

My Life in Hilton during World War II

By Tony Yates

This is an account of my memories of six years of life in Hilton from 1938 to 1945. It is written from the perspective of a young boy and some of the things he remembered.

My mother and father were married in Hilton Church in 1932. Shortly after they moved to London to improve my father's working prospects.

I was born a large (5.7kg) baby on 8 February 1933 at St. Giles Hospital, Camberwell, London. My mother (Laura Ann Yates nee Oakett) died suddenly 17 days later of a blood clot. My father (Herbert Sydney Yates) was devastated. His widowed mother (Mary Blythe Yates), then living in Hilton, Huntingdonshire, took care of me for some time. I think my father returned to Hilton. I know that I was baptized in Hilton Church on Easter Sunday 1933.

I do know that in the summer of (circa) 1936 we were living in Hilton because that year Jack Hobbs (arguably England's greatest ever batsman) brought a team from Cambridge University to play against Hilton who had a strong team. My father was due to play in the match but was delayed at work. I remember asking "When is my daddy coming?" and was told he was still at work. Shortly afterwards Jack Hobbs who opened the batting was dismissed. In build he was very like my father. I spotted what I thought was my daddy walking back to the pavilion and ran to meet him. I soon realised my mistake: I remember saying to myself "That's not my daddy that's Jack Hobbs" and stood there rooted to the spot. Jack Hobbs tucked his bat under his left arm took my left hand in his right and walked me back to the pavilion. Halfway there Jack Britten, who later became my uncle, appeared with a camera. It looked like a box. We stopped, the photo was taken and we proceeded on. Jack Hobbs took me inside to where several ladies were serving tea and sandwiches from a long table covered with a white cloth. He said, and I remember this clearly, "Would you please give this young gentleman an ice-cream? I don't have any money in my pocket at the moment, but I will pay you as soon as I have changed". One of the ladies replied "That's alright Mr. Hobbs, we'll fix that up, you don't have to pay". He went off to change, I got my ice-cream and shortly after my father appeared. Later in the match, I am told, Uncle Mick (Percy Hamilton Yates) hit a ball from Jack Hobbs all the way down to the stream that runs past what is now the Village Hall. Three men were needed to throw the ball back! I remember seeing this feat emulated in the late 1940s, although this time only two men were required.

Much of the knowledge gained about my childhood before 1938 has been the result of conversation with adults in later years. I was a "Cow and Gate" baby; when I was six months old a photo of me entered in a national competition won a years supply of Cow and Gate milk powder, no doubt a welcome boost to the slim family budget.

My father married Florence Maud Miles, probably in 1937 and I was delighted in July 1938 to hold my new baby sister (Joy Cynthia). By this time I was at school which could not come quickly enough for me. I had, a year or so before, pestered my father to teach me to read and I soon knew my letters and even punctuation. As I became more proficient he would cut sentences out of the morning newspaper before he went to work. On his return I would be quizzed on my understanding. He regularly bought me the "Mickey Mouse" and "Beano" comics provided that I read the text and did not simply look at the pictures. I became an avid reader, a skill that has served me well throughout my life. We were now living in London again.

With the possibility of war looming later in the year, there were fears that life in London could become unsafe. London had been bombed (by Zeppelins) in World War I and consequently there was talk of a mass evacuation of children. I believe that my parents were not in favour of their children going to strangers and so it was decided to send the family out of London preferably to Hilton. My grandmother (Gran) was willing to take me but did not have room in her tiny cottage for three of us. As a result all three of us went to Fenstanton to stay with my aunt Jenny (Jane Ding).

While we were there we were all issued with Identity Cards and gas-masks. I remember the disappointment when Joy got a "Mickey Mouse" gas-mask and I had the same kind of mask as an adult, albeit smaller. My mask came in a khaki-coloured cardboard box with a strap to sling across the chest. I'm not sure but I think the cardboard may have been waxed. We were instructed to carry the gas-masks with us at all times. Thankfully they were never needed!

I attended Fenstanton school for a while but my stepmother grew tired of country life and took my sister back to London. I then went to live in Hilton with my grandmother. She was currently living in a small cottage (which still stands) at the northern end of The Grove. The cottage was lit at night by a paraffin (kerosene) lamp and cooking was done on a coal-fired open range with a side oven. The fire was kept alight summer and winter and there were always two kettles simmering on the hob. One was for clothes washing and general cleaning, the other for drinking. Why two kettles? Drinking water was hard. The washing water, collected from rainfall, was soft and needed less soap to get the dirt out of the clothes. The drinking water kettle had a marble inside which bounced around as the water boiled. This dislodged the scale which precipitated from the hard water during boiling and settled on the bottom of the kettle. From time to time it was removed.

Drinking water was kept in an enamelled pail of which there were several. It became my duty to replenish the water every morning from the pump at the end of Reeves Ditch. In the early days I had to make several trips but as I grew older and stronger the trips became fewer and fewer. During the winter some of the pails contained eggs preserved in isinglass. The eggs came from chickens which scratched a living on the grass across the road from the cottage. Their houses were also located on the grass. My Grandmother maintained that since she was the Clerk to the Parish Council she had a right to graze her livestock on the Green, of which this small triangle was a part.

