

Interviewer: Rib Davis

R: Mrs Bennett, can you tell me where you were born and when?

B: I was born in Comber Grove which was then Lipsick Road, they changed the name because it was a German name. That was 1914. About three months after that the Great War broke out.

R: Could you tell me about your family?

B: We were in Comber Grove. I lived in Comber Grove for years, until I was about sixteen. Then they built some flats in Wyndham Road and we moved over to there and I stayed there till I got married and I moved down to end of Warner Road. Used to have lovely houses down there. I was 22 when I got married. Then when I had my eldest son I moved into here and I've been here ever since.

R: Was that before the war?

B: he was born in 1937. In 1938 I moved in here, so I've been here since 1938. Then the war broke out. At first was what they called the Phoney War - we all thought there was going to be a war, panic stations. We all got ready to go and then it all fell through. Then the next year it really did break out in the September. I was carrying my second son then. They bundled us all off to Rye, near Hastings. I stayed there and I could hear the old guns in the distance so I decided I'd better come home, so I came home. We carried on as normal as much as we could. We had the old rations books.

R: How long did you stay in Rye?

B: About two weeks. I could hear the guns and thought "It's not very healthy" so I came home, packed up my son and came home. It was quite nice there. Gave us a holiday care of the government!

R: Who did you stay with?

B: First of all we went into a big monastery, or church. And the people around kindly came to billet us. We was billeted with various people. It was heartbreaking really because we didn't know where we were going to go. We just sat there and waited and I was about seven months pregnant and my little Bill, my son, he was two and a half, kept running round and they kept giving him bars of chocolate. He kept coming up to me "Here you are, mum. Have some", because he knew I was upset, trying to soothe me with a bar of chocolate. He was getting them from the people - They had trestle tables with chocolate and all sorts of things. I don't think we seen much more chocolate after that because everything went on rations: sweets.

R: was this in the Town Hall where you were being chosen by people to put you up?

B: This wasn't a Town Hall. This was a church. I thought it was a cathedral because it was such a big church. I've been to Hastings various times and I haven't...I know I went to Rye, was evacuated to Rye after that. They took us to Rye and there I was with a nice young woman there. Ever so nice. She'd look after my son while I'd go to the pictures. It wasn't too bad at first. You didn't hear much. It was really quiet. Then the following year, in the September, over on that road there - number eleven - there was one almighty crash on Saturday evening, and they'd dropped a bomb down Warner Road there, on the houses there. A nice lady, I know the lady, and she died. We didn't know what day of the week it was because we'd all gone placidly on doing what we could. We knew we had a shortage of food, but not a lot then at the beginning. We'd had shelters built in the flats. There was about two of those brick shelters in the entrance here, two in each entrance. Two square brick bunkers with

bunks in. We stopped in there, but we didn't go in there till the real bombing started in about 1940, 41. Then they all came and there was night after night, daytime as well. We was forever running in there. People used to take their vegetables in there in the end and do their veg.

R: How many would it take?

B: About a dozen. Can you remember?

M: I never went in there. Only once when the whatsit was on fire.

B: Oh yes. That was another too-do. We had a fire bomb over there. This used to be a woodyard then. All the sparks. You lived on the end then, on the ground floor, didn't you? It was all coming in her windows.

M: I remember going into the shelter and the air raid wardens from the flat were there. I didn't stay very long. I came back in. But it was frightening because all the wood was on fire there. I wasn't actually on the ground floor, I was upstairs then. I was living next door to my sister at that time. She was upstairs. I took my curtains down because I was frightened that the curtains would get caught.

R: so you were in the house first when that incendiary bomb landed?

M: Yes, when the timber yard was on fire.

R: Could you see it from the window? What did you see?

M: Everything was on fire. I had got Mauren then. I must have, because we moved up there when I had Maureen. I was on the ground floor when I first came here. We were having the planes coming over and we had ...excuse me, I'm eighty seven and my memory is falling through - dog fighting over the top there. My husband hadn't got called up then. His friend had come round - He'd been called up. We were standing watching the dog fight. I was on the ground floor then. When the timber yard was on fire I'd moved higher up. I evacuated myself. When at first war was imminent I was in Westminster Hospital. I came home with my son and my sister was very alarmed and she wanted me to go and evacuate myself to Clandon, near Guildford. My husband had got a brother there who was in the police force. I went down there but I didn't stay very long. I came back again after I went down there. Then I evacuated myself once again up to my own home when the war was on. The buildings were bombed.

