

Interviewee: Bernard Crowhurst

Interviewer: Malin Lundin

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Interviewer: It should be recording now. This is Malin Lundin doing an interview with Bernard Crowhurst on the 5th of October 2010. Would you be able to tell me your date of birth please?

Bernard: Yes, my date of birth is October 1934.

Interviewer: Ok. How old were you when the war broke out then?

Bernard: I was five – five years of age – yes.

Interviewer: And where were you living at the time?

Bernard: I was living in a very small village called Lane's End, which still exists but it's a much bigger village now, which is a around about I suppose a mile and a half from here. It's not far from here. Yes.

Interviewer: Who were you living with at the time?

Bernard: I was living with my family. Me mother and father and I had one brother and four sisters and although me brother was born after the war and – just after the war.

Interviewer: So were your sisters – were they older or younger?

Bernard: I'm the second oldest but I have one sister who's still around now. Still living down in the village where we lived and she's three years older than me and I still have another sister who's sadly very ill and I've lost two sisters.

Interviewer: So even though you were – were very young when the war started. Can you remember the day the 3rd of September 1939 when war broke out?

Bernard: No, to be honest I can't remember the day. I've got very vivid memories of lots of things in my young life through the war but I can't actually remember the day war broke out. No.

Interviewer: So were you in school at this point?

Bernard: I was and – and it seems strange that I can remember things before I ever started school and yet I can't remember the day war broke out. But, yes, I was at school, a little Infant's School in the village where I lived and, yes, and lots of things whilst at that school I remember quite well.

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit about your school time?

Bernard: Yes, there's various things. One of the things that stands out above all others was my friend and myself used to walk home from school and have a sandwich at home because we lived just up the road and it was at the time when the rockets was coming over after the doodlebugs. We was walking back from school when there was an almighty bang in the sky and we both looked up and there was this object in the sky surrounded by a big cloud of smoke or whatever which was followed by another terrific explosion as it hit the ground. And my father was working at the power station just down the road, could Little Brook Power Station now and he was on watch on the roof of the power station – knew that the rocket came down in the vicinity of where we lived got on his pushbike and peddled down like mad and discovered that it had come down in a field – in open fields so it didn't do any damage but it did pick up from one of the two craters that it made in the ground. An object which I treasured for a long time on my shelf where I kept shrapnel and shell cases and incendiary bombs and all sorts of things. I think looking back at it, I remember the object quite well but I've don't know quite was but I think it must have been some pump, it stood about nine inches high and it was around two – two and a half inches square and it had various little jets and needles in to it and that was my price possession on my memo – memorabilia shelf. But sadly I don't know what happened to that and – as I say it came down in open fields so fortunately it didn't do any damage.

Also the same school friend that was walking back to school and his father was in the Home Guard and we used to live near a chalk pit which has now been in-filled and the Home Guard used to practice in the chalk pit and him and his brother went down¹ to meet their father coming home from Home Guard practice and picked up an object which resembled a cigarette lighter in the road but no idea what it was at the time. He took it home and he put it – and mucked about with it as do you as children and finished up in the drawer indoors and one day he was on his own indoors and rooting around and find it and it had wick on it just like a cigarette lighter. In those days we used to have the old cast-iron kitchen and stoves, there was an open fire and an oven alongside and he put it in the fire to light the wick and it duly exploded and blew the fire to pieces and took all of his fingers off. No idea what it was even to this day we can only assume that it was dropped from the sky somewhere but it blew all his fingers off, he was in hospital for a while and he sadly passed now not long ago. He finished up actually marrying a cousin of mine and – yes.

And the incendiary bombs is another issue of mine. I was dismantling incendiary bombs at the age of ten and eleven and making them in to money boxes. I became quite an expert, well, not just me but me school friends as well and we become quite experts in dismantling incendiary bombs. I mean, I can describe everything within an incendiary bomb now. We used to un-screw the base plate, there was a detonator at the bottom, we used to hit it with a hammer and nail because it only went bang. Just like the detonator they put on the railway lines, they used to in fog days. We used to empty the powder out which

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was inside and that had another detonator in it. We used to light the powder which – cos it was obviously a low explosive, it only burnt and it used to bang the other detonator and then we would take the fin off the top of the bomb which was only hold on by rivets which filed the rivets off and removed the fin, unscrewed the cap at the top that had a screwdriver slot in and we used to slot that screwdriver slot all the way through put the base plate back and the top back in and post you money, which we didn't have, we never had it but [laughs] but you had a slot to put money in on the top.

But we, actually, found – I lived – I was very fortunate – it was – although I was obviously very aware of war and bombs falling and whatever it was an adventure. It really was and I was very fortunate to live right on the edge of a very big wood which still exists today. I lived a lot of my young days in the woods. I mean our parents know that we were just as safe, if not safer, than at home. So we lived in the woods and again I was very fortunate there was orchards and open fields and whatever. We had an ample supply of most things, you know, in the fruit season we had apples and oranges, which we had to steal from the orchards. They belonged to someone else but they were massive orchards, they went for miles. It's all since been ripped out. We used to, if in season, we'd roast chestnuts or we would roast potatoes in the woods. And most of our times we wasn't at school, we was in the woods rather than at home. It really was a great adventure and on one occasion we actually come across in the woods of a whole canister full of incendiary bombs. I don't know quite how they realised the bombs from the planes but they obviously came in this big cylindrical carrier with rows of incendiary bombs inside and I assume that they used to open the door and drop all these bombs out. But we found a complete cylinder that had been dropped from the plane and although it burst open when it hit the ground and scattered a few bombs around. Most of the bombs, incendiary bombs, was still inside and they were ours because we found them so they were ours. We wasn't gonna report it to the wardens because they would stop us from going there, you see. But and I'm not sure how many bombs but there must have been hundreds and we got rid of every single one of them by various means. Looking back it was stupid but when you're that age it didn't mean anything. We used to light a fire and we'd pile six or seven of them on the fire cos, I mean, I didn't even know what they was made of them days². I do know now, it's made of magnesium which used to burn and so we used to light a big fire pile a few on top of the fire and then retreat behind some big trees a hundred years or so away and watch them all catch alight and burn . We used to throw them at trees so the base plate hit the tree which set of the detonator which set the bomb burning and we literally got rid of hundreds of them without any of the wardens or whatever knowing what we were doing.

