

COVENTRY SHERBOURNE U3A MAY 2021

LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Following the challenge from the committee, to produce a piece of written work on the theme of “home” in less than 1,000 words, we have four which we hope that you will enjoy.

Home by Bill Day

As the Halifax Mk II bomber of No. 10 squadron drew closer to the target, Flight Sergeant George Fernyhough checked that his newly issued camera was ready. It would provide colour photographs of the raid for the analysts back at RAF Melbourne, near York. The mission would introduce the seven crew members to Germany’s industrial heartland, the Ruhr, ironically dubbed “Happy Valley” by RAF airmen and it would be the responsibility of bomb aimer George to unleash the aircraft’s deadly payload. This November night in 1943, the bomber was one of 589 taking part in the raid on heavily defended Dusseldorf. The Halifax would be entering a diabolical scene of pyrotechnics and blinding light. A big worry for the raiders was that once a searchlight had captured a bomber in its beam, other beams would lock on and unless its pilot could swiftly escape the trap, anti-aircraft fire would be concentrated on the unfortunate aircraft.

However, everything changed when Doug, the Australian rear gunner, spotted a Messerschmitt 210 emerging from a cloud below on the port quarter. The enemy night fighter switched on its nose-lights and closed in as Doug told his compatriot the Skipper, Jack Trobe, to corkscrew in a textbook evasive manoeuvre as the gunner opened fire. At the same instant the fighter also opened fire, its first burst hitting the bomber and damaging the intercom, before the ME210 broke away below. Immediately another fighter attacked from above on the port quarter, its gunfire knocking out Doug’s gun turret and leaving him with just one serviceable gun out of four, which he had to fire manually. By this time, the second Aussie gunner Bill was firing from the mid-upper turret and the unidentified fighter broke away. The ME210 then resumed its attack from the port quarter and Bill scored hits and with flames coming from the fighter’s engines it seemed to be terminally damaged. However, the mid-upper turret had been put out of action and Bill was wounded. A fourth and final attack was made by an unidentified fighter, which shot away the elevators on the port side, but contact was lost when Jack performed another violent corkscrew.

The damage to the Halifax was severe and the Skipper’s only option was to jettison the bombload and turn back. Bill had been shot in the foot, the Flight Engineer, Bob, was shot in the leg and only later in the flight did the crew realize that Tom, the Wireless Operator, was wounded in the calves and thigh. With the intercom unserviceable, Doug kept the Skipper in touch with the crew by moving around the violently shaking aircraft. Two of the four engines had failed, but Bob managed to restart one of them, as well as dealing with two fires, together with Bill, which broke out in the fuselage. There was a huge hole in the floor and the hydraulics and emergency system had been rendered unserviceable. The wireless had been damaged, but despite being in a great deal of pain Tom managed to repair it sufficiently to get their only fix on their base and continued to work on the equipment as it intermittently cut out.

As they approached the North Sea, the Skipper asked the crew how they felt about baling out, as he was concerned that the bomber would break up, but when it was realized that Tom was seriously wounded and also that Doug's parachute was full of bullet holes, the only course of action was to continue to England. The nearest RAF airfield was Woolfox Lodge near Grantham, so the French-Canadian Navigator, Andre, plotted the course and George assisted the Skipper with the throttle controls of the stricken aircraft. The base signalled their permission to land, and the skipper dropped the Halifax onto the runway tarmac. The undercarriage held up, but with no hydraulics, brakes, or flaps there was nothing that could be done to slow them down. When the end of the runway was reached, the aircraft continued to the boundary of the airfield, across a road and into another field, before it came to rest, and they breathed a collective sigh of relief. The main hatch was jammed and couldn't be freed, but they were able to climb through the hole in the fuselage and drop to the ground. Against the odds, they had made it home.

Postscript

This story referenced contemporary documents and the reminiscences of my Uncle George, my mother's brother, which were written some years later.