B: That was after. Another night we were all in bed, before my husband went to the army, and they dropped one over the garage. They came round knocking at the doors for us to wake up. We didn't hear then. I got up the next morning and went round - we used to have a drying room round there - there was a little bird in a cage round there somebody had put. I said "Where is everybody?" Everybody had gone. Deserted, didn't see a soul! Then I saw the superintendant Mr Rose, his wife. She said "What are you doing here? Don't you know this is all caudoned off?". I think my husband and I and the two children were the only ones in the flats. So of course then it was panic station. Down came my sister because she used to live in Louth Road. She came along and she said "Come along. We're going to Watford". So I had to pack all my things up and went with my sister and her husband. He'd had an accident, he'd lost his leg so he was absolutely useless, so we all packed up and got the underground train and went to Watford to my step-sister. She had us all down there for a while.

R: Why was it caudoned off?

B: So nobody could get back. It was a time bomb.

M: In the garage. A time bomb.

B: They dropped this bomb and then you'd have to wait until it was the time to explode. But they got is so it didn't go off, defused it.

M: They did evacuate us because I remember going down to Victoria. The daftest thing was that the people that I went to had a glass conservatory. If anything had dropped we'd have had all the scattered glass. I was so alarmed because I wanted my husband to go and get the thing to put the baby in - we all had gas masks and you had to put the baby in a sort of cradle thing. How you would have operated it I don't know. He didn't come over. There was a florist by the garage. didn't they get a bomb?

B: Yes. By the side there was a florist, there was a toy shop. We used to take the dolls - what you call the doll's hospital. They used to take the dolls in there and expect them to mend them, the kids. It was a nice little toy shop. That was before the garage was there.

M: When the time bomb was there, I don't think anything was damaged then. The bomb had already fallen then. Probably I was away.

B: I stayed there with my sister in Watford for quite a while and then I came back. We had to put black up. "Put that light out!"

R: How did you do the blackout?

B: We had black curtaining. You couldn't show a little glimmer, could you? Even your torch had a bit of black over the top. We had some nice moonlit nights, which wasn't to our benefit because over would come the planes. While I was away at Watford they set fire to the city. My husband had come over on leave and he was staying in the flat. He told me - he wrote to me - that the whole of the city was ablaze, everything. Another time they dropped a bomb on the corner there. C Block (?). He was in bed and he got shot out of the bed and found himself on the floor. By the blast. Old Jock the porter was sweeping the square. He said he lost his broom. He said he never did find it!

R: Wasn't it dangerous in the blackout?

B: We didn't go out much in it.

M: You got used to it. It's more dangerous now with the mugging that goes on.

B: There wasn't a lot of traffic. Bikes, everything had a thing over the top. My sister lived down in Louth Road and I used to run down there to her in the blackout. You got used to it.

R: When the war broke out, do you remember where you were?

B: When they announced it - They were evacuating us to Rye. I was on Denmark Hill station and all of us was there crying our eyes out. We all had to pack our bags for twelve o'clock.

M: I was down at Clandon. My sister had arranged for us to go away. I was with my sister in law and we were both sitting together and it was announced that war had been declared. I remember we both were crying.

B: We were waiting to get on a train. In came the train and before we got on we heard the siren go - they thought they were going to come over right away and start bombing - so they bundled us all in the train and we didn't have time to say goodbye or anything. We were all pushed into the train and off we went. We didn't know where we were going. All the signs were all wiped out. You didn't know where you were. You couldn't say because if you opened your mouth you didn't know who was listening.

R: So you didn't even know you were heading to Rye?

B: No. Not till we got there. Even then it was only word of mouth because I'd never been to Rye. Hastings at first - I went on to Rye after, was billeted there.

R: You were with your children?

B: Yeah. One child and one coming along.

R: Were there some children there without their mothers?

B: No. They'd gone on before. This was parents, mothers. The school children had gone on a couple of days before.

