

WW2 People's War

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A Childhood in Gosport and Portsmouth: Part One [by Antony Norris](#)

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People in story: Antony Yorke Norris and family

Location of story: Gosport and Portsmouth, Hampshire

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Antony Norris was born in Gosport, 16 Jul 34 and was therefore just over 5 yrs of age at the outbreak of WW2. His parents were Henry Norris (HN), born Apr 1893 and Madeline, nee Whatley, born in Portsmouth on 12 Jun 1906. HN served in the Royal Marines from 1907 until 1933 and fought at the Battle of the Dogger Bank, 1915, and in HMS Warspite of the 5th Battle Squadron at the Battle of Jutland, 1916. In both engagements he was injured, at Jutland apparently badly so but he recovered to continue his service with the Corps. Having been discharged on pension, he served with the Royal Marine Police at the RN Armament Depots, Frater, Bedenham and Priddy's Hard, Gosport, until sometime in the mid 1940s, the family home being at **144 Albemarle Avenue, Elson, Gosport**.

1939

The family holiday of a week's duration was being taken during August at Boscombe, Bournemouth. Halfway through the week with war looming, HN was recalled to Gosport. I recall waving him farewell as he departed in the train from Boscombe station.

I went to school for the first time in September at Old Elson Church of England School, my teacher Miss Harris. Gosport was declared an evacuation area and the evacuation took place sometime in the earlier half of that month. The pupils of Old Elson School were evacuated to the Durley Street area of SE Hampshire. I recall being taken to Gosport station to board a special train which took us all to Bishop's Waltham from where we were transported to a hall at Durley Street to be allocated to local families. Eventually, I was boarded with Mrs Fremantle, seemingly an elderly widow with three sons, one serving in the Army in the forts of Spithead and another a teenager. The house was at the end of a small terrace, and with a lavatory at the bottom of the garden. My room, heated by a coal fire, was upstairs in the front of the building. The school was conducted in Wintershall Hall, a gracious country residence almost a mile northwards from the house. Walking to and from school and on my own seemed a long way. I recall having to take sandwiches and a medicine bottle of diluted orange juice each day for school lunch. My parents sometimes visited me for a day during a weekend having borrowed a tandem cycle from a neighbour to make the journey. I contracted chicken pox during my stay there. I particularly remember watching the Hambledon Hunt going past the house one overcast morning and seeing the huntsman returning with the hounds late in the afternoon. Having gone home to Gosport

for Christmas, my parents took the view that I should remain with them rather than return to Durley.

1940

January. My parents decided to send me to one of the very few schools in Gosport which was still open, the Gosport High School at 'Baronsmere' in Bury Road, Gosport, a fee-paying school. The headmaster was Mr M Bradshaw Bond. The school uniform of school blazer, blue with white, vertical stripes, cap and tie was obtained from Rowe's, a rather plush gentlemen's outfitters then in the High Street. The issue of anti-gas respirators in stiff, cardboard boxes with shoulder cords, was made at Grove Road School, Gosport.

Sometime during the summer months (it was actually in July), all beaches along the South Coast were closed preventing walks with my mother to Stokes Bay, Gosport. This prohibition continued until late '44 or early '45. At some time in the summer or slightly later, the Browdown Road, from the vicinity of Bay House near Stokes Bay to the eastern approaches of Lee-on-Solent and then the main road between Gosport and Lee, was also closed for the duration of the war. To travel between Gosport and Lee it was necessary to go by way of the lanes from Brockhurst and Rowner. The Browdown Ranges were an establishment of the Royal Marines.

Air-raids involving bombing commenced mid-July.

