

Memories of Norman Wilkinson (born 1934) in the war years

The following are the memories of Norman, with some additional information from David, Isabel and Martin (his brothers and sister) and Robert Brown who has lived in Sutton all his life.

Night watch and Home Guard

There was a night watch of local farmers in Sutton led by George and Joseph Wilkinson as there were regular night bombings, the locals thought these were aimed at the railway lines and the underground petrol dump over the railway bridge at Redmile. The night watch carried a stirrup pump to douse incendiaries with water and Norman, born in 1934, remembers that children helped pick up scraps of burnt out incendiaries in the morning. There were 2 search lights positioned on the Granby side of Sutton at Cook's barn and on the edge of George Wilkinson's field to draw bombers away from Nottingham. There were ammunition stores all along from Sutton to Granby in round nissen huts storing ammunition for the troops. The huts were 25 -30 feet long made of curved metal and painted a green colour.

Motor cars (not many around) had one headlamp blanked off, the other had slotted metal to point the beam downwards.

All fields had poles 20 feet high so that gliders could not land without crashing. Everyone thought we would be invaded.

The Home Guard, George, Bert and Joseph Wilkinson, had a uniform and were trained at Bingham to put out fires and look out for bombers coming. They were issued with rifles and bayonets but Norman was not sure if they had ammunition. George Wilkinson was a Special Constable i.e. an unofficial policeman. On Sunday mornings he went to Bingham for training drill to assist police in keeping law and order. The Home Guard had 2 horses ridden by the Roberts brothers, Jack and Walker, of Chapel farm. They were supplied with leggings, breeches, and tin helmets and they carried rifles when on patrol in Granby, Redmile and Barkestone.

May 9th 1941

There was severe bombing over Sutton on the night of May 9th 1941. Lots of incendiary bombs had landed near Jim Roberts' brick milking barn (at the side of the footpath near to Hornbuckle's land) where one ticked visibly for weeks. Mr. Roberts was told not to milk the cows but he carried on regardless! Another bomb underneath the railway bridge at Plungar did not go off. The incendiary bombs had vanes to make them spin and they embedded themselves deeply in the ground. They whistled very loudly and burst into white flames so as to light up the ground for the bombers to see to land and also to set fire to the haystacks.

During that particularly bad night Edith and Muriel Wilkinson walked around with saucepans on their heads because of slipping roof tiles and shrapnel, some laughed at them but at least they were safe.

Fifteen feet from the end of Poplars farm (Joseph Wilkinson's) there was a huge walnut tree. A bomb landed next to it and lifted the tree over the buildings (2 farm houses) and into the yard where the cart sheds stood, it took all the buildings down razing them to the ground.

My mother sensed something was happening when she heard bombs all around the villages from Barkestone to Whatton, so she put her children under the kitchen table. Ten seconds later there was a sound as if the entire house was being blown up. The Yorkist cast iron fireplace with a back boiler and cooking range was blown onto the floor and the

tap on it gushed water. A tall cupboard shattered and every pot in the house was broken because of the noise and vibration, there was dust everywhere. (To the end of her life my mother was terrified during thunder storms and could never eat until the noise had subsided). The bomb had demolished the brick toilet and lifted an entire stick heap onto the outside porch which was made of wood with a galvanised roof. The stick heap jammed against the main door to the house and mother and 3 young children, Norman, David and Ruth, were trapped inside. Father was on fire watch duty and he with other men had to clear the sticks away from the door in order to rescue his family.

A government Damage Committee paid for the repair and rebuilding which was done quickly as there was an urgent need for food. The Wilkinson family lived at the Gables for 6 weeks whilst Jacques of Bingham did the rapid repair. The family found it difficult to sleep at night after this especially heavy bombing.

Len Watson commented that "This Parish has the unenviable reputation as the most heavily bombed parish in Notts."

The evening newspaper later reported that 24 High Explosive bombs had fallen within the parish that night.

