

Jeane Cresswell's Memoir of Growing up in Wakefield in World War II

Mrs Jeane Cresswell née Drake (1927-2005), grew up in Wakefield during the War Years, and her experiences would have been similar to thousands of others growing up at the same time. She was the daughter of Charles Drake, a co-owner of Drake and Waters.

By 1938 there was a real fear of war, and a collection was made at school (Wakefield Girls High School) for Czechoslovak refugees, but despite the international situation, Miss Maris took a party of girls to Switzerland.

August for an 11year old appears to have been a string of hot days spent cycling to Coxley Valley for picnics, swimming and playing tennis. Parents spent much time, as many would later, listening to the news bulletins and talking about the German invasion of Poland and the Baltic area- Danzig and the corridor were a major worry. All at school were advised by Miss Maris to carry on quietly in school and with their own business in as normal a way as possible. The Friday night (1st September), was spent lying with her sister and friends on the lawn of the family home watching a lone single engine plane fly over, which had to be a Spitfire even then! The last minutes of peace ticking away.

From then on, the excitement rose, but parents became sadder and more resolute, they remembered and fought in the Great War, the War to end all Wars, and their memories were horrendous and now it was happening again ‘twenty years’ was repeated again and again. The family had no sons, but cousins who were of an age to go, indeed one, Eric Bradley, had been called up with the militia twelve months earlier. Denis my older cousin, went to the RAF in Rhodesia. Eric’s brother Jim had been called up, and he would spend his war in a concentration camp in Burma.

The Saturday passed and nothing. No Chapel on the Sunday morning added to the gloomy atmosphere of suspension.

The wireless was turned on about 10:50 and all sat down to wait out the last few minutes, an experience that many do not want to repeat. Then Neville Chamberlains serious voice came on the wireless to tell us and the world that the last hour of the ultimatum had passed and that we were therefore at war with Germany and her allies. Life for many seemed to stop that day as though no one knew what to do next. In a way the news was a relief.

The war began less with a bang than a whimper of apprehension.

The blackout had come, and we were told to that in the event of an air raid we must go under the table –a large sturdy oak affair- or under the piano- a boudoir grand with enormous legs. Later, the cellar was emptied out and the marble slabs were equipped with blankets and pillows, reminiscent of a morgue!

That night the air raid siren sounded nearly all over Britain, but it did not last long. An elderly aunt, Ruth Harvey, lived alone on Dewsbury Road, and during the raid one of her neighbours went to see that she was alright to be very startled by just her head appearing round the door in its gas mask!

Autumn Term at School started again in the second week of September, on the 14th, to find that the greatest sin on the calendar was not having your gas mask with you at all times. For a while every lesson began with a gas mask check. Later it became a registration ceremony which lasted until the last days of the war. If you had forgotten it, you were sent home to retrieve it. Gas Mask drills- putting them on, chin first and the straps over your head, staff in theirs checking straps- They smelt horrible, puffing and blowing to see that you had a good seal, moving around a little to get used to wearing them, became part of the timetable. Miss Frampton was always meticulous. Sticky white paper criss-crossed the windows to prevent flying glass.

During Air Raid Drills, when we were asked to get our gasmasks, became a welcome timetable break; all had to line up at the door with their gasmasks and walk quietly and silently to the schools' cellars, which eventually had benches to sit on, those who did not have a cellar peg, had to use the corridors, boiler rooms and storage areas of the school. The pupils went in to the cellar in lesson 'divisions', full forms for humanities and for sciences, languages and mathematics groups consisting of roughly one third of each of the two parallel forms The relevant member of staff would take the register of her group she had been teaching. This all became, as intended, routine but at first there were some girls at the school who would become hysterical, but received little sympathy. The cellars had numerous pipes crossing it and the staff were worried about their fracturing in the event of the school being hit. If the girls were in the cellar during an air raid and the gas and hot water pipes were broken there could have been a disaster!

The first thing taught in the first War Time French Lesson was of course to learn the French National Anthem. Once the initial excitement had died down, all these things became a matter of routine, and were never carried out in anger.

