

SOUTHWARK GROUP INTERVIEW AT THE YALDING CENTRE 23.2.95 TRANS18.DOC

Interviewer: Rib Davis

?: I was in domestic service and I was working for the crown equerry so we was at Windsor Castle.

R: How did you get that job?

?: The way you get any other job.

R: Were you living round here or in Windsor?

?: I was living in Windsor.

R: Had you been born round here?

?: I was born in Bermondsey, yes.

R: How was it that you finished up with a job in Windsor?

?: For the simple reason I was working for them at the Palace, Buckingham Palace along Buckingham Palace Road. And when the war...we were in Scotland. I used to go to their Scots House. And then when the war started we had to come down and they went to Windsor. They took me along with them.

R: What exactly did you do?

?: Cooking. I was cooking for the Crown Equerry.

R: The Crown Equerry was the person who looked after the horses?

?: All the horses. There's all that regalia that they put on when they go out - He organises all that.

R: When the war started you had to go and cook at Windsor Castle or what?

?: I was in Scotland when the war started, when they announced that the war had started. I had to come back on my own, by trains to Buckingham Palace Road, at Royal (?) Mews. I came back there and then we went.

R: And how old were you then?...What year were you born?

?: I was born in 1907, so now I'm 88 - I shall be in August anyway.

R: So you were thirty two when the war broke out. Were you married then?

?: Not until afterwards. After the war.

R: So you were working in Windsor. Did you travel to Windsor or did you stay there?

?: I stayed there. I was living there. We were living in the Royal Mews at the Castle.

R: Did Windsor suffer any bombing?

?: I think only once but I can't remember when it was. But we got some wallops because every night we were crouched down in the kitchen underneath the table. ..(?).. as he was then, he was up at the Castle watching round. He used to come and tell me, or not tell me, how bad it

was. If it was really bad, near my home, he wouldn't tell me. He always used to give us a report. He was always up at the Castle, every night.

R: Did you ever come back here during the war, to visit family or friends?

?: Yes, I came back to my parents. And eventually I came out of there altogether because they decided that I shouldn't be doing that sort of job. I should be doing war work, so they pushed me back into the factories.

R: How did you feel about that?

?: Not very good.

R: What was the war work? What sort of war work?

?: I don't know what I was really doing. Nothing very much. Didn't seem to be doing much war work, doing all sorts of funny things you used to have to do. Then I ended up in a scent factory, doing nothing, sitting there waiting for some work to come along.

R: How do you mean, doing nothing?

?: Sitting doing nothing. Sometimes they used to put some things through and we used to wait for it to come along and wrap it or whatever.

R: That must have been after the war? They weren't still doing scent in the wartime, were they?

?: Well, I was supposed to be on war work. I had to do it. I was too old I think, or I didn't want to join the WAF's or anything like that.

R: When you say scent, you mean perfume? That doesn't sound like war work!

?: Yeah, I know. These factories to keep open, they used put something over (?), and they used to employ so many people.

R: Jumping back to Windsor - Was it easier for you about rations and food because you were a cook?

?: It wasn't very easy but you managed.

R: were you rationed like everybody else? Was the kitchen on rations as well?

?: Yes. We was all on rations.

R: Even though it was the royal...?

?: Yes. Mind you, we was at Windsor and we used to get vegetables and that through their gardens. That used to come through so it wasn't so hard really.

R: That was off rations.

?: Yes. That was off rations because it used to come out of their garden. I used to see to the shop keepers, be nice to them!

R: were there special meals that you made during the war because of the shortages?

?: I just used to have to do fancy things as best I could.

R: How did you become a cook?

?: I went into a job and I was a kitchenmaid at one time. Then I did about two years there. Then I went and got another job and got another job. I used to go to places and people used to advertise for staff.

R: So you were never trained as a cook? You just learned by working in a kitchen?

?: Yes. In the kitchen. You're trained, you're under a cook that's learned her trade, used to do dinner parties and all that sort of thing, used to do all the fancy dishes.

R: What would you wear for that?

?: A frock under an apron.

R: You didn't have a special uniform?

?: No, I didn't. I did when I was in the kitchen. A cap to put my hair in, a cotton frock and a white apron. And change in the afternoon into that one or whatever.

R: What about clothes in the war in general. Fashion?

?: I didn't have a lot of time for fashions. I only used to get one day off a week.

R: What would you do one that day?

?: Come back to London. When I was in London I used to go around the shops. Go home first. Things like that and go round the shops. My parents lived ..(?) so I used to come home every week. Naturally they wanted to see ..(?). So I used to come home. That used to be an outing from there.

R: Where would you go?

?: Pictures in the evening. I used to have to be at the home at ten o'clock. Sometimes you only used to get off from three o'clock in the afternoon.

R: On your day off?

?: Yes. You were lucky if you got out at three o'clock in the afternoon. And you had to be back in by ten. Especially when you was an under (?).