The Farm

Land girls were based at Hawksworth and farmers could ring up for them when required¹, particularly at harvesting time when George Wilkinson brought out the binder which he shared with my father, but even then it was a slow job as the string kept getting raveled or broke. Farmers could get a permit to purchase a tractor provided it was also shared. The tractor was on allocation from WarAg (War Agricultural Executive Committee). The steel wheels had no rubber on them. The main jobs were for Shire horses. (Norman remembers that he was 13 when he was allowed to drive the tractor under the watchful eye of his uncle and disapproval of his father!) The tractor was quicker than the horses had been with the binder, but there was still much manual work including standing up the stooks of cut corn. After drying for a few days these were transported to the stack yards where the previous year's floor of wooden poles were demolished to the great excitement of children who were armed with sticks to kill the masses of mice and empty the nests full of their pink babies as they scurried in all directions. They were then picked up by their tails and put into piles, however the rats were the worst as they played dead!

A huge pink threshing machine separated the corn from the stalks which were then stacked to use as food and bedding for the animals. The threshing machine was brought by Hempshall's, a contractor from Redmile, to thresh the corn as required. Steam power was used for this and a lot of water had to be brought from the wells in the fields and a ton of coal was needed (this was also rationed). Some corn was kept but some sold to Simpsons at Cropwell Bishop to produce flour. Simpsons ran a weekly bread van through the villages. Harvesting was a very heavy and laborious job and children carried jam sandwiches and a billycan of hot tea to the workers who would not stop until dusk. My mother also made nettle beer for the men working all day in the heat. Jessie Roberts (later Cook) worked as a land girl and her sister Jenny was a volunteer in the air force. Father sold his first motor car, a Bullnose Morris, to buy a hay making machine as getting and buying petrol was difficult. Everyone used bicycles.

There was an Italian prisoner of war camp at Redmile and several farmers (Percy Knight of Highfield Farm and Joseph Wilkinson of The Poplars) used them. Norman recalls they were grateful for the food cooked by Mum as they hated the endless potatoes served elsewhere! I do remember Mum saying that she did not know what food to give them. David recalls that the Italians were very good at catching rabbits, they outran them! Norman pays tribute to our mother's skill as he does not recall them ever being hungry.

The roads were very muddy and full of pot holes. The farm yards were mud as concrete entrances were not laid until the 1970's. Disinfected straw was laid across the entrances when the seemingly frequent bouts of fowl pest and foot and mouth disease happened. The pungent smell of Jeyes Fluid or similar was a grim indicator of what was happening.

1. Bill Roberts of Chapel Farm had the only telephone in the village as he was just starting up his joinery business. (Martin Wilkinson, Norman's youngest brother, remembers going up there with his father in the 1950's to make phone calls.)

Food

Many people kept hens and some, geese. Additionally father kept sheep (Border Leicester), cows (Lincoln Reds), shire horses and pigs (Large Whites). Large amounts of salt were needed for salting pigs. (As a child Isabel, Norman's younger sister, born in 1947, always wondered with fascination how there was enough on one pig to send round a "fry" of offal to everyone in the village, when a pig was killed, but there was always great excitement and a tasty meal. But Norman explained that the pigs were a vast size after having had many litters of piglets, thus laying on layers of fat.) Norman recalls that he always had the day off school for the pig killing. His job was to scrape the hairs off the pig using a scraper and hot water. Jack Wilkinson from Granby was the pig killer. He held a very select position as he had to be a butcher and licensed (to prevent the black market in food) and he had to inform the Police when pig killing and they had to be present. Jack had a butcher's shop on Plungar Lane, just past the Church in Allwood's farm which later became part of Manor Farm.

Mother made pork pies, brawn and sausages. Salted hams were hung up in the attic, above rows of carefully laid out cooking apples, and father always had cold ham for breakfast with pickled beetroot and warm eggs. Father finished each day with bread in hot milk for his supper. Real cow's milk tasted very different from bottled milk, but was almost undrinkable when the cows were first turned out into the fields after spending the winter in the sheds. They would charge around the field in a huge group in their joy at being released and for the first few days of eating grass again the milk was full of cream and extremely rich, excellent for my mother to make butter. Norman was 8 years old when he milked his first cow.