R: How was it sorted out who went where?

B: We were in this church, sitting down there and some official person would come round and say "This lady's going to take you". It was like an auction sale to me. "This person will take a mother and one child. This person has enough room for a mother and three children." Or - "This person will take you if you could do her housework".

R: Did they actually say that?

B: Yes.

R: Did people say "Yes, I'll do the housework"?

B: Yes. I know a person who had to do the house while the woman went - I don't know where she went, whether she was Lady Muck or whether she went to work or what. She used to do it. Got paid I suppose.

R: Did people come and have a look at you and point and say "Yes, I'll have these"?

B: No. They'd just come round and just take you and you'd follow them and they had an old banger to take us in. It was a coach they had, whatever they had available.

R: When did your husband join up?

B: He was in it for five years.

R: Do you remember seeing him off?

B: No. I was away at my sister's. He didn't go far at first. He'd come home down to there. We had jolly times really. He'd come home and we'd have a little party and celebrate him coming home. That is if Gerry didn't come over and break it up for us.

R: Did you go out at all?

B: Yes. To have a drink down the pub. To a party. The cinema, and on the screen would come "The siren has been sounded" - because you couldn't hear it in there, sometimes you could - "You can make your way out". You could go out or you could stay where you are. Sometimes we'd stay and see the end and wonder what was happening when you got out.

R: What would make you decide whether to stay or to leave?

B: It was our own intuitions. If the air raids hadn't been too bad then we would take a chance.

R: Did you ever regret it?

B: No. Never thought about this sort of thing. You just took it as it came. We had to get on with it. The food rationing was hard but we managed.

R: What was rationed?

B: Vegetables wasn't rationed. Meat, sugar, eggs, butter. Round the corner was a shop called Kennedey's. It's still there. I used to send my two children round there to get sausages.

M: Things coming from abroad were in short supply. You couldn't get bananas, for the children, you see. Things that were on the ration book were meat, wasn't it.

B: I used to send the children round for sausages. I used to get however many they would allow you. Sometimes you'd get a pound, sometimes you'd only get about six. Once I sent my two, and my eldest one got his and he went round and the other one was only about five and she said to him "I've just served your brother" so he didn't get any and he came home crying. She knew it was him. I was trying to work the oracle, trying to get two lots.

R: Were there special ways of cooking?

M: There was dried egg.

B: that was when the Americans sent their "Lend and Lease" (?). That was what the Americans would send when it could get through. It was horrible, like leather, the dried egg.

M: Dried milk as well.

B: Bananas. My kids never saw bananas.

R: How did you cope with being down the shelters?

B: They didn't like it when they were in bed and I had to get them up and drag them out. They used to cry "I don't want to go". Especially on a cold night. My youngest one, I wrapped him in the eiderdown. "How's your little eiderdown?" the woman used to say to me.

R: were they scared or was it just that they didn't like getting up?

B: No. They just wondered what was happening. Of course when you heard them very loud and then quite near, that scared them. We were scared ourselves. you could hear them all round you and you wondered whether you'd be the next. One time I stayed in the passageway. They wasn't well and I wasn't taking them out in the cold.

R: was that safer?

B: I dunno. I just took a chance. My step mother, she found herself a warden's hat. She came up to see if I was alright.

R: Did you see much of the wardens?

B: They was always walking about. At the end of the flats, Banner Court there's a little place there, used to be a wood yard. Just at the side they made a warden's post. There were about three in there. Anybody available would help to put out the incendiary bombs. My husband followed old Jock the porter. He followed him once putting out incendiaries and found himself up on the roof and there were several up on the roof that they put out.

R: Do you know how they put them out?

B: They had buckets of sand and stirrup pumps to put them out.

M: I went to Clandon twice, took myself down there.

R: So you were away for a lot of the war?

M: No. I was in London for quite a bit of the war. I came back, I'd evacuated myself to my home up in Stoke on Trent and my mother didn't want me to come back. There was a little bit of upheaval because I'd got a sister who was a bit put out because of arranging for me to sleep there. I was so upset I just said "I'm going back to London. I'd rather face the bombs." I came back and my mother said "Don't go. I'm sure he's got something else up his sleeve". and I came back and they'd got the flying bombs and I was here all the time the flying bombs were on.