Interviewer: Did your parents know what you were dismantling –?

Bernard: No. No, they didn't but it's very strange even at that tender age of ten and eleven we was aware that some were different from others. I mean, all – we only touched ones that was aluminium cover –

² 10 min

colour or magnesium colour. But we did sometimes come across some that were brown, coloured brown and some coloured green and we knew that they were different from the others. But how different we don't know and even to this day I don't know. But there was something different about them so we never touched them. We used to find those in the open fields were they got into the ground and just see the fins sticking out of the ground but if the was green or brown we left them there, we never touched them. Why they were different I don't know but we just felt something was different.

I remember also we had a raid on the village one night quite a lot of bombs dropped and a few people was killed and my father said to me when the siren went for the all-clear, 'We'll go for a walk and see what's happened'. We know quite a lot of bombs had dropped very close to where we lived and we was walking around and there was lots of debris in the road and, of course, there was no lights in them days and me father said to me, 'I don't think we ought to go any further, we'll go back'. So we went back home and we discovered in the morning that there was quite a few bombs dropped and people killed. One thing I remember on that particular bombing raid there was a school friend of mine, Tony Flint, I walked where – to where he lived and the whole front of the house had gone. It had been blown away. Fortunately they was in the air raid shelter but the thing I remember about it, there was a dressing table in the bedroom upstairs and the mirror wasn't even cracked and yet it had blown the front of the house away and the mirror wasn't even cracked. That stood out to me.

Where I lived there was a big open space with grass and trees and I remember another night a bombed dropped right at the base of a bog oak tree probably two/three/four-hundred year old oak tree and it blew the tree out of the ground and yet about twenty foot across the road it was a house and it never even cracked a window in the house but it blew the tree out the ground. That particular green and all I remember very well. Me and some of me mates, we was at the top of this green and there was no air raid siren had gone so there was no raid but there was quite a big flight of planes came over which turned out to be German planes. But no siren had gone and they all turned and was started to machine gun and we thought they were machine gunning us but if they was, we wouldn't have had a chance because we ran right across the open ground where I lived and it turned out that just a mile down the road there was Hor – a place called Horton Kirby, it's a viaduct and there was a train going over the viaduct and they all was machine gunning the train and not us but we wasn't to know that. I obviously remember that particular episode because it's the first time I had ever sworn in front of me parents so I ran right across this open land and me parents were in the air raid shelter and I said the b-word. I called them the b-'s and I got a clip round the ear for that, yeah, but I remember that very well.

There³ was lots of other incidences were barrage balloons were – they was all over the place and occasionally one used to break away for whatever reason we used to track them through the woods and

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because they had some nice thick elastic on the barrage balloons and we used to use the elastic to make catapults out of – it was very much sought after the barrage balloon elastic then. Even to this day there's still lots of bomb craters in that woods so I did a charity walk for the local hospital and the charity walk was through the hosp – through the trees in the woods and all the bomb craters are still there to this day. Most of them filled with water, little ponds now. Lots of things. During the Battle of Britain when I saw the Hurricane, which I thought was a Spitfire, crash. There was a chap who lived just down the road from me, Stan Gibbs, and he was standing watching the dog fights taking place in the air and he got a bullet in his foot. I think it only came gravity I don't think it came in with power. I think it was just gravity but it stuck in his foot and I remember – I wasn't there at the time but I was very much aware that he actually pulled it out a pair of pliers out of his foot. He lived just two doors from the girl who was machine gunned and was eventually killed when the bomb hit the hospital.

And the other side of the road, very sadly there was another young girl, she was only about five or six, I can't remember her first name but I know her surname was Bow and there was a lot of ack-ack going on at the time. German planes, it was at night time, German planes came over and the mobile guns which used to tour the streets and move on and the shells –. Ironically, when I went in the Army, I was in the ammunition business so I have since learned a lot about them and the shells self-destruct, obviously, when they get to a certain height they explode. But sadly one didn't and it came back down and went through the house and this little girl, Bow, was in bed and she sadly got killed by, if you like, friendly fire which was very sad. But just one of those things, you know, these things did happen.

There was lots of other things I remember which I suppose you could say related to war but it wasn't, you know, bombs and whatever. I was very fortunate as I said to live where I did because we lived quite well really. Because you could go and dig a few potatoes up in a farmer's field or cut a cabbage or something like that and all the orchards. Apples, pears, plums, everything was available but at the time which I thought was very good the farmers when they'd picked their crop word used to go around that the orchards let. The farmers used to let the orchards so all the villages used to go with their prams and barrels and whatever and glean up whatever the farmer had left, although that did get stopped in the orchards because invariably there was an apple at the top of a tree and people were climbing up and braking the branches off so they stopped that. But – the same used to happen when he harvested the potatoes, there was always a lot of potatoes left, always, and the word used to go around, 'The potato fields are let'. So you'd go with your barrels and prams and anything you got and pick up all of the potatoes so, I suppose, as opposed to people that was being incessantly bombed in London we were very lucky, although as I previously said there was more bombs dropped per acre then – in where I lived than anywhere else in the country, according to the article in the paper.

Interviewer: So how did you feel having all of this going on around you? Do you remember?

