

Written by Sheila Watt

My earliest memories are of being in the cool cellar under the stairs at 52 Hepworth Road, Streatham, South London, before we had a shelter, and hearing bombs and ceilings coming down and windows breaking. I also remember hearing low-flying aircraft and a sudden silence before bombs dropping. I did not feel afraid though, as I didn't know anything other than this, being only 18 months old when World War 2 started. I thought this was life! When my parents spoke about 'when the war is over', I remember wondering what that meant. My father had been wounded in the head in World War I and although he worked until he was 70, he was on full disability benefit.

One day when my grandmother was staying with us, she, my mother, my sister and I were in the cellar during an air raid when my father came in with his face completely black, as he had been in the house when a bomb had dropped nearby, bringing lots of soot down the chimney.

When the war started my mother, my sister (7 years older than me) and I (18 months old) were evacuated from Streatham to Hertford to stay with my mother's aunt and family at 10 Balfow Street. I do not remember this but apparently I would only eat when my father came down at weekends, as he was still working in London. After six months of this – and this was the time of the 'phoney war' – my parents decided that, if we were going to die, we would all die together, so we all went back to Streatham and we all survived.

Later on in the war we had a Morrison shelter put up in our sitting room, in which we all slept regularly and ate meals during air raids. At quieter times my sister and I played tennis on it. At the time we had a cat and I remember once when we were all in the shelter we realised that the cat was not with us so my father went to get it so that it was safe too!

My sister's education was very disrupted by the war as lots of local schools in Streatham were evacuated, so she had several changes, in addition to being at one in Hertford for the six months that we were there. She eventually went to a very good private school, Lexden House School in Streatham from 1941-45, and I also went there from 1943-47. I then went to St. Martin-in-the-fields High School for girls at Tube Hill until 1956. Food was of course scarce during the war and rationing went on for several years afterwards. I still can't bear to leave a scrap of food on my plate! A rabbit was a great treat to eat and sometimes my grandmother would arrive with one (I don't know where from) and skin it herself. We had an open fire at home and often heated bread over it and chestnuts too. Sometimes my mother would say that she was not hungry and have something very light to eat, but I think that was because of money as well as rationing.

In the summer of 1942, when I was four years old we had a week's holiday staying at the Fox and Pelican at Grayshott, Surrey. One day my family and I and several other people who were staying there went for a walk. At the time sign posts had been taken down in case of German invasion. At one point on our walk we got lost and local people would not give us directions for getting back in case we were German!

Looking back, I was surprised that our parents took us to the Fox and Pelican as it was a public house and they were not drinkers – only having a glass of port at Christmas. However, years later I met some people on a cruise who lived at Grayshott and who said during the war the Fox and Pelican made a special effort to get non-drinkers to stay there.