

ANGEL INN - BITTERNE

Wartime memories as a child at the Inn.

By Bernard Rogers.

My grandfather William Frank Rogers (Sam) was the Landlord and myself, sister Jean, mother Kathleen and father Bertie all lived at the Angel Inn at the outbreak of war in 1939. The only other person living at the Inn was the housekeeper Ethel Price.

My first recollection of the war was of walking out of the door of the Bottle and Jug at the age of six and seeing large V's chalked on shop doors. They were on the Sports Cycle shop and Rogers the butchers (no relation) and several others. I asked my father what it meant and he explained that it stood for victory because some chap named Hitler had started a war. At that age I was not too sure what a war was, or what the word victory meant.

I heard the air raid siren for the first time and my mother rushed my sister and myself down to the cellar where we sat on two bunks that had been placed in a corner. We stayed there for what I thought was an interminable time. It gave me time to really look at the cellar



in detail. It had a stone-flagged floor, stone walls with a little damp here and there, plus the boarded ceiling that was supposed to protect us from the high explosive bombs that Herr Hitler had promised us. My parents came to the conclusion some time later, that wooden boards did not make a top class shelter. So an Anderson Shelter was later built in the garden, allowing the family to experience the joys of living every night of the blitz a few square feet underground.

One night while we still in our "safe cellar" an Incendiary bomb pierced its way through the roof and cut its way through the crown of my grandfather's trilby hat which was hanging on a peg in the upstairs hall. It penetrated through both floors and through the far end of the bunk where I was sitting. I am certain that the 4 minute mile accomplished by myself that night was not necessary, as the bomb proved to be a "dud" (a bomb that does not explode).

My father decided to take a look upstairs to check for damage and found another Incendiary in the hall outside my bedroom. In the excitement of the moment my father grabbed the nearest bucket (we had buckets of sand and water at many points in the Inn), a bucket of water and threw it on the fire. That really got things popping (Phosphorus and water do not mix). My father was only slightly burnt but suffered a lot later with the ribbing he received from his friends . The fire was eventually extinguished but there was quite a lot of damage to the hall and bedroom.

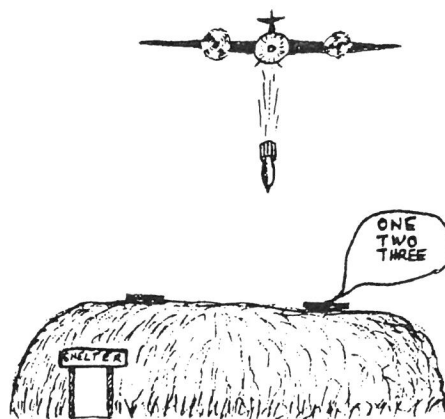
A third Incendiary fell harmlessly in the back garden.

The hat with the crown hanging forlornly down remained on the peg until my grandfather's death many years later.

Often the air raid warning sounded while the Inn was open to customers and many were happy to follow my grandfather and family down to the " safety " of the cellar enabling them to continue the morning or evening drinking session, which sometimes did not end until dawn.

The " customers " seemed to me to just help themselves to the bottled beer or draw off from the barrels. I did not ever witness payment thereof but the bonhomie was always great and sometimes the singing which inevitably followed a long drinking session seemed to drown out the noise of Adolf's exploding bombs.

Some of the air raids took place while I was at school forcing us to take cover in the local shelter, sometimes for many hours. To pass the time the teachers organised the singing of songs such as " My Bonny Lies Over The Ocean " and " Roll Out The Barrel ". Other games were also played such as " I Spy ", but the favourite amongst the pupils was a delightful one that would start with the whistle of a bomb leaving the aircraft whereupon all the darling children (myself included) would chant one to ten. The idea was that if you did not reach ten you were dead. We all felt the teachers loved it, even if they did seem a little agitated. One of the older lady teachers did go into uncontrollable tears bringing our little game to an abrupt end. The other teachers threatened something more dire than Hitler's bombs if we started again.



Rat! Yes we certainly had rats. Where they all came from is not certain. Perhaps they came from all the bombed buildings, or was there any truth in the rumours that they originated from places like darkest Africa, catching the local ships when they docked? It was said they crawled down the mooring ropes and by the number we had seen there must have been a signpost directing them to the Angel.

One of the most vivid memories I have of that time is of " Ethel " the housekeeper entering the flagstoned Scullery first thing in the morning with broom in hand to take on anything up to 4 giant rats. Ethel would be in the corner by the door, the rats in the other corner baring their teeth. Battle would then commence and "Ethel " would inevitably win but the replacement of brooms , which were difficult to obtain in wartime, became a major issue.



Washday at the Angel, Mondays were washday, a day to avoid being anywhere near the Scullery at all costs. At exactly 7.00 a.m. the boiler was fired up by Ethel and my mother. Soon the room was filled with enough steam to power a large liner out of the docks. Sheets, pillows and items of clothing were pummelled with a large stick, and then forced by turning a handle through a green cast iron mangle with 6" diameter wooden rollers and then into several wicker baskets. The baskets were carted out and the washing pegged to a very long, very high line. At 2.00 p.m. the boiler was turned off and the mangle stopped mangling. At that point my sister and I would creep into the larder in the hope of finding a few goodies without the chance of being dragged into the fury of wash day.

Times were difficult for hotel supplies in that period and my grandfather could be seen many times chasing customers who were running to catch a bus to Southampton, still clutching their glass of beer. The Inn was desperate for glasses and my grandfather sent my sister and myself searching for some in the old Bitterne Rifle Club building in the garden. The building ran the length of the garden and after searching in the dust and cobwebs we located several boxes containing glasses about a 1/4" thick of crude green distorted glass all packed in straw. These were used until they were subsequently broken or stolen. What would the antique value of such glasses be today?



