

Interviewee: Eileen Allchin and Joyce Flaherty

Interviewer: Malin Lundin

Date: 02.11.2010

Interviewer: This is an interview with Eileen Allchin and Joyce Flaherty – is that right? Yes. And the date is the 2nd of November and the interviewer is Malin Lundin. So Eileen would you be able to tell me your date of birth please?

Eileen: March 1911.

Interviewer: And Joyce?

Joyce: November 1940.

Interviewer: Ok. So how old were you when the war broke out in 1939 then?

Eileen: [Laughs] how old was I?

Joyce: Twenty-eight, twenty-eight.

Eileen: Hey?

Joyce; Twenty-eight.

Interviewer: Twenty-eight.

Eileen: [unclear] I had three kids [laughs].

Interviewer: So when did you have your first child?

Eileen: At Forest Hill. When the war broke out I was expecting at Forest Hill and the nurse said she couldn't see to me because we were in a top flat so I went over and moved in with my old mum and dad. They were school keepers, of course, the council wouldn't allow us to live there for long so they gave us a flat at the top of the street and we lived in this flat and when war broke out the two flats above used to come down into my place. We used to put the kids to bed and – in my double bed. We used to put three or four kids in there and we'd all sit play cards in the front room. Every time a bomb come you heard it drop, you put your head under the table and stuck your bum out [laughs].

Interviewer: Were you not scared with all these air raids going on and having to stay in the flat? Did you not have a shelter that you could go to?

Eileen: No. At first you didn't have shelters. They offered you these shelters in the garden but you got to climb down into it. So we had an indoor one, it was like a table. We got a – and I put a mattress in it and the kids used to put to sleep in there. But after a time we had a – one built outside one. We all used – we had shelves and we used to take the kids over and make a bed up on the shelves. But it

didn't last long for – I don't know something happened that we – the doodlebugs come and you – you stood outside. My hubby was a watcher and he used to watch them come and there was three ways they come in, which, if it was coming our way he'd tell us all to get in the shelter and put your heads under – under the shelters. But not very often you got it over the head. We had one when the doodlebugs, hadn't we? The light and at the back that used to come and we used to wait – wait for that to go out before we ducked in. I evacuated with, after a time, with the council and put me in a place up at Whitmore, Derbyshire, and it was very nice but there was a – they collected a lot of old furniture that might have been comfortable and I sent for my clothes and they sent them up to me. But I don't – I don't think I was there long before someone offered me a – police – local policeman offered me a job¹, offered me a house and I moved in to this house and I had the kids. I was alright but after a time the man lost his wife two doors up and they offered me a job going looking after his three kids so I went to live with – in and mind these three kids. Till my hubby got the wind up [laughs] and [unclear] me up and, anyway, he – we stood – I can remember standing in the garden when they bombed –

Joyce: Coventry.

Eileen: Eh.

Joyce: Coventry.

Eileen: Coventry Cathedral and kids were in bed, in a double bed, asleep and me and him stood in the garden and the bombs come over and bombed the cathedral. We saw the cathedral go up in flames but as all of those things, as the planes went over, you heard them go over but you didn't see much. It was all dark.

Interviewer: What – how did you feel when you saw them – them bomb Coventry. Were you scared?

Eileen: I think we got so used to things that you took it for granted. You just didn't – didn't – the kids were in bed asleep and I used to get in with them, a double bed, and sleep. But you didn't think about it, you got used to it. You got used to hearing them go over but –

Joyce: What about when you came back to Kidbrooke? When you were living – what about when you moved back to Kidbrooke and were living there?

Eileen: Oh, we went back to Kidbrooke and they were building the second half. While they were building it the church caught fire and we all stood on the step and watched the church burn because they started a fire bombs then and the – we sat – stood outside the house and watched them, watched the church burn. But other than that I think it was all the same. The fire bombs and all of that, they kept – the – we moved over into the new part and after we moved over there it dropped off from there (??). I don't remember much.

Interviewer: What year did you return to Kidbrooke? Can you remember what year you came back?

¹ 5 min

Eileen: No, I thought (??) we had a – when we went back to Kidbrooke we just sort of you had the bombs more, all the fire bombs and that but you just kept indoors and ducked under the table [laughs]. That sort of –

Interviewer: How did you deal with such challenges as rationing and the blackout?

Eileen: Oh, I – we used to – I used to wait for Fred to come home and I'd shoot up the shops and you'd laugh. We used to line up and [laughs] I was lining up one day and the butcher woman called me in because I was out and I'd got a kid. I went in and stood aside cos if – if you were expecting you didn't line up you got in – inside and she'd serve you and I stood at the counter and held me booklet out and a woman stood on the side of me and she'd put herself in front of me. So she said, 'Oh, I didn't expect you – think you were going to have a baby'. So I said, 'Well, what do you blinkin think it is? A² pimple?' [laughs] and everybody laughed. I was there [laughs] but we used to have some friends standing in the queue. But I can remember her saying, 'Oh, I didn't think you were pregnant', and I said, 'What bloody hell do you think it is? A pimple' [laughs] and they all burst out laughing. But mostly it was – you – you didn't line up if you were pregnant or anything. You – you'd got women in the shop and she sell – give you ration.