Life settled down to normal, for an 11year old sitting in class and daily watching the flags move around a map of Europe the war virtually died until Dunkirk came and the Battle of Britain started. After Dunkirk Wakefield rapidly filled with battered wrecks of men, all highly nervous, and it was not advisable to come up behind them quietly. Pemberton House and Vincent House, on Westgate near the station, were full of men- often leaning from windows and calling out.

The Lupset estate, and certainly others, all had men billeted on them and the hospital blue pyjamas of the wounded men from Pinderfields became a common sight around the town. About 180 evacuees arrived from the Channel Islands and Miss Maris put them up in the Jubilee Hall, pending the finding of permanent homes. The only difficulty was, where would they go in case of an air raid or emergency.

Then came the bombing of London, Birmingham, Coventry, Manchester and Liverpool and that unnamed east coast town 'Hull' and of course the all-embracing South Coast. Somewhere amongst this came Sheffield, when for several hours for two nights, Wakefield citizens could see the reflection of the burning city in the sky, and could hear the bombers circling, and the local searchlights, one being at Snapethorpe school, quartered the sky looking for them. The skies would dull, the flashes of bombs exploding would be seen and the dull crump, crump crump, of the explosions heard and the sky flare up again. Drake & Warters, part-owned by my daddy had men working in Sheffield, and they told stories of going into the shelters at night and coming out in the morning to find the town around them literally gone; just piles and piles of smouldering rubble and worn-out air raid wardens, firemen and ambulance drivers coping as best they could. Within three weeks, I went to Sheffield, and saw the unbelievable devastation, piles of rubbish with narrow roads cleared between them, and the smell of fire still everywhere.

Leeds and Wakefield were very lucky. The chief designer of Drake & Warters, Hayden Suthill, was not frightened but terrified of being called up, and as he was an essential member of staff, Mr Drake moved heaven and earth to have him reserved. He was only to die some weeks later outside his own gate in the raid on Thornes Road on the night of Friday March 4th 1941. The explosions killed five other people, ranging from a two-year-old child to an 80-year-old man, 15 were injured, 5 seriously. Hayden Suthill was replaced by Pete Mundy. Fate is far more important than fear or planning.

Leeds was indeed bombed, but not in the concentrated way of Sheffield. An ancillary diversionary town was built for Leeds to the right of the A64, where roads and lights were put in and straw bales burnt to confuse the bombers.

The people of Wakefield would hear our bombers going out, hundreds collecting up from local airfields and going out in the early evening, a heavy growling prophetic sound, which would be somewhat lighter on their return in the morning.

At the Girls High School, Fire watching was organised. Each night two members of staff and two members of the sixth form would be on duty. Later on, anyone over 16 did fire watching, which involved sleeping at the school about once a month, making coffee for the staff on duty and actually sitting in the staff common room when homework was finished. Everyone did their turn of fire watching at their office or factory. Wakefield was bombed on 17th September 1940, when 10 high explosive and 40 incendiaries were dropped, falling on Alverthorpe, around Westgate Station, Ings Road and Kirkgate Station. Bombs hit the timber store of Drake & Warters, and nearby Williams and Womersley's foundry, both off Ings Road. The prompt action of Drake & Warters ARP wardens saved the store. If the store had gone up, then the surrounding area would have been destroyed due to the amount of timber stored. The City had a remarkable escape, the only casualty being a fireman.

An incendiary bomb could be easily put out if someone was there to raise the alarm. An unwatched building may well be alight before an alarm was sounded. There were alarms at night and air raid warnings but fortunately none were near to Wentworth house. The watchers were either left to listening to eerie cracks and groans of the empty

school or trying to sleep, the girls in a lecture room, the staff in the staff room or any corner which was more convenient. In the raid on Thornes Road, one of the girl's homes was damaged but not destroyed. I was tending my pony at Lupset farm when the raid started.

The sirens rarely sounded during 1942, and even less in 1943, as the war was taken to Germany and away from Great Britain. The sirens last wailed their lonely lament across the city on March 17 1945.

The war really affected everyone, in one way or another.

