at the junction of Silverwell Street and Bradshawgate. I believe that building has recently been turned into a pub-restaurant. The Ordnance Survey were in there when it was still a government building, but that was the original Post Office on the street level and up above was the Telephone Exchange.

K: So, when the Home Guard was formed, it was after a broadcast wasn't it, by Anthony Eden, I think.

JM: Oh, that was the LDV - Look, Duck and Vanish (laughs). Someone must have decided somewhere that Telephone Exchanges should be defended by dedicated Home Guard within the Post Office.

K: What sort of a uniform did you have?

JM: In the Home Guard, it was the regular Army uniform - gaiters, boots... It was funny because, we were specifically told, the people that worked externally in the gangs, of course these Home Guard boots were ideal for climbing telegraph poles you know. Climbing telegraph poles tended to rip your footwear apart. You used to get overalls provided but one thing, never, ever, was footwear, and of course, the Home Guard boots were ideal for climbing telegraph poles and anyone caught wearing his Home Guard boots or even the scuff marks of... The steps of the telegraph pole, were held on with corkscrews and it was those corkscrews that used to cut into the leather on the inside of the in-step in the boots, and it was quickly evident that if anyone had been wearing their Home Guard boots to climb a telegraph pole it was immediately noticed, because they were looking for that and it was a punishable offence. What the punishment was, I don't know, but wearing uniform trousers, under overall trousers (laughs) was also quite common I'm told! (laughs)

K: There was something else you were telling me earlier about potato picking.

JM: Oh, that was the Civil Service harvesting scheme, when... 1942-43 the farmers were desperately short of labour to get the potato harvest in and someone in government suggested that maybe the Civil Service... why they must have thought the Civil Service had the spare labour I don't know, but we were invited, should anyone wish to help out with potato harvest to volunteer to go potato picking and two years running I volunteered and I went to what was then called Kirby Fields, which is now Kirby Newtown near Liverpool. On to a very big farm there, along with a colleague, John Bentley. We had special leave from the Post Office, which was leave with full pay, and one shilling an hour from the farmers. And the odd potato we could take home at weekend!

K: Oh, you were actually billeted there for a week?

JM: Well, it was two weeks, and we went home. We stayed at a hostel, near Fazakerley and it was an ROF hostel and Violet Carson came in the evening... There was workers there from the ROF factory, Napier aircraft engines, that was what this hostel was for, and also there was a great

number, must have been about two or three hundred sailors, both Merchant Navy and Royal Navy, who were waiting in Liverpool to join ships that never arrived... because they'd been sunk by the U boats. So there was all these sailors in Liverpool and it's surrounding districts waiting for something to do, so the government then put them on potato picking! They weren't very enthusiastic potato pickers, the sailors, and they would get up to all kinds of tricks. Standing on the odd spud to push it back in the ground, rather than picking it up, you know? And Violet Carson used to come and play the piano, on entertainment evenings in the hostel canteen.

K: Was that part of ENSA?

JM: No, I think she was just a volunteer to... She was well-known as a pianist apparently, that was one of her fortes, before she became famous in Coronation Street.

K: You said you went twice - that was potato picking each time?

JM: Yes, yes. And I went to the same farm each time.

K: Well, it would be a bit of a change wouldn't it, and you say you got paid a bit more, but been hard work.

JM: Fortunately, we did two weeks, because, I think the whole of the first week was just one of pain, with all this bending down, and the second week we were accustomed to it and it was enjoyable. We were... I know there was four girls from round up Oldham, all Civil Service, and I was with a boy, John Bentley, who became Head Postmaster at Glasgow in his later years, which was one of the top jobs in the Post Office, I think.

K: What do you remember of entertainment in Bolton during the War, what did you do?

JM: Palais de Dance! I call it my misspent youth. As I've already said, I went to night school three nights a week and it was a matter of... at nine o'clock when the classes finish, dashing out to the corner of the Queens Cinema on the corner and catching the first tram, Halliwell or Dunscair that went down Bridge Street and dropping off at the Palais... to get there for the interval.

K: And you got there for some of the evening anyway.

JM: Oh yes, after the interval.

