

INTERVIEW WITH GRACE SHELFORD, SOUTHWARK 10/2/95

Interviewer: Rib Davis

Trans 14

R: Your name is Mrs Grace Shelford. Can you tell me where you were born and when.

G: I was born in Oxen Street, 1918. It is at the back of Parker's Row. It's all been altered. It was a combination of Jamaica Road. Then there was Christchurch in the middle. Parker's Row went down round by Dock Head where the Catholic church is, and then up here, up to Tooley Street. It was one long main road. Then we lived next door to the Teritorials. Course there was four lanes of traffic outside the road. There was the Lilly Part (?) and there was a row of shop: a newsagent and Watkins the photographers. We lived opposite, and in our front room where I slept, it was facing the main road and there were four lanes of traffic. Two going up and two coming down. When the war started that's where we lived. In Number 4 Jamaica Road.

R: What was it that your parents did?

G: My father worked. My mother stayed at home. God knows what father did. He worked for some sort of Council, but it was over through the tunnel. I think he used to go through the Rotherhithe Tunnel. I never really asked much. When the war started I was at Brighton, when the first air raid started - course there was no air raid, it was just the sirens going. We was all sort of, in wonder. Couldn't get home quickly enough. I was at Brighton. I couldn't get home quickly enough back to Bermondsey to be with mother. We lived in 4 Jamaica Road all through the war.

R: What were you doing in Brighton that day?

G: I'd been on a holiday. The war started in 39 but of course the first sirens going in...No, old Chamberlain declared war in September 39 and the sirens went. Course nothing...This was what was called the Phoney War. When it did start I worked in Aldersgate street by then. We was having daylight raids. They used to have a couple of girls up on the top to see the planes coming over and say "They're coming! They're coming!" Course when they did start dropping things there was a mad rush down the stairs. Not that we could have got anywhere. It was just that we was on a lower floor then.

R: You wouldn't go down just because the air raid siren sounded?

G: Oh no.

R: Even in the bombing period?

G: Well, you never knew. It seems funny to say so but you didn't take an awful lot of notice. "The air raid siren is going", and then nothing happened. "Oh well". And you'd go about your ordinary business. We had an air raid shelter in the garden. We used to get down there. The biggest thing that struck me at the time - You stayed down in this air raid shelter - sevenish in the evening, and you stayed there all night, dead uncomfortable - and there was these VE bombers going round and dropping and all the rest of it. And in the morning there would be a man going along and whistling and it was lovely. You thought "Oh. Things are quite all right. There's other people still living out there". Everything was back to normal again. But the hatred that you felt with these planes circling around. Real hatred. You could have sworn at them.

R: What was it like in the shelters?

G: Terrible. It was just wide enough for me to lay like that, widthways. But of course, anybody who came down - there was my sister, had a sailor man-friend and he was about 5'10", six foot. What happened to him - He had to lay like that and you had to put your legs over his legs. Most uncomfortable. You'd die for 6 o'clock to come, for the All Clear, for you to get out and either you fell into your bed for an hour or you had a bit of a wash down.

R: Did you sometimes have to go straight off to work?

G: You had to wash and things. I'm talking about 6 o'clock in the morning when the All Clear went. I'm assuming this - it could be different times. If you had to be at work at eight or half eight, then you had to get back in and get washed or changed. You couldn't sleep in the air raid shelter and then go off... I don't remember, as far as I'm concerned you washed and changed to get to work.

Then there wa a lull, I think and we went down to the hop-fields for some time. Before that it was the V2's or V1's or was it?

R: The V1s - there was a lull before that, in 1942, 43.

G: Then I was in Blackfriars, Ludgate Circus when the City went on fire. I saw the most amazing scene. There was St Pauls with all the statues on either side. And everything was blood red, all except St Pauls and the saints. It was a marvellous sight and I've never forgotten it. There was all these hoses you had to step over. You were walking about the City by St Pauls, down Cannon Street and they had all their hoses all around and they were just playing on the planes but you walked about there. The big post office that used to be there was opened all day and all night. That fell in. I was standing there and "Yeouung!" it all fell in.

R: You weren't in it?

