

REMINISCENCES OF WILLIAM ELFED DAVIES, Salem 1919-2002

My father William Elfed Davies was from Salem, born on 21st September 1919, the only son amongst six sisters Sal, Glenys, Lizzie, Megan, Beattie, and Hannah Mary whose parents (my grandparents) Marged Ann and John Davies lived in the Terrace in Salem.. My father died in January 2002 but I was extremely fortunate that he, at my request, left me with three thorough and detailed handwritten manuscripts (approx. 45000 words) presenting a detailed and vivid account of his childhood in the village, school in Trefeurig, initial employment in Aberystwyth before the outbreak of war, as well as meticulous, poignant but frequently humorous account of his life as a soldier in the war before returning to Salem and Penrhyn. The documents give comprehensive accounts of his experiences during initial training in the U.K., travel on a convoy down the North Atlantic, the North Africa campaign, and progress through Italy until demob in 1946. EXTRACTS OF THE WORK APPEAR BELOW.

Brian Davies

Extract 1:

We were a family of six girls and one boy, Megan being the youngest was next to me. My father up to the time I was about twelve years of age was always working away in the South, in South Wales, as a miner at Nant y Moel, as were a great many other men of the neighbourhood in those days. There was very little work locally after the lead mines closed one by one in the earlier part of the century. My father came home to see us every holiday and regularly every Saturday morning the postman would bring a registered envelope with the housekeeping money for a week. Not a lot, but mother was a very good exchequer and budgeted for everything. Good job that the postal service in those days was most reliable. Mother therefore was the boss and all decisions were hers.

My eldest sisters Sal and Lizzie were soon out in service, as it was customary with most girls in those days. Sal was in service at a farm called Caergywydd near Bow Street and Lizzie was working at the house of the tailors, Edwards of Penygroes near Llandre. My other sister Glenys, on finishing her spell at Ardwyn School also went to service temporarily at a house in Llandre, whilst waiting to be old enough to enter the nursing service. It was therefore quite an event for us the younger ones, when the older girls walked over Banc y Cwrt to pay us a visit from time to time. Beattie in due course was found employment at a small-holding called Tyngwndwn near Cwmerfyn in the next valley, to look after the children. This left Hannah Mary my next sister and Megan the youngest at home with myself.

Hannah Mary gained a very good place on the scholarship to enter Ardwyn Grammar School. In those days entry was limited to the number of vacancies available and therefore that number would be the top of those trying within the catchment area.

Salem hamlet stands just over a mile from Penrhyncoch along a single-track road. On entering the village from that direction one came first to what was the Manse. This was a large house belonging to the large Congregational chapel further on in the village. This was a large double fronted house, very well built, standing in its own grounds having four up and four down, with a fireplace in every room otherwise not very modern by today's standard. There was also a purpose built stable alongside in the elevated garden. This had a loft over it

presumably to store fodder for the horse which it seemed in days long before mine, every minister would keep a horse. However well before I became a teenager, a man called Rev. Elias Jackson became our minister, shared with Siloah, Cwmerfin and soon he was the owner of a small car - a Morris Cowley with a dickey seat behind and so the stable was altered to accommodate this. Next along the village road was our house. The western end of a terrace of three. In fact it was officially called No1 the Terrace though almost everybody would know it, as was the habit then, as Marged Anns house-my mothers name. So familiar the name became that in recent years, 20 or 30 years after my mothers death, its present owners who never knew her have put a name plate on the door declaring it just Marged Ann's. The house in those days did not have a back door, so everything had to be carried through the front door including water, coal and refuse. There was an old fashioned grate with a side oven and the usual collection of fire irons and a steel fender with a hob on either side. Below the fireplace was an ash pit with a grating to cover it, which of course had to be lifted every couple of days to clear the ashes away. The oven cooked fairly well but there was a lot of hit or miss about it and probably only mother would be able to make good use of it having studied a complicated formula taking into account the type of coal available and direction of the wind etc.