K: How many nights a week would that be?

JM: At the Palais? (laughs) Probably about five!

K: Five!

JM: Well, as I say, misspent youth. No, maybe three nights a week, and some people that I think of now and see occasionally... and it's funny that the band then in the Palais de Dance was Johnny Healey, a very well-known band leader, I don't know if you've heard of him? But his son also became a well-known musician, being called in on a trumpet when they wanted to form a big band and the saxophonist whose surname I can't remember, Charlie... and he was the saxophone player in Johnny Healey's band. Charlie died. He was 92, he died about 12 months ago, and not too long ago, the trombone player, named Jim Nowell... Charlie rang me up and said Jim Nowell's coming to see me if you remember him and I went round there and I met Jim Nowell.

K: During the War, this was a great source of entertainment?

JM: Yes, well, yes, it was the only... It was a very cosmopolitan crowd of people - the Americans were coming in on Liberty trucks from Burtonwood, and then there was all the other lads that were on leave, already in the Forces and I was always a little bit fed-up waiting to get into the Air Force. I'd done two and a half years in the Air Training Corps ready for the Air Force and when my time came, I'd finished my training... and it was only when the Ministry of Labour released you from your civilian job and said to the War Department 'You can now have this man', that you were able to go in the Forces, you got called up - and you had to be employed on the job that the Ministry of Labour had released you for. And anyone who was not employed on that job, in the Forces, could be 'claimed out' on what was called Class B Release by his employer and quite a number of people, who had been in the Forces, came out on Class B Release, because the Army could not find them the correct type of work that they'd been released for. But, with my job, telephones -, Royal Corps of Signals, Catterick Camp, and I spent all my time at Catterick as an instructor.

K: I was just thinking about the Palais stuff. It was quite a way to come from Warrington wasn't it, was it renowned?

JM: Oh yes, they used to come in you know, Liberty trucks? And I suppose these Liberty trucks - I'm only assuming this, that the Americans at Burtonwood would have a number of trucks to choose from, going to different places and where they wanted to go to. And anyone that wanted to go to

Bolton Palais, would get on the Bolton truck, and I know there'd be at least four, and they would park in that little street, leading up to where St Mary's Church. It doesn't exist now, but the drivers used to park the trucks up there until the dancing had finished and then take the Americans back. And there was at least two American soldiers - they were Eighth Army Air Force - and they had been in Bolton so long they could speak Lancashire accent without any trouble at all! That was their party piece when they saw you to say something in a Bolton dialect, a Lancashire accent!

K: Did you resent the Americans at all?

JM: No, I found them quite sociable. They always had more money and, of course, the chewing gum. You know what they used to say 'Over-paid, over-sexed and over here!'. (laughs) But no, I got a nice jacket called a South River jacket, which suited me down to the ground for work. We had coupons when you wanted to buy anything, any textiles other than wearing the dust coats as we did, or the blue jackets, I got this South River jacket which was a US Army issue and I had it for two or three years.

K: What about the cinema, did you go there?

JM: Well, yes, I had an Aunt, she was a shareholder, in... there was a group of cinemas, The Queen's, The Rialto, The Gem at Brownlow Fold, were under the same owner and she must have had shares in that company because she got complimentary tickets. That was the only time I used to go, I think, when I didn't have to pay!

K: Presumably you're quite a good dancer then after spending so much time?

JM: I suppose I thought I was! I went to your VE celebrations, on July 2nd - really enjoyed it, really appreciated being given the opportunity. And when I saw that lady with the silver fox fur strung over her shoulders and the man in the trilby hat, dancing as they did - Jitterbugging - I said to the lady who was sitting on my table, they wouldn't have been allowed to do that at Bolton Palais! Because that was absolutely taboo, Mr Boone, the manager, used to stand in the middle of the floor, and if, once you started raising your arm, and the girl going underneath - you were off the floor. (laughs) 'Will you please leave the floor.' He would not have it at all. For anybody to be Jitterbugging they needed too much room for the number of people that wanted to dance, that was the real reason! (laughs)

K: Was it very grand inside, the Palais?