G: No, no. I'm just walking about. Actually I'd been dancing I think. Either I'd been dancing at Covent Garden or...I don't know how I got there. Surely I didn't walk? But there was no fear. It sounds ridiculous now. I was there and I saw these things. I saw St Pauls and there was everything ablaze all the way round it. The main post office is by Lubit Street. Everything was ablaze, all except St Pauls. As you went round the side of St Pauls here you were stepping over the hoses. It sounds amazing, doesn't it?

I had a new coat. It was grey with a fur fabric. Out I go. Again, I can't remember anybody with me, I suppose there must have been. I was in Leicester Square. There was a doodle-bug coming over. There was Dolcis the shoe shop right bang on, a big shop, Coventry Street and all round. It was all glass. The doodle-bugs coming over. I wasn't going to go and fall down on the pavement in my new coat. I'm hanging round the lamp post and this doodle-bug comes over "Boom!" but I was all right, and everything was all right. But, the thought of it "What, fall down in the main road in my new coat?". It doesn't sound possible, does it?

When you think of people - mad, rushing - I'm not saying that we weren't frightened. We used to go dancing at the Astoria, Charing Cross Road in Covent Garden. We used to go to the Locarno, but that was before.

R: Where was the Locarno?

G: Streatham. And you used to com out of there at half past eleven at night and catch the 133 bus or tram to the Elephant. No thought. "I'll be all right". Sometimes you would go in the Milk Bar and have a milk shake. At half eleven, walk down Tooley Street down to where I lived. Not by myself. There used to be some boys, four boys. They lived over at Stamford Hill way. Don't ask me how they got to Stamford Hill, but they used to come to Streatham and to London Bridge and walk down Tooley Street and then they would have to get back. You can look back and think "Lovely times". Fear - I'm not saying there wasn't fear. There used to be hatred when I use to hear those...There you were stuck in the shelter and there were these airplanes buzzing round. Of course theguns used to go off but they never seemed to do anything. I sometimes wondered if they put them on, gunfire, just for a show to let you know that they was being on their toes doing something. I don't feel as they ever hit anything, any planes.

I must tell you of the time - In number 4 we were next door to the Territorials and of course they had a parade ground and a land mine fell in there and we had a quarter of an hour to get out. So my brother got one of those wooden barrows and my sister got all her clothes. We had a parrot. That come on the end. And we had a great dane dog. Mother gave me a pail of mushrooms that she was feeding him with, and two basins full of custard. Well, we'd got to eat, hadn't we? So there I am with two basins with a parrot, with the dog, and I had a hat with two red feathers - Talk about Casey's Court (?). Anyway, round we go. My brother in law who lived with us in number 4, he's dying. And we go round to my brother in Southwark Park Road who had steps up to the house. And we had taken all the cushion covers off the settee for my brother in law. My father, who is about 78 by now - He's got my brother in law up on his shoulders - I'm picking his legs up at the back. Anyway, we get into my brother's house. But his air raid shelter was facing next door. In the morning mother gets up and she doesn't know where she is. So she goes all through this next door house screaming (?) all over the place. But the cats had to be fed, didn't they, back in number 4. So back they had to go to feed the cats, although you only had about a quarter of an hour the night before to get out.

R: Had they defused the bomb?

G: Must have done. It was a land mine. I don't know what the difference is but a land mine was heavier. Still, we went back to our house so it must have been all right. I don't know details about things like that. We just wandered back. But it tickled me to pieces cos I was in their air raid shelter. The air raid siren goes at about half six in the morning and my mother's gone. I'm out saying "Come back". She's saying "But I don't know where I am". "Well come in here!" Anyway we went back to our house in number 4 and we was all right.

Mother nearly had one of these Molotov things on her head. It fell on the top of the - it was like a Victorian house - the dining room and kitchen was there, then there is a narrow bit of garden that goes down, that widens out. Well, the air raid shelter was down there with the dirt piled on the top. The siren goes and mother goes to run out of the kitchen door and rundown to the air raid shelter but the dog decides to go with her and they get jammed in the air raid shelter door. This Molotov thing, they was all like 'electric blue'. It came down and it missed my mother by a...It landed on top of the air raid shelter.

