



A Ventnor Childhood in WW2 by Marigold Harding Part 1: Home Life

Marigold Harding was ten when WW2 broke out. Her family lived at the foot of Nine Stone Steps, where her father, builder Tom Harding, ran the 'Trinity Works'. For the next three weeks we will be featuring Marigold's memories of her wartime childhood.

At this time, my family was made up of my mother, father (when home from shift work), baby brother, two grandmothers and me all living together. We had a huge cellar which ran the full length of the house, only accessible from outside, so my father, who was a builder, made stairs and a trap-door into the cellar from our living room, and we covered it with a rug and hoped that we would never have to use it. My father was retained for essential war-work and was not in the forces. I can remember - to my shame later on for thinking such a thing - how disappointed I was when many of my friends' fathers looked so handsome in their uniform. At that stage I was unaware of the horrors of war. He did however, join the Home Guard and was given a rifle and three rounds of ammunition and was told that on no account was he to use it as there was a shortage of ammunition. Everyone had to carry an identity card and gas mask at all times; I hated the gas masks, they had a horrible smell.



As schoolchildren one of our chores was to collect wool from the sheep off the barbed wire and hedge rows - for the servicemen's uniforms we were told. It really was surprising just how much wool could be collected by dozens of little boys and girls all over England. We were also asked to collect the wild rose hops for medicine. It also meant time off lessons so we didn't complain. We were requested to work on farms and pick tomatoes during the holidays. I chose tomato picking; although it was back-breaking work we were paid and it was fun especially as we had longer holidays to do these things. Once the bombs started, it affected our school life in many ways, apart from the obvious danger. In one raid 240 bombs were dropped on the town, mostly on the Downs and many were unexploded and would go off at any time during the day or night, which was one reason I had to do my 11 plus paper three times (as if one wasn't enough) as each time the siren went, students could communicate with each other in the shelter, so it was back to another paper.

I had a dear friend named Vivian York who, although deaf and dumb, could make himself understood quite clearly. His lip-reading was amazing, he could even read with his back to the person by looking in a mirror held over his shoulder. One November day in 1941 a dinghy was seen off Ventnor with six men on board. No-one could make out what nationality they were, and Vivian was called in to identify them by reading their lips through a telescope. He announced them British. They had been adrift for two days after their Wellington bomber dived into the sea after they were hit by German fire over Berlin - they had nursed their blazing aircraft over the Channel, before running out of petrol. When they asked where they were and were told it was the IOW one replied "I always wanted to go to the IOW!" (Right: the crew at the Royal National Hospital after 57 hours adrift.)



My cousin Pam was two years older than me and she joined up as a 'Messenger'. Messengers ran from one ARP post to another if the telephone lines were down. I thought she had a great uniform, navy battle blouse and slacks and a tin helmet, and I would like to look like that, so I went to sign up too, but I was told to go home and ask my mother, who of course said a definite NO, as fourteen was the minimum age. At this time my Dad was working on the pylons and to supplement our meat ration he would trap rabbits on the way home from the Downs. One day he spotted a beautiful black rabbit, which I begged him to show me. Although he promised to take me the next day he was inclined to set the trap anyway, but his conscience got the better of him and he decided not to set the trap but to wait and take me there after school. Before I came out of school there was a raid without a warning and two bombs were dropped on the Downs. If my Dad hadn't waited for me he would have been in exactly that spot, for on his way to work the next morning there were two craters where he would have been setting his traps.