Eventually the glass situation became so bad that regular customers left a suitable drinking vessel behind the bar for their own use and more casual customers brought along with them practically anything that would hold liquid such as milk jugs and jam jars.

The time arrived when the petrol rationing became so severe that it was impossible to use the car purely for pleasure, so the family Rover was put to rest for the duration of the war in one of the three bays originally built for horse drawn coaches. My friends and myself decided the disused car would make a good meeting place for our little gang, my father thought otherwise.

After the car we transferred our headquarters to the Tack-Room above the stables and many a night we used to sneak out of our bedrooms, meet in the Tack-Room for a feast of soup cubes heated on an old paraffin stove, dry bread and peanut butter. The rationing made it difficult to obtain food and these seemed to be the only things we could rustle up.

"D" Day loomed nearer and the bars were packed with soldiers, sailors and a few airmen. As the evenings progressed and the beer took effect the occasional fight would break out. The Americans would fight the Canadians, the French would fight the Belgians and the British would have a go at anyone. The military police soon sorted things out.

Some nights the Inn was crowded with American and Canadian servicemen and at such times my sister and myself would walk up and down behind the bars, collecting for the poor. We were the poor.

The day I found a shilling under one of the seats in the lounge bar changed my habits for at least three weeks.. Completely out of character, I rose early each day to sweep out before the cleaner arrived. Grandfather never did understand my sudden interest in the well-being of the Inn. My efforts were in fact short lived as the 'pickings' did not rise to my first estimate.

One morning I awoke to much activity, we had been burgled! Some villain had hidden himself (yes all burglars were male in those days) in the toilet. During the night he had crept out, taken cigarettes and bottles of beer and disappeared through one of the sash windows. Excitement for the 40's but commonplace for the 90's.

Soon the rationing became more intense and the Inn's quota of spirit went down and down, arriving eventually I was told at about 4 bottles per month. On the day the spirits etc. arrived the bottles were rushed into the back room that served as an office and not long after we were visited by various traders, such as the butcher, the baker and maybe the candlestick maker and all re-emerged with brown paper parcels tucked underneath their arms. Was it my imagination that all of us at the Inn seemed to eat a little better than my friends? Perhaps it was.

The Bitterne Rifle Range ran down the length of the garden and at the outbreak of war the building was not used for its intended purpose and was put to good use rearing chickens, rabbits and ferrets. Ferrets were used extensively in the war years to catch wild rabbits to supplement the meagre rations.

Watching the Draymen delivering the barrels of beer was always exciting for a young lad. One day as I watched them from a corner of the cellar, a rope slipped and the barrel crashed against the far wall spilling its precious contents over the flagstone floor. A serious shortage for the Inn that week, as replacements were not obtainable in wartime.

Somewhat later in the war Bitterne Road, West End Road and Peartree Avenue were packed with lorries, tanks and gun carriers with soldiers milling around everywhere. It was obvious that some large scale attack was about to take place. My friends and myself took full advantage of the situation by walking along the lines of soldiers, chanting the well worn phrase, Any gum chum, normally with great success. Our luck did not last long as one morning I rose to find the majority gone.

Hitler decided at one point in the war to drop many personnel booby trap devices. A soldier was duly assigned to the onerous task of warning school children of the dangers. The soldier visited Bitterne School one morning and started by showing us the various shapes and sizes of the devices and the only one I can remember was a shiny thin metal cylinder about 3" long. The danger of these objects was demonstrated when the soldier went out to his vehicle, set a fuse to a live device and Baaannngg! - out went the window and out went the pupils for the rest of the day. Naturally we all looked forward to our next demonstration.

A house in Peartree Gardens, on the boundary of the Inn's garden, was reduced to rubble one night and remained a constant reminder to the rest of us of the dangers we faced.

A mobile gun was in use at Southampton and one particular night the powers-that-be decided the car park of the Angel Inn was as good as anywhere and when the enemy planes paid us their usual visit the gun let rip with a frightening roar and what was left of the glass in our windows disappeared.

Favourite items for collections were Shrapnel, Bullet Cases and tail fins of Incendiary Bombs. Pretty harmless stuff. Live ammunition was of course a real prize and I had discovered an ammunition box or two on the sloping banks of Hum Hole (a copse running alongside Lances Hill)----- boxes obviously abandoned from one or other of the lorries that had been parked along the road. Handfuls of 303 shells soon became star items in many a collection until a teacher found I was the main distributor. The local Bobby was not amused. Hoping for a little clemency and perhaps earn a brownie point or two, I told him I had left the hand grenades in the box. On being almost dragged to the spot of my discoveries I came to a conclusion - no points had been earned.



Victory in Europe arrived at last. I had by that time learnt the meaning of the Victory. In my jubilation I managed to fall out of an apple tree and broke my wrist. All through the war without a scratch and on the last day the humiliation of walking around with a plaster and a sling, sympathy from my parents and my grandfather was non-existent. Towards afternoon



the preparations for the celebrations were well under way. My father and many helpers rolled barrels of beer to Maytree Road where tables were laid for the party. My mother organised the pushing of the piano from the Inn and the lads and myself (albeit with one arm) helped to construct the bonfire. Soon the food was consumed, the piano was played, the beer was drunk, the adults sang and the bonfire was lit. The doors of the houses started to scorch, the firemen arrived, the police arrived and the bonfire was controlled. Yes - everyone enjoyed themselves until dawn. It was the last day of war at the Inn.