

Friern Barnet & District Local History Society

INTERVIEW BETWEEN PERCY REBOUL AND DORIS HAMMERSLEY AT 8 TEMPLE AVENUE, WHETSTONE, N20 ON MONDAY 2 OCTOBER 1994

PR: Mrs Hammersley, before we talk about the Control Room and your part in it, I wonder if we could just say something about the years immediately before war broke out and I'm wondering if you remember what your feelings were at that time?

DH: Scared stiff.

PR: Why would you have been scared stiff?

DH: Well, we'd had films shown to us of the Spanish War and I was working in Old Bond Street and we had lots of very high powered people coming in and talking about what the Nazis were doing.

PR: Were these from Nazi Germany?

DH: No, they just visited, so we knew that when it happened it would be very sudden, but of course, it wasn't like that.

PR: How old were you at the time, I must ask this...

DH: Well I was born in '14, so in 1939 I would have been 25.

PR: So you were in a position to judge. And was it your opinion that other people felt like this. It was the air raids and the gas, wasn't it?

DH: Yes, basically. If we hadn't had the Spanish War immediately before with all the films that we saw. And we'd had the Phoney War the year before and most of us had joined something, Civil Defence or something, and we were shown these films, probably not everybody saw quite as much as we did.

PR: I was hoping to talk to you about that, when things were looking grim in 1938 and with Chamberlain and his famous piece of paper, did they lead you, for the first time to take an interest in Civil Defence? And would you say that your friends felt the same way?

DH: Everybody did.

PR: Tell me what happened, did you see an advertisement in a paper – what happened exactly?

DH: We knew the balloon was going up and the radio was gradually getting more and more serious there were local advertisements: "Join the Civil Defence", "Join the Territorial Army", do this, do that. Then they wanted volunteers to, later on, gas masks, etc,

PR: So you could see that things were on the way. So, what was your background, were you unmarried then?

DH: I was unmarried.

PR: And you were living with your mother and father. Whereabouts?

- DH: In Friern Barnet,
- PR: So what action did you take? You decided to volunteer for Civil Defence...
- DH: Well, I thought I'd be a nurse, but my father, who was in the First World War said: "No way are you going to be a nurse!" So I joined the Civil Defence and I went up to 246 Friern Barnet Lane, which was headquarters.
- PR: Was the house opposite Friary Park?
- DH: No that was Strathrite. 246 is now a block of council flats. It's up on the left hand side going up towards Whetstone, and they built a big block of flats. And that's where Commander Thurlow was. And I went and the first person I saw was Ted Drake, and I'd known Ted since I was a little girl. Everybody tried to do something, if they were single.
- PR: One of the things I'm trying to do is to find out about the issue of Identity Cards.
- DH: We had to have one with the Civil Defence, we had a special one.
- PR: Do you remember about how they organised the issue of them?
- DH: I think you had to go to whatever was available. I suppose I had to go to Friern Barnet Town Hall, well, it wasn't built then so you had to go to The Priory, or you had to go to one of the places they were distributing them. Ours were made out and handed to us when we joined the Civil Defence.
- PR: Did it have a photograph of you on it?
- DH: No.
- PR: Tell me some thing about Commander Thurlow.
- DH: He was absolutely the king pin, and his daughter was on the Control Staff with us.
- PR: Presumably he was from the First World War, presumably he had a lot of experience.
- DH: Yes, his son is still alive.
- PR: Where did you do your training? It must have been a lot of fun.
- DH: At 246 Headquarters. I always remember we had to go through a gas chamber and people who were with me – I had very fair hair – and they said "You're not going through that, Doris?"
- PR: That was testing the gas mask?
- DH: Yes, so that we would know what to do and how to do it. And we had lectures on gas and how to recognise it and we had a sort of exam – I think I've got a certificate.
- PR: And your respirator was a bit different?
- DH: Ours was a bit different from the normal ones.
- PR: Were you issued with anything else, apart from respirators?
- DH: To begin with we had overalls when we joined.