R: What about the days in the rest of the week? What were your hours?

?: Some people used to have to be up at about five. I was up at about seven. Used to get the boiler going, you had to get hot water for the bath to start off with. we had a kitchen range then. Used to have to get the fire going so that the water was hot.

R: Would you cook breakfast?

?: Do all the washing up, used to cook breakfast, used to have everything ready for them, plates in the oven and everything and wash up after.

R: So when would your working day finish?

?: Ten o'clock at night.

R: Did you get any time off in the day?

?: In the afternoon sometimes. It was all according to how you worked. After lunch you had to wash up everything, so if you was quick washing up, you could get time off and then you had to get the tea.

R: I suppose the washing up wasn't like washing up in an ordinary house?

?: No. We had big sinks and plates and dishes..

R: Did they have great tureens?

?: Yes. Everything. Pots and pans. Used to work those days. And I scrubbed the passages, stone floors. Scrubbed the kitchen, scrubbed the table down. You didn't have a lot of time to spare.

R: Was that work affected, changed a lot by the war?

?: It did for some people, but for some people it didn't. For me, at that time I was at Windsor Castle, I wasn't too bad really.

R: Did you get on with the Royal Equerry?

?: He never had much to do with me. I only had to get on with his wife. We got on all right.

R: Were there any raids when you were going from Windsor to here on your days off?

?: Yes. If I wanted to get home, and in bad weather. One time when the snow was about I got stuck on the line. By the time I got home I had to get straight back to get a train again to get back by ten o'clock.

R: So you really didn't see your parents that day? Were there any attacks on trains while you were travelling?

?: Yes. There were some all the time. You took the same chance as everybody else. They didn't say "Cos you've got to get back to ..(?) we're not going to bomb you!" My life was only an ordinary person, I was nobody, was I? I was just doing a job.

R: Apart from seeing your parents, did you have much chance to enjoy yourself in other ways? Did you ever meet boys or men or go dancing?

?: No. Didn't have much chance. I came home and we went to the pictures most of the time. Only had time to go to the pictures, that was the only off-time you had.

R: Can you remember what films you liked?

?: I remember seeing Vera Lynn at the time. All sorts...

R: Did you have a shelter at Windsor Castle? Did you used the kitchen as a shelter or waht?

?: We used to be in our own place in the kitchen.

R: Was there anywhere in particular you would stand.

?: Under the table or anywhere. If it was pretty heavy you used to be under the table.

R: When you came back here were you shocked by the appearance of the place? After a raid?

?: No. Because I used to know all about it. They used to tell me what was going on and I knew my parents were having a rough time of it. I got them down at Windsor - They stayed with me. I got them some lodgings to give them a week's break because it was a little bit lighter.

R: When you came back to do war work, were you staying with your parents then?

?: No. I had to go to digs, which wasn't very happy. It wasn't very comfortable...Near the big Gramophone people...just outside London...HMV...They put their factory out near Watford way. I had to get myself some digs there and I used to come home weekends.

R: Why did you come back down here, or did they just tell you where to go?

?: They used to tell me where I had to go. I got my papers and I was too old to go into the war so I had to go and do war work in a factory. I went into the NAAFI, cooking in the NAAFI for a little while.

R: Which NAAFI? Near Watford?

?: I was at the Castle at one time because they had a NAAFI in the grounds. I went there and then they decided, they used to manipulate you and say "We're opening a place, we'll take you for a month down there for training and of course you wasn't really." They could call us to go somewhere else. That's how they used to do it on you.

R: So you were really on a placement (?)

?: Yes. They'd say you was going there for training, for their cook's job. But I walked out of that.

R: Cooking in the NAAFI must have been completely different to cooking...

?: Yes, it was. You did it in much bigger quantities like they would in a factory.

R: was the NAAFI food any good.

?: Yes, the food was good.

R: what were you doing by the end of the war?

?: Going mad! My father died and I ended up looking after my mother. That's when they suddenly found I hadn't been registered anywhere. That's when I went into this scent factory.

R: do you remember VE Day or VJ Day? The end of the war celebrations?

?: Not very much.

R: some people say they didn't feel all that happy?

?: No. It was just, you was relieved to think it was finished. I worked at Shatters (?) at one time. I came back and I was at Shatters chocolate place. The bombs were coming over there and exploding over the top of us. In the end you were going about your work and if you were caught you were just unlucky. One could come and explode over you when you were walking along. You didn't know they were coming along. You had to take your chance. If you stopped indoors you could have been bombed. If you went out you could be bombed. Those flying bombs.

R: Had you met your husband by then?

?: Oh yes. We didn't get married. We were too busy.

R: Is that because the war was on?

?: More or less, yes.

R: What was your husband doing?

?: He was a stonemason at Buckingham Palace. There wasn't much wages.