August. There were heavier air raids on Portsmouth and co-laterally, Gosport. It was my mother's custom on a Saturday to join her mother for the day; her mother's home was at 138 Hertford Street in Buckland, Portsmouth. After lunch, shopping in Commercial Road or out in Southsea was the routine. Having had lunch on Saturday 24th, we walked out early in bright, warm sunshine. I particularly remember seeing young children playing on the pavement in Buckingham Street just around the corner from my grandparents' house. We were in 'Lyons' having a mid-afternoon snack when the air-raid sirens sounded. Leaving 'Lyons', we were directed to the 'Landport Drapery Bazaar' at the junction of Commercial Road and Arundel Street. Here we were told to take shelter in the carpet department in the basement. Late in the afternoon there were the sounds of heavy gunfire, bombs falling and the sound of a succession of loud explosions. The raid was brief but seemingly violent; it was the first time that I had been close to where bombs were landing and exploding. It was not until some time after that the crowd was allowed out on to the street following the 'All clear'. Outside was much smoke. The police in helmets, fire and emergency services were evident. It was also clear that there were no buses running. My mother enquired about the extent of bomb damage to be told that Lake Road had been badly hit. We tried to walk to Hertford Street by several ways but were prevented from going further by the police until we managed to find that the way by Church Street was available. We got to the house mid-evening. Some of the windows on the ground floor were blown in. The factory of Spickernells close by and houses around the corner in Buckingham Street had been destroyed; the children which I had seen had been killed. My mother was concerned about things in Gosport but we stayed with my grandparents for the night. We walked to the harbour ferry the following morning passing much devastation on the way. Gosport buses were operating the usual Sunday morning service. All was well at home.

A daylight raid on Gosport a few days later (27/8) caused destruction and damage in Elson. I remember that the Thorngate Hall, the Market House by the Hard and the Ritz cinema were destroyed by incendiary bombs. For the rest of the year, air raids were a constant feature with much damage in Portsmouth and Gosport. When the raids occurred, the sound of aircraft engines, guns firing, bombs falling and explosions became a terrible fact of life. While I was at school and the sirens sounded, all the pupils were shepherded into a large brick shelter in the grounds where we remained often into the evenings when 'All clears' were sounded, parents coming to collect us.

Mid-November (14/11) on a fine, crisp day, the sirens sounded just after mid-day. About 1pm the drone of numbers of aircraft could be heard; soon, they were overhead. Mr Newman, the neighbour, called us to the entrance of the Anderson shelter to look into the sky to see many close formations of German bombers flying northwards at a high level. The 'All clear' sounded after they had passed over. The sirens sounded off late afternoon or early evening and the formations were seen flying southwards. On the BBC Home Service early that evening it was announced on the wireless that Coventry had been bombed heavily and it was assumed that this city had been the destination of the aircraft. Later in the evening the sirens sounded again. 'Blitz' was the word then being used about the effect of these raids.

For three days almost immediately before Christmas Day, there were air-raids on the Portsmouth area. On Christmas Eve, the Germans were expected again but they did not come. For several years afterwards, my grandmother recalled the barbarity of "...these people of 'Old Kaiser Bill'", her term for Germans, who raided us in the final run-up to Christmas, 1940 '...and they call themselves Christians' she used to fume.

I believe that the record is that over thirty attacks were made by the Luftwaffe on the area of Portsmouth and Gosport that year.

1941

10th January. My mother, younger sister and I went to visit my grandparents for the day and it was decided that we should remain with them in their house for the night returning home in Gosport on the Sunday morning. The sirens sounded the alarm during the evening and we went down into the shelter. The heavy air raid developed during the night and immense damage was done. I remember on leaving the air-raid shelter, the night sky was red with fires, smoke was everywhere and the smell was acrid. The following morning, my mother walked us down to Portsmouth Hard to catch the ferry back to Gosport, there being no public transport in the city, the route Mother attempted was often blocked off by the police and detours were long and circuitous. Many buildings were destroyed or damaged and some were still alight as was the Guildhall. Debris was everywhere.

10th March. A heavy air raid took place during the night. The family was in the air raid shelter when bombs fell in several areas of Elson particularly in School Road; the terrific explosions seemed to be very close.