- PR: Did it have a badge on it?
- DH: I think it had Civil Defence on it. It was a crossover one. But later on they had top coats and I think we used to have a beret. Navy blue.
- PR: Do you think you were thoroughly trained?
- DH: We managed very well and we certainly got the messages through. We had the incoming and the outgoing and our messages came into the Control Centre and we had to pass them through to the Officers in the Control Room and we had trial runs when there weren't any Officers. We were all very keen.
- PR: Let's talk about the Control Room. It was located in the basement of the new Town Hall.
- DH: Not to begin with. Right at the beginning we were in the garages in Goldsmith Road (*where Leadbetter Close now is*) we had three garages and we had all the control efforts there, the telephones, everything- that's how we started.
- PR: Did they have any extra reinforcement on it?
- DH: They were just garages. Everything was sandbagged. Everywhere you went was sandbagged.
- PR: Were the garages connected?
- DH: They were made into one big area. We had ordinary GPO telephones and we sat on them on the first night in 1939 just waiting for the call. There were no plugs, just ordinary telephones.
- PR: Where were they connected to, these telephones?
- DH: One was connected to the police, one to the fire brigade, then the sub-headquarters at Woodhouse. Thee others were all to the warden posts in Friern Barnet.
- PR: The Woodhouse one was an emergency one wasn't it?
- DH: If I remember rightly, it was the next step up to us. Whatever happened in our area had to be reported to them. And they reported it to County. We had a list of telephones to ring if they weren't there. If there was a yellow we had to ring Ted Draper, John Kitts, Commander Thurlow.
- PR: In that Control Room you had all kinds of resources which you would need to call out in the event of an incident.
- DH: Well, you had the officers sitting there, but you had it on the board and you had Light Rescue, how many light rescue teams you'd got, Heavy Rescue.
- PR: Were they all located in the same place?
- DH: They were at Friern Barnet Church Hall, the Light and Heavy Rescue at that time. So you knew how many light and heavy rescue you'd got. Then you'd got the ambulances, they were all on hooks and you'd got a note of the first aid posts. So the Medical Officer would get from Mr Fletcher, who was the Clerk of the Council at the time, you'd got the Engineer sitting there, then the incident would come in from the ARP posts and that would be passed into the Control Room.

Then the Medical Officer would decide how many ambulances to go then somebody would be standing up at the boards with a map of Friern Barnet and they would put a pin in for the incident and then they would say "two ambulances" so they would take two ambulances off here and put it that they were out. So, if another incident came in they knew what was available. And that's how it worked, quite simple.

PR: How were they in contact with the ambulances were they radio controlled?

DH: A message would be sent up to the ambulances. Ambulance 1 was up at Barrington in the north, Ambulance 2 was at Holly Park School and Ambulance 3 was at St Peter-le-Poer.

PR: So you had three ambulances at that time?

DH: Stations. Ambulance stations. If there was an incident you would have an Incident Officer there and you had messengers. I was running the girls' training corps at that time and, amazing as it seems now, those girls came out on duty at night and they were used as messengers. And the boys came from that ATS and the Sea Cadets. But I was only interested in the girls' training corps.

PR: How old would they have been?

DH: Fourteen to eighteen.

PR: And they would have been on duty for a night.

DH: Not the whole night

PR: Up to that time all your training had been based around this control centre?

DH: Yes.

PR: Now meanwhile you're stuck in the garages but in the meantime the new Town Hall is being built \and special arrangements were being made to reinforce the basement with heavy concrete and stuff. When did you move down there?

DH: I can't remember exactly, but I would think about the beginning of 1940.

PR: But in terms of organisation and the resources it was the same except that it moved down. You must have felt a bit more secure?

DH: Oh, yes, really. We used the house in Goldsmith Road – they've pulled it down now – to sleep in.

PR: What about your hours of duty, were you full time in Civil Defence?

DH: Oh, yes. To begin with we did 6 hours on and 12 hours off, seven days a week, because everybody was only concentrating on one thing. Later on, of course, they altered it round. We had 3 shifts, 3 teams, one taking over from the other and I think we started with 6 hours on and 6 hours off. I know that the ambulances used to come and pick us up at 6 in the morning and at midnight. They'd take us home and bring us back.

PR: What magnificent sum were you being paid?

DH: I can't remember exactly, but it would have been about 25 or 30 shillings a week. That was the average for anybody at that time. We weren't really worried about what we got paid; we were only concentrating on what we were doing.

PR: You felt it was your duty.

DH: Everybody did.

PR: What was morale like; we did go through some hideous times up to Dunkirk. What was your opinion, did you think that we had lost that war?

DH: I didn't think we would lose it, but I wasn't very happy. The morale was very good and we used to put on shows, we used to do all sorts of things.

PR: These were the recreational side of the Civil Defence. It wasn't all work, so what did you do in your spare time?

DH: In the very little spare time we had at the beginning we just slept. Later on we would go up to town, we just lived normally really.

PR: Did you bring your food with you?

DH: Oh, no, we cooked down there, when we were in the Town Hall. When we were in the garages we only had deck chairs to sit on and when you try to sleep in a deck chair it's not very funny. We had electric fires and we brought some bread and we toasted it and that was marvellous.

PR: But they had not made facilities....

DH: Not really.

PR: What about lavatories and other vital facilities?