Before he joined the RAF in 1942, George had spent many nights serving with the Auxiliary Fire Service and both parents were Civil Defence volunteers in Coventry, so he had witnessed the death and destruction of air raids. Looking back, we can only be shocked by the civilian casualties on both sides, but George and his comrades did not volunteer for Bomber Command and it was not how they would have chosen to serve. This shouldn't detract from the extraordinary courage they exhibited while stoically doing their duty. Bomber Command operations had a mortality rate of 44%, with 15% wounded or captured. However, the casualty rate for crashes in the UK added a further 15%, making bomber crew the most dangerous occupation in the British armed forces.

For their gallantry on that night, Tom Bisby was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal, Jack Trobe received the Distinguished Flying Cross and Distinguished Flying Medals were awarded to Bill Mowatt and Bob Bridge. Tom and Bob recovered after spending time in hospital but were unable to complete their tours of operation with the rest of the crew. Bill received medical treatment before travelling back to RAF Melbourne the very next day with the remaining crew members and insisted on resuming flying duties with a bandaged foot. They must have looked a strange sight as they stood in the corridor of a packed train to York in their flying kit; Bill with his wound heavily bandaged and George carrying his precious camera!



(L) Jack, George, Andre, Tom, Bob, Bill and photo by Doug. (R) George in the Halifax

My First Home Remembered, by Marion Hodgkins

I lived in St Margaret Road Coventry from when I was born until I married aged twenty. The terraced house was one of four owned by a single landlady Mrs Carrs. She lived in imagined luxury on the south coast. She had little interest in repairs and updating the houses. All had uniform brown wartime paintwork that was never changed, even after it faded and began to peel. My parents had moved into the house after they married in 1941.

We had a small front garden with a brick wall along the pavement. The long back garden had a 6ft wall dividing us from the entry/jetty that ran along the back of the houses. The gardens were separated by beech paling, grew vegetables to eat and flowers for decoration and had some grass to play on. Three doors away from us was a bombed site where 10 houses had previously stood. This was a great place for exploration, play and bonfires.

Of course, there was no bathroom in the two up two down but there was electricity in the main part of the house and in the kitchen. The kitchen, pantry, a coal shed and then an outside toilet was in a single floor extension, forming a yard with the wall between us and the next house. Because of no electricity, visiting the toilet at night and in bad weather even with a candle was an effort. I remember the inside of the toilet painted dark brown over plastered bricks making it very dark. It was full of cobwebs. In the winter everything would freeze along with our nether regions. Toilet paper was recycled newspapers tied with string. I made up stories about the characters I could see in the patches of plaster showing through the paint.

We went into the front room directly from the front door and the stairs went up from between the two downstairs rooms. Upstairs we had two double bedrooms one for Mum and Dad and one for me and my sister.

Although there were fireplaces upstairs we rarely used them, and the rooms were damp. In the winter, the patterns of frost on the inside of the windows made it hard to see outside. I remember the heavy dark green greatcoat that hung on the back of our bedroom door and assumed monstrous proportions when it was dark. I was afraid of the spiders that I thought occupied the corners of the room and would duck under the blanket to hide from these monsters of the night. One very special Christmas I was given a torch so could hide with a book under the covers safe from the monsters of the night. In our bedroom was the only family heirloom, an old Jacobean chest of drawers green and black moulding and a smell of decay. Eventually it rotted away with wood worm and was placed on the bonfire never to be passed on.

The front room was kept for best, and the living room was used for eating playing and daily life. The house had sash windows which got more and more decrepit as we got older. When the sashes broke we resorted to propping the windows open with a bit of wood.

The fire in the living room was where we found some warmth. Fire lighting on cold mornings was hard work, clearing the ashes and laying the kindling hoping it would start first time. We aimed to get it to stay in all night by 'banking up' with damp slack and shutting the air vent so it burned slowly. On good days you could get it to rekindle in the morning with screwed up newspaper, small sticks of wood and by using another newspaper across the opening to draw the flame. Care was taken not to catch the paper alight, which may go up the chimney and start a chimney fire. More positively the fire gave us hot buttered toast when we got in from school on a cold day and kept us and the teapot warm.