My grandmother was offered a job in the Royal Naval and Royal Marine Orphan Home at 'Hopfields', Waterlooville by the matron, a long term and close friend, in order to get her away from Portsmouth. She accepted and she spent the rest of the war years working in the 'Home'. We were allowed to visit her. My grandfather who worked in Portsmouth dockyard had to remain in Portsmouth. He was unharmed by hostilities, likewise his house.

Summer months: My brother Robin, born in April, was asleep in his cot in the room on the ground floor at the front of our home; a surprise flight of a German fighter aircraft firing its cannons, occurred without warning low along the road. A bullet passed through the window and the headboard of the cot, about six inches above the baby's head and became embedded in the wall. In the road outside, some people were injured.

1942

The North Nova Scotia Highlanders were billeted at Fort Brockhurst. They were popular locally and they allowed local children access to many of their activities. They smoked a brand of cigarettes known as 'Sweet Caporals' the packets of which had pictures of allied and enemy aircraft to acquaint the soldiers with the detail of aircraft recognition. These pictures became very collectable for many of us. I remember an occasion when the Canadians made us form a queue and several of us were given one each in turn; we came away with four or five each. Sometime mid-year, they marched away with their pipe band leading; where they were bound nobody knew. In August, there occurred the disastrous Dieppe Raid involving large numbers of Canadian troops.

One evening on 4th or 5th November, I was in the home of a school friend when a special announcement was made on the wireless that the Eighth Army had defeated the Germans and Italians at El Alamein in Egypt and were chasing the enemy westwards.

I remember the accounts of the Battle of Stalingrad through the final months of the year with the victory of the Russian armies over the forces of Germany in January. There seemed to be a sense of relief that the tide had turned against Hitler and his Germans. The news about the losses of shipping due to U-boat action remained depressing.

1943

By that year, we were used to the routines and upsets of the War although the terror induced by the air raids was never far away. One fine afternoon in June or July, there was a furious air battle above Gosport and Portsmouth. The sirens had sounded and everybody had gone to their shelters. The sound of aircraft manoeuvring at high speed with the noise of distant air cannon fire but no anti-aircraft fire from the ground, caused some people to look out and up into the sky. It became evident that a group of German fighter aircraft had been caught by the RAF. Soon everybody was out of the shelters to watch the action and cheering on our side much to the consternation of the local Air Raid Warden, Mr Hobbs, the local grocer, who ran around the backs of the gardens in his helmet, shouting at everyone to take cover but nobody took any notice. Several German aircraft were hit and chased off southwards.

1944

For several weeks in the late spring and early summer, many Army (British, Canadian, US and others) convoys, squadrons of guns, tanks (Shermans and Churchills) and armoured vehicles were parked at the sides of roads in Elson in preparation for a continuous embarkation on landing craft at a recently constructed landing ramp at Hardway. The area of Hardway was out of bounds to all except residents, police (the local bobby, PC Wren was a man of commanding presence whose method of disciplining errant, small boys was a terrifying telling-off and, subsequently, a clip around the ear if one re-offended: very few did) and naval and military personnel. Local boys including me, knew the way to the embarkation area without going near the various road blocks and check points. I often spent time watching landing craft being loaded with men and vehicles, the vehicles always having to load by going up the ramps backwards. Many neighbours gave the soldiers cups of tea and invited some in for meals.

6th June 'D Day'. I was out in the road outside home when a neighbour came out of her front door to shout that the landings in France had begun.

After 'D Day' large numbers of German POWs were landed frequently at Hardway and marched under guard, bayonets fixed, down Grove Road to a temporary transit camp in a field behind HMS St Vincent. On one occasion, I remember that the length of this road (1000yds) was full of trudging Germans in grey uniforms, the smell foetid with unclean bodies and dirty clothing. Residents of the nearby houses watched grimly. I don't recall any sense of triumphalism on the part of anyone although some felt sorry for the predicament of some of the younger men who looked little more than teenagers. On another occasion, a group of POWs contained an officer immaculate in a light grey blue uniform which included riding breeches, polished jack-boots and grey gloves. He portrayed an aura of haughtiness and when his part of the column reached the 'Glencoe' junction to turn left from Grove Road on to San Diego Road, he refused to wheel around; a guard forced him to turn left by hitting his thigh hard with the butt of the rifle. Watching people boo-ed the German officer.

