

# **Christmas in a North Oxfordshire Village**

## **Recollections of a little girl growing up during WWII**

*Barbara Neville, neé Hillman, was born in Hornton, a valley village near Upton House, on the eve of war in January 1939 – the oldest of five children all born before 1947. She has vivid memories of her childhood, during the war, and of their simple Christmas celebrations.*

*Aged 13, she left Hornton with her family, returning with husband, Colin, in 2007, and moving into a traditional Hornton stone, thatched cottage right next-door to her original family home on Millers Lane.*

*Here, we interlace Barbara's memories (in italics) with those of local amateur historian, Arthur Miles, who published a short history of the village in 1992. (To get a fuller picture, read this handout with our two others written by those who were children in Hornton during WWII.)*



Despite the turmoil of war, village life in Hornton carried on in a surprisingly tranquil fashion most of the time, semi-insulated from the full threat and impact of the war, but fully aware of it and occasionally experiencing shocking glimpses. Surprisingly, in the Parish Council minutes, there is only one reference to the war effort during the entire period.

More memorable for Barbara was the routine of daily life in a rural settlement where facilities and conditions were still, to our modern eyes and compared with Upton, quite primitive in many ways. Lavatories were outside, as were taps, and electricity did not reach the village until 1949.

These red and blue masks were for two-to-five-year-old children and known as the 'Mickey Mouse' mask, even though they don't look anything like the cartoon mouse: to help overcome youngsters' fear, bright colours and the friendly name were used.

Kids learned to annoy their parents by making a 'raspberry' noise every time they breathed out!



### **Domestic Life**

*"My mum, Fanny Hillman, was born in the village. Her real name was Violet. Before she married she was in service for the Profumos at Avon Carrow. She cycled there every day and her father would walk her to the top of our hill each morning and say 'now get on that bike and don't look back'.*

*"We had a black stove and an old black kettle was always on the fire. Bath night was Friday night and we were all in the same water, heated up in the kettle, in the tin bath in front of the fire. Fortunately, the oldest child went first, so I was lucky. Mr Hemmings collected the football coupon on a Friday night: I begged my mum not to let him in while I was in the bath!*

*"We only had two bedrooms, so we three girls were in one room and my mum and dad in the other with the two boys. To free up some space, I was sent down the road to share a big double bed with my*

*widowed grandma and that's where I would have been on Christmas Eve in my early childhood.*

*"We washed up in the scullery in a tin bowl which stood on a stone slab. We got the water from a tap in the garden, next to the chickens, and heated it up in the kettle over the fire.*

*"We had a wireless, although I don't remember any Christmas broadcast that we listened to. I used to take the accumulator down to Mr Miles to be charged up."*

### **Wartime Babies Born on the Same Day**

*Barbara's mother had five babies between 1939 and 1947. "The fourth was Jennifer, born in January 1945. I remember Nurse Cadd coming to see to my mother and manage her birth and then having an emergency call to go over the road to Mrs Goddard, who hadn't realised she was pregnant but who gave birth the same day! Nurse Cadd had to come back over to our house to get some of the equipment she needed for the second birth."*



*This scene shows, in the background, the cottage where Barbara grew up. Due to lack of rain, a standpipe has been set up in the village. Barbara's mother is on the far left.*

### **Christmas Time**

*"I remember my father going off to get a Christmas tree. We weren't allowed to put it up till Christmas Eve, when we all had a hand in decorating it, and then we all had to go to bed. The tree stood in the corner with presents underneath and we each had a stocking which wasn't very big and usually contained an apple, orange and a few nuts.*

*"For decorations, we used the cardboard tops of milk bottles which had a hole in the middle of them – we would wind wool in and round the hole and make pom-poms. I hated that milk – it had thick cream on the top – and I don't have milk in tea or coffee to this day! Other decorations were paper chains which we made at school.*

*"I remember writing a note to Father Christmas and leaving it by the fireplace. We had to go to bed early on Christmas Eve. On Christmas Day, we always wore our Sunday best. Our hair was cut by Billy Freeman in the village. Mine was in a bob and my mum used to do my hair and put two red bows in it. On Boxing Day the entire family would go up to Upton House to see the hunt."*

### **Food and Livestock**

*"We always had an allotment and there was a path that used to lead up there from the heart of the village. My dad used to come back with a sack full of vegetables for Christmas dinner – boiled Brussels sprouts, which I still love, carrots, parsnips and potatoes.*

*"My mum was a very good cook. She was cook at Hornton's Holloway House, to Colonel and Mrs Hartley, which is why we moved to Sussex with them when I was 13 years old.*

*"We lived off the land. Dad would shoot hares, rabbits, pigeons, pheasants and partridges and my mum did the gutting and plucking. We kept chickens in the front garden, under the washing line, next to the wash*

house. We kept them for a year while they were laying and then, before the meat got too tough, they were killed. They were boiled with onions and vegetables and we ate them with bread sauce. That was my favourite. At Christmas, a cockerel from our flock was killed and roasted for Christmas dinner. Mum made her own stuffing, with stale bread and herbs from the garden. Then we would have Christmas pudding with custard - there was no cream or ice cream in those days.

"There was a shop over at Upton House, down the back driveway, where they sold produce from the estate. Phil Varney was in charge of the vegetables. We used to cycle over to buy salad produce – tomatoes, cucumber and lettuce. I used to be friendly with the Varneys' three children. Their mother was former Hornton girl, Rosemary Freeman.

"We also kept a pig over at the sty at the Old Red Lion and we were part of a pig club. The pork used to go in the salting lead first and then was hung up in our inglenook at home."