School activities had to be curtailed because of the war, primarily the black out. In the Spring term of 1940 a lecture was given by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the only event was the Hockey Team Party. By this time Coral 'Kate' Taylor had started, we became friends. Another was Constance Gilby. The dinner break was shortened so that the girls could get home before dark in winter. The bus services were irregular, and the journey home could be an ordeal or there was no bus. As much as possible was fitted into the shortened dinner hour, choir practice, discussion groups, Guide Meetings, and working parties. Dorothy Chatfield was the daughter of the vicar of St Mary's Primrose Hill, Wakefield, and as a trained pianist, asked if I would play for some services at her father's church due to the absence of an organist. Being pianist, I have no idea what to do. It was a large cold church. My grandsons, like my cousin Eric, are both organists. A great emphasis was placed on music and sport at the High School, the basic annual fee for piano tuition was about £12, in addition to singing lessons.

In 1939 very few people were lucky enough to have a car and most travelled, and usually not very far, by either bus, tram or steam train, (indeed some still travelled by horse bus or pony and trap due to the restrictions on petrol). The fuel for these became scarce as it was rationed. Bus windows were taped or netted to prevent flying glass and the lights were always very low, so much so one could not read the bus ticket. The services were reduced, the buses were very crowded.

Private cars had a small 'basic' allocation of petrol and eventually you had to prove your need for that, there were greater rations for essential work, but woe betide you if you were found outside your immediate area or latterly running on Red petrol, which was regarded as a crime. Most cars were 'moth balled' for the duration. The black out of course affected everybody, and 'turn that light out!' became a regular yell from Air Raid Wardens. Fines were heavy for people not maintaining a strict blackout. This applied to cars whose head lamps had to be masked with just three slits on each light, and of course after 1940 all sign posts, and in some cases street names, town boundary signs and anything that could give you an idea of where you were, were removed in case of invasion from the air. With only a torch covered with a mask to help you find your way about, life became to say the least difficult. 'Got your tin hat? Got your gasmask? Got your gasmask? Got your torch? Goodnight!' became a ritual saying and was heard virtually everywhere.

Fuel of all sorts was valuable and every effort was made to save it. Coal was rationed, but gas –except for reduction of pressure- and electricity could not be, so in came the rule if possible one bath a week, and only 5” of water, that did not mean 5” of boiling water to cool off with cold, but 5” maximum. Many people measured a five-inch mark, and painted it on their baths. So ‘Save Fuel, Save Lives’ became a slogan. The war was full of slogans.

Food of course was rationed and difficult to come by, all queued for everything from onions, fish, sausage, liver and even nylons. Anything that was not rationed had to be queued for. The smallness of rations did not affect everybody, as you ate what you were given. Fat ration was 4oz a week, as was sugar. Meat was 1/- worth (1 shilling = 5p), half an egg a week. Some things like dried fruit, dried milk, dried eggs and certain tinned foods were on ‘points’. Each item was allocated a number of points and everybody was allocated so many a week, which could be used as you wished, always providing that anything was available, queues depending. Life was very difficult and very unfair for many, anyone who had anything to exchange could usually have a barter system somewhere, and the black market was always there for anyone who had money. At and before the beginning of the war, people were encouraged to stock up on food as far as they could because shops could not carry very large stocks. Butter was preserved in crocks of saline solution, eggs in water glass, tinned stuffs bought along with many other essentials. The older people who had been through the previous war were of course keener to do so than the ‘war will be over by Christmas’ people.

The real unfairness came when what had been a patriotic duty became regarded later as unfair and unpatriotic, and hoarding became almost criminal. It affected the middle classes more than the working class, many of whom did not have the resources to stock up, ‘why should we go without when they have something’ became a mind set for a lot of people.

The diet may have been restricted, but it was a healthy one, there were very few overweight children, and in some cases it improved the diet of some families, and the children of the real poor were better fed than they would have been without the war, except in the cases, of which there was a number in Wakefield, where mothers sold their ration books.

Rationing meant that more girls stayed at school for dinner, before the majority had gone home in the long dinner hour before this, but now school dinners could be bought in addition to one’s normal ration, so with the stringency of the rationing in 1941, when the meat ration was reduced to a shilling’s worth a week, even girls living nearby had dinners in school to obtain the extra food.