JM: Very nice, yes, and it wasn't always to go for a dance - you used to go for a coffee on the balcony, because you got sugar... you know, sugar was rationed, coffee was rationed and you could go up there and get a cup of coffee for sixpence and make it last all night! And listening to Johnny Healey's band was worth what you'd paid to go on the balcony.

K: You could still go and watch and it was cheaper than going dancing?

JM: Oh, yes, when you move from the dance floor to go up on the balcony, you passed someone who gave you a ticket, and that allowed you to come back down off the balcony to dance again on the dance floor. Well, we used to... somebody would say 'Lend us your ticket' and go on down and have a dance and without paying for the dancing. (laughs)

K: And what time did it finish in the evening?

JM: Certainly after the last tram, and I think the last tram would be ten thirty, probably about eleven and sometimes there was a late night. Thursday night was private dances, when works had their own dance - like Atlas Mills Dance Night.

K: Did you ever go to those?

JM: Oh, yes, you could buy tickets at the door. You went to the door and there would be someone there from that company who'd hired the hall, and you could buy the ticket from them and go in.

K: I suppose some mills had better dances than others, did they?

JM: Yes, there was well-known ones - the Hunt Balls, Holcombe Hunt Ball was a big night when people came in their huntsman outfit and blew their hunting horns and... (laughs)

K: Innocent days! Did they serve alcohol?

JM: No.

K: Did people go elsewhere?

JM: They had to go out to the Founder's. I didn't drink... but you had to go out to the Founders in St George's Street, opposite the old Town Hall or on the other corner - it's knocked down now - at the top of Knowsley Street. There was a big pub on the corner there.

K: Did you do any, or your family do any voluntary work, or recycling or contributions to the War effort?

JM: In the Post Office there was one or two of us who were keen on keeping fit, and I joined the Bolton Harriers, both for the running and then became interested in amateur wrestling and I was selected for the Bolton team who took part in demonstrations of wrestling and... there's one in particular, because I remember it, because I've still got the ticket that says 'Competitor' on it. And it was in aid of the Wings for Victory Week, where a town would raise money in order to buy aeroplanes and different organizations would do their part in raising that money. And we, from the Harriers, put on a display of wrestling at Eccles Town Hall. How much we raised I've absolutely no idea, but... and a colleague of mine, named Joe Wilson, was well-known as a weight-lifter - on Bolton Town Council at one point - also worked in the Post Office, and he would give demonstrations of weight-lifting, for the same reason, raising money for the War effort. There was Wings for Victory, and Warship Week and...

K: So you were a keen Harrier, but wrestling really?

JM: I was made the wrestling representative on the Harriers committee and they were very, very, keen on the amateur status, and some professional wrestlers - no harm in mentioning, the Pye family - they are always looking for somewhere to do training and started to use the Harriers premises and it was absolutely *taboo* for a professional wrestler to go on to an amateur mat. That's the wrestling mat - that was against all the rules of the Amateur Athletics Association. And someone came to me and said 'Eh, you're the wrestling representative on the committee, you'd better tell them that they're not to come here anymore' ...and here's me, Jack Pye who became famous as a wrestler at Belle Vue, and it was up to me to be going telling him that he had..! (laughs). And another man called Jim Foy, who wrestled as the name of Dominic Foy, he was another one with about a size 25 collar, you know. I used to practice trying to get an arm lock on his neck and bend his neck, but I never managed it! Of course, we did the running part, round Colliers Rows, top of Smithills Dean, there.

K: And you carried on through the, all through the Wartime with these things?

JM: Until I was called up, yes.

K: Were you called up before the War ended?

JM: No, no. After... End of '45. December '45.

K: What about Christmas and birthdays, did Wartime affect those?

JM: No... my closest colleague was a boy named Brian Olive and he went away to Peterhouse, Cambridge, and then I was more or less on my own then. We were very, very close and then he joined the Air Force and I was just waiting then to get into the Air Force. Brian became a Lancaster bomber pilot and whilst I may never have achieved that kind of thing, at least I did look forward to the Air Force and then the great disappointment for me, was, no Air Force, I had to go in the Army... talking about telephones.