B: The worst part was 43, when we had it day and night. Then we had those awful doodle-bugs. We were in the shelter one night and old Jock came round and said "They've dropped a bomb up at Kennington. They can't find any pilot. They don't know what's happened to him." We didn't realise they were pilotless planes. They used to shoot them, see them coming in the distance.

M: Was the flying bomb called the doodle-bug?

B: Doodle bugs, they called them. We'd say "Please god give the doodle- bugs strength to carry on", so it would go over you.

M: they came over and shot off and came down.

B: When it shot off you all dived.

M: One fell in Peckham somewhere, in Woolworths.

B: That was a rocket. All the people in Woolworths got killed. And when the underground got flooded - Was that Tooting?

M: Where the Women's Hospital was.

B: Stockwell. They all got drowned. It was a bomb, I think and all these people used to go down to the underground of a night to sleep and be safe. This night it took a hit and everybody - there wasn't one person that was saved in that one. All the children and all.

R: Before you had your children, were you at work?

B: Yes, I worked at Kings College on the old cleaning lark.

R: did you do any of that when you had the children, during the war?

B: Yes I did a couple of times. I helped a gentleman cleaning. That was over at Southampton Way. I worked for him for a while but I was worried because I left the children. They went to school.

M: When ..(?) the children, they used the coal sheds out here, tramsheds - the children used to run along out there picking up the shrapnel.

B: They played soldiers.

R: What would they do with the shrapnel?

B: Kept it for souvenirs.

M: Mine weren't old enough to get out there but that's what the children used to do.

B: Used to love it, running along there. Peter Waldren, he was tall; he used to be the leader and they all used to follow him.

R: did either of you have to do any fire watching or anything like that?

B: We didn't but if you had a man in the family he had to do fire watching if he wasn't in the war or couldn't go to war, he had to go.

R: Did you write regularly to your husband while he was away?

B: Yes. I've still got a few of his letters.

R: Did you send things?

B: Censors? It was censored at one time. Blue marks, blue pencils right through.

R: I was wondering whether you sent things?

B: No. It was the other way around. He would bring things home to us. If he had anything extra. He got himself a good job in the canteen. He'd bring a bit of butter or whatever. He'd save all the little extra bits.

R: Did you see much of the Americans or Canadians round here?

W: Yeah. Americans.

B: Where I was at Watford, there was quite a few Americans there. Where my sister was, that terrible Arnhem, there was an aerodrome near where she lived at that time, that morning they had that terrible thing we were in the garden and we could see them all coming and I said to my sister "There's a big do on I think". And she said "Yes." They were all going with the carriers at the back. They had a plane and at the back was this carrier with soldiers in it. They was all Canadian. Over they went, over and over, all day long. And then in the evening we saw one of two coming back - how they got home I don't know, in the wind, broken, in bits. My husband was there then and he saw them. He was just outside Holland and they all came down. And as they all came down, he said, the Germans killed, shot them out. Because somebody had given them away, some spy had told them what was going to happen. I couldn't get over it. Seeing these planes come back, the state they were in. Hundreds and hundreds of them went, from Watford I'm talking about, they probably went from all over.

R: You saw them flying back?

B: We saw them come back, limping back. You could see they were broken, in bits. We sort of sensed it because for one thing they didn't have the piece up the back - they had a carrier at the back - they didn't have that so we realised they'd been bombing, dropped their load and they were coming back. We sort of sensed that there was trouble. We heard after a while what had happened and we put two and two together.

R: Do you remember your feelings about Dunkirk?

M: Yes ...(?)

R: Do you remember them coming back?

B: Just heard of it, coming back.

M: My sister's husband, she was up in Staffordshire, he came back from Dunkirk. Also I evacuated myself to Leatherhead, I've got a sister who lived down in Leatherhead. Her

husband was in a New Orleans band (?). It was bombed out and they lost two ships. I think I've got the paper where Norman was bombed and he was taking the troops to Salerno. My sister has got a picture of the ship there in the harbour where it was being bombed. I was never really an evacuee. I evacuated myself each time she was going down in Leatherhead. There was one ship in Marseilles.

