

Interview with Caroline Bellis.

This is an interview with Caroline Bellis at Marleyfield, Nany Mawr Road, Buckley on the 7th December, 2008.

Caroline: Yes.

First of all could you tell me where you were born and when and something about your parents and so on?

Caroline: Well I was born near Loggerheads, Mold. My mother came from Birkenhead for me to be born there and we went back after to Birkenhead to live, because my father worked at Cammell Laird's in Birkenhead.. You know what Cammell Laird's did, ships isn't it?

Yes

Caroline: We lived there for a while. Of course, after the war my father was redundant so we came back to North Wales. My grandmother found us a house in Mold and we came back to live.

So when was that roughly, what year?

Caroline: Oh I don't know.

How old were you?

Caroline: About 4.

1920?

Caroline:.. My father didn't have a job of course and he went to work for the Flintshire County Council and he was working on roads to begin with and then he worked himself up to a foreman and he used to be called out in the middle of the night and he went on the roads. I can't remember how long he was doing that job. I think it was until he retired but he didn't retire. He had this terrible disease cancer and he died when he was 56.

So is that before the war? Before the Second World War?

Caroline: Yes.

You came back to Mold when you were 4? So did you go to school when you were five?

Caroline: Yes in Mold.

Which school did you go to?

Caroline: The National Church school in King Street. Course it's knocked down now. It's a car park. It was belonging to the church as I said. It's knocked down now.

How old were you when you left school 15?

Caroline: No, 14.

So the same school from 5 to 14?

Caroline: Yes. It was a bad year getting jobs. 1930 so my grandmother said to my mother let her come and live with us, she had a big house and they had a shop in Mold my auntie.

Whereabouts was that in Mold?

Caroline: Gwernafield, on the road to Gwernafield. Now you turn by the Council houses on to the Denbigh Road. Anyway I used to help in the shop, selling everything. I was only about 17. My auntie used to go on holidays and leave me and I used to take care of the shop. The man I married lived three doors away. Friendly from the age of 14. We got married when the war broke out in 1939. I was 23 then.

That's a long courting isn't it nine years?

Caroline: Yes.

So was he saving up?

Caroline: No he worked for his father in the shop in Mold. There used to be shops in front of the church. You wouldn't know about that. He used to have vegetables and fish and everything and of course they were all knocked down to widen the road.

So was he the same age as you or older?

Caroline: 10 months between us. And then of course the war broke out 1939. I lived with my in laws in the shop then. He went in the RAF in the February and I was called up and that's when I went to Rhydymwyn. 1940 I think or 41 and I was married.

So then you were 24.

Caroline: Yes.

You had to register or something like that?

Caroline: I was called up. I had a letter.

What did they say to you?

Caroline: I can't remember that.

Roughly what did they say to you?

Caroline: I had no children did I? People with children weren't called up. They tried to get me off my sister-in-law at the shop. I had to go.

Did you have a choice about the Forces?

Caroline: I had a job at Rhydymwyn. My sister had started at Rhydymwyn.

What was your sister's name?

Caroline: Marjorie.

Could we back track a little bit to keep in sequence? Did you have any brothers and sisters, that's a good way to start isn't it?

Caroline: I had a sister and I had a little brother but he died when he was seven of meningitis. There was only me and my sister.

So was that something to do with his ear?

Caroline: My mother couldn't afford to get a doctor. He just lay there. There was nothing to give him.

Your sister was quite a bit younger than you was she?

Caroline: Five or six years I suppose.

She would have been 18 or 19.

Caroline: Yes. She started in Rhydymwyn before me.

They said, that's it, Caroline...?'

Caroline: You can't say no! (laughs) and the work was shifts.

When you started on the first day what happened, when you went there? Can you remember? Did somebody interview you and say?

Caroline: Oh yes Mr. Woodward. I think it was Mr Woodward.

I'll tell you about Mr Woodward later on.

Caroline: He lived down Gwernafield Road.

What did he say to you?

Caroline: There was a few of us together. Anyway I remember he came to me and wanted me to go and be a light helper with the joiners whatever. To be what you call them?

A mate?

So what you started on the first day and what happened on the first day when you went there? Can you remember? So did somebody interview you and say?

Caroline: Oh yes Mr. Woodward. I think it was Mr Woodward.

I'll tell you about Mr Woodward later on.

Caroline: He lived down Gwernafield Road.

And what did he say to you?

Caroline: There was a few of us together. Anyway I remember he came to me and wanted me to go and be a light helper with the joiners whatever. To be what you call them?

A mate?

Caroline: Oh I was upset. My sister because she knew him and she said my sister is very upset. She doesn't want to do that. I didn't want to go and work with a man. To be like what do you call them? No way!

A mate. A plumber's mate?

Caroline: That's it. But I was working testing the bombs and that.

