

**Written by Brian Clark**

### **Sixty Five Years Later**

It all happened in the second week of June 2009, when together with my son Darrell and his wife Helen, we had arranged to take a short break down to South Wales. We stayed in a village called Llangennith. Darrell wanted to check out the beaches, famous for their surfing, but the main reason for our trip was to re-visit The Mumbles, and to go back to show my family where I had been evacuated during the last war. But to put things into perspective we have pressed the rewind button, and to go back to those war years, 1939 to 1945.

My name is Brian Clark and we lived in Hounslow which is about seven miles from London. I was coming up to seven when war was declared and as any child of that age we had no idea of the horrors and fear that was going to happen over the next six years, (unlike my parents who had already experienced the horrors of the First World War). Early in 1940, dad had built a large, all concrete underground shelter in the back garden, which was to be our refuge during those dark days of the Blitz, which started in September 1940. Every time that siren (Old Moaning Minnie) went off, Mum always had a flask and sandwiches and blankets at the ready, and I would grab one of my favourite toys not knowing just how long the raid would last. One night the all clear had sounded, as we emerged after a long and heavy raid we turned our eyes towards London, seeing a sight that I will never forget, something that even today would be hard to describe. Half the sky was filled with this gigantic sunset, but this was no sunset. This was London burning. Later I learned that this was the night when the London docks had been hit, even today, seventy years later, that image is as clear as though it happened yesterday.

In the November of that year the bombing stopped and dad decided to build a shelter inside the house, in the dining room. He erected almost a house within a house. He did it mainly because the garden shelter was so cold and damp. This new shelter was so strong that apart from a direct hit we felt safe, and that a room was to be our home for the next five years.

To a young boy of my age, because of our innocence, war was almost an adventure. Every morning on the way to school it seemed that every boy and girl had their heads down looking and collecting shrapnel, and if you found a piece with German markings you were king. You could swap that for anything in the playground.

We lived at 17 Lampton Avenue, Hounslow and at the end of the road was a large field, today that is where Lampton School now stands. Dad was in the ARP and their headquarters called 'Post 1.6' was just inside the field. It was a small circular concrete building with a couple of bunks inside it had communication to all the services, maps and names and addresses of all the people living in our area.

On the 6<sup>th</sup> June 1944, D-Day began. We all thought we were now safe, completely unaware of what was going to happen within a week of that historical day. But on the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> June the first V1 hit London. This strange, black, pilotless craft in the shape of a tube, the flying bomb, nicknamed 'the doodlebug'. I can remember going shopping for mum in Hounslow High Street, when standing at a bus stop waiting to come home, when one came over. I will never forget that sight, or the sound of their pulsating engines, people could only stand there praying it kept going. When it passed we all breathed again, we were lucky, but sadly we knew that when the engine cut out we were watching a disaster about to happen to another family. In the borough of Hounslow only 19 V1 and 2 V2 landed, we were so very fortunate.

I remember on the evening of the 20<sup>th</sup> June, all the wardens and members of the rescue squad were standing in that field talking. I was there, just listening to the grownups just talking, we were all standing on a large mound where the farmer kept and stored certain vegetables. The following morning mum were asleep in our inside shelter, dad was on night shift with the ARP. Suddenly there was the biggest explosion I have ever heard and the whole house shook. Mum rushed out and ran towards the field where there was a large field of black smoke. The nearer she got to the field it seemed that every house, although still standing, every door, window had been blown out because the doodlebug has hit the field. The earth had taken most of the blast, had it landed in the road it would have demolished 90% of the houses and the death rate would have been catastrophic. At that time dad was in the field, had heard the throb of the engine and when it cut out he dived to the ground and fell into a potato furrow, and the devastating blast went right over his head. Dad was ok, the only thing was that the blast had blown off most of the back of his uniform, I can be thankful that the farmer had not decided to plant cabbages that year.