In place of the school trips and outings, some girls went each year to a harvest camp. In 1941 it was fruit picking in Huntingdonshire. In 1943 school was closed for a week in October while a party of V Uppers and VI Uppers went to camp. The V Loweres and VI Loweres had been the previous week, so got their holidays at the expense of the uppers. The work was either picking potatoes or pulling sugar beet. We slept on palliasses and got up at 6 in the morning, and still enjoyed the recreations of tennis, table tennis, dancing and walking in the evenings. Another

group at the same camp at Walton near Boston Spa, Lincolnshire, forgot to get up in the morning to go to work! The last camp took place in October 1945.

Clothes were also rationed. Many service men came back to very reduced wardrobes where their trousers had been cut down for their sons or made into skirts for daughters. Fashion basically went out of the window as clothes were turned, many clothes were turned inside out and back to front and made up on the other side at least twice and of course lengths became short and shorter.

One of the features of the war years was the savings campaign when many saved money for themselves by buying War Savings Certificates, and at the same time helped to raise money for the war effort through their purchase. In 1942 War Ship week was held, only a few weeks after a previous Weapons Week. An Ambitious target of £2000 was set. An open day was held, where the minimum admission was a six-penny savings stamp. On the stage was a model of a destroyer showing what total had been raised so far.

There were fewer journeys for many outside of school, but entertainment came to school instead. In 1942, two concerts were given by the Northern Philharmonic Orchestra in the Jubilee Hall, and 110 girls went to see the London Philharmonic at the Unity Hall. In February 1942, the women of the ATS gave a marching display in Jubilee Hall. As the war progressed, school activities went back to normal, though there still was no dramatic competition or sports day.

Evacuation was a big thing, Wakefield was lucky as it did not see the wholesale removal of children that London, Hull and other places saw. The emotional stress and strain was colossal, but people were stronger, there was little moaning, and most weeping was done in private, people had their families close and supported each other.

It was a different war to the Great War, there were no serried trenches, there were few artillery barrages as such, except El Alamein. After El Alamein it was Tunis, Sicily, Normandy, the Rhine. 'Monty' became a real hero of the people, and was given the freedom of the City in 1947. People turned out in their hundreds to see and cheer their hero, the Cromwell with the common touch. He stayed in Wakefield with his Batman Sir Richard O'Brien, a native of Wakefield, who attended Holy Trinity Church on George Street. O'Brien resided on South Parade, his neighbour being the Mayor of Wakefield at the time, Harry Watson, who had invited Monty to visit the City. Incidentally, my husband and I purchased O'Brien's house in 1960, where the family still remain.

The real barrages were sea fights and of course the blitz where the civilians suffered the most.

What also made the war different was the lack of Pals battalions when the male youth of an entire street could be wiped out at once, at least someone had seen sense about that, and although in 1938 most of Wakefield's 21-year-olds had joined the York's and Lanc's at Pontefract Barracks they were soon spread about a bit.

Also, there was no long casualty lists printed in newspapers or pinned up behind the post office door, the grief was allowed to be private.

So, movement was reduced to essentials, holidays for the most part were non-existent.

That indeed would have been many children's life in school and out of school, but outside school hours, I was fortunate in having a far more interesting life. Daddy, as I said earlier, was co-owner of a shopfitting and building company in Wakefield, and was a very energetic man. Before war began, on a Friday he would take the Yorkshire Pullman to London to lobby ministers for contracts. He would return tired late on the Friday, having travelled first class both ways. His train was often pulled by the Flying Scotsman or a "Mallard" painted a lovely apple green.

One present daddy bought for mummy was an electric food mixer. It was top of the range, and few people had one even then. Mummy was not quite sure what to do with it: it made a ghastly noise. It found a use to churn cream into butter, but at a considerable cost to our hearing.

Within weeks of war being declared, the company was building air raid shelters in Castleford, and he would not be seen by his family from Sunday to Sunday. Before this contract was complete, the building side of the company was busy starting to build army camps on green field sites at Hessle near Hull, and near Ripon in North Yorkshire. In order to prevent the docks at Hull being bombed a decoy port was created, which involved the digging of huge ditches and building light emplacements. Another decoy, this time a town, was built for Leeds, and consisted of road ways and large bonfire emplacements. Incidentally, this decoy port was subject to a BBC 2 programme as part of the 'Time Fliers' series.