Interviewer: So did you have three children during the war?

Eileen: Yeah. Yeah, I had Joan, she's the oldest and John. Yeah, John had [unclear] and when I moved to Downham to my mum and dad cos I – that was when Jane and John – Joan and John were with my mum, got me the place at Downham and then we lived opposite the children. They were in two floors above us. Little flats, used to come down into –

Interviewer: When you were evacuated, did you – you took your children with you?

Eileen: Yes, I wouldn't go anywhere – I wouldn't go away without my children and that's why it was that they let me go. They let us take our children in the end but I don't believe in leaving your children to other people. I took them with me.

Interviewer: So was it a happy experience being evacuated or was it a difficult time being away from your home?

Eileen: It was a difficult time as far as money was concerned. You – if you didn't claim when you first went, see I used to rely on Fred sending me money and if he didn't send the post didn't come. As I dealt at the same shop each week they were very good. They let me take me rations so that I had a chance to get it and then I could pay them as soon as I could change me cheque. But mostly you were alright if you behaved yourself. A lot of women were dirty and that up there. But I liked it, I enjoyed it. I had some good times and I had some bad.

² 10 min

Joyce: And she worked a while cleaning at Bletchley, at the – I said you worked for a while at Bletchley, didn't you?

Eileen: Yes. When I came back I went to me cousins cos they lived there and she'd worked at Bexley and cleaning and that [Joyce: Bletchley, she meant] and she'd got me a job there while the – the two kids were at school and I went – I used to do the cleaning in the Women's Section cos we lived on the edge of the Women's Section and the others (??) were very good to me. But I done about nine months cleaning there 'for I come home. Dad wanted me home because [unclear] [laughs], that's part of me life [laughs]. But we were alright, we got – we were married sixty-eight years so that was the whole war. But I wouldn't like to go through another war³. I don't think there'll be another war. I think the next one will blow us – each other up rather than carrying on.

Interviewer: So you were born in – in 1911.

Eileen: Eh?

Interviewer: You were born in 1911.

Eileen: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you remember anything of the First World War?

Eileen: The First World War, yeah. I was three when that broke out and both mum and dad were school keepers at Castle Street School (??) and it was an air raid shelter for – for the people and there was a big iron gate at the top (??). We lived inside with – the house was inside the playground and I can remember waiting for the police to come and we couldn't open the gate until they come. They put me and me sister under one each arm, take us over and put us in the corridor and tell us to wait there while they went back and opened the gate to let the people in and then when the people come in they used to sit up around the corridor. Right the way round and we used to take new bottles of water and give them drinks.

Interviewer: Did you have any air raids then in the First World War?

Eileen: No, you – you had raids but they were, eh, something else they called them and they were more iron and all that on the floor when you come out. It was – I don't know what they called them but it wasn't like we – like we had – had the bombs and that. It was pieces of iron and that on the ground. When you'd come out you had to walk round these pieces. But I – I don't think cos we had a playground on the top of the school. It was a three storey school and the playground on the top so, of course, police used to go up there and take the bits of iron away.

Interviewer: Did you used to go to school in the war as well?

³ 15 min

Eileen: Eh, no. I don't think I did. No, I went to school after the war cos I – I don't – my mum was a fiery (??) woman she always rowed with everybody and we never went to the same school as we lived. I went to a church school in City Road (??) in Old Street and we went to St. Mark's Church School and I think it was after the war cos we used to – it was a Catholic school. It must have been because I can remember going across the road in – when the – what's her name? Miss (??) – certain – certain things were on. We used to go over across to the church, across the road to the church. The police used to see us – lead us across and me another girl we used to pump the organ. It was one of these organs that you pumped and we used to have to watch the peg come down and see that it didn't come below a certain point when you pumped the – pumped the organ.

Interviewer: Can you remember the day when the Second World War broke out? So the 3rd of September 1939?⁴

Eileen: No. I can't remember much.

Interviewer: Can you remember how you felt when you realised that another war was going to –?

Eileen: Eh, no. I forget – forget all that. [Unclear] I was fourteen when I started work.

Interviewer: So what kind of work did you start when you were fourteen?

Eileen: Oh, embroidery. I worked for the English and French Embroidery Company and I had three years training.