Bernard: Yeah, it was as I say, I was so young that it was an adventure. I was aware, fully aware, of bombs and fully aware that people were being killed and whatever but⁴ I was living a really adventure and I was talking not long ago to a friend of mine, who has now moved down to Devon and he was one 'gang', that I used to go around in the woods with and whatever and we both agreed on our telephone conversation that we had a brilliant childhood and although there was a horrendous war going on. But we did have a brilliant childhood and, ironically, he lived in London initially and got bombed out and moved down to where we lived. But, yeah, I mean, we was also very fortunate not far away was a river and we used to go over the river and play about. In the summer we used to go in it, not swimming because it wasn't deep enough for swimming but, you know, paddling in and whatever so we really did have a very good childhood in spite of what – the horrors that was going on around. So I was very lucky in that respect and lots of things – I made a little note of things cos I can't – I remember them but to think of everything off the cuff is very difficult. Oh, now, I've just seen one here. I used to collect shrapnel and sometimes you'd pick it up and it was still hot for example and another thing you're at school.

You asked me about school and I shall always remember this, I was only five and six and at the school there was a lot of tins and they had labels on – tinned fruit, pineapples and things like that. Well, they didn't exist in my world then. It was – you couldn't go and buy fruit like that. We had plenty of fresh fruit from the orchards but you didn't have tins of fruit and I was – not only me, some of me other friends, you know, we was mesmerised by these tins of fruit on the shelves and we thought they were emergency rations in case the school got bombed or something. We set up a little scam, whereby we decided we were gonna have one of these tins of fruit and we did. We actually stole one of these tins of so-called fruit of the shelves of in the classroom and we went out and we opened it up with an old army jack-knife that got a point on the jack-knife and we opened it up. It turned out that there was no fruit in the tin but stone and they were only for teaching purposes, wasn't they so there was no fruit. They was all filled with stone, well, I say all, we only took one and – but you could say that we was little thieves in those days as well. But, yeah, I always remember the tin – I think it was a tin of pineapple and the –

I can remember going down the shop, there was no air raid on and me mother asked to go – we only had one shop in the village and I went down the shop to get something and whilst I was there a load of planes come over and the siren went and bombs was dropping and I can remember running home from the shop and there was guns blazing, trying to fetch the planes down and a woman, Mrs. Hull, I remember her name very well, she'd come out and grabbed me and took me down her shelter before I got home and I stayed in that shelter for the rest of the day and they went and – someone from the family, either her husband went and told my mother and father where I was. I remember that very well and these mobile guns, I remember they used to – not far from where I lived there was an army artillery camp where these mobile guns where – they had static guns there as well but they had mobiles. They used to tour the

⁴ 20 min

street, fire a couple of shots and then move on and I remember an – one day three German planes blew up in the air and, ironically, it's reference to that in here. But I remember it very well because one of the static guns that was on the artillery camp fired and one of the planes exploded and brought down⁵ two others so three came down around the village of Horton Kirby and all with their full bomb load onboard. Very fortunately all the crew were killed but very fortunately it was only one civilian killed in it. But the thing that I remember about it, this artillery camp was behind a pub, a public house, called the Ship, which still exists to this day, it's still there. The story went around that I believed to be true that the chap that fired the gun and brought three planes down was court marshalled because he fired without orders. He didn't have permission to fire, although he was a bit of a hero and he was court marshalled and I don't know what the outcome of that was but I do know that they held a party for him in the pub, the Ship and give him a good drinker. Ironically, they – someone wrote an article in the local paper only just last year about those three planes coming down and I think there's reference to it in that article there.

So I – there are so many things and I remember, well, I've got it living in the woods as a youngster. I've already mentioned all of that but another thing, right at the tail end of the war and why I don't know, I was evacuated to Devonshire and I finished up in Axminster in Devon. I don't know if you saw the play with John Thaw, *Goodnight Mister Tom* a beautiful –.

Interviewer: I've read the book.

Bernard: Beautiful. Beautiful. Well, that in many ways not totally but in many ways echoed me because I evacuated to Axminster but my mother and the rest of the family was evacuated to St Austell in Cornwall. I was separated from them and why? My father didn't go cos he was working at the power station and it was right at the tail end of the war when the doodlebugs and the rockets and that was coming over and I remember we went to this school when we got to Axminster and I distinctly remember having a donut and I'd never had a donut in my life. We also had scrambled egg and I remember the scrambled egg was very watery. I don't know why these things stand at me but I remember the watery scrambled eggs and the donut. The local people came and said, 'I'll have him', 'I'll have her', 'I'll take her' and whatever. But for whatever reason no one wanted me, I was the last one there and – and I remember and very sadly I can't remember her name but the dear lady, very old, she said, 'I will take him but I can only take him for two days and – but I will take him for two days if you can find somewhere else for him'. I went to this dear lady, a lovely lady, and her husband was a tin-smith and he used to make kettles and saucepans in a big shed in the back garden, I remember that very well. But then another thing I remember with that lady, I got ready for school on my first day with her and I had a pair of socks that had lines up the side and I can remember pulling me socks on and making sure that the lines were dead correct vertical up me legs and not twisted. This dear lady thought that was something special in me to – that I was taking a little bit of

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pride in lining me socks up. But anyway I sadly got moved on and I – I finished up in another family, Miller, their name, which backed on to Axminster's football ground although there was no football then but the ground was there and the stand and the stand was used by Americans with their girlfriends and whatever. I remember that very well. But her husband was a baker and I can remember having fresh cream sandwiches. I mean, this is all strange to me, we never had anything like that. We had all the fruit and veg. back home but all of this fresh cream stuff and apple cakes. She made the most delicious apple cake but I was only there, I think, just a couple of months and I didn't like it at all. I hated it. So I wrote to my father and told him⁶ I wanted to come home and he got on a train and came down to Axminster and brought me home. Because the rest of me family was in Cornwall and he was at work, I stayed with me grandmother in the town in Anne Of Cleves Road named after Anne of Cleves because Henry gave her the mansion across the road to Anne and they named the road after Anne of Cleves. Why I was evacuated just for that very short space of time I don't know.