R: Did you think at any point that you were going to be invaded?

M: In the First World War when I was a child I used to think "If the Germans came..." what I would do. I don't think I thought about it in the Second World War. No. I took myself down to Leatherhead and my sister had a rather nice orchard, apples and things. I used to take the pram down, wheel the pram up to Waterloo and get on the train and take the children down, load it up with stuff and come back up again. Walk right from Waterloo each time. I never expected anything like this or I might have... The one I evacuated myself to in Clandon, he got the OBE.

R: Do you remember before the war, what your feelings were?

M: I was working. I was a receptionist at a doctor's.

R: Were you expecting there to be a war?

M: Yes. When I was a receptionist at Mr Odgers, he took himself back to America - he was an American - he was an osteopath, as war broke out. I was expecting my son. It was in the air, kind of thing.

R: You didn't think that Chamberlain had managed to avoid it?

M: No. I never was one for taking in what ...(?) I know they were sandbagging the Westminster Hospital up while I was in there but war hadn't been declared. I'd left my husband and he didn't worry about anything much. The blackout I think was brought in and he'd been in trouble because he'd had the curtains open and been round to the pub. That's why I took myself to his brother's at Clandon. My son had just been born - he was born in 1939. War was imminent. It hadn't been declared because I was down there with him when war was declared. Then we came back again. He didn't get called up until 1940. He was on the guns. He never went out of the country. He was up in Manchester on the guns and he was invalided out because of deafness from the guns going off.

R: Did he stay deaf after the war?

M: I can't really remember.

R: So before the war started you went away?

M: Before war was just declared. Then I came back again.

R: so you said goodbye to your husband and he stayed in London?

M: He stayed in London. Then I was in Victoria in a flat and we came to this place here and he was working as a barman round at Hennickers when he was called up. It isn't Hennicker's now, it's a pub.

R: What about clothing?

B: We had ration books with so many coupons. We'd buy a blanket with our coupons. I had a nice grey blanket I bought with them. somebody made me a nice coat and I got a velvet collar on it. The buttons were off-coupon - you didn't give any coupons for buttons. I don't think it



was much for this little bit of velveteen. Some things you could get. Wool, you could get. Some kinds of yarn you could get without coupons.

R: I've heard of people using parachute silk?

B: Yes. You were lucky to get them. The Yanks would bring stockings but I didn't know any Yanks. You were lucky to know somebody who knew somebody, sort of thing. I had a couple of pairs of stockings from America, I think. My husband would forage round.

R: What about the Italian prisoners of war that were close to here?

B: They had some up at Peckham Rye. I took the children up there once - I used to take them to the park - and we saw them doing the gardening there. They had huts and things to shelter them in.

R: You didn't really meet them?

B: No. Once when I was at Watford with my sister, they were sweeping the road - there was snow - cleared the road. There was somebody official with them. My sister said "They're prisoners of war". These were Italians up there in Peckham, but these were Germans.

R: Did you have a very different attitude towards Germans and Italians?

B: We did then. Italians we didn't know much about, we wasn't so worried about Italians. But Germans. As well they didn't come near us at the time for what we were going through. But now, I'm not prejudiced. After all, it wasn't this generation, was it?

R: How long did it take for your attitudes to change?

B: As soon as the war was over, simmered down. When they got their come-uppance when Hitler had done himself in, we was all of us relieved. He was a horrible man. All those Jews. We didn't know anything about that till afterwards when we saw the concentration camps. Good job we wasn't anywhere near Hitler.

END OF AUDIO TAPE SIDE A

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SIDE B

Mrs BENNETT: Hitler committed suicide. I swear somebody done him in.

RIB: At the end of the war, do you remember VE Day?

B: Lovely. I was decorating my bedroom because here they'd give us the stuff to do our...bucket, whitewash. Red and white so I was mixing red with white.

R: They gave you stuff to decorate for VE Day?

B: No. Just to decorate. On this particular day I was doing my bedroom, making it - red and white - pink, you see? I was in a right mess. Up came my step mother - they only lived down the end there - "Leave all that" she said. "Come on" and we went into Hennickers and everybody got three sheets to the wind. We all did. and the kids went mad out in the square because they realised and nobody worried about anything to eat. They couldn't get over it. We were mad. And we had a nice party for the children.