Wash day in our houses was a big job and only happened once a week on a Monday. It entailed heating the gas copper. The whites were boiled, rinsed in the large sink, put through the mangle in the yard and hung on the line. Delicate items and jumpers were washed by hand.

Bath night was Sunday ready for work and school on Monday. Again, it was the Gas Copper which provided the water that was ladled into the large tin bath which was fetched in from outside and set before the fire in the living room. We all bathed in turn. after we were in bed Mum had to empty the water and drag the bath back outside to dry. In the summer we had the tin bath outside in the garden filled with cold water so we could play.

We knew our neighbours well and children and adults played team games in the street. This stopped as more cars came but initially there were rounder's, French cricket, and football. Celebrations like the coronation and Empire Day were held in the street with fancy dress for the children and competitions for the adults.

Eventually the bombed site was rebuilt, and older neighbours died, the street changed. The car took precedence over the space to play, TV took precedence to communal evening chats and suddenly we did not know our neighbours. Dad died in 1973 and Mum moved out into a high rise flat. The door still had the same brown paint, and the next person who went into the house fell through the floorboards which were damp and full of woodworm: perhaps harking back to the rotting heirloom, and the landlady's reluctance to complete repairs or improvements.

The house is still there, and I often wonder what changes have been made to it. Presumably, they now have a bathroom and central heating, and I am sure there are now no spiders in the bedroom and toilets to frighten the children trying to sleep on dark nights.



Marion's family on Coronation Day in Fancy Dress. The zinc bath was used to cool off and for bath time.

The next author's name doesn't ring a bell, but I'm assured that he's one of our members.

Home, by Isaac Adinough

As the galactic exploration vessel drew closer to the azure dot, details were becoming sharper on the ship's screens and analysis of the images confirmed that this small world was defined by its water. It was soon possible to distinguish the white of cloud swirls and frozen liquid, and the greens, yellows, and browns of the land masses. Most stunning of all were the blues, appearing darker for the ocean depths,

but becoming lighter in the seas above the continental shelf, until palest of all, the shallows gently kissed the shore.

The Chief Translation Officer had been woken from the last of his cryogenic sleeps only five shift periods ago and his body had barely adjusted to the trauma of revival. However, there was no time to dwell on the hardships of this extraordinary mission. Everyone aboard was a key member of the team with specialist responsibilities, and this was the culmination of their journey. They had travelled along one arm of their barred spiral galaxy in the longest single journey in history. Despite their vessel being equipped with the prototype of the most advanced propulsion system yet devised, this voyage would have taken their distant forebears several generations. Even with the stretched life spans of the modern era, made possible by remarkable advances in genetic engineering, it took a leap forward in cryo-sleep technology to make the expedition a possibility.

Promising and enthusiastic recruits from all nearby colonies had been selected directly from the education system and allocated roles according to their strengths. These were determined by test outcomes and genetic indicators. Hundreds of candidates were unsuccessful, but those who did well undertook the basic spaceflight operational and survival training, before the chosen few were announced. It was only after the mission launched that the young crew completed their education in advanced navigation, communications, engineering, science, medicine and so on, according to their allotted disciplines. After all, they had plenty of time.

The Officer was no longer young, and the journey had lasted well beyond the point of no return for the crew. It seemed that their interstellar search had come to an end without achieving its main goal which meant, devastatingly, that the only alternative was to try to find a suitable planet on which to see out the rest of their days and start their long-delayed families. Eventually, according to the backup plan, the next generation would make the return journey. For a moment, his thoughts wandered as he contemplated finding a match when the time came, perhaps someone that, due to the crew cryo-sleep rotations, he had yet to meet onboard.