But, anyway, it was a bit of an experience I suppose. But another thing I remember very well before I was evacuated, my friend who had his fingers blown off, his family used to go hop-picking and my family didn't. They – Lenny's family was going hop-picking and they asked my parents if I could go with them and they agreed. They thought I'd be safe further down in the country in the hop fields. We went to Staplehurst near Maidstone and lived in huts on the edge of the hop fields but my oldest sister, Violet, for whatever reason, thought that I was being injured because bombs were still dropping around and she used to cry because I wasn't there and thought I might get hurt. So my father got on a push-bike and peddled all the way to Staplehurst, which I suppose, is twenty-five miles, to fetch me home. Of course, in those days you were stopped if you went out of certain areas whatever. He got stopped a few times but explained the reason for going and they allowed him through and he got to the hop field and I actually came home, twenty miles, from Staplehurst on the cross-bar of me father's cycle. Of course, we had nothing to eat or drink but there was still orchards and it was at the time of the apples. They pick hops in, you know, when it starts to get frosty and I can remember climbing over a gate into an orchard picking a few apples and so we had something to eat on the way home on the push-bike. So that was very memorable coming all that way on the cross-bar of a push-bike but we made it home. The –

Interviewer: Returning to the evacuation. How did you feel about being evacuated apart from your family? So you were sent to –. Being so far from them?

Bernard: I suppose, it would be wrong for me to say that I was enjoying life, as I mentioned previously it was an adventure and I didn't feel that I was in danger. I was too young to realise a lot of what was happening although I was aware bombs dropping. I thought, 'Why do I have to go, you know, I'm quite happy here I don't have to go'. But, of course, the decision wasn't up to me and I was kitted out with me

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label and me little bag with belongings and me gasmask. The same as all the others and finished up in Axminster in Devon. But I would much rather, looking back at it now, cos I never liked it anyway I would have much rather have stayed where I was and in enjoying – well, not enjoying but living what I thought was quite a good life as a youngster.

But I did eventually go back down to Devon after the war and I think it was in 1948. I actually cycled down to Devon to visit the people and one of the other chaps that came with me, he was evacuated on to a farm, I remember all of this vividly, he was on Spillers Farm (??), hay farm, Musbury just outside Seaton in Devon. We peddled through the night all the way down to Devon, we got as far as, well, the first night we stopped at Guildford in Surrey, we had no idea, literally nothing, you know, we didn't take any provisions or anything. We just had a couple of bob in our pockets and whatever. I can remember sleeping, trying to get some sleep on a bit of grass somewhere around Guildford and a policeman come along and wanted⁷ to know what we was doing. But he was very good and said, you know, 'Look after yourselves' and away he went. We peddled off and I think it was down the A30 we went and we got as far as Salisbury and horrendous rain, it was just pouring down and we saw a chap doing some decorating at a bungalow and it looked a derelict bungalow and he had a big barn in the garden and we went up and asked him if we could shelter in the barn and he kindly let us go in the barn and we stayed there over night and we rigged up a hammock with an old blanket [laughs] that we took with us, I remember. Quite an experience but something I enjoyed and then we – we set off the next morning and we – we set off on a Friday night and we eventually got to this hay farm in Musbury on – late Sunday afternoon and – and we went and saw Mr and Mrs Spiller and their daughter Eileen. I've got photographs of them upstairs and they allowed us to pitch a tent, we had a little two-man tent, down in the field alongside the river, where we used to wash on a morning and Eileen the daughter used to come down every morning with boiled eggs and a pot of coffee. I mean, bearing in mind, you know, this is 1948, I was what? Fourteen. Just – I think I just left school. I left school at fourteen and we stayed there for a while and I – I also remember that we wasn't very nice to Mr Spiller because it was harvesting time and he wanted us to help him get the harvest in but we'd already planned to go on Puffing Billy to Lyme Regis in Dorset and we said, 'No, we're already going out' and I thought back since, you know, how terrible that was when he was looking after us. But, you know, you don't realise things like that at the time. Yeah, we cycled back home again as well but I only got as far as Beckenham when the back wheel of me bicycle collapsed and I had to put it on a train and come the rest of the way by train. I quite honestly don't know – I can't – I can remember most things but I don't remember where the money for the train journey. Whether I paid for the train or not I don't know, I can't recall that. But I know I got a train to Farningham Road Station which is where those three planes came down incidentally, around that area, and walked from there. But, yeah, I've meet Mr and Mrs Spiller again and their daughter had married an American at the time and had gone over to

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America so I didn't see her. But very sadly I didn't know the other ladies name and I wouldn't even have known where to have found the house where she lived but she was a lovely, lovely lady.

Interviewer: So when you were evacuated, was the whole school evacuated with you to the same area?

Bernard: I don't think the whole school because some of the parents for whatever reason didn't want their children to go but quite a lot of the school did and the – I didn't meet up with any children apart from one who lived quite near me at the time, Sidney Wilson his name, and he – he was billeted out with someone else and for whatever reason he changed his billets and he came to live with me, with Mr and Mrs Spillers house but he hated it there as well and he moved on from there. I don't know where he went from there to another billet for whatever reason and was being shunted around. But some of the school did but I didn't meet up with them apart from Sidney Wilson. I didn't meet up with anyone else.

Interviewer: Do you know if many of the children stayed in the area or if many of them returned back?