R: a few days later?

B: Yeah. I had a photo of that. I gave it to my son a while back.

R: Did the mood change after the war?

B: Yes. Things changed, but gradually.

R: But just in those years from before the war to after the war?

B: It took us a while. We were still on rationing until four years after. You'd read in the paper "Something is off rations" and we would all go mad. "Sweets off-ration" - We made ourselves sick, I think. The kids did. Gradually, it wasn't a drastic thing, it was just an easing out. Then afterwards we had quite a lot of immigrants, Jamaicans and that came over because our people thought they were too good to do all these dirty jobs. They wouldn't do them and they were the ones that did the jobs. They did do some horrible jobs. And we had all those to contend with after. They seemed to have a chip on their shoulder. They all thought we were all going to be horrible (?) to them.

R: A lot of people were horrible to them, weren't they?

B: Yes. But even if there wasn't - You'd be in a shop and they'd turn round, without any (?) - they didn't give you a chance. But now they've all settled down. That lady that gets my (?), personally I couldn't care what colour they are.

R: Was there a change in how people felt - I've been told during the war there was a feeling of everybody doing things together and then that changed after the war?

B: During the war we'd help one another out, yes - we'd say "I've got so and so, do you want a bit?" We'd always share and we'd let one another know if somebody had something in the shop and they'd all go flying round. Sometimes you'd see a line outside a shop - They didn't know what they were standing there for themselves. They'd say "What's the queue for?" Just standing there waiting!

R: They'd join the queue even if...?

B: Regardless - Hoping something was there. On the whole, it wasn't a bad diet actually. They recommend it nowadays - Plenty of vegetables, not a lot of meat.

R: When the war finished...?

B: Did people go back to their old ways? We tried to. I can't rightly say. We tried to but I don't think we could really, not after what we'd gone through. A different generation came up. One thing - We tried to give our children what we never had. I think it spoiled them myself. It spoiled them because they had too much.

R: Was it parents trying to make up for a lost childhood.

B: Yes.

R: Somebody said to me it was like six years being stolen from them. Do you feel like that about it?

B: No. I don't look at it in that way. It was all an experience, an experience you could well have done without.

R: It sounds like in some ways you quite enjoyed it.

B: I didn't enjoy it, no. But we had to make the best of it. We had enjoyable times in it. But we was always on edge. Even when you went to bed you had to have everything all

ready - your policies and your money, coat and all that. Everything ready to pick up quick and run.

R: You kept all those things?

B: I used to. Yeah. I used to have a bag with my policies and things like that, just at the table there. Pick up the kids, all clothes, scoop up your bits of belongings and go down.

R: Did you take them with you to the shelter?

B: Yeah. Everything that you could. Your bag and your money, ration book and pension book - my husband's pension book.

R: Were you part of the wave at the end of the war of wanting a change politically. Because people supported Churchill during the war but at the end he was very heavily defeated. Where did you stand in that, the elections at the end of the war?

B: I don't know, can't answer that really. All we had to do then, us women, was to get ourselves organised and see our children. The men used to worry about the elections. I remember seeing Churchill when he came over the green (?). Then after that he got the sack didn't he? Threw him out. I was sorry about that. Didn't like to see him go because he had done a good job. That was my feeling. He stuck at it and he had also warned them the year before. He gave them warning but they wouldn't listen to him...(?)

R: was there a feeling at the end of the war of some sort of idealism or not? Or was it just people wanting to get the best for themselves? There was a huge change - the NHS, education - or did it really pass you by...?

B: I didn't know. didn't take it in. It just sort of happened gradually. Things did turn out better. The wages went up for a start. There was more work - Quite a lot of building to be done. All those nice little houses.

R: What did it look like at the end of the war?

B: A mess. Craters and bombsites everywhere. Bombsite down the road there. The children used to go and play up there. Bombsites everywhere. Big tanks, of water which they had for putting out the fires. There's nothing more I can tell you.

R: You've told us a great deal.

END OF AUDIO TAPE SIDE B

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