

Cottingham and Middleton

...memories



David Dodd (born 1934)

London-born David Dodd moved to Middleton in 1939 and shortly afterwards to 'Frog Island' a row of cottages on the North side of Rockingham Road, Cottingham, with splendid views across the Welland Valley. Read David's memories of wartime in Cottingham, seen through the eyes of a 6 to 10 year old boy.

David, now living in Kettering, sent us his memories in May 2005. He is pictured here in his Scout uniform, aged 15 (1949).

Gas masks

One of my earliest recollections is of going to the clothing factory with my mother to collect our gas masks. I was most upset because I was just a bit too old to have a Mickey Mouse one!

Parachutes

I recall watching a mass practice parachute jump over the valley. Hundreds of planes dropping thousands of men, it looked just like it was snowing. We heard later that several of the men were injured, and some died, as a result of the exercise.

Once a parachute was found in the field adjacent to the school (in School Lane then). Don't know if the parachutist was one of ours or from an enemy plane, but the 'chute was quickly cannibalised by us school children, and a few adults, until **Mr Porter** ordered us out of the field. The nylon parachute cord (I still have some) was very useful and I believe the ladies of the village found things to do with portions of the silk canopy.

Dambusters

From Frog Island we could often see the Eyebrook Reservoir glimmering in the sun, and aeroplanes dropping flares on to it. We learned later that this was in fact Wing Commander Guy Gibson and his comrades practising for the Dambuster raids over Germany.

Bombs

The closest a bomb got to Cottingham was in Claypole's field about halfway between the old windmill and the Corby Road. It made a crater some 10 or 12 feet deep and 20 feet across, and, we were told, it was either intended for Corby Steel works or was discharged before the plane returned to Germany.

Fighter planes

One day we heard rumours that a plane had crashed somewhere South of East Carlton. A posse of us furiously pedalling our bikes headed towards East Carlton. In fact the plane had not crashed but had landed relatively unscathed on a farm track (I think it was the one leading to **Darnell's Lodge**). The pilot was there and told us to be sure not to go round to the front of the plane as he had set the machine guns to fire off all the ammunition to render the plane safe.

Searchlights

Before Ripley Road was built to its current length it was called Approach Road and ended with the last house being the home of the **Hulyatt** family (I think) at the time. Beyond this was a field where searchlights were installed and if we were lucky we boys were allowed to get up close and even search the skies for enemy aircraft.

Tanks

On the bend at the bottom of **Brickyard Hill** on the way to Rockingham, there is a path on the right which leads through to the grounds of Rockingham Castle. Part way along this path there used to be a sheep dip and in a field nearby tanks used to practice on some rough terrain. One day a large convoy of tanks came from Rockingham direction, right past Frog Island. There seemed to be hundreds of them, taking hours to go by. I remember the grown-ups complaining what a churned up mess they made of the road.

Prisoners of War

I remember watching Italian POWs digging the foundations to some sort of temporary building or hut, near the War Memorial (Berryfield Road etc didn't exist then). There were British soldiers standing over them with rifles.

Evacuees

One day **Crane's** lorry (the local carrier) arrived at the old school. About 20 children disembarked. Each one had a parcel tag attached bearing their name and maybe one or two other details. These were the evacuees, children from London who were to be absorbed into the local community away from the blitz.

Only a few names come to mind now, 60 years on. One, however, was Ronnie Witt, who was taken in by a family in Middleton. He stayed on, whereas most of course returned after the war. There was one called Sneider whose name was translated to Tailor or Taylor for obvious reasons. Then there was Brian or was it Harry **Farey** who could tap dance, sometimes demonstrating his talents at 'Social Evenings'.

Air raid precautions

One final memory is of helping to construct the blinds that had to be put in the windows so that light didn't shine out from within at night. One chink and the Wardens would be knocking on the door!

General memories

Here are some reminiscences of a 9 year old boy living at Frog Island in the early 1940s.

Now, in those days, **Frog Island**, or **Frogs Island** as I remember it, was one continuous row of cottages. And just to set the scene, the families that lived there, starting from the Rockingham end, were **Bradshaws, Baileys, Claypoles, Perkins, Grangers** and then two dwellings on the end facing towards the village one of which was more **Claypoles** and the other I can't remember. Also I think I've missed one out next to the Grangers.

The bare necessities

The basics for living were somewhat primitive, even for those days I suspect.

Water had to be fetched in buckets from a hand operated pump situated about 20 yards down the garden. Sometimes in winter the pump would freeze up, refusing all efforts to thaw it out. Then it meant a trip to the pump at **The Cross** and an arduous climb back up the hill to Frogs Island. Bathtime was quite a performance. A galvanised bath was placed on the floor in front of the fire and hot water ladled from the 'copper' in the scullery into the bath with cold water added as necessary. The grown-ups had to wait their turn until the children were in bed, using a larger bath-tub.