He was abruptly jolted back to his task as an alert flashed onto his screen. They were starting to pick up communications traffic from the target planet and the Translation Officer was quickly immersed in overseeing the computers as they eavesdropped on the communication streams. The aim was to infer translations and build up linguistic databases. Previous encounters with inhabited planets had always turned out, after investigation, to be fellow colonists with the same shared origins as their forebears had spread between star systems, over countless eons. All the earliest star maps and co-ordinates had been lost, along with much knowledge of their origins, in the Great Colonial Conflict and occasionally remote, long forgotten colonies were rediscovered. However, no such inhabited planets were considered a possibility so many light years along the galaxy's starry arm. Could this finally be the first known contact with a truly alien civilisation?

How would they be received? If they couldn't stay here, where else could they go? Until the unmistakable signs of intelligent life were detected, it had initially seemed so perfect. All the remote analysis programs had indicated as much. Normally even the most promising planets had to be tamed to make them acceptable for long term habitation. Once a planet with this rare potential was identified, they would set in motion changes to the atmosphere so that it became suitable to support their species. The next step was to seed the surface with familiar flora and fauna which they had brought with them. All this preparation would necessitate brief visits, with a more permanent return only possible very

many generations later, by which time, if all of the changes had stabilised as hoped, the planet could be cautiously settled.

This taming of alien worlds was a lesson that was learned the hard way. There had been disasters and loss of life on an almost incomprehensible scale, but over time such catastrophes were increasingly avoided, and their species had flourished.

Surviving records related vague tales of how these interstellar nomads had abandoned their own planet when extreme orbital variations disrupted the global climate. The result was an ice age which rendered much of the planet uninhabitable.

Now the blue sphere almost filled the screens without the need for magnification and the navigator was slowing the vessel. Soon it would be time for the spaceship to go into orbit and the Translation Officer would have a crucial role to play in making contact with the planet's inhabitants.

Just then an alert flashed up on the screens, followed by another and then a stream of messages from the vessel's analytic programs. The Officer could hardly believe what he was seeing, but there seemed no room for doubt. Not only had the analysis of communications traffic identified archaic forms of several languages widely spoken in the colonies, but there were many other matches as well. Information from the sensors scanning the planet had revealed multiple similarities with the surviving fragments of historic data in the vessel's databases.

The mission had been to rediscover the planet that their ancestors had left, so very long ago. Further flung than expected, this small but beautiful satellite of an unremarkable star, gladly no longer a sphere of ice, was the very thing that they had been seeking. It was the almost mythical planet Earth. It was HOME.



My home after the War, by Eileen Wallis

I was born in Coventry at the end of the War, (November 1945). I was the baby of the family, an unexpected bonus. I had 2 brothers aged 12 and 8.

We lived in a rented house in Bolingbrook Road, Stoke. At the back of our garden was the Humber works. The house had 3 bedrooms without a bathroom, inside toilet or hot water.

We boiled the kettle on the stove for hot water to have a wash, or if you had a hot bottle the night before, you used the slightly warm water to wash in. Friday night was bath night. The copper was brick built in the corner of the kitchen with a fire underneath to heat the water in the metal cylinder. The tin bath, which during the week hung on the garden wall, was brought into the kitchen. Dad had first bath, followed by my two brothers, using his water. More water was heated, then Mum had her bath, followed by me. We then warmed up in front of the living room fire. The toilet was outside, so during the Winter a coat was needed. We didn't have toilet paper, so we cut up squares of the Radio Times, threaded them onto string and hung them from a nail. If you ran out of paper you would bang on the

wall, or learn to whistle, so that someone would bring more paper. I was often in trouble, for peeling the emulsion off the toilet walls, naughty girl.

We never had heat in the bedrooms or the “posh” front room. In the Winter, the bedroom windows had beautiful frost patterns on the inside. I think we put more clothes on to go to bed, than during the day. During the War, the Germans tried to bomb the Humber Works several times. As we lived so nearby, our windows were broken by the blast, my window was replaced with thick frosted glass, so I couldn't see outside. The front room was the “posh room”, only used when we had visitors or at Christmas, when Dad would light a fire. Mum had her good furniture here, and there was a piano, which my brother and I played, mainly hymns.