Within days dad and his friends had arranged for myself, the other boys and one girl to be evacuated. There was Peter Smith, Keith Hutchings, Peter Cook together with Lily Blanchard – everything happened so fast, but suddenly we were all whisked down to Mumbles in South Wales. Lily I believe stayed in one of the small cottages on the front, and our gang of four, we all went to stay with Gwen and Carl Mock at number 23 Thistleboon Road. Peter Cook was their nephew so our parents knew we were in safe hands. Looking back it's really hard to imagine as to what they had to organise, and to put their lives into absolute chaos. They moved out of their bedroom, found extra beds and that was to be our sleeping quarters. Carl and Gwen moved into their daughter's room. Just to imaging then to feed, look after and cope with our eleven year old boys, and although we only stayed there for four months, that was when the D-Day landings had advanced and eventually destroyed all of the rocket launching sites.

Although that time spent in Mumbles was such a short period of my life it's a time I will never forget. Gwen and Carl looked after us as though we were family, we made so many friends, were accepted by all the local kids and we even seemed to have our own private creek, down in Rotherslade Bay. Some days we would set out, armed with sandwiches, exploring the wonderful bays of the Gower Coast. We were away

from the horrors of the bombing but life to us at the time was one big adventure, being looked after by a wonderful family, in a wonderful town.

## **2009**

It was on Tuesday the 9<sup>th</sup> June when we started our journey, and who would have ever conceived or even imagined that the events that were going to take place that day. The nearer we got to Mumbles I was feeling very apprehensive as just what would the place look like today, knowing that like the town where I live has been totally gutted, and people coming back visiting hardly recognise the place. And you have to remember I was going back to a place with the memory as seen through the eyes of an eleven year old boy.

As we turned into the main road there, on the left, was an unbelievable sight, the dear old 'Tivoli' which used to be a cinema, the facade and name exactly the same as it was all those years ago. I realised it was now an amusement arcade but then, as a cinema, we spent so many happy hours, and in those days they had a change of programme three times a week. We always went there when it rained, believe me, we saw a lot of films!

We parked the car. I was looking for Thistleboon Road, I knew it was still there through the internet but was the old house still there? I had no idea, then I recognised the road and that unmistakable hill. As we started that climb on the right was Tichbourne Street where many of our friends lived then suddenly there it was – number 23 Thistleboon Road, that tiny terraced house, so small. I pointed saying "that was the bedroom where we all slept". It was quite a nostalgic moment. I knocked on the door in anticipation, no answer, so I tried next door – they were in. I introduced myself explaining who I was and asked if he had ever known Gwen and Carl next door. Apparently he did remember them but as he had to go out he said "If we go down to the Tivoli there is a lady by the name of Pauline working in the kitchen and if we wanted to know anything about Mumbles she is the lady to ask". As we left I thanked him very much for what he had done.

It was still only 10:30am, too early to go visiting so we continued up onto the Mumbles Hill, which is now a nature reserve. As we made our way along the paths through the undergrowth, I remembered those years ago, everything then was so flat, they must have had sheep up there in those days, that wonderful view, something that will never change. Eventually we reached the steps and there was the lighthouse and the dear old pier. I know it looks in a bit of a sorry state now and could do with a makeover but standing there, on the sun bleached, weathered decking, I'm sure they are the same ones I stood on as a boy.

As we made our way along the promenade I began to realise just how the town had changed. Houses and shops had all been modernised and updated but it was still Mumbles. It had brought into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century without losing its character.

Arriving at the Tivoli, I found the kitchen where Pauline was. I introduced myself, explaining my story and how I was trying to find out about the family we had all stayed with back in 1944. Apparently she had known both Carl and Gwen, who are sadly no longer with us. When I asked if she knew of their daughter Joyce who was my age, she asked, "if we had a car, only she only lives about ten minutes from here". To say I was 'gobsmacked' would be the understatement of the year. Pauline gave me an address and although she didn't know her surname or the house number, "don't worry, just ask for Joyce, everybody knows her". As we left I thanked Pauline for all the help she had given and we made our way to find the address.

Within ten minutes, there was the road. We parked the car as it was a small cul-de-sac and we walked up the hill. As I didn't know which house it was it would be a case of knock and ask and on my second attempt a lady pointed to the house I was looking for. You can imagine my feelings as I nervously knocked on the door. A lady answered and when I explained who I was and that I was trying to locate Joyce, apparently after a few minutes I realised I was talking to Joyce's daughter. After we said our hellos, she said that mum had just gone out shopping but would be back about two that afternoon. As it was just about midday we said we would come back later – it would be one of those appointments that I was not going to miss.