Rainwater was collected in a number of interconnected 44 gallon (200 litre) drums fed from the roof guttering. Even in the driest summer we never ran out! At the back of the cottage was an open-sided lean-to structure running the full width of the cottage. We called this the porch. The water-drums stood under the porch on stages about 2 feet (600mm) high to protect the contents from falling or wind-blown leaves and low-flying birds. Between this staging and the back door was a rough table where I performed my morning ablutions. Although the wind was a trial at times there was never a shortage of warm water in which to wash, courtesy of the constant fire.

I attended the village school, which is now the Village Hall. In those days one started school in the "Little Room" where we learnt the three Rs (Reading, (w)Riting and (a)Rithmetic)! Progression to the "Big Room" came with age. The pupils sat in rows of desks, the youngest children at the front, the oldest at the back. One progressed each year from row to row towards the back.

I don't remember when I transferred to the "Big Room" but it didn't come soon enough for me. I had read all the books in the room and had started on the books in the big room. I should explain: The school also housed the village library and consequently had a much larger supply

of books from which to choose. The teacher from the Little Room was also the librarian and was aware of my reading ability. She allowed me to borrow books from the adult section subject to her approval. I was soon reading Rider Haggard, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells and the like. I remember being fascinated in particular by "She" by Rider Haggard because early in the book there was a page of Egyptian hieroglyphics followed by a page in Greek. This was followed by a page in Latin and finally an English translation.

The reason for my concentration on reading was simple:

1. There was no television! Although television broadcasts had begun in England in 1932 (I had in fact seen TV through a shop window in 1938), it was discontinued so that the transmitter could be diverted to the war effort.

2. We couldn't always listen to the wireless because we didn't always have a battery. Our wireless (radio) required an accumulator (12 Volt) and a "High Tension" (20 volt) battery. The accumulator was made of glass, contained acid and had to be re-charged frequently. The high tension battery was a "dry" battery with a number of take-off points for various voltages. At that time they cost 2 pounds which in those days was a lot of money for a pensioner. Unlike the accumulator they were not re-chargeable and moreover had to come from St Ives or Huntingdon when available.

3. It often rained. When it rained I had to stay indoors.



Tony Yates in 1945

During WWII we had double summer time and so daylight lasted an hour longer. The younger children such as myself had a lot of free time after school. We played cricket on the Green, fished for eels in the brook and explored the village. In those days Hilton had two fords, one near the church and the other at what is now Park Farm. The Sparrow house was still standing, but had been abandoned for some years. In 1939, I and another boy (probably Anthony Childs) decided to explore. We got into the house, I forget how, and crept through the empty rooms.

Not interested in the cobwebs and dust, we made our way cautiously up the stairs into a large room with windows looking out to the road. Opposite the windows was a large blank wall. But it wasn't blank! Faintly through the wallpaper I could see a painting! My boyish imagination immediately conjured up visions of secret papist chapels and priest holes. My companion seized a loose piece of wallpaper and revealed the masterpiece. I recognised a Latin inscription and my suspicions were "confirmed". I raced home to tell my grandmother and she notified the Parish Council. The rest is history. Plans to restore the house were abandoned due to the expected war but part of the painting was saved and is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Sadly for me no papist chapel.

War came in September but Hilton was prepared. All buildings likely to be lit at night were required to be "Blacked-Out". In our cottage, wooden frames covered with heavy black material were fitted to all the windows, and the front door, which opened directly onto the street, was isolated by a heavy curtain running on an L-shaped track. When closed this enabled the front door to be opened without letting the light out. Walking or cycling at night was hindered by the requirement that all torches and cycle lamps had to be dimmed, usually by putting a piece of red paper over the glass. The "Battle of Britain" passed Hilton by. In the early days of 1940 we could sometimes hear the German aircraft at night. Their engine noise had a "beat" caused by unsynchronisation. We could usually tell it was "One of theirs".

At that time the road running alongside Reeves Ditch had no embankment. The ditch was framed by blackberry bushes growing alongside the road. In late summer when the water was low, one could walk along the shoreline and pick blackberries. In winter the ditch would fill and there was a danger that the water would undercut the road. One day several army trucks filled with soldiers and equipment arrived. They quickly removed the blackberry bushes and built an embankment using sandbags filled with concrete.

A lot has been written about the "Home Guard", much of it humorous. I had nothing to do with it in Hilton, save as a spectator. I was present at the meeting which set up what was then the Local Defence Volunteers in Hilton, but I was asleep. The meeting was held at night in Dr Peters' House "Hilton Hall" which had electricity, unlike the school which had none. I said earlier that my grandmother was the Clerk to the Parish Council and she was to attend the meeting. She was unwilling to leave me in the cottage alone and Dr Peters (who was the local member of Parliament) offered to make up a bed for me on the floor. I slept on a bearskin rug with a tigerskin over me. I asked did he not have a lion skin? His reply, "I've never shot a lion!"