Bernard: Well, I know of one. Ironically when my father came to fetch me home, he actually brought home another chap who used to live near me but I never ever met him down there until we was coming home. His name was Kumba (??), his surname was Kumba and he'd lived not far from where I lived and he came home with my father and me-self on the train. Well, his sister was evacuated down there and I think she's still around today but she never ever came back home. She was billeted onto a farm and eventually married one of the – the farmer's sons and I believe now that⁸ for many, many years, probably forty – fifty years they've actually been running the farm. I ran into – to Ivan Kumba when I had to go to the hospital some time ago and got talking and I did ask about Muriel, his sister, and he said, 'No, she's still on the farm down in Devon' – so, yeah. But whether others stayed, of course, I wouldn't know but – yeah. It was quite an experience but not one that I really enjoyed, you know, I would have much rather have stayed at home. But, of course, when I came home, I was on me own and with me grandmother and we basically lived in air raid shelter all the time. We didn't stay in the house for very long, always in the air raid shelter.

Interviewer: What was your experience of the air raid shelters?

Bernard: Well, there's various memories of air raid shelters. I can remember, we had our own air raid shelter in our garden, which me father had erected and I helped dig in – in my very limited way. We dug down into the ground, erected the shelter, covered it with earth and whatever. But then I can also remember the – me father moved the shelter and into next door neighbours garden and we had one big shelter instead of two small ones. Mr and Mrs Gear (??), I can remember their name. I remember, over night time, we used to go down the shelter. We had little bunks and things down there. It was only the Anderson shelter, it wasn't brick although we had a bit of a brick wall at the entrance. One thing I can remember about when we lived in that joint shelter and it was when doodlebugs started to come over for

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the very first time and I remember me father and Mr Gear, there was an air raid going on. We were all in the shelter and me father and Mr Gear was standing in – outside with their tin hats on watching the war go on so to speak. I can remember, me father shouting out, 'Look the bugger's got his tail alight', thinking it was an airplane that was alight. But, of course, it wasn't. It was the beginning of the doodlebugs with the flames coming out of the back and I always remember that. Yeah, I – I can remember being in the shelter when we had our own in the garden before we joined it with next doors, I can remember a piece of shrapnel, whilst we was down there, actually penetrating the earth that we had covered over the shelter and hit in the shelter. It never came in but I can remember it hitting the shelter and then when the all-clear went going out and digging it out for me collection.

Yes, lots of things – I don't know, [laughs], orchard letting, wheelbarr – Oh, wheelbarrow and the coke, that's another story. The school had a caretaker and all of the heating was done by coke boilers and the caretaker used to clean the fires out on a morning and throw all the clinker over the school fence into a field where the barrage balloons where at the time. Of course, fuel was of a premium we, you know, we used to burn logs cos we lived near the woods and – but I went one day with me little wheelbarrow to collect this clinker, some of it was un-burnt coke. What the caretaker had thrown over the fence and it wasn't on school property, it was in this field. I went there and I was putting all this clinker and un-burnt coke in to me barrow to wheel home when the caretaker spotted me and duly told me to leave it alone and I've got to be honest I was a cheeky little monkey them days and I had words with him even at that tender age. He told me to tip me barrow out and I refused to do so and he came and did it for me and took me barrow. Wouldn't let me have me barrow back and I – I was a bit lippy to him and perhaps I shouldn't mention the true words that he said but I remember it very, very well. When I was having a bit of lip to him, he said, 'Go on, get yourself home you're only a baby. You haven't finished messing yellow yet'. But he didn't say 'messing'. You're still a baby you haven't finished⁹ messing yellow yet' [laughs]. I always remember that and me father had to go and get me wheelbarrow back because he wouldn't let me have it. Yeah, that was another memory – yeah.

Interviewer: How did you feel about your – your education during the war? Did you feel like the education you were given that that was adequate?

Bernard: I can't ever remember taking exams what so ever. None what so ever. I can't remember – I remember when I went to the Secondary School at the age of eleven and it's now one of these – what do they call it? What they've just opened up now, new names? Any what's I'll think of it in a minute. I remember going to East Central, it was called when I went there and I remember a few things about that. I remember, we – the classrooms were built in a square and the open space in the middle had an air raid shelter down there. But above the air raid shelter was a genuine Tiger Moth aeroplane, fully assembled.

⁹ 45 min

Because it was the headquarters of the ATC, the Air Training Corps, and they had this Tiger Moth plane, a real one, and we had two spare engines in the metal work room cos we did metal work and wood work as well when I went to that school. I also remember the RAF coming and dismantling the Tiger Moth plane and taking it away. We roughly dug the foundation of a war memorial in memory of those school boys that was killed during the war. We in-filled the air raid shelter with all of the earth when we dug it all out but we only did the rough foundations and a firm came in and did this beautiful memorial with a pond and seats round where the elder pupils could sit and read their books and whatever and we had goldfish and what in the pond. It was lovely. I often wondered what happened to that now because I think they're pulling it down cos the word I was thinking of just now was an academy. It's an academy now but they've built all new, Lee City Academy, and knocking down the old school I went to.

But I can't ever remember taking any exams but I remember I was very sporty. I was quite a good athlete in me days at school. I represented the school in various – I used to travel around the area competing for the school, other schools and there was one story and I was there. I was present at the time. There used to be a home for naughty boys and it doesn't exist now, they've built houses on it now and Farningham Home for Boys, as it was called, and I was representing the school, running on their sports day. I don't know for what reason but all of the boys in that school had to run with bare feet, they wasn't allowed to run with anything else. But a patron of that naughty Boys' Home was Sir Bernard Montgomery and he came on the sports day and at the end of the day he was presenting all of the – the little token medal things to the winners. One of the boys from the home didn't get a medal, they didn't have enough and he didn't get a medal and Sir Bernard Montgomery took his watch off and gave it to him. I remember that very well, obviously if that watch is still around it will be very valuable now, I think. Probably not from the watch point of view but the fact it belonged to Montgomery. Yeah, I remember that very well. But school-wise I didn't mind school, we did gardening and we had a sport field where we played cricket or football, the same as most other schools. I, as I say, I used to love called out of classroom to go and run at some other school while others were doing maths or whatever. But I've never ever an academic [laughs].