R: You said you might have got married earlier if the war hadn't been on?

?: Yes.

R: Was it that you were moving around? Did you feel bitter about those years being taken out of your life?

?: I don't know. I didn't do too badly really. I used to get about quite a lot on my days off. I used to go and ride in the country. Do what we could. I saw quite a lot of the country.

R: So you were able to enjoy yourself anyway?

?: Yes. Had to make the best of it.

R: When did you come back and live round here? After the war?

?: Oh yes. Long after the war. I was down in Rotherhithe more. The flat I'm in, I've been in at least 39 years.

R: Was there a housing problem at the end of the war?

?: Oh yes. My mother had a house and I lived with her, down Rotherhithe. It was when they was pulling the place down that we had to get out. Now I live up here.

R: Why were they pulling it down?

?: War damage. They got money for war damage, some of them. Didn't know what to do with it. Our house down at Rotherhithe. I think they decided they had some money left over from the war, war damage. Our house had been ..(?) but they really pulled our house almost down and rebuilt it, put some new fireplaces in. We was only there about a year and they pulled all the lot down and built flats. Chucked us out and gave us another flat.

R: They'd already rebuilt your house and then they pulled it down?

?: Rebuilt it, yes. I wanted to live there. What we used to call our scullery only had a stone sink in it then, and a copper. They pulled the copper down and the floor was a really rough look. They resurfaced all the floor. And all the back part of the garden, we had a lovely garden. New toilet, new pipes, everything like that, that we should have had years before. New fireplace. And it was really lovely.

R: And then they pulled it down. Were all the other houses in the street destroyed?

?: Yes. We was one of the last to get out of ours. They'd pulled all those down. They didn't all have the (rebuilding). Some of them, not as much as we'd had done I don't think but they'd had quite a lot done.

R: At the end of the war, what did the street look like?

?: Ours wasn't too bad. We were lucky. I don't think we had any bombs in our street. I can't remember. We were near the docks, you see. The docks were a focus for the bombs. They had a lot of damage down there. I can't remember at the moment that there was any houses really bombed in the street. But we'd all had windows knocked out and whatever.

R: So you were made to go to a block of flats?

?: Yes.

R: Was the block of flats in the same place?

?: No. Just where they could find you one. Some of them - My sister went to New Cross. Eventually we came to where we are now and I've stayed there since.

R: And that was 1960-odd? 65?

?: I think 39 years. Some say it's 40 years. ..(?) the people that were still in it. (?).

R: Were there a lot of prefabs around.

?: Yes. They pulled the prefabs down, some of them.

R: At the end of the war, when they put the prefabs up, did people like being in prefabs?

?: Yes. They liked being in them. A lot of people were sorry they came out of those because they really made them quite nice. I never went in one. Its only what people told me.

R: People have said that at the end of the war there was a big change of mood, that people weren't doing things together in the same way.

?: That's right. Before, as we were in a street we were all neighbours. You all used to know who was getting married and who wasn't. You'd stand at your street door, people would come along. You all knew one another. Once you move away, you move away to strangers. I don't see a soul. I've got a man there, he had a family. His family's died. He's on his own. I'm on my own, my family died. Now there's a one-parent family next door there. I talk to them. The man's daughters come to him. But they're only waiting till he dies because they've already bought his flat. He's always in hospital so we never see one another. When I'm here, sometimes over the weekend I don't see a soul, don't talk to anybody. I go out.

R: That would never have happened before in the street?

?: Oh no, no. Because you always knew somebody.

R: Do you put that down to the destruction of housing in the war and rebuilding?

?: Yes. You see, as families grew up and got married, they lived upstairs in their mum's. You had two rooms at the top. Or one room or whatever was going. Families used to - My sister, one time, her family was in our house. I never had any family but my sister had a family that used to live with us. There used to be two or three families in one house. Didn't have a bed of your own all the time. We used to sleep top to bottom if we come to the push. It was families and so therefore you all knew one another.

R: Do you remember the election at the end of the war, when Churchill was voted out?

?: I suppose I do.

R: It seems strange to me that people say how wonderful Churchill was during the war and then they voted against him at the end of it.

?: It was all according to what they was getting. If you was getting something more out of them you voted for Labour. If Labour built you new houses, they'd get the votes if the others didn't.

R: So you don't remember a great wave of idealism at the end of the war? People saying "The National Health is a great idea". Comprehensive education. All those things the Labour Party stood for then.

?: Yes, it was good, but it was only a case of what you was going to get out of them. If somebody was going to give you more. The working people was more Labour. Bermondsey was always more or less Labour because we had all the dockers. They were Labour mostly.

R: I'll leave it there. Thankyou. Can I have your name so we can include your name as a contributor.

?: I don't know.

R: That was Iris Wilkins.

END OF AUDIO TAPE SIDE A

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Transcribed by Vanda