One evening early in July while my parents were out together, the sirens sounded. I got my sister and brother into the air-raid shelter. In time, the guns commenced firing. A hollow and gruff sounding engine which differed from that of a normal aircraft, could be heard. Over the wireless in the previous few weeks, this engine noise had been demonstrated as that of the V1 'Flying Bomb' (FB) and we had learnt that as long as we could hear it, we were reasonably safe. The problem occurred when the engine cut out, then the V1 would crash to the ground and blow up. The sound appeared to pass by and shortly afterwards the engine stopped. The explosion was some way off. Later, we learnt that the FB had crashed and exploded somewhere towards Warsash. My parents returned home shortly after the 'All Clear' had sounded.

1945

The news on the BBC broadcast was of British Army units reaching concentration camps in Germany and what they found. The newspapers had reports and many shocking pictures of those inmates still alive and the dead of these camps. Those pictures of living skeletons and

the piles of dead are still vivid; I had seen the results of so much depravity on the part of the Germans through the War but these accounts were so appalling as to be almost beyond belief.

Early one morning, perhaps in March, I stood at what was then the Ferry Gardens by the Hard, Gosport and watched the aircraft carrier HMS Formidable put to sea. It was such a wonderfully impressive, encouraging sight. Later I found out she had been bound for the Far East to join the British Pacific Fleet which took part in the final stages of the war against Japan. This was probably the first occasion which caused me to wish for a career in the Royal Navy as an officer.

Mid-April Returning from a visit to Portsmouth early on a fine evening, I saw an Evening News hoarding which announced the death of President Roosevelt. It seemed a sad moment when the end of WW2 was clearly in sight.

7th May A fine evening and on going to bed, my mother came to my room to say that it had just been announced on the BBC, Home Service that hostilities with Germany would cease the following day, VE Day. The 8th and 9th were declared public holidays for celebration and reflection. There was great rejoicing and many put flags on the front of their houses. My mother cut up some old sheets, dyed them red and others blue and we put red, white and blue pennants out in the front garden of the house. I recall wondering about the continuing war in the Far East; there were families in the district with relatives still fighting.

25th July General Election. The Labour Party defeated the Conservatives by a wide margin and the great war leader, Churchill, was voted out of office. The Conservative candidate, Sir Dymock White held the Gosport & Fareham seat against an impressive Labour candidate, Major Ashley Bramall, I think that was his name, who seemed to turn up everywhere regularly and often as he conducted his election campaign with much energy. As a young 11 year old with a family from a working class background but which voted Conservative although not by conviction, I suspect, and going to school with children from families which were of conservative background, I wondered how a seemingly well-educated army officer could possibly support the Labour Party. As demobilisation developed and with the passing of the years, I began to understand why and to sympathise with such an inclination.

15th August VJ Day following rapidly on the dropping of atomic bombs by the Americans on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There was little celebration as I recall just relief that the War was over finally. The singular hatred among people for the Japanese as the stories of the bestiality of their conduct was revealed, was palpable. The Japanese were considered to have got what they deserved, terrible as the realisation of the effects of atomic warfare was to develop later.

Sometime in September, a Victory Parade was organised. It formed up in Old Portsmouth and involved units of the Armed Forces, the Civil Defence and Medical Services, and cadet detachments of the Services. The route was along the front at Southsea past the Naval War Memorial and Southsea Castle and completing at Eastney. By this time, my father had joined me up with the Royal Marine Cadet Corps which paraded at the barracks at Eastney.

I was in the detachment which took part in that Parade. It was a long way to march for we were either teenagers up to 15 perhaps or 11 and 12. Marching in uniform in front of cheering and applauding crowds at that time was an honour and an unforgettable experience.

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