DH: I think we must have gone over to the little house I was talking about, and we did use the kitchen there after a bit. But it's funny I haven't a clue where the cloakroom was.

PR: I don't think there would be one at that level.

DH: We didn't go upstairs; there must be a cloakroom there. And I said to my friend who was there and she couldn't remember either. There was a kitchen there, so there must have been water there.

PR: Was there a sink there?

DH: Oh, yes. But I can't visualise it, isn't that peculiar? There's no way we could have been there all those hours without...

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PR: There must have been facilities for making tea; no British person would stand 6 hours without tea.

DH: We probably had a kettle from the beginning. We didn't have a lot because, let's face it, it didn't matter at that time, what we should have and what we shouldn't have. We weren't concerned with that.

PR: You were saying you formed a theatrical company, was it?

DH: No, we put on shows at the Church Hall. To begin with the stretcher party put on a concert party and then we formed it with John Gilpin who was the Ambulance Officer and we had the Arpettes, there were some from the ambulance station and some from the Control Centre and we had this dancing group.

PR: What sort of shows?

DH: Oh, we put on a very good show.

PR: So these were fairly sophisticated shows. Did the public come?

DH: Oh, yes and, of course, if the yellow went we all had to go.

PR: How often did you put on these shows?

DH: Twice a year I should think.

PR: And the public were invited were they?

DH: Oh, yes and they paid – tuppence or something. We had a very good dancing group and we made all our own dresses. On one occasion we couldn't get material so somebody went to Wood Green and bought some material, butter muslin I think, so we dyed it in the kitchen and strung it all along this corridor and then there was a red alert and all the Control people came rushing down and we had to run around picking it all up. My friend was a dressmaker and we used to spend hours making all these dresses. It was a wonderful show.

PR: Who did the writing and the choreography and the music side of it?

DH: I don't know if you've heard of Bill Rose, he was Incident Officer, he was very good at doing the sort of thing you're talking about – the Punch & Judy thing – he used to do one where he was miming somebody getting in a bath. And we had a very good pianist who lived in Church way. One was Bunny Martin and his next door neighbour used to do duets. They were very efficient shows. Then you started to get War Weapons Week and we got the big stars down and we'd incorporate theirs with ours.

PR: These were some of the local stars, like Cyril Fletcher?

DH: Yes, that's right.

PR: And that raised money for one of the Savings Weeks?

DH: Probably. I can't remember where the money went to, now.

PR: The names of the people in the Civil Defence are probably a matter of record, but Thurlow was at the head of this. Did he have deputies?

DH: Yes, John Kitts was the Deputy Chief Warden, Ted Draper was the Chief Warden. Then you had Tom Gilpin who was the Ambulance Officer and then Friern Barnet Council people such as Gameson who was the Engineer and Marshall who was the Engineer. Then you got the Medical Officers who were doctors – Dr Elkin and the other doctors.

PR: So the people in charge were skilled in their own game.

DH: The doctors and the engineers, for the rescue. The wardens obviously had to learn, the same as we did. We must have had about 16 posts.

- PR: Are there any incidents that stand out in your mind?
- DH: Commander Thurlow as blown up. He went down along by the railway to see an unexploded bomb and the message came back that he had been involved in an incident and he and Mr Fairservice were very badly injured and were taken to Friern Hospital.
- PR: It wasn't reported at the time.
- DH: Yes it was. If you go to Colindale you'll find it in the papers. I was married in '40.
- PR: Who was Mr Fairservice?
- DH: He was one of the wardens. And Commander Thurlow's daughter was married in '41. Anyway he was brought on a stretcher to St James where she was married, he was very badly injured.
- PR: What about other incidents, apart from people that you knew?
- DH: There was a bad one in Friern Hospital; a lot of people were injured there.
- PR: Then there was also the one in Simmons Way, the V1.
- DH: Of course, the thing didn't blow up. But the most important thing was the parachute mine, land mine, came down in St John's Avenue and all the people had to be evacuated. Of course, we didn't as we were underneath but we had the bomb disposal men were there. It was after I was married so it must have been after 1940 and I was going up to Beechlawns, where I lived, and all the people were coming off the Halliwick Estate with their dogs and their cats and birds in cages.
- PR: Did you ever go into one of these Rest Centres?
- DH: They had one down at Grove Road, New Southgate. But I didn't go into one. Mrs Dyke would have been in charge of.
- PR: Research shows that the number one thing that people hated about the war was the blackout. What do you remember about that?
- DH: There were some nights when it was like daylight, when the moon was out. But the main thing is that most of the people that were likely to cause trouble were in the Army so you could walk about quite happily through the streets. And if there was a yellow and we were on duty we had to run on duty.
- PR: Yellow is stand by, is it?
- DH: Yes and red is when it's imminent.
- PR: Was the siren on the Town Hall?
- DH: I have a feeling it was on the police station.
- PR: What about the police, they didn't come within your purview did they?
- DH: Well, we had to notify them.
- PR: But they didn't have someone on duty in the Control Centre?