But I – my very first¹⁰ job when I left school at fourteen, was found for me by the science master, Mr Kerwin (??), in a little engineering firm which had set up in an old farmyard with the machinery was set up in cowsheds and things like that. It's a – it still exists to this day but it's all been new buildings now. I – I went there in like an apprenticeship but I didn't do the full apprenticeship in virtue of – by virtue of the fact that I never went to college or anything on an evening. But I went through all of the processes within the engineering, I did milling, welding, turning and bench work, everything appertaining to it and then I left there and then I joined – I was there for two years and then I left there and went to Vickers Armstrong in the apprentices apartment at Vickers Armstrong which doesn't exist now. That's all been pulled down now. And stayed in engineering in all of my life and I did me –

¹⁰ 50 min

I was very fortunate, I did me National Service I did two years and I was – the Korean War was still, I went in the Army 1952 and the Korean War was still on and I was – I boarded a troop ship at Southampton, Empire Trooper. On route, we think, cos we was never ever told, on route to Korea. But we got to Singapore in 19 – cos we left in 1953 to go to Korea and we got as far as Singapore and the Korean War finished. I think, was it July '53 or something like that. So I was put ashore at Singapore where I stayed for eight weeks but the guerrilla warfare was still going on in the Malaysian jungle in them days as well. I met two VC's as well. Bill Speakman, for one, he was on the boat, he used to sing to us, *Take heed oh you young soldiers*, and he came ashore with us at Singapore. And I thought I might finish up in the Malaysian jungle and the guerrilla warfare but I didn't. I was flown up to Hong Kong and I – I spent fifteen months in – not on Hong Kong island although I used to go there on weekends but I was based in new territories up at – at a place called Su Quong (??) and I loved that as well. It was nice, I saw a bit of the world at the government's expense and I've since travelled back to lots of those places as well on holidays, including Singapore and Malaysia and all sorts. Yeah, but I – I didn't have any – what shall I say, I was never ever gonna be an academic. Never ever. I was good with me hands, I could do things with me hands and I still do it today, everything in this house, although it's not my house, I fitted me own kitchen, me own bathroom and I'm now upgrading the bathroom now putting a new washbasin in and laminate floor and all sorts of things. Although I can't obviously work at the same rate as I used to but I still do it.

Interviewer: Ok. So how summarise your experience of the war? If you could summarise it in a few words?

Bernard: I think from my point of view, as I previously mentioned it was an adventure. That's the word. It was an adventure at my age. I wouldn't say I loved the war but I – I went through many facets that I wouldn't have wanted to have gone through. If it wasn't for the war the incendiary bombs, dismantling them and all sorts of things and although I didn't like being evacuated it was an – another part of my life that I shall always remember. So, I suppose, summarising the war, I was very lucky to live where I did, in the country, and I didn't go hungry. I could always find food. My father kept chickens as well in the garden so we had a supply of eggs and yeah, I suppose, really I was very lucky to regard it as an adventure rather than go through the horrors that a lot of people did in London. I was very lucky. I know – I did in a way enjoy it. It's very strange to say that in such times of horror but in my tender age I wasn't aware of¹¹ the horrors as me parents were. But, yeah –

Interviewer: Did you ever get a sense of their feelings towards the war? Did they ever show their –?

Bernard: Yes, they did. Yes, they did, yeah, especially me father because his family was away, his wife, me mother, they were down in Cornwall and for a little while I was away and the – yeah. He was fully

¹¹ 55 min

aware of the villages being bombed and whatever. As I said, I used to walk the streets with him after the raids and whatever to, you know, find out what's happened during the night. Yeah, I think that they did really, in their minds, you know, like most people, I suppose, wish we were all back together again as a family and live in a nice quiet rural life. But – but from my point of view it really was an adventure and again it might be strange say that it was an adventure that I wouldn't mind if it was in the same vein going through it again. It's very strange to say that in war but I did have a lovely time through horrors and – and all sorts of things I can remember during the war which were horror things but not horror to me because I wasn't old enough to understand what was actually happening. I mean, to see a house being blown to pieces in the morning when I go out and walk the streets, you know, it was a house that had collapsed. You know, I wasn't sort of conscious of the fact that people might have been killed in there and things like that. Although they were, it's very strange but – yeah.

But – I – I remember a plane during the Battle of Britain, a German plane come over so low you could actually see the pilot inside, I think it crashed actually but I'm not sure where. But it was so low and, you know, it seems strange, I mean, I waved to it, you know. It was an airplane with someone in it, you know. Although given the chance, they would have killed me and others as well, you know. But it was very strange feeling but – yeah. I used to – well, that was after the war, I used to help on a little farm as a kid in me school holidays and things and there was still lots of incendiary bombs and that that you could find that had fallen into open fields and hadn't been discovered. I mean, they were such small things, anyway, they weren't very big, are they incendiary bombs? But we did find other bombs, I remember, it's another one that I remember very well the village was bombed one night and the next morning when I went out with me father and people were sweeping up glass in the street and there was – the one shop that we had in the village, Heath's, Mr Heath used to have the shop and a bomb had fallen in the field opposite and a piece of bomb had gone right through the shop, right through the living accommodation at the back of the shop as well.

But another bomb that fell on the same time in the same field didn't go off. It was unexploded and I remember the bomb disposal people coming and putting up a – like a tripod frame thing and they was digging down to find the bomb and it was a very big bomb that one. I remember they used to dig down and then they used to go off for an evening and leave everything there and we as kids used to go and have a look down and have a look at the bomb. But apparently it was in soft earth. It kept sinking and – but eventually they did get it out and they disarmed it and it was left in the field and we used to play on it and it was, I don't know, quite the weight of it but probably a thousand pound or something. It was one of the big bombs and they left it disarmed in the field for quite some time and we used to play on it. Yeah, that was in Weeks's¹² farm, yeah.

¹² 60 min

Interviewer: Have you talked about the war a lot with your family?

Bernard: No.