R: Was it an incendiary? Or what?

G: They used to drop these lights. I don't think they were incendiaries. I'm not sure what a Molotov...

R: Was it for the planes to drop at night so they'd know where to bomb?

G: Was it? I don't know. It certainly was electric blue. It lit everything up and it was electric blue and it landed on our air raid shelter. But poor mother, she was jammed out like this and this thing skidded over her head!

R: When you worked, what did you do there?

G: I used to make shirts. I was machining. I think I was making shirts at that time. I did work round Welsh Margaretsons making ties and sailor's collars.

R: And the shirts were for the forces as well?

G: No, I don't think so. No, they were ordinary shirts.

R: So did the war not make any difference to you as far as work was concerned?

G: Yes it did later on. I got called up. It was a case of - you went into the forces or you did munition work. I went and was trained as an engineer. An engineer takes 7 years, doesn't he. I was given 3 months. I went to a place down by East Croydon and was trained there by engineers on a lathe. Then I got a job down at Colliers Wood working on a small lathe.

R: Did you have any choice about this?

G: Not really?

R: Why engineering. Had you already been good at that at school?

G: No, no.

R: So it almost could have been anybody. They just needed to train people to be engineers?

G: Yes. I suppose so. It was either that or you went into the forces. This was not the thing - not me leaving mother and father.

R: Were there lots of other women being trained as engineers with you?

G: Yes. Not loads of them. Not dozens. Lets say a dozen. There wasn't a crowd or anything. I used to get to London Bridge and catch a train down to East Croydon and then walk. But when I worked at Colliers Wood it was on the Tube. And I did night work. Nearly killed me. But you worked 70 hours a week. From seven at night till seven in the morning. Then of course you had to get home. Of course I couldn't sleep during the day. But I must tell you - I was quite good at this lathe. I used to do a two star thread. You know what a thread is? A screw is like that. Now I did one like that and then I would have to drop in and go in between that, so it was a two star thread - Very nerve racking. Not a lot of people could do it. For the tail pins of the airoplanes to turn more quickly. Doubly quick. I don't know if you know anything about a lathe? It is quite a job. An engineer working a lathe - sometimes they work big lathes, but I had the small lathe, same principle - you had to move it in to a certain point. You dealt in millimetres I think - thousandths. You used to go in and the lathe would turn.

Now you had to pull it out to go back, but you had to remember where you went in. You had to know how far out you'd pulled it, cos if you didn't pull it out far enough you'd take your screw right off straight away. It was very nerve racking. You had a wheel here and you would drop in your tool, bring it out, go back, put it in a thousandth or whatever you wanted to take off again, wait till the wheel come round to six and drop in again. I was the head girl at that factory. They used to have visitors that used to come round. But of course I couldn't stand the strain of the long hours. I thought you would have a long weekend, Saturday, Sunday, and you wouldn't have to go in Monday night. But I couldn't sleep through the day and I ended up with a tired heart. And of course I got married in 42. And I was a very silly girl because when I was at home I did nothing - Nothing. I didn't have to lift a cup. So what did I do - I got married, and I had a job going there, then I had the flat to keep, then had to get out and get food in. All of it together, it didn't agree with me. I ended up with a tired heart. I couldn't keep on with that job. Stupid - me, I volunteered. He had to have a night shift going and he couldn't get anybody to keep the night shift going. "Oh I'll do it". Ever so bold. And that was it.

I think I went round to Welsh Margaretsons after that and did the sailor's collars. Then I worked at Edmuntons doing tents. I did the mosquito nets for the soldiers in the desert, the long piece going over the side bits, that was my job.

R: Did you meet your husband during the war?

G: Yes. I don't know how I met him. Oh, I met him through a friend. He was doing engineering work, I was doing engineering work - There was something going on that way.

R: Did you used to go dancing?