- DH: But what we did have was someone from Light Rescue or Heavy Rescue standing on the steps guarding us, not allowing anybody in unless they had got their pass.
- PR: Were they armed?
- DH: No.
- PR: Did you ever panic, or did things ever get on top of you?
- DH: It got on top before we started. Because if I could have gone to the country, I would have done. We were away when everyone was called up the first time. My husband and my father went off and you got that awful feeling that when it started it would be – poof.
- PR: When the testing time came, were you really up to it?
- DH: Oh, yes. We had to take down a message correctly and fully and we had to insist that our people did that, I was the Supervisor, and we used to go through it two or three times.
- PR: Did the Control Room have a direct link with the ambulance service?
- DH: Yes.
- PR: And did the wardens' posts have a direct link to the ambulance service?
- DH: We took the messages and they said what they wanted and that's where they were all telephoned out. It would have been disastrous if they had a direct link and not going through the Medical Officers.
- PR: So Friern Hospital was your hospital?
- DH: No, that was taken over by Barts. I suppose our people went to Barnet or Finchley.
- PR: But Finchley Memorial was linked to Barts.
- DH: But there still patients as well as casualties. Commander Thurlow was taken into Friern. They took over many of the wards but there were still mental patients there.
- PR: You mentioned earlier the Emergency Benefits Fund. What was that all about?
- DH: For anybody, any of the wardens or ARP people, who were injured, they could claim. Really and truly it was very small as you can see from the constitution. We used to get the odd request for help in different ways and then it had to go before the Committee on which Mrs Dyke and various people were on. Right at the end we had some money left over and a cot was endowed at Finchley Memorial. I went and pulled the curtains back.
- PR: That reminds me that many of the wardens were volunteers. Some were paid and some were voluntary.
- DH: Part time, yes. We had part timers as well – they came in and did part of a shift. They came home from the office and decided to....
- PR: But the local councils had no legal responsibility for them. I imagine this is why the Emergency Benefits Fund was set up.

- DH: Quite honestly, the little that they got wasn't much.
- PR: What were your colleagues like to work with – was it a happy atmosphere to work in?
- DH: Yes, very good. There were always the odd people who could be awkward. We used to cook, the officers used to come into the dining room for a meal. We had our own dining room right from the beginning. We had two of our young girls who were artists and they painted the pictures on the wall. I can't remember their names. We used to cook for the officers and it became, which team could cook the best food. It was a dining/rest room really. There was a table in the middle of the room.
- PR: What sort of meal would you cook?
- DH: Stuffed marrow went a long way. We did get emergency rations. I lived in Manor Drive at that time and I'd have them all back afterwards. We used to make loads and loads of little pastry cases which cost very little, and fill them up with all sorts of things, cheese – anything we could get. It's amazing what you can do on nothing. We always had a party after the shows and we always had plenty to eat, I can assure you.
- PR: Did you smoke then?
- DH: No. Everybody tried to get you to smoke but I didn't. I might have one after a coffee but I didn't want to smoke. I took half my lip off once, because they didn't have cork tips. People used to say: "Come on, be sociable, have a cigarette". Quite honestly, I think people needed it. I can remember being in the Control Room when they dropped a stick of bombs coming up Friern Barnet Lane and you could feel them getting nearer and nearer. You didn't allow yourself to be. I was in charge of these girls, one team – we'd probably got half a dozen girls.
- PR: Telephone lines are notoriously vulnerable. What emergency plans did you have if the wires went?
- DH: Well, they didn't. We'd have had to use the messengers.
- PR: We weren't heavily bombed, were we?
- DH: Not around the Town Hall anyway.
- PR: We're now coming up to the 50th anniversary of the end of the war. What was your overall impression of it?
- DH: I would much rather have not had it.
- PR: Were there any good sides to the war? What about the camaraderie?
- DH: The camaraderie was marvellous, but I don't think you need a war to develop that.
- PR: People said there was a lot less snobbishness then
- DH: Quite definitely. I certainly wouldn't wish it on anybody.
- PR: Do you blame the Chamberlain government?

DH: I blame them that they didn't do as Churchill wanted, and arm because I think if we had been armed I don't think Hitler would have attempted it.

PR: Of course, Churchill was ostracised by his party.

DH: Oh definitely. But he was right in the end and were we pleased when he was put in charge! Everybody was thrilled to bits.

PR: Thank you very much for your most interesting comments.