There were so many places that I wanted to revisit which would have been impossible, so we made our way to Caswell Bay. As we came down the hill towards the bay – what a wonderful sight. I realised that this area was a restricted zone for allowing dogs on the beach. I had my two Jack Russells, Jackson and Sam with me, so while my Darren and Helen headed towards the sea I was contented to just sit there and enjoy the moment. To think that the last time I saw this view I was only eleven years old. I remember that we had only one way to reach the bay – that was by taking the coastal path, going through Rotherslade and Langland Bay. In those days in Caswell, there was absolutely nothing there – in fact our gang of four were the only people there. Thinking back, we did all the exploring things that boys do then we'd just abandon all our clothes and head towards the sea. What wonderful memories.

Looking round there is now a car park and a few shops, things you have to have nowadays for the tourists, but I think the best part about it was that it had not been exploited or over commercialised, and when you look at the bay it is the same today as it was all those years ago.

As we made our way back to the town I had a certain sense of almost nervous anticipation. Meeting someone after all those years is quite something. As I walked towards her front door, Joyce was standing there and we greeted each other just like lifelong friends and I knew, directly as we met, that any thoughts of uneasiness were immediately erased. As I was invited in my son and his wife took themselves off for a bite to eat. It was amazing sitting there talking, even after 65 years we just seemed to pick up conversation almost as though all those intervening years had never taken place. We spoke about our families, the children, our ups and downs, but mainly it was all about that time years ago when we must

have caused quite an upheaval at her mum and dad's house, when suddenly there was four extra bodies in the house. Joyce told me of things I had completely forgotten, some of the antics we got up to, the more we talked, the more those memories came flooding back, each time unlocking another door. Those delicious Welsh cakes her mum used to bake – no sooner were they on the table they were gone, and I remember her dad as a hobby used to work with leather, making things like handbags and small travelling bags. He was certainly a craftsman and there was always that wonderful smell of leather around the house. We could have gone on all day but time was against us.

Our little group, before we were evacuated, we all lived properly within 100 yards of each other. We were friends but not close, because we all went to different schools, but when we came down to Mumbles, the time we spent there, a real friendship was created, something that you thought couldn't be broken but when we returned home we seemed to go our separate ways. Although we still remained friends that bonding we had never returned and the only one I have seen since those days was Keith Hutchings, and that was about seven years ago. It was then, when Joyce reminded me of Peter Cook, her cousin (who was one of the gang), she said that they still keep in touch and within minutes I had his address and phone number, email, the lot. Suddenly we were interrupted when my son knocked on the window – we didn't realise just how long we had been talking, a moment in time that could never be repeated, and it was time to say our goodbyes. Joyce came to the car, met Helen, my son's wife, and of course my two dogs, and I thanked her for making a chance visit into a perfect one. It was time to go.

Who could ever have imagined on that morning as we set out to Mumbles that the things that happened on that day, actually happened? Everything that occurred seemed to go as though it had all been pre-planned, when in fact it was all because of chance – had I not knocked on that door, or the person could have been out, but I did knock and the door was answered. An ordinary visit turned out to be a fantastic day.

I have always been amazed as to why that short period in my life at the time of the rocket attacks on London, that Mumbles has always been part of my fondest memories. I know how, as eleven year olds, we were then totally aware of the horrors of the bombing but being evacuated away from our family, our home, we were all taken completely out of the environment and all those fears had gone. I think you would call that the age of innocence.

There are no words that can describe my gratitude and thanks to that wonderful family who looked after us at that time of need. They were just one of the many thousands of people who took in and looked after all the evacuees during the war. These people were just as important as the people who built our planes and fired the guns. They all played their part but although they have never been recognised and must never be forgotten.

Later when I returned home I immediately phoned Peter Cook who was one of the other members of the gang, who Joyce had given me his address. Mind you, she had already contacted him, telling him the

story of my visit. Since then we have exchanged emails, letters and photographs, although I have tried to contact other members through the internet, so far without success. To meet with Joyce and to speak again to Peter after sixty five years is a remarkable experience, and will always be remembered.