G: No. He didn't dance. But I did. Not when I was married. I used to live up in Devon Mansions. Up on the fourth floor. Course when the air raids come on and the barrage of guns used to go "Zhoom! Zhoom" through the front of the flats. A bit terrifying that was. I didn't go to any air raid shelter, not at that time. Then when he went in the army and I was alone up there...I did go down into the air raid shelter cos I remember sitting there on my own. We had an air raid shelter down in the middle of Pear Street. Pear Street comes up and then there's a gap. There used to be a pub on the corner and there used to be an air raid shelter there. And I could hear the droning of this plane and I was as miserable as sin. I thought "Germans Ugh!" And they were so arrogant flying round with nothing to stop them.

There wasn't any air fights then. Down by Blethley, down by Coulsdon, my in laws lived down by Coulsdon. I used to go down there. They used to have fights - You could see the planes and fighting down there. Again, you knew it was there.

Before that, I don't know what year it was, but my sister decided we'd go down to the hop fields. We never normally went but this time things had got a bit trying. While we were there we heard this thing. There was no sirens, no nothing but the bomb came over and nobody knew where it was going to land. "Zhoom". It was a terrible thing. Course it was the V2, but we couldn't believe it. There was no sirens. No warning. Course when we came back to London we found out only too soon. But again, you just sort of muddled along. If there was siren or anything you just made for the nearest safety and when it passed, life went on.

R: People talk about the war speeding things up in some ways. For example, do you think you would have got married at the same point if it hadn't been for the war?

G: I don't think it mattered to me. I must have been very selfish but I had my mother. I was the only one at home. My father was quite a bit older than mother. He was retired. I'm only telling you what I know. Whether it's the truth or not, I don't know cos things had gone on. He had about ten shillings a week state pension. The rent was ten shillings a week. There was me going out to work and I halved everything with mother. I decided to get married. I don't consider how mother's getting on. I must have been very selfish and unthinking. She wouldn't try to stop you. I was being harassed every time "When are you going to marry me?" He sort of chased me. "Oh all right, we'll get married". The thought never struck me what my mother could do. It's a bit selfish, although being the youngest of a large family, being the last one left you can be stuck. If I hadn't got married then - I don't like to say this - probably I would have been left and just keep on going to work to keep your parents. A lot of women did that. I never gave it a thought.

R: What about your wedding itself? How did you get things together for the wedding?

G: I had my sister to help me and there was a dress going. Somebody was going to get married and they didn't and there was that dress that fitted me and I got fitted up. I had to have a chocolate wedding cake. Do you know the Cambridge Mission? It came round. The Cambridge Mission were the scouts, on the corner, and opposite was a dairy and next door was the baker's shop. Then there was Sweetlands, a lovely butcher's shop with meat one side and ham the other and they were very nice people. Anyway, I went to the baker's shop and they couldn't do an iced cake but they did me a chocolate cake. So altogether, it was just friends came to the house. I had it in the house. I can't remember any alcohol or anything like that. Maybe there was some beer but I don't remember that. Things were in a bit of a daze by this time.

R: More generally, how did you get by on the rations?

G: Right here and now, you just managed. How many books did I have? Not many. I don't know whether mother had three or whether Win may have come down at some time. Because her husband was a docker. He was down I don't know where - by a river or by any ship that needed unloading - he had to go there. Course that left Win on her own. I can't remember how many ration books we had, but not a lot. It could have only been three or if she was there, four. But you just managed.

R: Were there any recipes you had to make up?

G: I never had to do anything, did I? The biggest thing - my mother liked her sugar. Everything was rationed. She said "I don't drink and I don't..." so she felt entitled to her sugar ration. We never minded. I can't ever remember being "Oh, we haven't got enough to eat". I can't remember that. I remember something about the bread. It wasn't right. Then it came out that it was a much more healthier loaf rather than the white bread. If you could get a white loaf it was really something. Then the egg business got a bit dodgy and I never had any eggs, not on my ration. And I asked "Where's the egg ration?" She said "When I get yours, I'll smash yours". And I said "I'll smash your face!" Opposite where I lived, was it the Old Oak public house, next door there used to be a very nice shop where they sold butter and eggs and things - I'm talking about when I married - and I didn't get the egg ration which I thought I should. The eggs were in but I wasn't getting mine. And when I asked her about them, sort of insisted, she was being a bit funny "Smash yours when I get them" and I said "And I'll smash your face for you as well". But on the whole you didn't get temperish. Looking back, when you think of people like me - I was a young girl, and you used to walk about those streets in the blackout without fear. It doesn't seem possible does it? You were

just safe. I used to walk down from London Bridge. I will admit that there was boys at the time, all going dancing and all coming along. All very fun-loving, laughing and maybe singing. Then they would have to get to Stamford Hill. I don't know how they got back. I'm looking back and sometimes you were very frightened. But on the whole you think "Very nice" - The feeling of safety and being able to walk about the streets and never any fear that way. I don't know why.