We weren't a well-off family. Dad worked at Armstrong Siddley, making gear boxes, although he was knowledgeable about all the workings of cars. People were always asking him to look at their cars. Dad would help anyone do anything. Sweep chimneys, mend irons, make anything out of wood, decorate, or even lay people out when they had passed away.

We had an allotment, where Dad would grow everything you could think of. We would stay all day. Mum would make us thick cheese sandwiches and we took a flask of tea. I would get in trouble for eating the raw peas and carrots. It was a simple and healthy life.

Wash day was a long-drawn-out process. The copper would be lit, and the clothes sorted out. The large outside mangle and the wash board prepared, along with the “blue bag” and the starch. The starch was made by mixing starch powder with cold water, to make a paste and then boiling water was added. Mum would wash the clothes in the sink, but Dad's white Sunday shirt and all the white underwear would be boiled on the stove in a small tin bath. The white clothes were rinsed in water that Mum had squeezed the blue bag into. Shirt collars and cuffs, pillowcases, tablecloths etc were dipped in the starch. I was fascinated when the sheets were put through the mangle. They would blow up like a balloon and then make a whooshing noise as they went through. Drying the washing was I think the worst part. In wet weather it was placed around the fire to dry. This steamed up the windows and you couldn't feel any heat from the fire.

Although I was born after the War, my parents and relatives would often reminisce, when they thought I wasn't listening. One story terrified me, and I will never forget it. It was the night of the Coventry Blitz. Dad, mum, Aunt Cissie, Grandad, my brothers and some neighbours were in a shelter by the Humber Cricket Club. The air raid had been going on for some hours, when Grandad started cursing because he couldn't light his pipe, the matches kept going out. Dad realised what the problem was, so he told everyone to be quiet and carefully opened the shelter door, for a few minutes. When he closed it, Grandad could light his pipe? They had been in the shelter so long that they had used up most of the oxygen. So, Grandad and his pipe saved all their lives. I remember going into town with my parents after the War and looking along where the Lower Precinct now is. It was a scene of total devastation, rubble everywhere, the only building that seemed untouched, was St John's church. There always seemed to be men standing among the rubble selling things out of suitcases.



No Place Like home, by Ness Makepeace

“ There’s no place like home “ she said and clicked her heels together three times and had closed her eyes, when she opened them she was not in Kansas but still in the hall at the bottom of the stairs. Maybe it was the fact she was wearing blue fluffy slippers and not ruby slippers, and still wearing her dressing gown. She smiled to herself it would have caused a stir if she had ended up in Kansas [explain that!!]

Himself had taken the dog on a long walk and would be gone for at least a couple of hours and she was enjoying the novelty of being on her own for a while anyway, she felt guilty because some people are on their own all of the time during these interminable lockdowns .

The house seemed so quiet a house that had once reverberated with noise when the children had been teenagers, Heavy Metal in one room, Phil Collins in another and the girls playing some latest teen sensation.

Now they had moved on with their lives and moved away spread around the country on the four winds. Only one lived locally, they all phoned they had tried zoom but because she was hard of hearing, it had just become a cacophony of sound.

She hated looking at herself. Who was this white-haired person, surely she did not look that old , she did not feel like that person looked ?

There was housework, she had never been a great housewife and Lockdown had not improved her ambitions, she moved the dust around but never with enthusiasm, some people enjoyed cleaning , she did not consider herself one of them.

Craft had come into her life rather late ,and that she did enjoy, and had attacked various project with enthusiasm and had been pleased with the results. Baking was a pleasure she had always enjoyed, but even that was not the same when you could not share the results.

So, life goes on, Covid had not affected her life personally, but she felt its icy tentacles lurking in every corner, wearing a face mask, she had never realised how much she relied on lip reading.

Good news was on the horizon when life could get back to something like normal not so long now, until she can hug the family, meet friends, go out for a meal so many simple pleasures.

She did not really want to go to Kansas, as in the words of Dorothy Gale.

THERE IS NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Thank you to all who took part. It is to be hoped that it will spark interest in having similar challenges in the future and encourage more members to give them a go should we do so.