Interviewer: Ok. But I never gave up until I got married, of course, eh, there's a lot of short time when you're in that. In those days you – was a lot shorter and when there was no work [unclear] you stooped at [unclear]. I think I – it was then that I started to work for Woolworths. We used to work part-time [unclear] Woolworths cos we thought it was sort of short-time. I used to work for them but when – when I gave up. I just took full-time up a Woolworths [unclear] ten years now [unclear].

Interviewer: In what year did you get married?

Eileen: Oh. [laughs] can't remember.

Joyce: 1937.

Eileen: Ay?

Joyce: 1937.

Eileen: 1937, was it?

Joyce: Yes.

⁴ 20 min

Eileen: Oh.

Interviewer: Do you feel like the – the war and the experience that you had during the war that that changed you as a person in any way?

Eileen: Well, I suppose it must have done because when I – when I went to work for [unclear] Company some friends of ours got me there, course, they – they worked there but we used to stand on the stairs waiting to go in and when we were lining up there on the stairs waiting for it to open up, we used to stand there talking about the war. But I can't remember what we talked about but, of course, there was a lot of stories, a lot of things that happened that was hard but I – I can't remember much about it.

Interviewer: Ok.

Eileen: Do you remember anything?

Joyce: Well, obviously I was a lot younger than you. I was only a baby in the Second World War. I think the things I can remember, eh, I can remember going into the shelter across the road. There was one on the corner wasn't there? Across the road we used – that's how I learnt the alphabet. They – they all – they'd sing the alphabet and then somebody would start a nursery rhyme and then they'd sing another and then somebody else would have to start a different nursery rhyme and it carried on all the time until and then when there was a bombing and that, They – they did the hokey-cokey (??) but instead of holding on to the waist, you held on to the ears of the person in front so – try to stop them hearing. I can remember that. I can remember going to nursery school and you had to have sleep in the afternoon so they put out all these camp beds, in the summer months they'd be out in the playground and in the winter months they'd be inside. I remember laying down pulling the cover and thinking I'm not going to sleep, I don't need to go to sleep and the next minute you'd be woken up, you know, you had been to sleep. I can remember that. And there was a wood place, wasn't there –

Eileen: You used to go – get ready for bed at six o'clock cos the raids used to start at six.

Joyce: [Laughs]. There was a big fire, wasn't there? Opposite to where we lived because there was a wood yard there and that – I can remember that all going up in⁵ flames. I think I had nightmares of it afterwards cos I remember dreaming that there was a girl sitting opposite with her leg on fire or something, you know, so it must have been some sort of nightmare I had cos I can still remember that. But obviously my memories are just bits here and there because of being so young.

Interviewer: Can you remember the end of the war?

Joyce: No, no, I can't. No, I wasn't five then.

Interviewer: Can you remember if you had any street parties when, eh, victory was declared?

⁵ 25 min

Eileen: When war was declared. Yes, everybody had a street party. We, eh, they collected but I don't think the new part over the road, where we moved to then but the old part where there was some houses built, little bungalows, built on the piece of green opposite our houses and they had street parties there. But –

Joyce: I think there was a lot more community spirit in those days. I mean, even after the war I can remember all the children and their dads and that just being outside playing cricket in the street and all this sort playing together, you know, which you don't see nowadays. Much more community –.

Eileen: Days of old [both laughs]. Oh, dear. I – I never want to see another war. Well, I don't think there will be, I think they'd just blow each other up.

Joyce: There's wars going on all the time, aren't there?

Eileen: Do you think so?

Interviewer: Are there any other things that you remember about the war? Any other experiences that – that you remember?

Eileen: Yeah. It makes you think twice when they talking about another war. It makes you think twice about it.

Joyce: What did you tell me about waiving to the pilot and you found – realising it was a German plane?

Eileen: Oh, I was hanging me washing out one day in the back garden when I heard some a [unclear] standing by me and a plane went over and he leaned out waived so I waived back two minutes afterwards he'd dropped a bomb on Catford, just as kids were coming out of school. But the man next door said he was standing there and I know he said to me, 'That wasn't one of ours, get indoors', and as I went indoors I saw he dropped the bomb on – on a Catford school. Kids were coming out of school.

Interviewer: Can you remember, was there a lot of – of bombing in your area? Was there any near misses that –? Was there a lot of air raids in the area where you were living? Was there a lot of damage to property around your house?

Eileen: No, no, not a lot. We were very lucky we got plenty of sot down the chimney [laughs] every time a bomb dropped. But we – although we had, eh, what's the name? It was all war stuff all around us. You⁶ didn't get a lot of it. It used to go – go over cos they were all going for London and –

Joyce: [Unclear] Woolwich, of course, heading to the Arsenal at Woolwich, weren't they as well?

Eileen: Ay?

⁶ 30 min

Joyce: Heading for the Arsenal at Woolwich as well.