R: Did you ever know any Italian prisoners of war?

G: Not at all.

R: And what about the Americans and Canadians.

G: I went dancing once up by Hyde Park Corner. There were some big houses up there that were taken over by diplomats. Somebody had taken this lot over for the Americans to have a dance. We were asked to go there to dance with the Americans.

R: Individuals were asked?

G: Yes. I don't know who asked me. It was a thing, no nasty stuff, you know... Anyway I went there and I danced and this American took the mickey out of the way I spoke. That done it! He'd criticised my way of speaking. That was it, finished. I never did take to Americans after that. I couldn't understand their lingo and for them to criticise mine - that finished it. We never gelled.

I can remember with a couple of our own boys, I can remember dancing at the Covent Garden. They were down at Coppin Hills (?) down by Coulsdon, there used to be a camp. The Guards used to be down there - training or something. They invited us down there for a picnic. We went down there, my friend and I and there was a dog-fight going on over the top of us there. That was quite thrilling.

R: was it like watching a film? Or were you concerned because somebody might get killed up there?

G: No, no. It was interest. Not like a film because watching a film you are either on one side or the other. But not us. You knew we would win. There was no question about us losing the war. None! We would win, even at the darkest times. When you heard Churchill speak. I don't know what we would have done without Churchill. There was - I suppose he was an Englishman and he was in Germany and he used to broadcast "Come out of your rabbit holes". The fury inside you!. Churchill with his marvellous words, when he says "Some chicken. Some neck!" we thought "Yeah". It was marvellous, Churchill speaking. Whatever else he did, his speeches built you up. He answered them with better than what they ever gave. Lord Haw-Haw.

R: What about the end of the war? VE Day?

G: There was elation. I never went to any tea parties in the streets or anything like that but the feeling was marvellous. But then of course there was the Japanese thing. Don't get too...you know, because you never knew what the Japanese was going to do. Somehow they seemed to be more menacing, the Japanese, in the forests and the jungles and things. And of course they were very successful with whatever they were doing. I hate to say it but you saw America with all their masses of means, munitions and everything, and they didn't seem to

be doing a very good job round these islands and things. When you thought of Singapore being taken over- they seemed to be so successful, whatever they were doing. It was a question mark - "what's going to happen?" When the bomb dropped - At first it was a case of this bomb - it was so much more than any ordinary bomb and we couldn't grasp it was an atomic bomb. We didn't even know what atomic bombs were. When people said it was more devastating than any ordinary bomb, you couldn't grasp it. When they said it was an atomic bomb and it had shattered Hiroshima they were a bit appalled by it. Although it finished, thank god. The means did help the end and although that lot was dead, at least it saved our bods from whatever. So I couldn't feel terribly sorry. There wasn't the sadness that this earthquake has done - I feel sorry for them. But not then. Well, I didn't. People went "Woe, woe. Fancy dropping a bomb that finished the city". OK so it saved our bods and finished the war and saved us. That's how I regarded it, rightly or wrongly.

R: People say that after the war, the atmosphere changed. That people weren't helping each other but thinking of themselves. Did you feel that?

G: No, I never. No. I didn't notice. I was fairly newly married and in the flat. My husband was in the army. It was the general misery of him being in the army and just coming home on the occasion. I was quite friendly with the people next door. I never knew anything and she told me how to make an apple pie and how to do the cauliflower. You get by. I must have still been working but I can't remember what I did.

R: You were talking about the dancing? Can you remember what tunes you liked? And any radio programmes that you liked?

G: I don't remember? Yes, Glen Miller, he was all right. And Anne...She's still alive. She used to sing down at the Locarno.

R: No particular programmes you used to listen to on the radio?