K: What about VE Day, do you remember that?

JM: VE Day, oh yes, yes. There was a big celebration on the Town Hall Square and the part that sticks out in my mind, it was just going dark.. and at the top of the Town Hall steps, they had erected four large flag poles, and the Mayor and all the civic dignitaries were there, and there was a big crowd and they brought out these flags and they ran up the Union Jack, the French tricolour, The Stars and Stripes, and the last one on the right of the steps was the Russian red flag, and honestly, that got the biggest cheer of all, when the Russian flag went up. And the irony of that is, within twelve months it was illegal to fly that flag in this country because of the way of the political scene changed.

K: And what about VJ Day, would that... that would be in August so...

JM: No.

K: Nothing?

JM: Did they have street parties?

K: They had some street parties.

JM: Oh, they must have pooled their rations.

K: Yes, they did.

JM: I was not of that age then, for street parties.

K: No. You wouldn't be. To go back to... you mentioned something about your tonsils, didn't you?

JM: Oh yes. No, no, that's when I joined the Post Office. It just shows how things have changed, and I received this memo telling me that, on my employment - I can't remember the exact words - my tonsils caused concern to the doctors, who gave me the medical examination and there was a proviso put on my employment, that, should I have trouble with my tonsils, that the treatment for them would be at my own expense, and should I be have to be off work I would not receive any sick pay. It just shows the difference between then... and (laughs) the National Health Service.

K: I should have asked you John, did you have any brothers or sisters?

JM: No, no, my Mother died when I was five years old and I'm an only child. Some say that causes problems, but that's for other people to judge! (laughs)

K: Did you have any relatives in the War, in the Services?

JM: No, not... Canadian - the majority of my relatives are in Canada and I had Canadian relatives. My Great-grandmother left Bolton in 1910 and emigrated with two unmarried daughters and one unmarried son - first of all to Nova Scotia, and then on to where these new mills were opening, in Hamilton, Ontario - Cotton mills - and they were looking for people who were familiar with working in a cotton mill and all my relatives are still there, around Hamilton, Ontario, with very few relatives in Bolton.

K: Briefly, what you did after the War... Well first of all as an instructor in the Army, then back to the GPO.

JM: Yes, Bolton Telephone Exchange, and then...

K: How many years were you there, at Bolton?

JM: At Bolton, well, I started in 1939 and I left in 1961 and then I went... I did some work in Manchester, but without moving house - I travelled. But then I moved to... I passed a promotion board, and moved onto Penrith in Cumbria, which was great for me. I like the Lake District and to get a job at Penrith, particularly one where I was able to visit staff who were working in the Lake District, was, for me, couldn't have been anything I would have wished for better than that. From Penrith I moved on to Carlisle - still covered the same area, around Penrith, but a far larger area, from the top of Shap Fell to the Scots Borders. To the west coast and on the east fells as far as Alston, which was seven hundred square miles roughly where, my job was to look after the installation staff and underground maintenance... and get to know the Lake District very, very well. And in 1981, I knew that retirement would be coming eventually and I didn't want to retire in Carlisle and looked for an opportunity to move south, to Lancaster, which I did and that's how I came to live in Morecambe. And I took over the same kind of job - installation and underground maintenance and external works for the whole of the southern Lake District, whereas, previously, I'd been in the northern Lake District.

K: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about John?

JM: My eyesight is affected now with macular degeneration, so, I have these blind spots, which have prevented me from carrying on with my life-long hobby of philately. I've been President of the local society and got most pleasure from that, specialising in Line Engraved stamps, Penny Blacks and... But unfortunately, little boys now, don't bother with stamps, they have computers, and as there are no little boys coming into the hobby, the hobby is slowly dying, as there's no, no collectors coming along, collectors of the future. And I have, I still have this boyish desire to collect things - Army badges, stamps, so many different things that... I've got flat irons that my Father collected that I've added to! I've got seven different flat irons now. Enough to keep me going with the garden.

K: Well, it's been a pleasure talking to you and I enjoyed listening to your Wartime memories and we will be able to use them for the future.

JM: Thank you very much.

K: Thank you very much.

ENDS