Interviewer: No.

Bernard: No, I don't think I –. The only thing I – I did – the incendiary bomb incident I wrote an article for the local paper about my experience with incendiary bombs which they actually published as well which I was pleased about. But sadly I never cut it out, it was quite a big article as well and I never cut it out and kept it.

Interviewer: In which newspaper was that?

Bernard: It was in the *Dartford Messenger*, yeah. I wrote an article about it and the article about the three planes coming down, which I mentioned, a lady who lived in the area where they came down also wrote an article for the same paper, the *Dartford Messenger*. That was only, I mean, I lost my wife just over two years ago and I think – I think she'd gone then so it was only within the last couple of years. Yeah. More memories – yeah. The – there's a lot of adverts in the paper, I saw one this week in the local paper people like yourself, wants more stories so I assume a lot of this is going on all around the area is it?

Interviewer: Yeah. Especially, I think – cos it's seventy years since the Blitz started and the Battle of Britain and so on.

Bernard: Yeah. But yeah, the – the Hurricane crash – I went to the memorial – the dedication to the memorial. The memorial was in the field but not where the plane crashed it's – if they put it would be – where the plane crashed it would be in the middle of a field and the farmer still uses the field. But it's put on the edge. It's quite a nice memorial. The pilot was South African and that dedication some of his family who live in Canada now came over for that. And that – that's one incident I remember very well. I also remember that when I mentioned about Stan Gibbs getting the bullet in his foot and pulling it out with a pair of pliers and incendiary bombs being made out of magnesium, after the war Stan Gibbs was quite an expert in building motorcycles and he was turning magnesium on a lathe in his shed to make hubs for a front wheel and the magnesium caught alight and burnt his shed down [laughs]. But also, I mean, I worked in – as an engineer in a hospital for forty-two years and retired from there, a Victorian Hospital, and there was still lots of evidence. I used to go everywhere in that hospital, I knew every minute detail of it and up in the loft space there was still stirrup pumps and buckets of sand which was spread through the roofs spaces to put out incendiary bombs cos obviously you didn't use water on incendiary bombs. You had to smother it and if you use water it made it worse, it used to spread everywhere. But, yeah, there was still evidence there and the air raid shelters, the hospital's still there and the air raid shelters are still there but they're below ground and I – I've actually wrote article about that as well. I used to write quite a

lot of articles and the hospital now is closed but they can't knock it down because it's a grade II listed building and they've converted it. I've wrote quite a few articles about –.

Interviewer: So which hospital was this?

Bernard: It was called – it was initially, it opened in 1866 – I do talks on the history of the place as well so I know every minute detail, I did one a fortnight ago – three weeks ago. It was called the City of London Lunatic Asylum when it opened in 1866 and it changed its name in 18 – in 1924 to the City of London Mental Hospital, and it was. It did belong to the hospital – the City and all the Lord Mayors of London, Sir Dennis Truscott, Sir George Wyatt Truscott, they were all chairmen at the management committee. And then in – when it became health service in 1948, it became Stone House Hospital, which it is now. I used to write lots of things and that's the one about the air raid shelters I wrote, 'Above and Below', all the air raid shelters that was – that's still there to this day. Just the entrance is in-filled and the English Heritage have bought – English Heritage have bought¹³ the hospital now and are about to convert it into apartments and whatever. I went to an exhibition not long ago and they've obviously done a full survey of the hospital cos being listed they can't alter the facade and I did say to one of the English Heritage people that, 'Are you aware of the air raid shelters? You've done a full survey –.' But they weren't because there all below ground and they brought a drawing of the hospital and I marked on the drawing for them where the air raid shelters are. But – yeah, 'Above and Below' it's about the air raid shelters, yeah, quite a lot –. Yeah, also the – we had our own beautiful church which is still there today but sadly shut and lots of the – there was so much below ground – it's as much below ground as there was above and a lot of them were used as warden's posts during the war. Even the one that's underneath the church had bunks put down and the wardens slept down there during the war, the air raid wardens. Yeah, another exciting episode of my life, forty-two years of the hospital.

Interviewer: I don't have any more questions now, is there something that you feel that you haven't had the chance to talk about that you would like to add?

Bernard: No, I think I mentioned most things, I mean, there are other things here which wouldn't be very much of – of interest. I remember during the war my mother went into hospital before she was evacuated and I remember a lady, Mrs Budd, looking after me. Well, not just me, me sisters as well or me sister that was older than me. We used to have an old copper as they did in those days. Concrete copper with a fire underneath and a metal liner for boiling up water, do your washing in and I always remember, Mrs Budd cos there was no tap to empty the copper you had to bail it out and I remember Mrs Budd never ever bailed it out and when me mum came home from hospital the water was all foul and smelly and all those little things like that that stick in your mind. But shrapnel, tin fruit [unclear]. Old Fleet House that was another one. There was a magistrate, Mr Fleet, he had a very posh house in the paddock (??) and loads

¹³ 65 min

of ground to it and a very, very big house. It still exists to this day but it's a nursing home now and it got a bomb. It was bombed during the war and lot of the villagers including me-self cos Mr Fleet, the magistrate, moved out when it was bombed but we went to the house and, of course, it was still – got everything in it. Everything, you know, four-poster beds and all that sort of thing and it had a big conservatory which had all of the sports gear in. There was everything from fishing rods, golf clubs and tennis rackets, cricket bats and, of course, things like that during the war [laughs], well, let's put it this way they all disappeared, they didn't stay. There was still wine in the cellar and – and, of course, not that I had any of the wine but a lot of the adults of the village helped themselves to the wine cellar, which you couldn't blame them for. It's still there to this day but it's a nursing home now, yeah, mm. But I can't think of there's anything I haven't covered, I mean, I say I haven't covered there was so many little insignificant things like Mr Heath, who had the shop, he owned a shop in the village. He started to deal in black market meat, I always remember that incident and the police got – were made aware of it and they raided his shop but he was told about it before they arrived and almost opposite the shop used to be a big pit and he threw this meat down in the pit and that pit was in-filled with bomb rubble from the war so there's lots of old joints of pork in there as well he dumped down there. But, yeah, all the broken glass and debris from¹⁴ London and outer London used to in-fill that pit and another one a little bit further up the road.