Friday was daddy's usual day to go to the East Riding, in early days this was quite a trip, to visit the two camps that the company was building, pay wages and inspect development. As time went on other contracts saw the company build cubical tank traps on the beaches between Flamborough Head and Barmstone Sands just south of Bridlington. Daddy hoped to be able to use sand and pebbles off the beach to mix into the concrete: it contained too much salt, and the concrete failed. We had to bring sand and pebbles from Wakefield all the way to the sea to build pill boxes, light and gun emplacements. My sister and I were some of the fortunate children of the war because we went to the seaside many Fridays when other children could not or had never been. Daddy had to travel to inspect the work, so at first light we were bundled up into the back of the Jaguar Saloon GUG 686, and off we went. Our party would collect the liaison officer, usually a captain, in Beverly and would pass through the sentry posts. Whilst daddy was busy, we paddled in the sea and saw mines being laid on the beaches, and walked along cliffs, between the ever-present danger of mine fields and witnessed gun emplacements being constructed.

In later days when the 'real' war had started, many hours were spent in bomb damaged Beverly Barracks watching troops training. On one occasion, daddy and I had to run for our lives along with the Liaison Captain when the

street we were on was machine-gunned by a yellow nosed 109. I remember the ping ping ping of the bullets hitting the road and kicking up dust and debris; the roar of the engine and the stench of its fumes. We all burst out laughing as soon as we were safe. Daddy had served as a sergeant musketry instructor in the first war, he taught me shoot in case of invasion. He was a crack shot.

These trips to North Yorkshire did not last as long, but were equally exciting, mainly because of the great desire of the dispatch riders who guided the party about in the area to lose us somewhere- they never managed but we would have never found the camps without them.

Another of the companies interests at the time was the production and selling of anti-blast devices to stay shop windows, and were like spiders which were held in the centre of each side of the glass and stayed with wires to each corner, and were supposed to damp the ripples and vibrations that would be set up in the glass by an explosion. Other large contracts were obtained from the MOD for thousands of fold flat chairs and wardrobes for the RAF, innovative designs by Mr Warters, bedside cabinets, and officers camp beds. 250,000 bunk beds were also made for the American Army, and the construction of thousands of work benches and cupboards to equip shadow factories, such as those for Rover or at Yeadon where they made bombers. Daddy went to the giant factory to inspect the workbenches and other tools. I went with him. I remember these black giant planes being built by hand by teams of women, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The throb of the merlin engines was constant as women pilots ferried the giant bombers to where they were needed.

Slowly of course these physical preparations were completed and the builders become occupied with repairing bomb damage to civilian and military, and the factory turned from making army huts to the fittings for them, namely chairs, bunks, and bedside cabinets. Daddy had a contract to fit out USAAF airfields and barracks. Several USAAF officers became friends, and would visit at the Golden Hind. I went dancing with them, the Jitter Bug and all the latest American dances and Big Band tunes.

The build up for D-Day changed life for the families of those involved with Drake & Warters. The firm obtained a contract to build Landing Craft Assault, initially 16, later 72. By early 1944 we were completing one a day. The company were christened the boat builders of Back Street by the Navy. These were simple flat-bottomed craft with armour on them, 43 feet long, with a 10 foot 6 inch beam, and weighed 12.5 tonnes. The engines that were fitted to the original 16 were conversions of motor car engines, carried out by Harry Warters, Mr Bob's brother. They were built on specially produced jigs in the factory, and due to shortage of teak and plywood, mahogany was used in their place. In order to fulfil this contract a quick expansion of the labour force was required and 800 girls were taken on. Wearing their grey overalls, and forged into a team by Bob Warters, the girls could be found tapping screws, they not only planked the hull and built the frames, they made the internal fittings, oil and water coolers, female electricians made the instrument boards and switch panels. They worked too on the sheet metalting, the highly skilled girls worked on the adaptation of aero engines to marine use. The female workers' duties also included the hammering of thousands of rivets, tightening of hundreds of nuts and bolts and to give the craft the