Animals were sent for slaughter at Melton Mowbray market and later to Dick Pell of Plungar, who went to school with my father at Melton Mowbray Grammar. In the early years everything went to market (Nottingham, Melton or Newark) by rail. Father walked the sheep to Barnstone to catch the train. There were 2 weekly butchers vans and Mr. Doubleday had a butchers shop on the corner in Granby opposite the church. Brian Harrison, born 1938, of Keyworth farm in Granby thinks it was previously a hardware shop. The Post office was up the twitchel, run by Mary Moulds parents.

My father grew potatoes and the village came together to harvest these. (Isabel remembers one of the ladies, Mrs. Crawley, being given a threepenny bit for a day's work in the 1950s). My father also grew as many other vegetables as he could. There were wild mushrooms growing in their distinct circles in the fields and father would come home with his huge handkerchief full of mushrooms and bluebuttons which my mother cooked and thickened with flour and served on toast, delicious! Walnuts, Apples, Plums, Damsons and Pears were plentiful in the orchard and my mother was skilled in preserving fruit in kilner jars as well as making pies and jams. We had a good supply of food to hand from the land (pigeons, pheasants, partridge, hares and rabbits) and from the orchards, but children were aware of rationing. A policeman from Nottingham used to bring biscuits in exchange for eggs (highly illegal!) There was a weekly hardware van and also clothes

and material were supplied by Doncaster's van. Trips to Bingham were rare and difficult as father rarely had time to leave the farm, but as well as food shops there, there was a cobbler Laurie Smith.

Water and Electricity

Each house had a well, and each village green had a pump serviced from an underground stream which went down the fields and was accessed by a number of wells. It was perfectly clean water and never ran dry. The water was carried in buckets to the houses. Significantly in Sutton the communal sheep dip was sited opposite the green (now part of the garden of Springs Cottage). Bingham council also provided a water cart twice a week for drinking water. In Sutton there was a water tower on top of the hill and this piped water to White House farm.

Mother had a sink and a pump in the outhouse which was connected to an outside metal tank fed by water from the roof (used for washing clothes). In dry weather when the water level was low we watched small red worms settle in the water before we could drink it! Baths were taken in a large metal bath in an outside garage which had originally been a slaughter house evidenced by the sloping floor. Bert Wilkinson was a licensed butcher and used it to slaughter pigs. Once electricity arrived a copper was installed to boil hot water there for baths. Mother hung War Dept. issued blankets over 2 clothes horses to give some measure of privacy and a little shelter from the draughts. The toilet was a brick building down the garden from which father emptied the pan every so often into a hole in the garden, toilet paper was usually newspaper or rough shiny lzal paper if we were lucky!

Father said the greatest problems were water and light. In winter days there was not enough water to feed the cattle in the sheds so he went down the fields with a water cart to the numerous wells. The Poplars farm had a wind mill generating power to the milking sheds.

Radios in Sutton were run on batteries. Billy Cook charged up the batteries using electricity in Granby and then brought them up to Sutton.

Granby had electricity long before Sutton which had no mains electricity until 1949 and no mains water until 1956. (Isabel recalls the great excitement of an inside toilet and bathroom when she was 16 in 1963. Father was chairman of the Parish council in the 1960s and his greatest delight was the achievement of street lights in the 2 villages.)

School

Both Brian Harrison and David Wilkinson, born 1936, recall their time at Granby school as rather chaotic. There were 2 classrooms, children being in the small class for one year. Bedlam ensued as Miss Pepper supervised both classes from the doorway between the two rooms. Sandwiches were provided for the children at lunchtimes. There was a coal fire in the kitchen and a stove in the big room. Mother used to take the 3 children to Granby each day on her bike, transporting each one a short distance then going back for another. The Wilkinson children were sent to Lady Bay school after a few years but David recalls that when he was 8, having only been at the school a short while, he was moved from there to Bingham church school and taught by Miss Wortly, since the evacuees in West Bridgford were given their places at Lady Bay during the war. After the war they went back to Lady Bay.

Evacuees

There were at least 4 evacuees in Sutton. Two girls lived with George and Edith Wilkinson but only for a short time as they were unable to settle.