Where was that? In what area was that? Down in the Assembly or? There was big buildings and a lot of small buildings?

Caroline: I was in the big one.

K4/K5?

Caroline: That's it. The bombs. You know all about it don't you?

I know the facts about what was built where. I've learned so much this week about things I didn't know about. When you went to work in the K buildings did have to change your clothes?

Caroline: Yes. We had trousers on and we had a hat on and when we were holding the bombs -they were that big -we had to have gloves on.

Did you wear different shoes?

Caroline: I can't remember.

Wellingtons?

Caroline: We must have had something.

You went in there and got changed. So you put your clothes in your locker and you went down to the K buildings.

Caroline: We had different jobs. Changeover? One would do a testing job- what do you call them- tins they were. We used to have to put them in water.

65 pound mustard gas bombs. Like petrol cans. You drop them in water.

Caroline: Yes and you put a lever on them to see if there were any holes in them. That was one job. Then we had to stand by this conveyor belt and the men were putting their stuff on

them (makes a sound of spraying) We had to stencil them with numbers, lift them up and put them on a trolley and then take them down the tunnel which I didn't like doing it in the middle of the night.

Which tunnel was that that you took them down?

Caroline: I went to see it one day when I came down with my daughter.

Did you? So that was the same tunnel was it? You used to take them in the big tunnels?

Caroline: Yes. I used to hate it. Bats would come in.

Everybody says that!

Caroline: They lifted up the lever and put it on the top of the pile. You're on your own you know.

Everybody said that if the bats got in your hair they'd cut all your hair off. Is that right?

Caroline: I don't know about that.

So you got these bombs and put them in racks? On a sort of trolley was it?

Caroline: Yes.

Was it motorised?

Caroline: It was a lever thing. You got it on the pile. I didn't like doing that.

These trollies were motorised. You lifted up the lever?

Caroline: There was hardly any light on in the middle of the night, very eerie. Not a nice job really.

Was that the only place you worked on there? Not down in the danger area or anywhere like that?

Caroline: No the men were doing that. We could see the men working behind this big shield like that.

No I meant on another part of the site? Right at the very bottom there was an assembly area. That's where they stencilled all the bombs and put the explosives in?

Caroline: Yes I was stencilling them.

You were stencilling them in the K buildings you said?

Caroline: I know they were full of gas.

You saw the guys putting the gas in?

Caroline: Yes and they used to get burnt terrible.

That is in the K buildings. Yes, did you smoke at that time?

Caroline: I never smoked.

The people that did smoke can you remember what kind of cigarettes they did smoke?

Caroline: No, I don't remember anybody smoking. We had a place where we put our clothes and a place where there was a little lady in this room if we brought anything to cook for the middle of the night. She had an oven and she managed to make us all a cup of tea in the break. I can remember her name- Mrs Tibbett. She used to do that and we'd have our break.

Did you drink then outside socially?

Caroline: No.

On the site did they play some music on the tannoy and Workers' Playtime and things like that?

Caroline: No.

Do you remember people visiting there? Do you remember the King and Queen?

Caroline: No no.

Duke of Kent?

Caroline: No. They might have come. I can't remember. I worked mornings and afternoons.

You worked shift work?

Caroline: Yes. I was normally on mornings, afternoons and nights. I rotated through those. I hated nights. 3 o'clock in the morning.

Did you know when the trains were being made up to be shipped out?

Caroline: No didn't know about that. They were near weren't they??? Bombed? I wouldn't be here now!

There was one shell did land there? One from an Ack, Ack gun in the Mersey. It hit where they were going to put a tank in.

Caroline: Did it?

Do you recall the lookouts on the chimneys?

Caroline: No. I wasn't involved in the decoy site at Cilcain.

When you went into the P buildings can you remember the traffic on the road? What was being pulled around there? They had these trollies with the munitions on right.

Caroline: I was doing bombs (shows by saying 'that big'). You had to pile them on top of each other. We shouldn't have been doing that I don't think? But we did.

Can you remember what you got paid?

Caroline: No I can't. Wouldn't have been much would it? Three pound?

Did you cycle in to work or come on the train?

Caroline: Double decker bus. I was living with my in laws and had to walk down to Chester Street to get the bus. It never stopped anywhere. I don't think we paid. We stayed with my mother in law. There were no houses after the War so we had to stop there. We didn't have any lodgers put on us, were never asked. I had a baby so I had to finish before the end of the War. She's still very good she takes me out every week. She takes me on holiday Llandudno every year she was 7 when we had our first Council house brand new.

So you worked there for 5 years?