Toilet facilities were just as basic. A brick built 'privy' was located also about 20 yards down the garden, right next to the pump for the drinking water! The construction was no more than a deep pit in the ground with a wooden box over having two circular holes in it, one large and one small.

Each privy was shared by two families. When the time came to empty the pit the men of several families would join forces to ladle the 'sludge' into wheel barrows and deliver it to a pre-dug trench in someone's garden. Turns were taken to receive the 'sludge' as it made good manure. I can still remember trotting down the garden path at night, matches and candlestick in hand, with advice to "be sure to use the small hole."

Cooking arrangements. Cooking in most houses was on a built-in range – a cast iron oven next to the fire in the living room. However when it came to the Sunday roast outside help was sometimes required. Whether it was because the joint was too big for the oven, or the weather was too hot to tolerate a fire, or maybe it was cheaper - Sunday morning about 10.30 usually saw a few people cautiously heading towards **Bidwell's bakery** in Corby Road, baking tray in hand, determined not to spill the sloppy Yorkshire pudding. Be sure to keep it level going down the hill, I was told. When fetching the cooked joint an hour or so later the instruction was " don't put it down on the ground - a dog might get it."

A roof over our heads? Although I didn't realize it at the time, the general state of repair of the cottages must have left something to be desired. Lying in bed one night I was woken by a tremendous crash at the top of the stairs. Was it a bomb? After all there was a war on at the time. It turned out to be that the landing ceiling had fallen down, weakened by a leak in the roof !

Electricity. We did have electricity. However the safety precautions, or lack of them, which were regarded as normal then, would be considered somewhat alarming today. Apart from the lights I can only recall two appliances in the house. One, a radio, the valves of which seemed to blow with monotonous regularity, requiring the services of **Mr Bradshaw** from the end cottage; the other was an electric iron which was plugged into the light socket above via a two way bayonet adapter. (N.B. no earth!)

Shopping etc

There was a remarkable selection of shops and other facilities at that time.

In Corby Road there was the **Co-op**, **Bidwell's** bakery, **Smiths** haberdashery where you could also get bicycle spares such as inner tubes and valve rubbers, and **Mrs. Buckby's** general stores on the corner at the Cross. In Church Street was the **Post Office (Buswell's)**, and another bakery across the road. Down the hill towards Middleton we had **Crane's** the carrier. For a charge of 3d per item he would collect any item of shopping from nearby towns (e.g. Kettering on Fridays). Further down the hill was **Vere Cole's** shop where you buy anything from a ball of string (or a string of ball, as I once asked for) to a writing pad.

There was also **Jack Buswell**, carpenter, joiner, and undertaker in Rockingham Road. And there was a man whose name escapes me, who would give a boy a 'pudding basin' haircut for a small charge.

Of pubs, we had the **Spread Eagle** (thatched then, completely re-built now), the **Crown Inn** (now demolished), and the **Royal George**, off Blind Lane.

Amusements

No Sony Playstations then of course. An old bicycle tyre and a stick to propel it along the street was the order of the day. Cricket in the Dale, where the ball would conveniently roll back to the pitch, useful when there was a shortage of fielders, in the Summer. In Winter, also up the Dale, sledging. It was almost taken for granted there would be snow every year. There was a selection of slopes ranging from the comparatively safe, on the line of the footpath from the road at the top, to the more advanced **Swiss Bank** where you could leave the ground, on a good day with a good sledge.

I did have a bicycle with 20 inch diameter wheels, as did other kids my age. One day I cycled all the way to the railway bridge at Corby, on my own, my first ever venture out of the village. Another time, getting to the over confident stage, I decided to go no-handed down Church Street. I ended up hitting the road on my chin. A kind lady from a nearby house took me in to render first-aid. It's an awkward place to secure a dressing on the chin, there being no sticking plasters in those days (?). First a bandage round the back of the head to keep the dressing in position. Then another bandage round the forehead to stop the first bandage from slipping. Get the picture? I eventually arrived home swathed in bandages looking like something out of a horror movie.

There was the radio, or wireless, of course, with Children's Hour. Also, I always made a point of being home for Monday Night at Seven (later moved to Eight) with regular features such as 'Spot the deliberate mistake'. I never did of course, that was for the grown-ups.

School

Mr **L.V. Porter** was headmaster at this time, with **Mr A.A. Kisby** presumably head teacher. There was also Miss (or was it Mrs ?) **Simpson** who retired whilst I was there. I remember us all being lined up class by class in the playground, facing **Marshall's** house over the road. There were a few speeches by various people, and Miss Simpson was given a present, and I couldn't understand why she, a teacher, was crying.

To add my pen'orth to the stories about **Mr.Kisby**, he gave me once a beautiful etching of a fish about to be caught by a fisherman's hook. Sadly, somewhere over the years it has been lost. The other thing I remember about him was his frequent reference to his daughter Rosemary. She was about the same age as our class, but did not attend Cottingham school.

I don't think we ever met her, but she was the yardstick against which he measured our academic progress.