Robert Brown recalls a boy named Sawyer living with Bert Wilkinson. He may have been the girls' brother, but he was sent back after an incident there. Robert also recalls Alan Hemmings living with his mother in 1944. Alan has fond memories and has expressed "the gratitude of our family to Mrs. Coy, daughter Nora and Mrs. Brown, who with the tiny village of Sutton cum Granby gave us sanctuary in those terrible dangerous times." He came from near London at a time when the V1 and V2 bombs were being targeted on England.

Christmas and Winter

A large piece of yew tree was sawn off to make a Christmas tree. Christmas dinner was goose with a cockerel on Boxing Day. Norman did not remember having any toys as they had the farm to play and work on.

He remembers huge snowfalls in winter. Father said that once he walked over a 5-bar farm gate without noticing as the snow had drifted so deeply.

The houses were very cold as there was just one fire in the living room, the front room was only heated on a Sunday and at Christmas. The bedrooms were particularly cold and it was with fascination that we all woke up on a frosty morning to see wonderfully patterned frost on the inside of the windows. Each pattern of fronds like ferns was different and never ceased to amaze us all. Icicles hung from the roofs of sheds and were very tasty! We lit our way to bed using a candle and were very warm under Ministry issued Army Surplus grey blankets – but they were very scratchy! In the morning we washed in cold water from a jug poured into an ornate pottery basin.

Martin recalls the perpetual smell of white paraffin as there were many paraffin lamps in the house and attics.

Chapel

There was an evening service at Sutton Independent Primitive Methodist chapel on a Sunday and Robert Brown, born 1931, recalls the prominence of his mother and the Hemphrey and Roberts families in the organisation of this. There were morning and evening services at Granby chapel, also a Sunday school. Father sang in the combined church and chapel choir and later mother became organist at the chapel when Lou Wilkinson retired and the other organist, Miss Hall, had gone blind. Mother had always played the piano regularly at home, but felt she needed lessons from Mr. Carter, church organist at Bottesford, in order to understand how to play the bass note pedals and the 2 manual pipe organ. She did a very good job and walked three times every Sunday to Granby and back to play for Sunday Services and Sunday School. She was also a Sunday School teacher and secretary of the Women's Institute.

The chapel anniversary at Granby was a grand affair. A wooden, tiered platform was set up next to the pulpit and it regularly held 40 children for the special afternoon and evening service of a programme rehearsed for weeks which was devised by the organist at the Albert Hall, Fred Garnett, who produced anniversary scripts, words and music under the name of P.G. Larbaestier. The Christmas play and Sunday School party were in the back room of the chapel.

Outings to Skegness were a treat after the war and tea was always booked by Connie Hopewell for the entire group at a café in Skegness.

The Harvest Festival was another important day when Hilda and Maurice Hopewell supervised the elaborate display of food brought and then on the Monday evening there was an intense auction when bidding for items reached dizzy heights and helped the chapel coffers. This was followed by a harvest supper provided by the ladies.

End of War

In 1945 there was an end of war celebration in the field belonging to Henry Wilkinson of Manor Farm, along from the Village Hall in Granby, where bungalows now stand. There were games, teas and general relief and thanksgiving!

Church

These notes are from the Church Parish records, not from Norman, and they detail the contribution made to the life of the parish by Rev. Marson.

In 1941 he ran a Boy Scout movement and regularly wrote and directed religious plays. (Members of 29 Parishes attended the Passion Play when it was performed at Southwell Minster. It was performed at Langar in 1951 and Isabel remembers a couple of years later being a maid to Pilate's wife while her brother David was a Roman soldier.)

Rev. Marson urged collections for the RAF Benevolent Fund and held a summer garden fete each year on the vicarage lawn.

Fund raising was often in the form of regular whist drives which were the main social event for the villagers.

The Church Sunday School was run by Miss Pepper. There was a party at Christmas. Instead of a summer outing in 1942 there was a children's treat of presents, tea and games on a field in Elton.

Also in 1942 Rev. Marson felt that the ladies in the village needed somewhere to talk to each other and organised the formation of the Mothers Union.