We boys were never allowed to watch the Volunteers at their drill (probably to save them embarrassment) except for one notable occasion! One evening some soldiers set up on the Green close to the road a large rectangular sheet of metal, almost upright on one of the long sides. After tea that evening I made my way to the green to see what was going on.

There were the Home Guard throwing flaming bottles against the sheet of metal. "What are they?", I asked, "Molotov Cocktails", was the reply! Watching became pretty boring and I was about to leave when we heard the sound of an aeroplane coming from the direction of the Church. As it came closer and landed on the road we could see that it had no wings! Moreover it had two propellers, one in the normal position and a much larger one on top. It was painted green and contained two soldiers, the pilot and an officer. What was it? An Autogyro, a forerunner of the helicopter. After an address to the locals the autogyro was readied for take-off. A length of rope was wound around the shaft of the larger propeller. Meanwhile the engine was started by the traditional means of swinging the propeller. The Officer climbed in. Several men pulled sharply on the rope in much the same way as one would set a top spinning. The big propeller spun, the aircraft slowly moved forward gaining speed. As it did so the rope somehow

disappeared into the cockpit, the big propeller spun faster and after about twenty or so yards the aircraft left the ground and flew off towards Fenstanton.

My next foray into house exploration had a very different result. One morning (in, I think, 1941) after school prayers the whole school was marched to the churchyard via Grove Lane, High Street, Potton Road and Church Lane. We were lined up outside the churchyard looking over the wall and ordered to be quiet. After some minutes a funeral party left the church and proceeded to the gravesite north of the church and directly in front of us although some 25-30 yards away. The body was laid to rest in the usual manner, except that at the end a squad of soldiers fired a salute over the grave. I asked Mrs Hammond who had been buried, she replied "A very brave man". I never learnt his name and I do not know the date. Some time later (in the early 1940s) I went house-haunting again. My memory tells me there were three of us this time but their names escape me. Near where Park Villa stands now overlooking the Green there was another abandoned dwelling, this time a cottage. But this one wasn't empty! Downstairs had furniture. So did the upstairs when I negotiated the rickety treads (keeping carefully to the ends of the boards as my reading had taught me). Imagine my delight when I saw on the wall next to the window a Zulu shield and two broad bladed stabbing spears. Underneath was a chest of drawers almost identical to the one in my grandmother's cottage. I wondered if it too had a secret drawer. It did! Inside was a jumble of papers but what caught my eye was a bronze cross with a purple ribbon. It was a Victoria Cross! On the back was a name that I don't remember and the word "Islandhwana". I knew from my reading that this was important so I put it back in the drawer and carefully descended the stairs and so out of the cottage. I intended to tell my grandmother what I had found but forgot. The next day came the news of a fire in the village. A cottage had burnt down in the night! I was horrified: "There was a Victoria Cross in the secret drawer" I cried. "What secret drawer" said my grandmother? "You know, like the one in the chest of drawers upstairs. "There's no secret drawer." "There is! I'll show you." I rushed upstairs, dragged open the drawer before my grandmother was halfway up and stood waiting. I forget what she said at the time but it turned out that there was an insurance policy in the drawer along with some gold sovereigns. All was not lost. The insurance man brought £200 in cash which I was allowed to hold. My grandmother was pleased, I got a new pocket-knife or shutknife as we called them.

I enjoyed school. Although we older children were all in the same room it was never noisy. Some lessons such as Singing, Bible Stories, etc. were taken by the whole room. Not without muttering from the back row who had heard it all before. Mostly we were given tasks that we could accomplish unsupervised while Mrs Hammond taught one group at a time. I thought I was making reasonable progress until one day I arrived at school to find all the littlies in the big room too! Mrs Hammond called me over. "You have to go in the little room today", she said. I was horrified! What had I done to be banished? In I went. The other teacher (whose name I forget "Mrs Hurst?") was there. "You have an examination today" she said, "And we have brought a desk in from the big room for you". There I was all alone answering questions on an exam sheet. I have forgotten everything except the last question. "Write an essay telling what you did on your holidays". What Holidays!?! There was a war on! Luckily I had just read a Sherlock Holmes story about his struggle with Moriarty. So I wrote about taking the boat train to France, travelling to Switzerland and going up into the mountain road. I was wondering how I would describe the avalanche when time ran out. Phew! Saved by the bell.

The next day things were back to normal and I thought no more about it. Some time later I was told that I had to go to an interview at Huntingdon Grammar School. I must have done reasonably well because they awarded me a scholarship which I took up in 1944. I rode my bike to school and back every day and depending on which way the wind was blowing would go by

the Gravelly road or the St. Ives road. I only stayed there for one year because the end of the war meant I could go back to London.

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Tony Yates at home on 26th January 2010

The tale is real. After I left Hilton I went to school in London. In 1962 I got involved in computer programming. One thing led to another and in 1965 my wife and I moved to Canberra at the request of the Australian Government. I retired in 1991 as a senior adviser on Information Technology. Hilton school was good for me in the singular respect that it gave me access to books that few other schools would have done. The fact that I could borrow books from the adult library gave me a breadth of knowledge that few children my age could match.

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