At about eye level or mantelpiece height and at right angles to the fireplace was a bread-baking oven, very common in those days. This was a brick lined oven with an iron door and the smoke from it would still enter the main chimney. This was heated with wood and whilst heating mother would be busy making the dough for the bread. This she would knead in a large earthenware bowl some 36 inches across the top. The bread she would then put into tins about twice the size of a large loaf today and laid out on the fender in front of the fire covered with a cloth, to rise. The fire meantime in the wall oven would be constantly checked and at a certain moment when all was well and just a few red charcoal embers glowing in the oven the bread would go in, assisted by a long poker with a twist at the end. to push the bread tins to the furthest corner and the oven door would be shut tight for the next couple of hours. What bread it was, enough for a family for a week and stored after cooling again in the large earthenware bowl beneath the back kitchen table. It was one of our rare treats to cut off a hot crust and have it with a lump of fresh butter.

All the villagers had to carry all the water from a very good well in the middle of the village and this continued until the mid 30's when the council, using the same well provided a pump alongside the road thus facilitating the task a little. Today the village has full mains supply. One has to wonder how our home like most others managed to cook at all their meals on open fires with so little facilities and I can't recall anyone being burned or scalded.

Extract 2:

During the summer of 1939 every boy of 19 was to register for National Service and of course so did I. Then we all had to attend the Drill Hall in Aberystwyth for a medical, where all the doctors in turn had been formed into a medical board. Then one just waited and sure enough my first call up papers came, to report in September to Kinnel Bay camp in North Wales to join a search light unit. However when war proper came on the 3rd. September these instructions were cancelled and I was to await further orders.

During June of that year there was great excitement in Aber when the Navy again came to visit, in the form of two battleships and one or two destroyers. One was the Renown and the

other the Prince of Wales, if my memory serves me correctly. As was usual during those summer visits the town and surrounding areas was heaving with sailors on shore leave. Various dances and entertainment was always organised to welcome them. However one night during this visit a signal was flashed that all the sailors had to be back on board by 6 a.m. By the time that the town woke up the following morning all the ships had gone and the bay empty again. This was the first indication that mobilization had begun.

From then on there were frantic preparations made. Surface bomb shelters were built everywhere, emergency water tanks erected, trial blackouts at night, air raid sirens tried out, until that is towards the end of August came the biggest trial of all, the arrival of the evacuees.

So came the complicated question of issuing everyone with their own ration book. Soon this didn't just mean food but clothes, shoes soft furnishings, bed linen and of course petrol as well.

Although for myself I was out of it very soon, I can look back only in admiration at the stupendous organisation of it all. This bearing in mind was long, long before computers and modern radio telephone communications ever came into being.

However I just waited. I for, who was a few months older than me, had already been called up and on the 15th. December 1939, 10 days before Christmas my turn came when I had to report to the R.A.A.A. camp at Oswestry to start quite a different chapter in my life.

Extract 3:

August found me the lucky one and I was to go by train to Milan, across Switzerland, through the Simplon Tunnel across France to Calais to Dover and then a train to Aber.

Before I left Italy the first atom bomb had been dropped on Japan but by the time I got to Milan the second one had dropped and Japan at once surrendered and the whole of Europe, at least I think, came to a halt. No trains, ships or planes for that day and we were stuck in Milan in a transit camp. We had a good look around the city. Fortunately most of the trams were still running and we saw sights including La Scala the opera house. The following morning we were off on the train through Switzerland and I can always remember the guard coming onto the train with a canary in a cage to test for gas. Simplon then was the longest tunnel in Europe. We reached Calais and changed back to British money before crossing the channel and home.

Lena met me off the train and we went to Salem as I had not seen my mother or Lena for three and a half years. There was a huge welcome as one can imagine and as was the custom in those days a grand welcome home concert at my old school in Trefeurig a few nights later. Beattie my sister was also staying in Salem at the time whilst waiting for her husband Jock to be demobbed from the Navy.

There were still not many cars running about so we did as was customary in those days, we all walked to the school over Banc Tyngelli, as it was a nice evening. It was nice to meet old friends and to hear who had not come back and who was still a prisoner of war and still away somewhere. Salem was much the same apart from new people living here and there. The evacuees had all gone home. Towards the end of my months leave an order came for me to report back to Dover at the end of my leave to return to Italy by road. It was now September 1945.