Caroline: Always shift work, always in the same place. I had to finish as I was having a baby. boring those 5 years. I had my sister with me. We were on the same shifts. There was a gentleman who was clerical staff and he used to be good with us? He used to hold our hands sorry for us. My sister's husband went to South Africa. They got married then she didn't see him for 4 or 5 years. My husband came out of the RAF and he worked in De Havillands on prefabricated houses. He worked there for 5 years until the changeover. He didn't want to go on the dole. There was a vacancy for an ambulance driver in Mold and he said he'd do that until De Havillands started up again. He liked it. He stopped for 36 years. He won the British Empire Medal when he was 63 and he retired when he was 64. I had another daughter when I was 42, Moira, and she's 50 now? The War spoilt it really when we got married.

So you went along there in 1940 and in 1945 you said I'd have to leave because I was having a baby?

What did they say to you?

Caroline: I can't remember really. I couldn't work there having a baby! Now they do don't, they?

Did you feel relieved not having to do that after 5 years?

Caroline: I must have done.

Did the rationing affect you?

Caroline: No. Clothing coupons were alright. I didn't find I'd have to go without. We had a shop and my mother in law would put the butter in a basin and it lasted all week. She'd put a drop of milk in it. Make it go further.

I bet she was pleased when she found out you were having a baby?

Carolina: Yes. I was able to help in the shop. There was rationing. When they knew there were oranges or tomatoes there was a queue down the street. Oranges were not available very often and you queued for bananas.

Do you remember the evil winters in 1946/47?

Caroline: Terrible, terrible. Frozen really wasn't it? Water was frozen on the road. The worst winter we've had. We don't seem to have them now do we? I'm very lucky to be able to tell. There's people here who don't know from one hour to the next hour what day it is. It's a very good home.

In the War years what sort of soap did you use?

Caroline: Ordinary soap, whatever was in the Shops, I can't remember what but it wasn't Lifebuoy. I remember stuff that came in long bars and you had to cut bits off. We used it to scrub the floors. I can't remember if we had shampoo. They had a bath upstairs in the shop. As a child we had a bath in front of the fire. My mother had a lodger when we were kids. She used to take buckets of hot water upstairs for her to have a bath. Twelve and six a week she gave her.

Did you have an outside toilet or was it an indoor one?

Caroline: No, outside with newspaper cut into squares (for toilet paper) I remember my grandmother having one outside. I wouldn't go on my own it was pitch- black with two seats. They're into hygiene so much now. They have to wear gloves to serve the food here, ridiculous. There was lagging around the pipes in bad weather.

Did you have an allotment?

Caroline: We had a garden, apple trees, selling everything. My mother was a good cook. In her early days she used to cook in big houses. Three course dinners.

After the War when you had a little girl did you find that it was a happy time?

Caroline: Yes. We got through the war didn't we? We had to carry on. There was no telly thank God.

Did you have a radio?

Caroline: I don't think we did. Old people coming into the shop would tell you the news.

Did you think the Coronation in 1953 was exciting?

Caroline: Yes. I don't think we had a telly. I remember when we had a telly the neighbours came in to see ours.

Do you remember the street parties on VE Day?

Caroline: Yes. The drinking wasn't over the top. VJ Day was after that. That was the end of the war. I remember when it was finished. My sister in law and me ran down to the Assembly Rooms where the TSB bank is. We had the band and the music going.

Did you go to dances in the War?

Caroline: Yes, my sister and I. They were in the Assembly Rooms in Mold. They had one in Buckley. I didn't know they had dances in Rhydymwyn with an orchestra. I don't remember that. I was glad to get home. Working nights and having to stand in a queue for food in the town and then back up again to work perhaps on nights again. There was no entertainment. Was there?

There was cinemas?

Caroline: Not in Mold I don't think. I never saw film shows at Rhydymwyn. The buses were waiting for us when the shift finished. We had to get home. There was someone in Mold who used to wash our uniforms. They gave us some uniforms. We had two. One set to wear and one to wash. I used to feel sorry for the men in the cubicles. You could just see their hands. After the war the tunnels used to be storage places weren't they?

Not really. They kept mustard gas in there until 1958/9. They've been empty ever since. You used to go into the tunnels to deliver the shells and go left and then right?

Caroline: Yes. They had lights in the tunnels but very little. I never knew of anyone spilling the bombs. We did our job. We all had to do our best didn't we?

Did you know you were making poison gas?

Caroline: Oh yes. Just in case the Germans used it. If they knew about that factory we wouldn't be here now would we and we were right by the railway weren't we?

Do you remember signing the Official Secrets Act?

Caroline: No but I must have done.

Did people say it was secret?

Caroline: No. It went very quiet after the war. We never heard anything about it. They weren't going to do anything with it. There's a lot of land there. We used to hear airplanes going over here to Liverpool during the war. We used to hear the droning. I think we were

lucky we won the War because we had nothing did we? I was a baby in the First War. I lost an uncle then. 21.