Eileen: Yeah, they were making for the Arsenal at Woolwich cos they followed the river up. But I don't think there was a lot damage cos it was all new building, new buildings around and ours was a big farm that was being built on. The days of old [laughs], dance (??) were bold [laughs].

Interviewer: Did they ever ask you to do any war work?

Eileen: No, they couldn't cos I – I had children. I used to look after different children, I wasn't fussed about that. The soldiers used to come over on leave and they wanted a break so I used to mind the children and [unclear].

Interviewer: Did you say that your husband, that – that he – he used to be a – a fire-watcher? He used to watch out for – for the bombs and the air raids at night?

Eileen: Yes, well, of course, he had to go out on bomb – bomb damage and that to see that they didn't – these shelters that they had in the street and in the gardens. If you didn't get out quick and all turn them all twelve (??) they drown, see, so he used to have to get there quick and turn the water off.

Interviewer: Did he use to work long days?

Eileen: No, I did – I never worked.

Interviewer: No, your husband? Did he use to work long days?

Eileen: He used to – used to always be on standby. He used to be able to see that I was alright and sometimes he come – come home during a raid to make sure I was alright.

Joyce: Who were the Dutch people?

Eileen: Ay?

Joyce: Who were the Dutch people that you used to – were they something to do with the war?

Eileen: Dutch?

Joyce: Yeah. They used to write – cos you used to write to them just after the war, didn't you? And said – I don't remember.

Eileen: Yeah. I used to –

Joyce: Who were they?

Eileen: Yes, I used to look after some, I say, some of the kids come over. I used to look after them while parents were working and that.

Joyce: You don't remember who the Dutch people were?

Eileen: No.

Joyce: They used to send you cheese and stuff and things just after the war as well so they must have been over during the war.

Eileen: Yeah.

Joyce: It must have been someone you met in the war?

Eileen: I can't remember much about –

Joyce: You can't remember them, no.

Eileen: You go to sleep, go to sleep.

Joyce: Yeah [both laughs].

Eileen: Forget all about 'em.

Interviewer: What – what can you remember about the blackout?

Eileen: The what?

Interviewer: About the blackout?

Eileen: Black boat?

Interviewer: The blackout? When you had to turn all the lights off in the evening.

Eileen: Oh, you just – you – what you did, you blacked the windows out like you do now, like we do here, windows. But you – you just covered them all well, we had the low lights. Yeah.

Interviewer: Were you afraid to go out in the evening when it was all dark?

Eileen: We never went out, we never went out. We did – used to make sure I'd got all my shopping in and, of course, I didn't do a lot of shopping because Fred used to bring it in rather than I go out. We – we⁷ had Well Hall to do all our shopping in and we had every shop under the sun there. When I was up there shopping once and the siren went and we shot down – cos there was a – a – a where you went down under ground at the top of the street, main street, and we shot down there when the siren went and stood there till the all-clear went then I walked home cos Fred was in with the kids.

Interviewer: H-how would you summarise your experience of the war?

Eileen: Oh, I think it made us all nervous. I think everybody was fighting to leave their kids or anything. For years afterwards you always made sure the kids were, at least I did, to make sure my kids were all (??). [Unclear] I think we made – made more nervous, made more people more nervous.

⁷ 35 min

Interviewer: Have – have you talked a lot about the war with your children and –?

Eileen: No. I – I never talk much about it at all.

Joyce: Yeah, just little bit now and then. Not a lot.

Eileen: Little bit now and then but I don't talk about it much, I try to forget it.

Interviewer: Ok. I – I don't have any more questions now. Is there something that you feel like you haven't had a chance to talk about that you would want to tell me?

Eileen: No, I don't think there's much I can tell you know now. Well, I wouldn't like – I don't think there was anything that I could think of.

Interviewer: Is there anything that you can think of, Joyce?

Joyce: I don't think so. No, because as I said I was a little bit too young.

Eileen: They built – built a new church up there. But they built it outside the old one.

Joyce: Inside the old one. They had a sort of – temporary building inside the framework of the old church that we used to go to for, oh, many, many years that was still there. 1950s I think it was still like that. It was quite late before they built – rebuilt the church.

Interviewer: Ok.

Joyce: My husband, he was bombed out where he lived, he lived at Plumstead. He was actually bombed out and they – they moved into the prefabs, you know, the new prefabs and said – everybody was thrilled with those when they first had them [laughs]. They got inside toilets and things that some people hadn't had before.

Interviewer: Was your husband ever evacuated or did he stay –?

Joyce: No, he said he wasn't. No. He stayed in London.

Interviewer: Yeah. But he was – do you know what year he was bombed out?

Joyce: No, I don't. I can't ask him now cos he's had a stroke and can't talk so it's limited, you know, just little bits of and [unclear].

Interviewer: Yeah. Ok. Well, thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me.

Eileen: You're welcome.

End of Interview.