necessary strength. They also bolted on and manufactured the armour plate, assisted in the installation of engines and to give the craft their final coat of grey paint. The preferred age of the women workers was 15 to 30, and one noticed the number of educated women working in the factory; but skill, the experienced foreman would tell you, had nothing to do with education. The vast majority of the girls had never worked before and some had come from offices where they worked as typists or receptionists. Most were housewives, or “joined up” from being hairdressers or maids to do their bit. The craft had two half decks to afford the infantry onboard protection during landed and had plate armour capable of turning a machine gun bullet. The later LCA’s were fitted with two purpose-built Austin engines capable of developing 390hp each. At first Ford V8 engines were adapted. Fully laden with 50 troops, and equipped with machine guns and mortars, the craft had a draught of less than 2ft and the propellers were shielded in shallow tunnels to prevent damage upon landing.

One great advance made in the production of the craft was the establishment of a central brain, albeit 1944, to establish the supply all the small factories, which would order so many craft from a place and provide the required number of pieces from the keel to a screw and deliver it to them, like a conveyor belt, by road or rail, at the precise moment that a place needed them. Central stores were set up, and daily lorries or the railways collected the next portions of the craft required. You could have an LCA delivered to the factory in pieces like a giant jigsaw in its component parts. The first LCA’s were made from scratch, with only the aid of diagrams, blueprints and input from a Mr Lehman, who was appointed to assist in their construction by the MOD.

One novel aspect of the contract was the fact that Wakefield was, and still is, land locked, the factory being a mile from the nearest waterway. Once finished an LCA was rolled out of the works main entrance, and a special frame was erected to load the LCA onto the back of a low loader, nick named the ‘Queen Mary’ in West Parade Street. They were then taken by road to Earnshaw’s Timber Yard in Doncaster Road, a distance of nearly a mile, where a dock was excavated. The craft were then launched into the Canal to run trials; a system controlled by Naval Officers and the MOD. The first trip was several miles along the Calder & Hebel Navigation, through a series of locks, to the River Aire at Knottingley. Here in the presence of Naval experts, the craft had to pass their tests on a measured mile, and prove that they were capable of achieving the required speed. Few naval craft have such a peculiar start to life as these assault craft built in Yorkshire. The Naval officers present at the tests were inevitably Lieutenant Charles Warren and Sub Lieutenant Geoffrey Canadine.

The first LCA, no 1141, was launched on 13th October 1943, my birthday, and was a thrilling day for the employees of Drake & Warters and the citizens of Wakefield who flocked to see ‘Wakefield’s War Effort’. The first craft took 6 weeks and four days to build from laying of the keel. By the first launch seven other craft were on the stocks in various stages of construction, and by 1944 there was a launch a week.

When not at School, I was taught by a Royal Navy officer to pilot the LCA’s, and together with an experienced engineer to pilot one of the pair that were usually tested together doing a measured mile on the River Aire at Knottingley. We pushed them as fast they could go, and we managed to get them up onto the plain: they really

were very fast. The last two years of the war were very happy years, as the Naval officers became friends of the family, and provided lots of tennis at a friend's court, theatre and other amusements in winter.

On June 16 1944 came D-Day, not a particularly happy day as a good friend was dropped with other paratroops into Caen. He was home, wounded, within a week. Then on it went, pins marching across Europe again, but this time advancing. Then came Ravensbrooke, Bergen Belsen, days when the newspapers and more so the News Reels at the Cinema, the Savoy Horbury Road, the Regal, Grand Electric to name a few, made life unbearable and catastrophic for many. Then of course came VE Day, and the people of Wakefield celebrated in Wood Street outside the Town Hall. At school, we assembled at the usual time in the morning, but after assembly there was a ceremony when the flag was raised on the lawn and the whole school marched down to the Cathedral for a joint service of thanksgiving with the boys from QEGS, conducted by the Provost.

That was alright as far as it went, but what of the War in Asia? I had a cousin, a Captain on the staff at Bombay, and another somewhere in the Jungle having gone through Burma with the Chindits. A cousin by marriage a prisoner on the infamous Burma Railway, what of them and their war? What of those who fought in Italy? Rex my future husband was involved in the Naval build up to the invasion of Italy and a cousin who was in the RAF, and flew sorties over the Monastery of Monte Cassino.

Jeane Cresswell died on 4 May 2005.

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