G: Never had time did we? You went dancing. Henry Hall - he was well known on the radio with his music. I didn't care one way or the other about Henry Hall. Father hated him, mother didn't care. I didn't care one way or the other. I can't actually remember any tunes or music...Nothing to do with the war but I remember 'Lilac Time' at Drury Lane about a finishing school on the continent. Charlotte Greenwood was in it.

R: Before the war started, did you think there was going to be a war?

G: When Chamberlain came back - There was Hitler doing diabolical things. He was just moving in and moving in. You wondered when the devil it was going to stop. So when Chamberlain came back with his "Peace" - well, it was a case of "Huh!". Then people picked on Chamberlain for being such a nondescript, for going there and being bossed around. At least he gave us a year to get fixed up because we never had anything. We might have sorted our gas masks and children evacuated but as for munitions or anything like that - I thought we were dead naive...(?). He gave us a year from 39 to 40. Then there was the Phoney War up to about 41 I think. Then when the air raid started...

END OF AUDIO TAPE, SIDE A

SIDE B

G: I was amazed that he didn't try to invade England. I really thought we would be invaded. He didn't seem to...I couldn't understand that. Mind you, I was grateful. But never, never at any time did you think you were going to lose the war. Isn't that strange? Things were going against us left, right and centre - Dunkirk, coming over there. Everything was going against you. Half of France was Petain, was it? You was amazed at this man and the whole thing. There was France with a full army and the Germans just come through. They seemed invincible whatever they did. We were amazed. We still wasn't going to lose the war, whatever. That's ridiculous, but it is true. I don't think anybody thought we... That was my biggest impression of the war - you spent the night in an air raid shelter and there was bombs dropping and you could hear the planes circling round and the guns going and you had a very uncomfortable, frightening night. And then in the morning some man would be going along quite happy whistling away. I miss it now - You never hear men whistle. But then - I don't know whether it was the milkman or who it was. But they used to be going along and you thought "Oh, everything's all right. There's somebody whistling and somebody alive". I don't know of anybody who was killed. The girl next door to us was down at John Bull Arch when she got blown up with a V2 or V1. She's still alive. She's still got shrapnel in her. You felt "Oh. She's been blown up". They called her Jane cos when they found her she never had any clothes on. The poor girl was blown up in the air and when she gets to the hospital she's not got a stitch on and they call her Jane cos she was starkers.

R: Like the cartoon character?

G: Yes. Jane never had any clothes on. I remember that you would go to work on a 47 bus up to London Bridge cos the trams were running then. The 70 used to run up to London Bridge. The 68 used to run round to the Elephant and Castle. But they stopped up by Duke Street Hill. That was as far as they went. I remember one of the buildings there had been bombed. It was in the middle of the road and you couldn't go up cos all the building was in the road. It wasn't a case of "You have to get to work". You accepted it. Unless it was me, taking things as it happens. I was interested. I'd be roused at something or the other but I can't say that you went dashing about fearful and terrified. Was anybody? Did they go round running terrified?

R: A lot of people say what you say. Some people say that they were very scared right the way through the war. Some people spent an awful lot of time in air raid shelters. It varies a lot from individual to individual.

G: All I can say is the only time I felt "Aw" was when You had to have somebody else in the air raid shelter and you couldn't stretch out. I mean, how uncomfortable, when you had to put your legs over someone else's legs. But my mother was all very hospitable. You couldn't...

R: Maybe your sister quite enjoyed it.

G: What could she do down there with all of us, all panting away! I must tell you this.. I don't know if I should tell you...

R: We won't use the name.

G:..Well, my sister wasn't married you see. Mother was trying to get her married cos she was like her sore thumb in the house. Of course when the sailor came down it was a case of "Oh, maybe this was the chance". In the morning he had to go and have a wash and all the rest of it. To get this blooming tunic on - I was appalled - he was a sailor and he wasn't scrubbed clean and this tunic was a devil to get on though. I didn't know sailors had such a terrible

time. He was pulling his tunic on. But, anything to get this wooing on! Mind you, he bought her a ring but nothing came of it. She didn't get married. I don't know after that what happened to him.

R: Thankyou very much indeed.

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