Arthur Miles adds: "Keeping a pig was an advantage the countryman had over the town or city dweller. The pig owner had to register and forfeit the family bacon ration, but could claim a stipulated amount of toppings and bran. ...

He describes a village routine during the 1930's: "Sunday morning was the time for visiting and giving an opinion on a neighbour's pig and exchanging professional advice. Christmas saw the killing of the pig and then what feasting! Pies, faggots, scratchings and lard were made, the Sunday joint was carefully cut, hams and bacon were salted down and later hung in the chimney corner or, like pictures, on the wall. Frank Stanley was the village butcher and at Christmas-time he was at full stretch with as many as 30 pigs to kill and joint. It was the custom to burn off the hairs from the carcase over a straw fire outside the cottage. This left a black patch which indicated to passers-by that Christmas was in mind."

## Gifts

"We weren't allowed to open our presents till Christmas morning, when we were all sat on the floor and took it in turns to unwrap something. I remember most the colouring books and crayons. My favourite toy ever was a doll which my aunt gave me. It had long brown hair, a porcelain face and a blue knitted bonnet and outfit. Another present my aunt Frances gave me when I was born, in 1939, was a half sovereign."

## Hornton Home Guard

Voluntary auxiliary forces were recruited in the village – air raid wardens, fire fighters and members of the Home Guard (originally the Local Defence Volunteers) – and Land Army recruits. Hornton Home Guard had 20 members, of whom Barbara's father was one. Their entire unit was issued with just two Lee Enfield rifles and two rounds of cartridges (some individuals recall only receiving one bullet) and much was made about their limited weaponry. To make up the shortfall, they were allowed to use their own weapons – in many cases, this would have been their 12-bore shotguns.

Barbara says: "My dad, Harry Hillman, was born in Hornton. He was a stonemason and was in the Hornton Home Guard. During the war, he had to move from Edgehill Quarry to work in the Alcan factory in Banbury. We had no car – he used to cycle there. We walked or cycled everywhere.

"I remember my dad coming home when the war finished – he walked up our path with his big army coat on and it felt like a really big occasion as we hadn't seen much of him during the war." (Barbara's youngest sister, Ann, recalls that, after the war, the same big old coat was used as an extra blanket on her bed.)

Harry Hillman in 1937



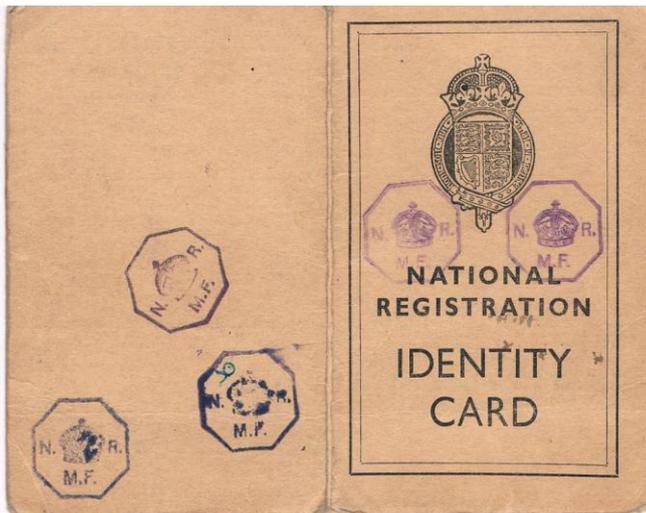
## Encounters with War

Barbara recalls: "We watched Coventry go up in flames from the top of the hill. Later in the war, they put a big barricade across the top of Millers Lane, at the entrance to the village. It was made of a huge tree trunk with barbed wire on top. It was left there all the time to deter invaders. I remember it so well because we used to play on it and that's how I got a big gash on my knee."

Local historian, Arthur Miles, recalls: "Nightly bombing of our cities, including Coventry and Birmingham, gave us many sleepless nights in our primitive shelters, hearing the drone of German aircraft. ... No bombs fell on the village itself, although a number fell on our boundary, doing little damage. Close by, the building of Shenington Aerodrome gave rise to much concern, especially when a number of crashes of trainer aircraft occurred. Shenington was an important base, linking in with operational forces, although we did not fully appreciate its significance at the time."

*Barbara adds: "There was an army camp up at Hornton Grounds Farm and my aunt, Frances, who was in service at Hornton Hall, married Bob Clough who was stationed at the camp. They moved to Darlington after the war where Bob went to work on the railways. That's when my aunt used to send us goodies every year – Christmas pudding, cake and sweeties and a little present for each of us, all in a big parcel. One year the parcel didn't reach us – we never found out what happened to it."*

Barbara's childhood identity card:



NATIONAL REGISTRATION		
DZBA	166	3
Barbara June Hillman		
<p>1. This Identity Card must be carefully preserved. You may need it under conditions of national emergency for important purposes. You must not lose it or allow it to be stolen. If, nevertheless, it is stolen or completely lost, you must report the fact in person at any local National Registration Office.</p> <p>2. You may have to show your Identity Card to persons who are authorised by law to ask you to produce it.</p> <p>3. You must not allow your Identity Card to pass into the hands of unauthorised persons or strangers. Every grown up person should be responsible for the keeping of his or her Identity Card. The Identity Card of a child should be kept by the parent or guardian or person in charge of the child for the time being.</p> <p>4. Anyone finding this Card must hand it in at a Police Station or National Registration Office.</p>		
<p>DO NOTHING WITH THIS PART UNTIL YOU ARE TOLD</p> <p>Full Postal Address of Above Person :-</p> <p>Milner Lane</p> <p>Hornton</p> <p>Barbury</p> <p>(Signed) H.P. Hillman</p> <p>Date 23-5-40</p>		