I also remember a hospital which doesn't exist now, called the Southern Hospital, and in fact I helped to dismantle a lot of the stuff in the boiler house when it closed. But wounded soldiers were in that hospital and it had a lot of woodland, it was sort of built within the wood but it had a big six foot high wall built around all of the perimeter. It was a very large perimeter and but the best chestnuts in the wood were over the wall so we used to climb over the wall to get the chestnuts and we used to see the soldiers walking around the grounds in through the woods in – they were dressed in blue overall uniform type of thing when recouping from their injuries and whatever. They used to go out for walks in the woods and I also remember the water tank that supplied Southern Hospital was just over the wall in the woods and it was massive great tank and – and it was built – the actual tank was above ground about ten – fifteen foot above ground but like a big brick building and you had to go up through a – a – like a tunnel which came up in the middle of the tank. Very dangerous, very dodgy cos the water was always ice cold up there but in the summer we used to use that as a swimming pool and that was the supply – the water supply to the Southern Hospital, I always remember that [laughs].

But – no – I can't think of anything apart from little incidences, like the local policeman that's another incident. Mr Burgess, I used to live next door but one to him. He was as different policeman from the one that stopped the boys from pinching the machine gun. He was Irish, Mr O'Leary, but he finished in the police force and Mr Burgess came and I remember him seeing a chap out in the field cutting cabbages but he was talking sack fulls. Nothing was said if you wanted to catch yourself a cabbage for dinner,

¹⁴ 70 min

Sunday dinner that was fine. Although it was wrong they didn't mind. But this bloke was cutting sacks of them presumably to sell and whatever. Mr Burgess, George as we all knew him, went out and approached him and the bloke that was doing it worked in the docks in London and he had his stevedores up with him and he lanced Mr Burgess and ripped all his arm open with a stevedore. I remember that. The same family [laughs], there's a notorious family, another one was in the army and the – he was an out and out villain, I mean, I remember him pinching a gun with ammunition and coming home and firing an apple tree up in the orchard until it – in the same spot until it toppled over. But I remember him pinching an army ambulance and driving home and whatever, you know. It's things like that, you know. Another brother at the same time broke into a shop, he was visiting relatives up in London and broke in to a shop and got caught. So there was three of them inside all at the same time but, ironically, one of them lives just over the road. Not those people they've all since past on but the niece of one of them lives opposite. She's a nice lady. Little incidences like that and same again George Burgess, the copper, again, there was a fight in a pub called the White Harps, now an Indian restaurant, and he went into break a fight up and got hit over the head with a bottle and put in hospital.

So – and lots of little things like that I remember but that's sort of insignificant as far as war is concerned, I suppose. I remember the shell cap imbedded at the top of a telegraph pole and it stayed there for years long after the war. It was opposite the pub called the Fox and Hound at Lane's End, the village where I lived. The shell cap was imbedded in the top of a telegraph pole but they've long since changed the telegraph poles and that's gone¹⁵. All sorts of silly little things, I remember, that in the woods there was there was dene-holes. I don't really know the origin of these dene-holes but there was quite a few of them in there. I've always been led to believe they was a very primitive form of storing food because of the temperature below ground but whether that's factual or not I don't know. But as kids, we used to go down these dean holes which again was very dangerous because all of the dean holes had vertical shafts and because there's no ladders or anything like that we used to lower a rope down and climb down on the rope which wasn't a problem but coming up was a bit of a problem cos they was all fifty – sixty foot deep these shafts. When you got down there they opened up into big chalk caves and there was always six caves, I don't know why but there's always six. But fortunately the shafts was narrow enough when you was climbing up that you could rest because you could push your feet on one side and your back on the other side still clinging on rope and a have a rest. But looking back on it that was a very dangerous occupation as a kid. But it was. It's part of growing up, I mean, health and safety today, you can't even play conkers with –. But them days, you know, we lived a rough and tumble life and enjoyed every bit of it. We really did.

Those dene-holes are still there to this day and –. There's a story that one of them and I did ask someone in the public house the Ship pub were they – the soldier had a drink after he brought the planes

¹⁵ 75 min

down. There's a den-hole in the woods not far from there, when I say not far, it's probably a quarter of a mile but there was always a story that there was a tunnel from that den hole in to the cellar of that pub. I did – I went there for a wedding reception sometime ago and I did ask if there was any truth in that and the chap that I asked said, 'As soon as you started talking', he said, 'I knew that was what you was gonna ask me because it's a well known story'. He said, 'All I can tell you is there is a brick tap door in the cellar but as to what's behind, why it is bricked up I don't know'. So possible, why you'd have a tunnel there I don't know. But anything else in the war, yes. There was lots of little – as I said lots of little bits and pieces. I remember there was a big barn alongside another pub where all sorts of stuff in that would be worth a fortune today and I remember going in there as a – as a youngster and I remember finding a balls (??) or wood as they call them were you play balls with and I remember me and me mates we took it home and we lived on a hill and my father was never a drinker. He was never a boozer or had the money to do it anyway but this particular day, I don't know for what reason, he went in to the local pub and he did have just a little too much and he – although he wasn't drunk as such, he was very merry. I remember we balled this wood down the hill and as it's hurtling down there me father turned the corner at the bottom thinking it was a football and ran at it to kick it but fortunately his foot just slipped over the top of it. He would have smashed his foot, I remember that very well. That was during the war as well. Yeah [laughs].

Interviewer: Well, thank you very much for talking to me.

End of Interview.